

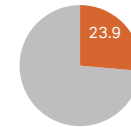
“Country recommendation

Ireland should take action to establish a dedicated and fully resourced Child Poverty Office which would oversee the implementation of a cross-government child poverty strategy with national goals and objectives.

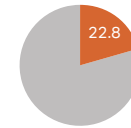
Country Profile 2022



Ireland



Child Population:
1.19 million
(23.9% of total population)



Child Poverty Rate:
22.8% (2021) ▼*

* [lower compared to pre-covid rates in 2019](#)

RESPONDENT ORGANISATION(S):
[Children's Rights Alliance](#)

European Semester Country Report and Recommendations

Overview of the Country Report: identification of the children in need

This year's [*European Semester Country Report for Ireland*](#) outlines the following priorities that should be the target of national policymakers in relation to children: early childhood development, education, children impacted by the pandemic, and the exacerbated inequalities they face. However, there is a dearth of focus on children in the country report prior to Annex 12 and 13.

In Annex 12, the report highlights the high cost of early childhood education and care (ECEC), albeit in the context of labour market participation and gender equality, and supporting those with disabilities and lone parents

into employment. However, Annex 13 makes a more holistic point regarding the key reform actions underway to improve the level of quality and affordability of early years' services. This includes publication of the *Childminding Action Plan*, a report on the sector's funding model, *Partnership for the Public Good: A New Funding Model for Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare*, and the package of measures announced in Ireland's national annual Budgets in 2022 and 2023 to improve pay, quality, and reduce costs to parents.

In the case of the 2023 Budget, released in September, the Irish government reached the goal of investing **€ 1 billion in early childhood education and care** five years ahead of schedule. This is the single biggest investment in childcare. Over the past 12 months, the government's Department of Children, Equality,

Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) has undertaken significant work to reach this milestone.

In Annex 12, the report notes the **fall in child poverty over the last decade** and refers to data related to 2020. Since then, the 2021 data has been published. This latest data shows a reduction in the rates of child poverty between 2020 and 2021.¹ However, the Irish Central Statistics Office highlights that without COVID-19 income support, poverty rates in Ireland would have been much higher. For instance, while the at-risk-of-poverty rate for the entire population was 13.2% in 2021, without the COVID-19 income support this would have risen to 19.9%.² Furthermore, the COVID-19 income support had the greatest impact on those in younger age cohorts. The poverty risk for the 0-17 age group was reduced from

24.2% to 13.6%, a reduction of almost 11 percentage points. The data collection for the Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2021 was carried out prior to the onset of sustained increases in the cost of living. According to the Central Statistics Office, the Consumer Price Index (CPI) rose by 8.7% in the 12 months between August 2021 and 2022.³

Needs analysis: alignment at country-level

The recommendations included in the country report do not sufficiently address the needs of children. The [*Country Specific Recommendations for Ireland*](#) include no reference to children or actions that would have a direct impact on the fulfilment of children's rights. Instead, they focus on economic issues, particularly as they relate to the invasion in Ukraine, the need to

1 For further analysis on the issue of child poverty in Ireland see Children's Rights Alliance Child Poverty Monitor (CRA 2022).

2 Central Statistics Office, *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2021* (CSO 2022).

3 Central Statistics Office, Consumer Price Index August 2022 (CSO September 2022).

reduce Ireland's reliance on fossil fuels, and boosting the circular economy.

This omission is all the starker as Ireland is facing a **huge challenge in providing housing and accommodation for children at risk of poverty**, as noted in Annex 12 of the country report. Low-income families with children have been particularly impacted by a contracted housing market with the numbers living in emergency accommodation increasing month-on-month. Furthermore, the options to exit such accommodation are also increasingly limited, with few properties available to rent within the set limits of government support, such as the Rent Supplement, and the Housing Assistance Payment.⁴

In the latest edition of the Children's Rights Alliance Report

Card – an annual publication grading 16 programmes for the government's commitments focused on children and young people – **family homelessness was graded with an E**.⁵ With the Irish government failing to meet social housing targets, there is an **urgent need to prioritise reform that is both sustainable and focused on long term change**, but unfortunately this year's Country Specific Recommendations have missed the opportunity to push for that.

European Social Fund Plus funding should prioritise the implementation of Ireland's commitments under the European Child Guarantee. To achieve this goal, the Irish government should **establish a fully resourced Child Poverty Office** to oversee a cross-government child poverty strategy.

Poverty and Social Exclusion – experiences of children, families, and communities

Child poverty in Ireland

Ireland has a total child population of 1.19 million, 22.8% of which live at risk of poverty and social exclusion in 2021. This is a decrease from 2020, where the rate of children at risk was 23.5%.

The annual poverty statistics captured by the Survey on Income and Living Conditions provides important data across three sub-categories – at risk of poverty, households experiencing deprivation, and consistent poverty.

Children are the second highest demographic group in Ireland at risk of poverty, with a poverty rate of 13.6% – higher than the rate among the general population

(11.6%).⁶ Single parent households with children have a higher rate, 22.8%, versus those in two-adult households 9.1%.

A shortcoming of the SILC is that it collects data at a household level and therefore does not contain data on groups such as the Traveller community or those living in Direct Provision.⁷ Research from the EU Fundamental Rights Agency found that in **2018, 38% of Traveller and Roma families experienced difficulties in making ends meet**. These are among the most marginalised groups in Irish society and need specific and targeted actions to address their needs.

⁴ Simon Communities of Ireland, Locked Out of the Market.

⁵ Children's Rights Alliance, Report Card 2022.

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Direct Provision is the name for Ireland's system of provision of accommodation, food, money, and medical services for people applying for international protection and asylum.

To effectively reduce child poverty and social exclusion in Ireland, the Government should:

- **Ensure access to an adequate income.** This includes setting weekly social welfare payments at a rate that enables families with children to meet a minimum essential standard of living. A payment at a rate equivalent to the universal child benefit payment must be introduced to support families living in Direct Provision.
- **Introduce a new funding stream for early years, which targets disadvantaged children and their families** to break the cycle of poverty and ensure all children have the best start in life.
- **Prioritise the building of social housing** and meet the target of building an average of 10,000 homes each year as outlined in the government's strategy document Housing for All.

European Child Guarantee

Ireland National Action Plan

The [Council Recommendation on a European Child Guarantee](#) asked Member States to submit a National Action Plan (NAP) that would outline how the Child Guarantee would be implemented at national level. These Action Plans should outline the children most in need, the planned and existing policy actions, the measures to support them, and a monitoring, and evaluation framework. The Plans should also have been drafted in consultation with children, civil society, and national authorities. The [National Action Plan of Ireland was published in June 2022.](#)

In January 2022, Eurochild and Children's Rights Alliance published a [country report for Ireland](#) that included

recommendations for the Irish government to consider when drafting its action plan. Together, we recommended that:

- The National Coordinator of the European Child Guarantee should be a central component of a fully resourced Child Poverty Office established jointly between the DCEDIY and the Department of Social Protection.
- The DCEDIY should draw on the resources of its Participation Unit and the guidance of its [National Framework for Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making](#) to ensure that a **meaningful consultation involving children and young people takes place** during the implementation and monitoring of the NAP.

Overview of the NAP

The Irish National Action Plan on the European Child Guarantee was developed by the Irish National Coordinator for the EU Child Guarantee, responsibility for which lies with a recently established EU and International Unit in the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.⁸

It restates the current services, programmes, and support in place across relevant government departments within the scope of the Guarantee. In addition, the **plan proposes to leverage the relationship between Local Community Development Committees** and Children and Young People's Services Committees to develop Local Area Child Poverty Plans.⁹ The Children's Rights Alliance welcomes this proposal. A pilot programme of four sites will

8 Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Roderic O'Gorman, Dáil Debates, Written Answers, Child Poverty, 22 September 2021, [8736/8738/8739/22].

9 EU Child Guarantee Ireland's National Action Plan, p.27.

10 Ibid

seek to ‘maximise learning and assess the feasibility of local area child poverty action plans being embedded in local co-ordinating structures’ planning frameworks’.¹⁰

A notable development in the Budget for 2023 was the announcement of the provision of free schoolbooks for children in primary school in September 2023, as part of the government’s commitment to provide educational materials.

Involvement in drafting

The Children’s Rights Alliance prepared a [detailed contribution](#), which was submitted as part of the national consultation process to feed into the development of the NAP, held from December 2021 to mid-January 2022.¹¹ The call for submissions was the only

means by which stakeholders could influence the development of the plan.

Prior to the public consultation process, the government established the ‘Better Outcomes Brighter Futures National Advisory Council for Children and Young People’ and developed a comprehensive [paper on addressing child poverty](#). The government also engaged specifically with the Council, given their knowledge and expertise, on how the Guarantee could be implemented.¹²

The DCEDIY has a dedicated Participation Unit, which has **published a participation framework for engaging children and young people in decision-making**. There are best practice examples of participation with previous departmental strategies,

such as Ireland’s [LGBTI+ National Youth Strategy 2018-2020](#) that incorporated the ‘Lundy model of participation’.¹³ However, it is not clear if children were involved in the drafting of Ireland’s NAP.

Does the NAP identify children in need?

The NAP provides data and statistics relating to children most in need in Ireland. This includes identifying the proportion of children living in lone parent families, those engaged in caring duties and those who are members of the Traveller community. In addition, the NAP presents the key barriers to accessing services that families and children face.

Monitoring and evaluation

The NAP states that a new monitoring and evaluation

framework will be developed to meet the needs of the implementation of both the EU Child Guarantee and the new policy framework being developed for children and young people. Support from both the European Commission’s Directorate General for Structural Reform Support and the OECD will be leveraged to support with this task.

EU Funding

Civil Society engagement in the implementation of EU funds

There are a variety of European funds available in Ireland for actions that invest in children. At national level, information about funds can be found through the initiative [Access Europe](#) and on the website of [Leargas](#) – the national agency for Erasmus+.

¹¹ Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Roderic O’Gorman, Dáil Debates, Written Answers, Child Poverty, 22 September 2021, [8736/8738/8739/22].

¹² Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Roderic O’Gorman, Dáil Debates, ‘Ombudsman for Children’s Initiative on Eliminating Child Poverty and Child Homelessness: Statements’, 23 September 2021.

¹³ Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth *National Framework for Children and Young People’s Participation in Decision-making* (DCEDIY 2020). Accessed 25 May 2021.

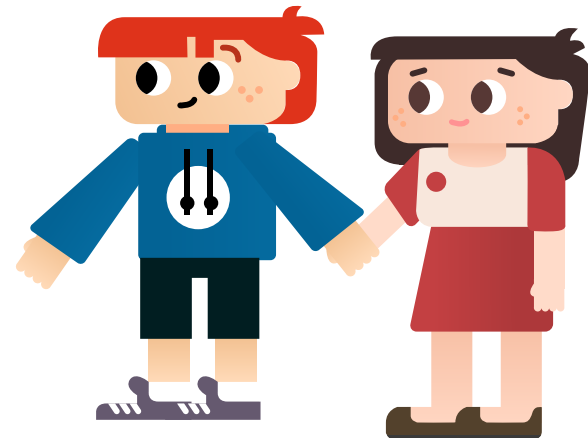
Projects funded by the EU in Ireland

The Children's Rights Alliance has launched a new project called [Building Children's Futures](#). This project will examine the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on activities and services for children and young people through consultations with groups that were disproportionately impacted. It is funded by the EU's Citizens, Equality, Rights, and Values (CERV) programme.

The project will explore **how Child Rights Impact Assessments (CRIAs) can mainstream a children's rights approach**, including during times of emergency, into decision-making throughout Europe.

Priorities for EU funding in Ireland

On 28 January 2021, the Council of the European Union and the European Parliament reached an agreement that compels Member States with a level of child poverty above the EU average (23.4% - AROPE between the years 2017–2019) to allocate 5% of ESF+ resources to tackle child poverty.¹⁴ Ireland is one of the countries bound by this agreement, despite current level of child poverty being just below the EU average. For this programming period 2021-2027, 12% of ESF+ funds is expected to be allocated to tackling child poverty.¹⁵ Therefore, **the Irish Government should prioritise investment to achieve the successful implementation of the European Child Guarantee.**



¹⁴ Regulation (EU) 2021/1057 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 24 June 2021 establishing the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+) and repealing Regulation (EU) No 1296/2013.

¹⁵ Kennedy A., *Child Guarantee National Action Plans – Targets, EU funding and governance*, Directorate-General for Internal Policies, 2022.