

The cover features a central purple circle with a white border. Inside the circle, the text 'Social inclusion report' is written in white. The background is a light blue and white gradient with abstract, flowing lines in shades of green and blue that sweep across the page.

**Social
inclusion
report**



Supporting the most vulnerable

Whether it is working families and the rising cost-of-living, a person with a disability seeking meaningful employment, or a carer balancing work and care, the social protection system must be a source of security, dignity, and opportunity, writes Minister for Social Protection Dara Calleary TD.

In Budget 2026, my first as Minister for Social Protection, I secured a total budget of €28.9 billion, including a package of over €1.15 billion for new measures. During 2026, this will enable my department to advance an ambitious reform agenda; reforms designed not only to protect people today, but to build a more equitable Ireland for the future. At the heart of this work is a simple principle: a fair society is one that supports its most vulnerable and enables everyone to participate fully in our communities and economy.

Delivering auto enrolment

More than two decades after it was first discussed in Dáil Éireann, I am really proud that we have successfully delivered our key Programme for Government commitment to implement the State's new automatic enrolment retirement savings system, known as MyFutureFund.

So far, over 763,000 employees, working for 104,000 employers have been automatically enrolled in MyFutureFund. In addition, over 5,000 employees have applied to join the scheme voluntarily, recognising the merits and benefits of being part of MyFutureFund.

MyFutureFund is truly revolutionary in terms of pensions for Ireland. It will benefit so many hard working people over the coming years and decades, making sure they have more money in retirement than they otherwise would.

Permanent cost of disability payment

One of my key priorities this year is the introduction of a permanent cost of disability payment. The Government fully recognises that disabled people face unavoidable and ongoing extra costs in their daily lives – transport, equipment, medicines – to name but a few. As such, the response will be a whole-of-government approach.

I have listened carefully to disability organisations, advocates, and individuals. Their message has been clear: support must be consistent and reflect the lived experience of disability. It will be a cornerstone reform, acknowledging that equality of opportunity requires equality of support.

Work on this is already well underway. I and my team are consulting with disabled people and their advocates, and a public consultation is currently open. This is hugely important to ensure that their voices are central to shaping this new payment. Following this work, I intend to bring a proposal to government in the coming months in advance of Budget 2027.

This new cost of disability is a statement of values. It says to people with disabilities that we recognise the real costs you face, and we support you to live full, independent lives.

Supporting meaningful employment

Financial support is essential, but it is only one part of the picture. People with disabilities consistently tell us that they want to work, contribute, and participate but that challenges remain. In 2026, we are intensifying our efforts to remove those barriers and open pathways to meaningful, sustainable employment.

This includes expanding tailored employment supports, strengthening employer engagement, and ensuring that work always pays for people with disabilities.

Ireland cannot afford to ignore talent. More importantly, we cannot accept a society where people are excluded from opportunity because of structural barriers. Our goal is clear: to create a labour market where people with disabilities have the same opportunities as everyone else to build careers, contribute their skills, and shape their futures.

In my time as Minister for Social Protection, I have met many disabled people who bring extraordinary skills and talents to their workplaces. I have seen how employers across the country also recognise the valuable contribution these employees make to their business. But we can and must do more.

Valuing carers

Carers are the backbone of our society. They provide extraordinary support – often quietly, often at personal cost – to loved ones who depend on them. In June 2026, the largest-ever increases in the income disregards for Carer's Allowance will come into effect.

As a result, many more carers will now qualify for support. For example, a couple with a joint income of €108,000 will still qualify for Carer's Allowance. This is a major step forward in recognising the value of care and demonstrates my commitment to ultimately phasing out the means test over the lifetime of this government.

Tackling child poverty

Reducing child poverty remains one of the most urgent social challenges facing Ireland. In Budget 2026, we delivered a substantial package aimed at tackling child poverty and support working families. This included the largest-ever increases in the Child Support Payment, ensuring that families have greater financial stability at a time of rising costs.

We are also extending the Fuel Allowance to approximately 50,000 families receiving the Working Family Payment, with effect from March 2026 and backdated to January 2026. This is a targeted, practical intervention that will help working families manage energy costs and reduce financial pressure during the winter months.

These measures reflect a broader commitment: to ensure that work is rewarded, that families are supported, and that no child grows up in poverty.

Roadmap for Social Inclusion

In May 2026, we will publish a new Roadmap for Social Inclusion for the period 2026-2030, setting out Ireland's strategy to reduce poverty, strengthen social inclusion, and improve outcomes for disadvantaged groups over the coming years. This roadmap will build on the progress made to date while addressing evolving challenges.

The roadmap will be grounded in evidence, shaped by consultation, and focused on measurable outcomes. It will guide our efforts to ensure that every person – regardless of background, ability, or circumstance – has the opportunity to participate fully in Irish society.

Ireland's EU presidency

From July to December 2026, Ireland will hold the presidency of the European Union. During this period, I will chair the EPSCO Council, which brings together EU ministers responsible for employment, social policy, health, and consumer affairs.

Our presidency will place a strong emphasis on anti-poverty, disability supports, employment participation, among other key issues. The priorities we are advancing at home will be reflected in our leadership at European level.

Ireland has long championed a social Europe. During our presidency, we will work to strengthen social protections, promote fair working conditions, and ensure that the EU remains focused on improving the lives of its citizens.

Todhchaí níos cothroime

Ní bhíonn deireadh le hobair na coimirce sóisialaí riamh. Bíonn aird leanúnach, síor-athchóiriú, agus toilteanas éisteacht agus oiriúnú de dhíth. Ach tá an chonair soiléir. Táimid ag tógáil córas a chosnaíonn daoine ar lagchuidiú, a thacaíonn le rannpháirtíocht, agus a léiríonn luachanna comhbhá, cothroime, agus deiseanna.

In 2026, trí thacú le daoine faoi mhíchumas, pinsinéirí, cúramóirí, teaghlaigh ag obair, agus grúpaí eile ar lagchuidiú, tá dul chun cinn suntasach á dhéanamh againn i dtreo Éire níos ionchuimsithí.

Tá uailmhian simplí againn: Éire ina bhfuil deis ag gach duine a bheith rathúil.

The Pobal HP Deprivation Index

Using Data to Support Social Inclusion in Ireland



Pobal works on behalf of Government to support communities and local organisations toward achieving social inclusion and community development.

We do this by providing high-quality programme supports and grant management services, working in partnership with Government, partner agencies and those delivering services.

As a social inclusion agency, we recognise that good data is crucial for understanding community needs and improving outcomes for individuals and families. To this end, we have invested in our data and analytics capabilities, a crucial element of which is the Pobal HP Deprivation Index, developed by Dr Trutz Haase and Dr Jonathan Pratschke.



- 1 Extremely Disadvantaged
- 2 Very Disadvantaged
- 3 Disadvantaged

- 4 Marginally Below Average
- 5 Marginally Above Average
- 6 Affluent

- 7 Very Affluent
- 8 Extremely Affluent

About the Pobal HP Deprivation Index

The Pobal HP Deprivation Index is Ireland's primary social gradient tool, used by numerous Government departments and state agencies, to target resources and services towards communities most in need. The Index has provided a crucial evidence base for tailored interventions, ensuring those communities experiencing the most disadvantage receive supports proportionate to the scale and intensity of their need.

Created using data from each Census, the Index is based on ten measures of an area's levels of disadvantage. These include educational attainment, employment status and population changes. Almost 19,000 small areas (approximately 100 households) were indexed leading to the development of a detailed map of the relative affluence and disadvantage. In this way, the Index identifies the specific pockets of Ireland which have not kept pace with national-level progress and this data can then inform the policy response and resource

allocation models. There are currently four waves of data (2006, 2011, 2016 and 2022) so it is possible to see how deprivation scores have changed over time at different geographic units of analysis: small areas, electoral divisions or at county level.

By helping to create an understanding of the challenge of disadvantage and where it is prevalent, the Index has supported transparency and evidence-driven allocation of public resources. This objective and impartial data underpins many national and local strategies aimed

at addressing social inclusion, early learning and care, education inequality, community development and health inequality.

Pobal publishes the Index and ensures its accessibility to Government departments, state agencies and local implementers. Beyond publication, Pobal makes the data available online, as well as providing practical supports to policymakers, state agencies and researchers across a range of public policy areas to utilise the index.

Key Use Cases Across the Civil and Public Services

1. Resource Allocation Models

The Index is integral to allocating funds across Government funded programmes such as:

Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP):

SICAP 2024-2028

is co-funded by the Irish Government, through the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht, and the European Social Fund Plus under the Employment, Inclusion, Skills, and Training (EIST) Programme 2021-2027.



Community Services Programme (CSP):

The Community Services Programme is funded by the Department of Rural and Community Development and the Gaeltacht. The Community Services Programme supports community-based organisations to provide local social, economic and environmental services that meet identified needs and provide employment locally, contributing to sustainable, inclusive and empowered communities.

Spatial targeting in programme design is critical for ensuring that publicly funded services and supports can reach those who are most in need.

2. Educational Targeting

The Department of Education's DEIS model was one of the first national initiatives which used the Pobal HP Deprivation Index with the model being recently recognized in an OECD evaluation.

The Index has also been central to roll-out of the Equal Start model for Early Learning and Care which gives enhanced resources to childcare centres where there is a concentration of children from disadvantaged backgrounds

3. Health Service Executive (HSE) Service Planning

The HSE's Health Intelligence Unit uses the Index to support service planning in areas such as primary care, population health, chronic disease supports and addiction services.

Research Using the Pobal HP Deprivation Index

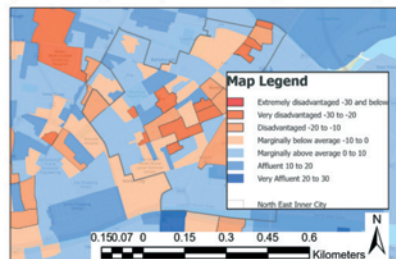
Complementing its use as a resource allocation tool, the Index has also been used to build the evidence base on key areas of social policy.

A recent partnership project undertaken with UCD School of Geography revealed a stark divide in Ireland's clean energy transition. The analysis demonstrated that households in the most disadvantaged areas are almost five times less likely to use renewable energy than those in more affluent communities, providing critical evidence which can guide energy policy and a just transition.

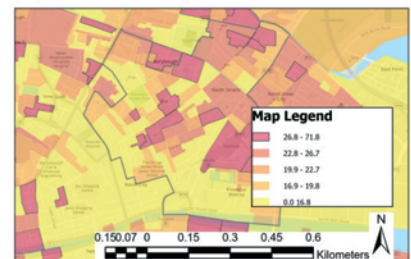
Similarly, several recent projects using the Index have added to the literature on health inequalities and the social determinants of health. A project by Pobal using Census 2022 data found that people living in the most disadvantaged areas in Ireland are much less likely to rate their health positively and, are twice as likely to report having a disability compared to their peers in affluent areas. This heightened health burden has also been documented by the ESRI through the Pobal-ESRI Research Framework. One recent study revealed that the national declines in health status are most pronounced in the most deprived areas, while another project showed that rates of COVID-19 infections were also higher in these areas.

Dublin Inner City

Map 1: Small Areas with HP Index in Dublin Inner City (Disadvantaged, Very and Extremely Disadvantaged)



Map 2: Small Areas with Quantile Disability Ratio (%) in Dublin Inner City



Accessing the Pobal HP Deprivation Index

The 2022 datasets are freely available on Pobal's Open Data portal and on data.gov.ie

For users wishing to explore the data visually, Pobal Maps (maps.pobal.ie) provides an interactive platform to view Index scores across Small Areas and Electoral Divisions, compare regions and overlay other relevant socio-economic indicators.

Contact Pobal

Pobal welcomes enquiries from Government departments, agencies, local authorities, academic researchers and community organisations interested in using the Index or seeking analytical guidance.

Please email: pobalmaps@pobal.ie or visit www.pobal.ie



How Manchester City Council uses technology for digital inclusion

Digital inclusion is essential for delivering AI-ready cities, says Sherelle Fairweather, Digital Strategy Lead at Manchester City Council.

Fairweather states that the growth of tech in Manchester is the largest of any city in the UK outside of London. However, she adds that a large percentage of young people and families are continuing to experience poverty. She describes the statistics around this as “harrowing”, and insists that it means many people are not feeling the benefits of tech growth in the city.

Fairweather asserts that Manchester City Council takes a human-centred approach to technology. She explains that the authority is endeavouring to make Manchester an “AI-ready city”, adding that it is important to consider what this entails for the city and if it will lead to “sustainable growth for all”.

The city of Manchester is part of the ‘smart city’ movement. This has included development of internet of things (IoT) infrastructure, integrating ICT systems around core infrastructure assets, and scaling up IoT projects in urban areas.

Fairweather discusses Manchester’s digital strategy, *Doing Digital Together*. It contains four thematic areas. First is ‘Remarkable People, Extraordinary Opportunities’, under which the council aims to ensure everyone in Manchester is represented.

Second is 'Connecting Places, Enhancing Lives', which underpins the cities aim to provide the digital infrastructure that drive's digital inclusion and provides capacity for AI uptake.

Third is 'Pioneering The Future, Prosperity For All'. Fairweather explains: "As more big tech companies move to the city, that pipeline for smaller non-for-profit, tech-for-good organisations is not necessarily growing. How do we retain that legacy knowledge from those organisations?"

Fourth is 'Rising To Challenges, Future-Proofing Our City' which underpins the strategy's aim to "mindfully" deploy tech and use it to address challenges such as emissions targets.

Digital inclusion

Fairweather asserts that digital inclusion is the core of everything the strategy delivers. "We do not think we can grow, sustain, scale, and digitally transform without ensuring people have access to the things they need," she says.

"A lot of this work started after the pandemic and there were lots of attempts to support people but initially not much thought was given to people's capacity to access it online."

To address this, Manchester City Council created a team which focused on this area. Initially, the team was reacting to emerging problems. Now, the team operates more in a consultancy capacity for services and community organisations to help them identify their challenges and deliver impactful digital inclusion initiatives.

Fairweather explains: "We have been using a data-led approach to understand where there might be specific challenges in the city through an open-sourced model called the Digital Exclusion Risk Index. It is not perfect but it is helping us to focus resources."

Fairweather asserts that the council intends to make the strategy "more intentional". She explains that

"People sometimes trust the technology but they do not tend to trust us. People assume that they do not trust the technology, but there is that challenge of trust in us as officers or leaders."

building is not a challenge for Manchester as it is "seen as quite an attractive city for industry". However, challenges remain such as overbuilding and connectivity quality.

"We have been working with Inakalum and Network UX to map the quality of mobile connectivity and, furthermore, Ofcom and Greater Manchester Combined Authority to gather more data around high footfall spaces such as events or travel spaces.

"Quality often depends on how many people are accessing at once. Buildings, such as high-rise apartments, can also impact the quality of someone's connectivity.

"This is where we are being more intentional. We are focusing more on areas of deprivation."

Fairweather explains that the council is also assessing how it shares infrastructure. The council is set to roll out EV charging points and Fairweather asserts that areas where they are rolled out will need to have appropriate internet quality ensuring smart, safe, and reliable operation.

AI

Fairweather states that Manchester is recognised as being the "most AI-ready city" in the UK outside of London. She states that there is

significant focus on the cost-saving benefits of AI and economic growth but adds that there should be consideration given to what these costs can be used for and the wider social benefits.

Continuing, Fairweather says Manchester City Council is "focussed on how we can put the human back into AI". She adds that one of the council aims to achieve this is through its 'People Panel for AI'.

The council is working with Manchester Metropolitan University to ensure people are involved in the design of services. Using the risk index, the council identifies people likely to be excluded from the AI conversation. It then travels to these areas to talk to them about various uses for AI as well as provide training.

Citizens can then opt in to become paid panel members, where they provide feedback to people creating services and products with AI. A report follows these discussions outlining how the council has acted upon views expressed.

Concluding, Fairweather says: "People sometimes trust the technology but they do not tend to trust us. People assume that they do not trust the technology, but there is that challenge of trust in us as officers or leaders."



Empowering Ireland's disabled people

L-R: NDA Chairperson, Kathryn O'Donoghue; Aideen Hartney, Rosalyn Tamming, and Gerald Craddock (NDA) at the NDA Annual Conference, October 2025.

It is impossible to talk about genuine social inclusion without considering the more than 21 per cent of our population who have a disability.



Aideen Hartney, Director, National Disability Authority (NDA).

The National Disability Authority (NDA) has a role to advise the public sector on ways to improve inclusion while also monitoring progress against various strategies, policies and legislation. In doing so we highlight examples of good practice and identify areas where further focus is required.

The NDA is the independent statutory body with a duty to provide evidence-informed advice and guidance directly to government on disability policy and practice. Established under the NDA Act of 1999, the organisation has seen its role and remit evolve and grow over the

last quarter century in response to increased focus on the State's efforts to foster an inclusive society.

The NDA is also lucky to have within it the only statutory Centre for Excellence in Universal Design (CEUD) in the world. Universal Design is the design and composition of physical and digital environments, products and services, so that they can be accessed, used and understood by all users, regardless of age, size, ability or disability.

National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People

In September 2025, the Government published its *National Human Rights Strategy for Disabled People 2025-2030* (NHRSDP). This articulates a whole-of-government commitment to realising the rights of disabled people.

The five pillars under the Strategy recognise the domains of life which we can take for granted, but where many

disabled people can encounter barriers to inclusion. Government departments and public bodies have since set out their action plans to address these barriers, and the NDA has a role to monitor progress against these plans, but also to provide data and evidence to inform policy decisions.

It is a strategy for the full life course, looking at education, employment, independent life in the community, health and wellbeing, and transport and mobility.

Education and employment

The Strategy recognises that genuine inclusion begins early in life, where places of childcare, education and learning are universally designed to meet the needs of the full population, and the physical environment, curricula and assessment processes also recognise the varied requirements of those teaching and learning within these settings.

Employment is also recognised as a key enabler of social and economic inclusion. Over the past number of years, the NDA has carried out research with partners such as the ESRI and OECD showing that Ireland has one of the largest employment gaps for disabled people in the EU27 and OECD. The gap between the percentage of disabled people of working age in employment and the percentage of their non-disabled peers is 22 percentage points and has proven a difficult gap to close. People are watching closely to see if the implementation of the new Strategy will be successful in narrowing the gap.

One of the NDA's annual responsibilities is to report on the proportion of the public sector workforce made up of disabled people. In 2024, 5.4 per cent of employees in this sector declared a disability, exceeding the minimum target for that year which was 4.5 per cent.

Analysis of the 2025 figures will begin shortly, applying a newly increased target of 6 per cent. Success is not just about meeting the target but in creating truly inclusive workplaces where disabled people can have confidence that they will receive the accommodations they need to fully achieve their potential.

Our research has shown that most accommodations cost little or nothing, and can range from allowing flexibility with regard to working patterns, ensuring office spaces are fully accessible, to designing job specs that focus on the truly essential requirements of the role rather than criteria that are often automatically included for example, clean driving license, but which may never be called on or can be easily adapted. Some of our work involves sharing evidence about good practice in this area with other public bodies so that employers can feel confident and empowered in tapping into this talented and under-utilised labour force.

Monitoring: What gets measured gets managed

We have other statutory monitoring responsibilities that ensure we keep a focus on aspects of public services that can foster rather than hinder participation and inclusion. We monitor how public body websites meet the requirements of the EU Web Accessibility Directive, seeing improvements in performance year-on-year as a result.

We also examine how public bodies meet their obligations under the Disability Act 2005 to provide accessible services and information, as well as implementation of the Irish Sign Language Act of 2017. The evidence-base provided through these monitoring activities is key to driving continuous progress across the public sector, and we balance this with provision of practical information and guidance to help public bodies on their journey.

Meaningful engagement

Policy decisions related to disability should always be informed by the voice of those impacted. Disability groups often use the phrase 'nothing about us, without us'. As a party to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD), the State is required to closely consult and engage with disabled people through their representative organisations (called Disabled Persons' Organisations) on all relevant policy matters. An example of this process was evident in the development of the NHRSDP, including wide-ranging consultation and co-design of the finished product. This is still an area that is new to many public bodies, however, and the NDA has developed practical guidance to help them along this journey.

This type of engagement with people with disabilities reminds us of the day-to-day challenges experienced by so many in the disabled community, including inaccessible infrastructure such as buildings, transport, and public spaces in our towns and communities. Public bodies should also give consideration to staff training in disability equality and evolving language relating to disability.

Access to suitable housing is a significant challenge for many disabled people, highlighting the need for a stock of universally designed housing to enable disabled people to live ordinary lives in ordinary places. There is also a well-documented additional cost for many to having a disability, as well as challenges in navigating access to publicly funded services and supports. Without addressing these challenges, disabled people can find themselves continuously marginalised and excluded from the socioeconomic life of the State.

W: www.nda.ie



Designing inclusive and accessible public services

At *eolas Magazine's* annual Public Services conference, experts discussed how to design inclusive and accessible public services.

How can we ensure inclusive design in public services?

Elaine Teague

Initially, accessibility focused on physical access but over time, we have added subtitles, Irish Sign Language interpretation, and other supports. We have been on a journey towards inclusion. Public services are for everybody. If we design for everyone, everyone is included. If we design for only one part of the population, we inevitably have to retrofit later. The challenge now is moving beyond physical spaces. We broadly understand physical accessibility with the introduction of ramps, doors, and accessible bathrooms. Now, we need to think about communication, policy design, engagement, and decision-making.

Dara Ryder

Ireland has one of the lowest disability employment rates in Europe, which is deeply concerning for a wealthy and progressive country. Addressing this is one of the biggest inclusion challenges of the next decade. In many workplaces, there are far more disabled people than employers realise, but people do not

disclose due to fear or lack of trust. They are constantly weighing the cost-benefit of disclosure. When we create environments where people feel safe to be open, we unlock lived expertise that directly improves design decisions. We see this increasingly through disability employee resource groups, which play a real role in shaping organisational policy.

Ronan Murphy

For us, consultation starts at the very beginning of any project. We involve disability user groups from the outset. A recent example is our wayfinding project across 147 stations. We developed several design options, discussed colour contrast and usability with our accessibility groups, piloted signage in stations, gathered feedback over a two-month period, and then refined the final design based on lived experience.

Sinéad Lucey Brennan

Feedback mechanisms must accommodate diverse communication needs and have things like extended survey times, phone conversations, written submissions, and accessible formats.



These are not 'nice to haves'; they are civil rights. If people feel heard and see action, trust is built. Disabled people should be paid and valued as professional consultants; not expected to contribute for free.

Nessa Whyte

Inclusive design requires listening to the people who experience barriers every day. It is important to involve disabled people not just in consultation but in decision-making at every level from strategy to policy and operational design. Small details, like clear signage, font size, and seating arrangements, can make a big difference. Co-design ensures solutions are practical and meaningful rather than theoretical.

As more services move online, what steps can organisations take to ensure services remain accessible across both digital and physical systems?

Elaine Teague

We must retain offline options. While digital capacity is built, people must still be able to engage in person. Otherwise, we risk excluding people further. EU legislation, including the European Accessibility Act and AI regulation, is also pushing us to be more careful and inclusive in digital design.

Dara Ryder

Inclusion must be operationalised. It is not one person's responsibility, it must be embedded across systems. Digital accessibility is highly measurable. We have clear standards through the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines, which are written into law for public services. This requires skilled IT teams, accessibility audits, and user testing. It also requires training content creators, but most people can learn accessible content design in a day.

Nessa Whyte

Digital accessibility must consider real-world usage. People have different devices, internet access, and digital literacy levels. Online services need to be intuitive, compatible with assistive technologies, and provide alternatives like phone or in-person options. Accessibility is only meaningful when it works for all users, not just in theory.

Participants



Sinéad Lucey Brennan is a lived-experience disability advocate and who promotes awareness of invisible disabilities. Brennan introduced the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower initiative to the island of Ireland.



Ronan Murphy is Head of Customer Care and Accessibility of Iarnród Éireann, the organisation which manages Ireland's rail network.



Dara Ryder is Chief Executive Officer of AHEAD, a non-profit organisation aiming to create inclusive environments in education and employment for people with disabilities.



Elaine Teague is Chief Executive of the Disability Federation of Ireland (DFI), a national support organisation advocating for the rights and inclusion of people with disabilities in Ireland.



Nessa Whyte is Interim CEO of SOLAS, the Further Education and Training (FET) Authority.





Designing inclusive and accessible public services

How can organisations best learn from the people who use their services?

Sinéad Lucey Brennan

Structured participation is key. Consultation must be meaningful and lead to action. Feedback mechanisms must be flexible to meet diverse needs such as surveys, phone calls, written submissions, and other accessible formats. People need to feel their inputs shape change. Professionalising the role of disabled consultants is important. People should be valued, recognised, and compensated for their expertise.

Elaine Teague

Outcomes must be measured, not just processes. Policies should result in tangible improvements in access, engagement, and quality of life. Ask disabled people directly if measures are making their lives easier. Employment, transport, and education are all areas that should feature in outcome measurement.

Dara Ryder

Some things are measurable; some are qualitative. We must be careful not to force disclosure. Universal design should reduce the need for people to identify themselves as 'different'. Better data sharing, within GDPR limits, can help us understand what is working nationally.

Ronan Murphy

We use customer satisfaction surveys, mystery shopping, and direct engagement with user groups. We also track assisted journeys. Consultation must lead to action. Otherwise, it is meaningless.



How can we measure progress and ensure best practice?

Elaine Teague

We must focus on outcomes. Policies must translate into better lives, not just processes. Ask disabled people if life is easier and assess the areas that matter most such as employment, transport, and education.

Sinéad Lucey Brennan

We need to move beyond counting ramps and accessible toilets. Real participation matters. We need to find out are disabled people using services at the same rate as others? Are complaint rates dropping? Are completion rates improving? This is vitally important because universal design benefits everyone.

Nessa Whyte

Learning from service users requires ongoing dialogue. One-off surveys are not enough. Organisations should embed feedback loops into everyday operations, document how changes are implemented, and communicate back to users. This builds trust and ensures solutions reflect real needs.





Supporting Ireland's young people

The Ombudsman for Children's Office (OCO) is a human rights organisation set up in 2004 to promote the rights and welfare of all children living in Ireland.

Accountable to the Oireachtas, the OCO investigates complaints about children's public services. The service is free and independent. The Ombudsman for Children is Niall Muldoon, who was first appointed to the role in 2015 by President Michael D Higgins and reappointed for a second term in 2021.

The Ombudsman for Children Act 2002 sets out the framework for the OCO's complaints work. Under this, it determines if a public body's administrative actions have had an adverse effect on a child or children. Anyone can make a complaint to the

OCO, including a child or an adult on their behalf, if they have already gone through the local complaints process with that service and are still not happy with the outcome.

The majority of complaints to the OCO come from parents or professionals working with children, and in 2024, 3 per cent of complaints were from children themselves. Education, Tusla and concerns about health services are typically the most complained about issues. The OCO also publishes investigations arising from its complaints work with recommendations for a public

body where it sees the need to highlight systemic issues that are impacting children.

Central to the OCO's work in promoting children's rights is consulting directly with children and ensuring their voices are heard on issues that affect them. The OCO's Youth Advisory Panel of young people aged between 13 and 18 is integral to this. The OCO also meets with more than 2,000 children every year through its rights education workshops with schools at the OCO Office in Dublin city centre, as well as through outreach visits, consultation and OCO events.

Child Talks, the OCO's annual flagship event celebrating World Children's Day at the Helix in Dublin, brings together children from across the country to speak about the issues that affect their lives. This provides a unique, national platform for children to highlight their experiences and concerns and reinforces the importance of listening to children in discussions about public services and society more broadly.

The OCO also runs a School Ambassador programme where it teams up with primary and secondary schools every year to work with them to raise awareness of children's rights. Providing advice to Government on policies and laws that impact children is another way the OCO promotes the rights of children.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) guides the work of the OCO. Despite being ratified by the State more than 30 years ago, it is not part of our law. The OCO is calling for full and direct incorporation of the UNCRC into domestic legislation to be the bedrock of the Government's commitment to children, so that their rights are always considered when decisions are being made that impact them. This would be a game changer for children's rights in Ireland and the OCO will continue to push for this to happen. Let's get it right for children's rights.

Find out more:
W: www.oco.ie



Mixed progress on social inclusion

The Department of Social Protection is due to publish a successor to the *Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025* on 27 May 2026, setting out the State's direction on poverty reduction and equality for the second half of the decade.

The *Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025*, is the Government's framework aimed at reducing deprivation, making Ireland "one of the most socially inclusive countries in the European Union", and lowering the rate of consistent poverty to 2 per cent or less.

It is expected that the next plan must respond to a dramatically altered social and economic landscape. The existing roadmap was drafted before the Covid-19 pandemic, the energy shock triggered by Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and the sharp rise in housing and living costs that dominated much of the period.

When it was launched in early 2020, the 2020-2025 roadmap outlined an aim of reducing the rate of consistent poverty to 2 per cent or less and to place Ireland among the strongest performers in Europe on a wide set of social indicators.

It translated that ambition into dozens of commitments spread across employment, income supports, childcare, disability, housing, health, and community participation. In total, more than 80 actions were attached to government departments and agencies.

By the end of 2025, the Department of Social Protection reported that 59 commitments had been completed or were in place on an ongoing basis, with the remaining 22 still in progress.

That represents substantial administrative movement, and the Government has consistently pointed to reforms such as the expansion of childcare subsidies, labour market activation measures, increases in core welfare rates, and new disability and housing initiatives as evidence of delivery.

Consistent poverty

On the central metric, Ireland did see long-term improvement across the lifespan of successive anti-poverty plans dating back to the late 1990s. Consistent poverty fell to a historic low of 3.6 per cent in 2023. However, the 2 per cent target has not been reached, and the rate increased again in 2024.

The rise in consistent poverty can be linked to the post-Covid cost-of-living rise, with significant increases having been recorded in the prices of rent, energy, and food. In addition, a number of pandemic income supports that had temporarily

boosted household finances have since been ended by the Government.

EU comparison targets

The roadmap also sought to push Ireland into the top tier of EU performers on measures such as the proportion of people at risk of poverty or social exclusion, income distribution, and deprivation.

Absolute improvements were recorded on many of these indicators in the early years of the strategy. Severe material deprivation, for instance, declined from pre-roadmap levels.

But Ireland's relative ranking is influenced by how other countries perform, not just domestic change. Maintaining or improving a top-five position proved challenging as other member states also advanced or, in some cases, moved more quickly.

Persistent gaps

Another recurring theme across the period was that headline averages often masked stubborn inequalities.

Traveller and Roma communities, people with disabilities, those unable to work due to long-term illness, lone-parent households, and many renters continued to experience poverty rates significantly above the national average.

Stakeholder groups involved in the mid-term review of the roadmap argued that while strategies and reports multiplied, delivery did not always translate into lived improvements, particularly in housing supply and income adequacy.

They also warned that full employment at national level does not automatically mean an inclusive labour market, with discrimination and caring responsibilities still limiting access for some.

The successor strategy will therefore land in a more complex climate than the one its predecessor envisaged.

While the economy continues to perform relatively well and the State's public finances are in a strong position, affordability remains a significant challenge.

Housing costs in Ireland are among the highest in the EU, at over double the EU average, and property prices and rents have continued upward trends in recent years. Despite this, measures of housing cost burden show Ireland somewhat below EU averages on some affordability ratios, although for these trends to not apply for people under the age of 40.

On broader cost-of-living concerns, 84 per cent of Irish adults report being worried about meeting household costs, with energy and food prices contributing to continued household strains.

Furthermore, recorded hate crimes and hate-related incidents in Ireland have risen in recent years, with official Garda data showing an increase from 651 incidents in 2023 to 676 in 2024, and anti-race motives forming around 39 per cent of cases. Hate crime incidents have also increased by 24 per cent since 2021.

There will also be scrutiny of whether the Government retains the 2 per cent consistent poverty ambition or attempts to reframe success in a different way.

At the time of writing, DSP is finalising the text prior to the stated release date of 27 May 2026.

While specifics are not yet known, consultation documents and reports indicate that the next strategy will again span multiple departments and broadly align with EU and UN commitments, while trying to balance economic competitiveness with as of yet unspecified social inclusion targets.



‘Nothing about us without us’

Pavee Point celebrates the recognition of Traveller ethnicity (March 1, 2017).

Achieving equality for, and with, Travellers and Roma requires sustained investment and political will in order to tackle pervasive systemic and social inequalities.

In 2025, Pavee Point marked 40 years of work for and with Travellers and Roma in Ireland. From the first education programme in Meath Street in 1985, Dublin Traveller Education and Development Group (now Pavee Point) has worked towards the empowerment of Travellers in Ireland; the coordination of community and collective action; and the ending of a vast web of discriminatory structures.

Traveller experiences in Ireland are marked by racism, social exclusion and long-standing inequalities which successive governments and local authorities have failed to adequately address. But more importantly, they are experiences marked by resilience, the determination of a community that has endured, organised and fought to assert its rights and dignity in the face of exclusion.

Laws on land use and public order have undermined Travellers’ right to live a nomadic way of life. Legal barriers make it harder to challenge discrimination, including in pubs and licensed premises. These laws may not name Travellers directly, but in practice they exclude communities and entrench inequality. While the recognition of Travellers as a distinct ethnic group in 2017 represented a landmark for the community, it does not disrupt the entrenched inequalities that continue to shape Travellers’ lives

Civil society organisations and national and international human rights bodies, in their reviews of Ireland’s record in implementing our international human rights law obligations, have been consistent in highlighting historic and ongoing inequalities: calling for concrete improvements by the state. Countless calls have been made to tackle systemic issues regarding low educational

attainment, profound barriers to employment, and access to healthcare, to name a few areas where fundamental rights are not, or only partly, being realised.

Giving lived currency to the recognition of Traveller ethnicity requires that these calls by national and international bodies are acted upon; that discriminatory legislation is repealed; and that equality and human rights are upheld in practice.

Positive steps

The National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy (NTRIS) 2017 marked the first national whole of government inclusion strategy for Travellers and Roma with Pavee Point and other Traveller organisations contributing to the development of the strategy and now overseeing its implementation. The second iteration of NTRIS, with particular focus on questions of discrimination, addresses inequalities in areas such as health, education, housing, and employment.

Sustained advocacy work followed the publication of *Our Geels: All Ireland Traveller Health Study* in 2010, and the *National Traveller Health Action Plan*

2022-2027 was developed to address the severe inequalities and social determinants of health affecting Travellers. Building on the work of NTHAP, and under the remit of NTRIS II, the Roma Health Action Plan became the first Roma-specific health plan to address unique barriers faced by the Roma community. NTRIS II also includes an evaluation of the national network of Primary Health Care for Travellers Projects (PHCTP), an initiative began by Pavee Point in 1994, in order to strengthen these Traveller-led health interventions across the country.

Pavee Point, and other Traveller organisations and groups working with Roma, was also actively involved in the development of the first Traveller and Roma Education Strategy (TRES). This is the first national strategy to address the Traveller and Roma educational inequalities and aims to ensure that Travellers and Roma have equality of access, participation and outcomes at all levels of education and throughout the education workforce.

NTRIS II, alongside the *National Action Plan Against Racism* (NAPAR), includes commitments by the State to address anti-Traveller and anti-Roma racism. This includes Traveller and Roma specific cultural awareness and anti-racism training to be introduced across the public sector: working to address the role of institutions in reproducing systemic racism.

With regards to employment, a Public Service Traveller and Roma Internship Programme was started to increase representation within the public sector. The Special Initiative for Travellers (SIT) aims to increase engagement with employment programmes.

There are positive outcomes from these policy initiatives, and a large proportion of credit there goes to the work of Traveller organisations on the ground, particularly that of Primary Health Care for Travellers Projects (PHCTP). For example, the overall life expectancy of Travellers has changed, with more Travellers living over the age of 65; Travellers have gained greater access to mainstream services, including higher rates of health screenings; and there are higher rates of health literacy amongst Travellers.

Despite such positive developments, structural factors relating to over-policing; lack of culturally appropriate



Launch of *Our Geels: All Ireland Traveller Health Study* (2010): Pavee Point Co-Director, Martin Collins; then-Minister for Health, Mary Harney; Pavee Point Primary Health Care Worker, Missie Collins.

accommodation; and a lack of sustained funding, across the necessary sectors, hinder the full realisation of the appropriately ambitious aims of NTRIS II and other government policies. The continued absence of ethnic data collection across state agencies and services, conducted in line with human rights standards, produces policy blind spots when it comes to responsive action.

In this way, securing long-term social and systemic equity for Travellers and Roma requires structured and sustained political; cultural; and financial investment.

Making 'good'

Speaking at the recent launch of a Pavee Point/EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) partnered nationwide survey concerning Traveller and Roma rights, Senator Eileen Flynn vividly recounted practices and instances of exclusion that continue to affect Travellers to this day.

Senator Flynn described living a double life as a Traveller: one life amongst Travelling People; and another life amongst settled people. As she socialised with her peer group as a young woman, she felt herself having to hide the fact that she was a Traveller; unable to take pride in her identity as a Traveller.

The FRA survey underlined the alarmingly high levels of day-to-day

racism and discrimination faced by Travellers and Roma in Ireland: 75 per cent of Travellers experiencing instances of discrimination in the year before the survey; and 60 per cent of Roma disclosing similar instances of discrimination. The findings underline that a robust response is required in order to achieve any sort of equality for Travellers and Roma, with particular attention needed to address the systemic inequalities and racism that impact on both groups.

While that same survey pointed to incremental progress made in terms of Traveller inclusion in health, education, and employment, Senator Flynn described the situation as one only moving from "very, very bad" to "very bad". In order that the lived experience of Travellers and Roma might one day be described as "good", it is essential that policymakers make good on the promises made to Traveller and Roma communities.

W: www.paveepoint.ie



PAVEE POINT
TRAVELLER AND ROMA CENTRE



Unemployment rate

Reducing income inequality

Public support for government action to reduce income inequality has remained consistently high and is above the European average, the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) has asserted.

Public support for welfare and redistributive policies in Ireland, published in February 2026, states that around 75 per cent of Irish residents indicate that they agree that the Government should take measures to reduce differences in income.

This proportion is slightly higher than the European average (71 per cent) and the proportions in other northern European countries. Support for income redistribution is higher among females, those in the lowest income quintile and those from the unskilled and skilled manual social classes.

The report also states that young people and those born in Ireland, as those who identify themselves as having left-wing views are also more supportive of redistribution.

The study also explores the attitudes to more concrete welfare and tax policy, as well as ideological basis for redistribution. While the connection found between social position (for example, low income) and support for

redistribution might be explained by self-interest (for example, the belief that greater redistribution would improve their own material conditions), the study finds that “there is also evidence that it is influenced by people’s views on fairness”.

In Ireland, perceptions about unfairness of the income of the rich is associated with support for redistribution as much as perceptions of how unfairly low the income of the poor is. In countries such as Norway and France, however, the ESRI states that “unfairly high incomes are more strongly associated with support for redistribution”.

Attitudes to social benefits

A high proportion of respondents in Ireland (64 per cent) believe that social benefits prevent poverty (down slightly from 69 per cent in 2009), however, there was a small increase in the proportion of respondents who agree that ‘social benefits lead to a more equal society’ from 52 per cent in 2009 to 53 per cent.

However, alongside these positive beliefs, there are also more negative sentiments, with 58 per cent believing in the sentiment that “social benefits make people lazy”. Younger people, those on the right of the left-right scale, and those with lower educational attainment are more likely to agree that “social benefits make people lazy”.

While that belief declined over time, Ireland has one of the highest proportions in Europe of respondents agreeing with this statement.

There is a higher level of support for government spending on older people and childcare for working families than there is for those who are unemployed. The same pattern is observed in most European countries but, in Ireland, the gaps between these three groups are significantly smaller. One-third of respondents indicated that they would agree with higher taxes if it meant more or better public services. This is the sixth highest percentage across the 27 participant countries.

Change over time

Over the period 2002 to 2023/24, support for redistribution in Ireland fluctuated around 75 per cent. Trends differ across social class groups. Support for income redistribution among the working class in Ireland is now at the highest level since 2002. Events such as a government campaign focused on welfare fraud and budget announcements have a significant but short-lived impact on welfare attitudes and support for redistribution.

Those who experienced job loss during the Covid-19 pandemic are more supportive of redistribution, regardless of their financial situation, suggesting that the enhanced role of government in supporting incomes during that period boosted support for redistribution.

These findings suggest that there is a strong basis of support for government policies of redistribution; however, these are sensitive to framing, with a focus on fraud rather than citizens’ entitlements, leading to more negative sentiment about redistribution.

The ESRI states that attitudes to social welfare are also “sensitive to trade-offs and perceived hierarchies of deservingness”.

“Awareness of one’s own potential reliance on social benefits motivates support for redistribution but so does people’s sense of what is fair. Lessons from behavioural studies suggest that providing information to individuals about the extent of existing inequalities influences individual support for redistribution.

“These findings underscore the importance of governments addressing misperceptions related to welfare recipients and providing reliable information about inequalities in society.”

Daniel Capistrano, researcher at the ESRI and co-author of the report, says: “This report shows a solid social support for enhancing the welfare state in Ireland. Policymakers have a favourable environment to design and implement policies that meet the demands for better distribution of income, opportunities and living conditions in Ireland.”

Denise Charlton, Chief Executive of Community Foundation Ireland, a partner on the research, states: “The study shows that even in times of challenge and complexities, there is a sense of fairness and support for equality within our society. Something all of us should be proud of. These important findings will inform our future work as a philanthropic hub with an equality mission, as well as our 5,000 community, voluntary, and charitable partners.”



**Family Resource Centre
National Forum**
Supporting • Strengthening • Empowering

Family Resource Centres: Social inclusion in action



Representatives of the Family Resource Centre National Forum present a Budget Briefing at Dáil Eireann in 2025.

Family Resource Centres are one of Ireland's most effective but under recognised engines of social inclusion. The Programme for Government commits to expanding and funding FRCs, with 10 new centres announced (now 136 nationwide) and core funding increased to €180,000 per year, writes Fergal Landy, CEO, Family Resource Centre National Forum.

FRCs are a critical and increasingly fundamental part of the mix of community infrastructure needed to build cohesive and inclusive communities. As an agile policy lever, FRCs help deliver the elusive whole-of-government approach sought by policymakers and politicians alike and to address priority areas, such as child poverty or support for people with disabilities.

Whilst policy objectives are assigned for implementation by government departments directly or by various state

agencies and local authorities, implementation is unlikely to be well received by communities unless those communities are engaged as active agents in those policy objectives.

This is true not just of community cohesiveness and social inclusion but also many other inter-related policy areas such as child and family wellbeing, poverty eradication with a particular focus on child poverty, community health and wellbeing, lifelong learning through community education, community safety and crime prevention, climate change,

biodiversity and a just transition, and participatory democracy.

Family Resource Centres (FRCs) are community-based hubs that help families and individuals access support, build skills, and feel connected locally. They do not just replace public services; they make them reachable, coordinated, and human. They offer community development activities, community education, childcare and parenting support, counselling and therapeutic support, support for older people and so much more.

This CLG structure also helps to integrate the silos that can occur as an unintended consequence of departmental funding streams. Using a belt and braces analogy, if governmental agencies are the braces for policy implementation, communities are a woven belt, and FRCs are the golden thread. Unique within the landscape of Irish community and voluntary organisations, FRCs operate a human rights-based approach to community development and family support across the life-course.



For FRCS, this starts with identifying the strengths of the community and then responding to the needs by acting as a broker between the complex tapestry of informal, semi-formal and formal supports that help to create meaningful social inclusion. Some FRCs are in urban areas where there is a concentration of poverty and inequality, many are the heart of a rural village or town and the surrounding hinterland. Place-based identity, the need to belong and to matter, are not only key to the work of FRCs but are also the evidence-based bedrock of lifelong health and wellbeing.

Integral to FRCs, is that each FRC is an independent company limited by guarantee (CLG) with trustees derived from the local community. These community representatives provide governance and oversight of a strategic plan developed in partnership with the community and implemented by a professional staff team acting alongside the community.

This highly devolved governance model delivers community autonomy, distributed leadership, and individual agency, it is also a mechanism to deliver meaningful social inclusion by creating the opportunity for marginalised groups to directly participate in the governance and oversight of funding allocated for their community.

This CLG structure also helps to integrate the silos that can occur as an unintended consequence of departmental funding streams.

Using the core funding managed and administered on government's behalf by Tusla, each FRC leverages and pools funding streams to deliver developmental opportunities and wrap around supports to the community in a joined-up manner under one roof.

The increasing governance and compliance required of Irish charities is undoubtedly a challenge for many locally led organisations. Rather than framing them as a burden, to be alleviated through centralisation and specialisation, FRCs offer the opportunity to re-frame governance and compliance requirements as process and outcome in a theory of change based on empowering rather than fixing communities.

FRCs understand that communities are struggling with intergenerational poverty and inequality, frequently without access to housing, fulfilling employment opportunities, leisure amenities, or proper public services in areas like health, including mental health, disability, education and public transport. Specific groups within communities, such as the Traveller and Roma communities, migrants, the LGBT+ community, lone parents, people with disabilities, and older people experience social exclusion.

The community development approach of FRCs is fundamentally about seeking change. Community is where change starts and where it is experienced, whether that is local, national, or indeed global change. FRCs have been working closely with communities on methods for

dealing with those who seek to divide their communities with divisive rhetoric.

FRCs bring the community together in a safe and trusted space to have conversations designed to create mutual understanding and solidarity, FRCs are empowering communities to address the structural causes of the challenges they face. This creates a real alternative and antidote to division.

Where FRCs are resourced, the community is much better equipped to respond and to deescalate such situations because the relationships of trust within the community have already been established.

This is why it is vital that the community development work of FRCs is resourced, so that we can build cohesive communities with meaningful social inclusion. There is a real opportunity now to grow this potential as part of a long-term strategy to address decades of poverty and inequality and to counteract divisive forces. If social inclusion is the policy objective, then government must continue to expand the capacity and network of FRCs and critically provide all FRCs with the adequate, sustainable funding needed to deliver meaningful social inclusion.

E: ceo@familyresource.ie
W: www.familyresource.ie



An Chomhairle Náisiúnta
um Oideachas Speisialta
National Council
for Special Education

Working with schools and families to improve access for autistic learners: D15 ACAT



John Kearney, CEO, National Council for Special Education.

According to NCSE CEO John Kearney, “the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) envisions a world-class, inclusive education system where children and adults with special educational needs are supported to achieve their potential and participate fully in society”.

“The NCSE’s mission focuses on promoting a continuum of inclusive education through research, policy advice, and supporting schools and families.” This vision is closely aligned with *The Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025*.

Achieving this vision includes the NCSE’s ongoing work with the Department of Education and Youth, (DEY), schools, patrons and families when expanding special classes for autistic learners requiring such provision. Through sustained advocacy by school principals, working in formal partnership with parents and the NCSE, autism class provision in the area in 2025 expanded to 47 autism classes across Dublin 15 schools, with plans to further develop this provision for the 2026/27 academic year, increasing fully inclusive participation of autistic learners in mainstream and special schools with their peers.

The trial

Despite support from the NCSE network of Special Educational Needs Organisers, (SENO), families have

continued to express experiencing significant challenges navigating the autism class admissions process:

- making applications to multiple schools;
- tracking multiple admission windows; and
- repeatedly submitting extensive documentation.

These systemic barriers prompted the Dublin 15 Primary Principals’ Network, in partnership with the NCSE, to design a more transparent and equitable approach: D15 Autism Class Application Trial (D15ACAT).

D15ACAT was established as a school-led initiative, developed in close partnership with the NCSE, with the following aims:

- to preserve each school’s independent admission policy and criteria;
- to introduce a single application window across all schools and a common application form;
- to reduce the administrative burden on families and schools;

- to improve clarity and consistency of communication;
- to provide structured and accessible parent supports; and
- to enable the NCSE to improve forward planning based on accurate, localised data on specialist provision requirements.

Extensive consultation underpinned the model, including engagement with school patrons, the Irish Primary Principals’ Network, the Irish National Teachers’ Organisation, the National Association of Boards of Management in Special Education, the National Parents Council, local parent groups, education welfare officers and HSE children’s disability network teams. The DEY’s governance and special education sections were also consulted.

As the statutory body responsible for sanctioning and reviewing autism classes, the NCSE was uniquely positioned to take on the role of data controller, formally embedding partnership at the core of D15ACAT.

In 2024/25, 13 schools participated in the initial trial, offering 24 autism class

APPLY ONCE
FOR AUTISM CLASS PLACE
IN 17 SCHOOLS
INCLUDING
DANU SPECIAL SCHOOL

DUBLIN 15
AUTISM CLASS
APPLICATION TRIAL



places. A joint communications strategy ensured wide awareness, including information on school websites, early years services, disability teams, local and national media, and a dedicated D15ACAT page on the NCSE website.

In the first year, 105 applications were received.

The initial trial demonstrated clear benefits for families, including submitting one application rather than multiple forms. Schools retained full autonomy in applying their own admissions criteria and managing offers and waiting lists. However, several areas for improvement were identified by principals, parents and the NCSE.

Year two

For the 2026/27 admissions cycle, D15ACAT expanded to 17 participating schools. Sixteen places were available through the ACAT process, with 38 places available across the wider network.

A key development was the introduction of an online application platform. This significantly simplified the process for parents and enabled:

- automated acknowledgements and follow-up communications;
- structured, scaffolded support for parents who required assistance; and
- clearer tracking of application status.

This also substantially reduced the administrative burden on schools.

Principals reported ease in applying admissions criteria consistently and efficiently. Notably, there was a 0 per cent error rate in applications received by schools, reducing time-consuming administrative workload significantly.

Parent engagement was strengthened further through a layered support model. Prior to the opening of one unified application window across all participating schools, principals and NCSE staff jointly delivered morning, evening and online parent information sessions.

During the trial NCSE, SENOs provided in-person support sessions one day per week in nominated schools. Sessions ran across mornings, afternoons and evenings, included provision during the mid-term break, and rotated across different days to maximise accessibility for parents.

A coordinated communications campaign also supported access. Posters, short explainer videos and digital content were shared across school websites, social media platforms and NCSE channels. Clear, step-by-step guidance was provided on how to access D15ACAT, to improve parental understanding of the process.

The 2026 cycle received 139 applications:

- 101 applicants (72.7 per cent) were eligible for autism class placement
- 28 applicants (20.1 per cent) were eligible for special school placement

- Only one application (0.72 per cent) indicating strong alignment between clinical assessments, school referrals and parental applications.
- Nine applications were incomplete.

As D15ACAT enters its next phase, the partnership between schools and the NCSE continues to evolve. Priorities include refining digital systems, strengthening early communication around eligibility deadlines in alignment with the relevant Department of Education and Youth circular and similar trials, and exploring options within legislative constraints to address identified issues.

The D15ACAT demonstrates the impact of collaborative, system-level leadership, combining school-based expertise with statutory partnership.

Kearney says: “When schools and agencies work together, meaningful and sustainable system improvement which promotes and supports fully inclusive education practices becomes achievable. This is key to our work with schools and families.”

Andrew Torrance, Principal Officer, NCSE

E: andrew.torrance@ncse.ie

T: + 353 1 603 3433

Helena Trench, Principal Powerstown ETNS

E: principal@powerstownet.com



Reducing the assessment of needs backlog

The HSE's assessment of need (AON) process for people with disabilities is set to be reformed to address the backlog of AON applications and free up therapists to perform their core duties instead of "writing endless reports".

Currently, applications are sent to an assessment officer in the HSE to decide if a child is eligible for an AON under the terms of the Disability Act 2005. Assessments are then carried out by a team or a single healthcare professional to decide if the child has a disability or not. Should a child be deemed to have a disability, the family is given a service statement listing the services and support the HSE would provide.

However, the Department of Children, Disability and Equality states that therapists spend up to one-third of their time producing clinical assessments under this process. This restricts their capacity to perform their core functions.

Under the General Scheme for the Disability (Amendment) Bill 2025, published in February 2026, assessment officers are to be supported by 11 new teams, each comprising four expert staff to provide clinical guidance during the process. The four members are to be a psychologist, a speech and language therapist, an occupational therapist, and an administrator.

Guidelines will be provided to assessment officers to outline that the AON process should focus on establishing the child's needs and not on a diagnosis of disability.

The requirement for professional reports, such as AON reports, for entry into special schools and classes is set to be removed. A new process is set to be agreed in its place.

HSE figures show that 20,290 children were overdue an AON with 16,960 waiting over three months. This includes 1,006 applications where an extended timeframe was agreed with the parent due to exceptional circumstances.

A total of 13,186 applications were received in 2025, a 23 per cent increase from 2024 when there were 10,690.

There were 5,949 AONs completed in 2025, a 43 per cent increase from 2024 when there were 4,162 completed.

The Disability Act 2005, which introduced AONs, stipulates that they must be completed within six months of the application being received. In 2025,

9.4 per cent of assessment were completed within this timeframe.

Minister for Children, Disability and Equality Norma Foley TD says: "I know that families have been enduring incredible stress and unacceptable delays in receiving AON reports and some existing AONs are taking up to 30 hours to complete, which is far too long. We are introducing a faster and more efficient way of carrying out AON reports."

The Labour Party's spokesperson for children, Mark Wall TD, says: "This government has rushed out a press release today promising more 'targeted reforms' on assessment of needs. Without the structures in place, this will not be worth the paper it is written on.

"The crux of the issue is even if a child does get an assessment of need, we simply do not have the staffing required to provide the vital therapies that these children need."