

Submission:

Statement of Strategy

2025-2027

To: Department of Children, Disability and Equality

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Introduction

SVP welcomes the invitation to submit our views to the Department of Children, Disability and Equality's new Statement of Strategy 2025-2027.

SVP is the largest charity of social concern in Ireland with over 10,000 volunteers nationwide and 800 staff. The Society's mission is to provide friendship and support to those experiencing poverty and social exclusion, to promote self-sufficiency and to work for social justice.

Over the last 2 years, we have received 500,000 requests for assistance, where we have provided direct support through home visitation assistance to individuals and families. Direct financial support involves support with food, education costs, fuel, and support with utility bills to individuals and families amounting to €43.67 million in 2023. (2022: €37.7 million). We offer social housing, providing almost 1,000 tenancies to older people and people with a disability, as well as a provider of a number of Community & Family Services, Adult and Older People Services, and over 230 Vincent's Retail stores in the Republic and North of Ireland. [Our Services | St. Vincent de Paul - Ireland | SVP](#)

Our members witness the stress that the continuing high cost of living is having for people in poverty – low pay, lack of adequate income supports, rising housing costs and homelessness, deprivation among refugees and asylum seekers, unaffordable and inaccessible early childhood education and care, and lack of transport. These are some of the challenges people are facing.

At SVP we are very concerned to see that the consistent poverty rate has risen to 5% in the general population and 11% for children in one-parent families.¹ The Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) basket of goods has increased by 16.8% from 2020 to 2024, further highlighting the need for substantial adjustments to social welfare rates and whole of Government approach to addressing poverty.

Our members witness the social injustices disabled people and families with children while living in poverty and social exclusion endure. A significant amount of the households we support are headed by someone with a disability, or have a disabled family member, and so

¹ Central Statistics Office (2024) Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2024 [Poverty Survey on Income and Living Conditions \(SILC\) 2024 - Central Statistics Office](#)

this is a very important issue to SVP members. We believe the over-representation of people with ill health or disability amongst the households we support is due to inadequate social protection payments and inadequate and inaccessible public health services.

Child Poverty is a core issue of concern for SVP. Last year we received almost a quarter of million calls and approximately 70% of those calls were from families with children. Providing our young, and school aged children, with access to high quality care and education will equip them to both benefit their brief years of childhood and acquire life skills which will enhance their life chances.

Early Childhood Education and Care

We are continuing to witness the persistent failure of the Irish Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) system to realise children's rights to education and care, families' rights to universally accessible and affordable services, and educators' rights to decent working conditions. There is a need for the State to play a more active role in ensuring high-quality ECEC can be provided as a vital public service.

The current model leaves large numbers of children and families without access to ECEC. The families we support are particularly impacted, limited places and high costs affect all children and families across the country. However, these challenges are further compounded for the households we support; lone parent families (mainly led by women), rural communities, disadvantaged communities in (sub)urban areas, homeless families, migrant families, members of the Traveller community, and children with additional educational needs and rights.

Strategic Goal:

A roadmap to a universal, rights-based, public Early Childhood Education and Care system.

Strategic Actions:

- Systematically establish local, publicly run ECEC services, beginning with areas and communities that are currently not served and in areas experiencing disadvantage.
- Fully implement the roll-out of the Equal Start model by 2027 to ensure children currently experiencing disadvantage can benefit from the programme.

- Increase the targeted subsidy for children availing of NCS through the Sponsor Referral Scheme.
- Increase the lowest income threshold for the National Childcare Scheme to reduce the costs of ECEC for low-income families and ensure they can continue to access the scheme if the National Minimum Wage increases.

Cost of Disability

Too often SVP members meet households with a disabled member who cannot afford food or heating, who prioritise their children's wellbeing at the expense of their health, or who are forced into financial hardship because of costs associated with their disability, such as dietary needs, regular transport to appointments, or higher energy or technology requirements at home. Increasingly we are being asked to fund private assessment of needs and private support therapies due to the long waiting lists in the public service. This is having a detrimental impact on the wellbeing of the families we visit.

SILC data reveals that households with disabled members experience higher risks of poverty, consistent poverty and enforced deprivation rates.² These rates of poverty are the result of people forced to navigate a very high cost of living on an inadequate income and unable to access affordable and accessible public health services. The cost of living is particularly high for people with a disability who also face additional costs, as detailed extensively by the Government's report from Indecon.³

The Vincentian MESL Centre at SVP looks at the adequacy of income from social protection. Even without factoring in additional costs from disability the research shows that for the majority of households reliant on social protection, income levels are inadequate to meet a standard of living: only 16 out of the 214 cases are assessed as adequate for 2024.⁴ Furthermore, a report by MESL highlights the significant additional costs faced by households with disabilities, estimating that these costs can amount to 52%-59% of disposable income.⁵

² Central Statistics Office (2024) Survey on Income and Living Conditions (2024) [Key Findings Survey on Income and Living Conditions \(SILC\) 2024 - Central Statistics Office](#)

³ Gov.ie (2021) The Cost of Disability in Ireland- Research Report [The Cost of Disability in Ireland – Research Report](#)

⁴ Vincentian MESL Research Centre (2024) MESL Impact Briefing Budget 2024 [mesl impact briefing - budget 2024.pdf](#)

⁵ Vincentian MESL Research Centre (2024). Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) Report 2024 [Green Paper on Disability Reform](#)

Assessment of Need and Therapy Interventions

SVP members are increasingly meeting with parents and/or school principals and teachers when an assessment of need or therapy intervention is required for a child. We meet with parents and carers that are not only stressed and concerned about their child's development and wellbeing, but are extremely worried about how they are going to fund the necessary care for them.

HSE data shows there has been significant growth in the number of applicants for assessment of need in recent years. Applications increased from 8,400 in 2023 to more than 10,600 in 2024, a 26% increase. HSE figures for the first quarter of this year indicate that there has been a 20% increase in the number of applications to the same period last year. At the end of March, almost 15,300 assessment of need applications were overdue for completion nationwide, an 8% increase on the number overdue at the end of December 2024.⁶ Behind these figures are children and families in distress, requiring and needing support from the State.

The initiatives undertaken in 2024 to address those waiting lists show that more than 4,000 assessments were completed, an increase of 30% over the previous year. Recent HSE data shows this trend is continuing with more than 1,400 assessments completed in the first three months of this year, a 65% increase compared to this time last year.⁷ We need to have sufficient investment in Budget 2026 to clear the backlog of Assessment of Needs, and a plan in place so that we can move forward with a system that gives parents and children certainty.

For those children that do receive a diagnosis, there are likely to wait on another waiting list; waiting lists are in the tens of thousands for essential therapies with over 20,000 children waiting on psychology and occupational therapy, 19,000 waiting on speech and language therapy and nearly 10,000 are waiting on physiotherapy.⁸ Early intervention is key, not only for receiving a diagnosis, but getting the necessary therapies and interventions as well. In

⁶ Dail Debates Tuesday 20th May 2025 Assessment of Need: Statements
<https://www.kildarestreet.com/debates/?id=2025-05-20a.313&s=%22access+and+inclusion%22+2025-05-19..2025-05-23#g320>

⁷ Dail Debates Tuesday 20th May 2025 Assessment of Need: Statements
<https://www.kildarestreet.com/debates/?id=2025-05-20a.313&s=%22access+and+inclusion%22+2025-05-19..2025-05-23#g320>

⁸ ibid

the Programme for Government there is a mention of grant funding for children's therapies. This needs to be explored further and if feasible, the required funding put in place in Budget 2026.⁹

A total of €3.2 billion has been allocated for HSE disability services in 2025. That is an 11.5% increase in funding on 2024 and an overall increase of €1.2 billion since 2020. While we acknowledge the level of funding has increased significantly, it is clear that it is not enough to address the challenges that exist in disability services. Assessment of Need applications are at record levels and by the Government's estimation are set to grow by the end of this year.¹⁰ That is not progress and more needs to be done. A surplus of €8.5 billion in the State and yet the increasing numbers of children waiting for vital services and supports is unacceptable. We know in SVP that it is the children and families on the lowest incomes that are affected the most.

In a survey of SVP Conferences (402 respondents) carried out in June 2024 we found that 55% of Conferences had received a request from families to support with the financial cost of private assessment. The number of requests in the past 2 years to Conferences was between one and twelve requests with an average of four requests being reported. Of those who provided support (n=143), 51% had spent up to €1,000 on direct support to families, 24% spent between €1,000 and €3,000 and 12% spent between €3,000 and €7,000 on support. The findings show a huge gap in state service provision for children which has created significant stress for families as a consequence. SVP members step into meet the need. Investment in these vital services would ensure children have their care needs met in school and in the community without being placed on long waiting lists for years.

The Department of Health estimate that the number of people with disabilities, their age groups, and where they are living, are all likely to change. To help guide this work, the Government published the 'Disability Capacity Review - A Review of Social Care Demand and Capacity Requirements to 2032'.¹¹ The report quantifies and costs future need for disability support services, in the light of expected population change, and the needs which

⁹ Programme For Government 2025 Securing Ireland's Future [programme-for-government-securing-irelands-future.pdf](#) page 93

¹⁰ Dail Debates Tuesday 20th May 2025 Assessment of Need: Statements
<https://www.kildarestreet.com/debates/?id=2025-05-20a.313&s=%22access+and+inclusion%22+2025-05-19..2025-05-23#g320>

¹¹ Department of Health "Disability Capacity Review to 2032- A Review of Social Care Demand and Capacity Requirements to 2032" [8fe32ca7-2154-4fb0-8a41-6931c5f15471.pdf \(www.gov.ie\)](#)

are yet to be met.¹² It provides a useful guide on the levels of funding required to address current and future health needs.

Disability Capacity Review 2022

A Review of Disability Social Care Demand and Capacity Requirements up to 2032

Table 1a: Estimate, additional annual funding required to meet demographic and unmet need-Low

Type of disability service unmet need	Demography only			Demography +		
	2022	2027	2032	2022	2027	2032
Residential-Minimum scenario	60	120	160	220	280	320
Day Services	8	30	60	40	60	90
PA& Home Help	4	10	15	34	40	45
Therapies	3	5	6	48	48	54
Respite	2	3	4	18	21	25
Community services	3	6	9	3	6	9
Total (rounded)	80	170	250	350	450	550

¹² ibid

Table 1b: Estimate, additional annual funding required to meet demographic and unmet need-High

Type of disability service unmet need	Demography only			Demography+		
	2022	2027	2032	2022	2027	2032
Residential- Pre recession scenario	60	120	160	400	500	550
Day Services	40	140	250	70	170	280
PA& Home Help	4	10	15	34	40	45
Therapies	3	5	6	74	74	80
Respite	2	3	4	18	21	25
Community services	3	6	9	3	6	9
Total (rounded)	110	280	450	600	800	1,000

*Estimates are indicative only. Totals may not add up due to rounding.

Case Studies from SVP Survey June 2024:

“A family sought assistance with speech and language therapy for their 11 year old son. He had not received any therapy for four years since the Covid-19 pandemic. The cost was €500 for six sessions”

Survey respondent June 2024- SVP Survey of the cost of assessments for families of children with additional needs

“A single mother on social welfare, with two children, is saving for a private assessment costing approximately €900. She is saddened that this is the only way to get an assessment. Her child in primary school feels isolated and angry because of his behaviour”

Survey respondent June 2024- SVP Survey of the cost of assessments for families of children with additional needs

Strategic Goal:

Promote the development of a progressive and equal society for people with disabilities.

Strategic Actions:

- Ensure that people with a disability's voice are at the centre of all processes relating to disability payments, education and employment supports.
- Introduce an evidenced-based, universal Cost of Disability payment, to address the additional costs experienced by people with a disability.
- Collaborate with the HSE and expediate the introduction of the autism and intervention protocol.
- Collaborate with the HSE on implementing a single point of access to ensure children are directed to the correct service provider and receive the necessary supports in a timely manner.
- Facilitate the development of a whole of Government programme of work under the National Disability Strategy to further advance rights under the UNCRPD (UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities).

- Increase funding to the Waiting List Initiative to clear waiting lists in Budget 2026 and ensure that all assessments are accepted by the HSE when seeking therapy interventions.
- Prioritise areas based on demand and demographics.
- Expediate the delivery of Regional Assessment Hubs and the Workforce Disability Strategy.
- Establish a taskforce on recruitment in disability; Explore other disciplines that could work in the area of therapy interventions (including apprenticeships), increase existing pathways in education to qualify as a therapist, explore how can recruiting more therapist from abroad be increased, develop a streamlined and quicker process for CORU registrations.
- Continue to prioritise the implementation of a National Therapy Service in conjunction with education officials.
- Review the EPSEN Act 2024 and Disability Act in tandem and enshrine a right to services in legislation.
- Provide the required investment to ensure all children requiring access to a therapy service can do so. Funding estimates outlined above in the Disability Capacity Review 2022 report should provide direction.

Concluding Remarks

At SVP, our work in communities continues to increase and involve more complex and challenging situations due to the effects of poverty and marginalisation. We need to see a whole of Government approach that ensures inequalities and barriers are addressed that prevent low-income households from participating fully in society. The Department can contribute to this process by ensuring the new Statement of Strategy has a clear focus on supporting children experiencing disadvantage and marginalisation as well as an action plan that addresses the challenges currently being experienced by low-income and vulnerable households who also are dealing with disability in the household.

For disabled people the combination of low incomes, high costs and lack of affordable and accessible public health services create a vicious cycle of poverty that is the State's responsibility to mitigate. All Government departments need to acknowledge and address these issues, as it is not an issue that can be addressed by one department alone. In particular, all Departments must acknowledge and address the extra costs endured for people with a disability and ensure they have an adequate income that allows them live their lives with a sense of dignity, security and respect.

We know that early intervention is critical for children, an implementation plan is now needed so that all children, particularly children experiencing disadvantage, can access a public funded early education and care system that is fit for purpose.

Regarding the assessment of needs process and therapy interventions for children, all stakeholders involved in making decisions on behalf of a child must focus on aligning the diagnosis and the treatment pathways as the priority. The confusion and uncertainty that parents and children requiring therapies and interventions from state agencies is preventable with the correct information available, and adequate resources directed across the health, disability, social care and education system.

Due to the limited timeframe given to submit this submission, we regretfully were unable to explore the issue of Equality, which the Department is also responsible for. We want to highlight our solidarity and mutual agreement with our colleagues in the Community and Voluntary sector advocating for a society that treats all groups and individuals with dignity, and upholds their rights to equality and justice in Irish society.

We thank the Department for its considerations of this submission and would be pleased to provide any further information or assistance.