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Ireland's Second European Child Guarantee Interim Report

2024-2025

An Roinn Leanaí, Míchumais agus Comhionannais
Department of Children, Disability and Equality

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Taoiseach's Foreword

Tá deireadh a chur le bochtaineacht leanaí ar cheann de na dúshláin is tábhachtaí atá romhainn chun a chinntiú go mbeidh gach leanbh sona, sláintiúil agus dóchasach, anois agus amach anseo. Léiríonn an dara tuarascáil seo ar chur chun feidhme Ráthaíocht Eorpach do Leanaí in Éirinn an dul chun cinn atá á dhéanamh i dtreo na sprice sin.

The Guarantee is a vital part of our broader effort to reduce child poverty and mitigate its impacts on children, families and communities. It seeks to ensure that children at risk of poverty or social exclusion have free and effective access to essential services, including early childhood education and care, healthcare, healthy nutrition, and adequate housing.

The progress outlined in this second report is encouraging and reflects the strong collaboration and shared focus across Government that have underpinned delivery to date.

Reducing child poverty is a key priority for Government. In 2025, we set an ambitious national Child Poverty Target to reduce the child consistent poverty rate to 3 per cent or less by the end of 2030. This target is now helping to shape policy, action and investment across Government.

Achieving this ambition will not be easy, especially as we face economic uncertainty and the risk of widening inequality. I do not underestimate the challenges we face particularly for our most vulnerable children, including those children who unfortunately experience homelessness. But we know what works and we know how to turn our ambition into reality.

The way forward is clear: we must continue to prioritise those who need support most and maintain momentum year by year. As we work towards our 2030 target, we will remain steadfast in our determination to protect the dignity, wellbeing and life chances of every child.

I am encouraged by the strong partnerships that have developed across Government departments, local authorities, agencies, and community and voluntary organisations in support of the European Child Guarantee. The establishment of the Child Poverty and Well-Being Programme Office in my Department has been an important catalyst for collaboration, coordination and shared accountability. We are committed to building on this foundation and strengthening our collective capacity to prevent and reduce child poverty.

Addressing child poverty requires sustained commitment, long-term investment and continued collaboration across society. By working together and maintaining our focus on those most at risk, we can create lasting change.

Tá Éire fós tiomanta go daingean do dhul i ngleic leis an mbochtaineacht agus leis an eisiamh sóisialta agus do chinntiú go mbíonn an deis ag gach leanbh barr a chumais a bhaint amach.

Micheál Martin, T.D.
Taoiseach

Minister's Foreword

I am delighted to publish this second report on Ireland's implementation of the European Child Guarantee, setting out the progress made across key priority areas of the Guarantee in 2024 and 2025. The actions outlined in this report reflect Ireland's continued commitment to ensuring every child, regardless of circumstance, has access to the services and supports they need to thrive, to learn, and to participate fully in society. It also gives us an opportunity to reflect on progress and identify key areas that need renewed focus and further action.

The Department of Children, Disability and Equality leads on a number of key initiatives that support all children, including children at risk of poverty or social exclusion, and aim to break cycles of intergenerational disadvantage. Addressing child

poverty is given a spotlight in Young Ireland, the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People. Young Ireland brings together the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the European Child Guarantee, with cross-Government actions that create an environment where children and young people are central to decisions that affect them. Young Ireland adopts an intersectional approach, informed by consultation with children and young people themselves, and recognises the importance of participation, equality and inclusion in improving outcomes. Actions taken to implement Young Ireland have already made and will continue to make a positive difference in the lives of many children and young people in Ireland, including those who face poverty or social exclusion.

In the last few years, we have made significant progress in the areas of affordability, accessibility and quality across the early learning and care and school-age childcare sector, transforming early years learning in Ireland. A significant milestone during this period was the launch of Equal Start in May 2024, delivering on a key commitment under the First 5 Strategy (2019–2028). This new funding model brings together universal and child-targeted supports to deliver equality of access and participation in early learning and childcare and school-age childcare, particularly for children and families experiencing disadvantage. Bia Blasta, the preschool nutrition programme, provides daily lunches for pre-school children in disadvantaged areas. It is essential that we facilitate early years services. The earlier in life children are supported to reach their fullest potential, the better the outcome for the children.

To further improve educational outcomes for children experiencing disadvantage, the Government has worked in close collaboration with Traveller and Roma communities on the development of a Traveller and Roma Education Strategy (TRES). Children and young people in Traveller and Roma families are facing extreme disadvantage and inequalities across a wide range of indicators, including in terms of health, education, employment and accommodation. In 2024 I launched the new National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy II 2024 – 2028, which represents a whole-of-Government approach to improving the lives of Travellers and Roma in Ireland and includes

strategies to tackle discrimination, improve access to accommodation, support health and wellbeing and improve social inclusion.

The National Participation Office ensures that the voices of young people, their opinions, thoughts and ambitions permeate across government policy and its implementation. I was delighted to launch the Participation of Children and Young People in Decision-Making: Action Plan 2024-2028, which builds on the achievements of the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making. The Action Plan reflects Ireland's longstanding commitment to participation and supports inclusion, in the home, in education settings, in communities and at a national level. In the first two years of delivery, children and young people have contributed directly to policy development across many areas, including climate action, housing, school meals and youth homelessness. The Action Plan guides policymakers and others to support the meaningful participation of children and young people in decision-making. Ireland continues to lead the way in participatory practices, and this Action Plan shows us our next steps in this area.

The best policy is made when the people the policy affects are listened to and engaged with. The development of the new National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People was driven by the advocacy and engagement of disabled people, their families and communities. The ambitious programme of work covers a range of areas including education, transport and participation in community life, to ensure disabled people in Ireland have access to the same opportunities as everyone else.

This period has been shaped by ongoing investment, strengthened cross-government collaboration and an emphasis on listening to and responding to the lived experiences of children and young people. These approaches are essential to ensuring that actions under the European Child Guarantee are inclusive, responsive, effective and grounded in real needs.

I would like to acknowledge and thank all those involved in delivering actions under the European Child Guarantee, including Government officials, service providers,

community and voluntary organisations, and, importantly, children, young people and families themselves all across the country.

While there is still more work to do to combat child poverty and social exclusion, I am confident that with continued collaboration, Ireland can build on these foundations and continue to improve outcomes for children and young people across Ireland.

Norma Foley, T.D.
Minister for Children, Disability and Equality

Chair of Young Ireland Advisory Council's Foreword

As Chair of the Young Ireland Advisory Council, I welcome, on behalf of the Council (YIAC), the opportunity to contribute to this interim report of progress under the European Child Guarantee in 2024 and 2025.

Young Ireland is the overarching, national policy framework for children and young people to 24 years of age with the aim of achieving "*An Ireland which fully respects and realises the rights of children and young people*".

The European Child Guarantee recognises the devastating impact that living in poverty has on the lives of children and families and has set the target to lift five million children out of poverty across the EU states. Whilst each country has the same goal each is starting from a different position. This progress report therefore outlines Ireland's actions to reduce child poverty and its impact on children and young people.

Child poverty is often the result of intergenerational cycles of poverty and systemic issues which takes time, investment and focus to reset. There is clear evidence that poverty and social disadvantage usually impact most aspects of a child's life, therefore an effective response must be one for the whole of government. As the report makes clear although the ECG is formally placed within the Department for Children, Disability and Equality it is a cross-Governmental responsibility to ensure its full implementation.

The Irish Government has made progress in a number of areas of the Guarantee including, the provision of free hot school meals which is beginning to make a meaningful difference to families (we look forward to seeing the outcome of the holiday hunger pilot programmes) and there is progress on equitable access to high-quality mental healthcare. The report demonstrates the strong recognition across government of the importance of prevention and early intervention measures as being key to ensuring all children can fulfil their potential. The Young Ireland Advisory Council welcomes the targeted supports that have been put in place to improve access to early childhood education and support for families experiencing and are at risk of experiencing disadvantage.

It is clear from this report that children and young people continue to experience a number of challenges that must be addressed and meaningful change is a multi-year endeavour. To achieve this, we must recognise and understand the needs of all children and young people particularly those who are most disadvantaged. This requires both strong administrative data as well as working in partnership with children, young people, their parents and carers. As a constituent strategy of Young Ireland, the implementation of the Guarantee is guided by a child's rights approach to ensure that children and young people are given meaningful opportunities to participate in decision making and that their rights are foremost whenever we make decisions that affect their lives. We are encouraged by the progress made in data collection and usage, with the publication of a National Equality Data Strategy and the young Ireland Research Roadmap which support the use of high-quality data and research to create policy that improves the lives of disadvantaged children and young people.

Overall, the data, where available, shows slow but meaningful progress in securing a system which will result with tangible outcomes. The YIAC recognises that it will take time for these actions to be fully embedded and for impacts to be felt in children's lives and along with other stakeholder organisations, advisory bodies, independent experts, children and young people we will continue to work closely with the

Government, giving our expertise, working in partnership and holding them to account, until we are confident that that Ireland is the best place to be a child – a place that fully respects and realises children's rights.

Koulla Yiasouma
Chair of the Young Ireland Advisory Council

Table of Acronyms

Acronym	Full name
AIM	Access and Inclusion Model
AON	Assessment of Need
AROP	At Risk of Poverty
AROPE	At Risk of Poverty or Social Exclusion
ASF	Active School Flag Programme
BLAST	Bringing Live Arts to Students & Teachers
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
CDNT	Children's Disability Network Team
CRYIA	Child Rights and Youth Impact Assessments
CSO	Central Statistics Office
CYP Indicator Set	Children and Young People's Indicator Set
CYPSC	Children and Young People's Services Committees
DCDE	Ireland's Department of Children, Disability and Equality
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DRCDG	Department of Rural Community Development and the Gaeltacht
EAL	English as an Additional Language
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
ELC	Early Learning and Care
EPIC	Empowering People in Care
EPSEN	Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004
ESF+	European Social Fund+
ESRI	The Economic and Social Research Institute
ETB	Education Training Board
ETBI	Education and Training Boards Ireland
EWS	Educational Welfare Service
FRA	The EU Fundamental Rights Agency
FRC	Family Resource Centre

Acronym	Full name
FSAI	Food Safety Authority of Ireland
GAL	Guardian ad litem
GP	General Practitioner (doctor)
GUI	Growing Up in Ireland, the national longitudinal study of children and young people
HAP	Housing Assistance Payments, a form of social housing support provided by all local authorities
HSCL	Home School Community Liaison Scheme
HSE	Health Service Executive
HFSS	High Fat, Salt and Sugar foods
IAIMH	Irish Association of Infant Mental Health
IPH	Institute of Public Health
LCYP	Local Creative Youth Partnerships
MESL	Minimum Essential Standard of Living
MUGA	Multi-Use Games Area
NCS	National Childcare Scheme
NCSE	National Council of Special Education
NEIC	North East Inner City
NEPS	The National Educational Psychological Service
NHAC	National Homeless Action Committee
NIAC	National Immunisation Advisory Committee
NIO	National Immunisation Office
NSLF	Nurturing Skills Learner Fund
NTRIS II	The National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy II
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OPAP	Obesity Policy and Action Plan
PCIP	Primary Childhood Immunisation Programme
PE	Physical Education
PEI	Prevention and Early Intervention
REALT	Regional Education and Language Teams

Acronym	Full name
SAC	School-Age Childcare
SCP	School Completion Programme
SEAI	Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland
SHC	Sláintecare Healthy Communities
SID	Safer Internet Day
SILC	Survey on Income and Living Conditions
SNA	Special Needs Assistants
SONC	State of the Nation's Children report
STAR	Supporting Traveller and Roma project
SVP	Society of St. Vincent de Paul
TESS	Tusla Education Support Service
TRES	Traveller and Roma Education Strategy
Tusla	Tusla, the Child and Family Agency
TY	Transition Year
UBU	UBU Your Place Your Space
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
WHS	Warmer Homes Scheme
WTE	Whole Time Equivalents
YAG	Youth Advisory Group

Executive Summary

The European Child Guarantee aims to ensure that every child at risk of poverty or social exclusion has access to services which are key to their well-being and development. Ireland's European Child Guarantee progress report shows Ireland's progress in the implementation of the European Child Guarantee, and our associated National Action Plan covering the years 2024 and 2025.

Chapter 1- Context

While the position of Ireland's European Child Guarantee Coordinator is within Ireland's Department of Children, Disability and Equality, the National Action Plan is a cross-departmental strategy. The cross-government response to the European Child Guarantee has been further strengthened by the establishment of the Child Poverty and Well-Being Programme Office in the Department of the Taoiseach (Prime Minister), and the embedding of the Child Guarantee in the governance and implementation framework of Young Ireland, the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People.

A number of strategies and initiatives addressing social inclusion and child poverty have been implemented since Ireland's first progress report on the implementation of the European Child Guarantee in 2024, including the following:

- Ireland's new Child Poverty Target
- Equal Start
- Enhancements to the Free Schoolbooks Scheme
- Enhancements to the School Meals Programme
- The National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy II 2024-2028 (NTRIS II)
- The National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030
- HSE Child and Youth Mental Health Office Action Plan 2024-2027
- Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030

Chapter 2- Target Groups

Ireland's at risk of poverty rate for children has increased since 2023. However, Ireland's deprivation rate for children has decreased steadily since 2023. Ireland's share of children experiencing consistent poverty, which includes those who are both at risk of poverty and experiencing deprivation, increased in 2024 compared to 2023, but then decreased in 2025. This suggests that targeted measures to address this group are having an impact.

Ireland's overall percentage of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) is lower than the EU average. In relation to education, nutrition, health and housing, Ireland generally compares well to the EU more broadly, but there are variations within these figures when broken out into component parts, particularly in relation to children who are AROPE. Some groups of children and young people have specific needs and challenges that require action. These are:

- homeless children or children experiencing severe housing deprivation;
- children with disabilities;
- children with mental health difficulties;
- children from a migrant background or minority ethnic origin;
- children in alternative, especially institutional, care;
- LGBTIQ+ children and young people.

Chapter 3- Roll Out of Services

3.1 Early Childhood Education and Care

There have been continued increases in public funding for early childhood education and care since the previous progress report. 2024 saw the launch of Equal Start, a funding model and a set of associated universal and targeted measures to support access and participation in early learning and care (ELC) and school-age childcare (SAC) for children and their families who experience disadvantage. The National Childcare Scheme (NCS) was enhanced including increased entitlement to NCS subsidies and the phased extension to include families availing of registered childminders. A number of other initiatives underway in this area also include the My

Little Library Book Bag, the Access and Inclusion model, and Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for ELC and SAC 2022-2028.

3.2 Education

There have been a range of services and policies to increase access to education; address financial and non-financial barriers to education; improve ongoing participation in education; and provide additional needs, language, inclusion, and integration supports in this reporting period. This includes the publication of the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy II 2024-2028 (NTRIS II) and the Traveller and Roma Education Strategy (TRES) 2024-2030, the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme, the expansion of the Free Schoolbooks Scheme, the Digital Strategy to School 2027, the Assistive Technology Scheme, the School Transport Scheme, the Tusla Education Support Service, the Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy 2024-2033 and a joint project between Finland and Ireland, 'Fostering Inclusive Quality Education in Finland and Ireland', funded through a Technical Support Instrument.

3.3 School-Based Activities

'School-based activities' means learning by means of sport, leisure or cultural activities that take place within or outside of regular school hours or are organised by the school community. Services and programmes to increase access to school-based activities include; Transition Year, Gaisce: The President's Award, The DEIS Gaeltachta Scheme, Active School Flag Programme, The Sports Action Plan 2024-2027, The Sport Ireland Dormant Account Fund, Creative Youth Plan 2023-2027, Music Generation, National Recreation Policy development, Outdoor Play and Recreation, National Public Library Strategy 2023-2027 and the Participation of Children and Young People in Decision-Making: Action Plan 2024-2028.

3.4 Healthy Meal Each School Day

A number of measures to tackle food poverty occurred during this reporting period. Funding for the School Meals Programme was increased in Budget 2025 and the Hot School Meals Programme was expanded to all Primary Schools. In 2025 there were two

pilot programmes to tackle holiday hunger by supporting children and young people in accessing a healthy meal outside of school termtime.

3.5 Healthcare

The report details the developments made in the area of child and youth mental health including The National Office for Child and Youth Mental Health's 3-year Youth Mental Health Action Plan and the setup of two Adolescent Dual Diagnosis Hub Teams. The National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030 was published in 2025. There has been continued delivery of actions under the Action Plan for Disability Services 2024-2026 and the Roadmap for Service Improvement 2023-2026, to increase capacity in Children's Disability Network Teams.

3.6 Healthy Nutrition

To further address food poverty from an early age Bia Blasta Pre-school Nutrition Programme was launched.

3.7 Adequate Housing

This section sets out the details initiatives in respect of homeless accommodation such as the funding of local authorities and family hubs; preventing homelessness through the National Homeless Action Committee, the Youth Homelessness Strategy and the Child and Family Homelessness Action Plan; social housing with particular reference to the Housing Assistance Payments; the Traveller Accommodation Expert Group, and measures to help alleviate energy poverty.

3.8 Alternative Care

Ireland has continued to increase investment in child-centred alternative care. The section details the upcoming National Policy Framework for Alternative Care, the Capital Assistance Scheme for Care Leavers, Care Experiences: Journeys Through the Irish Care System and the establishment of the Guardian ad Litem National Service.

Chapter 4- Indicators, Targets and Monitoring

Mechanisms in place to monitor progress in respect of the European Child Guarantee include stakeholder engagement, strong connections with civil society organisations, independent advice from the Young Ireland Advisory Council, and high-quality, accessible data underpinned by the National Equality Data Strategy.

Chapter 5- Financing

Ireland's spend on European Child Guarantee measures is not easily differentiated and the funding which is supporting their implementation has not been allocated specifically for implementation of the European Child Guarantee. Cost-of-living measures on child poverty in budget 2024 and Budget 2025, reduced the at risk of poverty rate for children (0-17) in both years. Budget 2026 continues the approach of previous budgets, providing universal supports, guaranteed to all children to meet their fundamental needs with additional, targeted measures to support families who face particular challenges due to experiences of poverty and disadvantage.

Chapter 6- Lessons Learned and Further Developments

Ireland will continue to build on implementation of the Guarantee and delivering best outcomes for children at risk of poverty. A number of actions are in development and due in the early stages of the next reporting cycle, including; a Model of Best Practice for Students with Care Experience, enhancements to the National Childcare Scheme, the launch of the new Guardian ad Litem National Service, the next iteration of Ireland's education strategy, 'Our Schools, Our Future', and the launch of a Child and Family Homelessness Action Plan.

Chapter 7- Conclusion

Significant progress has been made in recent years to implement the Guarantee. Including continued cross-government commitment to reduce child poverty and ensure both child rights and intersectionality are considered in policy decisions. Ireland will hold the Presidency of the Council of the EU in 2026, and the ethos of the European Child Guarantee can be seen in our Presidency priorities - values, competitiveness and security.

Chapter 1 – Context

What is the European Child Guarantee?

The European Child Guarantee[1] ("the Guarantee") 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.

Fundamentally, the Guarantee aims to improve outcomes for children in need across the EU. This includes children with disabilities, children from minority ethnic groups, and other disadvantaged cohorts, but the primary focus is on children living in poverty. 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 the EU lived in households at risk of poverty or social exclusion. The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan 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), and the Guarantee plays a key role in reaching that target.

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.

As part of the European Commission's first EU Anti-Poverty Strategy, the European Child Guarantee was strengthened in 2026 to address the social emergency of persistent child poverty and the needs of vulnerable children.

[1] *European Child Guarantee*, European Commission, 2021. Available at: EUR-Lex - 52021DC0137 - EN - EUR-Lex

Ireland's Implementation of the Guarantee

Ireland is committed to the implementation of the Guarantee. Ireland published its European Child Guarantee National Action Plan[2] in 2022, incorporating its implementation and monitoring into the governance structures of Young Ireland, the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People[3].

Young Ireland sets out actions to address issues impacting children and young people, highlighting priority areas requiring coordination across Government. Through Young Ireland, the implementation of the Action Plan is overseen by senior officials across most Government Departments, as well as an advisory group of civil society members and independent experts with relevant experience. This allows the Guarantee to be considered in the wider societal context and can help to improve service delivery in areas not explicitly covered by the European Child Guarantee.

While Ireland's European Child Guarantee Coordinator sits within Ireland's Department of Children, Disability and Equality (DCDE), the National Action Plan is a cross-departmental strategy. The effective implementation of the European Child Guarantee involves the active input of several Government departments and agencies, working together to address these barriers. The cross-government response to the Guarantee is further strengthened by the Child Poverty and Well-Being Programme Office in the Department of the Taoiseach. The central leadership from the Department of the Taoiseach has helped to shine a spotlight on child poverty, and to ensure that the issue is high on the Government agenda.

In relation to resourcing, while the team coordinating Ireland's response to the Guarantee is small, it has access to a number of supports to assist with

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[2] *Ireland's European Child Guarantee National Action Plan*, Department of Children, Disability, and Equality, 2022. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-children-disability-and-equality/publications/irelands-european-child-guarantee-national-action-plan/

[3] *Young Ireland: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People*, Department of Children, Disability, and Equality, 2023. Available at: www.gov.ie/YoungIreland

implementation. The team has close working relationships with the bodies delivering actions and emphasises a child-centred approach in its engagements. Through the Young Ireland governance structures, implementing bodies have access to both independent advice and cross-government consideration, to help to drive their actions. Government Departments work in partnership with Tusla (the Child and Family Agency), the Health Service Executive (HSE), Local Authorities and other bodies to deliver services in the community.

Individual Government Departments have their own budgets (rather than a central budget held by the European Child Guarantee coordination team) and request funding from the Exchequer based on planned activities for the forthcoming year. While requested on a project-by-project basis, budgets are not usually broken down into individual line items. Additionally, activities can serve multiple purposes, so it is not possible to specify here the exact amount budgeted for or spent on the European Child Guarantee in a particular period.

Stakeholder Consultation

Consultation with stakeholders is an integral part of the policy development and service delivery process. Ireland has a very active Civil Society sector, and Government Departments engage regularly with these organisations to ensure that services are the best they can be, while reaching the people that need them the most. As well as regular engagement with Young Ireland's governance structures, the European Child Guarantee coordination team recently conducted a consultation process, to gauge public awareness of the Guarantee and perception of life in Ireland under each of its facets. This survey will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4. The team have also considered feedback given through other sources, such as the Children's Rights Alliance's annual report cards[4], and Eurochild's 2025 report on children in need in Europe[5].

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[4] *Annual Report Cards 2009-2026*, Children's Rights Alliance. Available at: https://childrensrights.ie/whats-new/latest-publications/report-card/

[5] *Delivering on the European Child Guarantee: Implementation, Practice and Priorities*, Eurochild, 2026. Available at:https://eurochild.org/uploads/2026/03/Eurochild-2025-Flagship-Sub-report

Addressing Social Inclusion and Child Poverty in Ireland

There is a strong commitment and momentum to address child poverty in Ireland. Since 1997, Ireland has put in place successive, national, cross-government strategies focusing on the reduction of poverty and social exclusion in Irish society. Addressing child poverty is one of the priorities highlighted in Young Ireland, the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People. The whole of-government approach recognises the complex and multi-dimensional nature of child poverty and its underlying factors which require a range of interventions to address.

Since the publication of the National Strategy for Research and Data on Children's Lives in 2011, Ireland has developed a significant knowledge infrastructure regarding child poverty, which is contributing to a better understanding of the short- and longer-term consequences of childhood poverty[6]. National data collection, particularly through the annual Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC), provides substantial insights into the prevalence of poverty in Ireland. Alongside this, Ireland has continued to emphasise the importance of including the voices of children and young people in decision-making. DCDE is developing Child Rights Impact Assessments and child rights training to support policy makers in this area, alongside existing participation toolkits.

In 2024 Ireland submitted the first progress report on the implementation of the European Child Guarantee. The report recognised that Ireland has made significant progress in recent years towards the aims of preventing and combating social exclusion. However, there is still work to do, and child poverty continues to be an issue. In 2025 it is estimated that there were 1,229,603 children (0-17 years) living in Ireland, accounting for 22.5% of the population[7]. Ireland's 2024 report showed that Ireland's share of children experiencing consistent poverty had improved from 6.3% in

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[6] *From Poverty to Potential: A programme for Child Poverty and Wellbeing*, Department of the Taoiseach. Available at: child-poverty-and-well-being-work-programme-2023-2025.pdf

[7] "Population and Migration Estimates", Central Statistics Office, 2026. Available at: Population and Migration Estimates - CSO - Central Statistics Office

2021 to 4.8% 2023. However, in 2024, the consistent poverty rate increased to 8.5%. This decreased in 2025 to 7.8%, showing that targeted measures to address this group are having an effect. Ireland's At Risk of Poverty (AROP) rate for children has increased from 14.3% in 2023, to 15.3% in 2024, and 16.9% in 2025[8].

This report details progress made in implementing Ireland's European Child Guarantee National Action Plan in 2024 and 2025. A wide variety of work is underway, under a number of different Government Departments. Some of this work goes beyond what was originally envisaged in the Action Plan, and this activity will strengthen Ireland's implementation of the Guarantee.

This report has been written to avoid duplication as much as possible – that is, we aim not to reiterate information already given in the previous progress report, unless needed for context. The majority of actions in the Action Plan were started prior to this reporting period, and Chapter Three gives an update on those actions. Some references have been made to activity prior to this reporting period, where it was not referenced in the previous progress report, and it was felt it merited inclusion.

Key Policies / Policy Changes of Note

The following is a high-level summary of some of the key policies and policy changes in Ireland in 2024 and 2025, that impact different aspects of the Guarantee.

Child Poverty Target

In 2025, the Government agreed a new Child Poverty Target, to reduce the child consistent poverty rate to 3% or less by the end of 2030. This Target is ambitious, representing a reduction of 4.8 percentage points from the current rate of 7.8%. In setting this target, the Government is clear that no child should be left behind and that no level of child poverty is acceptable. Tackling child poverty requires sustained investment and cross-Government commitment over many years. The target will

[8] " Household Income Deprivation and Poverty Children and Young Persons Hub", Central Statistics Office, 2026. Available at: Household Income Deprivation and Poverty Children and Young Persons Hub - Central Statistics Office

guide this work and ensure resources are focused on families with children who are most in need.

Child Poverty and Well-Being Office

The Child Poverty and Well-Being Programme Office in the Department of the Taoiseach was established in 2023. An important strategic initiative of the Programme Office has been developing an annual focus on child poverty in the annual Budget. International practice has shown that enhancing a specific focus on child poverty at budget time can have a significant impact on delivery and innovation[9]. Since 2023 the Programme Office has asked Departments to outline how their overall spending will impact on child poverty and published annual reports analysing how each budget has addressed child poverty and well-being. This helps ensure that budgets reflect the Government's commitment to reducing child poverty.

Equal Start

Equal Start was launched in May 2024, delivering on a key commitment in the First 5 strategy (2019-2028). Equal Start is a funding model and a set of universal and targeted measures to support access and full participation in ELC and SAC for children and their families who experience disadvantage. Bia Blasta, the Pre-school Nutrition Programme was launched in 2025 under the Equal Start funding model. The initiative is a direct measure to combat child food poverty by supporting the provision of a light nutritious meal to preschool children in Equal Start services and ECCE sessional services with the highest concentrations of preschool children experiencing disadvantage.

The Free Education Scheme

2025 saw the introduction of the final phase of the free schoolbooks scheme, with the extension of the scheme to Senior Cycle students in post-primary schools in the Free Education Scheme. In the 2025/26 school year, for the first time, all children and

[9] *From Poverty to Potential: A programme for Child Poverty and Wellbeing*, Department of the Taoiseach. Available at: child-poverty-and-well-being-work-programme-2023-2025.pdf

young people enrolled in primary, special and post-primary schools in the Free Education Scheme were provided with schoolbooks/eBooks and core classroom resources.

Parents and guardians were not asked to purchase or to make a financial contribution to the school towards the cost of these items. With a total funding package of over €160 million available in 2026, the Schoolbooks Scheme continues to benefit almost one million children and young people and is helping to ease the financial burden facing families at back-to-school time.

The School Meals Programme

The Government is committed to improving the availability of free, healthy meals in schools. The budget for the Hot School Meals Programme was increased to €300 million, to allow for the extension of the Hot School Meals Programme to all primary schools in September 2025. There is a commitment in the Programme for Government to expand the Hot School Meals scheme to post-primary schools during the lifetime of the current Government.

The National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy II 2024-2028 (NTRIS II)

The National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy II 2024-2028 (NTRIS II) was published in 2024 as a successor strategy to the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017–2021 (NTRIS). It was created in close partnership with communities and sets out a range of actions to tackle discrimination, improve access to accommodation, support health and wellbeing and improve social inclusion. The Traveller and Roma Education Strategy (TRES) 2024-2030 is a key action within NTRIS II. TRES aims to enhance the educational experience and outcomes for Travellers and Roma across the whole education system.

The National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030

The National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030 was published in September 2025. It is Ireland's plan to advance the realisation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and aims to ensure that disabled people are supported and empowered to live full lives of their own choosing. The

whole-of-Government approach covers five key pillars: Inclusive Learning and Education, Employment, Independent Living and Active Participation in Society, Health and Wellbeing, and Transport and Mobility.

HSE Child and Youth Mental Health Office Action Plan 2024-2027

The HSE Child and Youth Mental Health Office was set up in September 2023 and is a significant development to improve leadership, operational oversight and management of all service delivery related to youth mental health in Ireland. The Office published its new three-year Youth Mental Health Action Plan in February 2025. The plan sets out 16 key actions for comprehensive reform of child and youth mental health services in Ireland, aiming to ensure that children and their families have equitable and timely access to high-quality mental health care.

Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030

Building on the progress of 'Housing for All', the new housing plan, 'Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030' was published in November 2025. It is an integrated housing and homelessness plan based on two key pillars: activating the supply of 300,000 more homes; and supporting people to have a home of their own. In recognition of the negative impact accessing emergency accommodation has on the wellbeing of individuals, particularly children, a key priority of the plan is addressing long-term family homelessness, and reducing the time that children spend in emergency accommodation. A key commitment in the new housing plan is the development of a child and family homelessness action plan, which is due to be published shortly.

Delivering Homes, Building Communities commits to the continuation of the National Homeless Action Committee (NHAC) which was originally established in December 2021 under Housing for All. NHAC is a cross-governmental and inter-agency oversight group with membership drawn from key Departments, agencies and stakeholders. The work of NHAC is informed by Delivering Homes, Building Communities and its objective is to bring better coherence and coordination of homeless related services in delivering policy measures and actions to address homelessness. In 2024, a subgroup was established under the NHAC to examine

barriers to families exiting emergency accommodation. Also in 2024, a subgroup was established under the Youth Homelessness Strategy Steering Group to focus on prevention and early intervention.

Chapter 2 – Target Groups

Child Poverty in Ireland

In 2025 it is estimated that there were 1,229,603 children aged between 0 and 17 years of age living in Ireland[10] accounting for 22.5% of the total population. The Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) captures rates of consistent poverty, at risk of poverty, and deprivation in Ireland.

Ireland's share of children experiencing consistent poverty increased from 4.8% in 2023 to 8.5% in 2024. In 2025 the share of children experiencing consistent poverty decreased to 7.8%[11]. This suggests that targeted measures to address this group are having an effect.

The at risk of poverty rate is the share of persons with an equivalised income below a given percentage (60% in Ireland) of the national median income. The SILC 2025 overall (for the whole population) at risk of poverty rate was 12.6%, up from 11.7% in SILC 2024[12]. Irelands at risk of poverty rate for children has increased since 2023. In 2025, 16.9% of children were considered to be at risk of poverty, up from 15.3% in 2024. By age group, persons aged under 18 years (16.9%) had the highest at risk of poverty rate in SILC 2025, followed by those aged 65 years and over (14.8%). Those aged 18 to 34 years had the lowest at risk of poverty rate of 9.3%[13]. Analysis by household composition shows that persons living in households comprised of one adult with children had the highest consistent poverty rates of 13.4%.

However, Ireland's deprivation rate for children has decreased steadily over the last two years, from 21.4% in 2023, to 21.2% in 2024 and to 19.6% in 2025.

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[10] "Population and Migration Estimates", Central Statistics Office, 2026. Available at: Population and Migration Estimates - CSO - Central Statistics Office

[11] Household Income Deprivation and Poverty Children and Young Persons Hub", Central Statistics Office, 2026. Available at: Household Income Deprivation and Poverty Children and Young Persons Hub

[12] "Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2025", Central Statistics Office, 2026. Available at: SILC 2025 - Central Statistics Office

[13] "Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2025", Central Statistics Office, 2026. Available at: Poverty Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2025 - Central Statistics Office

Percentage of children in Ireland aged 0-17	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
At risk of poverty	14.5	14.7	14.3	15.3	16.9
Experiencing deprivation	17.3	18.8	21.4	21.2	19.6
Consistent poverty	6.3	7.0	4.8	8.5	7.8
At risk of poverty and social exclusion	23.5	22.3	24.3	20.9	23.7

Another important rate, addressed throughout this report, is the At Risk of Poverty or Social Exclusion rate (AROPE), 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. In 2023 the overall rate of AROPE children in Ireland was 24.3%, which decreased to 20.9% in 2024, before increasing to 23.7% in 2025[14].

How Do Children in Ireland Compare to the Wider European Union?

The Monitoring Framework[15] 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.

Measure	Ireland	EU Average
Children AROPE in 2024 (and 2025)[16]	20.9% (23.7%)	24.2% (24.3%)
Children living in households with very low work intensity in 2024 (and 2025) [17]	8.5% (10.2%)	7.4% (7.5%)

[14] "Persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion", Eurostat, 2026. Available at: [ilc_pecs01] Persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion - EU2030 target

[15] *ECG monitoring framework - third version (autumn 2025)*, European Commission, 2026. Available at: European Child Guarantee - Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion

[16] Data for 2025 became available after publication of the 'ECG monitoring framework - third version (autumn 2025)' in February 2026 and has been included in brackets. Available at: [ilc_peps01n] Persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion by age and sex

[17] Data for 2025 became available after publication of the 'ECG monitoring framework - third version (autumn 2025)' in February 2026 and has been included in brackets. Available at: [ilc_pecs01] Persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion - EU2030 target

Children (<16 years) with (severe or moderate) limitations due to health problems in 2024	6.2%	4.5%
Percentage of children in residential care out of the total number of children in alternative care	10.1% of 5866	40.9% of 734,601
Children under 3 AROPE (and not AROPE) in ECEC one hour or more per week in 2024	9.8% (27.2%)	24.4% (42.4%)
Children between 3 and compulsory schooling age AROPE (and not AROPE) in ECEC one hour or more per week in 2024	97% (95%)	82% (91%)
Percentage of children (<16 years) AROPE who suffer from the enforced lack of access to school trips and school events that cost money in 2024	5.5%	13.9%
Children (<16 years) AROPE who suffer from the enforced lack of access to leisure activities in 2024	27.8%	22.7%
Early leavers from education and training in 2024	2.8%	9.4%
Children (<16 years) AROPE who suffer from the enforced lack of access to fresh fruits and vegetables daily in 2024	0.9%	7.4%
Children (<16 years) AROPE who suffer from the enforced lack of access to a meal with meat, chicken or fish daily in 2024	1.5%	10.2%
Children (<16 years) AROPE with “very good” health in 2024	67.2%	57.4%
Children AROPE (and not AROPE) living in a household facing housing cost overburden in 2024	16.2% (2.8%)	21.1% (2.4%)
Children AROPE (and not AROPE) living in an overcrowded household in 2024	19.6% (5.4%)	42.6% (20.1%)

Children in Need

As of 2025, Ireland’s overall percentage of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion (AROPE) is lower than the EU average of 24.3%. Ireland’s share of children

who live in households with a very low work intensity has improved from 10.1% in 2022[18] to 8.5% in 2024 but increased to 10.2% in 2025 and is still higher than the EU average. In 2024, 6.2% of children under 16 in Ireland reported severe or moderate limitations due to health problems, higher than the EU average of 4.5%. In Ireland the vast majority of children in alternative care live in formal family-based care. In 2024, 10.1% of children in Ireland in alternative care were in residential care, which is significantly lower than the EU average of 40.9%.

Early Childhood Education and Care

The number of both AROPE and not AROPE children in Ireland that attend Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) for one or more hour per week has increased from 2023 to 2024 but is still below the EU average. 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. However, the proportion of AROPE and non AROPE children in Ireland between three and compulsory schooling age attending Early Childhood Education and Care for one hour or more per week is higher than the EU average.

Education and School-Based Activities

Children in Ireland compare favourably to other children in the EU in respect of access to school trips and events that cost money, with 5.5% of AROPE children suffering from lack of access compared to an EU average of 13.9%. However, more AROPE children in Ireland suffer from the enforced lack of access to leisure activities than their EU counterparts. Ireland has very low levels of leaving education and training early compared to the EU average.

[18] "Persons living in households with very low work intensity by age and sex", Eurostat, 2026. Available at: [ilc_lvhl11n] Persons living in households with very low work intensity by age and sex (population aged 0 to 64 years) (Under 18 years)

Nutrition

Access to daily fruit and vegetables, and meals with meat or fish for AROPE children improved in Ireland between 2021 and 2024. In 2024, 0.9% of AROPE children in Ireland lacked daily access to fresh fruits and vegetables, compared to 6.1% in 2021. In 2024, 1.5% of AROPE children in Ireland lack daily access to a meal with meat, chicken or fish, compared to 5.5% in 2021. In the wider EU, these figures are 7.4% and 10.2% respectively.

Healthcare

Both AROPE and not AROPE children report high figures of "very good" health in comparison with the EU average. However, there is still a notable disparity between not AROPE children reporting "very good" health at 76.5%, compared to 67.2% of AROPE children.

Housing

Ireland's child AROPE housing indicators are broadly in line with or stronger than the EU average, but housing and related costs remain a significant issue in Ireland, in particular for certain groups, including members of the Traveller and Roma communities in Ireland. The number of AROPE children in Ireland living in a household facing housing cost overburden has increased slightly from 14.9% in 2022 to 16.2% in 2024. The percentage of not AROPE children in Ireland facing housing cost overburden has also increased from 1.4% to 2.8%. The number of AROPE and not AROPE children living in an overcrowded household in Ireland remains significantly lower than the EU average.

Specific Groups

The following sections focus on disadvantages experienced by particular groups as identified in Article 5 of the European Child Guarantee. Following the precedent of Ireland's 2024 progress report we have not included discussion of '5(f) children in precarious situations' due to limited data.

Ireland has a number of universal programmes that impact positively on all children and so can span several vulnerable cohorts, rather than specifically focussing on certain groups. Below we have noted some targeted interventions aimed at addressing groups experiencing particular disadvantages. In many instances, the cohorts of vulnerable children overlap, as suffering from one form of disadvantage can make other negative outcomes more likely.

In line with Ireland's 2024 progress report, this report has also included LGBTIQ+ children as a specific target group. The stakeholder consultation process for the National LGBTIQ+ Inclusion Strategy II 2024-2028 consistently raised issues in relation to the provision of healthcare for LGBTIQ+ people, including young people[19]. This was also echoed by the Committee on the Rights of the Child in their Concluding Observations on the combined fifth and sixth periodic reports of Ireland in 2023.

Homeless Children or Children Experiencing Severe Housing Deprivation

Since 2021, child and family homelessness has continued to rise significantly in Ireland. According to the latest Homelessness Report, 2,478 families accessed emergency accommodation in the week of 22-28 December 2025, with 5,188 children under 18 years of age[20]. Family households make up 25.3% of the total of households accessing emergency accommodation in the same time period. In Quarter 3 2025, 663 family households, including 1,148 children under 18 years of age, were either prevented from entering emergency accommodation through the creation of a secure tenancy or exited from emergency accommodation to a secure tenancy.

Children With Disabilities

[19] *National LGBTIQ+ Inclusion Strategy II 2024-2028*, Department of Children, Disability, and Equality, 2024 National_LGBTIQ_Inclusion_Strategy_II_2024-2028.pdf

[20] *Monthly Homelessness Report December 2025*, Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2025. Available at:Monthly Homelssness Report December 2025

The number of children attending early learning and childcare services with a diagnosed disability increased from 6,706 in 2022-2023 to 7,052 in 2024-2025[21]. The majority of children in Ireland with disabilities attend mainstream schools. The percentage of 5-year-old students with special needs attending mainstream national schools increased from 81.3% in 2022-2023 to 84.3% in 2024-2025.

Children With Mental Health Issues

Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) is a national longitudinal research project tracking the lives of children and young people across multiple cohorts, including those born in 1998 (Cohort '98), 2008 (Cohort '08), and 2024 (Cohort '24). In 2024 GUI reported that almost a third of 13-year-olds in Cohort '08 (31%) had scores in the 'at risk' range on a measure of depressive symptoms. Girls were at a much higher risk, with 45% in the 'at risk' group compared to 19% of boys[22].

The 2025 iteration of the Irish Health Survey found that younger respondents reported higher rates of poor general mental health. Females aged 15 to 24 years had the highest prevalence, with one in eight (12.8%) rating their mental health as bad or very bad. This compares with 8.4% of males in the same age group. One third (32.5%) of females aged 15 to 24 years who used social media reported it had a negative impact on their mental health, compared with 24.9% of males the same age[23].

Children With a Migrant Background or Minority Ethnic Origin

The Equality and Discrimination Survey, carried out by the CSO in 2024 reported that half (49%) of people of a Black Irish/Black African/other Black background had experienced discrimination of some form in the previous two years, compared with just one in five (19%) people whose ethnicity was White Irish. Members of the Irish Traveller/Roma community also experienced high levels of discrimination

[21] *The First Five Years of Life in Ireland – Update 2026*, Department of Children, Disability, and Equality, 2026. Available at: Statistical_Spotlight_19_First_5_Update_2026.pdf
[22] *Growing Up in Ireland: Key Findings from the Self-Complete Survey with Cohort '08 at 13,* Department of Children, Disability, and Equality, 2024. Available at:JAV15660_GUI_Report_May24_V7_FA_Online.pdf
[23] "Irish Health Survey", Central Statistics Office, 2025. Available at: Key Findings Irish Health Survey - Main Results 2025 - Central Statistics Office

(42%)[24]. While it should be noted that this was a survey of adults, rather than children, Ireland's National Action Plan Against Racism acknowledges that racism often intersects with other forms of oppression, and recognises poverty as a primary driver for racist marginalisation.

Under-enumeration of Travellers and Roma in CSO figures is a concern for reasons relating to Travellers not wanting to identify as Travellers for fear of repercussions, difficulties encountered filling out census forms because of poor literacy, and in some cases, not receiving forms in the first place[25]. The CSO has worked in partnership with Traveller and Roma organisations to try and ensure that Travellers are counted in a more accurate and sensitive manner. Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre reports that through positive action and partnership initiatives between the CSO and Traveller organisations, there was a 37% increase in Traveller enumeration between Census 2006 and Census 2016[26].

The number of Irish Travellers living in the State and counted in Census 2022 was 32,949, an increase of 6% from 30,987 in the 2016 census. 15,332 Irish Travellers were in the 0 to 19 years age bracket. 16,059 people identified as Roma and 5,234 of those were between 0-19 years of age. Within both the Irish Traveller and Roma population there was a higher percentage of children under the age of 15 than the total population[27].

The EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) published its 2024 survey data on Travellers and Roma across 13 European Countries in October 2025[28]. Discrimination against Travellers and Roma due to ethnicity remains high, with Travellers in Ireland

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[24] "Key Findings Equality and Discrimination 2024", Central Statistics Office, 2024. Available at:Key Findings Equality and Discrimination 2024 - Central Statistics Office

[25] *Traveller culture and history Research report*, National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2023. Available at: Traveller-culture-and-history-research-report_2023.pdf

[26] Submission to the Central Statistics Office (CSO), Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre, 2023. Available at: Pavee-Point-Traveller-and-Roma-Centre-Census-2027-Submission-Jan-2023.pdf

[27] "Irish Travellers Census of Population 2022 Profile 5", Central Statistics Office, 2023. Available at: Irish Travellers Census of Population 2022 Profile 5 - Central Statistics Office

[28] *Travellers and Roma in Ireland Summary*, European Fundamental Rights Agency and Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre, 2025. FRA-Report-2026-AF-WEB-1.pdf

having the highest reported levels of discrimination across all 13 countries. 75% of Travellers and 60% of Roma said they were discriminated against in the year before the survey. More positively, in 2024 there was an increase in Traveller child enrolment in early childhood education compared to the previous Survey in 2019, rising from 64% to 68%. There was also a 5% increase in Travellers completing upper-post-primary education, rising to 27% (which is still considerably lower than 97% of the general Irish population). In 2024, 33% of Roma children attend early childhood education services and 37% of Roma had completed upper-post-primary education.

Children in Alternative, Especially Institutional, Care

At the end of December 2024, a total of 5,704 children in Ireland were in alternative care[29]. Of those children, 88.6% were in foster-care, 8% were in residential care and 3.3% were in other care settings. At the end of December 2024, 2,935 young people aged between 18 and 23 years old were in receipt of aftercare services. The number of young people in receipt of aftercare who are in full-time education has increased over the last number of years and as of 2024 was 78%.

LGBTIQ+ Children and Young People

The Being LGBTQI+ in Ireland 2024[30] study details the findings of a national study of the mental health and wellbeing of LGBTIQ+ people in Ireland. The report found that LGBTIQ+ people continue to face significant health issues, with high levels of self-harm and suicidality, and increased levels of depression, anxiety and stress. Of the 14–18-year-olds in the study, 50% experienced severe or extremely severe symptoms of depression, 66% experienced severe or extremely severe symptoms of anxiety, 72% had self-harmed, and 33% had made a suicide attempt.

Over 29% of 14-18-year-olds reported experiencing anti-LGBTIQ+ hate speech either online or in public media in the last year, and 59% had witnessed it. Participants

[29] Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. Data is taken at (a) December and (b) Q4 of each year.
[30] Being LGBTQI+ in Ireland 2024, Belong To. Available at: Being LGBTQI+ in Ireland 2024 - Belong To - LGBTQ+ Youth Ireland

highlighted how hate speech negatively affected their self-perception and sense of safety. Within the survey, 14–18-year-olds had the lowest happiness score.

Chapter 3 – Roll-Out of Services

3.1 Early Childhood Education and Care

Heading	Services and Policies Discussed
Financial and Non-financial Barriers	- The First 5 Implementation Plan 2023-2025 - Early Childhood Care and Education Programme - Equal Start - My Little Library Book Bag - National Childcare Scheme - The National Action Plan for Childminding 2021-2028 - Shaping the Future: The Early Years Action Plan
Inclusive Education	- Access and Inclusion Model
Workforce Plan for ELC and SAC	- Nurturing Skills
Transport	- First 5

Financial and Non-Financial Barriers

The number of children taking part in early learning and care (ELC) and school-age childcare (SAC) services has continued to rise. Data from the Annual Early Years Sector Profile,[31] shows that overall enrolments in ELC and SAC services increased by 25% over the period 2022-2025, rising from 197,186 to 247,011, with

- enrolments for 1–2-year-olds increasing by 13%,
- enrolments for 2–3-year-olds increasing by 12%.
- This increase in enrolments is striking in the context of a decline in the population of young children. Between 2016 and 2024, there was a 12% decline in the total number of children in Ireland aged 0-4.

[31] "The Early Learning and Childcare Data dashboards", Pobal.ie, 2026. Available at: https://www.pobal.ie/childcare/capacity/

In Ireland, there is no legal entitlement to an Early Childhood Education and Care place. It is acknowledged that there is a higher participation rate among more advantaged families. Eurostat data for 2024 shows that for children less than three years, participation rates in formal childcare for those at risk of poverty or social exclusion (10.7%) are lower than for those not at risk (28.4%). For those aged from three to five the participation gap is very small (95.3 vs 96.7%).

The First 5 Implementation Plan 2023-2025 set a new investment target, to work to close the existing gap in public investment in ELC against the EU average, between 2023 and 2028. Ireland's investment in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) has continued to grow year on year, with €1.37bn allocated in 2025, which represented a 34% increase from 2023. The 2026 allocation is €1.52 billion. This funding is aimed at improved affordability, facilitating capacity growth within the sector, and providing additional supports for children and families who are experiencing disadvantage. Children to benefit from child-targeted supports include those living in disadvantaged areas, Traveller and Roma children, those experiencing homelessness and those in International Protection. This increased funding is largely channelled through the funding model, Together for Better, which comprises the ECCE programme, including Equal Start, the National Childcare Scheme and the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM).

Ireland's ECCE programme[32] provides universal, free access to pre-schooling for three hours per day for children who have turned 2 years and 8 months, ensuring all children can access a core ECCE experience regardless of income. Note that parents may be charged for extra activities and for any hours of Early Childhood Education and Care beyond the three-hours per day of the programme. A review of the ECCE programme was published in October 2024, informed by comprehensive stakeholder engagement, including parents, ECCE providers and staff, and representatives from disadvantaged groups. The review showed that ECCE enjoys participation rates of

[32] "Early Childhood Care and Education Programme (ECCE)", Department of Children, Disability, and Equality. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-children-disability-and-equality/publications/early-childhood-care-and-education-programme-ecce/

96%, with over 70% of families on low-income reporting that they would not be able to send their child to pre-school without the programme. The review proposed enhancements to the programme to strengthen it and improve quality, accessibility and equity, including providing greater support for disadvantaged and marginalised children. Ireland is working to improve the ECCE programme based on the findings of this report, and other consultations and data.

Equal Start

Equal Start[33] was launched in May 2024, delivering on a key commitment in the First 5 strategy (2019-2028), and roll-out has been underway since September 2024. It is expected that Equal Start will be fully in place by the end of 2028. Equal Start is a funding model and a set of universal and targeted measures to support access and full participation in ELC and SAC for children and their families who experience disadvantage, including Traveller and Roma children, children experiencing homelessness, children in International Protection Accommodation Services, and children living in areas of relative deprivation.

The design of Equal Start was informed by a public consultation process that covered barriers, challenges and issues related to disadvantage in accessing and participating in ELC and SAC, priority groups, and possible supports and actions. Barriers highlighted during this process included issues of affordability, availability of places, low awareness of existing supports (owing to a range of factors including language and literacy issues) and difficulties navigating the application system. Some of the barriers to access and participation in ELC and SAC services are specific to particular target groups. For example, for homeless families, frequently changing accommodation can make it difficult to access ELC and SAC places; and minority ethnic families may not feel that their children are safe and welcome in all services, based on both recent and historic experiences. The Equal Start model aims to ensure

[33] "Equal Start", Department of Children, Disability, and Equality. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-children-disability-and-equality/publications/equal-start/

every child, and every ELC and SAC setting will benefit from a continuum of supports that reflects a continuum of need.

Equal Start 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, AIM, the National Childcare Scheme, and Core Funding. A total of 807 settings (serving 38,000 children, 4,900 of whom are from priority cohorts) identified as operating in a context of concentrated disadvantage have been given priority designation and have, since September 2024, been receiving additional funding. This funding is provided for additional staffing supports that can be used for greater engagement between the settings and families, as well as other child and family support services. The funding also provides ELC and SAC supports for children with higher levels of need.

Equal Start commits to a phased rollout as specific strands are developed, and additional funding becomes available. €17,185,000 was allocated to Equal Start in 2025, which included an additional nutrition provision in Tier 1 and Tier 2 services[34]. In 2026, an additional €5.14 million was secured for Equal Start, bringing the total budget allocation for Equal Start to €22.33 million.

My Little Library

In 2024, after a successful pilot project in 2023, My Little Library Book Bag[35] was officially launched. The initiative is part of the First 5 Strategy and provides every child starting school with free books and invites them to join their local library. Children leaving ECCE and starting primary school were invited to visit their local library to pick up their book bag and take the opportunity to join the library. The My Little Library initiative aims to encourage children and their families to read, ease the transition

[34] Tier 1 and Tier 2 settings that are to benefit from these setting-targeted supports have been objectively identified through the Equal Start Identification Model as operating in the context of the highest levels of concentrated disadvantage.

[35] " My Little Library", Department of Children, Disability, and Equality. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-children-disability-and-equality/publications/my-little-library/

from ECCE to primary school and build strong links between young children and their local library.

Libraries Ireland has developed a range of support services for ELC and SAC educators and practitioners to support their work. These include a dedicated membership card for all educators, practitioners and childminders; group visits to libraries; outreach visits or presentations on the libraries at the ELC or SAC service and a range of reading and curriculum support materials. In 2025 almost 40,000 young children benefitted from the initiative.

National Childcare Scheme

The National Childcare Scheme[36] (NCS) reduces the cost of childcare for all families, including the most disadvantaged. NCS combines both universal subsidies and income-assessed subsidies. The universal subsidy, which is not means-tested, provides €2.14 per hour for a maximum of 45 hours of childcare per week. This was increased from €1.40 in 2024. An Income-assessed subsidy which is means-tested and calculated based on the family's individual circumstances is also available to families with children aged between 24 weeks and 15 years. The rate varies depending on the level of family income, the child's age and educational stage, and the number of children in a family. In 2025 a total of around 245,000 children benefitted from the scheme, a 12% increase on 2024 where around 218,000 children benefited.

A key component of the NCS is the sponsorship referral, which makes special provision for vulnerable children. The sponsorship arrangement allows designated bodies to refer children to the Scheme where ELC and or SAC is needed based on child welfare, child protection, family support or other specified grounds. Where a referral is made by a sponsor body, the family will automatically qualify for a sponsor subsidy at no cost to the family. Each of the designated sponsor bodies has its own

[36] " National Childcare Scheme", Department of Children, Disability, and Equality. Available at: https://www.ncs.gov.ie/en/

age rules for referrals, however the 24 weeks to 3 years of age cohort may be referred under any of the designated sponsor bodies. The maximum cut-off is 15 years. The Scheme pays the full cost of ELC and or SAC for families referred to it by a sponsor Body. A maximum of 45 weekly hours is available under sponsorship, with the actual hours awarded being determined by the referring body. Sponsorship is based on the family's individual circumstances and ELC/SAC requirements. In 2024 the NCS sponsor subsidy increased to €5.30 per hour for all children over the age of one.

The National Action Plan for Childminding 2021-2028[37] commits to extending regulation and supports to paid, non-relative childminders who work in their own homes. New regulations for childminders came into effect in September 2024. The regulations have been written to reflect the home and family setting in which childminders work and the unique features of childminding, while providing important safeguards for children and offering safety and quality assurance for parents. Phase 1 of the National Action Plan for Childminding is now complete, and phase 2, which is a transition period, will last three years, to allow childminders lead-in time for the new regulatory requirements. During the three-year transition period, all childminders can now register with Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, but are not yet required to do so. Tusla registered childminders can take part in the National Childcare Scheme, enabling parents who use childminders to also benefit from State subsidies. This phased process aims to facilitate the largest possible number of childminders to enter the regulated sector, the sphere of quality assurance, and access to Government subsidies, while recognising the time and supports required for this reform. The new regulations require childminders to undertake pre-registration training, as well as meeting certain regulatory requirements including Garda vetting, first aid certification and child safeguarding training. This is followed by an assessment and a home visit, to ensure the service meets the new regulations.

[37] *National Action Plan for Childminding*, Department of Children, Disability, and Equality. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-children-disability-and-equality/campaigns/national-action-plan-for-childminding-2021-2028/

While the above supports exist to significantly reduce out-of-pocket costs for families, costs can still be a barrier to participation for many families. In December 2025, Shaping the Future: The Early Years Action Plan[38] was published, setting out the Government's Action Plan to build an affordable, high-quality, accessible ELC and SAC system. Among a range of commitments that the Action Plan will cover, the Programme for Government commits to progressively reduce the cost of childcare to €200 per month per child. The objectives of Shaping the Future are to:

1. Reduce parental fees to a maximum of €200 per month over the lifetime of the Government.
2. Increase the supply of places.
3. Widen opportunities for children with disabilities.
4. Contribute to the reduction of child poverty.
5. Enhance the quality of provision

Inclusive Education

Ireland has taken an inclusive approach towards all children, including those from minority and migrant backgrounds, in the provision of ELC and SAC services. AIM[39] a child and parent centred model, provides both universal and targeted supports to ensure that children with disabilities can fully participate in the ECCE programme and beyond. According to a 2025 Eurydice report[40], children with special educational needs or disabilities benefit from assignment of specialised staff and reduced group sizes. AIM supports focus on improving child-staff ratios in mainstream preschool sessions, which may include financial supports for additional staff, and providing in depth mentoring and training for early years educators. Additional funding for therapeutic and health interventions and improving physical accessibility is also available, as well as funding for specialised equipment.

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[38] "Shaping the Future Early Years Action Plan" Department of Children, Disability, and Equality. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-children-disability-and-equality/publications/shaping-the-future/
[39] "Access and Inclusion Model", Government of Ireland. Available at: https://aim.gov.ie/
[40] *Key data on early childhood education and care in Europe – 2025*, Eurydice report, European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice 2025. Available at: key data on early childhood education and care in-EC0524395ENN.pdf

An independent evaluation of AIM was undertaken and published in January 2024 and informed the phased extension of AIM. In September 2024 targeted AIM supports to ECCE-age children were extended beyond the time they spend in the ECCE programme. These children can now access their ELC setting for up to an additional 3 hours during the ECCE term and an additional 6 hours outside of the ECCE term. It is intended that, over time, all children with additional needs registered in Early Learning and Care services will have access to supports under AIM. A comprehensive policy development process is taking place in 2026 to extend AIM to children aged under three in future years, underpinned by consultations with key stakeholders. It is also intended to give consideration at a later date to an extension of AIM for children attending SAC.

Since AIM was first launched in 2016, more than 41,500 children have received targeted AIM supports in over 4,900 settings nationally and many more children have benefited from its universal supports. Budget 2025 allocated an additional €23.4 million for AIM, bringing the total allocation for AIM to almost €81 million in 2025. The AIM budget for 2026 is €84.04 million supporting more than 8,400 children with a disability requiring AIM supports to access and participate in the ECCE programme in 2026, an increase from 7,900 children in the previous year.

Workforce Plan for ELC and SAC

Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for ELC and SAC 2022-2028, aims to strengthen the ongoing process of professionalisation for those working in ELC and SAC. Nurturing Skills contains commitments to support early years educators to develop their careers, reduce staff turnover and promote diversity and inclusion in the workforce. Nurturing Skills focuses on supporting existing Early Years Educators and SAC Practitioners to achieve higher qualifications while continuing to work in the sector. In 2024 a Nurturing Skills Learner Fund (NSLF) was introduced to provide funding to educators to upskill to degree level, while continuing to work in the sector. Since its inception, the Nurturing Skills Learner Fund has offered financial assistance to over 1250 educators.

Many ELC and SAC services report difficulties in staff recruitment and retention. This is a challenge for many employers in the current tight labour market. Despite these challenges, the sector continues to grow year on year with the number of educators / practitioners working with children in the sector has increased by over 8% between 2024 and 2025 and has increased by over 33% since 2022. Also, staff turnover in the sector has reduced from a national average of 25.8% in 2024 to 24.5% in 2025.

Pay is one of the issues impacting recruitment and retention in the sector and is seen as a key enabler in Nurturing Skills. While Government is the primary funder of the sector, the State is not the employer, and does not set pay or working conditions. The Joint Labour Committee process is the mechanism by which employer and employee representatives can negotiate minimum pay rates, which are set down in law through Employment Regulation Orders. Through the Joint Labour Committee process and support through the Government's Core Funding scheme, Employment Regulation Orders have been signed into law in October 2025 to progressively increase wage rates in the sector for staff at different grades. An allocation of up to €45m of ring-fenced funding for the full programme year 2026/27 was announced in December 2025, to support service providers with costs associated with possible increases in minimum rates of pay negotiated via the independent Joint Labour Committee process.

Transport

The aim of the First 5 Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families, is to provide accessible and affordable ELC provision 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 ELC and SAC services, the cost of these services is generally integrated into the services' overall fee structures. 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

Heading	Services and Policies Discussed
Access to Education	- The Department of Education and Youth's Statement of Strategy 2025–2028 - Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS)
Financial and Non-financial Barriers	- Free Education Scheme - Free Schoolbooks Scheme - Digital Strategy for Schools to 2027 - The Assistive Technology Grant - The School Transport Scheme
Ongoing Participation in Education	- Tusla Education Support Service (TESS) - The School Completion Programme (SCP) - The Home School Community Liaison Scheme (HSCL) - Educational Welfare Officers (EWOs) - The National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy II 2024-2028 (NTRIS II) - The Traveller and Roma Education Strategy (TRES) 2024-2030
Additional Needs Supports	- Special schools - Fostering Inclusive Quality Education in Finland and Ireland TSI Project - Summer Programme
Language, Inclusion and Integration Supports	- English as an Additional Language - Regional Education and Language Teams - The Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy 2024-2033

Access to Education

The Department of Education and Youth's Statement of Strategy 2025–2028[41] sets out Ireland's vision for a world-class education system where every child and young person is supported and nurtured to achieve their full potential and where barriers to their learning are removed.

In 2024, Ireland welcomed the publication by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) of the 'Review of Resourcing Schools to Address Educational Disadvantage in Ireland'[42]. The review found that Ireland has an education system that consistently outperforms many other OECD countries and also exhibits relative socio-economic fairness, making it one of the stronger performers globally. It recognised the positive impact of resources provided universally to all schools, as well as the additional resources provided to schools in the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme, in addressing educational disadvantage. The review also highlighted that despite these achievements differences in outcomes persist for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and Traveller and Roma students.

The DEIS programme[43] is a key policy initiative of Government to address concentrated educational disadvantage at school level in a targeted and equitable way. The programme focuses on targeting additional resources at those schools with the highest concentrations of students who are at risk of educational disadvantage. It reflects the Government's commitment to support the educational success of each learner and provide a quality inclusive school system with improved learning outcomes for all.

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[41] *Inclusive education for all,* Department of Education and Youth. Available at: https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/92422c98/IAE_strategy.pdf

[42] *OECD Review of Resourcing Schools to Address Educational Disadvantage in Ireland, Reviews of National Policies for Education*, OECD, 2024. Available at: OECD Review of Resourcing Schools to Address Educational Disadvantage in Ireland | OECD

[43] "DEIS" Department of Education and Youth. Available at:https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/policy-information/deis-delivering-equality-of-opportunity-in-schools/

As of 2025 the DEIS programme encompasses approximately 1,200 schools, supporting approximately 260,000 students, with an annual investment of over €180 million[44]. Schools in the DEIS Programme receive a range of targeted supports aimed at tackling educational disadvantage, including additional classroom teaching posts, additional grant funding, access to literacy and numeracy supports, access to Home School Community Liaison Services, and access to the School Completion Programme.

While not all children in DEIS schools are at risk of poverty and social exclusion, and not all children at risk of poverty and social exclusion attend DEIS schools, universal supports aim to reach children at risk of poverty and social exclusion who do receive support through the DEIS programme.

Financial and Non-Financial Barriers

Education has the power to transform lives, lift people out of poverty, and break down cycles of disadvantage[45]. In recent years, a core objective of education policy in Ireland has been improving the social inclusion of children suffering disadvantage. There are significant costs associated with primary and post-primary education, including schoolbooks, uniforms, lunches, transport, trips and sports.

There has been a sustained commitment over multiple budget cycles to expand free schoolbooks which in turn helps to reduce education costs. Since 2023 pupils in primary and special schools in the Free Education Scheme[46] have been provided with free schoolbooks, workbooks and copybooks. From September 2024 this measure was extended to students in Junior Cycle programmes in post-primary schools in the

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[44] *First Progress Report of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office*, Department of the Taoiseach, 2025. Available at:first-progress-report-of-the-child-poverty-and-well-being-programme-office.pdf

[45]*Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025,* Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection. Available at:roadmap-for-social-inclusion-2020-2025-ambition-goals-commitments.pdf

[46] "Primary Schoolbooks Scheme", Department of Education and Youth. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/primary-schoolbooks-scheme/

Free Education Scheme. The Junior Cycle Schoolbooks Scheme benefits more than 213,000 children and young people in approximately 670 post-primary schools.

As part of Budget 2025, the Minister for Education and Youth announced that the free schoolbooks scheme would be awarded to students in Senior Cycle years, including Transition Year, in post-primary schools in the Free Education Scheme. This meant for the first time from September 2025, over 940,000 children and young people in primary and post-primary schools in the Free Education Scheme received free schoolbooks and core classroom resources.

The Schoolbooks Scheme does not extend to the supply of digital devices by schools. However, schools may use the funding for digital media support, which relates to teaching and learning within curricular requirements. In addition, schools receive an ICT Grant as part of the Digital Strategy for Schools to 2027[47] which may be used for ICT infrastructure, including devices for learners (including shared or loaned devices), software and digital learning platforms, to support teaching and learning and to promote equitable access to digital technologies. An enhanced per capita rate applies to students enrolled in DEIS and Special schools and to pupils in mainstream special class primary settings.

The Assistive Technology Grant[48] supplements funding for digital technology and equipment in schools. Under the Assistive Technology Grant, funding is provided to schools towards the cost of computers and specialist equipment for individual children with complex needs. This equipment is intended to ensure that these children can access the curriculum where, due to their complex needs, they would otherwise be unable to do so.

[47] "Digital Strategy for Schools", Department of Education and Youth. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/digital-strategy-for-schools-to-2027/
[48] "Assistive Technology Grant", Department of Education and Youth. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/services/assistive-technology-grant/

School Transport

The School Transport scheme[49] is operated by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department of Education and Youth. Under this 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 and children availing of Special Educational Needs transport are exempt from the annual ticket charge. In the 2024/25 school year, 172,500 students are estimated to have travelled across 10,300 routes on a daily basis[50]. The scheme is heavily subsidised by the State, with over 92% of the overall cost covered. The cost of transport as a barrier to participation in school and school-based activities has been further reduced by the decision in Budget 2025 to extend free public transport to children between 5 and 8 years of age. In 2026, this will reduce further, with no family paying more than €1.32 per day, regardless of how many children use the service.

While these measures have made substantial inroads into reducing the costs of education, addressing the attainment gap between DEIS and non-DEIS schools remains a key focus of the Government's efforts to ensure educational equity.

Ongoing Participation in Education

Ireland's early school leaving rate is well below the EU average, at 3% in 2024,[51] down from 4% in 2022[52]. Despite this, differences in retention rates for certain cohorts such as those attending DEIS schools and members of the Traveller and Roma communities persist.

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[49] "School Transport", Department of Education and Youth. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/services/school-transport/

[50] *Overview of the School Transport Scheme*, Parliamentary Budget Office, 2025. PBO Publication 20 of 2025

[51] "Educational Attainment Thematic Report 2024", Central Statistics Office, 2024. Available at:Education Level and Labour Force Educational Attainment Thematic Report 2024 - Central Statistics Office

[52] "Educational Attainment Thematic Report 2023", Central Statistics Office, 2023. Available at: Ireland, the EU and Educational Attainment Educational Attainment Thematic Report 2023

In May 2025, the Minister for Education and Youth announced a comprehensive suite of targeted and universal actions to improve school attendance. Among the key initiatives was a national multimedia campaign, developed by the Department and Tusla Education Support Service[53] (TESS) in consultation with key stakeholders. The campaign, "Every School Day is a New Day", was launched in September 2025 to raise awareness of the school attendance issue with parents and guardians, communicate the many positive benefits that daily attendance at school provides for our children and young people, and signpost the available supports for schools, parents and guardians.

TESS works collaboratively with schools, families and other relevant services to tackle educational disadvantage and achieve the best educational outcomes for children and young people at risk of poor attendance or early school leaving. TESS Supports include:

- The School Completion Programme[54] (SCP), a targeted programme of support for primary and post primary children and young people who are at risk of early school leaving or are not currently attending school;
- The Home School Community Liaison Scheme[55] (HSCL), promoting partnerships between parents, teachers and community support services to improve educational outcomes for primary and post primary students who are at risk of poor attendance and participation; and
- The Educational Welfare Service[56] (EWS), funding Educational Welfare Officers (EWOs) who work in a child-centred way with young people and their families who are experiencing difficulty with school attendance.

The Traveller and Roma Education Strategy[57] (TRES) 2024-2030 is a key action within NTRIS II. TRES aims to build on ongoing work across the continuum of education to

[53] "TESS", Tusla. Available at: https://www.tusla.ie/tess/
[54] "TESS, The School completion Programme", Tusla. Available at: https://www.tusla.ie/tess/scp/
[55] "TESS, the Home School Community Liaison Scheme", Tusla. Available at: https://www.tusla.ie/tess/hscl/
[56] "TESS, Education Welfare Service", Tusla. Available at: https://www.tusla.ie/tess/tess-ews/
[57] *Traveller and Roma Education Strategy*, Department of Education and Youth, 2024. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/consultations/traveller-and-roma-education-strategy/

improve outcomes and ensure equity of access, opportunity and outcomes, as well as meaningful participation, for all Travellers and Roma. TESS will work in close collaboration with schools and Traveller and Roma organisations in developing Community Link Worker roles, identifying the specific needs of the communities, and improving school attendance and participation through its three-strand integrated service of SCP, HSCL and EWS.

Additional Needs Supports

Ireland spends in excess of 25% of its annual education budget on additional provision for children with special educational needs in schools. Ireland's policy is that students with special educational needs should be included where possible and appropriate in mainstream placements with additional supports provided. 97% of all children are supported in mainstream classes with their peers. Where more specialist provision is required special classes within mainstream schools are provided or special schools places made available.

In 2024 and 2025 an additional 824 special classes in mainstream schools and 9 new special schools were established, bringing the total number in 2025 to 3,741 and 139 respectively. Of the 139 special schools, 7 are affiliated with hospitals and 3 with Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) units. Capacity has also been expanded in a number of other special schools. There has also been a shift to developing campus sites, where special schools and mainstream schools are co-located. These investments have helped enable the enrolment of almost 31,000 pupils in special classes and special schools in 2025, up from 13,000 in 2015.

At the end of 2025 there were over 44,000 teachers and Special Needs Assistants (SNA) working in Ireland's education system, committed to supporting and nurturing students with special educational needs, and enabling them to achieve their best outcomes and reach their full potential.

Ireland is collaborating with Finland and the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education to develop a Roadmap for Inclusion. This work will run from 2023

to 2026[58]. Aligned with EU priorities under the Technical Support Instrument (TSI), the multi-country project supports reforms to strengthen inclusive mainstream education by addressing gaps in policy implementation, teacher capacity and stakeholder collaboration, and promotes system-level improvements and peer learning between both countries.

The Irish Government has provided further substantial investment to support children with special educational needs including:

- the expansion of the Summer Programme[59], which offers participating schools grants to ensure children with complex special educational needs and those from disadvantaged backgrounds can access a school-based Summer Programme;
- increased capitation grants;
- enhanced start-up grants for schools establishing new special classes;
- additional funding and resource allocation to the National Council of Special Education (NCSE) to allow for the expansion of its services; and
- the establishment of the Education Therapy Service[60].

In addition, the final report of the review of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004[61], which provides for the education of children aged under 18 years with special educational needs, was published on 25 June 2025 with 51 recommendations. These are divided into 2 sections, legislative and policy based. The policy changes in the report are stepping stones to underpin these policy changes in legislation. An implementation plan will be published in 2026 to outline how these recommendations will be implemented.

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[58] "Fostering Inclusive Quality Education in Finland and Ireland", Available at: Fostering Inclusive Quality
[59] "Summer Programme 2026", Department of Education and Youth, 2026. Available at https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/summer-programme-2026-school-based-programme-in-primary-schools/
[60] "NCSE Education Therapy Service", National Council for Special Education. Available at: https://www.ncse.ie/school-leaders/resources-for-school-leaders/education-therapy-service/
[61] Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 (no.30) Available at: https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2004/act/30/enacted/en/html

Language, Inclusion and Integration Supports

A range of supports have been put in place to help meet the needs of young people who arrive in Ireland, including increased English as an Additional Language[62] (EAL) support. Students may avail of additional EAL support for two years, with the possibility of a further year, if required. Additional special education resources are available for children living in International Protection Accommodation centres and those who arrived from Ukraine. All migrant and refugee children and young people can access the same educational supports as Irish children such as free schoolbooks and access to the Hot School Meals Programme.

The National Educational Psychological Service[63] (NEPS) also provides schools with resources and guidance on trauma and wellbeing. These measures are designed to help children integrate into school life and progress in their learning as quickly as possible.

In 2022, in response to the outbreak of war in Ukraine the Department of Education and Youth established REALT (Regional Education and Language Teams) to assist families arriving from Ukraine to enrol their children in school. Each REALT is headed by a Coordinator, and their remit was extended in November 2022 to include families in the International Protection process. There are currently fourteen REALT coordinators in total.

Ireland's Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy 2024-2033 was launched in May 2024. The strategy aims to deliver systematic improvement in literacy, numeracy and digital literacy across the continuum of education from early childhood to post-primary level. Informed by extensive research and consultation processes, the strategy details how the learner will experience literacy, numeracy and digital literacy at each level from ELC to post primary school. The strategy recognises the importance of

[62] "Department of Education Inspectorate publishes findings from school inspections of English as an Additional Language", Department of Education and Youth, 2025. Available at https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/press-releases

[63] "National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)", Department of Education and Youth, 2026. Available at https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/services/national-educational-psychological-service-neps/

early intervention and support in establishing a strong foundation in literacy, numeracy, and digital literacy, and so prioritises development in ELC to ensure that all children have access to high quality learning experiences from an early age.

The strategy also includes initiatives aimed at enabling parents to support learners, developing curriculums and assessment types, supporting the professional practice of educators and fostering supportive learning environments that value diversity. The first implementation plan includes a number of actions that specifically address children at risk of educational disadvantage, including research into effectively supporting learners in DEIS schools; engaging with national organisations representing communities whose children are at risk of educational disadvantage to ensure their experiences and expertise are utilised; and initial training for educators.

3.3 School-Based Activities

Access to school-Based activities	- Transition Year - Gaisce – The President's Award - The DEIS Gaeltachta Scheme - Active School Flag Programme - The Sports Action Plan 2024-2027 - Creative Youth Plan 2023-2027 - Music Generation - National Public Library Strategy 2023-2027 - Webwise - National Recreation Policy development - The Participation of Children and Young People in Decision-Making: Action Plan 2024-2028

In this context, 'School-based activities' means learning by means of sport, leisure or cultural activities that take place within or outside of regular school hours or are organised by the school community. The Irish Government has a number of strategies and actions to promote equal and inclusive access to school-based activities. The

Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025 noted that "Social Inclusion is achieved when people have access to sufficient income, resources and services to enable them to play an active part in their communities and participate in activities that are considered the norm for people in society generally". This recognition of the importance of school-based activities in social inclusion will also be featured in the forthcoming Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2026-2030.

Transition Year

Transition Year[64] (TY) is a one-year optional programme available to all post-primary schools. The Transition Year Programme Statement highlights that TY programmes should be inclusive and embrace diversity. TY aims to help students as they transition from the more dependent learning of the Junior Cycle to the more independent, self-directed learning of the Senior Cycle. The programme is flexible and collaborative so schools can adapt the TY programme to suit the needs and interests of its students. During TY, students have opportunities to explore different career options, civic and community engagement, varied learning strategies and personal growth. In 2025, over 60,000 students were enrolled in TY programmes, representing a record level of participation.

The 2025 Programme for Government commits to promoting the expansion of the Transition Year programme and addressing the barriers faced by some students in accessing it[65]. In 2024, the Department of Education and Youth conducted a survey with all post-primary schools to help identify the barriers to participation and assess the level of unmet demand for access to Transition Year. The results of this survey will help inform the approach to ensuring universal access to the TY programme. There are a variety of local schemes to support students accessing the TY programme, in areas experiencing concentrated disadvantage. For example, the North East Inner City (NEIC) Transition Year Programme provided 422 high quality work experience

[64] "Transition Year", National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. Available at: https://ncca.ie/en/senior-cycle/senior-cycle-programmes/transition-year/
[65] *Programme for Government 2025 Securing Ireland's Future*, Department of the Taoiseach, 2025. Available at: programme-for-government-securing-irelands-future.pdf

placements for 218 students across six post-primary DEIS schools located in the North East Inner City of Dublin in the 2024/25 school year.

Gaisce – The President's Award

Gaisce – The President's Award[66] is Ireland's national youth award. It is a personal development programme that provides structure, support, and certification for non-formal learning experiences for young people aged 14 to 25. For each award level, participants must undertake Challenge Area activities that fulfil Personal Skill, Community Involvement, Physical Recreation and Adventure Journey requirements. Gaisce is delivered in post-primary schools, third level institutions, second-chance and further education services, youth services, disability organisations, sporting organisations, youth justice, prison and probation services, organisations working with young refugees and asylum seekers, and more.

The Gaisce Impact report for 2023 reported that Gaisce is active in 79% of all post primary schools in Ireland and in 62% of DEIS schools. 2023 saw the highest rate of registrations and completions since 2019 with 14,872 Award completions. Gaisce is committed to making the programme accessible to as many young people as possible, and the Gaisce Bursary Funds helps facilitate this. In 2023, 1,549 young people representing 41 organisations directly benefitted from Gaisce bursaries, with a total of €68,390 in Bursary funding given out through two funds. The Irish Aid Gaisce Glas Bursary Fund alleviates participation barrier costs including the hiring of transport, helping with disability access needs, equipment and providing accommodation. The second Bursary programme targets the area of Youth Justice, supporting the inclusion of young people in youth justice related projects and youth diversion projects. In 2023 there was a 120% increase in Youth Diversion Project participants[67].

[66] "Gaisce" Available at: https://gaisce.ie/
[67] *Impact Report 2023*, Gaisce the Presidents Award, 2024. Available at:Impact Report 2023_Digital

The DEIS Gaeltachta Scheme

Across Ireland, many post-primary students attend Irish language courses in the Gaeltacht (regions where the Irish language is the primary spoken language). The Government believes that the Irish language is of particular importance for the people, society and culture of Ireland. The objective of Government policy in relation to Irish is to increase on an incremental basis the use and knowledge of Irish as a community language and ensure that as many citizens as possible are bilingual in both Irish and English[68]. The price of these programmes varies.

The DEIS Gaeltachta Scheme started in 2019 and provides financial support for students of designated DEIS status post primary schools to attend an approved Gaeltacht summer course. In 2024, 63% of eligible schools submitted applications to the scheme, an increase on the 34% who applied in 2022. In Budget 2025, an additional €0.5 million was allocated to the DEIS Gaeltachta Scholarship Scheme, which significantly expanded the scholarship fund. Over 800 students were supported by the scholarship in the summer of 2025, compared to 422 students who received scholarships in 2022.

Sports Activities

The Department of Education and Youth develops and supports initiatives relating to physical activity and education, identifying and promoting ways to maximise physical activity throughout the school day. The Physical Education (PE) curriculum in schools is gender-neutral and emphasises participation for all, both in curricular and extracurricular physical activity. The Department of Education and Youth together with the Department of Health through the Healthy Ireland initiative, fund the Active School Flag Programme[69] (ASF). The ASF programme promotes physical activity, using a whole-of-school approach focused on inclusion and fun, anchored by student voice

[68] *20 Year Strategy For The Irish Language 2010 – 2030,* Government of Ireland, 2010. Available at: Strategy For The Irish Language
[69] Active School Website https://activeschoolflag.ie/

and student leadership. The ASF programme was expanded to post-primary schools in November 2025 and selected schools will participate in this initiative during 2026.

The Sports Action Plan 2024-2027[70], under the National Sports Policy 2018 – 2027 encourages and promotes the personal health, wellbeing and physical activity of young people. Promoting greater equality, diversity and inclusion in sport, throughout all parts of the sector, remains a priority that will guide the strategies implementation plan. Under this strategy Sport Ireland appointed a Disability in Sport Lead to provide focused leadership on measures to increase participation among those with a long-term illness or disability. The strategy aims to increase funding streams focused on women in sport, disability, elderly participation, equality, diversity and inclusion. A targeted 'Sports for All' fund was established for clubs to increase participation opportunities for people with disabilities. Funded by Sport Ireland from the European Social Fund+ (ESF+) since October 2023 the Sport4Empowerment programme aims to use sport and physical activity, to foster social inclusion and enhance the wellbeing, education, and economic prospects of people at risk of social exclusion.

Creative Activities

Creative Youth Plan 2023-2027[71], launched in 2023, is one of five pillars of the Creative Ireland Programme. Creative Youth aims to place creativity at the heart of children and young peoples' lives. It is implemented by the Department of Culture, Communications and Sport, the Department of Education, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and the Arts Council. Through the plan key skills and competencies of collaboration, critical thinking, problem-solving and innovation are encouraged through engagement with creativity in a range of formal and informal settings. Key outcomes identified through post-initiative evaluations include improved student confidence and collaboration, and

[70] *National Sports Policy 2018 – 2027: Sports Action Plan 2024 – 2027*, Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media,2024. Available at: Sports Action Plan (English).pdf
[71] *Creative Youth Plan 2023-2027*, Creative Ireland Programme, 2023. Available at: https://www.creativeireland.gov.ie/app/uploads/2023/03/Creative-Youth-Plan-2023-2027.pdf

evidence that creative learning experiences support student wellbeing and self-expression.

Between September 2023 and June 2025, more than 580 Creative Youth programmes took place in DEIS schools, over 100 in Special Schools, and 10 in Youthreach centres. These initiatives enhanced access to creative programmes for learners at risk of disadvantage or outside the mainstream education system. Creative Youth ensures marginalised or disadvantaged youth are included in creative activities through targeted programmes and partnerships. Examples from across the education system and within communities, include:

- Local Creative Youth Partnerships (LCYPs) work with children and young people in out-of-school settings, providing creative opportunities that complement those in formal education. LCYPs focus particularly on engaging marginalised and disadvantaged groups, ensuring that young people from all backgrounds can discover and explore their creativity through participation in diverse cultural and artistic activities. Based in Education and Training Boards, they complement and work with the formal school settings in a non-mainstream manner. In 2025, an eighth LCYP was established in Tipperary.

- A new Creative Youth School Data Mapping Tool[72] was developed in 2025, displaying participation by school in specific Creative Youth initiatives.

- The Creative Youth Nurture Fund Pilot 2023-2025 granted over €700,000 for nine projects to engage specific cohorts of seldom heard children and young people to participate in and develop creative projects. A new scheme was launched in December 2025, including a Shared Island[73] Strand.

[72] "Schools Map of Creative Youth Initiatives", Department of Education and Youth, 2026. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/publications/schools-map-of-creative-youth-initiatives/
[73] "Shared Island Initiative", Government of Ireland. Available at: Shared Island initiative

- Creative Connections Shared Island projects engage children and young people across the island of Ireland providing them with creative learning opportunities that may not otherwise be available and enabling them to weave creativity into their lives. Part of the Shared Island initiative on tackling educational disadvantage, Creative Connections[74] prioritise access for DEIS schools in Ireland and schools in RAISE areas in Northern Ireland.

- The models of Bringing Live Arts to Students & Teachers (BLAST) and Creative Clusters are being piloted, to focus on celebration of culture and creative expression for identified post-primary schools with high enrolments of Traveller and Roma young people. The two-year programme Creative Clusters makes use of innovative arts and creative learning to engage with a common learning theme or creative challenge.

- Creative Youth initiatives BLAST and Creative Clusters, delivered through Education Support Centres Ireland, operate application marking schemes which advantage DEIS schools, Youthreach centres and projects which aim to support specific marginalised and disadvantaged groups. An evaluation of the BLAST programme in 2025 identified a strong, deliberate commitment to educational inclusion, noting substantial participation from DEIS schools and a steadily increasing demand for residencies from special schools. The programme, together with the Teacher Artist Partnership+ and Creative Clusters has been highly effective in lowering participation barriers for marginalized or underrepresented educational sectors.

- Cruinniú na nÓg', the annual day of free creativity for children and young people delivered over 1,300 events in June 2025 across the island of Ireland and highlights specific inclusive events for young people with additional and/or sensory needs.

[74] "Creative Connections, Department of Education and Youth. Available at: Creative Connections

In addition to Creative Youth, the Department of Education and Youth fund Music Generation[75], a national non-mainstream out-of-school performance music education programme. Its mission is to empower children and young people to realise their full potential through access to, and participation in, high quality music performance education. In 2024, around 130,000 children and young people participated in over 200 different Music Generation programmes across 29 areas in Ireland.

Public Libraries

There are over 17 million visits annually to 330 public library branches and 30 mobile libraries across Ireland. Libraries play a key role in the community by providing free access to information, ideas, resources and services. Under the 'Libraries for All' theme of the Library is the Place: Information, Recreation, Inspiration - National Public Library Strategy 2023-2027[76], libraries commit to supporting disadvantaged and marginalised users, welcome new arrivals and assist with their integration into the community. This includes the provision of specific programming, technology and facilities for disadvantaged and marginalised library users.

Library services include the Right to Read Programme, a national literacy and reading programme and the 'Healthy Ireland at your Library' initiative which provides books, resources and workshops that focus on physical health, mental health and health literacy. The government is committed to investing in libraries as community hubs across the country. It was announced in 2024 that as part of the Libraries Capital Programme 2023-2027, the Government is investing €22.6 million in 11 library infrastructure projects and a further €2.6 million in 12 next-generation mobile libraries.

[75] Music Generation Website https://www.musicgeneration.ie/
[76] *National Public Library Strategy 2023-2027,* Department of Rural and Community Development, the City and County Management Association and the Local Government Management Agency, 2023. Available at: National Public Library Strategy 2023-2027

Online Safety

Online safety and ethical digital use are central to the Government's Digital Strategy for Schools to 2027. Webwise is the online safety initiative of the Department of Education and Youth and co-funded by the European Union. With the help of the Webwise Youth Advisory Panel, Webwise develops youth-oriented awareness raising resources and training programmes that promote digital citizenship and address topics such as online wellbeing, cyberbullying and more. The Youth Advisory Panel is made up of 30 members and meet throughout the academic year. The panel play an active role in developing the national Safer Internet Day awareness campaign.

Safer Internet Day (SID) is an EU wide initiative to promote a safer internet for all users, especially young people. Safer Internet Day Ambassador Programme is a peer-to-peer youth training programme that empowers students by providing them with opportunities to lead an online safety campaign in their own school or community. Over 200,000 young people celebrated Safer Internet Day in Ireland in 2025.

Play and Recreation

The Department of Children, Disability and Equality are currently developing an updated National Play and Recreation Strategy. The National Youth Assembly of Ireland, which is a consultative forum for young people between the ages of 12–24 years that facilitates youth participation in decision-making, has been convened to provide input to this strategy. Children under the age of 12 attended the Assembly as guest delegates.

An overview of outdoor play and recreation provisions for children and adolescents in Ireland was published in 2024[77]. As of March 2024, there are 960 playgrounds across the country, an increase of 6 per cent since 2018. The ratio of playgrounds to children aged 0-11 years improved from 1:903 in 2018 to 1:820 in 2024. Multi-Use Games Areas (MUGAs) increased from 171 in 2018 to 232 in 2024, improving the ratio from

[77] "Play and Recreation Reviews and Good Practice Examples", Department of Children, Disability, and Equality, 2025. Available at:Play and Recreation Reviews and Good Practice Examples

1:2,549 to 1:2,146 for adolescents aged 12-18 years. Nationally, there are 388 recreational forests across every county in Ireland, where recreational activities, such as, walking, cycling, playgrounds and camping can be experienced. The review found that overall, play and recreation amenities had improved since 2018 but recommended an enhanced focus on the play needs of adolescents for equitable access.

Participation of Children and Young People in Decision-Making

The Participation of Children and Young People in Decision-Making: Action Plan 2024-2028[78] is the second national plan to support children and young people to participate in decision-making. It builds on the first National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making, 2015-2020, which was the first of its kind in Europe.

The overall aim of this Action Plan is to promote the inclusion of children and young people in decision-making at all levels: in the home, in school, in their community and at national level. The participation of seldom-heard and vulnerable children and young people in decision-making is ensured by means of establishing and improving mechanisms for their participation.

The plan provides a framework to support all Government Departments and State agencies to have meaningful engagements with children and young people when developing relevant policy, legislation, research and services. It is underpinned by a rights-based model of participation developed by Professor Laura Lundy[79]. The first year of delivery saw well over 4,000 children and young people contribute directly to national policy development across multiple sectors.

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[78] *Participation of Children and Young People in Decision-making ACTION PLAN 2024-2028,* Department of Children, Disability, and Equality, 2024. Available at: participation-of-children-and-young-people-in-decision-making-action-plan-2024-2028.pdf

[79] Professor Laura Lundy is Professor Emerita of Children's Rights at Queen's University, Belfast and Professor of Law at University College Cork. Professor Lundy has developed 'The Lundy Model of Child Participation' which a way of conceptualising a child's right to participation, as laid down in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Key participation highlights include:

- A newly established Children and Young People's Participation Interdepartmental Group, with representation from 15 Government Departments, met quarterly throughout 2024, demonstrating a strengthened whole of Government approach to embedding youth voice in policymaking.

- Children and young people's participation was an integral part of the Child Poverty and Well-being Summits in 2024 and 2025. In advance of the Summits, the Department of Children, Disability and Equality and the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office established Youth Advisory Groups made up of young people aged 16-18 from across Ireland. The Youth Advisory Group met to talk to each other about their ideas for what the Government can do to improve children's lives. At the Summits, these young people shared their ideas with the Taoiseach and Ministers. Discussions and outcomes from the Summits fed into the process for Budgets 2025 and 2026 and will feed directly into the development of the Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office's second Programme Plan.

- 3,881 children and young people who shared their views through the School Meals Programme evaluation survey and focus groups. Three focus groups were held which concentrated specifically on children with special needs in mainstream schools and children from ethnic minority backgrounds.

- 400 students taking part in the inaugural Youth Agri Food Dialogue, part of Ireland's first National Youth Food Forum.

- 49 young delegates contributing to the Rural Youth Assembly, developing policy recommendations on living, learning and working in rural Ireland.

- 138 children and young people across 11 schools shared their views on the role of the Special Needs Assistants, contributing to the research underpinning the

Department of Education and Youth's first Special Needs Assistants Workforce Development Plan.

- Approximately 70 young delegates shaping the Climate Action Plan through the National Youth Assembly on Climate.

- Young people were engaged in the redesign of mental health transition services through surveys, focus groups and an in-person consultation event at Croke Park.

- Young members of the LGBTIQ+ community met with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to inform the implementation of the Youth Homelessness Strategy particularly the challenges LGBTIQ+ youth have accessing housing and the creation of safe and inclusive environments in emergency accommodation.

- The Participation of Children and Young People in Decision-making eLearning Course was launched in November 2025[80]. This self-directed eLearning course provides information on children and young people's right to participate in decisions that affect their lives. The course contains information, good practice guidance and tools to support those working with and for children to develop their capacity to engage meaningfully with children and young people when decisions that impact their lives are being made.

3.4 Healthy Meal Each School Day

Heading	Services and Policies Discussed
School Meal Programmes	- School Meals Programme - Hot School Meals Programme

[80] "Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making: An Introductory eLearning Course", Department of Children, Disability and Equality. Available at: Hub na nÓg

Supporting Access to Healthy Meals Outside of School	- 2025 Summer Programme - Summer 2025 Holiday Meals Pilot Programme

School Meal Programmes

The government is committed to improving the availability of healthy meals in schools. The School Meals Programme[81] provides funding towards provision of regular, free, nutritious meals to children. All DEIS schools, including DEIS post-primary schools are eligible for funding in respect of certain meal clubs under the School Meals Programme. As of 2024/25 academic year, there were 110,266 students in 232 DEIS post-primary schools in Ireland.

The School Meals Scheme provides funding for a range of different meals and food types, with logistics and delivery method depending on local needs. While food is procured by individual projects / schools / groups, rather than centrally by the Department of Education and Youth, it must meet the nutritional standards[82] set out for school meals.

Within the overarching School Meals Programme, the Hot School Meals Programme was introduced as a pilot programme in 2019 and was then rolled out to more schools on a phased basis. In Budget 2025 the School Meals budget was increased to €300 million. Within this, €72 million was allocated to extend the Hot School Meals Programme to all primary schools in September 2025. With this extension, there are now 3,200 eligible schools in respect of 550,000 children. Across all meal types there are some 3,700 schools and 682,000 children eligible for support.

Looking to the future, the Irish Government has committed to expanding Hot School Meals to all post-primary schools by 2030.

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[81] "School Meals Scheme", Department of Education and Youth, 2026. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-social-protection/services/school-meals-scheme/
[82] "Nutrition Standards for School Meals", Department of Health, 2020. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-health/publications/nutrition-standards-for-school-meals/

Supporting Access to Healthy Meals Outside of School

In 2025, the Department of Social Protection and the Department of Education and Youth collaborated on a pilot project with a budget of €1.3 million to combat holiday hunger. Schools that were eligible to avail of the School Meals Programme during school term were able to provide meals as part of the 2025 Summer Programme. More than 500 schools participated in this Holiday Hunger School Meals pilot project, supporting more than 42,200 vulnerable children, including those with complex special educational needs and those at risk of educational disadvantage by providing access to school meals throughout the Summer Programme.

A separate holiday hunger initiative, the Summer 2025 Holiday Meals Pilot Programme began in June 2025 and ran until August. The programme was designed to support young people who may not have had access to a hot or filling meal when schools are closed and is part of the Government's wider plan to end child poverty. The meals were provided through UBU Your Place Your Space[83] (UBU), a national scheme that funds youth services for young people aged 10 to 24. These services support young people who may be vulnerable or facing difficult life situations. Across 16 education and training board (ETB) areas, 41 UBU-funded youth services signed up to take part in the pilot and approximately 3,200 young people benefited. An independent evaluator, hired by Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), was commissioned to review how the pilot works from start to finish. The report highlights both the need for the programme and its positive impacts.

3.5 Healthcare

Heading	Services and Policies Discussed
Early Detection and Treatment	- GP Visit Cards

[83] UBU Your Place Your Space Website https://ubu.gov.ie/

Vaccination Programmes	- National Immunisation Programme - The RSV Immunisation Pathfinder Programme
Antenatal and Postnatal Care	- National Maternity Strategy 2016-2026 - National Infant Feeding Education Programme - National Breastfeeding Strategy - The National Mental Health Promotion Plan -
Mental Health Services	- Sharing the Vision – A Mental Health Policy for Everyone - Connecting for Life: Ireland's National Strategy to Reduce Suicide 2015 - 2024 - The National Office for Child and Youth Mental Health - Youth Mental Health Action Plan - Adolescent Dual Diagnosis Hubs
Disability Services	- National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030 - Children's Disability Network Teams - Assessment of Need (AON)
Service Identification	- The Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office

Early Detection and Treatment

General Practitioners (GPs) play a vital role in supporting disadvantaged children to gain access to the specialist support they need. In Ireland's previous report, we noted the expansion of the GP visit card eligibility to all children under eight years of age, as well as the extension of eligibility to those earning up to the median household income for free GP care. The Programme for Government 2025 commits to expanding GP care without charges to all children up to at least 12 years, and to keep further expansions under review.

For households with a medical card, approved prescribed medicines, including those prescribed for children in these households, are free, subject to payment of a small

prescription charge. All children, including those not covered by a medical card, receive a vision screen while in primary school from a Public Health Nurse.

Vaccination Programmes

In Ireland's previous report, it was noted that 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) and includes the Primary Childhood (PCIP) Immunisation Programme and the school-based programme that provides vaccines for children. These include the 6 in 1 vaccine (protects against diphtheria, tetanus, haemophilus influenzae b, pertussis, polio, hepatitis B), the MMR vaccine (measles, mumps and rubella), the PCV vaccine (pneumococcal conjugate), the rotavirus oral vaccine and the HPV vaccine, all of which are recommended by the World Health Organisation for all childhood immunisation programmes[84]. Ireland is a low-TB-incidence country[85]. The BCG vaccine is not routinely given to all children but is offered free of charge to high-risk groups[86].

In 2024, the RSV Immunisation Pathfinder Programme was launched following NIAC advice, recommending the use of monoclonal antibody immunisation for the 2024-2025 season[87]. Almost 22,500 infants were immunised, an uptake rate of approximately 83% overall. As a result, there was an estimated 65% reduction in the number of RSV cases throughout the season when compared with 2023-2024. Following an evaluation of that programme, an expanded RSV Immunisation Programme ran throughout Winter 2025-2026, offering free RSV immunisation to all children born between 1 September 2025 and 28 February 2026.

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[84] "Recommended Routine Immunization (updated December 2025)", World Health Organisation, 2025. Available at: immunization-summary-table-1.pdf

[85] *HSE National Tuberculosis Guidelines for Ireland*, HSE Public Health: National Health Protection Office, 2026. Available at:TBCh1-Intro.pdf

[86] "BCG Vaccine", Health Service Executive. Available at: BCG vaccine

[87] *"Minister for Health announces government approval for a new Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV) Immunisation Pathfinder Programme", Department of Health, 2024*. Immunisation Pathfinder Programme

The Health Protection Surveillance Centre collates data and reports on the uptake of vaccines provided through the childhood vaccination programme[88]. In Ireland, immunisation uptake rates at 12 and 24 months of age vary nationally. The HSE's National Immunisation Office (NIO) are engaged in various initiatives to improve childhood vaccine uptake as part of their 'National Immunisation Office Strategic Plan 2024-2027'[89].

Antenatal and Postnatal Care

The First 5 strategy has a number of objectives to support the optimum physical and mental health of children and their families in the early years of life. One way this will be achieved is through increased access to antenatal and postnatal supports.

In 2023, five pilot postnatal hubs were opened to provide postnatal care to mothers, education, breastfeeding, physiotherapy, emotional and physical supports in the community. Investment in 2024 and 2025, through the National Maternity Strategy 2016-2026[90], is delivering a further eight Postnatal Hubs.

First 5 aims to increase the rates of breastfeeding in Ireland, and the HSE launched the revised National Infant Feeding Education Programme for healthcare providers in Q3 2024. Over 70 staff were trained to deliver breastfeeding skills training sessions within maternity and public health nursing services. In its 2024 Breastfeeding Action Plan Progress Report, the HSE reported that the number of dedicated infant feeding specialists available to support mothers increased from 15 Whole Time Equivalents (WTEs) in 2017 to 59 WTEs in December 2024. Parents, regardless of location, had greater access to support via virtual breastfeeding support groups, and live chat and email with lactation consultants.

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[88] "Immunisation Uptake Statistics", Health Protection Surveillance Centre. Available at: Immunisation Uptake Statistics - Health Protection Surveillance Centre

[89] *National Immunisation Office Strategic Plan 2024-2027*, Health Service Executive. Available at: National Immunisation Office Strategic Plan 2024-2027

[90] *Creating A Better Future Together: National Maternity Strategy 2016-2026*, Department of Health. Available at: national-maternity-strategy-creating-a-better-future-together-2016-2026.pdf

There were over 600,000 user sessions with the breastfeeding content on the HSE's mychild.ie website, and 2,250 live chat/email queries were also responded to in 2024. The Department of Health formed a steering group to research and develop a new whole of Government breastfeeding policy, with stakeholder engagement already underway. Outcomes from this will inform actions in the National Breastfeeding Strategy, which will be published in 2026.

Ireland's National Mental Health Promotion Plan was launched in December 2024, and acknowledges the early years of a child's life as a particularly important period, as they can be key to cognitive, behavioural, social, emotional, physical and intellectual development. In 2024 a working group comprising staff from the HSE, Tusla and the Irish Association of Infant Mental Health (IAIMH) reviewed existing training and agreed to use the Solihull approach[91] as the Infant and Early Childhood Development Programme. Across Tusla, the HSE and partner agencies, 42 people were selected and completed the Train the Trainers in the Solihull approach.

Mental Health Services

It is a priority for the Irish Government to ensure that children who need services can access them in a timely and effective manner. This is in line with our national mental health policy Sharing the Vision[92], our suicide reduction strategy Connecting for Life[93], and the HSE Annual Service Plans. Children and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing is a spotlight area in Young Ireland, reflecting the need for a cross-Government response to this issue, bring together expertise and intersectional thinking to make a measurable, sustainable difference in children and young people's lives.

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[91] "The Solihull Approach (Understanding Your Child's Behaviour)", What Works Evidence Hub. Available at: What Works Ireland Evidence Hub - WhatWorks

[92] *Sharing the Vision A Mental Health Policy for Everyone*, Department of Health. sharing-the-vision-a-mental-health-policy-for-everyone.pdf

[93] *Connecting for Life: Ireland's National Strategy to Reduce Suicide*, Department of Health. connecting-for-life-irelands-national-strategy-to-reduce-suicide-2015-2024.pdf

Key stakeholders in this area include the National Cross Sectoral Steering and Implementation Group, the HSE National Office for Suicide Prevention (NOSP) and the community and voluntary sector. An interagency response in this area is critical, working together to reduce the suicide and self-harm rates in both the majority population and among priority groups, including members of the Traveller community, people experiencing homelessness and LGBTIQ+ people.

The National Office for Child and Youth Mental Health in the HSE is a significant development to improve leadership and management across youth mental health. The Office published its 3-year Youth Mental Health Action Plan in February 2025. This ambitious plan for comprehensive reform across all youth mental health services, including the specialist CAMHS service will deliver services which are safer, effective, easier to access and which offers appropriate support at all levels when needed.

Good progress is being made on delivering all 16 themes of the plan to ensure children and families have equitable and timely access to high-quality mental health care, including better links with Primary Care and Disability Services, and greater use of e-mental health responses. Other key deliverables include:

- The development of a Single Point of Access for mental health referrals to enable greater visibility of who is waiting for what service within the youth mental health system, while also reducing the volume of non-urgent cases in acute settings in favour of targeted community-based services.
- The development of an Integrated Care Pathway, incorporating 24/7 end-to-end service delivery components for young people with crisis response support needs.
- The development of a comprehensive suite of mental health promotion and prevention interventions for children, young people and their families.
- The delivery of socially inclusive youth mental health services that recognise the cultural and diverse needs of the whole population, including priority groups.
- An improved transition pathway between CAMHS and Adult Mental Health Services.

A dual diagnosis means a person experiencing both substance use and mental health issues. Treatment options must address both issues. The HSE have developed a Model

of Care which recommends the development of four Adolescent Hub Teams, to assist the recovery of young people with both drug dependency and mental health issues. Adolescent Dual Diagnosis Hub Teams will provide services for those in the age group of 10 to 17 years. Separate teams for Adolescents and Adults will help deliver services in a more targeted and age-appropriate manner. The Adolescent Hub Teams are multidisciplinary in nature and include outreach workers for youths and family therapists[94]. Two Adolescent Hub Teams were established in 2024 at a cost of €0.44 million each, per full year, with additional funding for 2025.

Disability Services

In September 2025 the National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030 was published. It is Ireland's plan to advance the realisation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and aims to ensure that disabled people are supported and empowered to live full lives of their own choosing. It adopted a whole-of-Government approach where individual Government Departments and State Agencies are responsible for planning and delivering the commitments that come under their remit across five key Pillars: Inclusive Learning and Education, Employment, Independent Living and Active Participation in Society, Health and Wellbeing, and Transport and Mobility.

The National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People was developed to align with existing frameworks for policy and rights progression. As such, the strategy continues the delivery of actions under the Action Plan for Disability Services 2024-2026 and the Roadmap for Service Improvement 2023-2026 to increase capacity in Children's Disability Network Teams (CDNT), to provide improved early intervention and therapy services for children with complex needs and their families, and to reduce waiting lists for both therapy services and Assessments of Need services[95]. Budget 2025 included €2.84 million to recruit new staff to CDNTs.

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[94] *Model of Care for People with Mental Disorder and Co-existing Substance Use Disorder (Dual Diagnosis),* Health Service Executive, 2023. dual-diagnosis-model-of-care.pdf

[95] *National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030*, Department of Children, Disability, and Equality, 2025. Available At: National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030

A number of actions are being taken to improve the Assessment of Need (AON) process, to meet demand and ensure timely access to appropriate services. In June 2024, an AON waiting list initiative was introduced, providing for the procurement of private assessments for those families waiting longest, in addition to the assessments being delivered by the CDNTs. Under this initiative, 2,479 AONs were procured from private providers and or assessors between June and December 2024. Funding has also been made available in 2025 for the procurement of around 2,850 assessments from private providers. Administrative and assessment hubs are being developed, to streamline AON processes, ensuring maximum efficiencies and equity of demand across all areas. A series of workforce recruitment and retention actions are being delivered to enhance capacity within CDNTs to support the delivery of AONs and therapy provision.

Service Identification

There are a variety of healthcare services in place to meet the needs of children across the country. However, there can be disparities in the level of provision, local practice models, and the formal or informal integration of services and referral arrangements in the different areas.

The Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office in the Department of the Taoiseach is working with relevant Government Departments and Agencies to develop service integration and coherence to support children and families who are finding it difficult to consistently access the services that they need.

3.6 Healthy Nutrition

Heading	Services and Policies Discussed
Nutritional Standards for Schools	- Healthy Ireland Nutritional Standards for School Meals - Nutrition Standards for Early Learning and Care Services

Bia Blasta	- Bia Blasta, the Pre-school Nutrition Programme
Obesity Related Initiatives	- Obesity Policy and Action Plan 2016-2025
Food Advertising	- Online Safety Taskforce - Obesity Policy Action Plan successor strategy
Healthy Ireland	- Sláintecare Healthy Communities Programme

Nutritional Standards for Schools

Food provided under the Schools Meals and Hot School Meals programmes in Ireland must meet the Healthy Ireland Nutritional Standards for School Meals[96]. These standards were developed by the Department of Health, in collaboration with Safefood, the Food Safety Authority of Ireland, the HSE, the Department of Education and Youth and the Department of Social Protection, and set minimum nutritional standards that food providers must meet as part of the procurement process. The standards are food-based and are derived from the Irish national healthy eating guidelines for children and adults. From September 2025, foods that are high in salt, fat, and sugar are not permitted to be served as part of school meals.

A CORU-registered[97] dietitian was appointed in the Department of Health to complete a nutrition review of the School Meals Programme in September 2025. Actions undertaken as part of this review up until December 2025 includes nutritional analysis of meals from nine of the largest school meals suppliers, who collectively supply 70% of primary schools in Ireland. The results of this analysis, as well as results from in-school audits, will be submitted in a report to the Minister for Social Protection in 2026. This will give an indication of compliance with the Nutrition Standards for Hot School Meals and the nutritional value of meals and will inform future recommendations to strengthen the universal school meals programme.

[96] "Nutrition Standards for School Meals", Department of Health, 2020. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-health/publications/nutrition-standards-for-school-meals/
[97] "CORU - Regulating Health & Social Care Professionals " Available at:https://www.coru.ie/

Separately, for school-aged children, healthy eating is promoted through a range of subjects.

Nutrition Standards for Early Learning and Care Services were published in 2023 based on Healthy Eating Guidelines for 1-4 Year Olds. All ECCE services must provide snacks and meals based on attendance length in line with these standards. This is funded via parental fees and the National Childcare Scheme. Children attending for a full day (over five hours) receive 2 meals and 2 snacks; whereas children attending for shorter periods (i.e. three hours) usually bring food from home.

Bia Blasta

Bia Blasta, the Pre-school Nutrition Programme was launched in 2025 under the Equal Start funding model. Bia Blasta is a direct measure to combat child food poverty, reduce the risk of hunger, and improve children's overall well-being.

The initiative supports the provision the provision of a light nutritious meal to preschool children in Equal Start services and ECCE sessional services with the highest concentrations of preschool children experiencing disadvantage. The Equal Start identification model has been used to identify services working with the highest concentrations of preschool children experiencing disadvantage[98].

Services currently participating in the Programme are Equal Start Tier 1 and Tier 2 designated priority services. Bia Blasta provides funding for these services to replace the lunch boxes brought from home to preschool with food being provided by the service during ECCE Programme hours.

[98] "Equal Start - Bia Blasta Frequently Asked Questions", Department of Children, Disability, and Equality. Available at: Equal_Start_-_Bia_Blasta_Frequently_Asked_Questions.pdf

Alongside the nutritional benefit to the child, the programme also supports parents by removing the need to provide a lunch for their children. The programme focuses on the engagement and participation of children in learning about nutritious foods.

Mealtimes are provided within a learning framework that builds children's experiences of preparing and sharing nutritious foods and encourages children to make choices and discover varied foods. A dedicated dietitian at a national level has been engaged to give advice and support to participating services, and resource packs for participants have been developed by Healthy Ireland, Safe Foods Ireland and Barnardos.

Obesity Related Initiatives

Work on development of a successor strategy to the Obesity Policy and Action Plan 2016-2025 (OPAP) is underway and will be published in 2026. Work began on this in 2025, and included an extensive stakeholder consultation, including a public consultation with 1,115 participants. As part of this work, the Institute of Public Health updated their 'Obesity Policy Options Matrix' which is a type of knowledge synthesis exercise which involves a rapid review of systematic reviews. This was presented to the Department of Health in April 2026 and along with the stakeholder consultation and other input, will inform the next iteration of OPAP.

In addition, the Department of Health continues to engage with the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) to research areas related to obesity which again will inform the next version of the policy. Both preventing and addressing childhood obesity is a priority for the Irish Government.

Food Advertising

In September 2024, the Minister for Health established an Online Safety Taskforce[99] to develop a public health response to harms caused to children and young people by

[99] *Online Health and Rights for Irelands Children and Young People*, Department of Health, 2025. Available at: Online_Health_Taskforce_Report_Final_Sept_2025.pdf

certain types of online activity. The Taskforce commissioned the Institute of Public Health (IPH) to undertake research to inform the development of the Taskforce's recommendations. This research included examining children's engagement with marketing of specific health harming products, namely: tobacco, e-cigarettes, alcohol, sunbeds, gambling, and high fat, salt and sugar (HFSS) foods and drinks.

Coimisiún na Meán is Ireland's statutory regulator for broadcasting and online media. The Department of Health continued their engagement with Coimisiún na Meán in 2024 and 2025 with regards to work being done to introduce codes to restrict marketing of unhealthy foods to children. This will be a key piece of work going forward as the Department drafts a successor strategy to Obesity Policy Action Plan (OPAP) in 2026. Engagement will continue both bilaterally and through the National Intersectoral Working Group on Restricting Marketing of Unhealthy Foods to Children as appropriate.

The Sláintecare Healthy Communities

The Sláintecare Healthy Communities Programme[100] (SHC) is led by Healthy Ireland in the Department of Health, in partnership with cross-sectoral, national and local stakeholders. The programme works in partnership with the HSE, local authorities, local communities, statutory, voluntary and community groups to deliver targeted interventions tackle health inequalities in the most disadvantaged areas in Ireland. At present there are 24 SHC areas in operation, in both rural and urban settings. Areas of greatest need were identified using the Pobal HP Deprivation index[101], based on the 2016 census.

While the programmes are available to adults and children several interventions provided by the programme are of direct benefit to children at risk of poverty. Community Food and Nutrition Officers are employed in each area to implement

[100] "Sláintecare Healthy Communities", Healthy Ireland, 2026. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/healthy-ireland/publications/sl%C3%A1intecare-healthy-communities/

[101] The Pobal HP Deprivation Index is Ireland's primary tool for measuring relative social and economic disadvantage across geographic areas based on census data.

targeted initiatives that reduce food insecurity challenges in the community. Healthy Food Made Easy, is a programme to reduce food poverty by providing user-friendly nutrition and cookery courses to help people increase their skills and plan meals on a budget. Parenting Programmes provide support for the mental health of parents and for healthy child development.

Through investment of Healthy Ireland Funding, Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSC) have been driving change by delivering innovative initiatives that enhance health, wellbeing and outcomes for children and young people.

3.7 Adequate Housing

Heading	Services and Policies Discussed
Housing for All and Delivering Homes, Building Communities	- Housing for All - Delivering Homes, Building Communities
Social Housing	- Housing Assistance Payments (HAP)
Family and Youth Homeless Accommodation	- Family Hubs - National Homeless Action Committee (NHAC) - Youth Homelessness Strategy - Child and Family Homelessness Action Plan
Accommodation for members of the Traveller Community	- Traveller Accommodation Expert Group
Energy Poverty	- The Energy Poverty Action Plan - Electricity Costs Emergency Benefit Scheme - The Warmer Homes Scheme (WHS)

Housing for All

The Irish Government is focused on making sure that everyone has access to good quality, affordable and secure homes that suit their needs. Housing for All - a New

Housing Plan for Ireland[102] was Ireland's previous national strategy to increase housing supply and reduce levels of national homelessness. The strategy included prevention and early intervention services to families at risk of homelessness, and those in emergency accommodation.

Housing for All delivered almost 93,000 new homes between 2022-24, surpassing their target of 87,050 for the same period. From 2020 to Q1 2025, 34,027 new social homes were built, with €9 billion allocated in 2026 to support 21,500 more households.

Delivering Homes, Building Communities

Building on the progress of Housing for All, the new housing plan, Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030[103] was published in November 2025. It is an integrated housing and homelessness plan based on two key pillars: activating the supply of 300,000 more homes; and supporting people to have a home of their own. The Irish Government recognises that accessing emergency accommodation has a negative impact on the wellbeing of all individuals, and particularly on children. A key priority for this Plan is to address long-term family homelessness, and in particular to reduce the time that children spend in emergency accommodation.

The 2025 Programme for Government commits to accelerating housing supply, focussing social housing allocations on getting families out of long-term homelessness; and continuing the Social Housing Tenant in Situ Programme to prevent homelessness, with annual targets and budgets assigned for each local authority. In 2025, some €449 million in Exchequer funding was recouped to local authorities towards the provision of homeless prevention services, emergency accommodation and other services for households experiencing homelessness.

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[102] *Housing for All A new Housing Plan for Ireland*, Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. Available at: housing-for-all-a-new-housing-plan-for-ireland.pdf
[103] *Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030: An Action Plan on Housing Supply and Targeting Homelessness*, Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2025. Available at:20251218_Delivering_HomesBuilding_Communities_18_Dec_Web_Version.pdf

Social Housing

The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage provides funding to housing authorities on a regional basis towards the operational costs of homeless accommodation and related services. The allocation of social housing is a matter for the local authority concerned, in accordance with their allocation scheme made under section 22 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 and associated Regulations. Under Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030, local authority allocation schemes will be reviewed with a focus on the number of allocations being made to families in emergency accommodation.

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. In 2025, the Homeless Unit were allocated a dedicated capital funding steam for the delivery and maintenance of new and existing homeless emergency and transitional accommodation. A new Scheme is being developed to support the management and delivery of this budget. The primary focus of the Homeless Capital Scheme is on new construction, ensuring the delivery of high-quality, purpose-built accommodation that meets the specific needs of individuals experiencing homelessness At present there are 23 active projects that have received funding approval from the Department and are progressing, however Capital Emergency Accommodation projects often encounter delays due to planning difficulties, objections from local communities and challenges in renovating the buildings. Increasing supply is key to addressing homelessness.

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 2025 Budget allocation will enable continued support of approximately 49,000 existing tenancies and anticipates 8,400 new households to be accommodated in HAP

supported tenancies. Approximately one third of exits from HAP are to other forms of social housing. The HAP 'single to couple uplift' (the ability of local authorities to apply a couple HAP rate to single person households in recognition of their shared one-bed need) was extended from new tenancies only to existing tenancies at risk of homelessness from 19 December 2025. The Department is now undertaking a review of existing HAP rent limits to ensure there is sufficient support under the HAP scheme to assist eligible households in accessing accommodation in the private rental sector.

Family and Youth Homeless Accommodation

Since 2021, child and family homelessness has risen significantly, especially among single parents, Travellers, and people with disabilities. In December 2024, 4,510 children in 2,092 families were living in emergency accommodation[104]. By December 2025 this had risen to 5,188 children in 2,478 families living in emergency accommodation. The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage works closely with local authorities to prioritise preventions to and exits from emergency accommodation.

Families are accommodated in either Family Hubs or in appropriate hotel or other commercial accommodation, and are not accommodated in congregated settings. The 2025 budget allocation included funding for 36 family hubs operational across the country. While hubs are emergency accommodation, they provide a greater level of stability than is possible in emergency hotel accommodation, with the capacity to provide appropriate play-space, cooking and laundry facilities, and communal recreation space, while move-on options to homes are identified and secured. More intensive assistance in terms of welfare, health and housing services are also supplied through family hubs.

[104] "Homelessness data", Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2025. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-housing-local-government-and-heritage/collections/homelessness-data/

Ireland is committed to enhancing family support, prevention and early intervention services for children and their families experiencing homelessness through a multi-agency coordinated response. Ireland's National Homeless Action Committee (NHAC) serves as the cross-governmental and inter-agency oversight group. In 2024, a subgroup was established under the NHAC to examine barriers to families exiting emergency accommodation in Dublin. The Subgroup comprised representatives from organisations including the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage; Department of Social Protection; Dublin Region Homeless Executive; HSE; Tusla; Simon Communities; and Focus Ireland. A report, setting out 13 recommendations from the subgroup, is intended to present to the NHAC at its Q1 2026 meeting.

Also in 2024, a dedicated Prevention and Early Intervention subgroup was established under the Youth Homelessness Strategy Steering Group. The subgroup met on a quarterly basis. The Subgroup brought together a range of key stakeholders with a role in the prevention of youth homelessness. Following the work of the Subgroup, which took place over a twelve-month period, three recommendations were proposed:

- Explore the feasibility of introducing a model, in a school setting, that identifies and supports at risk young people aged 12+;
- Consider the expansion of mediation services for young people and their families;
- Consider recommendations made by the subgroup in the development of the National Homelessness Prevention Framework.

The housing plan, Delivering Homes, Building Communities 2025-2030, sets out a number of measures to address family homelessness. This includes the development of a Child and Family Homelessness Action Plan; dedicated capital funding of €100m to support local authorities to acquire properties to tackle long-term homelessness; and the development of a whole-of-Government Homelessness Prevention Framework.

A pilot programme to support families was developed under Housing for All Action 3.18 and continues its implementation under Delivering Homes, Building

Communities Action 5.1. The action was 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.' The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage worked with HSE, Tusla, and Galway City and County Councils to develop a pilot scheme providing housing-led supported accommodation to families in need in both Galway City and County. This pilot has commenced and the four families are now in situ, with wrap around supports are being provided on an ongoing basis. Potential new families are being assessed at this time to replace those who are moving from the pilot. An Oversight Group is in place to monitor the pilot and an evaluation will take place in 2026.

The Department of the Taoiseach and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage are working together on the Child and Family Homelessness Action Plan, supported by relevant Government departments and State bodies. This plan is currently at the drafting stage and it is anticipated that the Plan will be published in 2026. This plan will bring together key stakeholders to drive the continued focus on preventing children and families entering emergency accommodation, providing enhanced supports for children experiencing homelessness, as well as putting in place measures to accelerate exits and reduce the time spent by children and their families in homeless emergency accommodation. A number of consultations have taken place with key stakeholders including members of the public, NGOs, and Government Departments.

Accommodation for Members of the Traveller Community

In 2018, the Traveller Accommodation Expert Group was established to review the Traveller Accommodation Act, 1998, and other legislation that impacts on the provision and delivery of accommodation for Travellers. They put forward recommendations and proposed actions to improve the delivery of Traveller accommodation. A Programme Board on which Travellers are represented has been established to oversee the implementation of recommendations of the Expert Group. To date 14 of the 32 recommendations made by the Expert Group have been

completed and progress made on a further 14 actions. The remaining 4 actions have been identified for future work programmes[105].

Increased capital funding to support specific categories of need in Budget 2025 included €23 million to deliver Traveller-specific accommodation for members of the Traveller community. Demonstrating Government's ongoing commitment to delivering accommodation for Traveller families in Ireland, full expenditure of the capital budget for Traveller-specific accommodation was achieved in 2025, representing the 6th consecutive year that full spend was achieved.

Energy Poverty

The Irish Government published the Energy Poverty Action Plan[106] in 2022 which sets out a range of measures to ensure those least able to afford increased energy costs are supported and protected. The plan recognises the importance of addressing and alleviating the impact of energy costs and includes both targeted and universal income supports. Alongside this, there is a focus on measures which aim to improve energy efficiency, the initiation of research to capture the extent of energy poverty more accurately, and public information campaigns about energy use and what supports are available.

In 2022, the ESRI estimated the proportion of people spending 10% of their household income on energy bills in Ireland reached 29%, its highest recorded rate. In 2025, the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI), published 'Energy poverty in Ireland: Analysis of 2023 data from the Behavioural Energy and Travel Tracker'[107]. It found that energy poverty was highly prevalent in Ireland throughout 2023, although estimates vary according to the measure used. It found that some of the

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[105] *Traveller Accommodation Expert Review Programme Board Update*, Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, 2025. Available at: Traveller_Accommodation_Expert_Review_-_PB_Update_November_2025.pdf

[106] *Energy Poverty Action Plan*, Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment, 2022. Available at: energy-poverty-action-plan-2022.pdf

[107] *Energy Poverty in Ireland: Analysis of 2023 data from the Behavioural Energy and Travel Tracker,* Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, 2025. Available at:https://www.seai.ie/sites/default/files/publications/bett-energy-poverty-in-ireland.pdf

characteristics associated with energy poverty change depending on the measure used. For example, families are more likely to have difficulty paying bills than single person households, but less likely to go without heating .

To help alleviate energy poverty, the Electricity Costs Emergency Benefit Scheme, which provided automatic credits to domestic electricity accounts, was extended in Budget 2024 to provide support worth €450 to over 2.2 million households. Budget 2025 has allocated support worth €250 per household in a further extension of the scheme. Budget 2025 also included a €300 lump sum to all households in receipt of Fuel Allowance. Approximately 17% of recipients of Fuel Allowance, or 11,500 households, have children under 18. SEAI supports are available to households at risk of energy poverty, as well as universal supports for the general population. The Warmer Homes Scheme (WHS) provides fully-funded energy upgrades for households on various welfare payments. The scheme received a 2024 Budget allocation of €208.8 million, and in the first half of 2024, approximately 2,000 households with children benefitted. Budget 2025 further increased the scheme's allocation to €240 million.

3.8 Alternative Care

Heading	Services and Policies Discussed
Alternative Care	- Tusla – the Child and Family Agency - Foster Care - The National Policy Framework for Alternative Care - Care Experiences: Journeys Through the Irish Care System
Aftercare	- The Capital Assistance Scheme for Care Leavers
Guardian ad litem	- Guardian ad litem National Service

Alternative Care

Ireland continues to invest in child-centred alternative care, with over €1.2 billion euros allocated to Tusla – the Child and Family Agency (Tusla) in Budget 2025, a year-

on-year increase of €145 million. Tusla has a statutory responsibility to prioritise children's welfare and regard their best interests as paramount, including when placing them in care. Care placements must meet national Regulations and Standards, which explicitly require the placement to consider the nature of the child's individual needs.

A total of 5,879 children were in care at the end of December 2025, 1% more than in December 2024. 86% of all children in care were in foster care (including relative foster care), 10.4% were in residential care, and 3.6% were in other care placements. Ireland continues to prioritise supporting foster carers. In 2024, there were 3,809 foster carers on the panel of approved foster carers[108]. To help alleviate ongoing recruitment and retention challenges, Ireland increased the allowance payable to foster carers by €25 per child per week from January 2024, and by a further €50 per child per week from November 2025, to help reduce some of the costs associated with fostering.

The Department of Children, Disability and Equality is currently developing a national plan for alternative care. This will include a short-term action plan addressing current issues in accessing appropriate care places, and a longer-term vision for how the care system will operate into the future. The National Policy Framework for Alternative Care will articulate the State's vision for alternative care, focus efforts to address existing challenges, and, most importantly, improve outcomes for young people as they age out of care.

A consultation process commenced in November 2025 to support the development of the National Policy Framework, through which the views of members of the public, stakeholders, key workers and carers, and people with care experience are being captured. As the Framework aims to centre the voice of the child from its development to its delivery, consultation with children and young people, as well as

[108] *Annual Report and Financial Statements 2024*, Tusla Child and Family Agency, 2024. Available at: Tusla Annual Report 2024.pdf

those who advocate for them, has been a key priority in the development of the Framework. Both the consultation process and the National Policy Framework itself aim to enable and consider the views of children, in accordance with Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

The child and youth consultation phase of the consultation process is currently underway. This is due to be completed in April 2026, with ongoing feedback to ensure that the views of child and youth participants are understood and actioned appropriately. Through organisations such as Ombudsman for Children's Office, Empowering People in Care (EPIC), Barnardos and Tusla Participation, the views of care leavers and children in care are being obtained by officials as part of targeted focus groups, to feed into the Framework. The Framework is expected to be completed in summer of 2026.

Care Experiences

Care Experiences: Journeys Through the Irish Care System (the Care Experiences Programme) brings together primary research with administrative data to examine and better understand the lives of children and young people in care and aftercare and adults who were in care as children, and to create a robust evidence base for policy and service improvement. To date the Department has commissioned five studies to look at the experiences and outcomes of those who have journeyed through the Irish care system. Reports from these studies will be finalised and published in the next year. The findings and evidence generated by these research studies and statistical outputs will inform future services provision to the care population and the development of the National Policy Framework for Alternative Care.

Aftercare

Ireland's Child Care Act 1991 and Tusla policies provide statutory aftercare supports for young people leaving care. Preparation begins when the young person is 16, including budgeting, savings, and life-skills training. At 18, eligible care leavers receive tailored aftercare services, financial and educational supports (aftercare allowance, grants, Student Universal Support Ireland, Higher Education Access Route) and access

to aftercare workers and drop-in services. Tusla may fund education until age 21, which may be extended up to age 23 if the young person remains in education. The Capital Assistance Scheme for Care Leavers provides long-term social housing for those at high risk of homelessness, and the City and County Management Agency protocol directs Housing Authorities to utilise all of the support options available to them to meet the accommodation needs of young people leaving State care.

At the end of 2024, 2935 young people were in receipt of aftercare services. 78% of young people aged 18-22 years old in receipt of these aftercare services were in education or training.

Guardians ad Litem (GAL)

Ireland enshrines the best interests of the child in alternative care under Article 42A of the Constitution and the Child Care Act 1991, which requires courts to consider each child's individual needs, and their best interests as paramount. The Child Care (Amendment) Act 2022 introduced significant reforms to strengthen the role of Guardians ad litem in childcare proceedings including creating a system of authorisation of Guardians ad litem, and establishing qualifications, standards, and governance for Guardians ad litem.

The Guardian ad litem National Service[109] was established under the Child Care (Amendment) Act 2022 and is on track to come into effect in June 2026. The Guardian ad litem National Service will ensure that children's voices are heard in childcare proceedings, and their best interests are independently presented, by an authorised Guardian ad litem, through a child-centred approach grounded in children's rights. Stakeholder engagement sessions began in August 2025 and will continue into 2026. Stakeholder engagement will include focus groups with care experienced young people over the age of 18. A Children's Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA) for the

[109] "Guardian ad litem National Service", Department of Children, Disability, and Equality. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-children-disability-and-equality/campaigns/guardian-ad-litem-national-service/

development of the Guardian ad litem National Service will be carried out as part of a CRIA pilot project within the Department of Children, Disability and Equality. The CRIA will examine how the service may affect children's rights, particularly their right to be heard and to have their best interests as a primary consideration.

3.9 Other Relevant Actions

Heading	Services and Policies Discussed
Child Poverty and Wellbeing Programme Office	- Child Poverty and Wellbeing Programme Office
Roadmap for Social Inclusion	- The Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025
Local Area child Poverty Plans	- Local Area child Poverty Plans
Family Resource Centres	- Family Resource Centres
Pathways to Work	- Pathways to Work 2021-2025
Prevention and Early Intervention	- National Policy Development
Parenting and Family Supports	- Supporting Parents: A National Model of Parenting Support Services
Barnahus Model	- Barnahus Centres
Child Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA)	- CRIA Development
Child Rights Training	- Child Rights Training

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

Child Poverty and Wellbeing Programme Office

The Child Poverty and Wellbeing Programme Office was established in 2023 within the Department of the Taoiseach, to coordinate government actions that reduce child poverty and foster children's well-being. An important strategic initiative of the Programme Office on Child Poverty and Well-being is the cross-government focus on

child poverty and well-being in the annual Budget. Since 2023 the Government has published a cross-government report on child poverty spending in the annual Budget analysing how annual budgets have addressed child poverty, including a focus on enabling services and workforce investment. The Office also chairs a Cross-Government Network on Child Poverty and Well-being, bringing together stakeholders across the government system to address key topics of interest and to build networks and cooperation, and has hosted the Child Poverty and Well-being Summit in 2024 and 2025, to promote a focus on child poverty among Government and other relevant stakeholders.

Roadmap for Social Inclusion

The Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025[110] was Ireland's national strategy for poverty reduction and improved social inclusion during the reporting period of this report. It is a whole-of-government strategy with the overall aim to reduce national consistent poverty to 2% or less by the end of 2025 and make Ireland one of the most socially inclusive EU Member States. To support this the Roadmap contains 81 commitments from across Government Departments, focusing on groups most impacted by poverty, including low income families with children. A final progress report will be published in 2026. Over the lifetime of the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025, the rate of consistent poverty in Ireland reduced overall, from the 2018 baseline of 5.6% to 4.7% in 2025.

Its successor strategy, the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2026-2030 will be published in May 2026. To inform its development, a public consultation took place in 2025, which received almost 500 responses. The successor strategy will build on progress to date, focusing on those groups most at risk of poverty, including families with children on low income and lone parents, and acknowledging the European Child Guarantee and the EU's forthcoming Anti-Poverty Strategy. The successor strategy will build on progress to date, and aims to again reduce the national consistent poverty rate to 2%

[110] *Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025*, Department of Social Protection, 2020. Available at: roadmap-for-social-inclusion-2020-2025-ambition-goals-commitments.pdf

or less by the end of 2030 and support the delivery of the child poverty target to reduce the national child consistent poverty rate to 3% or less by the end of 2030. The new Roadmap will be aligned with the EU's first Anti-Poverty Strategy and progress will be monitored by a cross-Government Steering group chaired by the Minister for Social Protection, with representation from civil society.

Local Area Child Poverty Plans

Ireland's European Child Guarantee National Action Plan commits to the establishment of four child poverty action plans at local area level in Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSC) areas. CYPSCs bring together all major organisations and agencies working locally on behalf of children and young people to ensure effective interagency co-ordination and collaboration.

The Department of Children, Disability and Equality (DCDE) and the Department of Rural Community Development and the Gaeltacht (DRCDG) jointly designed the Local Area Child Poverty Action Plans pilot programme in collaboration with the Department of the Taoiseach through the DCDE's What Works initiative funded by Dormant Accounts Fund.

The objectives of these pilot plans are to improve outcomes for disadvantaged children, young people and their families by first gaining a detailed understanding of the child poverty problem in each area and then using this information to promote experiences of enhanced service integration. This allows families to effectively access appropriate services. The pilots explore how to enhance access to vital supports in the areas of early years, food and fuel poverty, for those facing challenging circumstances, and for disadvantaged families with neurodivergent children. The four pilots are currently underway, as well as a comparative assessment of the implementation and the process of service integration, with a view to assessing mainstreaming of all or part of their work in the future.

Family Resource Centres

The Family Resource Centre (FRC) Programme is Ireland's largest family support programme. FRCs provide a range of universal and targeted services and development opportunities to address needs identified by the community they serve. In the current Programme for Government, the Government committed to work to increase funding and expand the capacity and network of Family Resource Centres. In 2025 five new FRCs were established, and a further ten in 2026, bringing the total FRC programme membership to 136. During the same period minimum core funding increased to a new base level of €180,000, up from the previous base level of €160,000.

Pathways to Work

Pathways to Work 2021-2025[111] is Ireland's national employment services strategy. 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, supporting employment opportunities for adults can provide a route out of poverty and social exclusion for them and their children, and encourage active participation in society.

Work is ongoing on the successor Pathways to Work strategy to cover the period 2026 – 2030. A robust public consultation process to inform the new strategy began in the second half of 2025. This included engagement with community and voluntary sectors, members of the public, regional workshops at locations around the State, and an analysis of labour market research, trends, and international best practice.

Prevention and Early Intervention – Development of a National Policy

Prevention and Early Intervention (PEI) is a statutory priority of Tusla and is a key principle of policy throughout the lifecycle for children and young people.

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[111] *Pathways to Work 2021-2025*, Department of Social Protection, 2021. Available at:https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-social-protection/publications/pathways-to-work-strategy-2021-2025/

The Department of Children, Disability and Equality is in the early stages of developing a national PEI policy. In 2025, the Department commissioned the National University of Ireland (Galway) to undertake a literature review, utilising the existing rich landscape of research and data sources to provide decision support, and translating existing research and data sources into policy relevant insights. Of particular interest are the mechanisms and contexts in which PEI works best, to guide Irish policy and investment. This will inform future design, piloting, and evaluation phases.

The review will generate evidence-informed insights into effective PEI strategies and provide a foundation for a national PEI policy to structure Tusla's work. This will support Ireland's goal of strengthening family supports, reducing reliance on late interventions, and help to achieve more equitable outcomes for vulnerable children and families. Key objectives include identifying PEI components that demonstrably improve outcomes, understanding how and why PEI approaches succeed, assessing outcomes linked to PEI, examining effectiveness across models, and identifying gaps requiring further research.

Parenting and Family Supports

Under Supporting Parents: A National Model of Parenting Support Services[112], Ireland has been improving the lives of children and young people by supporting parents to be more confident and capable in their parenting role. In 2025, 49 organisations received funding towards parent peer support activities. Online information on the Supporting Parents webpage brings together a wide range of trusted and high-quality resources for parents and guardians at all stages of their parenting journey, in one place.

[112] "Supporting Parents: A National Model of Parenting Support Services", Department of Children, Disability, and Equality, 2026. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-children-disability-and-equality/publications/supporting-parents-a-national-model-of-parenting-support-services/

With funding from the Children's Fund, under the Tusla National Home Visiting Programme, 16 home visiting programmes provided support to expecting parents and families with young children, focusing on child health, educational development, and preventing abuse and neglect. In 2025, a total of 2,567 home visits were delivered, with an average of 6.72 visits per family. There are currently 37 Home Visitors employed across the 16 services.

Barnahus Model

The project to implement the Barnahus model in the Irish context is ongoing. At Barnahus centres, a multi-agency team with professionals from child protection, law enforcement, healthcare, and therapeutic services work collaboratively to provide a coordinated response for children and young people who have experienced sexual abuse. In Ireland, Barnahus West is an established service offering support to children in the Northwest, West and Mid-West. Barnahus South began receiving referrals in May 2024 in Cork and Kerry and expanded to its full catchment area in 2025 to include support to South Tipperary and Waterford. Capital Development for a permanent location is underway. In 2025 the Department of Children, Disability and Equality with Tusla secured additional funding for critical posts required to establish Barnahus East. These posts will be recruited in 2026 to allow Barnahus East to become operational and complete national coverage of Barnahus in Ireland.

The Irish Government is working with the Council of Europe to strengthen Barnahus in Ireland and scale up its reach nationally. The joint European Union - Council of Europe project "Support the implementation of the Barnahus Project in Ireland" concluded its first phase in April 2025. The second phase of the project commenced in September 2025 under the Technical Support Instrument Fund. The project sought to address the challenges faced during the implementation of the pilot Barnahus centre in the West and to facilitate the roll out of two additional Barnahus centres in the South and East.

The project has provided the Government and key stakeholders with the opportunity to examine learnings from other EU countries who have implemented Barnahus, and

has allowed Ireland the opportunity to work with national and international experts in developing key documents, strategies and a Barnahus Ireland website which launched in 2025. From September 2025 to February 2028, Phase II will build on the legal, policy and interagency frameworks, strengthen professional capabilities and enhance awareness of Barnahus and Child Sexual Abuse in Ireland.

Child Rights Impact Assessments (CRIA)

A Child Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA) is an assessment that considers the best interests of children in legislative and other decisions that may impact them. It considers and highlights the impact, or potential impact, of a public measure on children. The CRIA will highlight important opportunities to progress children's rights and set out actions to safeguard against possible negative impacts on these rights. The ambition is that any new measure being developed within Government Departments and Agencies will undergo a CRIA screening.

A prototype CRIA Tool was developed as part of the CERV project, 'Building Children's Futures – Using Children's Rights to Recover from the Global Pandemic'. Building on this work and incorporating further input from stakeholders, the Department of Children, Disability and Equality has developed a CRIA Toolkit which will support policy makers and officials to conduct CRIAs on policies, legislation, and other measures which will or could impact the lives of children, while they are being developed.

A Pilot Programme to test the draft CRIA Toolkit ran from July 2025 to January 2026 and included 5 participating projects across different Government Departments and Agencies. A CRIA was conducted on each project as part of the Pilot. Feedback received from Pilot participants is being reviewed and updates being made to the CRIA Toolkit. Additional targeted feedback will be sought on the Toolkit before it is finalised and rolled out across Government Departments and Agencies.

Child Rights Training

Actions 13.1 and 13.2 of Young Ireland, the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People commit to the development of online, publicly accessible child rights training for a variety of relevant groups. The aim of the project is to provide training for public servants and wider society to understand and realise the rights of children and young people. The course will target civil and public servants but is also intended to be relevant to anyone working with or for children and/or young people.

In June 2024, a Stakeholder Advisory Group was established to advise on and support the development of child rights training. This group includes representatives from a range of stakeholder groups across the public sector and civil society. Desk research was carried out on existing relevant training nationally and internationally and scoping discussions held with relevant stakeholders. The input of civil servants was sought via a learning needs survey which ran from December 2024 to May 2025. The survey assessed knowledge and awareness of, and interest in children's rights and child rights training among civil servants. Following a competitive procurement process, work on the content development for an eLearning course on children and young people's rights commenced in November 2025. The content development phase of this project is expected to conclude by April 2026 and will be followed by the technical build phase of the eLearning Course.

Chapter 4 – Indicators, Targets and Monitoring

Overarching Targets

Child Poverty Target

The Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020–2025, Ireland's national strategy for poverty reduction and improved social inclusion, committed to setting a new national child poverty target. In 2025, the Government agreed a new Child Poverty Target[113] - to reduce the child consistent poverty rate to 3% or less by the end of 2030. Given the multi-faceted nature of child poverty, a whole of Government focus is essential to deliver the Target. This is reflected in the upcoming Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2026–2030, which has cross-Government actions in relation to income supports as well as other key areas such as employment, housing, healthcare, education and public services.

The Child Poverty and Well-being Programme Office in Ireland's Department of the Taoiseach has developed a Dashboard of Child Poverty Target Indicators that brings together data that reflects multiple dimensions of child poverty and well-being. Its purpose is to help stakeholders understand inequalities in outcomes for children living in poverty, highlight gaps between disadvantaged children and their peers, and track whether gaps are improving over time. The dashboard allows for a more holistic view of child poverty, providing insight into areas such as children's education, health, housing, and participation in cultural and recreational activities and how disadvantage affects children's daily experiences and long-term opportunities. The data underlying the indicators is hosted on the CSO's Child and Young Person's Datahub[114], with new data and indicators added to the Hub as they are developed. Progress towards the Target will be reported on in the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2026-2030.

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[113] "Taoiseach Micheál Martin and Minister Dara Calleary publish the new National Child Poverty Target", Department of Social Protection, 2025. Available at:Taoiseach Micheál Martin and Minister Dara Calleary publish the new National Child Poverty Target

[114] "Children and Young Persons Hub", Central Statistics Office, 2026. Available at: Children and Young Persons Hub - Central Statistics Office

Ireland's Monitoring Framework

High-quality, accessible, and timely research is essential to inform and support the many cross-government and sectoral policies and action plans that relate to the lives of children and young people. In Ireland, several important research resources and programmes provide useful information to policymakers. This research is used by Government departments in the development of evidence-based policies; to inform communications and marketing campaigns; and to evaluate services and provision. There have been a number of initiatives in the last few years to identify and address gaps and enhance Ireland's data and research capacities.

The Young Ireland Research Roadmap

The Young Ireland Research Roadmap[115], published April 2025, supports policymakers across government using evidence to inform the development of policies which support the best possible outcomes for children and young people in Ireland. The roadmap was informed by consultations with policymakers and an analysis of the research landscape on children and young people in Ireland over the period 2011 to 2023, carried out by the University of Galway. The research analysis included identifying research gaps across the Five National Outcomes for children and young people.

The roadmap aims to promote knowledge synthesis; support novel research to address gaps and emerging challenges; enhance the capacity and skill building of policy makers; and maximise the use of existing knowledge and data. The roadmap sets out actions to address these objectives that will be delivered over the period 2025 to 2028, aligned with the timeframe and reporting process for Young Ireland.

One action to support these objectives is the planned establishment of the Young Ireland Knowledge Creation and Synthesis Fund. The operation of the fund is designed to draw attention to the identified gaps in the research landscape and create

[115] *Young Ireland Research Roadmap,* Department of Children, Disability, and Equality, 2025. Available at:https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/Young_Ireland_Research_Roadmap_-_April_2025.pdf

an opportunity for policymakers to consider which policy questions would benefit from knowledge synthesis or novel research addressing these gaps. Other actions include developing a database of Irish research, developing case study guides and research skills training, and promoting the use of applicable data sets such as Growing Up in Ireland.

The National Equality Data Strategy

The National Equality Data Strategy 2026-2030[116] is a framework to improve and support the collection, standardisation, use and monitoring of all equality data across Government, including data relating to children and young people. The strategy recognises the importance of disaggregated data as it allows for policy makers to understand the situations of specific groups, identify potential disadvantages that may otherwise remain hidden, and develop approaches to address these inequalities. For example, the collection of ethnicity data is important for monitoring the access, participation and outcomes of ethnic minorities in key public services such as health, education, employment and access to accommodation, as non-disaggregated data can mask poorer outcomes for these groups.

The strategy provides guidance on data linkage, standard classification practices and improved data sharing to identify and fill in gaps in equality data. A key action in the strategy to improve the dissemination of equality data is the planned establishment of a centralised Equality Data Hub for all equality-related data and research in Ireland. This will improve access to equality data for a broad range of users and be an important tool for policy makers to be able to access the data they need to inform public policy.

Development of EU Monitoring Framework

The Indicators Sub Group of the Social Protection Committee and the European Commission developed a monitoring framework for the European Child Guarantee,

[116] *The National Equality Data Strategy 2026-2031*, Department of Children, Disability, and Equality, 2026. Available at The National Equality Data Strategy 2026-2031

which was first published in December 2023. The European Child Guarantee Monitoring Framework tracks Member States' progress in delivering the European Child Guarantee using statistical indicators. The monitoring framework also helps to identify good practices and foster mutual learning. An updated version of the monitoring framework was published in May 2025.

Other Data Sources

- **The Children and Young People's (CYP) Indicator Set** is a comprehensive collection of indicators relating to the lives of children and young people aged 0–24 years in Ireland. It supports the measurement of progress towards the National Outcomes outlined in Young Ireland.

- **Growing Up in Ireland** is the national longitudinal study of children and young people established in 2006 to support evidence-informed policy development. The study follows the progress of three nationally representative cohorts, born in 1998, 2008 and 2024. It collects data on physical health; socio-emotional / behavioural wellbeing; education; civic and economic participation; as well as family level demographic data and information from children's schools.

- **The State of the Nation's 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. It also presents data on supports and services available to children.

- **Central Statistics Office Survey on Income and Living Conditions**, tracks trends in child poverty and provides insights into different groups of children who are not always visible in datasets.

Data and Monitoring Frameworks Influencing Policy

A robust governance mechanism to monitor both the delivery of the policy and its effectiveness is a core aspect of policy development in Ireland[117].

Monitoring the effectiveness of a policy can support relevant data collection. The Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) published a review of the School Completion Programme in 2025. Through stakeholder engagement, the review found that student attendance, engagement and wellbeing have worsened in the wake of COVID-19 and that lack of emotional support and family circumstances impact school retention rates, but these rates can be enhanced through making school a more positive place for children. The review highlighted key strengths of the programme such as the flexibility of the programme to respond to a child's needs with a variety of interventions and supports, and challenges faced by the programme such as a lack of general awareness of the programme.

Evaluation of successes and challenges of policies and programmes inform the development of other policies in the same area. For example, the Traveller and Roma Education Strategy (TRES) was informed by extension consultation and stakeholder engagement and by evaluations of previous programmes such as the Supporting Travellers and Roma (STAR) pilot project. The STAR pilot project aimed to improve school attendance, participation and retention in specific Traveller and Roma communities regionally. The STAR teams worked together with parents, their children and the schools to remove the barriers impacting on Traveller and Roma children's attendance. Evaluation of the project by the Centre for Effective Services in 2023 and 2024 found that the STAR pilot project had positively impacted participants school experience and parents / guardians' engagement with the wider education system, and that the programme was widely welcomed by service users, which stands in contrast to the historical experiences of the Traveller and Roma communities in education.

[117] "Three pillars of policy development", Department of the Taoiseach, 2025. Available at: Three pillars of policy development

Engagement With Civil Society Organisations

Civil Society Organisations can play a crucial role in developing, implementing, and monitoring the European Child Guarantee. In Ireland, the involvement of stakeholders, including civil society and children and young people, is an integral part of the governance and implementation of Young Ireland.

The Young Ireland Advisory Council, which gives independent advice and support on policies that affect children and young people, is made up of members of civil society and independent experts, with experience of the issues that Young Ireland is trying to address, through their work, their lived experience or both. This includes two youth representatives of the National Youth Assembly of Ireland, to ensure that the voices of children and young people remain central. The Young Ireland Advisory Council is a key part of the governance of the European Child Guarantee in Ireland.

Eurofound's 2025 report European Child Guarantee: Eurochild members perspectives[118] found that "In Ireland, there is strong collaboration between the government and civil society. CSOs are actively consulted, and there is a close working relationship with the Department of Children, Disability and Equality".

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul (SVP), a charity that provides practical support to those experiencing poverty in Ireland, has an ongoing research study that publishes annual calculations of the cost of a Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) in Ireland, and the adequacy of core social protection supports in terms of meeting this cost[119]. Analysis from the 2025 MESL report highlights the contribution that measures such as the School Meals Scheme and the School Books Scheme can make towards income adequacy by reducing education costs. The Real Cost of School in

[118] *European Child Guarantee: Eurochild members' perspectives*, Eurochild, 2025. Available at: European Child Guarantee: Eurochild members' perspectives

[119] *Minimum Essential Standard of Living MESL 2025*, Vincentian MESL Research Centre, 2026. Available at: MESL-2025.pdf

Ireland[120], an annual survey of parents about education costs run by the children's charity Barnardos, also highlighted the positive impact of the extension of the School Books Scheme, with respondents "repeatedly commenting what a huge benefit it has been and the fact it has helped reduce some financial pressure".

Stakeholder Consultation

In February 2026 an online survey was issued, as part of a mid-term review of Young Ireland, the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People. The purpose of the review is to ensure that actions in Young Ireland reflect the current environment and assess its impact to date. The review is being conducted throughout 2026 alongside existing commitments, including a suite of communications related activity, implementation of actions and ongoing governance.

As Ireland's European Child Guarantee National Action Plan is a constituent strategy of Young Ireland, the survey aimed to also assess awareness and perception of the impact of the European Child Guarantee to date. The survey had 482 responses, from a variety of backgrounds (including social workers, civil servants, parents, researchers, and children themselves), from both urban and rural parts of the country.

Awareness of the Guarantee

Respondents were asked whether they had heard of the ECG, and 26% responded positively. Of those who identified themselves as children or young people, only 13.8% were aware of the Guarantee. This data will be used to influence communications activities over the next reporting period, and Ireland will aim to improve awareness among the general public, and children in particular, of the Guarantee, by the next progress report.

Impact of the Guarantee

The survey asked respondents to rate their level of agreement with the statement "access to services for children and young people has improved since the introduction

[120] *The Real Cost of School in 2025*, Barnardos, 2025. Available at:Barnardos-Back-To-School-Report-2025.pdf

of the European Child Guarantee", across eight key areas. While those surveyed reported that they felt access to ECCE and school meals had improved, responses were divided on education, school-based activities, nutrition and healthcare. The majority of participants disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement relating to housing. While this statement attempts to gauge public perception of action on the Guarantee, rather than implementation levels, it could be considered an indicator of the impact people are feeling in their lives (while noting the small sample size).

Survey Statement – "access to services for children and young people has improved since the introduction of the European Child Guarantee"

Responses	ECCE	Education	School-based activities	School meals
Strongly agree	9.5%	6.4%	4.6%	11.6%
Agree	36.5%	26.8%	27.2%	43.8%
Neutral	18.9%	26.1%	30.5%	17.6%
Not sure	5.0%	4.6%	9.5%	4.8%
No response	0.4%	1.5%	0.6%	1.7%
Disagree	18.3%	26.1%	21.2%	14.7%
Strongly disagree	11.4%	8.5%	6.4%	5.8%

Responses	Healthcare	Nutrition	Housing	Alternative care
Strongly agree	5.4%	2.9%	1.0%	1.7%
Agree	24.3%	20.3%	2.3%	5.4%
Neutral	17.6%	29.7%	10.0%	22.6%
Not sure	5.8%	4.6%	6.8%	13.3%
No response	0.6%	1.5%	1.5%	0.6%
Disagree	27.2%	28.0%	33.2%	27.2%
Strongly disagree	19.1%	13.1%	45.2%	29.3%

Chapter 5 – Financing

Ireland's spend on European Child Guarantee measures is not easily differentiated as 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. Consequently, the funding allocated is not specifically for implementation of the European Child Guarantee.

High Level Overview of Expenditure on the European Child Guarantee

Young Ireland, the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People, identifies child budgeting as a key enabling action to support improved outcomes for children and young people. The Child Poverty and Wellbeing Programme Office in the Department of the Taoiseach publishes a cross-government report on child poverty spending in the annual Budget[121], analysing how annual budgets have addressed child poverty and well-being each year since 2023. The reports provide visibility to the whole of-government response to child poverty and can help with identifying gaps and challenges in the cross-government response.

Child Poverty

- In Budget 2025, an additional €78.5 million was allocated to raise the Child Support Payment. The payment increased by €4 a week for children under 12, and €8 a week for over 12s, as well as a €100 lump sum paid for each child receiving a Child Support Payment, at a cost of €34 million. These changes to the Child Support Payment were expected to benefit approximately 338,000 children in 2025.

[121] "Annual Budget", Department of the Taoiseach. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-the-taoiseach/publications/annual-budget/

- For working families, from January 2025 the Working Family Payment was raised from €54 to €60 per week, regardless of family size, at a cost of €14.8 million.
- The Domiciliary Care Allowance[122] increased by €20 to €360 per month in 2025, at a cost of €15.9 million, and is expected to benefit approximately 56,000 children.
- A Newborn Baby Grant of €280 for each newborn child at a cost of €15 million was announced in 2025, applying to all children born on or after 1 December 2024 and who qualified for Child Benefit from birth.
- Funding for the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) increased by €2.5 million in 2025.

  Budget 2025 also allocated a €3.01million increase for youth justice interventions, to enhance existing policies and extend multi-agency youth diversion programmes nationwide.

Early Childhood Education and Care

- Ireland's investment in early education and childcare has continued to grow year on year. The total annual allocation for ECEC in 2024 was €1.1 billion, an increase of 70% since 2020. In Budget 2025, this increased again by 24% to €1.37 billion. The 2026 allocation is over €1.5bn.
- Core Funding, a grant for ELC and SAC providers, increased by 12% on the 2024 allocation, to €338.2 million in 2025.
- €17.185 million was allocated to Equal Start in 2025, a funding model that supports equitable access and participation in ELC and SAC settings, in particular for children experiencing disadvantage.
- Funding for the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) increased by €23.4 million, bringing the total allocation for AIM to almost €81 million in 2025.
- In 2023, €1.127 million of exchequer funding was secured to fund two parenting support projects, co-financed by Ireland's ESF+ Programme for 2021-27:

[122] "Domiciliary Care Allowance", Department of Social Protection, 2026. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-social-protection/services/domiciliary-care-allowance/

Employment, Inclusion, Skills and Training (EIST)[123]. The Young Parent Support Programme promotes the wellbeing of young parents up to age 24. The second programme recruits' family support practitioners for families living in International Protection Accommodation Services.

Education and School-Based Activities

- Budget 2025 allocated €11.8 billion to Education and Schools, an increase of 9% on Budget 2024, making it the highest amount ever allocated[124].
- The DEIS programme has an annual investment of €180 million, supporting approximately 260,000 students. An additional €16.5 million has been secured for 2026 to implement a new DEIS Strategy and the new DEIS Plus scheme.
- The State exam fee waiver, a cost-of-living measure, was extended to 2025, at a cost of approximately €12 million.
- Funding of €51 million was allocated in 2025 to extend the free schoolbooks scheme to support 940,000 students in primary, special and post-primary schools.
- €10 million of additional funding was allocated to social inclusion programmes targeted at the most vulnerable children at risk of education disadvantage and to prevent early school leaving. This includes supports for children who attend alternative education settings, as well as implementing the Traveller and Roma Education Strategy.
- An additional €1.2 million was allocated in 2025 to fund 10 new UBU Your Place Your Space services nationwide. These services provide out-of-school supports to marginalised, disadvantaged or vulnerable young people, between the ages of 10 to 24.
- A joint project between Finland and Ireland, 'Fostering Inclusive Quality Education in Finland and Ireland' started in 2023 and concluding in 2026, is being funded through the Technical Support Instrument and implemented by the European Agency for

[123] "Minister O'Gorman welcomes the initiation of two Tusla Family Support Projects, co-funded by the EU", Department of Children, Disability, and Equality, 2025. Available at: Tusla Family Support Projects
[124] "Ministers Foley, Naughton and Byrne announce details of almost €12 billion education funding in Budget 2025", Department of Education and Youth, 2025. Available at: Education funding in Budget 2025

Special Needs and Inclusive Education, in co-operation with the European Commission[125].

- Sport Ireland was awarded €11million from the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) for the 'Sport 4 Empowerment[126]' programme which aims to promote social inclusion and empower individuals through sport and physical activity, as part of Ireland's 2021-2027 EIST programme.
- The Sport Ireland Dormant Account Fund supports various programmes and initiatives that are remove barriers to participation in sport and physical activity for individuals from diverse and underrepresented communities. Funding in 2024 (€5.1 million) and 2025 (€4.17 million) included support for training and education to support disability inclusion; leadership and development opportunities for volunteers in disadvantaged communities or with people with disabilities; the purchase of disability-specific equipment and enabling infrastructure; and Her Moves, a campaign designed to encourage teenage girls to take up and continue physical activity, reducing the drop out in sport and physical activity in adolescent girls.

Healthy Meal Each School Day

- The actual expenditure for the School Meals Programme, which provides regular, free, nutritious meals to students, was €181.4 million in 2024 and €230 million in Budget 2025.
- The 2025 Budget increase includes €72 million to extend the Hot School Meals Programme to all primary schools, and €1.3 million for a School Meals Holiday Hunger pilot project[127].
- Ireland's Department of Social Protection funds a Food Poverty Caseworker Programme, which provides people seeking emergency food support, with a dedicated caseworker to help identify and address underlying issues contributing to

[125] "Fostering Inclusive Quality Education in Finland and Ireland", the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education. Available at: Fostering Inclusive Quality Education in Finland and Ireland
[126] "Minister Byrne launches New 'Sport 4 Empowerment' Programme by Sport Ireland", Sport Ireland, Available at: https://www.sportireland.ie/news/minister-byrne-launches-new-sport-4-empowerment
[127] *Budget 2025 Expenditure Report*, Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform. Available at: budget-2025-expenditure-report.pdf

their experience of food poverty. This programme began in September 2023 and is operating in Dublin, Limerick and Cork.

Healthcare

- Budget 2025 allocated a total of €81.7m for children's healthcare. This includes €0.4m for the Traveller Healthy Childhood Initiative, €0.4m for a dual diagnosis service for children with mental health and addiction issues, and €5m for paediatric homecare packages.
- The Sláintecare Healthy Communities Programme, which delivers targeted interventions in the areas of healthy living, parenting and mental health, received an additional €1.2 million to extend the programme to an additional four areas.
- Year-on-year funding for mental health services increased significantly, with €1.3 billion in allocated 2024, €1.5 billion in 2025, and nearly €1.6 billion in 2026.
- Budget 2025 provided an additional €2.9 million to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) to increase core staffing, develop a new CAMHS Emergency Liaison Service, and expand CAMHS Hubs to improve crisis cover for services. CAMHS now receives over €190 million in dedicated funding each year.
- A further €3 million has been allocated annually for a CAMHS wait list initiative, to reduce the length of time children are waiting – between 2022 and September 2025, an additional 4,712 cases were seen as a result of this initiative.
- The overall budget for Disability services in 2025 was €3.2 billion, a 12% increase over 2024. This includes continued support for various respite services and €2.84 million to recruit new staff to Children's Disability Network Teams.

Healthy Nutrition

- €1.2 million in capital funding was allocated in 2025 to support the Enhanced Nutrition Programme under Equal Start.
- €3.2 million in funding was allocated to deliver Bia Blasta, the pre-school nutrition programme, to provide daily lunches for pre-school children in disadvantaged areas in 2025. A further €1 million was made available to enable participating services to purchase necessary kitchen equipment.

- €2 million was allocated to complete the roll out of Phase 1 of Ireland's Obesity Policy and Action Plan.
- The ESF+ Food and Basic Materials Support[128] fund commenced in Ireland in August 2022, with €33.7 million allocated until 2027.

Adequate Housing

- Funding of €303 million, a 25% increase on 2024, has been allocated under Budget 2025 for homeless prevention services, emergency accommodation and other services for households, including children, experiencing homelessness.
- €23 million has been provided to deliver Traveller-Specific Accommodation for members of the Traveller community.
- An additional €47.5m has been allocated to Tusla for the purpose of meeting the needs of separated children arriving in Ireland who are at risk of homelessness and poverty and dependent on assistance from the State.
- The Warmer Homes Scheme received an allocation of €208.8 million in Budget 2024 to provide fully-funded energy upgrades for households on various welfare payments. In the first half of 2024, approximately 2,000 households with children benefitted. Budget 2025 further increased the scheme's allocation to €240 million.

Alternative Care

- In 2025, Tusla (the Child and Family Agency) was allocated €1.2 billion in funding to integrate and improve its existing service delivery, which supports the protection and welfare of children, young people and families.
- Additional supports for foster carers announced in Budget 2025 include €10.6 million to an increased Foster Care Allowance, €0.3 million allocated to an initial placement payment and €0.3 million allocated to associated travel costs.
- €14 million in additional funding has been allocated to meet existing levels of demand for residential care placements, as well as €6.9 million to fund full year costs

[128] " ESF+ Food and Basic Material Support", Department of Social Protection, 2026. Available at: https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-social-protection/publications/esf-food-and-basic-material-support/

of three new residential centres opened during 2024, and the opening and first-year costs during 2025 of a further 5 residential care centres.

Other Relevant Actions

- Tusla oversees Barnahus Ireland, a service which provides an integrated response to child sexual abuse. In 2024, Barnahus (Tusla) was awarded €1.2 million to address the need of new therapeutic posts in Barnahus West and Barnahus South. A further €971,542 was awarded in 2025 to support the work of Barnahus nationally for an aggregate budget of €2.17 million in 2025 allocated for service delivery. A total of €33 million in funding was confirmed up to 2030 which includes finding a permanent location for Barnahus South and establishing Barnahus East. The Project 'Support the implementation of the Barnahus project in Ireland (Phases I and II)' is co-funded by the European Union via the Technical Support Instrument Fund, and implemented by the Council of Europe, in cooperation with the European Commission.

Impact of Cost-of-Living Measures

In 2025 the Children and Young Persons Hub was launched by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) to serve as an accessible source for key information on children and young people in Ireland, using data sourced from a variety of CSO publications and other public service bodies. This hub supports cross-government actions to reduce the consistent child poverty rate to 3% by 2030.

In 2024 and 2025, the Government continued implemented various cost-of-living measures aimed at helping households meet higher costs of living, including universal energy credits and lump sum payments for those in receipt of the Child Benefit, Fuel Allowance, Working Family Payment and Carer's Support Grant. The Central Statistics Office reports that these cost-of-living measures reduced the at risk of poverty rate for children (0-17) in 2024 and 2025. In 2025, 16.9% of children were considered to be at risk of poverty, up from 15.3% in 2024[129]. The SILC 2025 reports that excluding

[129] "Household Income Deprivation and Poverty Children and Young Persons Hub", Central Statistics Office, 2026. Available at: Central Statistics Office

cost-of-living measures, the at risk of poverty rate would have been higher, at 19.2% in 2025 and 17.2% in 2024[130].

The consistent poverty rate for children was 8.5% in 2024 to 7.8% in 2025. SILC 2025 reports that without cost-of-living measures the consistent poverty rate would have been higher, at 9.1% in 2024 and 8.8% in 2025. This data is one of the indicators measured as part of Ireland's child poverty target.

Impact of cost-of-living measures on children aged 0-17	**2023**	**2024**	**2025**
At risk of poverty rate without cost-of-living measures	16.0	17.2	19.2
At risk of poverty (actual rate)	14.3	15.3	16.9
Consistent poverty rate without cost-of-living measures	5.4	9.1	8.8
Consistent poverty (actual rate)	4.8	8.5	7.8

For households with children, the largest impact in reducing at risk of poverty rates was for single-adult households with at least one child under 18 years. In SILC 2025, the at risk of poverty rate for this group was 17.1%, excluding cost-of-living measures the rate would have been 25.6%. By comparison, 13.6% of people living in two adult households with one to three children were at risk of poverty in 2025. Without cost-of-living measures the rate would have had been 14.9%.

SVPs 2025 MESL Report[131] and Barnardos Real Cost of School in Ireland[132] survey highlight the positive impact of cost-of-living measures and how reduced costs in one area can help offset costs in other areas. The 2025 Barnardos survey concluded that the significant reduction in survey respondents who reported being worried about meeting the costs of uniforms between 2025 and 2024 "could reflect the impact free schoolbooks are having".

[130] "Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2025", Central Statistics Office, 2026. Available at: SILC 2025
[131] *Minimum Essential Standard of Living MESL 2025*, Vincentian MESL Research Centre, 2026. Available at: MESL-2025.pdf
[132] *The Real Cost of School in 2025*, Barnardos, 2025. Available at:Barnardos-Back-To-School-Report-2025.pdf

Budget 2026

The measures announced in Budget 2026 represent the first year of a multi-year programme to meet the child poverty target of reducing consistent child poverty to 3% or less by the end of 2030.

Budget 2026 continues the approach of previous budgets, providing universal supports, guaranteed to all children to meet their fundamental needs with additional, targeted measures to support families who face particular challenges due to experiences of poverty and disadvantage. The Budget takes strong action to further tackle educational disadvantage through targeted supports. An additional €5.14 million has been allocated to Equal Start for 2026, a 30% increase from the 2025 allocation, to provide additional supports for disadvantaged children and families to take part in early learning and care, and school-aged childcare. €16.5 million (€48m full year cost) is being allocated to support pupils and students at the highest risk of educational disadvantage to reach their full educational potential via implementation of a new DEIS Strategy to 2035.

Budget 2026 aims to move away from cost-of-living payments towards permanent targeted payments to support those most vulnerable. This includes a €320 million social welfare package for children, which includes the largest increase ever in the Child Support Payment, increased income thresholds for the Working Family Payment, and the extension of Fuel Allowance to those on the Working Family Payment. Since 2020, the weekly Child Support Payment has increased by 95% (€38) for children aged 12 and over, and by 61% (€22) for children under 12, exceeding the growth in average wages (28%) and the rate of inflation (23.5%) in the same time period. Analysis by both the Department of Finance and the ESRI have found that Budget 2026 tax and welfare measures will have a positive impact on child poverty[133]. However, the ESRI also notes that further targeted measures will be necessary to achieve the consistent child poverty target of 3% or less by the end of 2030.

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[133] *Breaking the Cycle New Measures in Budget 2026 to Address Child Poverty and Promote Well-being,* Department of the Taoiseach, 2025. Available at: Child_Poverty_Budget_2026_Report.pdf

In their Preliminary Review of Budget 2026, Ireland's Parliamentary Budget Office calculated that the rise in core welfare payments of €10 supports income growth among low-income households, alongside other welfare measures outlined in Budget 2026, leading to average income gains of 3.9% among the poorest ten per cent of households[134]. However, the Office indicated that the winding down of cost-of-living supports would offset much of these gains, equivalent to an average decrease in annual income of 4.5% for the poorest ten per cent of households.

[134] *Budget 2026 Flash Impact Analysis,* Parliamentary Budget Office, 2025. Available at: Budget 2026 Flash Impact Analysis

Chapter 6 – Lessons Learned and Further Development

Ireland will continue to build on the implementation of the ECG and focus on delivering better outcomes for children at risk of poverty. This involves continuous learning from ongoing research and data, EU best practice examples, and consultation with stakeholders.

Ireland has prioritised a number of actions for further development, due in the early stages of the next reporting cycle. These actions will be discussed in more detail in the next report, but a short overview is given below.

Actions Planned for Early 2026

Care Research

As part of the Care Experiences Programme, Ireland has commissioned five studies to look at the experiences and outcomes of those who have journeyed through the Irish care system.

- An analysis of the care pathways that children and young people take through the care system, using data from Tusla's case management system.
- A study of the experiences and outcomes of adults who left the care system ten to fifteen years ago.
- A study of the educational and employment journeys of young care leavers.
- An examination of factors affecting the recruitment and retention of foster carers.
- A rapid integrative review to identify international practices in Special (Secure) Care.

Reports from these studies will be finalised and published in 2026. The findings and evidence generated by these research studies and statistical outputs will inform future care service provision and the development of the National Policy Framework for Alternative Care.

Model of Best Practice for Students with Care Experience

In 2026, Ireland will launch a Model of Best Practice for Students with Care Experience, based on the needs and requirements identified from the lived experience

of young people with care experience. This initiative will be the first of its kind in Ireland, and provide a coordinated information hub of pre- and post-entry supports for students with care experience in further and higher education. This includes career guidance and a named personal support advocate in each college.

This collaborative model involves a number of universities, Tusla and Empowering People in Care (EPIC), an independent organisation advocating with and for children in care and young care-leavers, with a range of supports committed to enhance educational outcomes for care-experienced students. It is expected to strengthen the pathways into further and higher education by ensuring care-experienced students can access clear information, personalised guidance, and coordinated assistance across institutions.

The National Childcare Scheme (NCS)

The NCS will undergo further enhancements in 2026. From 31 August 2026, an increase to the income-assessed subsidy's lower (base) and upper thresholds will be introduced. This will see the lower (base) threshold rise from €26,000 to €34,000 and the upper threshold rise from €60,000 to €68,000. Additionally, the multiple child discounts, which apply to families with two or more children under the age of 15, will also see a rise.

National Development Plan

€135 million was allocated in Budget 2026 to begin the process of providing State-led, high-quality, and accessible early learning and childcare services. DCDE will begin the process by assessing suitable sites, and acquiring or refurbishing appropriate buildings. The Department will then work with not-for-profit providers to design and open services, which these providers will operate. Locations will include both rural areas and urban areas which currently don't have sufficient capacity. Up to eight buildings will be selected for investment in 2026, with each one providing more than 100 places. This initiative will complement the work of existing private and community early learning and childcare providers.

Guardian ad Litem (GAL) National Service

The GAL National Service is due to commence in 2026. This new national service will deliver a high-quality, child-centred approach, grounded in children's rights and supported by clear standards, professional oversight, and accountability.

Cross-Border Relations

The first Ireland–UK Youth Forum was held in January 2026. It brought together 60 young delegates aged 16–24 from Ireland, England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Reflecting the ambition for closer people-to-people relations set out in the UK-Ireland 2030 Joint Statement and Ireland's bilateral cooperation frameworks with Wales and Scotland, this initiative aims to engage a new generation in shaping the future of Ireland–UK relations, strengthening links and improving mutual understanding between young people across the islands.

A Youth Advisory Group (YAG), comprising two representatives from each jurisdiction, was established early in 2025. The YAG shaped the Forum's agenda, methodology, and potential discussion topics. Their work ensured that the event was designed by young people, for young people. During the forum, delegates developed recommendations to be presented to the Taoiseach and the UK Prime Minister at the Leaders' Summit in Spring 2026.

Family Resource Centres

The Irish Government is committed to expanding the capacity and network of Family Resource Centres. In 2026 ten new Family Resource Centres will be established across the country, bringing the number of Family Resource Centres from 126 to 136. Tusla will work closely with the new centres, with assistance from the Family Resource Centre National Forum, to support their integration into the Family Resource Centre Programme. The National Forum will assist new centres in building links with existing FRCs, offering practical guidance and partnership to ensure smooth integration into the national Programme.

Convention on Education

In 2026, Ireland will host a Convention on Education. This will be a once in a generation opportunity for children, young people, parents, educators and wider society to help shape Ireland's education system for the next few decades. The Convention will sit over 4 weekends in 2026, with a focus on primary and post-primary schools, the transitions within education, looking at what is working well, what challenges need attention, and what changes may be needed in the years ahead. Findings and recommendations will be co-agreed between the four groups, and a Convention report will inform the next iteration of Ireland's education strategy, Our Schools, Our Future.

Child and Family Homelessness Action Plan

Ireland will develop a Child and Family Homelessness Action Plan in 2026. The Plan will place particular emphasis on prevention measures and on measures to accelerate exits, reducing the time children and their families spend in homeless emergency accommodation. It will examine issues currently experienced by children in emergency accommodation and put in place additional supports in areas such as education, nutrition and mental health. This will complement the Irish Government's new housing plan, Delivering Homes, Building Communities.

Presidency of the Council of the EU

For the second half of 2026, Ireland will hold the Presidency of the Council of the EU. Ireland's priorities for the Presidency are competitiveness, values and security. Within the Presidency Programme, Ireland have committed to supporting the strengthening of the European Child Guarantee, and working to improve conditions and outcomes for children experiencing disadvantage.

Through our focus on values, Ireland will ensure that the EU upholds fundamental rights and focus on those most in need of protection. The Irish Presidency will seek to uphold and promote the values of the Union by advocating for gender equality; and for the realisation of rights of disabled people, LGBTIQ+ people, Traveller and Roma communities, and other minoritised groups.

During the Presidency Ireland will host a meeting of European Child Guarantee coordinators in September 2026. The event will include a focus on prevention and early intervention as an approach to family supports. Ireland is commissioning an artwork, created in consultation with children, to mark the event. The artwork is expected to be permanently housed in Ireland's new Children's Hospital from 2027.

The Irish Presidency will continually showcase good practice in relation to the participation of children in decisions that affect their lives. A children's author and illustrator have been commissioned to produce a children's version of our Presidency policy programme, which will be made available to sixth class pupils (10-12 year-olds) in primary schools across Ireland. A Presidency reading guide for young people will also be made available, helping young people to engage with the full policy programme. A High-Level Conference on Child Participation will be held in July 2026, including a consultation with children across the EU on their views of the digital world.

In addition, several priorities of the Irish Presidency are relevant to implementing the European Child Guarantee. Through discussions, including at informal Meetings of Ministers and Council Meetings, Ireland's Presidency will aim to support the first European anti-poverty strategy, with a particular focus on Child Poverty. Ireland also aims to progress the Council Recommendation on fighting housing exclusion, to support vulnerable persons in precarious housing situations, and to prevent and address homelessness.

Ireland will host a high-level Presidency Conference on Online Safety, informed by a special Youth Forum to hear children and young people's views on their experiences online and what they think can make a safe online world. This aligns with the European Child Guarantee, as children from disadvantaged backgrounds are disproportionately exposed to online risks.

Children's Rights as a Key Component of Implementation of the Guarantee

Ireland is committed to implementing the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 42A of the Irish Constitution states that the State recognises and affirms the natural and imprescriptible rights of all children and shall, as far as practicable, by its laws protect and vindicate those rights. In the resolution of proceedings brought by the State regarding child safety, adoption, guardianship or custody of children, the best interests of the child should be the paramount consideration. In these matters, where possible, the views of the child should be sought and given due weight.

Young Ireland, the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People, is one of the key implementation vehicles of children's rights in Ireland. The Framework sets out the current issues facing children and young people, a range of cross-government actions to improve outcomes, and an enabling environment of systemic actions that aim to ensure the consideration of children and young people is a core part of everyone's agenda.

As a constituent part of Young Ireland, Ireland's implementation of its European Child Guarantee National Action Plan is guided by these same principles. Actions discussed in Chapter 3 about CRIAs, Child Rights Training, the participation of children in decision making and the GAL National Service are critical to ensure this child-rights-based approach.

Chapter 7 – Conclusion

The European Pillar of Social Rights Action Plan set out an ambitious target for Member States to lift five million children out of poverty or social exclusion. The Guarantee is a vital roadmap for countries to show how they can meet this target and improve outcomes for these children. Ireland remains committed to realising these improvements.

Ireland's second progress report shows the significant breadth of activity undertaken across the country in 2024 and 2025. At a macro level, the setting of a new child poverty target reflects a renewed commitment to ending child poverty, along with the continued central support of the Child Poverty and Wellbeing Programme Office in the Department of the Taoiseach, and the new Equality Data Strategy. At a local level, the Local Area Child Poverty Action Plan pilots are already making a meaningful difference in the lives of children, young people and their families.

Universal measures, such as the Free Schoolbooks Scheme and energy credits, have been shown to have an impact on children living in poverty. The School Meals Scheme, while not universal, has been expanded further, and many more children in need now have access to food through their school. Targeted measures are still an important tool – while a rising tide raises all boats, some cohorts need additional support. The launch of Equal Start in 2024 was a significant milestone, enabling children living in poverty to access early years education, which will have an impact throughout their lives.

The aims of the European Child Guarantee have been reflected in a number of cross-Government strategies in 2024 and 2025. The governance structures for Ireland's implementation of the European Child Guarantee had an input into the new Participation of Children and Young People in Decision Making Action Plan; the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy II; and the National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People, as well as the forthcoming National Strategy for Women and Girls, and the Child and Youth Homelessness Action Plan, both due for

publication in 2026. It is important to continue this interdepartmental working, to ensure both child rights and intersectionality are considered in policy decisions.

2026 will see Ireland hold the Presidency of the Council of the EU, and the European Child Guarantee can be seen in our Presidency priorities - values, competitiveness and security. The Communication on the Strengthening of the European Child Guarantee is also expected to bring changes, as Member States learn from one another and determine how best to tackle child poverty and social exclusion. 2026 marks the midpoint of the Guarantee, and there is still a significant body of work to be done for the next four years. Ireland will continue to work with colleagues across the EU, adapting to new challenges that arise, with a renewed focus on improving the lives of its children and young people.