

Ireland

Country Profile on the European Semester and COVID-19 crisis from a children's rights perspective

Contributors:

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24.1%

Children at risk of poverty or social exclusion in 2018 (AROPE)

Children in Alternative Care - CiAC

	Total number of institutions/ SGHs	Number of children
Small group homes (SGHs) in 2019	179	409 ¹
Number of children in family-based/foster care in 2019		5,957 at the end of Q2 2020 ²
Foster care (general and relative)		5,450 at the end of Q2 2020 ³
Residential Placement		406 at the end of Q2 2020 ⁴
Kinship care		1,548
Adoptions		131 (End 2018)
Number of unaccompanied minors in 2017		175

¹ Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, has identified 483 children with a moderate or severe disability living in foster care placements, but the Ombudsman for Children (Ireland) said there was no consensus with the Health Service Executive (HSE) that this was the actual number.

² Tusla, Quarterly Service Performance and Activity Report, Quarter 2, 2020.

³ Tusla, Quarterly Service Performance and Activity Report, Quarter 2, 2020.

⁴ Tusla, Quarterly Service Performance and Activity Report, Quarter 2, 2020.

Alternative Recommendations

Supporting children and families in the context of COVID-19 in the short term:

- Ensure **children safety at school** and prompt measures to remedy the effects of any future prolonged period away from schools (learning loss, educational and developmental delays, school dropout, deterioration of behaviour and emotional regulation).
- **Children's emotional well-being** is of serious concern. Our members are reporting high levels of stress and anxiety among young people. Supports need to be put in place for children and young people.

Supporting children and families in the context of COVID-19 in the long term:

- Implement the **Child Guarantee**
- Invest in addressing **food poverty**

Children in Alternative Care:

- Children or young people in care, or with care experience, need to be specifically mentioned within the next Programme for Government in Ireland, and related action plans, and cannot be simply included in a general category of 'children in vulnerable situations' or 'marginalised children'.



Summary of Ratings

Government's support for families and children during the COVID-19 pandemic:



Positive EU impact on more child-centred legislation at national level:



Child Poverty

Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

Government support

The government's support to families and children during the crisis was adequate. It extended the school meals programme when the schools shut, so that children would not go hungry. There has been a big focus on **reopening early years settings for all children**, in particular those from vulnerable groups and for children of frontline workers. Whilst this proved to be challenging, most of the country's early years settings opened on 29 June 2020. As of mid-August 2020, 85% of services that were normally open over the summer had reopened.¹

The COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment was introduced at the start of the pandemic and is available to

employees and the self-employed who have lost their job on or after 13 March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and it will be in place until April 2021.

Campaigns and Initiatives:

- **Let's Play Ireland**² is a government-led initiative aimed at promoting play for all children living in Ireland during the COVID-19 emergency.
- **Supporting Children**³ is a focused government campaign outlining information about services for children, young people and families.
- **Let's Get Ready**⁴ is a government campaign to help parents and children prepare to return to early learning and childcare services or make the move to pre-school and school for the first time.

Negative developments

The main key challenges experienced by children and families in Ireland as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak were: child poverty, the impact of the pandemic and the lockdown on children and young people's mental health and learning loss from children and young people as a result of being out of school. Moreover, technology difficulties - such as not having access to computers and internet connections - have been extremely challenging for certain groups, based on their economic situation and their location. This is an ongoing severe disparity which concerns primary, secondary and third level students in question.

The ESRI conducted research⁵ on the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for policy in relation to children and young people. The report highlights that emerging evidence suggests that inequalities experienced by vulnerable groups of

¹ Early Childhood Ireland, Dealing with the Pandemic: Member consultation Project.

² Let's Play Ireland.

³ Supporting children.

⁴ Let's get ready.

⁵ The Implications of the Covid-19 pandemic for Policy in Relation to Children and Young People.

children such as Traveller, Roma and children with a disability have grown because of the pandemic. It outlines that children from disadvantaged backgrounds were more likely to experience 'learning loss' as a result of school closures. The closures also reduced access to social and sports activities which will impact on a child's overall well-being. It also outlined that the two main drivers of family stress during the pandemic: the necessity to combine remote working with home schooling and childcare.

Another ESRI report⁶ highlighted the need to raise income supports to parents to mitigate a rise in child poverty as a result of COVID-19.

The Children's Rights Alliance held regular members' meetings on issues arising for children and families on the impact of COVID-19. Some of the areas of concern highlighted were:

- The impact of parents **losing their jobs**.

- The impact of the pandemic and the lockdown on children and young people's **mental health and well-being**.

- The challenges children have faced with the **schools and early years services closing**. In particular, families living in vulnerable situations and families in poverty have struggled with the lack of technology in the home and the need in some situations for parents to balance working from home with home schooling.

- An increase in **domestic violence** has been reported.

- **Food poverty**, because of the closure of early years' services and schools who would have provided meals to young children from vulnerable backgrounds.

- Difficulties, particularly during lockdown for families living in overcrowding/living arrangements.

- Direct provision/homelessness.
- Parenting challenges and activities with children.

- In response to the emerging needs resulting from COVID-19, members outlined that they adapted how they work to stay connected to families in vulnerable situations through phone and web when face to face support was not possible. Despite this being a short term beneficial solution, it is acknowledged that the longer this continues the harder will be for children and young people to connect this way, as well as for vulnerable families, as so much is lost without face to face physical interaction.

Good practice

The Children's Rights Alliance, with funding from a number of donors, established a food provision scheme to support the nutritional needs of children under the age of six years experiencing poverty and

deprivation during the COVID-19 crisis. A total of €164,000 was issued to 21 organisations across Ireland.⁷

National strategy to tackle child poverty

Adopting a national strategy to tackle child poverty is necessary for Ireland to tackle child poverty and efficiently implement the future EU Child Guarantee. At the moment, two important elements in this field are:

- **Better Outcome – Brighter Future**⁸: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020 contains a target for the reduction of child poverty in Ireland.
- **Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025**⁹: The Roadmap outlines a plan to reduce consistent poverty to 2% or less and make Ireland one of the most socially inclusive countries in the EU.

⁶ Child Poverty in Ireland and the Pandemic Recession.

⁷ Children's Rights Alliance, Food Provision Scheme.

⁸ <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/63a1ff-report-of-the-national-policy-framework-for-children-young-people-20/>.

⁹ http://www.dsfa.ie/en/pdf/Roadmap_for_Social_Inclusion_2020_2025_Summary_of_Ambition_Goals_and_Commitments.pdf.

Children in Alternative Care (CiAC)

Impact of the COVID-19 crisis

Tusla (the Child and Family Agency)¹⁰ staff around the country have been working with local partners and organisations to develop creative solutions to help children and families during the public health crisis.¹¹ However, solutions and supports have tended to be local, individual, and not an overarching support for the families in vulnerable situations and children in care.

Social media has been used a lot to try and share good practice and innovative practice within the sector. However, overall communication has been inconsistent and therefore it has been up to the residential care homes to make decisions, or indeed has come down to the discretion of social workers or their managers.

The majority of children in care are in foster care in Ireland and therefore decisions or supports depended on the needs of the foster family and the members of that family, in conjunction with their social workers.

There is currently no overarching long term strategy, that EPIC is aware of, to support families and children in vulnerable situations in coping with the long term effects of COVID-19. However, short and long term supports were implemented by Tusla because of COVID-19, such as extending existing placements and aftercare supports which have been continued and extended by Tusla and are currently providing some stability. This provided stability to the young people who were due to leave placements, or whose aftercare supports were due to end due to ageing out of the system.

Local schools extended food support programmes, which

ordinarily provided food for children and young people in school, out to the wider community, based on the recognised needs of the families. These supports have included other organisations which provide day to day supports for the vulnerable and homeless. Other programmes to support families in vulnerable situations have adapted or been rolled out¹². Each area of the country has adapted differently, depending on existing set up or supports.

Overall, in EPIC's view the responses as listed above have been positive and under extremely difficult circumstances, namely a prolonged lock-down, the supports seem to have worked well.

The difficulty in accessing services and the closure of schools has caused major challenges for EPIC. The issue of being out of school has impacted on many levels. The loss of the routine and structure

of going to school is impacting on the units as all the children are now there together. The other issue for staff was trying to motivate the young people to keep up with their schoolwork and it was said repeatedly in the surveys that care staff are not schoolteachers.

From the EPIC survey of residential centres¹³, it was reported that young people were experiencing loss due to a lack of family contact. Access has been curtailed and, in most places, completely stopped so young people are missing their family.

Other main challenges included:

- Lack of face to face contact with children and young people, children and young people not willing to engage over zoom etc. and the difficulty in adequately supporting them because services are not operating as normal.

10 Tusla – The Child and Family Agency was established on 1 January 2014 and is now the dedicated state agency responsible for improving well-being and outcomes for children. It represents the most comprehensive reform of child protection, early intervention and family support services ever undertaken in Ireland. It is an ambitious move which brings together over 4,000 staff and an operational budget of over €750m. [More info here.](#)

11 [Tusla... update](#)

12 [Tusla... initiatives](#)

13 EPIC, TUSLA – A survey of Children's Residential Care Services in Ireland during the Covid-19 crisis, May 2020.

- Inconsistencies nationally in terms of approaches to dealing with COVID-19 – for example when to allow family access, and in what shape or form.
- Courts and children's reviews been postponed or cancelled, so the usual oversight of the child's care has not taken place.

Initiative

During May 2020, Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) Inspectors from Children's Services organised a competition for children in care, inviting them to tell us about how they were being creative or showing kindness during COVID-19. Children in residential care, special care units and Oberstown Children Detention Campuses across the country took part – sending us stories, poems, drawings and photos of their initiatives.

Preventing the unnecessary entry of children in alternative care

Family support services have been run on a limited scale due to the restrictions around COVID-19. As stated previously, areas have operated differently, and it appears that there was no general oversight of these support services.

- Child Protection and Welfare Cases: 4,655 cases awaiting allocation at the end of March 2020.
- Child Protection Notification Scheme: A total of 827 children listed as "active" at the end of March 2020.¹⁴
- There were 31,134 referrals for welfare concerns and 25,427 referrals of abuse for 2019.¹⁵

One major concern is that the numbers of children and young people being referred to social

services has dropped. This is due to the schools, youth clubs, sports clubs, etc. being closed. Therefore, if children have been at risk during this time, they may not have had the supports of the Child and Family Agency, and may be unable to contact other supports and resources.

Progress on child protection and care reform

The government has been reviewing the Child Care Act 1991, and though this is a long process over a number of years some parts of the review have been delayed due to COVID-19 (for example, consulting with young people was due to take place in spring and summer and has been postponed).

Some court cases were initially delayed due to COVID-19 but these, where necessary, are taking place again. Online hearings also took place. However, one would anticipate that there will be delays due to the backlog. The Child Care Law Reporting Project (CCLRP)

has already made observations relating to some of the issues that have arisen, as a result of COVID-19.

Thankfully in Ireland the numbers of young people in residential care is low, 406.¹⁶ However, all research shows that young people have better outcomes when living in a family home environment. Due to a shortage of foster carers in Ireland at present, unfortunately more young people are ending up in residential care.

Care leavers

Aftercare supports were extended for those who were ageing out in March 2020 and, in some instances, in August 2020 as well. Depending on the situation it is expected that this will be reviewed and extended again. Young people who are in residential placements are staying there past their 18th birthdays. While this is positive in that they have a home, it does not help with them moving on to possible school/college places in the autumn. There is huge uncertainty around

¹⁴ Monthly Performance and Activity Report, March 2020.

¹⁵ The data is only recorded between welfare and abuse. There is no breakdown in the different types of abuse.

¹⁶ Tusla, Quarterly Service Performance and Activity Report, Quarter 2 2020.

education, leading to stress around where a young person will be living when they are moved on. No clear timescale is given, in all cases.

Children in migration

In 2019, 24 unaccompanied minors were granted international protection in Ireland. As of April 2020 there were 42 applications for international protection by unaccompanied minors pending.¹⁷ The ESRI report¹⁸ identified that there were 175 unaccompanied minors referred to the care of Tusla in 2017. In early June 2020 eight unaccompanied minors were welcomed to Ireland.¹⁹ These young people had been identified to come to Ireland during a scoping exercise in September 2019, but their arrival was apparently delayed due to COVID-19.

There are huge delays relating to COVID-19 regarding all refugee programmatic work - the family reunification processes are all very delayed, and the Immigrant Council of Ireland have stated that they have sought information in this regard but that their communication has not been responded too.²⁰ For example, an interim care order for an unaccompanied child victim of trafficking was granted by Dublin District Court in the first ever virtual hearing of a District Court case.²¹

Unaccompanied minors who arrive in Ireland are generally placed in foster families, residential homes, or supported lodgings. In Ireland (and recognising the tiny numbers) they would be comparably well supported by Tusla (the Child and Family Agency).



"Due to the lockdown, a young person who had just recently moved into residential care was unable to meet with his family for the first eight weeks in care. As this was also his first time in care, he found this very difficult. Thankfully, due to good social work, he was able to visit his home on a twice weekly basis thereafter."

For more information, please consult the [2020 Eurochild Report](#) or contact Enrico.Tormen@eurochild.org and Zuzana.Konradova@eurochild.org.

¹⁷ See Parliamentary Question (PQ) by Minister Flanagan, though in the same PQ the Minister obfuscates slightly and it is unclear if the 24 children have in fact all arrived. For more information please see [Department of Justice and Equality](#).

¹⁸ [Approaches to unaccompanied minors following status determination in Ireland](#).

¹⁹ [Here](#) for more information

²⁰ In communication with the Immigrant Council of Ireland 25.06.2020. See also [Immigrant Council of Ireland](#).

²¹ [Here](#) for more information