

**Social
Democrats**

Empowering Youth

A Manifesto for Young People

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Key Points

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Increase funding for youth work services, restoring youth work funding to pre-austerity levels.
- Commit to multi-annual funding of youth projects, that includes ongoing and evolving provision for supports that will retain and develop youth workers.
- Create a €150 Sports and Cultural Activity voucher for children aged 6 to 18.
- Increase investment in sports and recreation facilities.
- Provide free public transport for under 18s.
- Create a Culture Card valued at €200 for 18-24 year olds.
- Work towards the full clinical and administrative staffing of CAMHS teams, including the aim of establishing 16 CAMHS-Intellectual Disability teams.
- Aim for a situation where, by the end of one term of government, all schools have at least one specialist emotional counsellor/therapist on staff.
- Make primary and secondary education truly free by fully funding all school textbooks, the school transport scheme, and removing the need for voluntary contributions.
- Reduce third level fees by phasing out the student contribution charge and increase funding to the SUSI grant scheme.
- Review the CAO points system in partnership with young people, teachers and higher education institutions to develop a fairer framework for third level admissions.

Introduction

As part of the next government, the Social Democrats will have a focus on delivering better outcomes and brighter futures for young people in Ireland.

Our policies will increase funding for services for young people in areas like youth work, education, mental health, sport and recreation, and transport, and also take measures to increase youth participation in civic life.

By valuing the voice of young people, we recognise the important role they can play in Irish society.

As vicechair Oireachtas Joint Committee on the Future of Youth Work in 2023, our party leader Holly Cairns heard first hand of the challenges faced by young people as a result of the continued absence of investment in youth work in Ireland since the financial crash.

Many high-profile, high-impact instances of anti-social behaviour recently have led to the cross-party recognition that high quality youth work has the potential to make significant positive inroads in addressing many of the challenges being faced in Ireland today. Investment in this area is key.

We would also improve funding for youth mental health, to help deal with the explosion of need in this area over recent years, and the ever-increasing waiting lists for services.

We want to work towards a situation where all schools (primary and secondary) have access to at least one specialist emotional counsellor/therapist as a permanent member of the staff.

We will also support a number of measures to increase youth participation in civic life.

Youth Work and Youth Services

Youth workers throughout Ireland often provide the most valuable educational and relational services with young people experiencing structural inequality, marginalisation and disadvantage.

At a time of increasing demand for services in communities, it is imperative we assist youth work organisations to deliver high-quality programmes and supports for young people. All young people who need it should have the opportunity to access youth work.

In our most recent Alternative Budget, the Social Democrats called for additional investment of €15 million in the power of youth work to support young people to achieve their full potential. Funding youth work and youth services is not just the right thing to do now; it has the potential to save taxpayer money in future.

This sort of spending on young people should be seen as an investment, not a cost. Our goal in Government will be to restore youth work funding to pre-austerity levels (taking account of population growth and the increased cost of service delivery) and move towards pay parity for youth workers.

Additionally, a comprehensive review of the funding model in the UBU scheme is required to ensure youth workers are paid commensurate with the work they do, and to provide pathways for progression in the profession. We will also work with stakeholders to develop a comprehensive CPD (Continuous Professional Development) framework for youth workers in Ireland.

The Joint Oireachtas Committee's report on *The Future of Youth Work*, published in 2023, recommended that "every young person in Ireland should have access to local, accessible, high-quality youth work services, delivered by paid professionals." The Social Democrats will implement an all-of-Government approach to the youth sector and to youth work, ensuring a cross-departmental strategy is enacted and a cohesive, collaborative and synergised approach is taken to meet the full range of needs of Youth, as recommended in the report.

The existing capital budget for youth work is limited in scope and can be difficult to access for smaller organisations, especially those without own-door facilities, while the current application process requires clearer structure and planning. Reform is needed.

High quality youth work plays an important role in multiple policy areas including mental health, social inclusion, and employment. It brings alternative opportunities to access education, opening a door to life-long learning and meaningful life chances.

Failing to invest in this area is a false economy and will cost us more as a country in the long run.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Increase funding for youth work services, restoring youth work funding to pre-austerity levels.
All young people who wish to avail of youth work services should be able to benefit from them.
- Reform the capital budget for youth work services to ensure it is more accessible, and increase capital investment to create and develop community spaces and facilities that offer opportunities to young people.
- Examine the needs of the sector and establish an investment fund for youth work facilities and infrastructural improvements.
- Significantly increase access to facilities that address the challenges of growing up in urban, urban periphery or rural locations.
- Commit to multi-annual funding of youth projects, that includes ongoing and evolving provision for supports that will retain and develop youth workers.
- This must include pay, conditions, qualifications, and professional development. Funding should also allow the development of a volunteer strategy for youth work that invests in recruitment, training, and support.
- Work collaboratively with various key stakeholders, including the National Youth Council of Ireland, the sixteen Education and Training Boards, and various academic institutions when designing and delivering youth-related policy.
- Ensure justice-led funding being redirected into youth services that seek to address the root causes of anti-social behaviour, violence, and criminality in the longer term.
- Develop a CPD framework for youth workers in Ireland.
- Work collaboratively with the Department of Health, with a significant focus on youth mental health (see subsequent section), understanding the root causes of mental health challenges that include poor access to services, healthcare, adequate housing, youth services, and education settings that must meet their learning styles and needs.

Youth Mental Health

Youth mental health services and supports are at breaking point, with long waiting lists and a postcode lottery. There has been a well-reported decrease generally in young persons' mental health and general wellbeing over recent years. This has variously been attributed to increased social media use and Covid-19, though the decline seems to have started well over a decade ago.

This surge in demand, without commensurate increases in recruitment and staffing for the services that deal with young people, has meant that those services are not accessible for them, and their broader health and wellbeing is being adversely affected.

For example, as of August 2024, there were 3,681 children and young people on the waiting list for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). This means the waiting list has almost doubled since 2019. A further 21,601 children and young people are waiting for primary care psychology. Across the two services, more than ten thousand *have been waiting more than a year*.

Despite the fact that 75 per cent of mental health conditions are identified before a person reaches age 25, young people in their late teens and early 20s are not specifically targeted for early intervention. This needs to change. Early intervention services, such as talk therapy, are key to ensuring that mental health issues are not allowed to deteriorate to a point where emergency interventions are required.

Mental health advocacy groups have also identified a cliff edge for young people in CAMHS whose needs, upon turning 18, are not met by adult mental health services. This lack of integration is a huge problem. Young people with moderate to severe mental ill-health are discharged to General Adult Mental Health Services (GAMHS) at 18 years of age. This is contrary to international best practice, which generally follows the evidence which suggests that mental health services for young people should cover ages 12 to 25 years.

Reducing service waiting times requires significant and sustained investment to expand Ireland's mental health workforce. There is a significant shortage of a number of critical members of CAMHS teams. The lack of consultant psychiatrists and reduced inpatient capacity pose major patient safety risks.

Despite all the issues with mental health services in Ireland, we know that there are still not enough mental health practitioners being trained. Graduate programmes need to be developed to help with supply. Pay imbalances, including related to Section 39 workers, are also causing issues.

It must also be remembered that while CAMHS and its dysfunction is the headline grabber in youth mental health, it is far from the case that sorting CAMHS out will sort out youth mental health. The lack of multi-disciplinary community teams has pushed more care onto CAMHS, while the deficit in CAMHS teams has pushed many children into adult services.

It's also important to re-think how we look at mental health, removing it (as far as possible) from institutional (and medical) settings and providing community-based structures. Early intervention needs significantly more focus.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Implement the recommendations of the Inspector of Mental Health Services July 2023 report into CAMHS, including the independent regulation of CAMHS by the Mental Health Commission.
- Implement the recommendations of Families for Reform of CAMHS.
- Establish a National Workforce Task Force to address both the short term and medium-term needs of our health sector, including mental health.
- Ensure liaison between the Departments of Health and of Further and Higher Education to ensure higher education places in the area of mental health match projected service need.
- Work towards the full clinical and administrative staffing of CAMHS teams. This includes working towards the aim of establishing 16 CAMHS-Intellectual Disability teams. This will help to improve access and reduce CAMHS waiting times.
- Expand CAMHS to cover young people up to age 25, in line with international best practice, and improve focus on early intervention, targeting programmes at young adults 18-25.
- Resource teams dealing with early intervention in psychosis and ARMS ('at-risk mental state').
- Restore CAMHS bed capacity to 72, moving towards the necessary 115 beds over time.
- Expand services for young people that do not qualify for CAMHS, including by resourcing primary care and community-based mental health teams provide a more comprehensive service.
- Increase investment in Jigsaw, the youth mental health charity, to expand its service provision.
- Ensure that mental health practitioners in the Community & Voluntary sector, including Section 39 workers, are paid fairly for the work they are doing.
- Develop national standards of youth mental health services, driven by the regulation of CAMHS.

Protecting Children Online

The evidence of the detrimental impact on our children and young people of unregulated access to the internet and social media is overwhelming. It has resulted, among other things, in an evolving youth mental health crisis and other challenges, and requires leadership and political will to address it.

We have laws and structures to protect children from harm in our society; that principle must be extended and applied to the digital world. Internet service providers must be responsible for creating an online environment that is safe, and be held accountable where they fail.

Attempts to regulate access to online content according to age seem likely to fail. Instead, the Social Democrats believe that regulating how algorithms – which direct content towards our children – work makes more sense. We would enact regulation of social media platforms, underpinned by legislation and enforced with significant penalties (rather than codes of conduct). We will:

- Enact specific and effective legislation to protect children online, by regulating ‘preferences algorithms’ and ensuring that engagement-based recommendation algorithms are turned off by default.
- Expand the mandate of Coimisiún na Meán so they have authority to instruct for content to be taken down from online platforms on the basis that it represents misinformation or disinformation.
- Provide guidelines for best practice for smartphone use by children, including no smartphones for children while in primary/secondary school, and age verification requirements for social media.
- Provide education on digital and media literacy in schools, including by having misinformation – and how to identify it – included in primary and secondary school curricula via SPHE, and provide resources for public health awareness campaigns, wellbeing training, and school support services.
- Enact stricter rules on influencers, including around what they can promote, and guidance around how they promote it. For example, promoting cosmetic surgery has been banned in France and promotional images promoting cosmetics must come with a disclaimer if they have been altered or a filter has been used.

Education

Education can be an excellent driver of opportunity, quality of life, and social equality for young people. It is more than the accumulation of knowledge; it is the holistic development of each young person to reach their potential and engage positively in society.

The education of our youth is the bedrock of our country's future; economically, socially and culturally. All the research suggests that well-targeted investment in education is paid back many times over, with children and young people with high quality educational experiences having better life outcomes and employment prospects.

Ireland has a strong track record on education, with one of the highest school- and third level- completion rates in Europe. We have thousands of dedicated teachers and support staff delivering high quality education across the country.

However, we are failing to invest adequately in our infrastructure and people, with a low educational spend compared with European neighbours.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Make primary and secondary education truly free by fully funding all school textbooks, the school transport scheme, and removing the need for voluntary contributions.
- Review the CAO points system in partnership with young people, teachers and higher education institutions to develop a fairer framework for third level admissions.
- Aim for a situation where, by the end of one term of government, all schools have at least one specialist emotional counsellor/therapist on staff.
- Establish a DEIS+ scheme.
- Fund hot school meals in every school.
- Continue to professionalise our Special Needs Assistants.
- Reduce third level fees by phasing out the student contribution charge.
- Increase funding to the SUSI grant scheme.
- Reduce the student/teacher ratio at primary level to 20:1 and at secondary level to 18:1, and invest to achieve a 15:1 ratio in higher education.
- Increase third level core funding through State contributions.
- Develop an *Arts & Social Inclusion in Education Strategy*.
- Fully enact and resource the EPSEN Act.

Targeting Disadvantage, Investing in Wellbeing

The Social Democrats recognise our schools, with their dedicated staff, as one of the most important and formative settings for children. Their importance is perhaps even greater for those children who have experienced trauma, disadvantage or social exclusion.

The pandemic exposed our children to prolonged periods of remote learning, which has had lasting impact on the mental health of many, with learning impacts for a generation of children. There are now 90,000 children living in consistent poverty in Ireland. One in three have experienced mental health challenges and demand for specialist services soared during the pandemic. Most schools are still not fully resourced to support students needing additional help effectively. Now more than ever, we need to invest in additional services within schools, including more teachers, SNAs, classroom assistants, counsellors and support staff to ensure no child is left behind.

Successive Joint Oireachtas Education Committee reports have raised the same concern regarding absence of specialist counsellors/therapists in primary and secondary schools. The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) should be reconstituted and expanded urgently as the National Educational Psychological and Counselling Service (NEPCS) and mandated to provide specialist Emotional Counselling and Therapeutic Supports, on site, in all primary and secondary schools. The service should be adequately resourced and funded to ensure it can deliver on its mandate.

Trauma and adverse childhood experiences impacting on the mental health of our children and young people were exacerbated during the pandemic, including the additional emotional and financial strain of lockdown on so many families.

School-based emotional counselling is well established in 62 countries, and is mandatory in 39 countries, with a further seven countries in the process of developing such services.

Mental health is an education issue: it impacts directly on children and young people's engagement, attendance, motivation, concentration, peer and teacher relations, and ultimately academic attainment in school.

In Government, the Social Democrats will:

- Aim for a situation where, by the end of one term of government, all schools (primary and secondary) have access to at least one specialist emotional counsellor/therapist as a permanent member of the staff.

This will begin with a local area team, first, before evolving to one per school.

- Establish a DEIS+ scheme to provide multi-disciplinary teams to address intergenerational poverty, including counsellors and play therapists for the most disadvantaged areas.
- Reconstitute NEPS and expand it as the National Educational Psychological and Counselling Service (NEPCS) and mandate it to provide specialist Emotional Counselling and Therapeutic Supports, on site, in all primary and secondary schools.

This will help schools dealing with complex needs that teachers are not qualified to deal with.

- Increase the school meals programme budget by 20 per cent to improve food quality.
- Ensure that young people's Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) must be informed by best practice in science and healthcare. In a modern republic, we must have relationship and sexuality education that is informed by best practice in science and healthcare.
- Continue to support the expansion of *Gaisce – The President's Award* and its role in supporting the development of Ireland's young people, particularly those experiencing disadvantage, marginalisation, or who are otherwise vulnerable.

Youth Participation in Public Life

Young people should have a greater say in decisions that affect them and their community. We believe that young people's opportunities to participate in civic society are unfairly limited. Young people have been the leaders on issues of importance like climate action, education, and equality.

The Social Democrats would seek an amendment to the Local Authority Strategic Policy Committee scheme to provide two spaces on each Strategic Policy Committee for young people.

The Social Democrats would also resource a 'Taoiseach's Youth Council' (based on the Prime Minister's Youth Council in Canada) which would be an advisory structure to the Taoiseach's office on issues of importance to young people.

This could be considered through a formal relationship within the Comhairle Na nÓg structure.

Given that young people are mature enough to inform themselves on issues affecting their lives and engage in the political system in other ways, consideration should be given to lowering the voting age for local and national elections. Sixteen is the age that young people gain many rights and responsibilities in society; they can leave school, seek full-time employment, and pay taxes. Greater engagement in the democratic processes for them should be part of a broader discussion on Constitutional change.

Youth Participation in Recreation

Sports and Activity Voucher

Too many young people are being priced out of playing a sport or learning a creative art. This is not a failure of the clubs, who must fund their activities, but a failure of policy.

In Government, we will develop the 'Being Healthy and Active' scheme to ensure all children and young people have an opportunity to play a sport or be involved in a creative art.

The Social Democrats are proposing a €150 Sports and Cultural Activity voucher for all children aged 6 to 18.

We believe a voucher scheme would work better than a tax credit, which would likely exclude children from families reliant on social welfare, or with low earnings.

This voucher would ensure that children get to participate in their chosen sport or activity for free, or at a heavily subsidised price. There should be no financial barrier to parents getting their children active.

Culture Card

In recent years, a number of EU countries, including France, Spain and Germany, have introduced variations of a "Culture Card" scheme to support and encourage young people to participate in cultural activities. The Social Democrats want to bring this scheme to Ireland, with a Culture Card valued at €200 for young people aged 18 to 24.

Our call comes in light of the significant impact of lockdowns and the cost-of-living crisis on young people's ability to experience cultural activities, and also the difficult landscape for the arts and culture sectors.

Funds can be allocated through an app after young people sign up, with guidelines issued on what the credit can be spent on, from live performance to museums and beyond.

Investing in Community, Play and Sport

The Social Democrats are committed to prioritising play, sport and recreation opportunities for all young people.

Ireland has poor social infrastructure and were it not for the tremendous success of voluntary organisations such as the GAA and others, we would have very little indeed.

We need a renewed focus on bringing our communities together and investing in shared spaces. The Social Democrats want to set a general target of a community centre in every significant population base in Ireland. This can be made available to young and old alike, and funded by an enhanced Sports Capital Programme and the National Development Plan.

Across the country, there is growing demand for youth work facilities, a growing population of young people (the 10-24-year-old population increased 14 per cent between 2016 and 2022, compared to an 8 per cent increase in the wider population), and there is limited funding available to youth work organisations for new builds or improvements.

The exception is through the Department of Rural and Community Development's *Community Centres Investment Fund*, of which less than 5 per cent went to youth work projects and organisations in 2022. Any new builds under this fund require partnerships with local authorities.

The integration of new communities is a huge benefit of investing in things like sport and recreation. Sports help break down barriers and build a sense of a broader community across different groups. Youth clubs and groups can have an important role to play in welcoming and helping young people integrate into new communities. We also believe that better funding of youth services and their facilities can help prevent social challenges such as anti-social behaviour and crime in communities.

We can do so much better with the community facilities we already have or those that are in planning. The model developed at Fingal County Council, known as the "Fingal Schools model", is a good example where it was agreed to co-locate new schools with community facilities on sites made available by the Council (more on next pages). We would like to see this model replicated in other areas. Where feasible from a security and residential amenity point of view, school facilities should be made available for after-hours community use.

In government, the Social Democrats would make the following improvements:

Investing in Youth Facilities

Having down-time is vital to our health. But where do teenagers and young people go for this?

Our young are spending more and more time in school or online. This sedentary lifestyle can lead to physical and mental health problems. Young people are often lonely and isolated – and may feel overwhelmed by both the real life and virtual worlds they occupy.

The provision of additional community facilities for young people will be a priority for us in Government.

There has not been enough investment in facilities and services for young people. Nonetheless, some local authorities have shown that even with limited resources and by engaging in a genuine partnership with the community, they can play a key part in helping their local communities provide for this age group.

(The aforementioned Fingal Schools model is an example, see next page).

At a local level, our Social Democrats Councillors are already committed to maximising Council resources such as empty or under-used buildings, community/sports support workers, and other Council resources and facilities to improve youth services and in particular to offer alternatives to young people who don't engage in mainstream sports and activities.

Our Councillors also build support for investment in youth work facilities and infrastructure into County Development Plans.

Better Sports Facilities

In Government we will seek, through the Sports Capital Grants Programme, to provide a Multi-Use Games Area, or MUGA, pitch in every community where feasible. MUGA pitches should be open access, by which we mean open to a variety of different groups. These have worked very well in several communities where an appropriate location was identified and where strong community support was forthcoming.

The Social Democrats also wish to maximise playing time for local sports clubs on Council pitches. The upkeep of some Council facilities leaves a lot to be desired. Poor drainage, irregular mowing, poor maintenance, or indeed closing down pitches/facilities at certain times of the year all impact on how active our children, young people and adults can be.

This is unacceptable. It breaks very positive routines and is a factor in children dropping out of sport. We will end the practice of Councils shutting playing pitches during the year, other than for maintenance and pitch recovery.

All-weather Facilities

As well as developing open-access MUGA pitches, we want to see an increased prevalence of all-weather pitches and sporting facilities in our communities.

Their importance has been particularly evident this year, where an unusually wet Spring left many playing pitches unusable and led to the cancellation of training and/or matches for many sports clubs.

Replicating the Fingal Model

Communities need to do better with the community facilities we already have or those that are in planning.

The model developed at Fingal County Council, known as the “Fingal Schools model”, is a good example where it was agreed to co-locate new schools with community facilities on sites made available by the Council.

Under this model, development levies were used to build shared school and

community facilities; the pooling of resources means schools get the benefit of better facilities for use during the day, and the wider community can use the same facilities during the evening and at weekends.

We would like to see this model replicated in other areas.

Where feasible from a security and residential amenity point of view, school facilities should be made available for after-hours community use.

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