

Social Justice Ireland welcomed the establishment of a Child Poverty and Well-Being Office in the Department of the Taoiseach and its programme plan for child wellbeing. Given the slow and limited progress achieved by many previous anti-poverty strategies, it is crucial that these new anti-child poverty ambitions translate into actual measures that put more income in the pockets of poorer families and make the public services they rely on more available and more affordable. Budget 2024 must be the first of a series of Budgets focussed on delivering for children and their families. *Social Justice Ireland* has a series of proposals for Budget 2024 covering each of the six areas for early action identified by Government¹ to make a real impact on the lives of children living in poverty.

Income supports and joblessness

In Budget 2024, *Social Justice Ireland* is calling for:

- A minimum €25 increase in core weekly rates of social welfare and a commitment to benchmarking core social welfare rates to 27.5 per cent of average weekly earnings.
- An increase of €50 in the monthly Child Benefit Payment. Child benefit remains a key route to tackling child poverty and is of particular value to those families on the lowest incomes.
- An Increase the Direct Provision weekly adult allowance by €50, the Direct Provision child payment for children under 12 by €20 and the Direct Provision child payment for over 12 by €50.
- The Living Wage has an important role to play in addressing the persistent income inequality and poverty levels in our society. Budget 2024 should endorse this initiative, include it in all public sector supplier contracts and introduce a time-limited subsidy to allow small businesses to accelerate its introduction.
- The introduction of a system of Refundable Tax Credits in 2024 to allow low income workers who do not earn enough to use their full credit to have the unused portion “refunded”, and support their ability to deal with increasing living costs. Making tax credits refundable would make Ireland’s tax system fairer, address part of the working poor problem, and improve the living standards of a substantial number of low income workers and their families.
- An increase the PAYE credit and Earned Income credit by €5 per week in 2024.
- Investment in a financial literacy programme aimed at school children and their families.

Early learning and childcare

In Budget 2024, *Social Justice Ireland* is calling for:

- An investment of 0.1% of GNI* in Early Childhood Care and Education and build this investment each year to 2030 to support staff professionalisation, expansion of ECCE provision through the Irish language, and investment in non-contact ECCE time.
- An additional two weeks paternity leave.
- An additional two weeks of paid parental leave.
- An increase in the resources available for the regulation of childminders.

¹ <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/266235/6c4bf557-373d-4cb6-a91e-36f27106fe8b.pdf#page=null>

Reducing the cost of education

In Budget 2024, *Social Justice Ireland* is calling for:

- A target of keeping average class sizes below 20 and reducing the Pupil-Teacher Ratio (PTR) further with a special focus on primary level and DEIS schools.
- An investment of €100m to commence and implement EPSEN Act in full by 2026 and support students with Special Educational Needs.
- €15m to support the continued expansion of the DEIS programme in Budget 2024.
- Restoration of the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance to 2011 levels.
- Increased funding for Schools Meals Programme by ten per cent.
- €15m to fund school places, programmes and supports for students with special education needs.
- An increase in capitation grants at both primary and secondary level by 10 per cent.
- Investment in Further Education and Training to develop and expand apprenticeships and traineeships to meet future skills needs and advance the circular economy, particularly at a regional and community level.
- An expansion of the Human Capital Initiative to improve lifelong learning across all cohorts of the population.
- Increased investment in adult literacy.

Family homelessness

In Budget 2024, *Social Justice Ireland* is calling for:

- Expansion of the remit of Housing First in Budget 2024 to homeless families accessing emergency accommodation, and that Government introduce a limit to the amount of time a family may spend in Family Hubs as well as other forms of emergency housing.
- A target of 20 per cent of all housing stock be social housing by 2030. This would equate to an additional 232,800 social housing units to be delivered in the next eight years, starting with an increase of €1.4bn in capital expenditure in Budget 2024.
- A restructuring of the Rent Tax Credit to a Renters' Grant in Budget 2024.

Pathways to access the services children and families need

In Budget 2024, *Social Justice Ireland* is calling for:

- Additional funding to Tusla for child protection and increased social provision for children and families.
 - Sufficient resources to support the delivery of the National Action Plan for the EU Child Guarantee.
 - An investment of €600m from surplus windfall revenue into Sláintecare infrastructure with a focus on Enhanced Community Care in Budget 2024 to improve access to health care services.
 - The expansion of the Enhanced Community Care Programme to alleviate pressure on acute services and ensure treatment is provided at the appropriate level of need.
 - Sufficient resources to provide Universal Access to GP Care while expanding the number of GP and Practice Teams in line with the shift towards Primary Care & Community Based services envisaged in Sláintecare.
 - Investment in the full implementation of the *Sharing the Vision* policy (including addressing staffing issues).
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Participation in arts, culture and sports opportunities

In Budget 2024, *Social Justice Ireland* is calling for:

- An additional €2m to Increase investment in sports and recreation facilities, particularly in disadvantaged areas.
- An additional investment of €5m in funding for the Arts Council to embed arts and cultural participation as part of the ECCE framework. This investment would begin to address the large disparities in arts participation between children from different socio-economic backgrounds highlighted in the *Growing up in Ireland* study.

Making children a priority in Budget 2024

Child poverty is essentially an issue of low income families. 1 in 7 children in Ireland are affected. This figure highlights the scale of such households across the State. Investments made now, while expensive, will reap substantial rewards for individuals and society in the longer term. Child poverty solutions hinge on issues such as adequate adult welfare rates, decent rates of pay and conditions for working parents, and adequate and available public services. Child benefit also remains a key route to tackling child poverty. It is of particular value to those families on the lowest incomes.

The recent increased political focus on child poverty is welcome and overdue. If Government wants to deliver on Child Poverty and Wellbeing commitments in Budget 2024 then it must make income adequacy for vulnerable households and investment in public services and infrastructure a priority.

