

Opening Statement to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Youth.

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Evaluating the impact of the Hot School Meals Programme

Good morning and thank you to the Committee for the opportunity for St Vincent De Paul to contribute to this important conversation. SVP is an all-Ireland member led organisation that supports families and individuals in need, and in 2024, we provided over €41 million in direct financial assistance.¹

In 2025, we recorded more than 260,799 requests for assistance, a 6% increase on 2024, and the highest number of requests ever recorded.

Food remains the biggest driver of need. We received 112,772 requests for food assistance in 2025, up 8,548 on 2024. For four months of last year, food requests exceeded 10,000 per month. It is important to understand the level of food poverty when we are discussing the impact of the Hot School Meals programme.

Our comments are guided by the following facts.

1. Food poverty remains a significant challenge.
2. The MESL (Minimum Essential Standard of Living) Research Centre most recent report shows that social protection rates are inadequate for households reliant on social protection. Only 88% of the needs of a primary school aged child are met and this drops to 64% for children in second level education.²
3. The Survey in Income and Living Conditions 2024 reported that there are over 256,000 children experiencing enforced deprivation in Ireland, including essentials like nutritious meals.³

¹ Society of St. Vincent de Paul. (2024). *Consolidated financial statements 2024*.
<https://www.svp.ie/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/SVP-Consolidated-Financial-Statements-2024.pdf>

² Vincentian MESL Research Centre. (2025). *Minimum essential standard of living: MESL 2025*.
<https://budgeting.ie/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/MESL-2025.pdf>

³ Central Statistics Office. (2025, March 20). *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2024*.
<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditionssilc2024/keyfindings/>

4. The most recent homelessness figures show there are 5,321 children living in emergency accommodation, which is a year-on-year increase of 663 children.⁴ There are also over 9,000 children in the International Protection Accommodation Service.⁵ Many of these children do not have access to nutritious meals.⁶
5. We know that child food poverty impacts on a child's long term educational attainment, physical well-being and future socio-economic outcomes.⁷
6. Children experience higher poverty rates than any other age group. SILC 24 showed that the national consistent poverty rates were 5%, but for children it was 8.5%, and worryingly 11% for children in one parent households.
7. The Irish Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) Study 2022 shows that 18% of children report going to bed or school hungry because of a lack of food.⁸

In this context, we believe that the provision of free hot school meals is an important tool to mitigate against the negative impacts of food poverty among children and welcome the initiative. We understand some of the concerns around the implementation of the scheme and agree, that like any new initiative that a robust evaluation of the programme is essential and robust implementation of any recommendations.

The state is investing a significant amount in the provision of free hot school meals, and it is important that any use of public funds is getting value for money and achieving the desired outcomes.

It is important that any evaluation addresses the following concerns

1. Nutritional value.

⁴ Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. (2026, January 2). *Homeless Report November 2025*.

https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/a5dcb873/Homeless_Report_November_2025.pdf

⁵ Oireachtas. (2025, September 8). *Parliamentary question 1532: Providing reception conditions – accommodation and related supports*. <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2025-09-08/1532/>

⁶ O'Donnell, L., Slein, A., & Hoey, D. (2024). *Insights into family homelessness in Dublin during 2022 and 2023* (Vol. 3, No. 1). Focus Ireland. <https://www.focusireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Insights-Vol-3-No-1-Family-Homelessness-in-Dublin-2022-and-2023--Report.pdf>

⁷ Vazquez Mendoza, L., & McDonagh, P. (2022). *Child food poverty in Ireland: A mapping review of the national and international evidence*. Dublin City University. <https://doras.dcu.ie/27124/1/VazquezandMcDonaghReport2022.pdf>

⁸ Gavin, A., Költő, A., Lunney, L., Maloney, R., Walker, L., Nic Gabhainn, S., & Kelly, C. (2024, April). *The Irish Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) Study 2022*. Department of Health, Government of Ireland & University of Galway. <https://www.universityofgalway.ie/media/healthpromotionresearchcentre/hbscdocs/nationalreports/HBSC-2022-National-Report.pdf>

2. School logistics.
3. Holiday hunger.
4. Packaging waste.
5. Sustainability through locally sourced produce.
6. The investment in the Free Hot Meal programme should benefit Irish food producers.

Finally, I would like to address two important issues, the importance of the universal provision of the programme and secondly the expansion of the programme to children in second level education. Most people will see the importance of the hot school meals programme for the 18% of children experiencing hunger but may question the universal approach. The UK has had a targeted free school meals programme for over 80 years and there is considerable research that shows many children in need will forgo their entitlement to a meal because of the stigma associated with the programme and many parents fail to apply for similar reasons. School should be a welcoming and inclusive place, with no child feeling the stigma of poverty.

From our MESL research and our own CRM system, we know that households with older children are more likely to experience income inadequacy and enforced deprivation. Older children have longer school days and heavier workloads. It is crucial that their physical well-being and educational needs are supported at this time and we would strongly support an expansion of the Hot School Meals programme to all students in second level education.