



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

EU Child Guarantee

Ireland's National Action Plan

Prepared by the Department of Children,
Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
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Foreword by the Minister

The publication of the National Action Plan is an important and welcome first step in the implementation of the EU Child Guarantee.

I am confident that significant advancements can be made through my Department's coordination of the EU Child Guarantee, an important initiative that aims to combat social exclusion by guaranteeing access for children who are in need of a range of key services.

The commitments under the Guarantee address critical matters such as free access to early childhood education and care; education; healthcare for children; healthy nutrition including a healthy meal each school day; and adequate housing. While some of the actions necessary to address these complex problems will rest with my Department, an integrated and responsive approach from other key Departments will be mobilised to address the needs of children identified by the EU Child Guarantee.

As part of the EU Child Guarantee process, and in developing the successor national policy framework for children and young people, following *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*, I will be engaging with my cabinet colleagues to consider the most appropriate and effective structures to pursue the reforms necessary to improve outcomes for our most disadvantaged children and young people. The Child Guarantee will form part of the broader body of work supported by the new National Policy Framework for Children and Young People and its implementation structures. I am hopeful that the EU Child Guarantee will become a tipping point for addressing difficult challenges faced by, and improving outcomes for, our most vulnerable children.

Of course, this Plan comes at a time when we are dealing with the greatest humanitarian crises seen in Europe since the dark days of World War II. Ireland is unequivocal in its support for the people of Ukraine, fleeing aggression and war, and in need of safety, support and protection. The intent of the Child Guarantee speaks strongly to the needs of this cohort and the response of Ireland to those children in need of international protection will be swift, unambiguous and far reaching.

Roderic O'Gorman, T.D.

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

Foreword by the Secretary General

The EU Child Guarantee provides Ireland with an opportunity to re-focus and, where necessary, re-evaluate the current approach to tackling child poverty and promoting children's well-being. The objective of the Guarantee is to prevent and combat social exclusion by guaranteeing access for children who are in need of a range of key services and as such forms a subset to the wider issues revolving around child poverty.

As part of the obligations for Ireland under the Child Guarantee, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth has developed a National Action Plan for the Child Guarantee, in collaboration with a range of Government Departments. The effective implementation of the Child Guarantee will involve the active input and participation of all key government departments, agencies and stakeholders.

But that is not the whole story. The Department is working to develop a successor national framework for children and young people – a new framework following from the ground breaking work progressed under *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*. Implementation of the EU Child Guarantee National Action Plan will sit under this new framework. The ambition of this Department is that the successor framework to *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* along with the EU Child Guarantee will put a renewed emphasis on placing the child squarely at the heart of the decision making process in any matters of policy that affect them. As such, the implementation of the EU Child Guarantee will align with, and be complementary to, other strategic actions and responses aiming to improve the lives of all our children and young people.

Operationally, we now face a very significant challenge in the provision of assistance to those families, parents, guardians and children displaced from Ukraine as a result of Russia's invasion of that country. This Department, in collaboration with key Departments and Agencies of Government, will work to ensure that all those arriving from Ukraine are supported to the greatest extent possible. In this response, there is a recognition that the needs and vulnerabilities of children and young people require particular attention. Collectively, we are committed to meeting such need.

Kevin McCarthy

Secretary General

Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

Introduction

The text of the Recommendation for a European Child Guarantee was adopted by the Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council (EPSCO) on 14 June 2021. Ireland, along with all Member States, played an active role in the drafting of the text and related discussions.

The Guarantee seeks to prevent and combat social exclusion by guaranteeing access for children who are in need of a range of key services. It calls on Member States to guarantee for children in need, free access to early childhood education and care; education (including school-based activities); and healthcare; and to ensure effective access to healthy nutrition, a healthy meal each school day and adequate housing.

The Guarantee also aims to promote equal opportunity for children at risk of poverty or social exclusion, and to break cycles of intergenerational disadvantage. In 2020, some 18 million children in the EU lived in households at risk of poverty or social exclusion. The 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).

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

The EU Child Guarantee will help Ireland to sharpen its response and frameworks towards the goal that all children can grow up with the same opportunities, and access to quality support services that will allow them to thrive in society and in a post pandemic world. The effective implementation of the EU Child Guarantee will involve the active input of all of the key government departments and agencies. The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth's experience in the implementation of *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* will inform the design and implementation of the EU Child Guarantee to ensure it is collaborative, integrated and impactful.

Section 1: Context

Addressing social inclusion and child poverty in Ireland

Successive Governments, strategies and policies have sought to maximise the opportunities available to families and children to learn, grow develop and ultimately flourish. Service provision and tailored responses in many and varied arenas have helped to positively impact on the lives of children and families in Ireland over many years.

Since 1997, Ireland has put in place successive national strategies focusing on the reduction of poverty and social exclusion in Irish society. These plans have been cross-governmental with actions chosen for their potential to bring about improved outcomes for people living in poverty and/or experiencing social exclusion, particularly children and families. The whole-of-government approach recognises the complex and multi-dimensional nature of poverty and social exclusion, with a range of interventions required including income supports, improved access to affordable accessible services, and provision of supports in order to access good quality, well-paid employment. Improved outcomes for parents, guardians and families should result in improved outcomes for their children. In this regard, programmes, policies and responses seeking to improve and expand services and fiscal provision in Ireland invariably impact in some respect on child poverty in particular. Again, the goals of these State responses is to enable, to the greatest extent possible, families and children to avail of the beneficial opportunities that arise. Set out below are some of the mechanisms through which the Irish Government seeks to address child poverty and social inclusion.

The *Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025: Ambition, Goals, Commitments* is Ireland's national strategy for poverty reduction and improved social inclusion. It is a whole-of-government strategy spanning a five-year timeframe with a mid-term review due to take place in 2022. The Roadmap aims to reduce the percentage of the population in consistent poverty in Ireland to 2% or less and to position Ireland within the top five countries in the EU under a number of leading social inclusion measures. It seeks to ensure that social inclusion^{1 2} is at the core of public policy across all Government departments and services. In this regard, the Roadmap highlights the importance of both income supports and access to services, particularly to basic essential services such as housing, health and education, in addressing

¹ People are regarded as being in consistent poverty if they are both at risk of poverty (their income is below 60 per cent of the median income) and experiencing deprivation (cannot afford at least 2 out of 11 items on the basic deprivation list - two pairs of strong shoes; a warm waterproof overcoat; buy new not second hand clothes; eat meat, chicken, fish or a vegetarian equivalent every second day; have a roast joint or its equivalent once a week; had to go without heating during the last year through lack of money; keep the home adequately warm; buy presents for family or friends at least once a year; replace any worn out furniture; have family or friends for a drink or meal once a month; have a morning, afternoon or evening out in the last fortnight for entertainment.)

² The Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025 notes 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*". Roadmap for Social Inclusion, p.11

poverty and social exclusion. This aligns with the core recommendations contained in the EU Child Guarantee.

The Roadmap includes a chapter on supporting children and families with the goal of reducing child poverty in Ireland and ensuring that all families have the opportunity to participate fully in society. The Roadmap notes that the national child poverty target, identified and agreed by Government, required a 66% reduction in the number of children in consistent poverty by the end of 2020 (from its 2011 level of 107,000). Implicit in this target is the understanding that no child in Ireland should live in poverty and that, where due to adverse circumstances this occurs, available supports should ensure that the child and their family exit poverty as soon as is possible.

The Roadmap contains two measures for child poverty: one at national level and one at EU level:

- National Measure: lift over 70,000 children (aged 0-17 years) out of consistent poverty by 2020, a reduction of at least two thirds on the 2011 level (107,000 children);
- EU Measure: Ireland will improve its 2016 At Risk of Poverty and Social Exclusion (AROPE) rating amongst the EU Member States from 20th to 5th. Based on the 2018 AROPE rates for all EU Member States, this requires Ireland to reduce its AROPE rate for children under 18 years of age to at least 16%. It should be noted that over the period 2016 – 2020 Ireland recorded a 12% reduction in this rate.

On 17 December 2021, the Central Statistics Office published the 2020 Survey on Living Conditions (SILC) Data on Poverty and Deprivation³. The 2020 consistent poverty rate for children aged 0-17 years was 8%, equivalent to 96,000 children (based on the CSO 2020 Population Estimate). This shows that the national child poverty target has not been achieved although the numbers of children living in consistent poverty have been reduced by 54,000 since the highest number recorded in 2013 (150,000). A new national child poverty target, based on the consistent poverty measure, is being developed.

Ireland is currently finalising its contribution to the Headline Poverty Target outlined in the European Pillar for Social Rights Action Plan: the number of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion should be reduced by at least 15 million (compared to 2019). Out of the 15 million people to be lifted out of poverty or social exclusion in the EU, at least 5 million will be children.

³ The implementation of the new EU Regulation on Social Statistics will ensure improved comparability at EU level and improvements in the timeliness of data collection and collation. However, it has also resulted in a break in the time series for the Irish data. *This means that the Irish 2020 SILC data are not comparable with data from previous years.* At best, they can be regarded as being broadly in line with the trends seen in the data over the past number of years.

National Policy Framework for Children and Young People

Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures – The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People, 2014-2020 (BOBF) concluded at the end of 2020. BOBF confirmed a cross-Governmental and multidimensional approach to tackling child poverty, which prioritised early identification and intervention policies. The Framework itemised a range of new and ongoing measures and reforms intended to break the cycle of intergenerational disadvantage. These focused on increasing rates of parental, guardian and family employment, reducing the number of jobless households, and increasing investment in evidence-based, effective services that can improve child poverty outcomes. The updated BOBF Indicator Set and the final Annual Report for 2020 was published in January 2022 (<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/c9ad0-better-outcomes-brighter-future-indicator-set-report-2022>).

The research and review stage of development of the successor to the BOBF framework has now commenced, in parallel with the development of an enabling framework for the EU Child Guarantee and reporting to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child on the State's implementation of the United Nations Children's Rights Convention (UNCRC).

The integrated approach being adopted in developing these aligned domestic and international initiatives will inform the strategic approach to improving outcomes for children, young people and their families that will be pursued under the over-arching successor policy framework to *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*. It is envisaged that this Framework will be published by the end of 2022.

Pathways to Work

Pathways to Work 2021-2025 is Ireland's national employment strategy. It is a whole-of-government strategy encompassing a four-year timeframe with a mid-term review due to take place in 2023. 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.

Employment is vital to individual well-being, not just in the financial sense but also in terms of social, physical and mental health. While the Strategy is targeted at adults, well-paid employment improves outcomes for parents, leading to improved outcomes for children.

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

Current Strategies in Key Policy Sectors

There are a number of extant Government strategies and policies that will have significant impact in addressing many of the aims contained in the EU Child Guarantee. Those most relevant are set out below. By way of indication, documents referred to below and marked by asterisk contain cross-Departmental components.

SECTOR: EDUCATION

- DEIS Plan 2017 – Delivering Equality of Opportunity In Schools;
- National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development to 2030 *;
- Sustainable Development Goals National Implementation Plan * ;
- Digital Strategy for Schools to 2027 *;
- Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (process to develop new strategy currently underway);
- STEM Education Policy Statement 2017 – 2026 *;
- Languages Connect – Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017 – 2026;
- The Action Plan for Education 2022, and
- Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2018–2023) *.

SECTOR: EARLY YEARS

- First 5 – a whole of Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families, 2019 – 2028 *.

SECTOR: HEALTH

- Sláintecare;
- Child Health and Nutrition Policy *;
- Sharing the Vision;
- Connecting for Life: Ireland's National Strategy to Reduce Suicide 2015 – 2024 *;
- Healthy Ireland Strategic Action Plan 2021-2025 *;
- Get Ireland Active! The National Physical Activity Plan for Ireland *;
- National Drugs Strategy;
- National Obesity Strategy, and
- Obesity Policy and Action Plan.

SECTOR: NUTRITION

- National Healthy Eating Guidelines for 1 to 4 year olds;
- General Nutrition Guidelines *;
- Healthy Ireland Strategic Action Plan 2021-2025 *;
- Nutritional Standards for School Meals *, and
- Food in Schools Forum *.

SECTOR: HOUSING

- Housing for all - a New Housing Plan for Ireland, housing policy to 2030 *.

It should also be noted that there is a significant degree of overlap between the objectives of the strategies, policies etc. referred to above and the various cohorts they are seeking to serve.

In addition, there are other initiatives underway that would not form part of the core recommendations of the EU Child Guarantee but which, nonetheless, are noteworthy. These include:

- The Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill: which will establish an Online Safety Commissioner and minimise the spread and availability of harmful online content has begun its passage through the Oireachtas (Irish Parliament);
- The Sports Action Plan (to 2023);
- The Creative Youth Plan 2023 – 2027 (currently under development and with an expected publication this year, aims to enhance access to creative activities for young people in a range of formal and informal settings);
- The National Sports Policy 2018 – 2027, and
- The Youth Justice Strategy 2021 – 2027.

INCOME SUPPORT

It is widely recognised that in order to fully address the issues surrounding poverty and social inclusion adequate service provision across several policy domains, coupled with appropriate levels of income support, are necessary. In this regard, international comparisons indicate that Ireland performs strongly in the provision of income supports and the Department of Social Protection seeks to alleviate and prevent child poverty primarily by providing a range of income supports for families with children. Recent Budgets have provided for improvements to many of these measures which are targeted at low-income families and children. These supports (details of which can be found on the Government portal www.gov.ie) include:

- Child Benefit (universal payment in respect of children);
- Increase for a Qualified Child (to primary social welfare payments);
- Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance;
- One-Parent Family Payment and Jobseekers Transitional Payment (targeted supports for lone parents);
- Working Family Payment (a payment for employees with children on low incomes);
- Back to Work Family Dividend (a payment to help people with children move from welfare to employment);
- Maternity Benefit, Paternity Benefit, Parent's Benefit, Adoptive Benefit and Health and Safety Benefit, and
- Domiciliary Care Allowance (monthly payment for a child with a severe disability, who requires ongoing care and attention, substantially over and above the care and attention usually required by a child of the same age).

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

Underpinning of National Action Plan

The composition of this Action Plan, in the main, is drawn from the constituent elements of extant policies, strategies and programmes operating in relevant Government Departments. Inherent in the formulation of each is a distinct set of variables, objectives and analysis, the details of which can be found on the relevant Departmental websites. The main portal for all Government Departments, www.gov.ie, provides access to these websites and publications, including the strategies referred to above.

Finally, it is interesting to note the level of funding provided by Government to programmes aligned with the aims of the EU Child Guarantee. Details of the key elements of this expenditure, **though it must be stressed, not all**, are set out below:

Table 1: Expenditure by Ireland on Programmes of Relevance to EU Child Guarantee

Expenditure on:	Annual Cost in Euro
Child Benefit	€2.061bn
Increase for a Qualified Child Payment	€39.3m
Domiciliary Care Allowance	€203.3m
Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance	€58.2m
One-Parent Family Payment and Jobseekers Transitional Payment (targeted supports for lone parents)	€566m (OFF) €223.7m (JST)
Working Family Payment (a payment for employees with children on low incomes)	€348.5m

Back to Work Family Dividend (a payment to help people with children move from welfare to employment)	€10.3m
Maternity Benefit (MB), Paternity Benefit (PB), Parent's Benefit (Par B), Adoptive Benefit (AB) and Health and Safety Benefit (H&SB)	€267.8m (MB); €14.1m (PB); €63.9m (Par B); €140k (AB); €578k (H&SB)
Early Years funding (all schemes including AIM)	€716m
Special Educational Needs	€2.0185bn
School Transport Service	€270m
GP Services for Children under 6	€89m
School Meals Programme	€68.1m
Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS)	€170m
Housing Assistance Payments	€585m
Family Hubs (emergency accommodation provision for families experiencing homelessness)	€26.8m
TOTAL	<u>€7.8bn</u>

Section 2: Child Guarantee Coordinators

The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) is actively engaged in dealing with child poverty, previously identified as a priority area under *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures – the National Framework for Children and Young People* (BOBF) and a theme which will be included in its successor framework, currently under development.

DCEDIY has established an EU and International Unit, which, among other responsibilities, is leading on the coordination across Government of the necessary actions emerging from the EU Child Guarantee. The head of that Unit is the EU Child Guarantee Coordinator for Ireland.

The EU Child Guarantee provides Ireland with an opportunity to re-focus and, where necessary, re-evaluate our approach to tackling child poverty and promoting children's well-being. DCEDIY will coordinate actions across Government in addition to holding responsibility for the delivery of actions contained in this Plan relating to Early Childhood Education and Care. The delivery of other key actions in the plan will be a matter for the parent Department holding policy and operational responsibility. In this regard, the Departments of Social Protection, Housing, Local Government and Heritage, Education and Health are critical stakeholders.

The effective implementation of the EU Child Guarantee will involve the active input and participation of all key government departments and agencies. The experience of DCEDIY in the effective implementation of BOBF and its cross government and cross sectoral engagement will inform the implementation of this Plan to ensure that it is collaborative, integrated and, ultimately, impactful. The coordination and monitoring of the National Action Plan will form a key component of the ambitious framework structures to be rolled out in 2022.

Section 3: Identification of Children in Need and Barriers in Access

Children in need

For context, it is useful to illustrate the broader picture in relation to children in Ireland. The most recent data from the *State of the Nation's Children* – a biennial report published by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth – is set out below. This is in addition to the most relevant statistics on children in need, as defined by the EU Child Guarantee, which are shown in Table 2.

Children⁴ in Ireland:

- In 2021, there were 1,191,125 children living in Ireland, accounting for 23.8% of the total population.
- In 2020, (the latest year for which EU data is available), Ireland had the highest estimated proportion of children in the European Union (24.2%). The EU-27 average was 18.2%.
- In 2019, 284 children died in Ireland. This equated to an overall mortality rate of 2.36 per 10,000.
- In 2016, 16.5% of children lived in a lone-parent household.
- In 2016, 8.1% of children had a mother with either no formal education or primary education only; and 50.6% of children had a mother whose highest level of education was either a lower secondary or upper-secondary education.
- In 2016, there were 6,108 children providing regular unpaid personal help for a friend or family member with a long-term illness, health problem or disability in Ireland. This accounted for 0.5% of the child population.
- In 2020/2021, 104,137 children (more than 95% of the eligible cohort) were enrolled in the Early Childhood Care and Education programme.
- The average class size in primary school reduced from 24.9 pupils in 2014/2015 to 23.3 pupils in 2020/2021.
- The Leaving Cert retention (completion) rate increased from 90% for the 2007 post- primary school entry cohort to 91.5% for the 2014 cohort.
- In 2021 there were 72,095 child welfare and protection referrals to Tusla, the Child and Family Agency.
- At the end of 2021 there were 5,863 children in the care of Tusla, the Child and Family Agency.
- In 2018, 90.2% of children aged 10-17 reported feeling safe in the area where they live.

⁴ Children are defined as being under 18 years of age.

Table 2: Children per vulnerable cohort

Description of vulnerable cohort:	No of children identified
In consistent poverty (2020 SILC)	8%
At risk of poverty (2020 SILC)	16.9%
Experiencing deprivation (2020 SILC)	20.3%
Living in households with no employment	11.3%
Living in households with substance abuse	4,588 children had parents that entered treatment for problem alcohol use in 2020 7,088 children had parents that entered treatment for problem drug use in 2020
Living in households with mental illness	Not available
Children of a teenage mother	1.5% of all births in 2020
Children of imprisoned parent(s)	Not available
Households containing children assessed as having a housing need	24,646 households
Children using emergency accommodation (as part of family)	2,563
Number of children with disabilities	75,963
Children with mental health issues	506 children were admitted to Psychiatric Hospitals/Units and to Child and Adolescent Units in 2016
Number of Traveller Children	15,387 (aged 19 years old and under)
Children with a migrant background	16% of parents in 2016 were of a non-Irish background and had a least one child under the age of 18

Note: Figures above are the most recent available, unless qualified by date. Children are defined as those under 18 years of age, unless otherwise stated.

In addition, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, published its first report under the Child-specific Poverty Research Programme in mid-2020. It draws from existing data and literature to provide a 'baseline' understanding of what we know about the situation of children living in poverty. It describes families' financial circumstances at different income levels, providing insights into the depth of poverty and movements into and out of poverty from 2011 to 2018. It also identifies the main risk factors for experiencing child poverty. The aim of this Programme is to support evidence-informed decision making at Departmental and Government level by meeting the research and evidence needs of policymakers. Two key reports that support understanding of the prevalence, experience and impacts of child poverty in Ireland have emerged under this Programme:

- Byrne, D., and Treanor, M. (2020) *Income, Poverty and Deprivation among Children - A Statistical Baseline Analysis*, and
- Maître, Bertrand, Russell, Helen, and Smyth, Emer (2021) *The dynamics of child poverty in Ireland: Evidence from the Growing Up in Ireland survey*.

Work is currently underway to commission a methodological review of how to capture seldom heard voices of vulnerable children, with a particular focus on experiences of children living in poverty. It is hoped that this methodological review will inform future research initiatives that aim to better understand the lived experience of children experiencing poverty.

Barriers to Access

A range of services and supports are available for families and children. While these services are accessed by a large number of people, it is noted that some people can experience barriers to access. In general, the barriers to service access are not confined to a particular set of State responses or particular cohort of children in need. Rather, a similar set of challenges span a number of service areas and their associated response times. Some of the more significant barriers to access are described below.

Service cost: The costs associated with availing of essential services can, in some instances, be prohibitive, for certain sections of the population. In relation to the domains covered by the EU Child Guarantee, these issues can arise in relation to medical matters. While public service provision is available, waiting lists for certain medical assessments and treatments exist. In cases of urgent need, where the public system may not be in a position to respond within a particular timeframe, this may cause difficulties where the means to meet private medical treatment does not exist. This is most commonly manifested in access to GP services.

In addition, the cost of formal early learning and care and school age childcare has also been identified as a barrier for some families - impacting on maternal employment in particular, on lone parent families and on families where there is a person with a disability. It is recognised that this can have a significant impact on the earning potential for these families.

Qualified staff: The availability of qualified staff and associated workforce planning is the most significant contributory factor in limiting service accessibility. Health, child welfare and protection and educational (including early learning and care and school-age childcare) domains are all experiencing pressures in the recruitment of qualified staff across multiple professional disciplines. This difficulty manifests itself on the client side by way of limited access to services and a reduced service response.

Supply and demand: The housing sector in Ireland is probably the most notable area in terms of public service provision impacted by the phenomenon of supply and demand. In this domain, while progress has been made in the reduction of those on housing waiting lists, the shortage of suitable accommodation units – and in particular social housing – has led to significant pressures in the housing market. While various State mechanisms have been deployed to alleviate the challenges for families in need of accommodation, the nature of the problem and the lead in time from development of concept to turnkey reality means that mitigating actions in this area will be required over the medium term at least. In addition, there is also evidence of unmet need for early learning and care and school-age childcare for certain cohorts of children and in certain geographic locations.

Stigmatisation: Seeking and being provided with (noting the distinction between both) supports or other services for mental health and family/parenting still carry a degree of stigmatisation. While this scenario is not, generally speaking, a societal norm and reinforces the importance of progressive universalism, it is still nonetheless manifested at the level of the individual. As such it is difficult to quantify with self-reporting and qualitative instruments forming the basis of estimations of this effect in this area.

Key Barriers to Access

In order to address and focus on a manageable number of initial barriers, it was determined that critical impediments – across each of the domains of education, early learning and care and school age childcare, housing, health and nutrition should be identified. On this basis a series of relevant actions could then be identified and set out in the plan. The following barriers, which are deemed to be of priority, are those to be addressed, monitored and reported on under this Plan. Accordingly, Sections 7 and 8 of this document cite the barriers listed here and associated remedial response.

- Non-financial barriers to participation in education;
- Financial barriers to participation in early learning and care and school age childcare;
- Non-financial barriers to participation in early learning and care and school age childcare;
- Cost of access to healthcare;
- Availability of healthy meals each school day, and
- Timely access to adequate accommodation for children in need.

These barriers were also echoed as being of particular note during the course of the consultation process (see Section 6 for details).

Additional Barriers to Access

Other barriers to service access for vulnerable children identified during the course of the consultation process, which though not as prevalent as those listed above, nonetheless impact on a less frequent basis include:

- Transport to services (affordability of public transport) when located outside the Dublin area;
- Access to high quality, affordable early learning and care and school age childcare ;
- Obtaining time off work;
- Lack of health/other literacy issue and failure to understand the importance of, or reasons for, particular required engagement;
- Inability to effectively communicate (language difficulties, comprehension challenges);
- Lack of correct contact data;
- Cost of school books, uniforms, extra-curricular activities, and
- Suitable facilities to avail of school meals programme.

Section 4: Targeted Categories of Children in Need

In many instances the cohorts of vulnerable children, in an Irish context, that the EU Child Guarantee seeks to assist, overlap (e.g. children with a disability attending early learning and care and school age childcare or mainstream schools). Efforts to implement the interventions determined in existing strategies, policies and programmes will, in the main, span several vulnerable cohorts. Inherent in this is the recognition that some of the actions proposed will be universal in nature and will impact positively on a broader population of children and young people – not just those defined as being in need.

Section 3 has established the key barriers to be addressed during the initial phase of action under this plan. As part of the oversight mechanisms currently under development and with regard to the integration of any interventions with wider Government priorities, it is intended to utilise existing robust data sets (e.g. those currently operationalised by *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* or the *National Longitudinal Study of Children in Ireland*) to determine ongoing appropriate responses to the needs of these vulnerable children.

A descriptive examination in a recent baseline analysis, drawing on the individual characteristics of children (sex, age, nationality, region, local area deprivation), shows that females, and older children, particularly those aged 6-11 and aged 12-17, have above average rates of poverty across each of the measures. Above average rates on the 60% and 70% median income threshold measures are also evident among children that do not hold Irish nationality: 43 per cent of children who have a nationality other than Irish live at or below the 70% poverty line compared to 25 per cent of Irish nationals. Children living outside Dublin have above average rates of poverty than children living in Dublin, while those living in affluent areas have below average rates of poverty than children living in all other areas.

A substantial amount of data exists detailing, in accordance with recognised research best practice, the following indicators:

- children's current material living standards;
- children's wider wellbeing;
- causes of child poverty, and
- future chances of children.

These will be drawn upon and, where necessary refined, in providing an informed evidence base from which policy decisions in relation to further interventions can be established.

Section 5: Outreach and Awareness Raising

The Social Inclusion Forum

The Social Inclusion Forum is an annual national event hosted by the Department of Social Protection. It provides people affected by poverty and social exclusion, as well as the community organisations representing them, with the opportunity to come together with officials from relevant Government Departments and the Minister for Social Protection to discuss poverty and social inclusion policy and related issues of common concern. The 2021 Forum, which took place in April 2021, included discussions on child poverty and food poverty. Relevant themes from these discussions included:

- Increased participation and engagement of children and young people in policy making structures, and through outreach to engage with marginalised children and those experiencing poverty;
- Increased service provision through early learning and care and school-age childcare, education and housing, with access to more universal supports particularly for those experiencing in-work poverty;
- The importance of preventing food poverty and the 'normalisation' of food banks, and
- The need to ensure affordable housing and the recognition of housing as a social determinant of health and wellbeing.

Other Stakeholder Engagements

The Department of Social Protection also hosts a Disability Consultative Forum and conducts regular meetings with representatives of the Community and Voluntary Sectors. For example, twice a year, a range of NGOs (including those focussed on children and/or child poverty) meet with senior officials to discuss a range of policy and implementation issues. The Department routinely runs public consultation processes when significant policies are being reviewed or developed.

Early Learning and Childcare Stakeholder Forum

The Early Learning and Childcare Stakeholder Forum provides a communication and engagement mechanism between the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, his Department and the Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School Age Childcare (SAC) sector. The membership is broadly representative of the entire sector, including key public bodies and regulatory services, and representatives of staff and providers, parents, academics, and children's rights groups.

The objectives of the Forum are to:

- Give stakeholders the opportunity to raise issues with the Minister and the Department and to co-design solutions for these issues;
- Provide all members with updates on developments and challenges in the sector;
- Enable the Department to canvass stakeholder views;
- Encourage networking between all members (stakeholders and officials);
- Support evidence based decision making, informed by the sector, and
- Support the professionalisation of the ELC and SAC sector.

Other early learning and care and school age childcare sector engagements

Ongoing reforms and enhancements to provision are supported by structured engagement and communications in the context of recent and ongoing assessments and reviews of Early Learning and Care and School Aged Childcare.

In addition there are wider sectoral communications in form of newsletters, public information campaigns and targeted communications, which are ongoing.

Healthy Ireland – Food and nutrition

Under Healthy Ireland, the Department of Health, Safefood and the HSE run a communications campaign called START, which aims to inspire, empower and support parents to start building and persist with healthy lifestyle habits in the family to prevent childhood obesity (<https://www.safefood.net/start>).

More broadly, the Healthy Ireland Strategic Action Plan 2021-2025, launched in May 2021, features an additional theme on “Reducing Health Inequalities”, and this will be a major focus of Healthy Ireland. Within this, the goal of the Sláintecare Healthy Communities Programme will be to improve the long-term health and wellbeing of the most disadvantaged communities in Ireland, with health-specific interventions targeting smoking, social prescribing, parenting, healthy eating (e.g. expansion of the Healthy Food Made Easy community cooking programme), and Making Every Contact Count.

Physical Activity in Early Childhood

A number of resources have been made available in recent years for this age group.

- (i) The HSE's Nurture Programme is designed to improve the information and professional supports available to parents during pregnancy and the first three years of their baby's life;

- (ii) A website, mychild.ie, a new pregnancy information book and Caring for Your Baby books were launched in late 2018 and form core components of the Nurture Programme. Physical activity messages are integrated into the www.mychild.ie website;
- (iii) START is a five-year public health awareness campaign from Safefood, the HSE and Healthy Ireland, which aims to build healthy lifestyle habits amongst parents;
- (iv) Active Play Everyday resources are distributed free of charge via www.healthpromotion.ie;
- (v) Healthy Ireland Smart Start is a health promotion training programme led by the HSE to ensure children in ELC settings are supported to adopt healthy lifestyle behaviours, and
- (vi) Nutrition and physical activity is an integral part of the Early Years Services Regulations.

Mental Health

Over 20 HSE Resource Officers for Suicide Prevention are fundamental in the local implementation of *Connecting for Life*, and the current development of new localised plans to cover this new period to 2024.

Under *Sharing the Vision*, the national mental health policy, there are a number of outreach structures as part of the governance, implementation and specialist structures, including a whole-of-government National Implementation Monitoring Committee (NIMC), which was established in December 2020 to oversee the implementation of the recommendations in the *Sharing the Vision* policy and to monitor progress. The NIMC is made up of the NIMC Steering Committee, which will be supported by a NIMC Reference Group of Service Users and Family Members and NIMC Specialist Groups. In this regard, the Specialist Group on youth mental health transitions will prepare an overall final report, including a detailed plan which will facilitate the provision of age-appropriate specialist mental health services in alignment with the overall timeframe and approach of both *Sharing the Vision* and *Sláintecare*.

Section 6: Involvement of Stakeholders

This National Action Plan was submitted to, and approved by, Government on 31 May 2022.

Prior to submission to Government, the plan had the input and consideration of all relevant Government Departments and senior officials.

As part of the developmental process for the National Action Plan, an online consultation was launched by the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth on 1 December 2021, encouraging everyone with a view on the Child Guarantee to submit their comments and thoughts by 14 January 2022. In total, the Department received 21 submissions. In addition, expert input in drafting the plan, supplied by senior officials, drew on consultations held by those Departments in the formulation of relevant policy priorities that would have taken place outside of the actions related to the EU Child Guarantee.

Ireland has very strong participatory structures that engage with children and young people to provide a rich vein of knowledge and different sense of the world that helps shape policy debates. Ireland concluded, in advance of its most recent submission to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, a significant consultation exercise with children and young people, to ascertain their views in relation to matters of import to them. Notably, primary school children raised issues in relation to poverty and homelessness; while older children raised matters outside of the EU Child Guarantee about social meeting spaces and structural matters in relation to education provision (access was not raised as a matter of concern). Engagement with children and young people is ongoing and will continue to form part of the development and oversight mechanisms for the new policy framework for children and young people, including EU Child Guarantee related concerns.

In addition to the above, submissions received from civil society and other key stakeholders were brought for consideration to an Inter-Departmental Group that drafted and agreed the text of the Plan.

It is important to note that all submissions received will inform the approach to the development of the successor to the *National Framework for Children and Young People*. This framework will have as its foundation the following five key outcomes for children and young people:

1. Are active and healthy, with positive physical and mental wellbeing;
2. Are achieving their full potential in all areas of learning and development;
3. Are safe and protected from harm;
4. Have economic security and opportunity, and
5. Are connected, respected and contributing to their world.

It is intended that significant cross government action on child poverty will form a central component of the new framework under Outcome 4 - Economic Security and Opportunity, while also impacting on Outcomes 1 – 3. Within this programme of work, the contributions of the EU Child Guarantee will augment commitments to address causes and impacts of child and family poverty.

The implementation and monitoring of the National Action Plan will be part of the work stream under this broader child and youth focussed umbrella, with a view to aligning relevant service delivery across a number of domains, not only on social inclusion. A list of those organisations/individuals whose contributions were received can be found at Appendix 1.

Sections 7 and 8: Actions, Objectives, Targets and Timelines

The majority of the State responses to address the issues raised in the EU Child Guarantee are met from existing annual State expenditure and do not draw down EU funding. Initiatives developed in future will have wider regard to the availability of potential funding sourced from central EU funds. The actions, objectives, targets and timelines set out below in the main relate to those barriers identified previously in Section 3. Additional interventions of note are also referenced for completeness.

Universal Actions

Barrier: Integration of Service Provision and Awareness of Supports at Local Level

Interventions: Local Area Child Poverty Action Plans, Raising Awareness of Services Covered by EU Child Guarantee

Description: A number of interventions in this arena aim to address this barrier, namely:

- (i) **Local Area Child Poverty Plans:** The inter-relationship between Local Community Development Committees and Children and Young People's Services Committees is informed by the Local Community Development Committees (LCDC) – Children & Young People's Services Committees (CYPSC) Guidance Document. The opportunity now arises to implement a progressive universalism approach that builds on existing LCDC-CYPSC alignment and embeds child poverty action planning into existing local co-ordinating structures' planning frameworks; maximising the utilisation of local multi-agency effort to realise a necessary, specific and targeted focus on economic security and opportunity for children, young people and families in greatest need, within mainstream, universal provision.

The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and the Department of Rural and Community Development will jointly conduct a pilot programme that examines the development of local child poverty action plans to be led by CYPSC in cooperation with their corresponding LCDC. Selection of pilot programme development sites will be limited to four sites and it is expected that regard will be given to ensuring distribution of pilots across rural/urban areas, mixed population density, levels of deprivation, comprehension of existing local service provision, and diversity of groups engaged. The intention of this pilot programme will be to maximise learning and assess the feasibility of local area child poverty action plans being embedded in local co-ordinating structures' planning frameworks and to that end, pilots will ideally support a range of approaches.

(ii) **Raising Awareness of Services Covered by EU Child Guarantee:** The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth will examine the possibility and feasibility surrounding an ongoing awareness and information campaign regarding the provision of key services referenced under the EU Child Guarantee. Such consideration will include matters such as image/branding of the EU Child Guarantee, web based information provision and support, development of consultation channels and engagement with children and young people, NGOs and, of course, relevant Departments. Preparatory work for this campaign to commence in 2022.

EU CG Reference	Target Group	Numbers impacted	Lead Agency
N/A	<p>Children at risk of social exclusion in CYPSC areas covered by pilot scheme</p> <p>All children availing of services covered by the EU Child Guarantee</p>		Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

Information Note: Local Community Development Committees (LCDCs) are groups established in each local authority area to pursue an integrated approach to local community based services across providers and delivery structures. In 2022, LCDCs commence the process of developing their next Local Economic and Community Plan (LECP) which aims to set out, for a six-year period, the objectives and actions needed to promote and support the economic development and the local and community development of the relevant local authority area, both by the Local Authority directly and in partnership with other economic and community development stakeholders.

CYPSC are county-level committees that bring together the main statutory, community and voluntary providers of services to children and young people. They provide a forum for joint planning and co-ordination of activity to ensure that children, young people and their families receive improved and accessible services. Their role is to enhance interagency co-operation and to realise improved outcomes for children and young people. In 2020, 17 out of 27 CYPSC reported having a subgroup focussing on achieving economic security and opportunity. A national review of CYPSC will also be conducted to inform future direction of CYPSC and to strengthen their alignment and cooperation with LCDC.

Sector: Education

Barrier: Non-financial barriers to participation in Education

Interventions: Special Educational Needs, Tusla Education Support Service, Addressing Educational Disadvantage, Digital Strategy and Education for All, Literacy (including Digital Literacy), STEM and Wellbeing

Description: A number of interventions in this arena aim to address this barrier, namely:

- (i) **Special Educational Needs:** Currently, Ireland spends in excess of 25% of its annual education and training budget (€9.2 billion in total) on making additional provision for children with special educational needs, representing an increase of over 60% in total expenditure since 2011, at which point €1.247 billion per annum was provided. The policy is that students with special educational needs should be included where possible and appropriate in mainstream placements with additional supports provided.
- (ii) **Tusla Education Support Service:** Tusla Education Support Service (TESS) operates under the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000, a piece of legislation that emphasises the promotion of school attendance, participation and retention. TESS works collaboratively with schools, families and other relevant services to achieve the best educational outcomes for children and young people at risk of poor attendance or early school leaving.
- (iii) **Addressing Educational Disadvantage:** Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) is the main policy initiative of the Government to address educational disadvantage at school level. This programme provides additional teaching and other supports and resources to schools, aimed at tackling 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.
- (iv) **Digital Strategy:** The recently published Digital Strategy for Schools to 2027 sets out the Government's policy on the use of digital technologies in teaching, learning and assessment in the school sector. The Strategy will advance the embedding of digital technologies across teaching, learning and assessment, building on the work under previous strategies. It aims to further support the school system so that all students across our schools have the opportunity to gain the knowledge and skills they need to navigate an ever-evolving digital world successfully. The Strategy was developed following an extensive consultation process with all relevant stakeholders. The safe and effective use of digital technologies is an important feature of the new Strategy and will build on the achievements of the previous Strategy in further embedding the use of digital technologies in teaching, learning and assessment. Inclusion will be an important element of the new Strategy and it will be supported by a further investment of €200m under the National Development Plan. All post-primary schools now have high-speed broadband with minimum connectivity speeds of 200

Mbps. It is the intention of the Department to provide all primary schools with high-speed broadband connectivity by end 2022/early 2023.

Ensuring access to digital technologies, as well as their effective use, can play an important role in engaging those most at risk of educational disadvantage. In recognition of this, DEIS schools will continue to receive an additional 10% on the per capita amount issued relative to non-DEIS schools under the new Digital Strategy. An enhanced per capita rate will also continue to apply to students enrolled in Special schools and to pupils in mainstream special class primary settings.

- (v) **Education for all:** Ireland is committed to the promotion of migrant integration as a key part of Ireland's renewal and as an underpinning principle of Irish society. The education system is underpinned by a policy of inclusion, where children, including migrant children attend mainstream schools and additional supports are allocated on the basis of identified additional educational need. A key objective of the National Traveller Roma Inclusion Strategy (NTRIS 2017-2021) has been the phasing out of segregated Traveller education provision and the inclusion of Traveller children and young people in mainstream education. A pilot programme is underway to tackle educational disadvantage and improve school completion rates and educational attainment of Travellers and Roma.
- (vi) **Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy** - Development of a new Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy, is underway. The strategy will be informed by robust research to include consideration of national and international practice, by stakeholder engagement and public consultation for the purpose of identifying key recommendations and actions that should form part of a new Literacy, Numeracy and Digital Literacy Strategy.
- (vii) **STEM Policy Statement:** The Department of Education's STEM Education Policy Statement 2017–2026, published in November 2017, sets out the ambitious goals and actions required to achieve and improve the STEM education experience and outcomes for all learners. The STEM Education Policy Statement 2017-2026 acknowledges that there is a need to increase the uptake of STEM subjects and to enhance STEM learning for learners of all backgrounds, abilities and gender, with a particular focus on uptake by females. Development of the next phase implementation plan 2022-2026, delayed due to Covid-19, is underway. The plan will be informed from information gathered from a public consultation that took place from 13 December 2021 to 26 January 2022 and focus group consultations with education stakeholders and partners which are underway at the moment. Publication of the implementation plan is expected by the end of Q2 2022.
- (viii) **Wellbeing:** The Department of Education is strongly supportive of the promotion of wellbeing in schools and has a key role to play in the promotion of the wellbeing of children and young people in Ireland. The Department's Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for Practice sets out the ambition and vision of the Department that, by 2023, the promotion of wellbeing will be at the core of the ethos of every school and centre for education in Ireland, that all schools will provide evidence-informed approaches and support, appropriate to need, to

promote the wellbeing of their students and that Ireland will be recognised as a leader in this area.			
EU CG Reference	Target Group	Numbers impacted	Lead Agency
7(a), (b), (c), (d), (e) and (h)	All children with special educational needs	8,018 pupils in special schools in 2020	Department of Education
	All children and young people at risk of educational disadvantage	7,510 Pupils in special classes in mainstream primary schools in 2020	
	All primary and post primary school children	2,856 pupils in special classes in post primary schools in 2020	
	Migrant/Traveller/Roma children in education	10,835 Traveller/Roma children in primary school education	
		3,437 Traveller/Roma children in post-primary education	
		From the 2022/23 school year 1,194 schools will be included in DEIS serving over 240,000 students, representing an increase of 33% in students supported by the programme	
		In 2020, there were 561,411 primary school students and 379,184 post-primary school students in Ireland's education system	

Sector: Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare

Barrier: Financial barriers to participation in Early Childhood Education and Care

Intervention: First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families (2019 – 2028)

Description: A number of interventions in this arena aim to address this barrier, namely:

- (i) **Doubling investment in Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School Aged Care (SAC)** to at least €1bn by 2028 and introducing a new funding model, with rollout to commence in 2022.
- (ii) **Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme⁵** to be reviewed in 2022, as a precursor to establishment in legislation with legal entitlement to pre-school.
- (iii) **The National Childcare Scheme⁶**, a progressive and sponsoring enabling programme grounded in legislation, was introduced in 2019. Currently an action plan, on foot of review, is being developed with a 3 year evaluation to follow in 2023. Phased roll-out of agreed actions to commence in 2022.
- (iv) **The National Action Plan for Childminding (2021 – 2028)** sets out a phased, incremental approach towards the development and supports for this sector of early learning and care and school-age childcare, initial implementation phase having commenced.

⁵ The Early Childhood Care and Education Programme (ECCE) programme is a universal two-year pre-school programme available to all children within the eligible age range. It provides children with their first formal experience of early learning prior to commencing primary school. The programme is provided for three hours per day, five days per week over 38 weeks per year and the programme year runs from September to June each year. There is one point of entry at the beginning of the programme year. The programme will be available to all children who have turned 2 years and 8 months of age before August 31st as long they won't turn 5 years and 6 months of age on or before June 30th of the programme year.

⁶ The National Childcare Scheme (NCS) is a new scheme that provides financial support to help parents to meet the costs of childcare. The Scheme provides 2 types of childcare subsidy for children over 6 months of age:

- A **universal subsidy** for children under 3. Children over 3 who have not yet qualified for the ECCE are also eligible. It is not means tested.
- An **income-assessed subsidy** for children up to 15. It is means tested.

From September 2022, the Universal Subsidy under the NCS will be extended to children aged up to 15. Hours spent in pre-school or school will no longer be deducted from hours subsidised by the NCS. A key objective of the NCS is to support employment as a route out of poverty. It replaced schemes linked to benefit payments and is designed so there is no 'income cliff'.

EU CG Reference	Target Group	Numbers impacted	Lead Agency
7(a), (c) and (e),	<p>All families of children under 15 years seeking to access ELC and SAC</p> <p>All children between 2 years and 8 months and 5 year 6 months attending ECCE Programme</p> <p>All children from birth to transition to primary school and school age children (up to 15) attending SAC</p> <p>All families of children using childminding services</p>	c 300,000 children will be targeted by these interventions	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

Barrier: Non-financial barriers to participation in Early Childhood Learning and School Age Childcare

Intervention: First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families (2019 – 2028)

Description: A number of interventions in this arena aim to address this barrier, namely:

- (i) The **Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)** enables the full inclusion and meaningful participation of children with disabilities in the ECCE Programme. It is based on seven levels of progressive enhanced provision support, ranging from targeted to universal. More than 4,000 children with disabilities receive targeted AIM supports every year to enable them to participate in mainstream pre-school, and many other children are benefitting from universal AIM supports. As part of a three year evaluation of AIM, to be concluded in 2022, consideration will be given to other supports that exist for children with a disability in ELC and the scope to consolidate and streamline these under AIM, or to align eligibility and access routes as well as practice and training. Consideration will also be given to enhancements to or expansion of AIM to other cohorts.
- (ii) Development of a model to provide **universal and targeted supports** to children at risk of poverty to mitigate impact of early disadvantage – commencing in 2022.
- (iii) Ensure that **future capital investment** facilitates the participation of all children in ELC and SAC, and promotes settings that are inclusive and accessible to all children, families and educators and practitioners, informed by Universal Design Guidelines.
- (iv) Development and publication of **National Nutrition Standards for ELC Settings**, including a toolkit for implementation, to be published in 2022.
- (v) The **workforce plan 'Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare, 2022-2028'** sets out a series of actions to meet the workforce related targets in First 5 and includes an implementation plan, now underway, for the next three years (2022-2024) including specific continuing professional development courses to support access and inclusion.

EU CG Reference	Target Group	Numbers impacted	Lead Agency
7(a), (c), (d) and (e)	<p>All children in need of supports to participate in ECCE Programme</p> <p>All children in ELC and SAC at risk of poverty</p> <p>Service providers of ELC and SAC</p> <p>All 4,500 ELC and SAC services.</p> <p>ELC and SAC workforce</p>	c 300,000 children will be targeted by these interventions	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

Additional items to note:

First 5 was fully endorsed in the new Programme for Government and commitments in First 5 are reflected in key national policies, including the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (2021), Making Remote Work: National Remote Work Strategy (2021); Pathways to Work 2021 – 2025 and the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025.

Sector: Health

Barrier: Cost of access to healthcare

Interventions: Expansion of free GP care and related services to more children

Description: The Government is committed to increasing access to GP care and related services required for children for :

- (i) **Increasing access to GP care** without charges for children. At present, all children up to and including the age of 5 are eligible for a GP visit card and therefore GP care without charges. Legislation has been enacted to provide for the phased expansion of GP care without charges to all children aged 12 years and under, which will, when fully operational benefit some 285,000 children. The next phase of this programme, to include 6 and 7 years old children will roll out in 2022. An additional 80,000 children will become eligible in this phase. A schedule for the final series of expansions (children aged 8 and 9, and children aged, 10, 11 and 12) has yet to be determined.
- (ii) **Improving, developing and enhancing mental health services** for young people. This includes prevention and early intervention, improved access, increased integrated care and reduced waiting lists in both community-based care and acute in-patient units. Improvements to mental health care for young people will be made under *Sharing the Vision*, Ireland's national mental health policy – as detailed in the forthcoming *Sharing the Vision Implementation Plan, 2022-2024*.
- (iii) **Alleviating the financial burden of hospital charges** incurred for children accessing hospital care by providing funding of €4.5 million in Budget 2022 to meet the charges associated with hospital services. This will ensure that hospital care is accessible and affordable for children thereby easing the burden on parents/guardian and ensuring that every child is given the best start in life.
- (iv) In line with the principles set out in *Sláintecare*, **developing a dedicated child health workforce** adopting a population-based approach focussed initially in areas of high population density and disadvantage, recognising that this will require additional resources. While this initiative had not commenced as a result of the outbreak of Covid-19, as a first step work will soon begin on the development of a pilot model of practice, designed to underpin and drive implementation and evaluation of a dedicated child health workforce.

EU CG Reference	Target Group	Numbers impacted	Lead Agency
8(a)	<p>All children aged 12 and under for free GP care based on phased basis of age groups</p> <p>All children and young people requiring mental health services</p> <p>Children and young people requiring hospital care</p>	When fully operational, some 285,000 children will benefit	Department of Health

Additional items of note:

In line with the recent national waiting list initiative under the Sláintecare implementation programme, work has commenced in addressing Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) waiting lists, with the specific purpose of agreeing action plans to address their respective CAMHS waiting lists that exceed 12 months.

The Department of Health, the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF) continue to identify ways to improve access to care and reduce waiting times for all patients, including children, throughout the acute hospital system.

Improved access to services for children with disabilities and developmental delays is taking place with the ongoing roll out of Progressing Disability Services (PDS) for Children and Young People. This includes universal, targeted and specialist supports, such as individual therapeutic intervention and access to specialist consultation and assessment when needed. This reconfiguration of services under PDS is in line with Health Service Reform and the implementation of Community Healthcare Networks under Sláintecare.

Sector: Nutrition

Barrier: Availability of healthy meals each school day

Intervention: School Meals Programme

Description: The Government is committed to improving the availability of healthy meals each school day by reducing barriers through the following measures:

- (i) Providing funding through the **School Meals Programme** for the provision of food to some 1,500 schools and organisations. The objective of the programme is to provide regular, nutritious food to children so that they may take full advantage of educational opportunities. This is an important component of policies to encourage school attendance and extra educational achievement. As resources permit, additional schools both primary and post-primary will be added to the Programme.
- (ii) An **independent evaluation**, commissioned by the Department of Social Protection, of the current School Meals Programme is underway. This will inform future policy decisions in relation to the Scheme and will assess the challenge of **providing all children with free access to a healthy meal** each school day.
- (iii) **DEIS – Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools** is the main policy initiative of the Department of Education to address educational disadvantage at school level. This includes DEIS schools receiving priority access to the school meals programme funded by the Department of Social Protection (see Education Sector interventions above).
- (iv) **Guidelines are available on developing a healthy eating policy** in primary and post-primary schools, which have been developed by the Department of Health and the Health Service Executive. The healthy eating policy should outline how the school supports healthy eating practices through the promotion of healthy lunches and healthy snacks and other means. Schools and the wider education sector have a vital role to play in contributing to the Government's 'Healthy Ireland' agenda and are strongly encouraged to have a formal healthy eating policy that has been developed in consultation with students and parents.
- (v) The issue of **promoting healthy eating** is addressed in schools through subjects such as Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), and Home Economics as well as in Physical Education. SPHE is delivered on a mandatory basis throughout primary level and at junior cycle. The aim is to equip students with such skills and knowledge to enable them to make appropriate choices for healthy lifestyles.
- (vi) A working group in the Department of Social Protection, chaired at Ministerial level, is currently developing a **research proposal to analyse the prevalence of food poverty**, the drivers of it and the actions to address it, in selected case study areas. It will focus on

people experiencing food poverty, including children and families, and is expected to commence in 2022.			
EU CG Reference	Target Group	Numbers impacted	Lead Agency
9(a), (b) and (d)	Currently targeting children attending DEIS schools	Currently supporting some 230,000 children	Department of Social Protection

Sector: Housing

Barrier: Timely access to adequate accommodation for children in need

Interventions: Housing For All Strategy Actions

Description: In June 2021, the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, with the support of the Government, signed the 'Lisbon Declaration on the European Platform on Combatting Homelessness'. The Declaration commits all signatories, Ireland included, to working towards the ending of homelessness by 2030. This is now a crucial national strategic goal. *Housing for All* – the Government's multi-annual, multi-billion euro housing plan for Ireland aims to improve Ireland's housing system and deliver more homes of all types for people with different housing needs. *Housing for All* reaffirms the commitments made through the Lisbon Declaration. Interventions include:

- (i) **Providing capital funding** to develop further supported emergency accommodation for families and individuals experiencing homelessness through the *Housing for All Strategy*.
- (ii) **Delivery of a number of family-focused facilities** or hubs. There are now 36 hubs operational nationally, offering 870 units of family accommodation. Family hubs offer a greater degree of stability to families than is possible in hotels with access to more appropriate living and storage space as well as cooking and laundry facilities. Families in hubs are supported by the local authorities and their service delivery partners to identify and secure a tenancy. Where need is identified, the Department will support the development by local authorities of further family hubs.
- (iii) **Enhance family support and prevention and early intervention services** for children and their families experiencing homelessness through a multiagency and coordinated response, and disseminate innovative practice.
- (iv) **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.
- (v) **Support homeless households with children** to access early learning and care and school age childcare services by building on the child and family supports and coordination provided through Tusla, and Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSC) and through targeted initiatives, such as that provided through the National Childcare Scheme.
- (vi) Ensure that **Housing Assistance Payments** (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.

(vii) **Increase the supply of housing** to an average of 33,000 homes per year over the next decade. This target includes the delivery of 90,000 new social homes, 36,000 affordable purchase homes and 18,000 cost rental homes for the period 2022 to 2030.

(viii) **Prioritise the implementation of recommendations contained within the Traveller Accommodation Expert Group Report of July 2019**, in order to improve the effectiveness of the arrangements for providing accommodation for members of the Traveller community. A Programme Board on which Travellers are represented has been established to oversee the implementation of recommendations of the Expert Group, which include revised and increased budgets and the inclusion of an identifier for members of the Traveller Community on the Social Housing Support application form.

EU CG Reference	Target Group	Numbers impacted	Lead Agency
10(a), 10(b) and 10(c)	All families and children experiencing homelessness	c 9,000 individuals accessing emergency accommodation – of which 1,082 were families (including 2,513 children)	Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage

Additional items of note

Housing for All takes a whole-of-Government approach with 213 actions to be taken by government departments, local authorities, State agencies and others that will deliver a range of housing options for all with many actions focussed on families.

Responses to address homelessness are among the top priorities for Government. Housing for All recognises the criticality of the interagency supports required to address the complex combination of social, health and economic needs of homeless persons and those at risk of homelessness, in addition to their specific housing need. In that context, a new National Homeless Action Committee (NHAC) was established in late 2021. Chaired by the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage, this Committee comprises representatives from different Government Departments, agencies and bodies. The overarching objective of the group is to ensure that a renewed emphasis is brought to collaborating across Government to implement actions in the Plan, along with bringing better coherence and coordination of homeless-related services in delivering policy measures and actions to address homelessness.

Housing for All also sets out a commitment to deliver an appropriate range of housing and related support services, in an integrated and sustainable manner, which promote equality of opportunity, individual choice and independent living for people with a disability. Adjustments to homes to make them more accessible for those with disabilities are provided for through grant schemes made available by

the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. Furthermore, the recently launched National Housing Strategy for Disabled People 2022 – 2027, developed by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, the Department of Health and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, sets out the government's vision for delivering housing and related supports for people with disabilities.

Section 9: Enabling Policy Framework

Following the expiration of *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* (BOBF) on 31 December 2020, work commenced on the development of a successor policy framework for children, young people and their families. This policy framework is intended to cover the period 2023-2028, coterminous with *First 5: A Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families*. The successor framework will cover the age range of 0-24 years and is expected to be published by Q4 2022.

It is expected that the new policy framework for children and young people will have a strong focus on children's rights, particularly the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and taking account of Ireland's State Report under Article 44 of the Convention.

The successor framework will retain the current five national outcomes (as referenced earlier) for children and young people:

1. Are active and healthy, with positive physical and mental wellbeing;
2. Are achieving their full potential in all areas of learning and development;
3. Are safe and protected from harm;
4. Have economic security and opportunity, and
5. Are connected, respected and contributing to their world.

This approach has significant advantages. These include the existing Government buy-in, strong political commitment, clearly measurable outcomes, and a clear pathway to devising meaningful actions. The new policy framework for children and young people will also take account of the Government's focus on wellbeing, following the publication of *Understanding Life in Ireland: The Well-being Framework, Second Report in June 2022*⁷.

Under Outcome number 4, the Framework will outline cross-Governmental commitments to address the multiple dimensions of child poverty, which when combined, will be expected to guide progress towards meeting the target identified under the *Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025*. It is under this broad enabling framework that the actions committed to under the EU Child Guarantee will form a significant component of this package alongside complementary actions beyond the scope of the EU Child Guarantee – forming a component of a wider, child focussed agenda, albeit a significant one.

The successor framework is being developed using a phased approach. The research and review phase began in early 2022. An open consultation phase, launched by the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, ran from 27 January to 28 February 2022. This consultation asked what is going well and not so well in the lives of children and young people and what actions Government

⁷ Available on gov.ie at <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/1fb9b-a-well-being-framework-for-ireland-join-the-conversation/>

should take to have the greatest possible positive impact in these areas. The responses are currently being analysed to identify the emerging trends.

In addition, use is being made of existing consultations that have taken place with children and young people in recent years, and, given the importance of children's rights under the new policy framework for children and young people, it will pay particular attention to the consultation carried out in the context of the State's preparations for the next reports to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, and the UN Human Rights Council under the Universal Periodic Review process.

Crucially, it is recognised that there is a special need to ensure that policy makers are listening to the voices of all children and young people. It is intended to carry out further targeted consultations in the coming months.

Initial consultations across Government have taken place to identify priorities for inclusion in the new policy framework for children and young people, which will be developed in more detail as the framework emerges.

Support through the Technical Support Instrument for the implementation of, not only the EU Child Guarantee, but also the new policy framework for children and young people, as the wider policy framework within which it is situated, has been granted by DG Reform. The project will assist Ireland in developing a whole-of-government, cross-sectoral and integrated approach strategy to tackle child poverty and improve outcomes for children and young people. This will support the successful and coherent implementation of the EU Child Guarantee and the new policy framework for children and young people. Technical assistance will inform policy design, and support the development of robust implementation and accountability mechanisms. It will also aid in the development of enhanced and improve monitoring and evaluation mechanisms and tools with a view to strengthening overall governance arrangements.

The project will pay specific attention to addressing implementation challenges and to promoting policy coherence, in order to reduce child poverty and improve child and youth outcomes, drawing from EU and OECD good practices. The project shall further aim to improve and enhance the engagement of governmental and civil society stakeholders at all levels on the basis of shared objectives, effective leadership, oversight of implementation and policy agility.

Finally, it is crucial that the enabling policy framework provides a firm foundation for the effective implementation of the EU Child Guarantee. Barriers and mitigating actions identified in this plan, while of import, are only the platform for further intervention, assessment, refinement and the determination of meaningful responses with the clear goal of improving the lives of all children in this State, but particularly those children in need identified by the EU Child Guarantee. As such, the actions in this plan to address the barriers identified are the first step – the ambitious enabling policy framework which encompasses a broader reach will be the organic vehicle by which, over time, issues pertinent to children in need are identified and addressed. In short, the child will continue to be firmly placed at the centre of the policy making and evaluation process so as to ensure the operationalisation of effective measures.

Section 10: EU Funding

Funding for the State responses outlined in Sections 7 and 8 predominantly issues from the Irish Exchequer, and is an ongoing commitment in the main.

Presently, there are a small number of projects (e.g. Family support practitioners and standardised pathways, Young parents' supports programme, Parenting support public awareness fund and Scaling proven models from Area Based Childhood interventions) currently being considered for funding under ESF+ that would be focussed on child poverty, rather than the aims of the EU Child Guarantee (though a degree of overlap, of course, exists).

As the new policy framework for children and young people progresses and a greater sense and understanding of the potential synergies across multiple domains, in the context of the new framework emerges, potential new ESF+ (and other EU options for funding) projects may emerge – which will be brought forward for consideration when developed.

Section 11: Data Collection, Monitoring and Evaluation

There already exists a substantial body of data in relation to children generally, not only in relation to child poverty and social inclusion. The indicator set of *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* (BOBF) tracks children and young people aged 0–24 across the five national outcomes outlined in BOBF.

This indicator set was first published in 2017, alongside an accompanying methodology report in 2019. Since then, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth has also published more detailed data for specific subsets of the population of children and young people, including on young carers and young Travellers. The most recent available data for all BOBF indicators, and how these indicators have changed over the lifetime of BOBF, was published in January 2022.

While BOBF indicators will not explain how or whether a particular action or commitment in the policy framework has given rise to, or caused, a particular outcome, they are important because they:

- Help to track progress towards outcomes;
- Assist in identifying trends;
- Contribute to priority setting or resetting;
- Inform policy formulation and service provision, and;
- Provide for international comparisons, where possible.

The methodology used to develop the indicator set has involved a number of phases, including a literature review and compilation of a data inventory; the establishment of, and consultation, with an expert panel; a Delphi process; a review of consultations with children and young people; and bilateral consultations with experts and policy-makers in Government Departments and agencies.

The indicator set covers 70 indicator areas, with between one and four indicators per area. In some cases, more than one indicator is required for an indicator area to ensure coverage of younger and older age groups. See Appendix 2 for sample data from this indicator set.

In parallel with the development of the new policy framework for children and young people, a new approach to monitoring and evaluation will be advanced, to support the implementation of the EU Child Guarantee National Action Plan and broader policy aims for children and young people at the national, regional and local levels.

At present, there exists a comprehensive list of outcome indicators and the overall composition of this indicator set will be refined following the publication of the proposed new policy framework to ensure alignment with that framework, and by extension, the EU Child Guarantee. This data set, in conjunction with ongoing data collation associated with the *State of the Nation's Children*, SILC and research under the Poverty Research Programme, will also be utilised for evaluation purposes.

Technical support to assist in this objective is being provided by DG Reform and the OECD with a view to (i) embedding existing and future indicators within a set of unique reporting mechanisms at the national, local and regional levels, and (ii) ensuring the alignment between national outcomes and agreed objectives and actions included within the EU Child Guarantee National Action Plan and the new policy framework for children and young people, and (iii) establishing a mechanism to examine correlational and interactional effects of policy measures initiated over the lifetime of the new framework on specific outcome indicators. Technical specifications for a new IT tool (i.e. a dashboard of indicators) shall also be developed, to gather and visualise data extracted from different datasets and registries, and facilitate the monitoring and evaluation of relevant policies and services.

Appendix 1: List of Organisations who responded to online consultation in relation to EU Child Guarantee

- 1 Alcohol Action Ireland
- 2 Baby Feeding Law Group Ireland
- 3 Barnardos
- 4 Children in Hospital Ireland - CIH
- 5 Children's Health Ireland at Temple Street - CHI
- 6 Children's Rights Alliance
- 7 COPE Galway
- 8 Early Childhood Ireland
- 9 Early Childhood Research Centre - ECRC
- 10 Focus Ireland
- 11 INFORM
- 12 Irish Heart Foundation - IHF
- 13 National Council for the Blind Ireland - NCBI
- 14 Ombudsman for Children's Office - OCO
- 15 One Family
- 16 Pavee Point
- 17 Play Therapy Ireland
- 18 Simon Communities of Ireland
- 19 St Patrick's Mental Health Services
- 20 The Labour Party
- 21 The Society of Saint Vincent de Paul

Appendix 2: Example of BOBF Data Set

Indicator area	Indicator	Age range	Baseline	Most recent as of 2017	Most recent as of 2021	Change ⁸
Aim 4.1: Protected from poverty and social exclusion						
44. Consistent poverty ⁹	Consistent poverty	0–14 years	10.5% 2014	9.8% 2015	7.5% 2020	N/A
		15–24 years	13.4% 2014	15.7% 2015	6.4% 2020	N/A
45. Deprivation ¹⁰	Deprivation	0–14 years	35.5% 2014	31.1% 2015	19.9% 2020	N/A
		15–24 years	34.3% 2014	31.0% 2015	19.4% 2020	N/A
46. Children and young people in jobless households	Jobless households	0–17 years	16.2% 2014	13.3% 2016	10.6% 2020	↓
47. Impact of social welfare	Impact of social transfers in	0–14 years	57.9%	58.9%	60.8%	↑

⁸ Note that the changes are based on the differences between the baseline data and the most recent time point.

⁹ SILC data for 2012-2016 was revised and re-weighted in 2018, so updated estimates for 2014 and 2015 data are provided here. Due to methodological changes in 2021, the 2020 data cannot be compared to previous years. For more information: <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc2020/backgroundnotes/>

¹⁰ SILC data for 2012-2016 was revised and re-weighted in 2018, so updated estimates for 2014 and 2015 data are provided here. Due to methodological changes in 2021, the 2020 data cannot be compared to previous years. For more information: <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc2020/backgroundnotes/>

transfers on poverty ⁷⁷	reducing the at-risk of poverty rate		2014	2015	2019	
		15–24 years	42.4%	41.6%	55.6%	↑
			2014	2015	2019	

⁷⁷ SILC data for 2012-2016 was revised and re-weighted in 2018, so updated estimates for 2014 and 2015 data are provided here.

Aim 4.2: Living in child/youth-friendly sustainable communities						
48. Homelessness	Homelessness (children)	0–17 years	880 2014	2,505 2016	2,193 2021	↑
	Homelessness (young people)	18–24 years	477 2014	765 2016	733 2021	↑
49. Safe play and recreation spaces for children and young people	Places to spend free time	11–17 years	50.1% 2010	59.7% 2014	61.0% 2018	↑
50. Perception of antisocial behaviour and crime	Feeling safe	11–17 years	90.8% 2010	89.1% 2014	86.1% 2018	↓

(Extracted from data in relation to Outcome 4: Economic security and opportunity)



Data increasing

Data decreasing

Data show broadly constant or no significant movement/relatively static

N/A Insufficient data available to determine a change/data not strictly comparable over time.

