**OHCHR Report to the High Level Political Forum on the Sustainable Development Goals and the rights of the child- Human Rights Council resolution 37/20 “Rights of the Child”**

**Submission of Ireland**

**December 2020**

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Goals (SDG), represents an extensive and ambitious 15-year policy agenda.

Overall political oversight for national SDG implementation is provided through the Cabinet, with each Minister having specific responsibility for implementing individual SDG targets related to their Ministerial functions. Each of the 169 SDG targets has been assigned to a lead government department. The Minister and the Department for Environment, Climate and Communications (DECC) has responsibility for promoting the SDGs, and for overseeing their coherent implementation across government.

1. **How the rights of the child are being upheld as a priority in your country in the face of the adverse impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on children’s rights and the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.**

The complexity and interconnectedness of the SDGs requires continued and regular cross-government engagement to support effective and coherent implementation. It remains of the utmost importance that commitments made to the 2030 Agenda are met by all government departments and that they are accounted for in policies fighting the pandemic.

The government places a strong emphasis on the protection of the rights of the child, including the right to quality education, and continues to emphasise these rights throughout the adverse impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. This has been done through several steps and measures.

***Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021***

The *Plan for Living with COVID-19*[[1]](#footnote-1) sets out the government’s position on prioritising keeping schools open. It describes education’s ability to provide “holistic development” and be the “foundation for lifelong learning and wellbeing” for young people and children in Ireland.

***Keeping Schools, Early Learning, Childcare Services open - A top priority***

The Programme for government’s commitment to re-opening schools was given effect through a funding package announced in late July which underpinned *The Roadmap for the Full Return to School*[[2]](#footnote-2). The implementation of this Roadmap ensures that schools can continue to operate safely and sustainably in line with public health advice and government Decisions within the framework of the Plan for Living with COVID-19.

Research has shown that transmission rates of COVID-19 in schools in Ireland has been low as schools have been supported by significant investments to support all infection prevention and control measures recommended by public health authorities. At the end of July 2020, the government approved a comprehensive €376 million funding package along with an additional €61 million for hand sanitiser and PPE (further augmented in Budget 2021) and plans that provided the necessary supports and guidance for primary and post-primary schools to reopen safely and sustainably following the summer.

The Roadmap and the funding package recognised the challenges faced by schools in ensuring the safe return of over one million students and approximately 100,000 staff in 4,000 schools in the context of COVID-19. The suite of support materials for schools, includes guidance on curriculum, wellbeing of students, wellbeing of staff as well as protocols for minimising the risk of the introduction and spread of infection in schools. In addition, template COVID-19 Response Plans for schools have also been published that provide clear and practical guidance and support to schools on the range of measures that need to be put in place to operate safely.

As well as the significant additional funding provided, practical supports were provided to schools, including: age-appropriate posters on handwashing, face coverings and other hygiene measures; a series of induction training videos for all school staff at primary and post-primary level. This is in line with the government’s Return to Work Safely protocol[[3]](#footnote-3). A dedicated school reopening helpline was set up by the Department, along with online information provided.[[4]](#footnote-4)

***Digital Issues***

Remote learning throughout the pandemic’s various levels of restrictions has brought about new issues to be taken into consideration, such as digital issues. As part of the implementation of the Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020 Enhancing Teaching Learning and Assessment, funding of €210m for ICT Infrastructure is being distributed to schools over the five years of the Strategy.

In the context of the current public health crisis the funding can be focussed on assisting schools to address ICT needs to support the provision of remote learning. This can include the purchase of ICT devices that can be shared with students who do not have access to devices, essential learning platforms and other ICT infrastructure to support the provision of remote learning.

***Children with Special Education Needs (SEN)***

The government is committed to supporting every child with special educational needs to receive an education. Next year it will spend approximately €2 Billion, or over 20% of its total educational budget annually, on making additional provision for children with special educational needs.

Approximately 1000 additional Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) will also be allocated to schools next year, bringing the total number to 18,000.

***Protecting the rights of the child under International Protection***

The government is adopting a children’s rights-based approach to the new model for International Protection for asylum seekers and refugees, and for its National Action Plan Against Racism, which is under preparation. The government is listening to the voices of children under international protection who are receiving essential services, such as medical care, accommodation and board, from the state. The proposed new model will combat isolation and help children to integrate into their new communities by promoting English language support and other school-based supports. Furthermore, by promoting an own-door accommodation model for families, a child’s right to privacy will be more fully respected under the new system.

As well as this, the International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS) has developed a Strategic Framework for Engagement on Child and Family Issues in the context of school closures and social distancing requirements put in place during the COVID-19 crisis.

1. **Particularly noteworthy examples of good practice towards realizing the rights of the child in your country, in relation to sustainable and resilient recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and the goals under review- including specific laws, policies and actions to advance the implantation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.**

The government took many measures to ensure the advancement of the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

As Article 7 of the Convention ensures the right of a child to a name and a nationality, the government worked at a cross-departmental level to ensure that birth registrations continued. This was done by adapting legislation and introducing a new system of postal or online registrations. This allowed for parents to adhere to travel restrictions, to be able to appropriately cocoon if necessary and the closure of certain public offices to the public.

Birth registrations also provide the appropriate paperwork to apply for passport and a Personal Public Service Number, which is required to receive state funded health care. Through the registration of a child, parents are also entitled to Child Benefit Allowance from the State, which provides much needed financial support to many parents.

The government continued to put in place new measures to ensure the safety of children and their parents throughout the pandemic, in accordance with Article 19 of the Convention. This was done through adopting measures such as prioritising applications relating to domestic violence in the home and custody applications in the Courts, along with changing methods of the delivery of judgements and the facilitation of applications for adjournments by e-mail.

The government further examined its policies in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic and implemented new measures to afford every child the right to quality education, under Article 28 and 29 of the Convention. These policies took into consideration the children and young people who were at most risk of being left behind without the structure of the school system on a daily basis during heightened COVID-19 restrictions.

In addition to the guidance published previously for schools on the overall approach recommended to support the wellbeing of school communities, the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) has developed separate webinars for primary and post-primary schools – Supporting the Wellbeing of the School Community: Returning to School after COVID-19 School Closure.

Furthermore, 17 additional NEPS psychologist posts were created for schools, as well as 120 Guidance Counsellor positions. NEPS psychologists have been asked to support reluctant school attendance behaviour. NEPS psychologists are also focusing on supporting the inclusion and participation of children with special and additional needs through their casework and consultation service.

A wellbeing toolkit has also been provided to teachers as further support with user-friendly materials to promote student wellbeing in the classroom.

***Covid 19 and SEN Learners***

Additional provisions are being made for children with special needs including an enhanced COVID-19 rate payable in respect of students attending special schools and special classes, including special classes in mainstream primary schools.

A significantly expanded summer education programme for children with complex special educational needs was also provided, which aimed to prevent regression among children with special needs.

The enhanced supports under the return to school package, combined with the very significant levels of provision currently available, will ensure that pupils with special educational needs can continue to be supported in schools.

***Covid-19 supports for disadvantaged students***

During the period of school closures, the need for at risk learners to have regular, ongoing schooling was particularly important. Learners at risk of educational disadvantage needed intense support at that time. The teachers of pupils at risk of educational disadvantage were particularly focussed on ensuring that they provided support to these students when schools were closed.

Comprehensive guidance issued to all schools on supporting teaching and learning. This guidance covered themes such as, the role of schools in engaging with students, teachers and school leaders working together, keeping in touch with students and the importance of providing feedback and advice.

Recognising the need to support parents in the context of supporting their children to engage in learning during this period guidance documents for primary parents were developed which was issued in multiple languages.

Schools were encouraged to continue to operate the School Meals Programme during the extended Covid-19 restrictions and detailed guidelines were issued to schools to assist them.

During the extended period of school closure in 2019/20 school year Tusla Education Support Service (TESS) provided a range of supports to targeted students and their families.

All DEIS primary and post-primary schools were offered the opportunity to run a week long summer camp or programme in accordance with the relevant public health guidelines. 215 (31.06%) DEIS primary schools ran literacy and numeracy summer camps in 2020, with over 7,000 pupils attending. 72 (36.36%) DEIS post-primary schools ran the week long summer programme in 2020 with some 2,243 students attending.

The government issued detailed guidance to support post-primary schools in encouraging students to return to school to complete their education, and/or to outline options such as alternative pathways to further education or employment.

1. <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/resilience-recovery-2020-2021-plan-for-living-with-covid-19/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/a128d-back-to-school/?referrer=http://www.gov.ie/backtoschool/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/22829a-return-to-work-safely-protocol/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/your-questions-answered/?referrer=http://www.gov.ie/en/publication/389bd-topics-being-raised-on-the-back-to-school-helpline/> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)