

EU Child Guarantee

Introduction

Children in Hospital Ireland (CIH) welcome the opportunity to make a submission to the consultation on the implementation of the EU Child Guarantee.

In this submission we focus on pillar four – **Providing free access to healthcare**.

To provide genuinely free and equitable access to healthcare to all children the following measures are required;

- Free access at the point of delivery to all GP, primary care services, and medication;
- Elimination of all in-patient and outpatient hospital charges for children;
- Significant reduction in waiting times experienced by children for treatments, assessments, and tests;
- Significant reduction in waiting times experienced by children accessing mental health services;
- Financial measures to assist parents and carers with the non-medical financial costs arising from childhood illness.

Accessing care in the community

Ireland is unique among countries in Western Europe – most children do not have access to general practice (GP) and primary care services free of charge.

Children without free access visit their GP significantly less than those covered by medical or GP visit cards. Cost is a barrier to accessing primary care, with 29% of respondents to a household survey reporting that they had unmet medical needs due to the financial expense associated with visiting a GP. Comparisons with GP access in Northern Ireland (where there is universal free access) further underlines the impact of primary care access charges – 18.9% of study participants in the south went without GP care due to the cost, compared with 1.8% in the north¹.

The implementation of free GP care for children has been repeatedly delayed, with only those under six currently benefitting.

CIH recommendation – Provide free access at the point of delivery to all GP and primary care services

Waiting Lists

Ireland was ranked 22nd out of 35 European countries in the 2018 Health Consumer Powerhouse (HCP) study², but was ranked last for accessibility. Lengthy waiting lists are a significant contributor to this ranking.

According to November 2021 figures from the National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF), there are 97,387 children on waiting lists for treatment, assessments, and tests. This includes

- 26,153 children awaiting outpatient care for over 18 months.
- 1,470 children awaiting inpatient care for over 18 months.

CIH recommendation – Implement the recommendations contained within the Sláintecare plan to significantly reduce waiting lists for children and ensure timely access to treatment, assessments, and tests.

¹ https://www.euro.who.int/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/260088/Health-system-responses-to-financial-pressures-in-Ireland.pdf

² <https://healthpowerhouse.com/publications/#200118>

Mental Health Services

Using the most recent HSE data 2,625 children were waiting on support from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), with 171 waiting more than 12 months³.

There are 72 CAMHS inpatient beds nationally, based in Dublin, Cork, and Galway⁴. This is significantly below the target of 100 beds, first set out in *A Vision for Change* in 2006. The CAMHS units generally do not take out-of-hours admissions, with children in crisis only able to access an emergency department, a children's hospital, or an adult inpatient unit⁵.

The implementation of CAMHS services, as initially set out in the *Vision for Change* recommendations, has not reached its targets. There is a shortfall of 118 psychologists⁶ and only 73 community CAMHS teams⁷, far below the target of 129.

CIH recommendation – Implement the Sharing the Vision strategy to improve mental health services for children and young people

Non-medical financial costs of childhood illness on parents and families

Research published by CIH in its report, *Childhood Illness, Financial Stress (2020)*⁸ provides compelling evidence of the range of non-medical costs which may be incurred by parents whose child requires prolonged and/or repeated hospital care.

Parents are required to be almost constantly present with their child in hospital and form a key part of the child's care team. This restricts their ability to participate in paid employment, compounding the financial difficulties they experience. According to parents surveyed, the median loss in income experienced was €300 per week. 33% of parents surveyed had given up paid employment to care for their sick child.

³ <https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/publications/performance-reports/management-data-report-march-2021.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/personal/pq/pg/2021-pq-responses/october-2021/pg-49372-21-claire-kerrane.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.mhcirl.ie/sites/default/files/2021-06/MHC-Annual-Report-2020.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.hse.ie/eng/staff/resources/our-workforce/resources/workforce-planning-report-mhs.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/personal/pq/pg/2021-pq-responses/september-2021/pg-41553-21-bernard-durkan.pdf>

⁸ https://childreninhospital.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Children-in-Hospital-Report_1-FINAL.pdf

The non-medical costs have a significant impact on the entire family unit, with 58% of parents reporting a significant negative financial impact on the household finances. 61% of parents surveyed took on debt to meet non-medical costs.

This situation contributes to the weakening the financial stability of the family unit, with adverse consequences for the sick child, their parents, and other children within the household. This is a pressing children's rights issue. An adequate package of financial support is required to support families and promote the rights of the child.

CIH recommendation – Introduce a new social protection payment to assist parents with the non-medical financial costs arising from childhood illness

Attached:

Children in Hospital Ireland Submission to the Public Consultation on the EU Child Guarantee

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Children in Hospital Ireland, founded in 1970, seeks to promote the well-being of children within the healthcare system in Ireland in particular, before, during and after hospitalisation. It advocates for reform and improvement in the healthcare system so that the child's right to child-centred health services may be fully realised. It provides a volunteer-led play and recreation service in 14 hospitals across Ireland.

www.childreninhospital.ie

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