



Research into the Educational Needs of 12 – 15 Year Olds in Fingal

A research report for FCYPSC

Acknowledgements

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It is hoped this research will contribute to informing planning, strengthening collaboration and the continued development of inclusive educational and community supports for children and young people in Fingal.

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Abbreviations

Autism Spectrum (AS)
Children and Young People’s Services Committees (CYPSC)
Children and Young People’s Plans (CYPP)
Central Statistics Office (CSO)
Community Training Centre (CTC)
Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS)
Dublin & Dún Laoghaire ETB (DDLETB)
Educational Research Centre (ERC)
Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN)
Economic Social Research Institute (ESRI)
Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)
English as an Additional Language (EAL)
Educational Agreement as a Response to School Dropout (EARS)
Fingal Children and Young People’s Services Committees (FCYPSC)
Family Resource Centre (FRC)
Global Education Monitoring (GEM)
Growing Up in Ireland (GUI)
Home School Community Liaison (HSCL)
Healthy Ireland Funding (HIF)
Local Electoral Area (LEA)
National Traveller & Roma Inclusion Strategy (NTRIS)
National Educational Psychological services (NEPS)
National Council for Special Education (NCSE)
Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)
School Completion Programme (SCP)
Supporting Traveller and Roma (STAR)
Special Education Needs (SEN)
Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM)
Socio-economic status (SES)
Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP)
Small Area (SA)
Traveller and Roma Education Strategy (TRES)
Tusla Education Support Service (TESS)
United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO)
Youth Dependency Ratio (YDR)

Executive Summary

This executive summary presents the key findings from the comprehensive research undertaken to understand the educational needs of 12-15-year-olds in Fingal. The study was commissioned in response to concerns around school avoidance, increasing complexity of additional needs, and widening socio-economic disparities affecting educational engagement. Fingal, one of Ireland’s most rapidly expanding local authority areas, faces an intersection of rising youth population, increasing diversity, and varying levels of disadvantage that challenge the capacity of schools and community services.

This research draws from extensive qualitative consultations with school leaders, Educational Welfare Officers (EWOs), youth services, community organisations, and mental health providers, as well as quantitative data from post-primary schools and national datasets. It provides stakeholders with a practical evidence base to inform service planning and targeted intervention.



Strategic & Policy Context

The Irish Constitution, the UN Rights of the Child and the European Child Guarantee provide the underpinning rights based framework for education access. Ireland’s policy landscape to address educational disadvantage includes national strategies such as Young Ireland (2023-2028), Delivering Equality in Schools (DEIS), the Tusla Education Support Service (TESS) and the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy II (2024-2028). These frameworks emphasise the removal of barriers for disadvantaged learners, inclusive education, and multi-agency collaboration.



Socio-Demographic Profile of Fingal

Fingal’s unique demographic and socio-economic profile results in gaps in support coverage particularly because the area has one of the lowest proportions of DEIS schools nationwide. As a result, many disadvantaged or at-risk students attend non-DEIS schools that do not have access to the enhanced supports necessary to meet their needs.

Fingal is the third most populous county in Ireland, having experienced population growth of over 20% between 2011 and 2022. It also holds the second-highest proportion of children and young people under 15 nationally. The youth dependency ratio significantly exceeds the national average highlighting the scale of demand for services for children and young people. Fingal is also one of Ireland’s most ethnically diverse counties. Just 65.5% of residents identify as White Irish, well below the national figure of 76.6%. Areas like Blanchardstown-Mulhuddart show even higher levels of diversity.

While the county is relatively affluent overall, there are marked pockets of deprivation, particularly in parts of Swords, Balbriggan, and the Dublin 15 area. These demographic complexities shape the type and scale of educational supports required, particularly in relation to English as an Additional Language (EAL), integration supports, and targeted interventions for disadvantaged communities.



Risk Factors for Educational Disengagement

Risk factors for disengagement operate across three domains: home, school, and community.

- > **Home:** parental capacity, financial challenges, housing instability, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), and intergenerational educational disadvantage.
- > **School:** undiagnosed additional needs, overwhelmed classrooms, delayed assessments, inflexible curriculum demands, and behavioural issues.
- > **Community:** exposure to drugs and alcohol, intimidation, crime, peer influence, and limited access to community supports.

Mental health emerged as a dominant theme, with sharp increases in anxiety, school avoidance, and social withdrawal reported by schools and youth services. Many difficulties begin before entry to post-primary education, becoming more entrenched during the transition to secondary school.



Indicators of Disengagement

A survey of 19 post-primary schools revealed significant challenges based on 2024-2025 academic year data:

- > Over 800 students reached the 20-day absence threshold.
- > 71 students were suspended for six days or more.
- > Over 2,100 students were identified as having additional educational needs.
- > Requests for psychological assessments far exceed available provision, leading to delays of 1-3 years.
- > 84 students presented with school refusal or avoidance.

These figures highlight a system under strain, where supports do not match the volume or complexity of needs.



School-Based Responses

DEIS schools provide comprehensive wraparound supports such as the School Completion Programme (SCP), additional teaching hours, EAL support, and nutritional meals. Non-DEIS schools, however, rely on internal resources and overstretched staff to meet growing needs. Many adopt innovative practices such as morning check-ins, pastoral care programmes, student support teams, and targeted literacy and numeracy interventions. Schools report difficulty sustaining these supports without additional staffing, particularly for Special Education Needs (SEN), EAL, counselling, and behavioural support. The burden on teachers is increasing, with more time required managing complex classroom dynamics.



Out-of-School and Alternative Provision

Out-of-school and alternative education supports play a crucial role in stabilising and re-engaging students, these include:

- > Youthreach Centres in Blanchardstown, Balbriggan, Rush, and Swords.
- > Foróige Early School Leavers Programme (informal education with therapeutic supports).
- > Alternative learning programmes in Swords and Balbriggan.
- > iScoil.
- > YMCA Back on Track (short-term behavioural and reintegration support).
- > Healthy Ireland Programme for marginalised young people.

Such programmes are impactful but limited in scale, with waiting lists and insufficient coverage across Fingal.



Mental Health Supports

Rising demand for mental health supports has created capacity pressures, with many young people requiring intensive, ongoing support. Schools increasingly function as first responders to mental health crises, despite lacking the clinical capacity to manage them. Access to Child and Adult Mental Health Services (CAMHS) remains challenging, with long waits and strict thresholds. This leaves many young people with mild to moderate needs unsupported at critical intervention points.



Key findings

Key insights from the research include:

- > Educational disengagement is typically the result of multiple overlapping risk factors across the home, school and community environments.
- > Fingal’s rapid population growth and increasing diversity are creating additional pressures on schools and support services.
- > Non-DEIS schools are supporting significant numbers of disadvantaged students without access to the enhanced resources available to DEIS schools.
- > Mental health challenges, including anxiety, school avoidance and social withdrawal, are increasing among young people.
- > Demand for assessment, psychological and therapeutic supports significantly exceeds current capacity.
- > Out-of-school and alternative education programmes play an important role in re-engagement but are insufficiently resourced.
- > There is a significant gap in DEIS provision between primary and post-primary education in Fingal.
- > Current educational, mental health and family support systems are struggling to keep pace with the scale and complexity of need
- > Educational disadvantage in Fingal is not confined to DEIS schools. Non DEIS schools are supporting significant numbers of students experiencing educational, social and economic disadvantage.



Priority Areas for Action

- > Additional DEIS provision and greater continuity of DEIS supports from primary to post-primary education.
- > Increased investment in out-of-school and alternative education pathways, including a minimum of 100 additional places annually.
- > Longer-duration and accredited alternative education programmes.
- > Greater flexibility within Youthreach to support young people under 16 years of age.
- > Additional NEPS assessment capacity and earlier access to educational supports.
- > Improved access to integrated and timely mental health services.
- > Expansion of community-based wraparound supports for children, young people and families.
- > Increased family and parenting supports.
- > Improved collection and monitoring of early school leaving data.

The Cost of Inaction

The findings of this research highlight the importance of early intervention and targeted investment. Failure to address educational disengagement at an early stage carries significant social and economic costs. Young people who disengage from education are at greater risk of early school leaving, unemployment, poor mental health outcomes and long-term reliance on public services. International evidence demonstrates that early intervention and prevention measures are significantly more cost-effective than responding to entrenched educational, social and mental health difficulties later in life. Investment in educational supports, mental health services, alternative pathways and family supports should therefore be viewed not as an additional cost, but as a preventative measure that delivers long-term social and economic benefits for young people, communities and the State.



Strategic Recommendations.

16 themed recommendations are offered for consideration.

Planning

- 1. Request a meeting with the Department of Education to feedback the research findings and discuss DEIS eligibility and resource allocation.
- 2. This research is factored into the needs analysis and action plan for the new Fingal CYPSC Children and Young Persons Plan.
- 3. Disseminate the findings of this research to non DEIS schools in Fingal and support those where required in the next round of DEIS applications.

Systemic Change

- 4. Advocate that DEIS supports should follow the child from primary to secondary school.
- 5. All schools regardless of DEIS status should have access to family support services.
- 6. The creation of a pre youthreach education programme with 30 places for the 12-15 year old group which is part of a pathway to transition to the full Youthreach curriculum when age 16.
- 7. Early intervention in the form of Behaviour for Learning teachers in primary schools.



Capacity

- 8. Additional resources should be invested in all out of school programmes in Fingal. Providers should explore extending their reach across Fingal, the length of the programmes and introducing accreditation.
- 9. Fingal CYPSC prioritise in their Healthy Ireland funding (HIF) allocations, programmes that address early school leaving.
- 10. Consider a wider scoping exercise on iScoil across Fingal.
- 11. More mental health services (HSE, CAMHS, Jigsaw and community) for young people in Fingal. This could include a non-clinical social prescribing service for U18's.

Diversity and Inclusion

- 12. Traveller and Roma Education Strategy (TRES) worker for Fingal.
- 13. Mandatory inclusion, diversity, anti-racism, cultural competence, and trauma informed training for education providers including, teachers, SNAs and Home School Liaison Officers.
- 14. Cultural Curriculum content in schools should reflect diverse cultures including Traveller and Roma history and identity.

Area Based

- 15. The mobilisation of an area based approach through engaging key Fingal influencers and stakeholders around the message of “more resources for Fingal.”
- 16. Commission a poverty profile for Fingal.

1: Introduction

“
Ensuring all children and young people have what they need to reach their potential empowers them to contribute to the society we want today, as well as in the future.¹
”

This section sets the scene for this research through exploring the background and methodology.

1.1 Background

Children and Young People’s Services Committees (CYPSCs) were established in 2007 with the purpose of improving outcomes for children and families at local and community level. Since then, CYPSCs have been identified as a key structure by government to plan and co-ordinate services for children and young people, aged 0 – 24 years, in every county. Fingal Children and Young Peoples Services Committee (FCYPSC) have in recent times, expressed concerns about school avoidance, the numbers of children on reduced timetables due to behavioural issues, missing 20+ school days per year, or who have dropped out of school completely.

FCYPSC partner agencies came together to form a steering group to assess the educational needs of children, young people, and their families across County Fingal and to identify where there are gaps in supports. Fingal CYPSC commissioned Business Improvement Solutions (BIS) to undertake research to facilitate FCYPSC and partner agencies in realising its objective to support young people to remain in education. This study focuses on the 12-15 age cohort, a pivotal phase through to completion of Junior Cycle where disengagement patterns can become embedded.

¹ Foreword to *Young Ireland: National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023–2028*.

1.2 Methodology

A mixed method approach was adopted to enable stakeholders articulate their understanding and experiences of risk factors for educational disengagement among those aged 12-15 in Fingal. This comprised the following activity carried out between September and December 2025.

- Desk review to collate a profile of Fingal using a range of sources including - Central Statistics Office (CSO) Census 2022, Small Area Population Statistics, Department of Education data, County Council data, Health Research Board, and National Drug Treatment Reporting System data.
- Desk review of literature on children and young people’s educational needs and examples of best practice from an international perspective.
- Desk review of the national and local policy landscape in which education and FCYPSC operate. This ensures that the research is grounded in current strategic and operational frameworks.
- Semi-structured 1-1 discussion with the Youthreach Coordinators in Blanchardstown, Rush, and Swords and the Manager of the Community Training Centre (CTC) in Blanchardstown.
- Semi-structured 1-1 discussions with the Foróige Early School Leavers Programme, the Back on Track Programme, Jigsaw and the Balbriggan Traveller Project.
- Semi-structured 1-1 discussions with Two School Principals, Two Deputy School Principals and the School Completion Programme (SCP) Coordinator for Dublin 15.
- Semi-structured 1-1 discussion with six Educational Welfare Officers (EWOs) operating across Fingal, Principal Social Worker in Tusla Prevention, Partnership and Family Support (PPFS), two parents and one Home School Liaison Officer.
- Focus Group with four participants in the Blakestown & Mountview Youth Initiative Life Skills Programme.
- Questionnaire completed by 19 secondary schools (50% of the total number i.e. 38) in Fingal County.

Each contributor via semi-structured interview were asked for qualitative feedback on what they identified as existing and emerging needs in terms of educational risk based on trends in their respective professional environment and the wider community in Fingal. Recommendations were sought on their work moving forward with these young people and what type of local services and supports they envisage are required in the future.

1.3 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were an important part of the research design. Consent was gained from all interviewees with clear guidance provided on how the data collated would be used in the research. All data is anonymised with no individual identified in any aspect of the reporting. Ownership of data is with Fingal CYPSC and it will be their responsibility to decide upon any future dissemination of this report.

1.4 Report Limitations

While every effort was made, the research was only able to engage directly with small numbers of parents and children at risk of early school leaving. 50% of the 38 secondary schools in Fingal responded to the survey rendering it statistically valid. The research might have benefitted from engaging with primary schools in Fingal given that some sixth class pupils are aged 12 and the risk factors for educational engagement can be evident in primary school.

Consultations with the special educational facilities that are referenced in the research would have enabled further insights into the behavioural and educational needs of those most at risk from early school leaving. Data available from the Department of Education on early school leaving is limited with statistics on those commencing secondary school in 2016 and completing Junior Certificate in 2019 the most recently available dataset.

50% of the 38 secondary schools in Fingal responded to the survey rendering it statistically valid.



1.5 Report Structure

Section one provides the background to and introduces the research. It sets out the methodology adopted including design, data analysis, management and oversight, ethical considerations and limitations.

Section two explores the strategic context within which the risk factors of educational disengagement for 12-15 year olds are positioned in Ireland.

Section three combines literature on education inequality and outcomes for marginalised groups with examples of local and international best practice in out of school and alternative education provision. It examines existing knowledge on the topics and synthesises evidence from multiple studies to identify patterns and trends.

Section four presents a socio-demographic profile for Co. Fingal including both the general and target population (12-15 years) for this study.

Section five presents the findings from the stakeholder consultations involving schools and community based professionals.

Section six examines the responses that schools and communities have in place to mitigate the risk factors for educational disengagement. The associated challenges involved in meeting what are evolving complex needs are explored.

Section seven offers a summary of the main findings of the research.

Section eight articulates a set of recommendations for consideration by Fingal CYPSC.



2: Strategic Context

This section reviews the international, national and local policy landscape in which education and alternative provision operates.

2.1 National Policy Framework

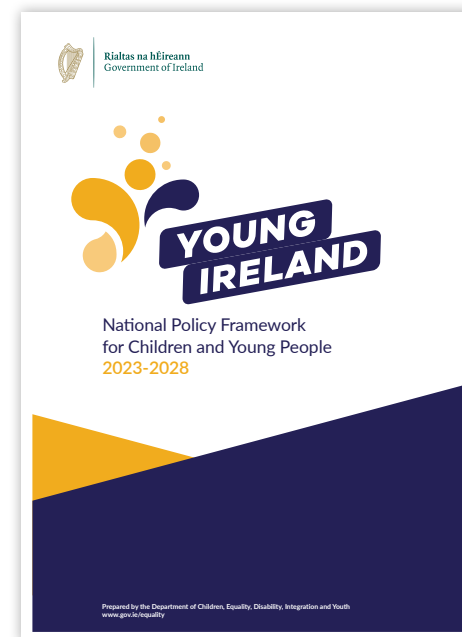
Young Ireland is the policy framework for children and young people. It covers the period from 2023-2028 and envisages an Ireland in which all children and young people can fully access their rights. It is focused on tackling the biggest challenges that affect children and young people in Ireland today. It advocates for robust structures, so children's rights are foremost whenever decisions are made affecting the lives of children and young people.

Young Ireland is a whole of government policy emphasising the importance of everyone working together for the development, to their maximum potential, of children and young people. It identifies five national outcomes for children and young people and recognises CYPSCs as the key vehicle for inter-agency work and development of local Children and Young People's Plans (CYPP).

Young Ireland references child poverty, mental health and wellbeing, and disability services. For this study, the anchor is National Outcome 2 – Achieving in Learning and Development, which asserts that children and young people: (a) positively engage with learning from birth; (b) successfully navigate key transitions; and (c) develop the social, emotional and communication skills to achieve their potential. Delivery relies on inter departmental collaboration, robust data and indicators, and meaningful youth participation.

National Outcome 2 reinforces key considerations for 12-15-year-olds namely:

- > Inclusion in education (removing barriers for disadvantaged cohorts and learners with additional needs).
- > Ongoing education reform (curriculum assessment; digital skills/literacy; wellbeing; anti bullying).
- > Pathways and access (clear routes through Junior Cycle into senior cycle and further education and training).



2.2 Legislative and Rights Based Frameworks

The Constitution of Ireland (Bunreacht na hÉireann) establishes the branches of government and sets out how those institutions should be run. It also provides for the fundamental rights of Irish citizens including the right to education. Ireland's legal framework establishes duties around attendance (*Educational Welfare Act 2000*) and inclusive education (*Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004*) and child protection/safeguarding (*Children First Act 2015*).

2.2.1 Bunreacht na hÉireann

The right to education is enshrined in Article 42 which is expanded further below.

Parents as Primary Educators

Article 42.1 recognizes the family as the “primary and natural educator” and guarantees respect for the inalienable right and duty of parents to provide for their children's education covering religious, moral, intellectual, physical, and social domains according to their means.

Choice of Education Path

Article 42.2 ensures parents are free to educate their children at home or in private schools, or in state-recognized or state-established schools.

Freedom of Conscience in School Choice

The State shall not oblige parents in violation of their conscience and lawful preference to send their children to schools established by the State, or to any particular type of school designated by the State.

Minimum Education Standard

While upholding parental choice, Article 42.3.2 mandates that the State, acting in the common good, can require that children receive a “certain minimum education” — moral, intellectual, and social — in light of actual conditions.

Free Primary Education and State Support

Article 42.4 obliges the State to provide free primary education and to support private and corporate educational initiatives. If required by the public good, the State may provide additional educational facilities—all while respecting parents' rights, particularly regarding religious and moral education.

State Intervention in Exceptional Cases

Article 42.5 allows the State to intervene when parents fail in their educational duties due to physical or moral incapacity. In such cases, the State may step in to fulfil parental obligations, always respecting the child's natural invincible rights.

Key Judicial Interpretations

Home Education Oversight: In *O'Shiel v Minister for Education*, the courts ruled the State may intervene if home education fails to meet minimum standards. Evolving Educational Standards: In *DPP v Best*, the Supreme Court noted that the “certain minimum education” standard is dynamic and should reflect contemporary societal norms (e.g., digital literacy).

Summary

The constitutional right to education in Ireland balances two fundamental principles.

- > **Parental Primacy and Choice:** Parents have broad autonomy over their children’s education covering day-to-day schooling, religious formation, and curriculum choice.
- > **State Responsibility and Oversight:** The State must provide free primary education, support education initiatives, ensure children receive a minimum education, and intervene when parents fail to uphold this duty.

Together, these provisions reflect an educational philosophy that respects family autonomy while safeguarding each child’s right to a basic, well-rounded education.

2.2.2 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

Articles 28 and 29 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child focus on education.

Article 28 – Right to Education

Universal Access: Every child has the right to education, and states must make primary education compulsory and free for all.

Progressive Access: States should encourage the development of different forms of secondary education (including vocational) and make them accessible to every child, with financial assistance where needed.

Higher Education: Access should be based on capacity and made available to all by appropriate means.

Educational Guidance: States must provide guidance and vocational counselling to all children.

Reducing Dropout Rates: Measures should be taken to encourage regular attendance and reduce dropout rates.

Discipline: School discipline must respect the child’s dignity and conform to the Convention’s principles.

Article 29 – Aims of Education

Article 29 articulates that education should be directed towards:

Full Development of Personality: Helping the child develop their talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential.

Respect for Human Rights: Fostering respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Identity and Culture: Developing respect for the child’s parents, cultural identity, language, and values, as well as national values and those of other cultures.

Preparation for Responsible Life: Preparing the child for life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among peoples.

Respect for the Environment: Instilling respect for the natural environment.

2.2.3 EU European Child Guarantee

Ireland’s principal obligations under the EU European Child Guarantee (ECG)² specifically regarding access to education for children experiencing poverty and social exclusion are outlined below.

Universal Access to School-Based Education

Member States must ensure that children in need enjoy free, effective access to education, including school-based activities. This encompasses primary and secondary education, as well as vocational and non-formal learning opportunities.

Ireland’s 2024 Biennial Report confirms the state has expanded the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) Programme and provides free books to primary students, ensuring universal access for eligible children³.

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

ECG requires free and accessible ECEC to vulnerable children. Ireland must guarantee this through referral to the National Childcare Scheme and targeted supports⁴. The Biennial Report highlights enhancements to the National Childcare Scheme, including increased subsidies under the Equal Start model for disadvantaged families.

Financial and Attendance Barriers

Ireland must actively remove financial obstacles that hinder access to education. Under ECG, the State is obligated to minimize costs, improve transportation access, and provide materials such as books. The Free Education Scheme covers primary students with books funded, while travel support schemes are regularly reviewed for better reach.

Holistic Support and Inclusion

Article 28 of ECG includes school-based activities beyond core education—extra-curricular, mentoring, and support services which Ireland addresses primarily through DEIS schools that include literacy, numeracy, digital initiatives, and Traveller-Roma supports.

Monitoring, Evaluation and Outreach

Ireland must track implementation and remove systemic barriers. This is done through published Biennial Reports, National Action Plans, and stakeholder engagement forums.

Ireland’s Interim Report⁵ outlines strategic outreach to Social Inclusion Fora and programmes like Equal Start to promote uptake among disadvantaged groups.

² [Ireland’s European Child Guarantee National Action Plan](#)
³ [ec.europa.eu](#)
⁴ [publicpolicy.ie](#)
⁵ [Ireland’s European Child Guarantee National Action Plan](#)

2.2.4 Children’s Rights Alliance Report Card on Education (2025)⁶

The Children’s Rights Alliance Report Card on Education (2025) sets out Ireland’s performance, obligations, and national-level recommendations in relation to education access. Ireland shows notable progress in areas like free school books and ECEC, yet persistent challenges remain especially for children with Special Education Needs (SEN), Traveller/Roma communities, and resource-strained ECEC.

- > **Free School Books:** Awarded A+, reflecting nationwide rollout of free books in primary, special, and post-primary schools, benefiting 940,000 students.
- > **Early Childhood Education & Care (ECEC):** Recognised progress including introduction of the National Childcare Scheme reforms, *Equal Start* subsidies, and regulation of childminders but flagged issues such as long waiting lists, staff retention, and affordability.
- > **Constitutional Right to Education for Special Educational Needs:** Some improvement in resources, increased SEN teacher and assistant numbers, and publication of Guidelines on Behaviours of Concern. Challenges remain over children without placements (126 as of Sept 2024) and the use of seclusion/restraint.
- > **Traveller & Roma Education:** Graded C+, improved from D+. Progress includes publication of the Traveller and Roma Education Strategy (TRES) and positive Supporting Traveller and Roma (STAR) pilot outcomes. However, issues around discrimination, accommodation, and implementation persist.

The Report Card 2025 sets out a clear roadmap to ensure equitable education by ensuring implementation of agreed strategies, resource allocation, and systematic monitoring.

Impact of Homelessness on Education

Research⁷ for the Children’s Rights Alliance amplifies the negative impacts of homelessness and living in emergency accommodation on education (exhaustion, hunger, increased susceptibility to illness, poor living conditions and long journeys to and from school). The research reinforces that children require adequate rest, nutrition, and appropriate clothing to fully participate in learning.

2.2.5 Compulsory Education Duty

Education in Ireland is compulsory from age 6 to 16 or until completion of three years of post primary education (whichever is later). Parents/guardians have the legal duty to ensure their child attends a recognised school on each school day, with specified exceptions. Where education is provided outside a recognised school (e.g. home education), the child must be registered with Tusla’s register of children educated in places other than recognised schools. Tusla’s Education Support Service, the Education Welfare Service (EWS) may issue School Attendance Notices and initiate proceedings where the duty is not met.

⁶ FINAL-Report-Card-2025.pdf
⁷ <https://childrensrights.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Home-Works-Study-on-the-Educational-Needs-of-Children-Experiencing-Homelessness-Full-Report.pdf>

2.2.6 Inclusive Education/Special Educational Needs (SEN)

The Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004 provides the statutory framework for inclusive education and planning for learners with additional needs. A government review of EPSEN in June 2025 signalled a concerted move toward earlier, needs led support in mainstream settings and reduced reliance on diagnosis.

2.2.7 Child Protection and Safeguarding – Children First

Children First comprises both the *Children First Act* and the *Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (2017)*. In schools, it is implemented through the *Department of Education Child Protection Procedures* (updated in 2025). Core legal duties affecting schools are outlined below:

- > Registered teachers and other professionals (therapists, youth workers, social care workers) are considered mandated persons and as such must report concerns meeting the “threshold of harm” to Tusla and must act with Tusla if required.
- > All organisations working with children must carry out a risk assessment and publish a Child Safeguarding Statement (CSS) that sets out procedures to manage risks; Schools’ Boards of Management must annually review and confirm compliance.
- > Each school appoints a Designated Liaison Person (DLP) and Deputy DLP to manage referrals and liaison with Tusla.
- > Clear steps for reporting (between staff, Tusla, Gardai) maintain secure records.

This context has implications for educational needs of 12–15-year-olds, including:

- > Where poor attendance, behaviour crises or re-engagement needs reveal welfare or protection concerns, Children First defines the duty to act for school staff and partner services (TESS/EWS/HSCL/SCP, youth organisations, ETB provision).



- > Alternative programmes such as Youthreach, iScoil and re-engagement initiatives must operate under CSSs, have clear reporting routes to Tusla, and ensure trained staff and safe environments for online/blended provision.
- > Governance and consistency; Boards of Management and ETB governance must ensure procedures are adopted, staff are trained, and that student voice mechanisms (e.g. anti-bullying policies) are aligned with safeguarding.

2.3 TESS

Tusla's Educational Support Service (TESS) is underpinned by the aforementioned *Educational Welfare Act*, centred around attendance, participation and retention. DEIS is the Department of Education's framework to address educational disadvantage across primary and post-primary, including targeted staffing, grants and planning requirements. TESS brings together the Education Welfare Service (EWS), Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) and the School Completion Programme (SCP) to improve attendance, participation and retention. For Fingal, SCP clusters and HSCL posts are key targeted supports that interface with schools, families and community services.

2.4 DEIS⁸ – Addressing Educational Disadvantage

Ireland's Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) Programme is the national strategy since 2005 to tackle concentrated educational disadvantage, providing extra resources (like smaller classes, support staff) to schools in deprived areas to boost literacy, numeracy, and overall outcomes for vulnerable students facing poverty, homelessness, and other challenges. The key components of the DEIS Programme are;

- > **Targeted Support:** Identifies schools in disadvantaged areas (based on socio-economic factors) to receive additional funding and resources.
- > **Key Interventions:** Focuses on improving literacy & numeracy, reducing class sizes (crucial for one-on-one attention), and providing holistic support for students facing poverty, hunger, and unstable home lives.
- > **Whole-School Approach:** Aims to create a positive environment where teachers often act as carers, addressing basic needs and promoting inclusion.

⁸ <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/policy-information/deis-delivering-equality-of-opportunity-in-schools/#deis-schools-2025-2026>

2.5 Healthy Ireland

Healthy Ireland⁹ is the government framework for improved health and wellbeing. It integrates a wide range of national strategies (e.g., the National Physical Activity Plan, Obesity Policy, Tobacco Free Ireland, Mental Health strategies). CYPSCs are the key mechanism for implementing Healthy Ireland funding (HIF) at a local level. They utilise HIF to support its delivery under National Outcome 1 that children and young people are *active and healthy*. Healthy Ireland encourages interagency collaboration. Fingal CYPSC utilised it's HIF in 2025 to fund the Foróige Health and Wellbeing programme. (See Section 6.3.5)

2.6 National Traveller & Roma Inclusion Strategy (NTRIS)II 24-28¹⁰

The aims of this strategy are to

- > Promote full equality and social inclusion for Travellers and Roma in Irish society.
- > Eliminate discrimination and address barriers in key areas such as education, employment, health, and accommodation.
- > Ensure meaningful participation of Traveller and Roma communities in policy design and implementation

The consultation for this strategy found that “it is still the case” that Travellers and Roma continue to experience much higher rates of economic disadvantage and social exclusion than exists for other disadvantaged communities. In recognition that much of the disadvantage begins with education, one of the strategic outcomes in the strategy is to

“Ensure equity of access, opportunity and outcomes, as well as meaningful participation, across the continuum of education for all Travellers and Roma, including those with additional educational needs, in an inclusive system where they feel respected and supported to fulfil their potential, and where they, and their cultures and ethnic identities, are visible and valued”

The Children's Rights Alliance Report Card on Education (2025)¹¹ graded Traveller & Roma Education at C+, improved from D+. Progress included publication of the Traveller and Roma Education Strategy (TRES) and positive STAR pilot outcomes. However, issues around discrimination, accommodation, and implementation persist.

⁹ <https://www.gov.ie/en/healthy-ireland/publications/healthy-ireland-framework-2019-2025/>

¹⁰ <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-children-disability-and-equality/publications/national-traveller-and-roma-inclusion-strategy-ii-2024-2028/>

¹¹ [FINAL-Report-Card-2025.pdf](#)

Among the recommendations in the 2025 Report Card was continued focus on the delivery of the education priorities of the NTRIS namely.

- > Improve access, participation, and outcomes for Traveller and Roma children at all levels of education.
- > Reduce early school leaving and increase progression to post-primary, further education, and higher education.
- > Provide targeted supports such as, culturally appropriate curricula, anti-bias training for educators and enhanced home-school liaison and mentoring programmes.
- > Address digital divide and resource gaps to ensure equitable access to learning tools.
- > Promote inclusive school environments that respect cultural identity and combat discrimination.

2.6.1 Traveller and Roma Education Strategy (TRES) 2024-30

The Traveller and Roma Education Strategy (TRES) team was established within Tusla to drive implementation of Ireland’s national TRES. Its creation reflects a commitment to address persistent educational inequalities for these communities. The core functions of the TRES team are:

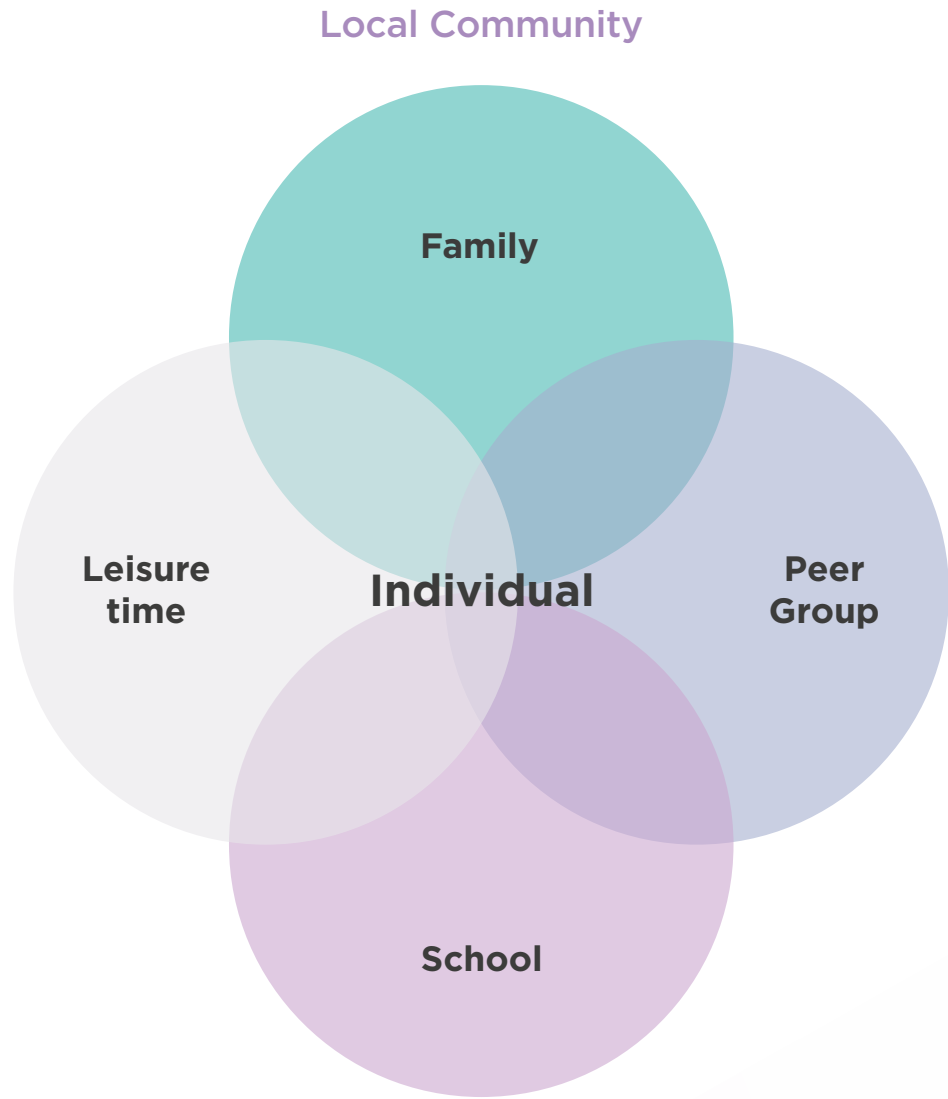
- > **Policy Implementation:** Oversee delivery of the Traveller and Roma Education Strategy across early years, primary, and post-primary education.
- > **Coordination:** Act as a central liaison between Tusla, the Department of Education, schools, and community organisations.
- > **Monitoring & Reporting:** Track progress on key indicators such as school attendance, retention, and progression to further education.
- > **Capacity Building:** Support schools and education welfare officers with culturally appropriate engagement and anti-discrimination practices.
- > **Community Engagement:** Work directly with Traveller and Roma families to improve trust and participation in education.

There is no TRES worker in Fingal. Examples of programmes and initiatives that the TRES team are working on in other areas currently are :

- > **Mid-West (Limerick, Clare):** Supporting Traveller and Roma(STAR) pilot projects and Tusla-led outreach through School Completion Programme.
- > **West (Galway):** Community-based Traveller education hubs linked to Tusla’s Education Welfare Service.
- > **Midlands (Longford, Offaly):** Traveller mentoring and homework clubs supported by Tusla and local partnerships.
- > **South-East (Waterford, Wexford):** Emerging initiatives under TRES, focusing on early years and primary retention.
- > **National Coordination:** TRES team provides oversight and guidance for regional implementation.

2.7 Four Domains

Preventing child and adolescent substance use and risks associated with early school leaving are critical in promoting and ensuring healthy development. A proven approach in this sphere is strengthening key protective factors and reducing risk in the local community environment of children and young people. This requires time, effort and the mutual commitment of key stakeholders in focussing attention and resources on four major domains¹² of the environment surrounding children and young people (CYP). Where these domains are positive CYP are much less likely to drop out of school. Conversely engaging in negative behaviours in one domain greatly increases the risk in others. For example young people who indulge in alcohol and illicit substances are much more likely to leave school early.



¹² <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0190740923002220>

3: Literature Review

This section combines literature examining education inequality and outcomes for marginalised groups nationally and internationally with examples of local and international best practice in out of school and alternative education provision. It examines existing knowledge on the topics and synthesises evidence from multiple studies to identify patterns and trends.

3.1 Education Inequality Internationally

Comparative research defines education inequality as a system in which background characteristics (socio economic status, migrant status, disability, ethnicity, gender) disproportionately impacts learning outcomes or later opportunities. Education Equality requires that differences in outcomes are not systematically linked to factors outside learners' control.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) analyses across Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA¹³) cycles show persistent socio economic influences in achievement, and warn that simple expansion of access does not automatically yield equality without targeted supports for the disadvantaged¹⁴. The United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) Global Education Monitoring (GEM) reports reach similar conclusions, stressing that inclusion is a system level process (funding, data, teacher support, governance) and not a placement alone.

PISA 2022¹⁵ indicates many countries experienced declines in mathematics post pandemic; equity patterns remain strongly associated with socio economic status and immigrant background, despite variation across systems. The 2024 GEM update¹⁶ reports 251 million children and youth still out of school globally and underscores finance gaps (4 in 10 countries spend below agreed benchmarks), with exclusion concentrated in low income contexts; leaders are urged to prioritise inclusive investments.

An extensive evidence base links socio economic status to differential exposure to quality teaching, curriculum access, and “shadow education.” The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF)¹⁷ documents how disadvantage compounds via teacher shortages/turnover in poorer schools and through differential uptake of private tutoring intensifying selection in high stakes systems. Reviews show school closures during Covid-19¹⁸ widened gaps and increased the share of very low attainers, particularly in early reading; recovery remains uneven.

¹³ PISA is the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment. PISA measures 15 year olds ability to use their reading, mathematics and science knowledge and skills to meet real life challenges.

¹⁴ https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/equity-in-education_9789264073234-en.html

¹⁵ <https://eric.ed.gov/?q=PISA&id=ED635593>

¹⁶ <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/unesco-global-education-monitoring-report-2024-leadership-education-lead-learning>

¹⁷ committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/120311/pdf/

¹⁸ [EEF \(2020\) - Impact of School Closures on the Attainment Gap.pdf](#)

3.2 Education Inequality in Ireland

In PISA 2022, Ireland remained above the OECD average in reading, maths and science, but with declines in maths since 2018 and an increased proportion below baseline proficiency in science since 2012. The Department of Education and the Educational Research Centre's (ERC) national report¹⁹ corroborates these patterns. Economic Social Research Institute ESRI studies using the Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) study and school level data highlight enduring socio-economic status (SES) related differences across phases (home learning resources, “grinds” participation, transitions). Macro reports show rising child material deprivation since 2022, reinforcing the risk that poverty translates into attainment gaps²⁰.

Ireland compares favourably within the EU on completion and attainment, and has one of the lowest early school leaver rates. Yet averages mask inequities by socio economic status, disability, ethnicity, language background (EAL), and local context²¹.

- > Outcomes for Travellers and Roma remain markedly below population averages across participation, retention and attainment. Newly released EU level and country data show high poverty risks, lower upper secondary completion, and reported discrimination in education²².
- > Students with Special Education Needs (SEN)²³
- > English as an Additional Language (EAL) A 2023/24 Inspectorate thematic review found one fifth of schools showed less than satisfactory EAL teaching. Systematic reviews and Irish studies similarly point to variable home-school partnerships and the need for teacher preparation tailored to multilingual classrooms²⁴.
- > Early school leavers and disengagement: Ireland's School Completion Programme (SCP) (under Tusla TESS) aims at improved attendance, participation and retention for those at risk; the ESRI 2025 review affirms SCP's flexible value but notes governance variation and rising post pandemic non attendance. Literature shows early school leavers face significantly poorer labour market outcomes²⁵.

As I Am's (Ireland's Autism Charity) 2025 *Same Chance* Report²⁶ indicated that 70% of members felt that the Irish education system was not inclusive, up 14% from 2024. The barriers to inclusion include a lack of Special Educational Teaching hours, non-inclusive school policies such as codes of behaviour, a lack of understanding of Autism from educational professionals and Autistic children being disproportionately excluded compared to the non-Autistic school going age.

¹⁹ [PISA 2022 Results \(Volume I and II\) - Country Notes: Ireland | OECD](#)

²⁰ [YB2022-Research-03.pdf](#)

²¹ [Ireland, the EU and Educational Attainment Educational Attainment Thematic Report 2023 - Central Statistics Office](#)

²² <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/consultations/traveller-and-roma-education-strategy/>

²³ [Inclusion at a Crossroads: Dismantling Ireland's System of Special Education](#)

²⁴ [EAL Inspectorate Report SMG For Review 27Nov2023](#)

²⁵ [The School Completion Programme revisited | ESRI](#)

²⁶ <https://asiam.ie/news/asiam-launches-2025-report-revealing-deep-inequalities-for-autistic-people-in-ireland>

3.3 Out of school and alternative education in Ireland

For young people who are out of, or not managing within, mainstream schooling, an important set of out of school and alternative education pathways operate which are explored further in Section 6.3 and 6.4. and Appendix 1. These include national programmes delivered in Fingal and local community initiatives. For brevity, we will not repeat them in this section. These pathways are not a substitute for inclusion in mainstream; they are re engagement and progression routes, ideally used early, with clear criteria and wrap around supports.

One notable alternative education initiative not referenced elsewhere in this report is Cork Life Centre²⁷ which is a voluntary organisation that offers education services for up to 55 young people between the ages of 12 and 18 who, for various reasons, have not thrived in a mainstream educational setting. Based in a former monastery in Cork City, over 60 staff members of the centre, most of whom are volunteers or part-time workers, offer one-to-one or small group tuition to students pursuing Junior and Leaving Certificate, supporting them to prepare for state examinations.

²⁷ <https://www.corklifecentre.ie/about>

3.4 Pan European – EARS Project

Educational Agreement as a Response to School Dropout (EARS) was a collaborative project between multiple Countries. Italy, Greece, Romania, Netherlands, Spain, Poland which launched in 2023 to address early school leaving. It seeks to do so by standardising school-level procedures and building a whole-school, multi-agency response. Its core method is an “educational agreement” between schools, families, community, and labour-market partners co-design supports around at-risk learners. It is organised into three mutually reinforcing pillars:

1. Learn the Future (guidance, identity, self-efficacy);
2. Local & EU Labour Market (relevance, skills, pathways)
3. Family Involvement (relationships, participation).

Across partner regions, the project engaged 586+ teachers in 39+ schools, 3,850+ pupils (11-19) and approx. 1,420 family/community members, evidencing wide stakeholder reach.

Ultimately EARS produced:

- > An anti-dropout protocol handbook spelling out risk-profiling, school governance, teacher competencies, learner supports, family engagement and external partnerships – intended for direct adoption at school level.
- > Impact research mapping teacher views on causes, measures and training needs (e.g. case management, family/community work, digital skills).
- > A competency-based training scheme for teachers/admin staff, aligned to ECVET (European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training) and ESCO (European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations) with pillar-specific modules and a digital platform/badge.
- > Pilots & micro-pilots translating the pillars into concrete activities – career fairs, expert chats, digital storytelling/Kahoot/STEM tasks, Lego, family workshops – plus an evaluation and scalability notes. Micro-pilots specifically targeted younger students (11-14) for prevention.
- > A Green Paper distilling lessons and EU-level recommendations, linking to existing ESL policies and proposing the coordinated, whole-school and cross-sector response.

3.5 Finland – JOPO (Flexible Basic Education)

JOPO is a Finnish Ministry of Education initiative launched in 2006, embedded in Finnish education to prevent dropout and re-engage lower secondary students through flexible, activity-based learning. JOPO has since been written into the Basic Education Act and Government Decree, moving from project to permanent provision.

JOPO is aimed at pupils in grades 7-9 (~13-15-year-olds) who struggle with motivation, achievement, behaviour, attendance or need a small-group setting. Many are identified as facing psychosocial challenges and family insecurity. The programme is delivered in small groups by a teacher (who is often SEN-trained) plus a second professional (e.g. youth worker, SNA). There is a mix of on-the-job learning, thematic and project-based learning and selected subject classes with mainstream groups.

School camps, excursions and tailored short courses to build community, confidence and life management skills are also provided. The initiative has a strong school-home cooperation, with multi-professional working and early intervention as a core principle. JOPO estimates that 90% of pupils improve from their initial situation – with small groupwork and personal support and guidance reported as the most influential interventions.

3.6 France – Relay Devices

France’s relay devices provide temporary, intensive alternatives for lower-secondary pupils (11-16-year-olds) who are in entrenched disengagement (unjustified absence, recurrent behaviour incidents, or extreme passivity). The goal is remobilisation and a successful return to mainstream general/technological/vocational pathways via an individualised plan co-designed with the family and delivered by a multidisciplinary team (education and youth justice partners). They provide different models:

- > **Relay workshops:** 4-6 weeks, renewable up to three times.
- > **Relay classes:** a few weeks to months (up to one school year).
- > Springboard boarding schools for pupils most disconnected from school life; schooling usually delivered through a relay class with structured homework support.

All devices are small groups (maximum 12 pupils), and pupils remain enrolled in their home school. Success of these initiatives are accredited to the individualised pathway provided, based on a multidisciplinary assessment; aligning school, extracurricular and family actions and gradual inclusion back into common curriculum classes which is planned from day one.

Each pupil has a designated tutor in the host institution to coordinate support, maintain family liaison and oversee reintegration – tutoring continues post-programme. Parents sign an admission agreement, receive regular updates and – where needed – may engage in a Parental Accountability Protocol (PAR) to support behavioural change. Again, this tight school-family coordination – with clear time limits and planned reintegration – combines effectively to help contain drift and sustain returns to mainstream.

4: Socio-Demographic Profile

A key element in the evaluation on educational needs of 12-15-year-olds in Fingal is the compilation of a comprehensive socio-demographic area profile. This section does this for both the general and target population (12-15 years) in Fingal based on the Central Statistics Office (CSO) 2022 Census and other primary and secondary research sources. National comparisons are provided where appropriate.

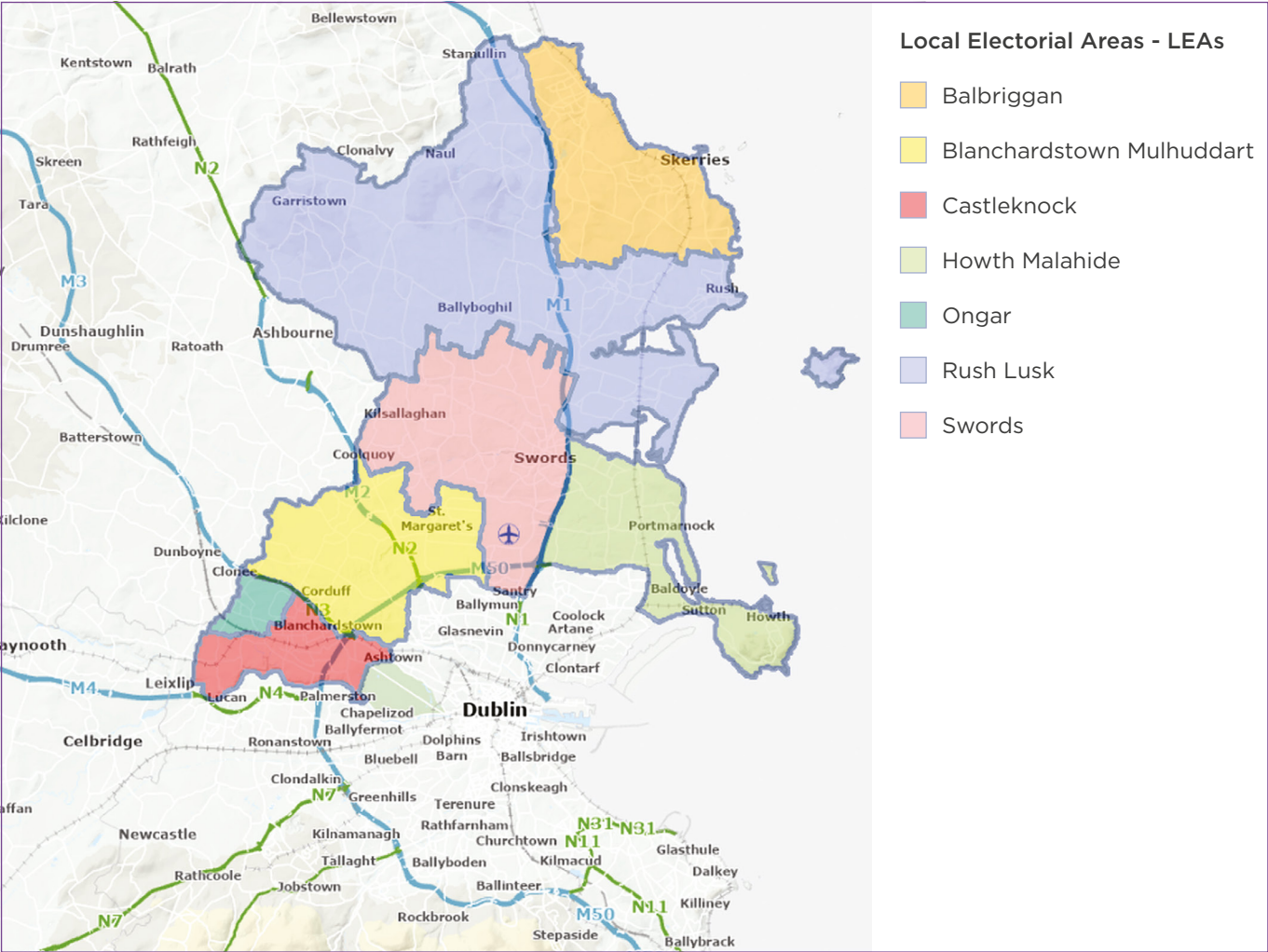


Figure 1: Map of Fingal Local Electoral Areas

Fingal County Council covers an area of 450sq kilometres and stretches from the River Liffey and the Dublin City boundary to the Meath boundary north of Balbriggan, and from the coast in the east to the Meath and Kildare boundaries in the west.

4.1 Population

As of 2022, Fingal’s population stands at 330,506, making it the 3rd most populated county council in Ireland. From 2011 to 2022, Fingal’s population grew by 20.6% the highest in Ireland during this period and significantly above the state average of 12.2%.

Population Change 2011 - 2022

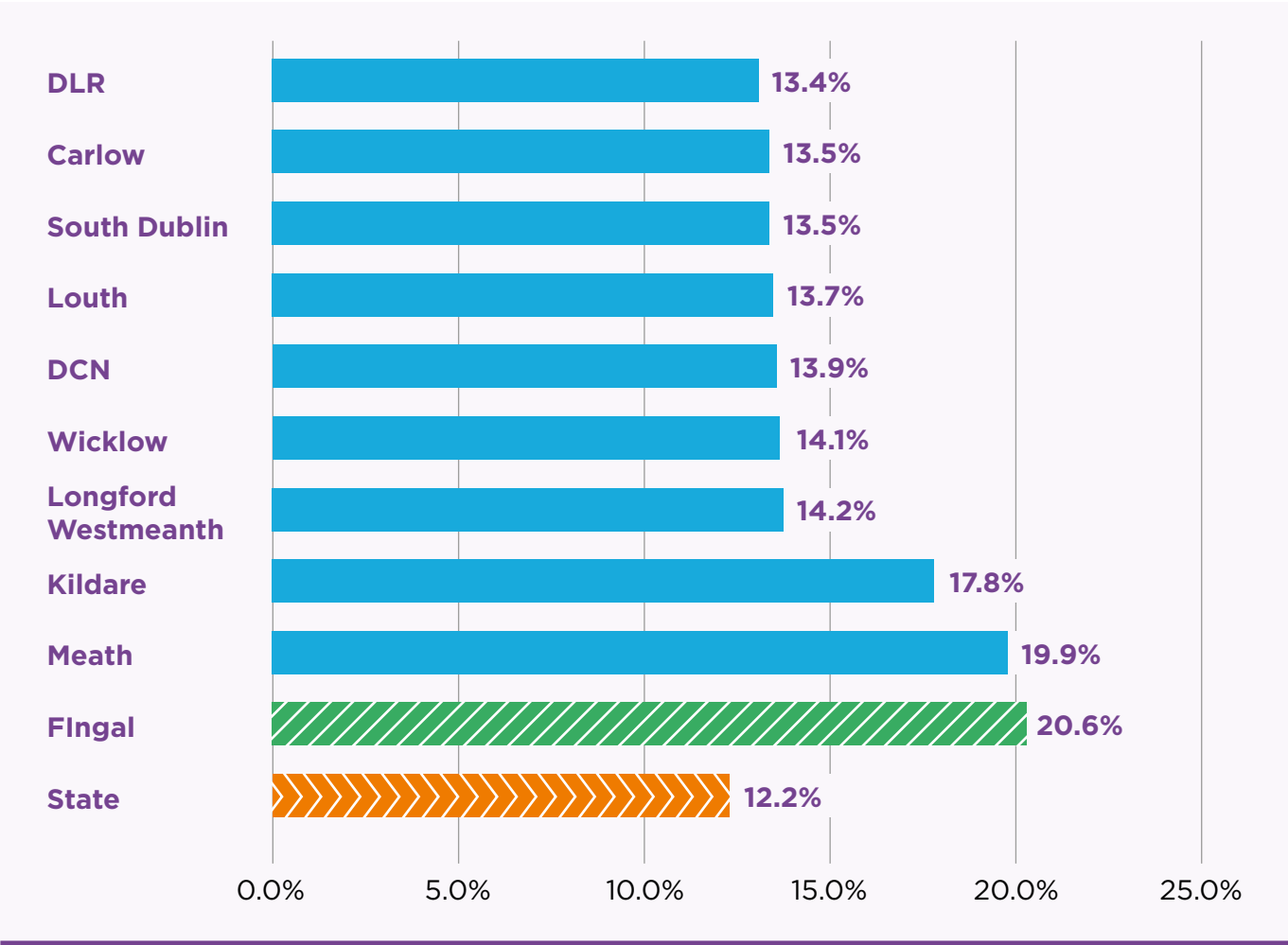


Figure 2: Population Change 2011 - 2022

From 2011 to 2022, Fingal’s population grew by 20.6% the highest in Ireland during this period

ClonRush-Lusk (26.2%) and Ongar (21.8%) had increases above the Fingal average, whilst Castleknock experience the lowest increase at 12%.

Fingal Local Electoral Areas (LEAs) Population Growth 2011 - 2022

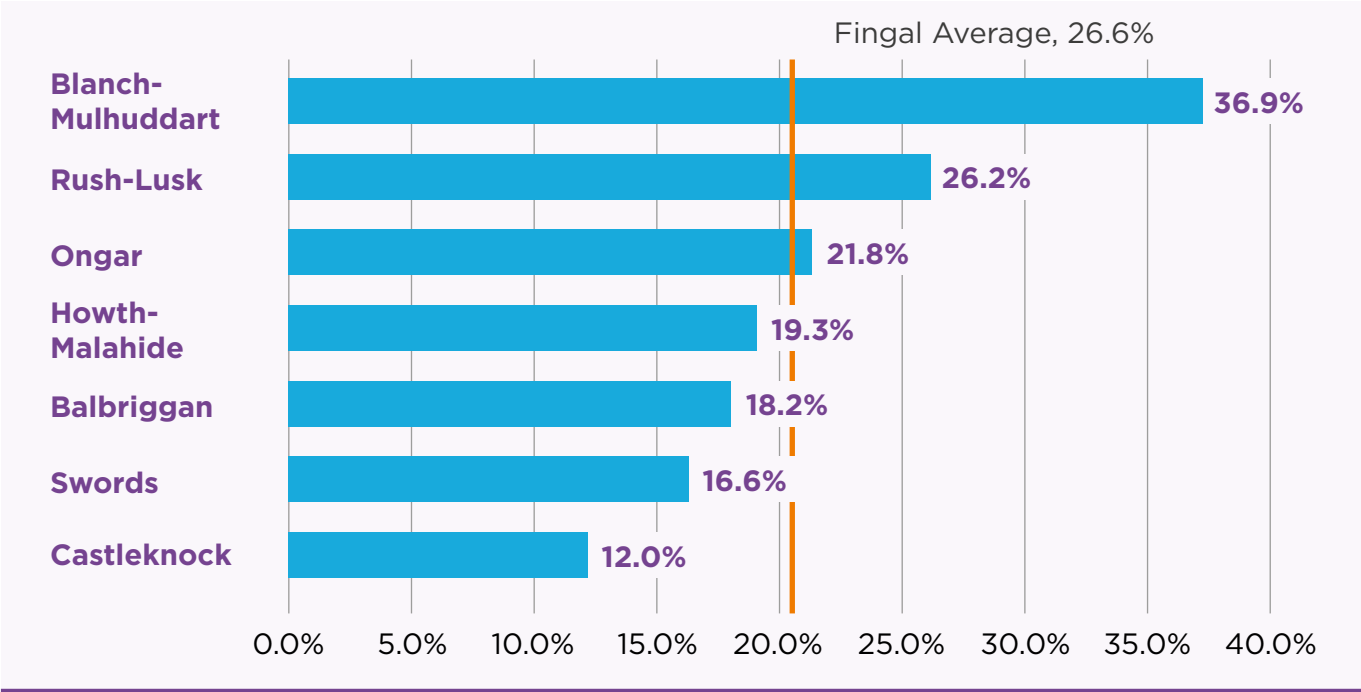


Figure 3: Fingal Local Electoral Areas (LEAs) Population Growth 2011 - 2022



Fingal experienced the largest growth in the population aged 15 years and under during the same period of 2011 – 2022, **16%**, well above the state figure of **4.7%**. Meath was the only county where this cohort’s population grew at a similar rate (**15.5%**), with Fingal sitting at least **5%** above all other counties. Areas with the highest proportion of youth population are in Blanchardstown, Swords, and Balbriggan (Census 2022).

Population Change age 0-15 years 2011 - 2022

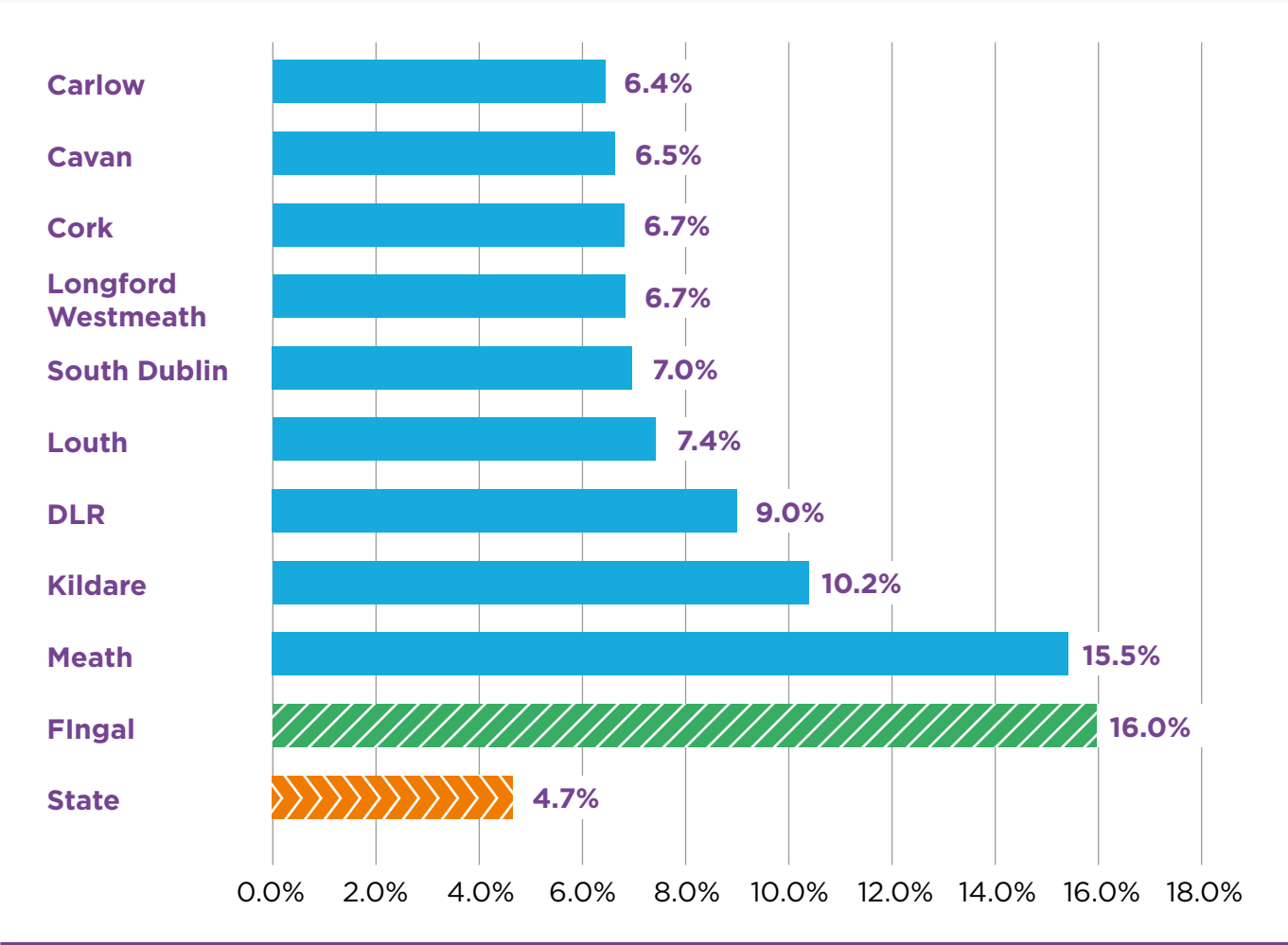


Figure 4: Population Change Age Range 0-15 years - 2011-2022

This rapid increase in the 0-15 age range has resulted in Fingal having the second highest population percentage share of this cohort in Ireland.

0 - 15 years Population % Share

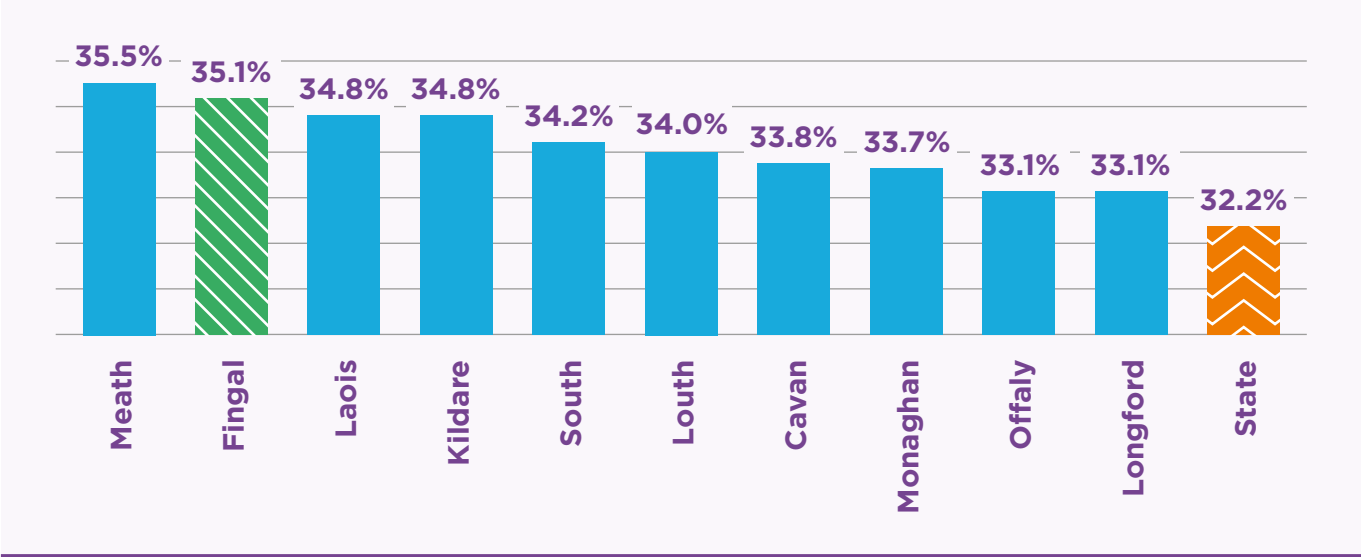


Figure 5: 0-15 Years Population Share 2022

In the Fingal County Council catchment area in 2016, the percentage share of 12–15-year-olds as a proportion of the total population was 5.6%. This rose to 6.5% in 2022 – which is now the 3rd highest percentage share of 12-15 year olds nationally and above the State average of 5.74%. As can be gleaned from the percentage share across the five-year age group cohorts depicted in Figure 6, Fingal has a larger concentration of the age groups pertaining to the focus of this report around 12–15-year-olds (i.e. 10 to 14 and 15 to 19 age groups) than the state.

Five Year Age Groups 2022

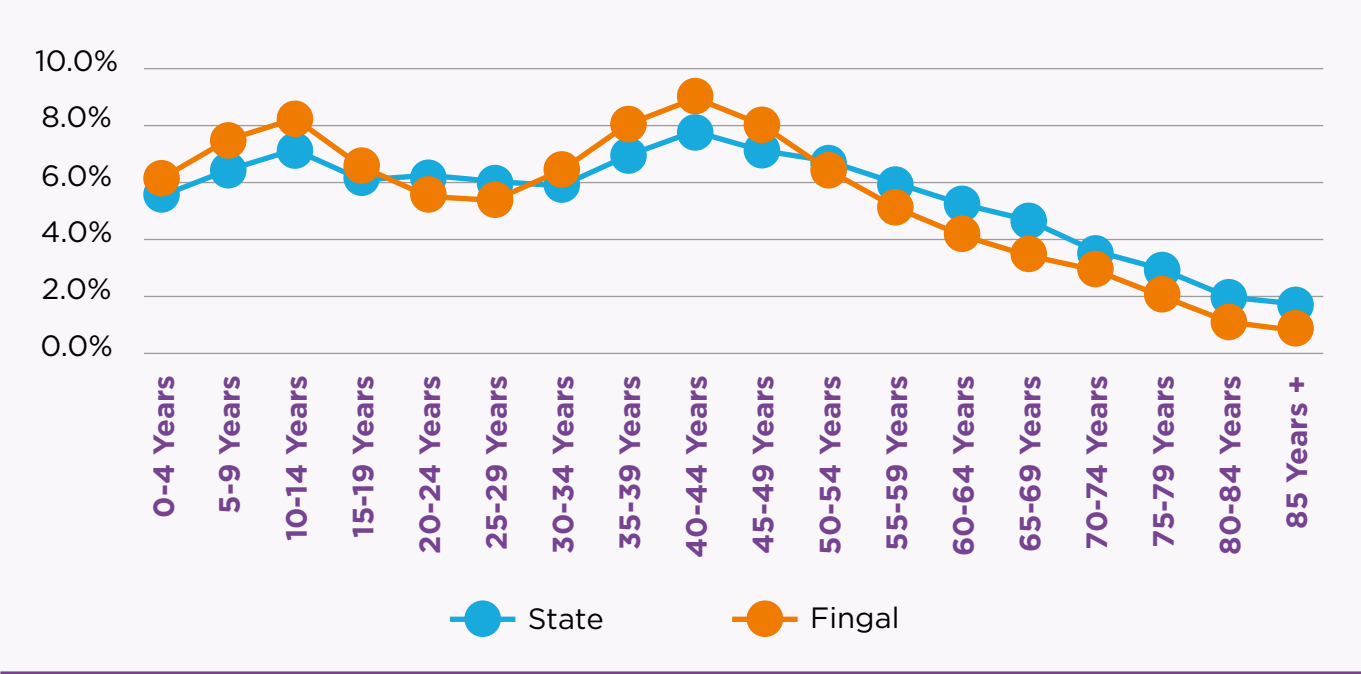


Figure 6: Fingal Five Year Age Groups 2022

The Youth Dependency Ratio (YDR) – population aged <15 as a proportion of the population aged 15 to 64) in Fingal was also higher than the state at **34.4%** v **30.1%**. Although Blanchardstown/Mulhuddart is the LEA with the highest YDR in the area (**40.2%**), the YDR across the LEAs doesn’t fluctuate much from the Fingal average, as illustrated in Figure 7 below.

Fingal Local Electoral Areas (LEAs) Youth Dependency Ratio 2022

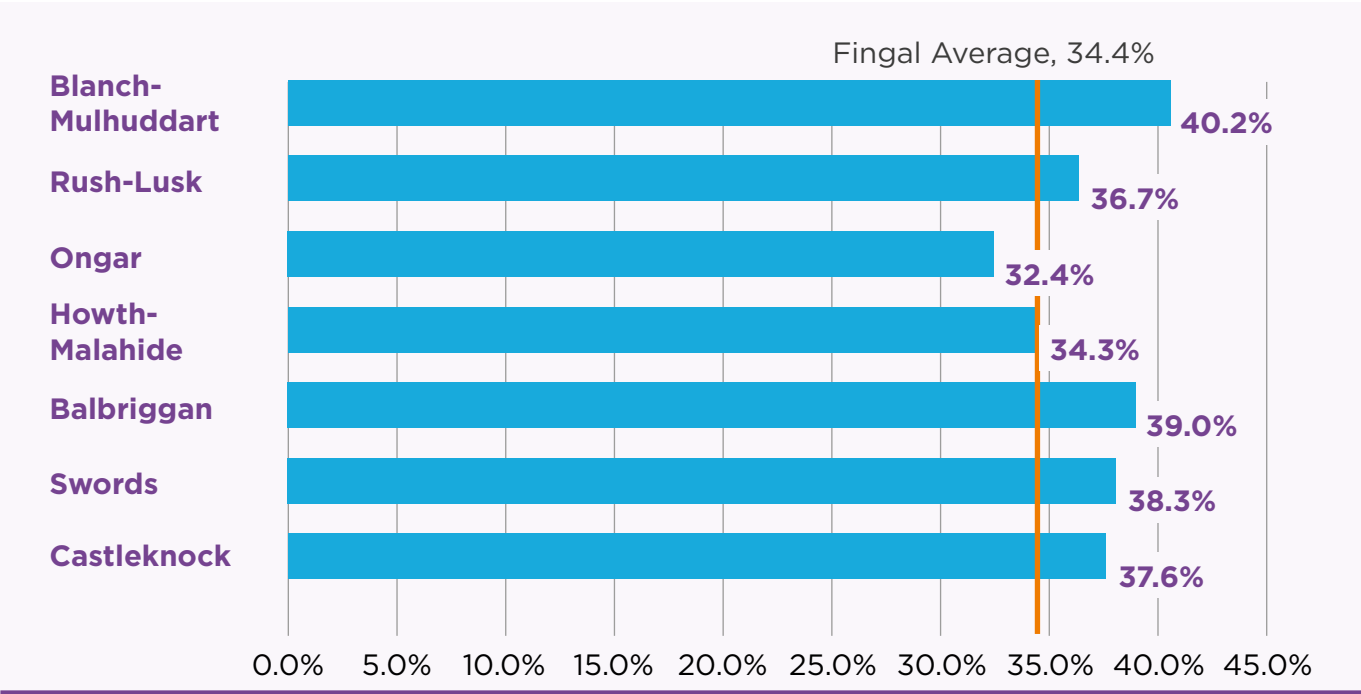


Figure 7: Fingal LEAs YDR 2022

These demographic trends have significant implications for planning support services and resource allocations across Fingal.

4.2 Ethnicity

Fingal has a diverse spread of ethnicities compared to other areas in the country. As of 2022, the percentage share of ‘White Irish’ was **65.5%** with the state figure at **76.6%**. Fingal was also the second lowest of all the CYPSC areas in the country in terms of ‘White Irish’ proportion, with only Dublin City South lower.

White Irish % Share 2022

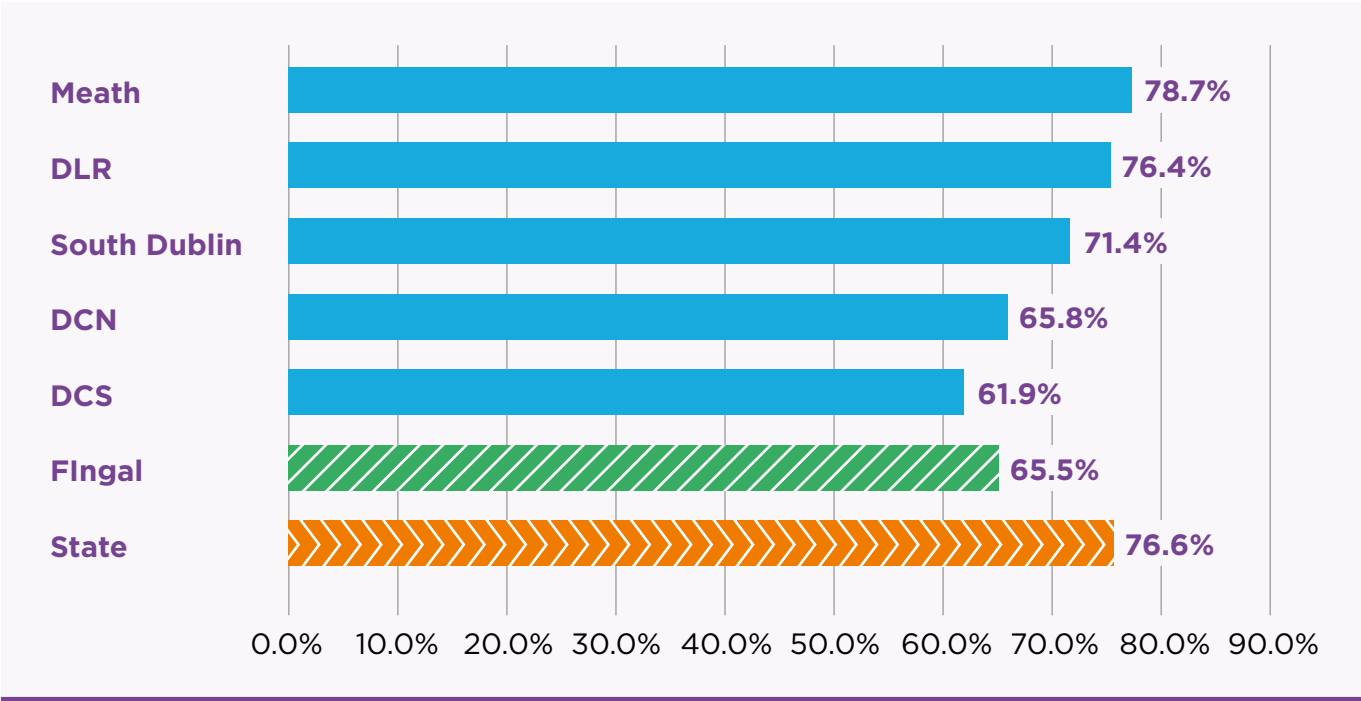


Figure 8: White Irish % Share 2022

Ongar have **52.9%** ‘White Irish’ and Blanchardstown-Mulhuddart has **41.6%**. The diversity of Fingal is further evidence by the prominence of ‘Black or Black Irish’ and ‘Asian or Asian Irish’ communities in the area. Fingal’s proportion of ‘Black or Black Irish’ is the highest among all CYPSC areas at **3.6%**, which is also higher than the state figure of 1.5%.

The LEAs with the highest proportion of ‘Black or Black Irish’ are Blanchardstown-Mulhuddart (**7.7%**), Balbriggan (**6.4%**) and Ongar (**5%**). Fingal has the 4th highest proportion of ‘Asian or Asian Irish’ population of all the CYPSC areas in the state at **5.9%** - again higher than the state average of **3.3%**. LEAs with the highest concentration of ‘Asian or Asian Irish’ ethnicities are Blanchardstown-Mulhuddart (12.7%), Ongar (10.5%) and Castleknock (**6%**).

The total population classified as ‘White Irish Traveller’ residing in the Fingal area was 1,545 in 2022. This represented **0.5%** of the total population in Fingal. November 2023 figures reported 587 Traveller families living in Fingal²⁸.

Fingal residents born outside of Ireland account for **26.6%** of the population, higher than the state average of **20%**. This is driven mainly by the LEAs of Blanchardstown-Mulhuddart and Rush-Lusk, with **32.3%** and **27.3%** respectively.

²⁸ [fingal-county-council-traveller-accommodation-plan-2025-2029.pdf](#)

Fingal LEAs % Born Outside Ireland

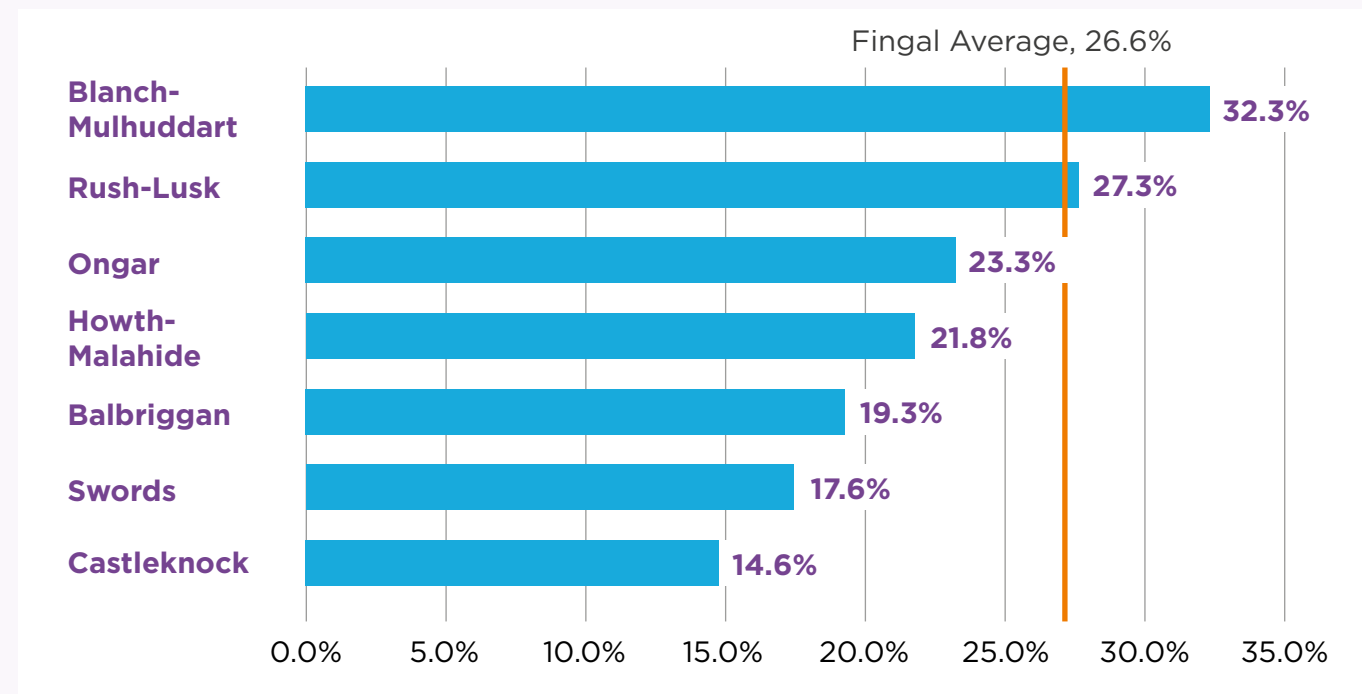


Figure 9: Fingal LEAs % Born Outside Ireland 2022

4.3 One Parent Families

According to Census 2022, there were 14,144 one parent families residing in Fingal which represented 23.2% of the total families. This proportion was lower than the State average of 24.9%. Variations are evident across the LEAs. Blanchardstown'-Mulhuddart (30.2%) had the highest proportion followed by Balbriggan (27.3%) and Swords (23.2%). Rates were slightly lower in Ongar (21.8%), Castleknock (21.2%), Malahide (20.9%) and Rush-Lusk (19.9%). The SAs with the highest proportion are in Swords, Blanchardstown and Balbriggan where in some cases 58% of families are headed by one parent.

There is some evidence of correlation between one parent families and educational achievement. The Growing Up in Ireland study²⁹ by Hannan, Halpin & Coleman finds that children in lone-parent families score lower in Drumcondra reading and maths tests and have higher absenteeism. However, much of the gap is linked to socio-economic factors. An Economic and Social Research Institute³⁰ (ESRI) review confirms that lone parenthood is associated with lower educational outcomes, but causal effects diminish significantly once socio-economic background is controlled.

²⁹ <https://www.growingup.gov.ie/>

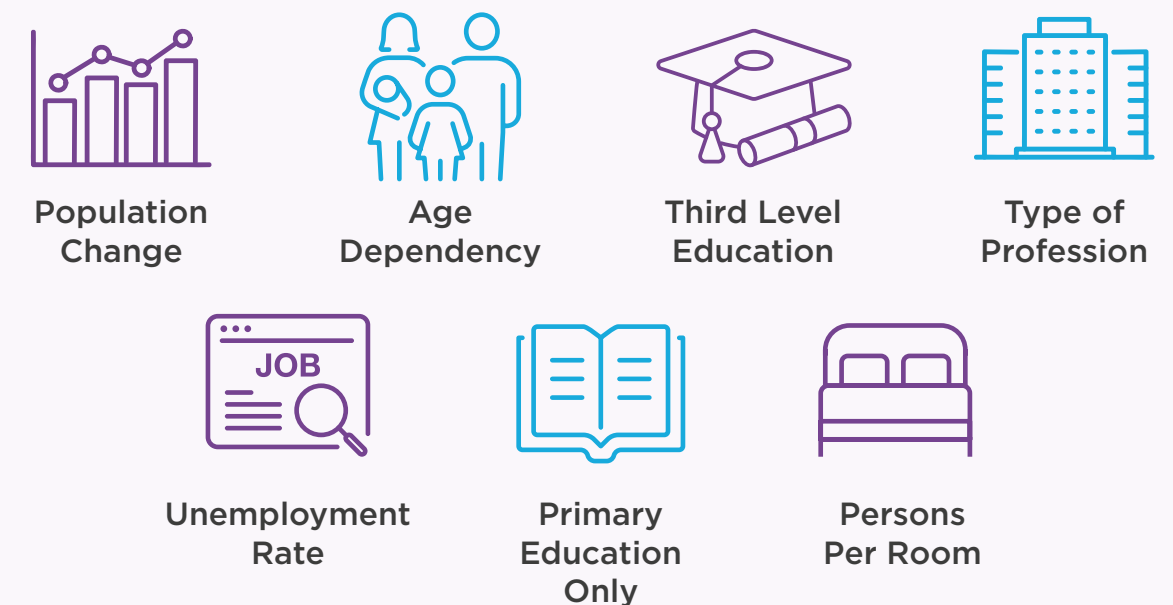
³⁰ <https://www.esri.ie/article/download/106/74>

4.4 Deprivation

Policy makers use the Pobal HP Deprivation Index for the purposes of selecting DEIS schools, allocating funding under the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP), identifying communities to work with as part of the Family Resource Centre (FRC) Programme, and to determine the location of healthcare facilities based on the predicted health needs and outcomes of a local population.

Indicators Used to Calculate The Relative Index Score

Three categories - demographic, social class and labour market situation, which include the following indicators:



How The Index Is Used

- Comparing small areas (around 100 households) across the state.
- Targeting and allocating resources to the areas most in need.
- Plotting changes in deprivation over various censuses (2006, 2011, 2016, 2022).
- Planning effective service delivery.

Who Uses The Index

- The Department of Education (DEIS school identification).
- The HSE (Health Atlas Ireland).
- Various other Government Departments and State Agencies involved in targeting and supporting marginalised communities.
- Researchers, media and the public.

Find out more by visiting www.pobal.ie or email: pobalmaps@pobal.ie

Figure 10: Pobal HP Deprivation Index

Overall, the Local Authority Area of Fingal is among the more affluent in the country, with 32 of its 42 Electoral Divisions (EDs) classified as ‘above average’ or ‘affluent’. This is contrasted by pockets of deprivation particularly within the urban areas. Fingal is the third most populous county in Ireland. The most disadvantaged in Fingal i.e. Blanchardstown-Corduff and Blanchardstown-Tyrrelstown whose population is projected to double from the present figure of 7,000 over the next decade.

Blanchardstown has a lot of Housing Assistance Payments (HAP) and private renting resulting in cases where high value private houses are next door to social housing. The Local Electoral Area (LEA) of Howth Malahide had the highest rate of population who classified their health as ‘very good’ while the Balbriggan LEA had the highest rate of population who classified their health as ‘very bad’ (Census 2022). Detailed below in Table 1 are the most disadvantaged EDs within Fingal, as determined by their deprivation scores.

Electoral District (ED)	2022 Pop (% change)	2016 Deprivation Score	2022 Deprivation Score
B’stown-Corduff	3,689 (-4.7%)	-11.55	-14.16
B’stown-Tyrrelstown	3,343 (2.6%)	-6.67	-11.60
B’stown-Coolmine	11,271 (-0.4%)	-2.79	-5.42
Balbriggan Urban	8,102 (-0.1%)	-3.44	-4.70
B’stown-Mulhuddart	4,219 (2.3%)	-3.47	-4.36
Kilsallaghan	2,406 (6.3%)	-2.20	-3.29
B’stown-Roselawn	1,647 (-2.4%)	1.53	-1.38

Table 1: Fingal EDs Deprivation Scores

Small Area (SA) statistics enable socio-demographic profile analysis of areas as small as 100 houses. Within Fingal, 21% of SAs are ‘Marginally Below Average’³², 4.1% are ‘Disadvantaged’ and 1.7% are ‘Very Disadvantaged’. Of the 18 SAs that are classified as ‘Very Disadvantaged’³³ most have a proportion of youth population greater than 30% as per Table 2. Areas with the highest level of disadvantage in Fingal include, Corduff, Sheepmore and Whitestown in Blanchardstown, Dromheath, Saint Cronan’s and Mooretown in Swords as well as Pinewood and Bath Road in Balbriggan.

Of the 18 SAs that are classified as very disadvantaged most have a proportion of youth population greater than 30%

³¹ A social housing support that helps eligible individuals and families rent a home in the private market.

³² Deprivation score of between 0 and -10

³³ Deprivation score of between -20 and -30.

Small Area	Electoral Divisions	Deprivation Score	Population Aged <24 Years
267029018	Blanchardstown - Coolmine	-28.6	142 or 34.4%
267030012	Blanchardstown - Corduff	-25.9	77 or 39.5%
267029005	Blanchardstown - Coolmine	-25.4	70 or 29.8%
267003019	Balbriggan - Urban	-24.9	63 or 33.0%
267131013	Swords - Glasmore	-24.3	83 or 25.9%
267133002	Swords - Lissenhall	-23.4	64 or 42.3%
267030009	Blanchardstown - Corduff	-23.2	77 or 22.3%
267029024	Blanchardstown - Coolmine	-23.0	63 or 32.4%
267003018	Balbriggan - Urban	-22.9	74 or 42.2%
267030010	Blanchardstown - Corduff	-22.5	68 or 33.8%
267029026	Blanchardstown - Coolmine	-22.4	65 or 36.0%
267032009	Blanchardstown - Mulhuddart	-22.1	121 or 39.3%
267002046	Balbriggan -Urban	-21.5	76 or 45.1%
267030008	Blanchardstown - Corduff	-20.8	83 or 37.5%
267029025	Blanchardstown - Coolmine	-20.6	101 or 24.9%
267029021	Blanchardstown - Coolmine	-20.6	163 or 31.9%
267029017	Blanchardstown - Coolmine	-20.5	104 or 70.4%
267098004	Kilsallaghan	-20.4	75 or 21.8%

Table 2: Very Disadvantaged Small Areas in Fingal

There were 41,377 households with a housing tenure of owned with a mortgage or loan in the Fingal area in 2022, representing 38.5% of the total households. This proportion was far higher than the State average of 28.9%. Variations are evident when examining the distribution of households with a housing tenure of owned with a mortgage or loan across the LEAs. The Ongar LEA (46.2%) had the highest proportion followed by Rush-Luck (45.3%) and Balbriggan (39.1%). These rates were higher than Swords (37.9%), Blanch’-Mulhuddart (36.0%), Howth-Malahide (35.4%) and Castleknock (33.0%).

There were 21,230 households with a housing tenure of private rented in the Fingal area. This represented 19.7% of the total households in Fingal. This proportion was higher than the State average of 18.0%. The Blanch’-Mulhuddart LEA (27.3%) had the highest proportion followed by Ongar (23.0%), Swords (23.0%) and Castleknock (21.7%). These rates were considerably higher than Balbriggan (17%), Howth-Malahide (16.4%) and Rush-Lusk (12.0%).

There were 7,133 households with a housing tenure of rented from the Local Authority (LA) in Fingal, 6.6% of the total households. This proportion was far lower than the State average of 8.3%, the Eastern and Midlands average of 8.9% and the Dublin regional average of 9.5%. Relative to the 27 CYPSC areas, Fingal has the seventh lowest proportion of households with a housing tenure of rented from a LA.

Variations are evident when examining the distribution of households with a housing tenure of rented from a LA across the LEAs. The Blanch’-Mulhuddart LEA (14.7%) had the highest proportion followed by Balbriggan with a rate of 10.4% and Rush-Lusk (6.8%). These rates were considerably higher than Swords (6.2%), Castleknock (5.9%), Ongar (3.3%) and Howth-Malahide (2.9%). The SAs with the highest proportions are primarily concentrated in the west of Fingal in Blanchardstown and Mulhuddart as well as other areas including Swords, Donabate, Skerries and Balbriggan.

4.5 Education

In 2022, the proportion of the Fingal population whose education ceased at age 15 or younger was 3.17% (a decrease from 3.95% in 2016). This was below the State average of 4.47%. The LEA of Balbriggan had the highest proportion of population with no formal or primary only education as well as one of the lowest proportion with Third Level education. In 2022, Fingal had the 3rd highest proportion of people in the state aged 15 years and over who had a Third Level education, at 50%.

In 2016, a total of 4,189 students entered the first year of the junior cycle in Fingal, by 2021/22, a total of 3,871 students in that cohort had completed their Leaving Certificate and 318 had not. This equates to a retention rate of 92.4%, the 12th highest in the country in 2022³⁴ and above the state average of 91.7%.

Based on the same 2016 sample above of 4,189 students, by 2019, a total of 4,063 students had completed their Junior Certificate³⁵ and 126 had not. This equates to a retention rate of 97.9%. This was marginally above the State average of 96.7%. Relative to other local authorities this rate was the ninth highest rate in the country with Sligo recording the highest retention at 98.8% and Cavan the lowest at 95.8%.

In 2024, 6 out of the 35 post-primary schools (that had leaving certificate students in 2024), in Fingal recorded progression rates to third level education of 100%. Six schools recorded progression rates of 60% or less³⁶.

³⁴ (Department of Education 2022, taken from Fingal CYPSC Baseline Report 2025 https://www.cypsc.ie/_fileupload/Documents/Resources/Fingal/fingal-evidence-base-line-report-24-07-2024.pdf?utm)

³⁵ Deemed as a requirement for progression to further education, training or employment

³⁶ Fingal CYPSC Evidence Baseline Report

Fingal County Council has the 4th lowest proportion of both DEIS schools in Primary and Post-Primary in the country. **15.2%** of Fingal’s primary schools are DEIS (below the national average of **31.7%**), whilst **15.8%** of Fingal’s Post-Primary schools are DEIS (again, significantly below the national average of **30.9%**). Considering all schools combined, Fingal has the 3rd lowest proportion in the country of total schools classified as DEIS – at **15.3%**, below the national average of **31.4%**. In total, Fingal has **15** Primary schools which are DEIS and **5** Post-Primary.

For DEIS primary, schools are segmented into four categories: Urban Band 1, Urban Band 2, Rural and non-DEIS. At post-primary, schools are simply classified as DEIS or non-DEIS. Focusing on Urban Band 1, it is notable that Fingal has the 2nd highest proportion of primary schools in this classification, in the country – at **66.7%**, second only to Dublin South and significantly above the national average of **27.4%**. Details of Fingal’s DEIS schools, both primary and post-primary are detailed below and overleaf in Tables 3 and 4.



Primary DEIS Schools³⁷

School Name	Address 1	Classification	Nos	Electoral Division
Corduff N S Junior	Corduff	Urban Band 1	174	B’stown-Mulhuddart
Corduff NS Senior	Corduff	Urban Band 1	205	B’stown-Mulhuddart
St Philip The Apostle Junior N S	Mountview	Urban Band 1	201	B’stown-Mulhuddart
Scoil Nais Mhuire Sois	Blakestown	Urban Band 1	183	B’stown-Mulhuddart
St Patricks Senior School	Corduff	Urban Band 1	205	B’stown-Mulhuddart
St Philips Senior N S	Mountview	Urban Band 1	229	B’stown-Mulhuddart
Scoil Mhuire Sin	Blakestown	Urban Band 1	233	B’stown-Mulhuddart
Ladyswell N S	Ladyswell	Urban Band 1	434	B’stown-Mulhuddart
Balbriggan Educate Together	Hamlet Lane	Urban Band 1	357	Balbriggan
Bracken Educate Together NS	Castlelands	Urban Band 1	383	Balbriggan
Thornleigh Avenue Educate Together NS	Thornleigh Green	Urban Band 1	299	Swords
SN Naomh Treasa	Balbriggan	Urban Band 2	377	Balbriggan
Castaheany Educate Together	Ongar Village	Urban Band 2	401	Ongar
Scoil Choilm Community NS	Porterstown Road	Urban Band 2	747	Castleknock
Skerries Educate Together NS	Barnageeragh Cove	Urban Band 2	352	Balbriggan
Mary Queen of Ireland N S	Toberburr	Rural	105	Swords

Table 3: Fingal Primary DEIS Schools

As of June 2025, 4,885 pupils were attending DEIS primary schools in Fingal³⁸, 2,903 of whom were attending Urban Band 1 schools which is the highest level of disadvantage.

³⁷ As of June 2025. Ladyswell National School in Mulhuddart was awarded DEIS Plus status in March 2026
³⁸ [Find a school](#)

Post-Primary DEIS Schools

School Name	Address 1	Electoral Division	No:
St Joseph’s Secondary School	Convent Lane	Rush-Lusk	928
Balbriggan Community College	Pine Ridge	Balbriggan	696
Rath Dara Community College	Blanchardstown Rd North	Blanchardstown-Mulhuddart	297
St Finians Community College	Swords	Swords	661
Blakestown Community School	Blanchardstown	Blanchardstown-Mulhuddart	521

Table 4: Fingal Post Primary DEIS Schools

As of June 2025, there were 3,103 pupils attending DEIS secondary schools in Fingal.

Fingal County Council has the 4th lowest proportion of both DEIS schools in Primary and Post-Primary in the country

5: Stakeholder Consultation

This section presents the findings from the stakeholder consultations involving schools and community based professionals working with children and young people in education, youth work, welfare, health and wellbeing and family support. Verbatim quotations from contributors are interspersed to reinforce findings.

5.1 Schools Survey

A survey (See Appendix 2) was disseminated to 38 post primary schools across Fingal. Part 1 of this survey sought data in relation to school population and catchment, student absence, out of school status and supports in place during the 2024-25 academic year. Part 2 of the survey pursued qualitative feedback on educational need, factors contributing to disengagement and responses in place to address challenges based on an agreed set of open questions. 19 schools answered at least one question in the survey. The total student population across the 18 schools who answered this question was 15,216 an average of 845 students per respondent school. Two schools had student numbers of <500, nine had between 500 and 1,000 with seven over 1,000. 17 out of the 19 schools were non DEIS.

5.1.1 Early Warning Signs

Figures 11 - 17 present data from the respondent schools on what are perceived by educationalists as early warning signs of potential early school dropout.

Number of students suspended for 6 days or more cumulatively

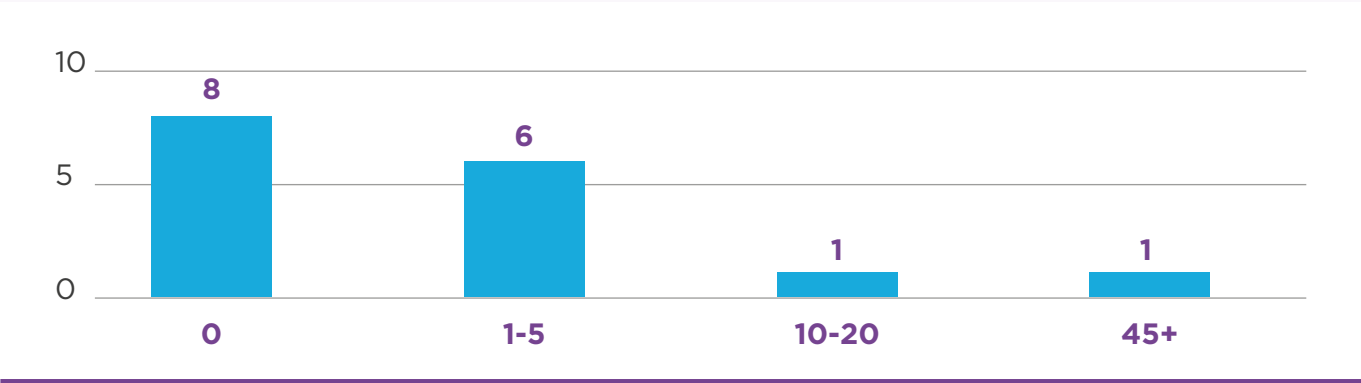


Figure 11: Suspensions

50% of the respondent schools had students suspended in 2024-25. One school had 18 students suspended while another had 48 students suspended in 2024-25. A total of 71 students across the respondent schools were suspended for six days or more in 2024-25.

Number of students who reached 20 days absence cumulatively

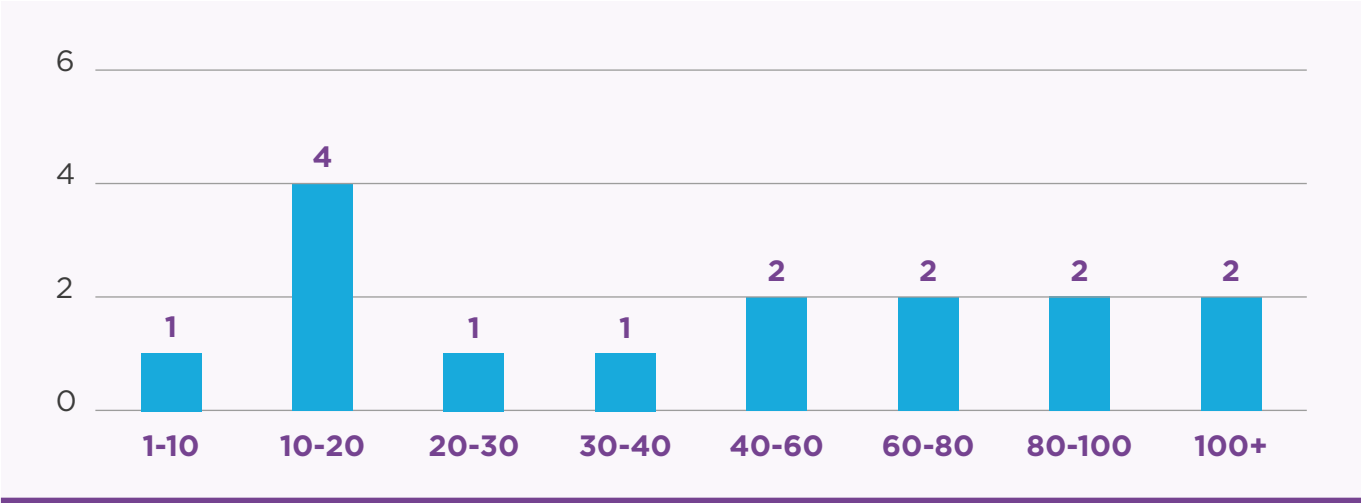


Figure 12: Student Absence

All respondent schools had students that reached 20 days absence in 2024-25. Seven schools had 50 or more students absent for 20 days. Two schools had over 80 students reaching this threshold with a further two having over 100 doing so. 807 students in total reached 20 days absence in 2024-25. Five students were expelled.

Number of students with school avoidance

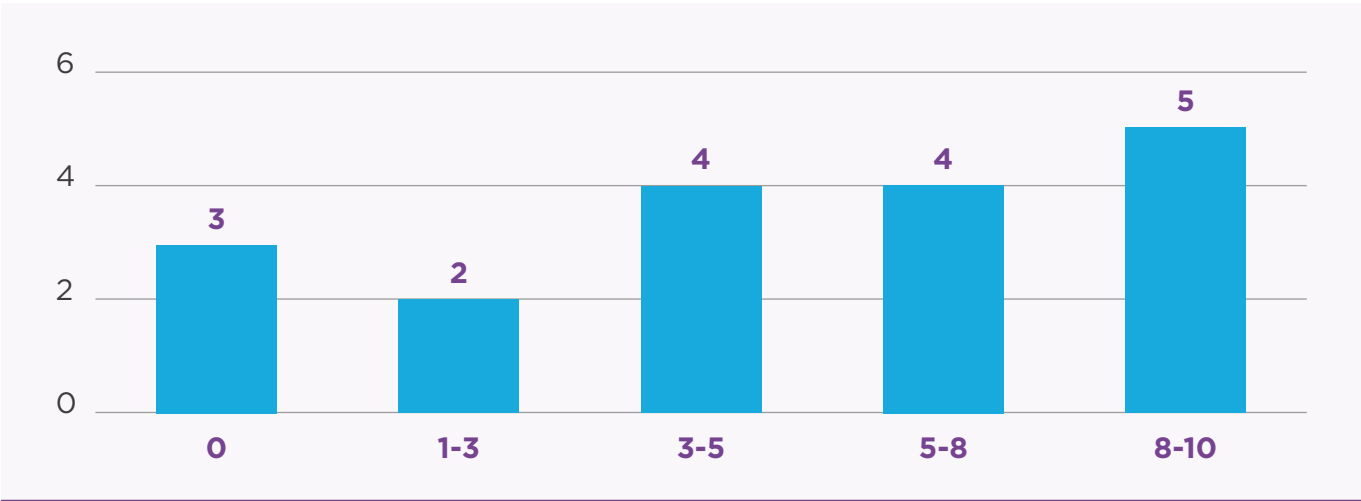


Figure 13: School Avoidance

School avoidance is a child or young person’s consistent refusal to attend school driven by overwhelming emotional distress, anxiety or fear. 84 students across 15 schools had school avoidance in the 2024-25 academic year.

Number of students on reduced school day

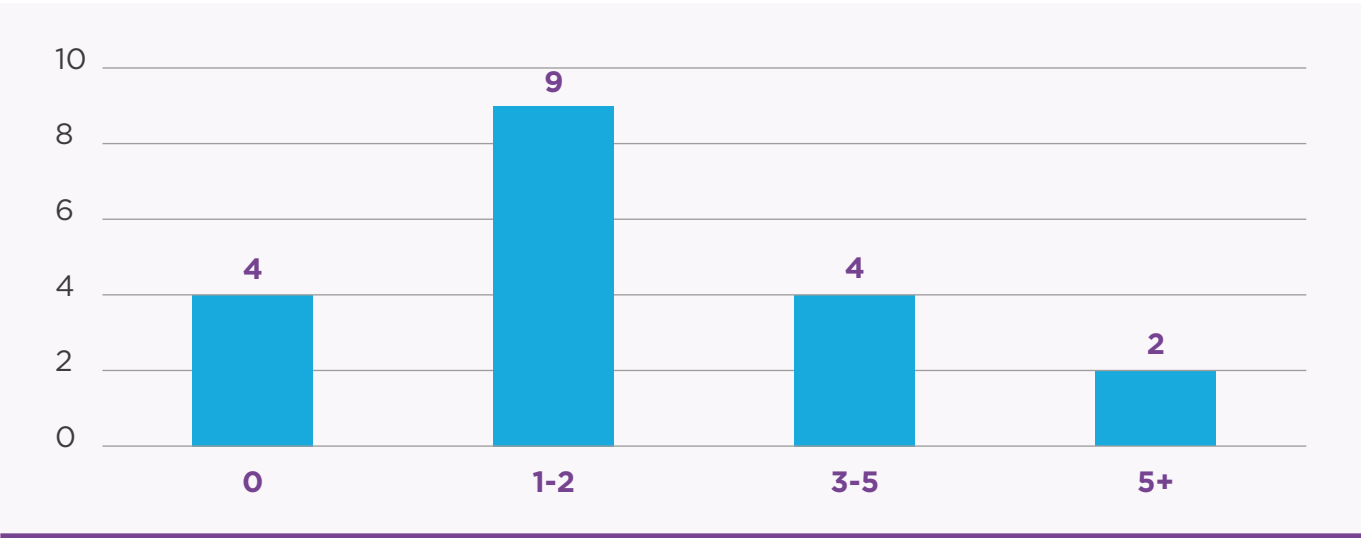


Figure 14: Reduced School Day

A reduced school day is a temporary arrangement to ease a child or young person back to a full school timetable after illness or managing complex needs. 40 students across 19 respondent schools were on reduced school days in 2024-25.

Number of students with additional educational needs

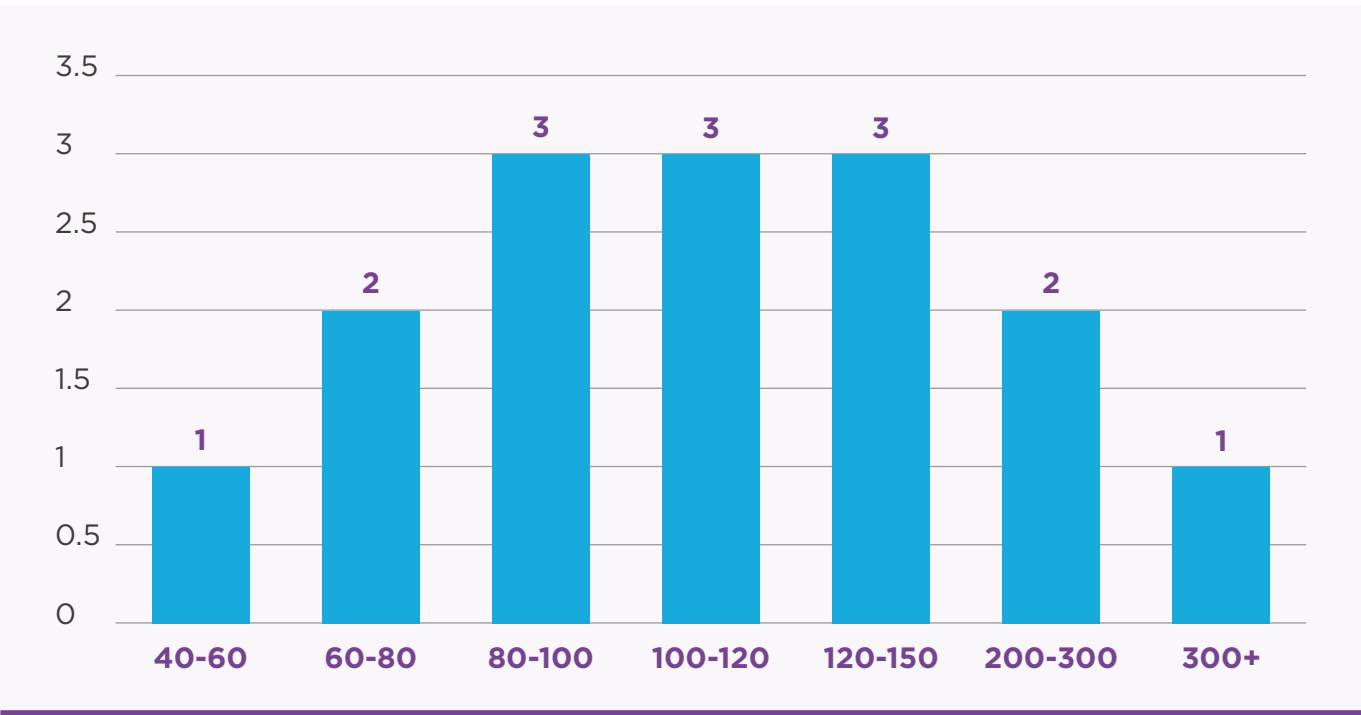


Figure 15: Additional Educational Needs

17 schools responded to this question reporting that 2110 students (16%) of the respondent schools population had additional education needs with one school indicating that 25% of their students had such a need.

Number requiring assessment by the National Education Psychological Service (NEPS)

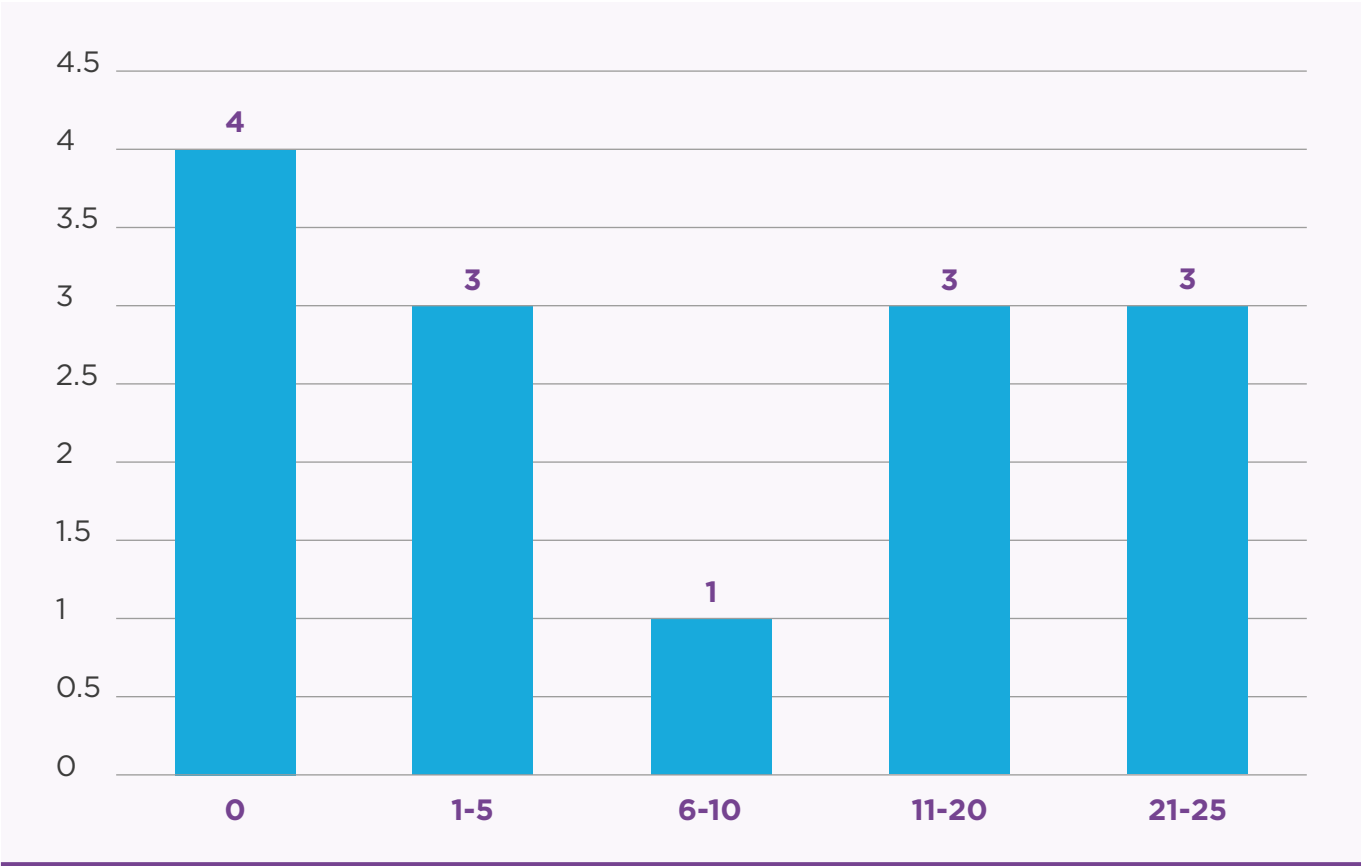


Figure 16: NEPS Assessment Numbers

33% of the schools had a NEPS³⁹ Psychologist with one respondent indicating their school had a Psychological Support Services through DDLETB . Another reported 2024-25 as the third consecutive year when they did not have a NEPS Psychologist. 143 students across 18 schools required a NEPS assessment in 2024-25 with 27 assessments granted. One school highlighted assessments were required for 10 students.

Two schools had student numbers of <500, nine had between 500 and 1,000 with seven over 1,000. 17 out of the 19 schools were non DEIS.

³⁹ National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)

Number of AS Classes

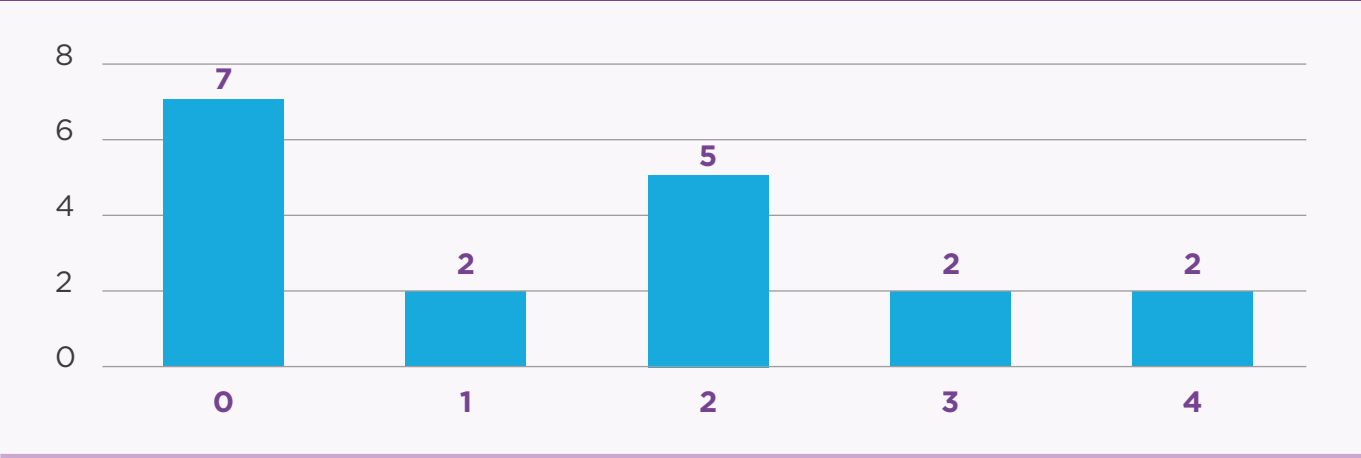


Figure 17: Number of AS Classes

There were 28 Autism Specific (AS) classes with six in each class across the 19 respondent schools in 2024-25. All school reported that they had a SEN Coordinator in place. This is a qualified teacher leading school support for students with learning difficulties or disabilities. There were 179 Special Needs Assistants across 18 schools in the 2024-25 academic year. One school has 10 SNAs but need more. 85% of respondent schools (n=15) had posts of responsibility overseeing attendance. 64 young people were engaged with a School Completion Programme.

5.2 Risk Factors

We have combined the risk factors emerging from the consultations with community based professionals and the schools survey into thematic headings in Table 5.

Home/Personal	School	Community/Environmental
Mental Health	Poor Numeracy and Literacy	Drugs and alcohol
Socio-Economic Conditions	Undiagnosed Needs	Peer Pressure
Home support structure	Low academic ability	Homelessness
Adverse Childhood Experiences	Low confidence and self esteem	Cultural Diversity
Attitudes to Education	Suspensions & absenteeism	Lack of community supports
Parental Capacity	Emotional Based Avoidance	Rural and urban considerations
Nurturing Environment	Inflexible curricula	across Fingal

Table 5: Risk Factors Thematic Headings

5.2.1 Home

The home environment of the child and the associated levels of parental support and engagement was consistently highlighted as a significant risk or protective factor in relation to early school leaving. *“So much of what happens in any child or young adult’s life is shaped and defined by their home environment”*. Many key informants interviewed agreed that a robust home support structure to nurture the young person in school is essential throughout all cycles. It is especially important at key milestones such as transition from primary to secondary school. Underlying challenges at this juncture can lead to rapid disengagement as the child can *“get lost”* in a bigger secondary school with a different configuration of support services.

Parental Capacity

The correlation between parental attitude to education and their child’s participation was a prominent theme identified by contributors. Where the prevailing parental attitude is negative arising possibly from their poor experience of education coupled with long term unemployment and absence of aspiration through low educational attainment, it is more likely that such attitudes will be transferred to their children. As children become more independent when moving through primary school and into secondary school, embedded negative attitudes can impact on participation and lead to disengagement.

Parents struggling with aspects of their parental responsibilities such as authority and boundaries in addition to other parts of their lives can result in their child’s education becoming less of a priority. These challenges can be exacerbated in cases where only one parent is present and there are financial issues. 27% of families in Blanchardstown were headed by one parent according to Census 2022 with some smaller pockets within the LEA having rates of one parent families greater than 50%.

Socio Economic

Contributors highlighted a range of circumstances such as children coming in late, poorly presented, homework not done which represent early warning signs. This is of particular concern when happening for children in first year as it indicates that the home environment may not be functioning properly. These are warning signs that capacity is not there to support and sustain their children in education.

Single-parent households where there are financial pressures around working makes it difficult to devote time towards their child’s education. This is amplified when children get older and become more independent. The lure of employment and cash-in-hand draws some 14-15 year olds to disengage from education for work to contribute financially.

One key informant highlighted the risk factors to educational engagement should basic needs not be met for all children. *“If children do not have the basics in their lives, their capacity to develop academically and emotionally is severely reduced”*

Mental Health

Mental Health presentations are high and continually increasing with services across Fingal reporting sharp increases in anxiety, self-harm influences often driven by online activity and behaviours and social skills regression post-COVID. This cohort with mental health challenges and poor social skills, are equally concerning for educators as those 12-15 year olds presenting with behavioural issues. Those aged 12-15 represent Jigsaw’s largest cohort, with some of these still in primary school.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are a risk factor regardless of socioeconomic status. Some children are presenting to youth services with an average of four ACEs, with many from affluent families where the issues may not be immediately evident on the surface. Family breakdowns due to incarceration or addiction often result in caregiving provided by the children’s grandparents or their own siblings.

The Local Health Office (LHO) of Dublin North West had the second highest rate of self-harm in males aged 24 years and under in 2020 in the state (NSRF, 2020). In 2022, there were 145 admissions of children and young people aged 17 years or under to Psychiatric Hospitals/ Units and to Child and Adolescent Units in Dublin. This equates to a rate of 4.5 per 10,000 children (aged 17 years and under) and was above the State average of 3.0⁴⁰.

5.2.2 School

In what ways do you see the risk factors presenting in school

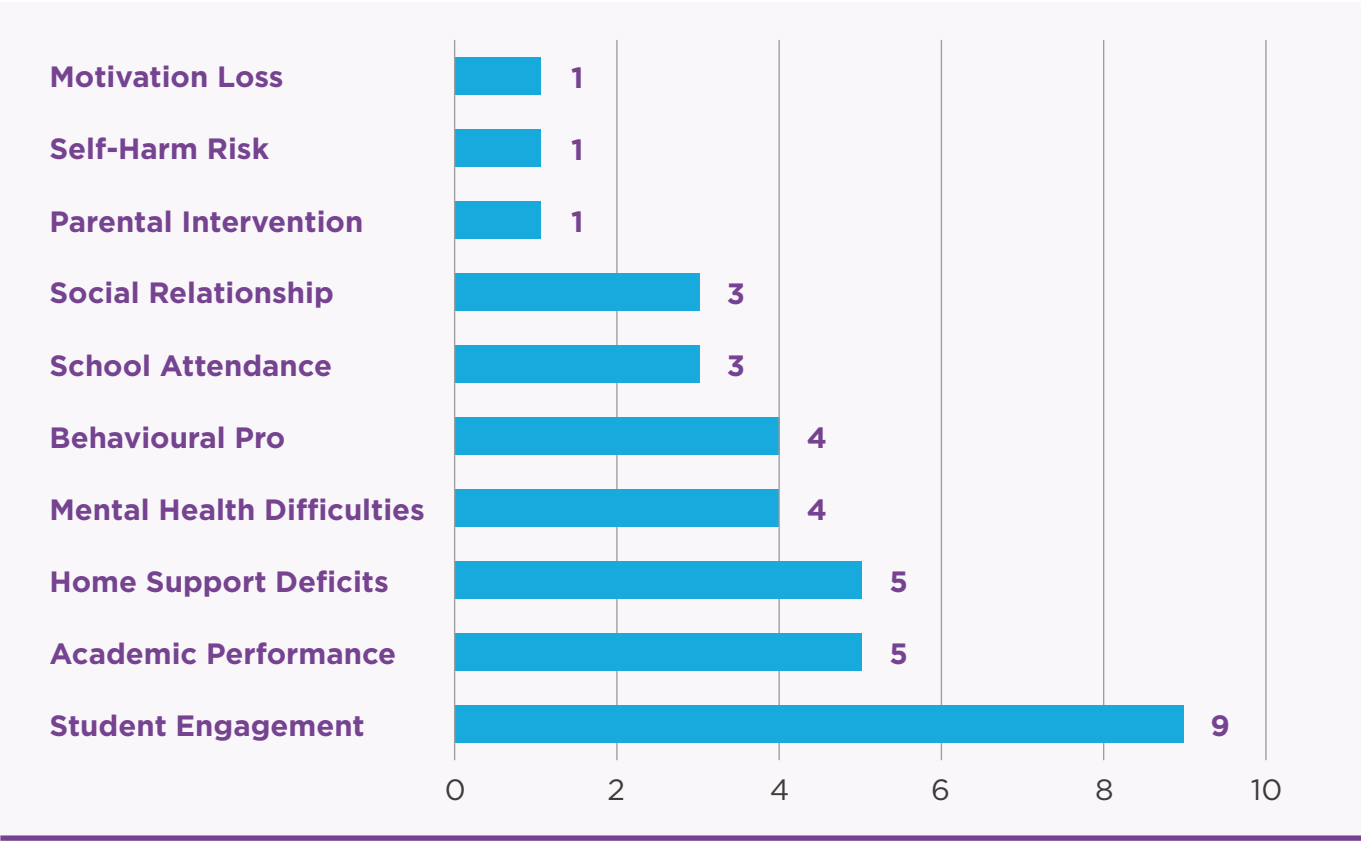


Figure 18: Risk Factors Presenting in school

⁴⁰ Fingal CYPSC Evidence Baseline Report, 2025

It is in school where many of the risk factors identified within the home and community environments are amplified creating multiple barriers to participation for many vulnerable 12-15 year olds. Young people with literacy deficits that have not been addressed in primary school can reach a point in secondary school where they are unable to engage with a Junior Certificate curriculum. This creates difficulties for the young person, teacher and other students. As a coping strategy some become more absent which intensifies the difficulties and indulge in disruptive behaviour in the classroom when they are in school.

Assessment

National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) waiting list can be three years with private assessments costing circa €2,000. Such delays accentuates the gap between pupil needs and mainstream classroom demands. Interim contingencies such as movement breaks noise trigger distress for neurodivergent pupils, assistive technology are often identified but schools often lack the resources to integrate these within the classroom. Small adjustments such as quiet spaces and earplugs help, but the teacher – pupil ratio limits the amount of realistic modification. Reduced school days are an option but can entrench avoidance if not time-bound with a restoration plan.

If an assessment for an emotional or behavioural disorder is required, it can take up to 12 months for completion by the Health Service Executive (HSE). Contributors expressed frustration at such waiting times adding that a diagnosis brings certainty to the child, their family and the school and helps inform principals on the allocation of learning resources.

Where a diagnosis is confirmed, there can still be delays in being seen by the Child & Adult Mental Health Services (CAMHS). The Local Health Office (LHO) of Dublin North West and Dublin North have some of the highest rates of young people waiting for psychology treatment and OT assessments (HSE 2024).



Post Primary Transition

The transition from primary to post primary school is challenging with movement into large, multi-teacher secondary settings overwhelming for some. If sporadic attendance continues from primary to secondary school, it can sever friendships and belonging, accelerating withdrawal. Targeted, attachment-informed small group work and summer programmes where available were deemed effective by stakeholders in smoothing this transition.

The cumulative psychological impact of a complex home, school and community environment on levels of participation and attainment in school can be significant particularly as the child gets older, progresses to secondary school and become more aware of their external environment. Some children learn to cope as they mature but others struggle, leading, to emotional and mental health issues.

Avoidance, Absenteeism, Suspension & Expulsion

Anxiety induced school avoidance is now more prevalent, particularly post-COVID. Avoidance anxieties have since become more accepted in home routines, with parents unsure about the best approach. They are torn whether to comfort anxious children by enabling them to stay at home or positively enforce school attendance. This can result in children becoming “too comfortable at home”, leading to habit-forming late nights and compounding their disengagement.

84 students across 15 schools in our survey had school avoidance in the 2024-25 academic year. 807 students in total reached 20 days absence in 2024-25 slightly above the national average. The highest incidence of suspensions occurred in first and second year with about one third of those suspended having a suspected undiagnosed learning or behavioural difficulty.

The number of expulsions (n=5) were negligible and broadly in line with the national average. The lack of school places in Fingal is a challenge as sometimes a change of school after avoidance, absenteeism or suspension could make a difference, but this is often not an option for the EWOs as there are no places available in other schools for in year transfer.

Quantification of Need

Referrals are made to the EWS when a school, agency or parent is concerned about the attendance of the young person. Table 6 presents the current⁴¹ caseload of EWOs working across Fingal, 44% (n=61) of which are disengaged from education.

84 students across 15 schools in our survey had school avoidance in the 2024-25 academic year.

⁴¹ As of November 2025

EWO	1st - 3rd Year Cases	Numbers Disengaged
1	20 cases	10 cases disengaged
2	19	5
3	20 cases	9 disengaged
4	24	11
5	8 cases	7 disengaged
6	18	7
7	29 cases	12 disengaged

Table 6: EWO caseload and disengagement 2025

5.2.3 Community

Schools are located within communities in Fingal and a range of wider societal issues which present ongoing risk factors for dis-engagement from education are discussed below.

Normalisation of Drugs and Alcohol

Intergenerational involvement with drugs and addiction and its impact on the current generation of young people was a recurring theme in the consultations. The normalisation of drug use is evident in its recreational use among 12-15 year olds. Experimentation with drugs and alcohol could happen “as early as 3rd class” increasing the potential for mental health challenges and possible exposure to manipulation by drug and criminal gangs. The LHO of Dublin North Central has the second highest rate of children and young people accessing treatment for substance misuse in the State (National Drugs Library 2024).

There is frequent feuding among various gangs and there were references to young people in the 12-15 age group “badly beaten up” purely on familial links. Intimidation has become a major factor for concern over the last number of years, linked with drug debt and gang culture. Anti-social behaviour and community safety remain serious issues that affect the experience of children, young people and families in particularly in Dublin 15.

Contributors reported the widespread use and availability of illicit drugs for sale locally. The frequency of poly-drug use in the area is high among younger people. Accessibility to and normalisation of drugs and alcohol at a young age are linked to risky behaviours with some indications that children are presenting in school on occasion under the influence of drugs.

The Planet Youth Programme is being piloted across North Dublin by the North Dublin Regional Drug and Alcohol Task Force. It adopts a holistic approach focusing on strengthening protective factors and reducing risk for substance use and early school leaving. The first results based on a sample of transition year, fifth year and Leaving Certificate Applied students across 16 secondary schools in North Dublin are illustrated below.

Substance Use

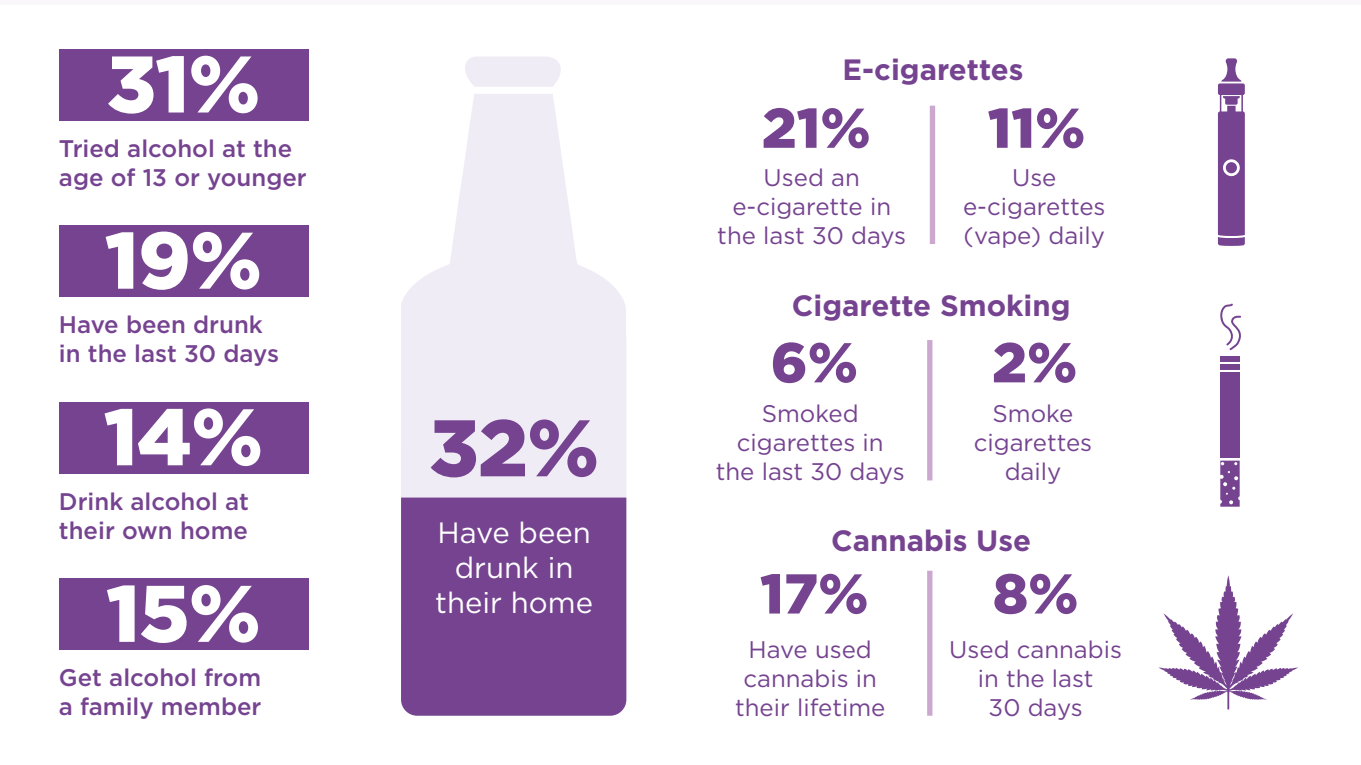


Figure 19: Planet Youth North Dublin 2025

Normalisation of drugs and alcohol in families can lead to an early introduction to illegal drug use. Young people of early secondary school going age are being used as carriers and sellers of illicit drugs with increasing exposure to drug related gangs and intimidation. There were multiple references to manufactured drug debts that purposely put young people in a situation they can’t control or get out of.

A number of risk factors were identified across interviews that might identify a young person as vulnerable to ‘selection’ or ‘targeting’ including: a young person’s own drug and alcohol use, family involvement in drug consumption or crime, difficult family circumstances (lone parent, domestic violence), knowledge of poor performance or trouble at school, links with other young people known to be involved in drug/alcohol misuse or anti-social behaviour or even simply ‘looking innocent’ and therefore less like to be stopped. The impact of this on participation in school is damaging and for such students early drop out is “*virtually inevitable*”.

Peer Pressure

The normal maturing process of becoming more independent, being given more freedom to stay out later in the evening and increased access to social and digital media can present barriers to participation for a cohort who are well behaved and have positively engaged in primary and early secondary school. Falling in with the ‘*wrong crowd*’ at this stage can have detrimental consequences for participation in school as the child moves through secondary school.

Bullying is not an issue exclusive to schools in Fingal, however given the influence that some of the most disruptive children can have on their more vulnerable class mates, it can present regularly, as reported, through overt aggression in the schoolyard, on the way to and from school and on-line through the various social media channels. While much of it is bravado and gang related, contributors did highlight increasing instances where it is related to race and ethnicity.

Homelessness

Experience of homelessness can impact on level of participation and involvement in school. In 2024, the Local Authority (LA) of Fingal had the second highest rate of families with children on social housing waiting lists when compared to the other LAs⁴² (Summary of Social Housing Assessments). The areas with the highest housing tenure of rented from a private landlord are in the some of the most disadvantage areas of Fingal (Census 2022). Family homeless hubs in Fingal are funded by Fingal County Council and managed by approved housing providers such as Respond, Sophia and the Peter McVerry Trust (PMVT).

As of December 2025, there are 17 young people aged 12-15 housed in PMVT⁴³ family hubs in Swords, Kinsealy and Ongar. Contributors referenced families based in Homeless Hubs outside Fingal in areas such as Dublin 1 Dublin 7, Cabra, Finglas and Celbridge with children attending school in Fingal. Many are reliant on public transport (two or three bus journeys) to get to and from school each day as the family does not have access to a car. This can lead to inconsistent attendance and engagement, poor punctuality, and fatigue as discussed in Section 2.2.3.

In Dublin at the end of November 2025, there were 1,787 families (3,929 children) in emergency accommodation, 21% (n=375 families, 825 children) of whom were in the Fingal County Council area⁴⁴. Given the narrow scope of the definition of homelessness in Ireland, it is likely many more children in Fingal are living in transient accommodation thereby impacting on their education participation.

⁴² Fingal CYPSC Evidence Baseline Report, 2025
⁴³ Information sourced from PMVT
⁴⁴ <https://www.homelessdublin.ie/content/files/Homeless-update-69-November-2025.pdf?v=1767614429>

There are also concerns around the possible latent mental health impact of homelessness on children and young people in such accommodation which though not yet presenting may emerge in the future without satisfactory resolution of the homeless issue. Children in care and living in informal foster care arrangements is a risk factor for education, the transient nature of some of these arrangements impacts significantly on attendance and engagement. As of Q4 2023, there were 388 children and young people in the care of Tusla in the Dublin North Local Health Office.

Cultural Diversity

Fingal has the second lowest of all the CYPSC areas in the country of ‘White Irish’ population. Ongar have **52.9%** ‘White Irish’ and Blanchardstown-Mulhuddart has **41.6%**. Fingal’s proportion of ‘Black or Black Irish’ is the highest among all CYPSC areas at **3.6%**, which is also higher than the state figure of **1.5%**. As of 31/12/2025 there were 2,034 people living in IPAS accommodation in Fingal⁴⁵. This diversity presents in the classroom with some schools reporting more than 50% of students not having English as their first language. This amplifies the importance of English as an Additional Language (EAL) supports which are much better resourced in DEIS Schools.

Contributors highlighted challenges with school engagement among Travellers, Roma and other ethnic minorities. The prevailing culture is such that many Travellers especially girls will leave secondary school before completing the Junior Certificate. The Roma community move around for seasonal work which can impact family cohesion and school attendance.

Contributors highlighted that there is some bias against the Traveller and Roma communities in schools manifesting in the student population through bullying with insufficient supports in place. Some from ethnic minorities can also struggle to integrate in secondary school in the initial stages but with the appropriate supports, they overcome the early challenges and in many cases, prosper in school due to the high levels of motivation that are often prevalent in children from ethnic minorities.

Community Wraparound

A recurring theme to emerge from the consultations was the variance in community wraparounds accessed. Some schools in Blanchardstown emphasised the links they have locally with community organisations and the Local Development Company who provide supports to children, families, new communities and the Traveller and Roma communities.

This is not the case in areas and estates that have been built in the past 20 years such as Ongar which in that time has transitioned between owner occupied to rental with a mix of middle class people, those in receipt of a Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) and people on the poverty line. While there is a community centre in Ongar, the programmes in it are not free which impacts participation from parents and young people aged 12-15.

Ongar have 52.9% ‘White Irish’ and Blanchardstown-Mulhuddart has 41.6%

⁴⁵ IPAS Weekly Accommodation and Arrivals Statistics

6: Responses

This section explores the universal, targeted and alternative pathway responses that schools and communities in Fingal have in place to mitigate the risk factors for educational disengagement discussed in Section 5. This is based on consultations with stakeholders and desk research.

6.1 In School DEIS Supports

There are five post primary DEIS schools in Fingal (one in Rush-Lusk, one in Balbriggan, one in Swords and two in Blanchardstown, D15). DEIS schools deliver a full wraparound of tailored learning supports along with nutritious meals and snacks. The model is particularly effective for learners with additional needs, and/or recently arrived where practical supports and a trusted HSCL contact can keep students and families engaged.

DEIS status comes with additional Special Education Teaching Hours with flexibility for the school as to how they use this resource based on their student needs⁴⁶. This facilitates a classroom environment where one teacher leads the curriculum while a second adapts in real-time through movement breaks, dyslexia friendly materials and sensory supports for learners with additional needs. Autism classes on site create step-up and step-down options.

This inclusive model sustains more pupils within mainstream education by adjusting methods and environment, rather than taking the pupil from class. This shift to responsive differentiation keeps learning social and visible. Classrooms hold highly mixed needs (Neurodivergence, Mental health, EAL) in 30-pupil groups. Ultimately these responses mean more learners are kept in-class rather than being brought to separate classrooms and made to feel different, avoiding exclusionary patterns and maintaining peer connections key for those aged between 12-15 years whose sense of belonging and connection might be fragile.

Teachers reported calmer classrooms when movement breaks and adapted materials are normalised. Overstimulation through noise levels cannot be controlled in this environment however, while timetable complexity limits personalisation even with these robust practices in place. Demand for SNA time exceeds allocation, forcing constant triage on who, when and for how long.

Anxious and neurodivergent pupils (diagnosed/undiagnosed) benefit from short, right-sized inputs and from environmental tweaks (quiet space, predictable movement breaks, timetable amendments). Schools report same day de-escalation and re-entry when calm spaces are available; whilst mental health literacy for staff and parents improves earlier identification and more appropriate classroom accommodations. Where resources permit, schools complement SNA supports with nurture/calm rooms and simple sensory aids such as ear plugs and quiet spaces.

⁴⁶ <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-education/services/special-education-teacher-allocation-20242025-explained/#the-number-of-special-education-teachers-working-in-mainstream-classes>

The Home School Liaison Officer (HSCL) facilitates proactive home contact, with year heads and care teams monitoring early indicators of poor attendance and engagement. HSCL collaborate with SCP and EWOs at statutory thresholds (20+ days absent in one school year) and suspensions ensuring same-day or next-day contact with home. Daily attendance checks enable early parent contact, while pupils transitioning from primary to secondary school can be routed by EWOs to Foróige summer provision in D15 when school-based offers aren’t available.

6.1.1 School Completion Programme (SCP)

There are five SCPs⁴⁷ in Fingal across eight post primary and 26 primary schools. Typical secondary school caseload is 44 at any time; with a mix of targeted and brief supports, involving 1-to-1, and small groups. Profile includes high proportion of working-class boys (aged 12-15) at expulsion risk, Traveller and Roma children, and anxiety-based school avoidance with vaping and cannabis use prevalent.

SCPs lead on transition supports from primary to post primary school, coordinating summer programmes from their post-primary school site, also involving day trips to aquatic centres and other amenities. This builds familiarity with the secondary school site, rooms and staff while also enabling early care-team handovers, and identifying first-year watchlists. The SCP also signpost into Foróige summer offerings where available. All this combined helps reduce first-week anxiety and improves initial attendance among pupils who might otherwise struggle.

SCP teams operate targeted retention supports, including out of school groups, transition supports, and attendance promotion. Where reduced timetables, suspensions or school avoidance persist, SCP can coordinate bespoke plans that connect to, iScoil or short term re engagement programmes where places exist but the SCP coordinators echoed the challenge around “very low” availability of places in alternative programmes.

Teachers credit SCP with social, emotional and behavioural gains, and with smoother first-year starts because pupils arrive familiar with the site and staff. If they need to avail of additional support from SCP staff, they already know them and are more likely to engage positively. The SCP resources are finite equating to 40-60 minutes per pupil each week and are conditional on DEIS status.

⁴⁷ Blakestown/Mountview SCP, North Fingal SCP, St. Finians SCP, Together Opportunities For Education (TOFE) and Swords SCP

6.2 Supports in Non DEIS Schools

Figure 20 documents the supports in place in the survey respondent schools of which 88% (n=17) were non DEIS schools.

Supports your school has implemented to meeting the needs of young people at risk of early school leaving.

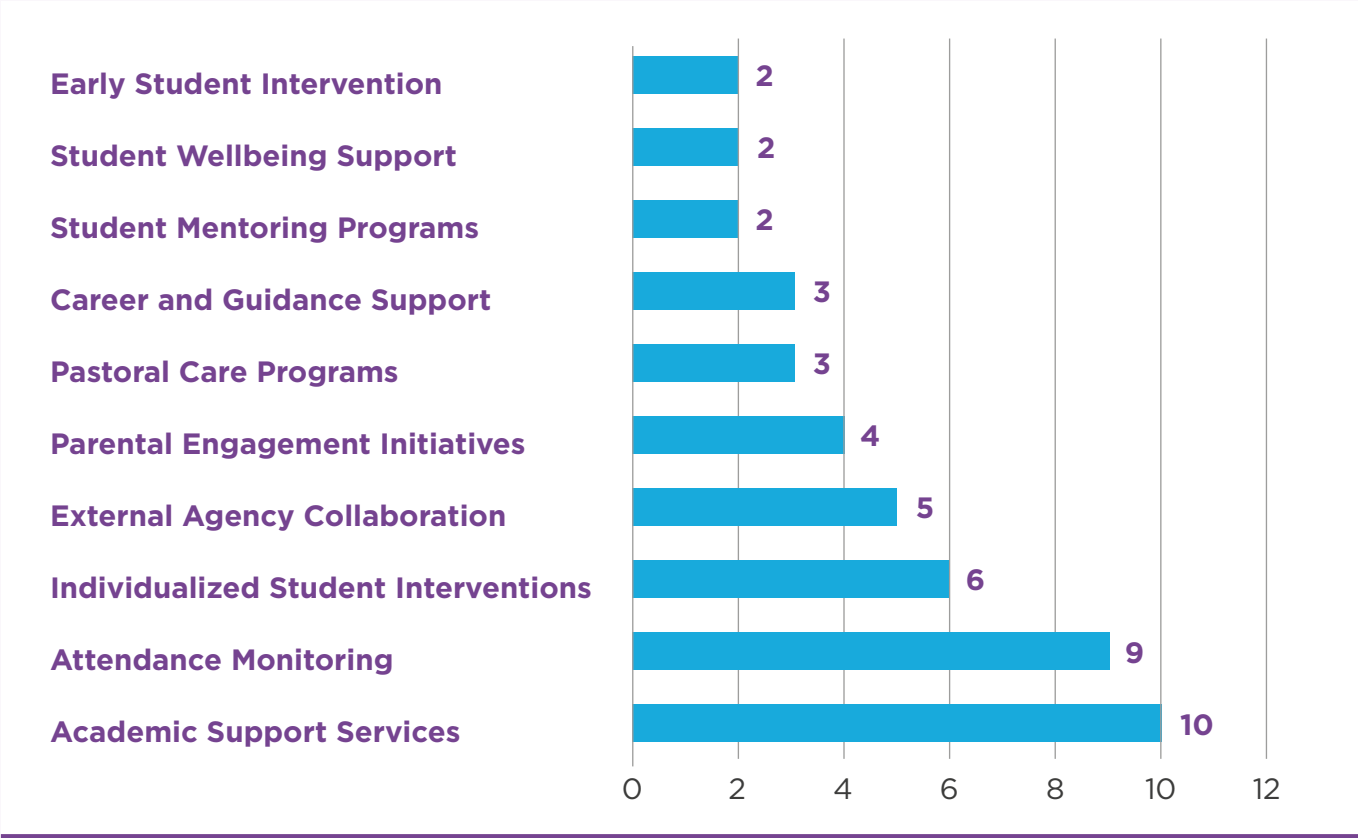


Figure 20: Supports in Place

Individualised student support, attendance monitoring and academic supports are the three most prevalent interventions adopted by schools to mitigate the risks of early school leaving. As most are non-Deis schools, the resources used will come from existing school budgets and the staff team.

Respondents referenced well-being programmes, study skills seminars, extra-curricular programmes, input from Guidance Counsellors and in school psychotherapy and sports, chess, music and art clubs as being crucial enablers for sustaining young people in school. Building relationships and peer support is facilitated through the “One good adult, Big Brother, Big sister initiative”.

Pastoral Care programmes were prominent in the responses. These are designed to create a sense of belonging to the school and while these are led by the guidance team and school chaplain it is evident that teachers are integrally involved also through initiatives such as “Check in and connect” each morning with awards for participation.

Attendance monitoring is rigorous, schools track attendance closely and identify students at early stages who are displaying poor attendance. Concerns around student’s absenteeism are followed up by Assistant Principals⁴⁸ and the relevant Year Head. Schools highlighted that they engage with parents when six days absence is reached followed by a letter at 10 days and an invitation to an attendance clinic. Parental engagement was prominent in the responses with coffee mornings for parents and support videos referenced.

Schools are proactive in collaborating with outside agencies and community supports to support young people to stay in school. They are making significant efforts to manage the risks of early school leaving, however with most not having DEIS status the resources deployed are from existing budgets and teaching resources which is not sustainable in the long term.

6.3 Out of School

Out of School supports to assist young people at risk of early school leaving in Fingal to sustain in or return to school are discussed in this sub section.

6.3.1 YMCA Back on Track

Treated as a schooling response, although delivered off-site, this is school or Tusla Education Support Service (TESS) referred young people. It is of 3-5 days duration and explicitly aims at return to school with a reintegration plan. It has repositioned from “*alternative to suspension*” to enable pre-suspension referrals (school avoidance, poor attendance) and shift away from perception of punitive measures. Each learner gets an individual plan blending schoolwork and targeted workshops such as anger regulation and “*react vs respond*”.

A reintegration meeting with school leaders converts insights gained through the programme into concrete classroom tweaks such as movement breaks, teacher proximity, visuals, assistive technology, immersive reader and bionic reading. This programme is delivered in several sites across Dublin with one Fingal site in Parslickstown, D15 which was established in early 2025 and has already supported eight young people. The participants were predominantly male, in second or third year and mixed socio-economic backgrounds.

A follow up is undertaken with the school three months post completion to monitor progression, regression and improvements.

Across indicators such as participation, attendance, behaviour, motivation and punctuality, programme completers in 2025 reported a 68% improvement. Off-site separation creates a genuine reset and practical reintegration adjustments teachers can implement immediately. Current programme capacity is small but scalable via satellite services with appropriate funding.

⁴⁸ Assistant Principal Posts involve management and additional duties beyond standard teaching. 85% of schools in the survey had these posts of responsibility overseeing attendance.

6.3.2 Foróige Early School Leavers (ESL) Programme

Foróige ESL in Blanchardstown provides an informal education, 10–2pm, school-term programme designed to stabilise attendance and engagement with a view to reintegrating young people in school or enabling progression to Youthreach. Typical intake is 10 per year with a live waiting list of 10. It is framed as informal education complementing school, not a replacement.

Referrals come from secondary schools across D15 (including fee-paying) and increasingly non-DEIS schools. ESL is used when a pupil is on the brink of expulsion or where absenteeism is spiralling. All ESL referrals come via the EWO , reflecting its position as a last-resort measure to keep the young person in school often where no home tuition is in place.

ESL provides a low pressure, relationship-focused environment (e.g. teachers on first-name terms) with food, homework support, provision of Leap cards, dyslexia supports and mental health supports and signposting. Youth workers also deliver assertive outreach to maintain engagement. Staff are equipped to manage complexities around mental health, neurodivergence and social and emotional difficulties.

The flexibility ESL affords is what mainstream cannot provide at scale i.e. tailored student environment and intensive support to address a multitude of complex issues presenting. It facilitates Junior Cert exams with the support of a local secondary school. Challenges for the ESL Programme includes a reduction in funding resulting in them having to pay for some teaching input from their own budgets.



6.3.3 Alternative Learning Programme (ALP)

The aim of ALP is to engage participants in an informal learning environment, to establish beneficial routines and positive social interactions. ALP fosters an environment of mutual respect, encouragement, inclusiveness and personal responsibility. Participants in the ALP are given an opportunity to research and access information on issues such as returning to school, educational progression, training and future career options and to develop the skills to sustain involvement in these areas.

A participant attends ALP initially for an eight-week period. After this time a review is carried out with the ALP staff, Parents/Guardians, EWO and school or other relevant supports. It discusses the progress of the young person on the programme and the possible transition back to school or other appropriate educational setting. If a transition is not possible at that time the young person may be offered another eight-week cycle after which another review meeting will be held. There are two ALP sites in Fingal (Swords and Balbriggan) with capacity for nine young people per programme. There are no ALP sites in D15.

6.3.4 Blakestown Mountview Life Skills Programme

This Tusla funded 10 week Life Skills Programmes which commenced in October 2025 provides a combination of group work, one-to-one support, practical skills training, and targeted interventions for vulnerable young people who are at risk of early school leaving. Themes covered in the programme include creative skills, team building, practical skills, personal development and conflict resolution. Referrals to the programme come from Tusla and EWOs.

6.3.5 Foróige Health and Wellbeing programme

This programme, funded by Fingal CYPSC through their Healthy Ireland Funding allocation, engages young people with complex needs and at risk of early school leaving. Young people are referred in by EWOs, schools and TúsIa in Fingal. Foróige youth officers meet 1-1 with participants two to three times per week to focus on behaviour issues, promote positive social, mental and physical health and explore relationship boundaries. The intervention aims to build resilience and confidence in young people so they can return to school or training and get involved in other clubs, groups or projects in their community.

Most referrals are for young people who have missed up to six months at school and in some cases the absence is up to two years. The programme commenced in 2022 and in the ensuing period, 75 young people aged 12-15 have been referred with the following education and training outcomes.

- > Numbers returning to school part-time or full time- 39
- > Numbers move to the alternative learning programme- 9
- > Numbers transitioning to iScoil- 2
- > Numbers availing of training -15

6.4 Alternative Education

Supports discussed previously are delivered in school or off site with the aim of the young person returning to school. This sub section explores the theme of alternative education provision for young people in Fingal when all efforts and interventions have been exhausted to support the young person to return to school. While alternative educational programmes play a critical role in reengagement the current provision is insufficient to meet identified levels of need.

6.4.1 iScoil

To be considered for iScoil, the participant must be aged 13-16, have not completed the Junior Certificate and be absent from mainstream education for at least six months. iScoil provide a personalised learning programme based on a student’s unique needs, interests and abilities. The approach combines instructional content with individual mentoring and tutoring support to guide each student along their journey, building up an assessable portfolio of work, leading to their QQI accreditation.

iScoil is flexible and adaptable with 1-1 mentoring support, allowing students to work at their own pace online or in a local blended learning centre of which there is none currently in Fingal. Referrals are typically made through TESS in collaboration with families and services. The number of iScoil places nationally will increase from 180 to 250 students in 2026. With the state funding level at €1.2 million, the approximate cost per student is: €4,800 per student per year⁴⁹.

6.4.2 Youthreach

Centres typically cater for early school leavers aged 16–20 on a full time, year round basis, offering QQI accredited learning, guidance, and pastoral supports. Entry under age 16 is exceptional and requires formal approval. Youthreach progression aims include further education and training, traineeships/apprenticeships, and employment. Youthreach Centres in Swords, Rush, Blanchardstown and Balbriggan deliver QQI Level 3 (Junior Cert equivalent) and Level 4 (Leaving Cert equivalent) to early school leavers. Rush, Swords and Balbriggan centres are capped at 25 places each (meaning a total of 75 places across North County Fingal).

The centres however in very exceptional cases exceeded their quota to avoid turning away 15-year-olds. There are long waiting lists for these centres, with Swords having 40 on their waiting list currently, which in practice “become next year’s intake”, inevitably meaning that the waiting list just continues to grow. Blanchardstown currently has 35 full time learners with a high waiting list and “could easily take another 35” if capacity, space and staffing allowed.

Youthreach progression aims include further education and training, traineeships/ apprenticeships, and employment

⁴⁹ [Ministers Naughton and Moynihan announce funding boost to iScoil](#)

The profile of young people attending YR in Fingal has shifted from “*mostly boys with behaviour issues*” to younger, anxious, often neurodivergent cohorts. Many present without a Junior Certificate and begin at QQI L3 to rebuild basics. Self-referrals dominate as schools are getting better at retaining challenging young people. Participants in Youthreaches in Fingal include members of the Traveller community, while EAL migrant community needs are present but lower than Dublin city centre levels.

The Youthreach environment involves five days per week attendance and is characterised by small groups, no uniform, no homework first-name terms with tutors, and regular meals throughout the day. Portfolio building involving small incremental progression rebuilds confidence and creates a sense of purpose and belonging. The two-year continuity consolidates social and emotional gains.

A clear progression from Level 3 to Level 4 avoids disruptive moves; with links to Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses and employment routes on exit. There is a good relationship with schools despite the shift from school to self-referrals. Youthreach stakeholders report a strong interface with the SCP coordinators and EWOs. With centres generally unable to admit under 16s, ALP is used as an alternative holding route until eligible, but again capacity here is limited.

For long non-attenders in mainstream education, Youthreach provides a credible re-entry to certification and at the very least stabilises routine, with onward transition to PLCs, training or employment. Youthreach Centres notes that adolescents often carry Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), and the smaller setting is key to engagement and addressing this trauma. Challenges are faced in the form of long waiting lists (e.g. Swords 40) creating a de facto one-year delay, with no additional places across any of the four Fingal YR Centres to reflect the growth in population. Age eligibility further blocks early diversion of under 16s, exactly when avoidance issues start to fester.

6.4.3 Community Training Centre (CTC) - Blanchardstown

Serves 16–21 age range only (cannot take 15-year-olds, even with exceptions). 32 enrolled across QQI L3–L4 vocational strands: Creative Digital Media (L4), Sports & Health (L3/4), and Beauty Specialist Techniques (L4 diploma); max 12 per class; short 5-day Barista courses)

About 70–80% of young people are from DEIS areas, whilst 50% have Junior Cert, very few have a Leaving Certificate.

Many arrive after “*dwindling years*” of non-attendance, probation or Juvenile Liaison Officer involvement and self-referrals are prominent. There are generally two school referral types they receive: a) Overwhelmed by school from anxiety/ASD/ADHD; b) cases schools needed to exit.

Small classes capped at 12 are felt to reduce anxiety and increase participation; embedded functional maths across strands keeps pathways to apprenticeship/FE open. Community integration (e.g. public availing of student beauty/barista services) accelerate word-of-mouth engagement. The one-year programmes (with possible 6-month extension) provide work-ready individuals with stronger soft-skills.

Retention hinges on appropriate mental health supports and relevance of strand choice. Staff report anger management issues among participants and high CAMHS involvement, which underlines the need for an on-site wellbeing advocate. Staff are not trained mental health clinicians yet carry the mental health load of students. Further challenges arise with ETB geography limiting cross-catchment intake; whilst under 16s referrals are sent to Youthreach/ALP due to age rules. Ukrainian/EAL learners may fail the mandatory literacy/numeracy test, leading to a service gap until language improves.

6.4.4 Alternatives Outside Fingal

There are some options outside Fingal though transport challenges and accessibility could be a barrier. The St. Paul's Youth Encounter Project in Finglas⁵⁰ cater for children 10 to 16 years old. Its role is to provide an alternative less formal school setting for children that have become alienated from mainstream education for reasons of truancy, behavioural problems, or family difficulties. St Paul's learning programmes are based on an Individual Student Profiling system involving individual assessment of strengths, difficulties, and learning priorities based on teacher observations, in-house assessments, and standardised testing.

Planning is based on the provision of class teaching, learning support, and paired reading to provide a programme tailored at the appropriate level and identified learning priorities for each individual child. This student-centred approach and curriculum framework for young people in St Paul's is based on the provision of the Primary Curriculum, Junior Cycle, JCSP, and Level 2 Learning Programmes, and/or a combination of these as appropriate. Planning and selection of learning programmes is done by the whole school teaching team in conjunction with parental consultation and consent.

The Carline Learning Centre is an education centre based in Lucan which caters for young people aged 13–17 years old, excluded from or no longer attending mainstream education. Programmes are designed to meet individual learning needs and maximises participants intrinsic ability to engage in continued learning. They aim to enable young people to recognise the positive impact education has on their future development.

6.5 Mental Health Supports

Jigsaw Fingal supports 12–15s with Neart education around mental health supports for post-primary schools, partnering with NEPS and Department for Education and Youth (DEY). They also offer staff/parent sessions and flexible session counts with no fixed cap (session numbers are tailored on a case-by-case basis for each young person). Referrals from Fingal have increased significantly in recent years with the highest proportion in the 12–15 age group with many still at primary school. Jigsaw is voluntary and is not a condition attached to poor attendance, suspension or expulsion, hence engagement requires some readiness. Geography is an issue for these services with stakeholders referencing the access to the main Jigsaw hub in Swords is challenging especially when using public transport.

⁵⁰ <https://www.stpaulsyep.com/>

7: Discussion and Learning

The research into the educational needs of 12-15-year-olds in Fingal seeks to provides a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing school engagement and disengagement. This section discusses the key learnings emerging:

7.1 The Policy Context

The research is aligned to Young Ireland: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028, particularly National Outcome 2 – Achieving in Learning and Development. This emphasises inclusive, high quality education, tackling educational disadvantage, and meaningful participation of young people in shaping services. The policy context also includes DEIS, Tusla’s Education Support Service, the School Completion Programme and Home School Community Liaison and local provision led by Dublin & Dún Laoghaire ETB (DDLETB) and youth organisations such as Foróige and Crosscare.

7.2 Socio-Demographic Profile

Fingal is one of Ireland’s fastest growing and youngest Local Authority (LA) Areas, combining large urban centres (e.g., Blanchardstown, Swords) with towns and rural coastal communities. Affluence sits alongside marked pockets of disadvantage, particularly in parts of Swords, Balbriggan and Blanchardstown-Mullhuddart. Fingal is highly diverse by ethnicity and country of birth. It has one of the highest youth populations in the country.

These dynamics shape both demand for school places and the nature of supports needed for engagement, inclusion, and progression. Particularly relevant to this research is Fingal ranking fourth lowest nationally of all CYPSC areas for both Primary and Post-Primary DEIS school classification. This limits access to special education teaching hours, and wraparound supports that DEIS status affords. Non-DEIS schools rely on internal budgets and the existing teaching base to support students with additional education needs.

7.3 Risk Factors

Educational disengagement is rarely caused exclusively by a single issue. Instead, it stems from a combination of home, school, and community influences. Mental health challenges, socio-economic pressures, and parental attitudes toward education were consistently identified as major contributors. The prevalence of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) across socio-economic groups underscores the need for trauma-informed approaches. Post-COVID trends show heightened anxiety, school avoidance, and social skill regression among adolescents.

Services such as Jigsaw report that 12-15-year-olds represent their largest cohort, indicating an urgent need for integrated mental health supports within educational settings. An emerging complex set of mental health needs, many undiagnosed and in the mild to moderate spectrum, will without further assessment and intervention continue to challenge the learning resources and the overall functioning of schools. For the cohort who are deemed most at risk of early school leaving⁵¹ continuation in a mainstream educational setting without tailored support exposes them to further risk and furthermore places extreme pressure on the school to manage their needs.

7.4 Indicators

Survey results based on the 2024-2025 academic year from 19 schools with a combined student population of over 15,000 found that

- > 71 students were suspended for six days or more.
- > 807 students in total reached 20 days absence.
- > 84 students across 15 schools had school avoidance.
- > (16%) of the respondent schools population had additional education needs.
- > 143 students across 18 schools required a NEPS assessment⁵² with 27 assessments granted.
- > Shortages of educational psychologists, rising demand, and structural constraints mean that families are experiencing significant delays⁵³.
- > There were 28 AS classes with six in each class across the 19 respondent schools.
- > There were 179 Special Needs Assistants across 18 schools.
- > As there were only two DEIS schools in the sample, 64 young people were engaged with a School Completion Programme.

⁵¹ Due to multiple risk factors which may include poor attendance, drug use, known to An Ga da Siochana, familial difficulties, health and well -being issues.

⁵² NEPS assessments are vital because they: Support early identification of learning needs. Provide state funded, evidence informed evaluations. Ensure schools adopt inclusive, strutured interventions before and after assessment. Reduce reliance on costly private asesments.

⁵³ [Dept warns of shortage of educational psychologists](#)

7.5 Responses

The consensus emerging from the stakeholder discussions and survey responses from the schools was that supports currently in place can be effective but are insufficient in capacity to meet the level and complexity of current need. Alternative education pathways (Youthreach, iScoil) and off site programmes (Back on Track, Early School Leavers) provide vital re-engagement routes, yet capacity is limited. Waiting lists for Youthreach centres in Fingal are long, and age eligibility rules prevent early diversion for Under 16s when avoidance patterns are most acute. Resources must be invested to increase the capacity of these programmes as they are tried and tested and make a difference.

There were some concerns expressed about current approaches, while reduced school days are viewed as beneficial as a short-term intervention, some felt this is problematic in the long-term, arguing what 12-15-year-old would not want a shorter school day. Some contributors felt that this compounds the issue of anxiety-driven avoidance by ignoring the root causes (home, school, community).

7.6 Non DEIS Schools

A combination of learning supports, pastoral care, parental engagement, attendance promotion and school resilience manage most students additional educational needs in the non DEIS schools. This can include a disproportionate allocation of teaching resources to those with the most extreme behavioural and learning needs. The success of schools in retaining this cohort must be acknowledged. However that management of complex classroom and school environments is taking a toll on school resources and is not sustainable.

7.7 Quantification of Need

Quantifying the number of young people aged 12-15 in Fingal disengaged from education is challenging. There are however several statistics gleaned from the research that can provide indicative numbers. Historical data is relevant, in 2016, a total of 4,189 students entered the first year of the junior cycle in Fingal. By 2019, a total of 4,063 students in that cohort had completed their Junior Certificate and 126 had not.

We recognise that all the non-completers may not be attributable to disengagement as some may have moved away from the area. We know from the survey findings that 807 students in our school sample had 20 days or more absence in the 2024-25 school year. 61 EWO cases aged 12-15 are disengaged from school. Factoring in all the above, it is reasonable to propose that in the region of 100 young people could be classified as early school leavers (exiting before reaching age 16 or completing the Junior Certificate) in Fingal in the school year 2024-2025.

8: Recommendations

The experience of school for some young people in Fingal is undermined by a mix of factors: uneven access to supports, complex needs, attendance and behaviour pressures, and disadvantage. The priority is to strengthen inclusive practice and multi agency pathways that keep young people in learning, feeling safe, and progressing ideally in mainstream settings and when all such options have been exhausted appropriate alternative pathways.

In devising the recommendations offered for consideration in this section, we have been guided by the finding that by age 15 in the region of 100 young people in Fingal were early school leavers in the 2024-2025 school year. The recommendations focus on planning, systemic change, creating new programmes, building the capacity of existing programmes and supports to engage these young people and ensure that schools have the requisite resources to maximise retention.

8.1 Fingal CYPSC Children and Young Person’s Plan (CYPP)

Fingal CYPSC will be developing their new CYPP in 2027. We recommend that this research is factored into the needs analysis and action plan for the new CYPP. The findings are relevant to all five national outcomes with corresponding actions most likely to present for Outcome 2 (Achieving in Learning and Development) Outcome 3 (Safe and Protected from Harm) and Outcome 4 (Economic Security and Opportunity)



8.2 DEIS Classification

The socio-demographic and qualitative findings point to a clear need for additional DEIS schools in Fingal. While acknowledging that applying for DEIS status is a matter for each individual school, there are some actions that can be progressed in response to this finding.

1. Request a meeting with the Department of Education to feedback the research findings and discuss DEIS eligibility and resource allocation.
2. Disseminate the findings of this research to non DEIS schools and support those where applicable in the next round of DEIS applications.
3. Advocate that DEIS supports should follow the child from primary to secondary school. This would address the variance between the numbers(4,885) attending DEIS primary schools and DEIS secondary (3,103) schools in Fingal as of June 2025.
4. All considerations in relation to future DEIS resources in Fingal should be cognisant of the DEIS Plus initiative commencing in 2026⁵⁴. This has already resulted in one primary school in Fingal (Ladyswell National School in Mulhuddart) securing DEIS Plus status.

8.3 Out of School Programmes

A range of effective out of school programmes were identified and explored in this research. Such programmes are impactful as they meet different needs and are on a continuum. Many are underfunded with challenges around future sustainability and are not Fingal wide i.e. they service either North Fingal or D15 and generally not both. Additional resources should be invested in all out of school programmes in Fingal.

With financial sustainability, the delivery organisations could explore extending their reach across Fingal, the length of the programmes and introducing accreditation. This adds value through the sense of achievement experienced by the participant which can be a motivator to re-engage with school. Where those disengaged from school in Fingal have to travel outside their area to access out of school programmes e.g. in Glasnevin, Finglas, City Centre, all transport costs should be covered.

We recommend that Fingal CYPSC prioritise in their Healthy Ireland funding (HIF) allocations programmes that address early school leaving. The Foróige Health and Wellbeing programme currently funded by Fingal CYPSC through HIF has since commencement in 2022 supported 75 young people aged 12-15 of which more than 50% (n=39) have returned to school part-time or full time.

⁵⁴ <https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/education/2025/11/19/deis-plus-needs-to-be-creative-imaginative-and-bold/>

8.4 Alternative Education

Contributors to this research emphasised that there is a cohort of young people who it is evident before finishing primary school that their needs cannot be met through mainstream education. To address this, we recommend the creation of a pre youthreach education programme with 30 places for the 12-15 year old group which is part of a pathway to transition to the full Youthreach curriculum when age 16. The starting point for this initiative would be discussion with DDLETB.

There is no blended iScoil Centre in Fingal. We recommend that Fingal CYPSC consider a scoping exercise on iScoil across Fingal to explore how capacity could be increased. Much of the data generated through this research will be relevant to this study which should also explore whether additional mental health supports could be built into the iScoil programme.

8.5 Community Wraparound

There is evidence indicating positive education outcomes in smaller schools where there are established community wraparound supports. These are not available in areas that have experienced significant changes in housing tenure in recent decades such as Ongar and parts of Tyrrelstown. Fingal CYPSC should work with youth and community organisations, local partnership companies and Family Resource Centres to ensure that disadvantaged small areas have the community infrastructure available for young people and families to help sustain in education.

One of the dominant themes emerging from this research is the importance of the home environment and in particular parental attitude, engagement, and support for the child to sustain in education. The key informants of this research indicated that in many cases parents have multiple issues to contend with which can reduce the priority afforded to getting their children to and from school and achieving within this environment.

To augment universal community wraparound support across Fingal, we recommend that all non DEIS schools should have access to family support services and that all 12-15 year olds on a reduced school day be connected to a youth service in the area. To advance national strategy priorities for the Traveller and Roma communities, we recommend a Traveller and Roma Education Strategy (TRES) worker for Fingal.

8.6 Mental Health Services

Fingal has one of the highest youth populations in Ireland which is likely to continue as it also has the fastest population growth rate per local authority. Services have not kept pace with population growth and need. We recommend more mental health services (HSE, CAMHS, Jigsaw and community) for young people in Fingal. This could include a non-clinical social prescribing service for U18’s⁵⁵ aligned with similar initiatives that have/are being progressed nationally. Early intervention in the form of Behaviour for Learning teachers in Primary Schools should be prioritised.

Stakeholders consistently identified mental health difficulties as both a contributor and consequence of education disengagement, highlighting the need for integrated, educational and therapeutic responses.

8.7 School Based Interventions

We acknowledge that schools have a range of training and supports in place to support diversity and challenge bullying and racism. To augment these, we recommend mandatory inclusion, diversity, anti-racism, cultural competence, and trauma informed training for education providers including, teachers, SNAs and Home School Liaison Officers. Cultural Curriculum content should reflect diverse cultures including Traveller and Roma history and identity. Having teachers from different cultures should be encouraged and facilitated.

8.8 Area Based Approach

There was a sense from research contributors that Fingal has missed out in area based allocations e.g. no ABC programme, lack of DEIS schools and only three Family Resource Centres to provide much needed parent, family and wraparound supports. We recommend that an area based approach is mobilised through engaging local elected representatives, local development companies, the local community development committee (LCDC) around the message of “*more resources for Fingal*”.

To address the consensus among research contributors that the scale and intensity of population growth and disadvantage is not reflected in mainstream data collection (CSO Census, HP Deprivation Index) “*The data is at least five years behind*”, we recommend that a poverty profile be commissioned for Fingal. The terms of reference must include the co-design of a set of metrics which captures the on the ground situation in what is one of the most complex socio-demographic landscapes in Ireland.

⁵⁵ [Exploration of youth social prescribing study](#)

Appendix 1 – Alternative Education in Fingal

Name of Service and Service Provider	No. of places available every year Waiting list time currently	Length Prog. Full /Part time	Age Group	Course admission requirements Referral process and criteria
Balbriggan ALP Foróige	9 places available every year Waiting list depends on time of year.	Normal length of programme is 8 weeks- 3 days per week for 9 hours total. Two cycles can be applied for in total (16 weeks)	Post Primary (13- 16 years)	Young people who have been out of school have not completed their junior cert. Referrals are made by school principals or Educational Welfare Officers (EWO), followed by an interview process.
iScoil Swords - St. Finians	3 places available every year	The programme aims to complete during a school year.	Must be 13-16 years at time of application	Young people who have been out of school for 6 months and have not sat JC, and all other options including home tuition have been explored/exhausted. Referrals to iScoil are made through Tusla Education Support Service
ALP Swords Crosscare	8 places available every year 4 students on the waiting list currently.	8-16 weeks- 3 days per week for 9 hours total.	The cut off age for a participant to join is 16	Young people out of school who have not completed their junior cert and wants to progress on to further education Referrals are made by school principals or Educational Welfare Officers (EWO), followed by an interview process.
Blanchardstown Early School Leavers' Programme - Foróige	10 places available every year Currently full. Waiting list also full.	25 hours a week Parallel to the school term	Minimum 12 years , maximum 16 years	Facilitates Junior Cert exams with the support of local school Rath Dara Community school. Referrals are made via Foróige Blanchardstown.

Name of Service and Service Provider	No. of places available every year Waiting list time currently	Length Prog. Full /Part time	Age Group	Course admission requirements Referral process and criteria
Blanchardstown Community Training Centre www.blanchardstownctc.ie	20 places available every year Do not operate a waiting list	Up to two years depending on programme and accreditation	16-21 years	Second chance education and training for early school leavers. Referrals made directly to the centre by youth workers, youth justice, social work, schools, community groups, or parents/guardians.
National Learning Network (NLN) Mulhuddart, D15 & Nationwide	Varies on course topic Generally, no, or short waiting time	Varies on course topic	16 years plus	For young people who need assistance entering the job market who find traditional post-school study routes challenging, including individuals who may struggle in larger class settings or require additional support, such as those living with autism. Referrals made directly to the centre by self or agency.
Youthreach Balbriggan Blanchardstown Swords Rush DDLETB www.ddletb.ie/youth/youthreach	25-35 places available every year Waiting list is one year’s intake	1-2 years	16 – 20 years	For young people left school early and would like to get guidance, training and work experience and qualifications. SEN (Special Education Needs) Programme may be available for young people who have been assessed as having multiple learning difficulties. Referrals made directly to the Co-ordinator of the local Centre.

Appendix 2 – School Survey

About Your School	Response
School name	
School Catchment Area	
Overall school population on roll	
Are You a DEIS School Yes No If yes, what band	
Boys, Girls, mixed	
Total school population of those aged 12-15	
Please list numbers of male and female students if a mixed school	
Student absence for 12-15 year olds for school year 2024-25 Number of student suspended for 6 days or more cumulatively. Number of students who reached 20 days absence cumulatively	
Out of school status for those aged 12-15 for school year 2024-25 Number of students expelled Number of students with school avoidance Number of students on reduced school day	
Other relevant data	
Number of students with additional educational needs	
Does your school currently have a NEPS psychologist	
Number of students requiring assessment by National Education Psychological Service (NEPS)	
Number of NEPS assessments granted per year	
Does your school have an Autism Spectrum (AS) class?, if so how many and numbers in the class/es	
Do you have an SEN Coordinator in your school? Yes ☐ No ☐	
How many SNAs do you have in your school?	
Do any teaching posts of responsibility oversee attendance in your school?	
Number of students engaged with School Completion Programme	

Section 1 – Exploring level of need

1. What are the key risk factors for early school leaving in your school

2. At what ages are such risk factors impacting on some children in your school

3. In what ways do you see these presenting and impacting on their participation

4. Are their specific emotional/behavioural factors associated with children/young people, with high levels of absence or who are on a reduced school day

Yes ☐ No ☐

Please comment further

5. Do you think that there is a cohort of students in your school who have good attendance but are vulnerable and unable to participate meaningfully in school?

Yes ☐ No ☐

If so, what do you think are the factors contributing to this?

Section 2 – Exploring responses and challenges

6. Can you describe some of the supports/interventions your school has implemented to meet the needs of those at risk of early school leaving.

7. As a school, what challenges do you experience in meeting needs of children most at risk

8. What are the impacts of the focus and resources invested in meeting the needs of those young people most at risk, on other young people in your school not identified as high risk and not in receipt of any additional supports.

9. Moving forward, what additional resources are required to achieve better outcomes for young people most at risk of educational exclusion.

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