



PRE-BUDGET SUBMISSION 2026

Investing in young people by addressing today's challenges and tomorrow's opportunities



ABOUT SPUNOUT

spunout is Ireland's youth information and support platform, working for an Ireland where all young people are empowered and supported to thrive. We work collaboratively with young people to support mental health and wellbeing by creating evidence-based, person-centred digital solutions and safe, validating support spaces. spunout has been supporting young people's mental health and wellbeing since 2004 and serves over 100,000 young people in Ireland annually across its services.

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AT A GLANCE

- ▶ Allocate €100 million to community-based and statutory youth mental health services.
- ▶ Provide €70 million to train more mental health professionals, especially psychologists, nurses, and assistant roles.
- ▶ Allocate €60 million to develop six Youth Hubs across the country.
- ▶ Provide €21.3 million investment in youth work services.
- ▶ Support a pilot programme focused on building healthy relationships and gender norms among young people through a €135,000 annual investment over three years.
- ▶ Develop and fund an Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2026-2030.
- ▶ Invest €4.1 billion in affordable and cost-rental housing targeted at young people.
- ▶ Allocate €786 million to provide free public transport for all young adults.

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We're full of ideas, energy, and solutions. We're not just asking for help, we're offering our voice, our experiences, and our commitment to making things better.

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FOREWORD

This October, this Government has its first real chance to prove that young people are a genuine priority. Budget 2026 is where words from the Programme for Government must translate into measurable action. Promises made around youth mental health, inclusion, education, and affordability need a funding plan behind them, because young people can't afford to wait.

At spunout, we believe every young person in Ireland should be able to access the support they need—whether that's mental health care, affordable housing, reliable transport, or inclusive spaces to connect.

Young people are experts in their own experiences, and any attempt to create effective, meaningful public policy must begin with listening to them. That's why this pre-budget submission is rooted in the realities and priorities of young people across Ireland.

Every year, we work closely with our Youth Action Panel – a diverse group of over 200 young people from across the country who shape and guide our advocacy. Through discussions, workshops, and consultations, they've told us clearly where the system is working, where it's falling short, and where urgent investment is needed. Their voices, ideas, and lived experiences are at the heart of every recommendation in this document.

Time and again, we hear from young people that they are anxious about their futures. They are struggling to afford rent, to access timely mental health care and to navigate an education system that doesn't always meet their needs. Many also face additional barriers due to disability, geography, identity, or socioeconomic background.

At the same time, young people are showing leadership in climate action, community engagement, peer mental health support, and innovation. They are not waiting for change — they are driving it. What they need now is a Government that meets their energy and ambition with urgency and action.





The recommendations within this submission represent opportunities to build a healthier, more inclusive Ireland. To strengthen public services. To futureproof our economy. And to ensure that no young person is left behind because of where they live, who they are, or the circumstances they were born into.

Of course, no single submission can cover every challenge young people are facing. There are crucial policy areas – including the continued lack of a fair and structured pathway for hiring assistant psychologists, the barriers facing young people with disabilities in accessing education, employment, and public services, and the need for better real time information regarding public transport – that require immediate attention but fall outside the scope of the budget. These remain priorities for us and we will continue to work with the Youth Action Panel to advocate on them throughout the year ahead.

The eight asks we outline here are practical, targeted, and achievable. But more than anything, they reflect what young people are telling us they need – not in five or ten years, but now.

Prioritising mental health supports for young people

Young people in Ireland are facing a mental health crisis. The peak age of onset for mental health conditions is between 15 and 25, precisely when young people are navigating school, further education, work, and complex social transitions, and reports of mental health challenges amongst this age cohort are increasing. Despite this, timely and appropriate mental health supports remain out of reach for too many.

The Programme for Government contains a number of welcome commitments in this area, including plans to double the number of therapists, increase the recruitment of psychologists, and introduce a new model of primary care tailored to the mental health needs of young people. However, these intentions have yet to translate into sufficient, on-the-ground change.

Young people across the country are still experiencing unacceptable delays in accessing care. HSE figures show that as of June 2025, there were just over 4,500 children and adolescents waiting to be seen by CAMHS. 763 young people have been waiting for more than one year, while 504 young people were waiting between 39 and 52 weeks. These delays can lead to worsening conditions and preventable crises.

These long waiting times are symptomatic of deeper systemic issues, including an acute shortage of trained mental health professionals. Strategic investment in training new mental health workers and psychologists is not only essential to build capacity, but will also support the broader shift towards prevention and early intervention, an approach proven to reduce long-term health costs and improve outcomes.

Alarmingly, CAMHS staffing levels declined from 831 to 811 in 2024—even as demand rose. Meanwhile, the HSE spent nearly €93 million outsourcing mental health care to private providers—often abroad—because public services are unable to meet demand.

Ireland's youth population is growing, but workforce development hasn't kept pace. Investment here would cover college placements, training subsidies, and incentives to work in youth-focused mental health services. The Programme for Government outlines a plan to build capacity, but funding it properly is the only way to make that happen.

The mental health crisis facing Ireland's young people is a matter of significant public concern. A recent Red C poll found that 79% of people believe that the Government should prioritise mental health services for children and young people, while 87% support increased investment in

these services. Almost two-thirds (63%) believe the mental health of young people in Ireland has gotten worse over the past five years, with 65% believing the incidence of anxiety and depression in young people has increased during the same period. Critically, 90% of respondents agreed that early intervention by mental health services is essential when a child or young person begins to struggle.

These public perceptions are backed by international and national data. A recent UNICEF report analysing wellbeing in 43 OECD and EU countries found that Ireland's adolescents are among the least happy in the developed world, with the country placing 24th for adolescent mental health. Supporting this, data from the Growing Up in Ireland study found that 25% of 25-year-olds reported being diagnosed with depression or anxiety, this figure had increased by 5% from when the young people were last surveyed 5 years previous, demonstrating a worrying trend of deteriorating mental health among our young people.

The lack of accessible mental health supports, particularly at the early stages of distress, leaves many young people struggling without the tools or help they need to cope.

To meet this crisis, Ireland must significantly expand its mental health infrastructure, both in services and in workforce while embedding early intervention and prevention at the heart of youth mental health policy. The cost of employing an additional 100 psychiatric nurses, 100 clinical psychologists and 100 consultant child & adolescent psychiatrists is €70 million per annum. These are life-saving measures that will determine whether a generation of young people are supported to thrive.

Invest €100 million in youth mental health community and statutory services

Invest €70 million to employ additional mental health workers and psychologists

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“We’re constantly told to talk about our mental health, but when we ask for help, the waiting lists are months long.”

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Investing in one-stop-shop Youth Hubs for services



A major challenge facing youth services in Ireland has been the decline of 'third spaces' in which young people can congregate, socialise and access services without having to pay money or be exposed to unsafe or antisocial environments. These spaces, distinct from home and school, are vital to youth development. The loss of third spaces is especially keenly felt in isolated or disadvantaged communities where further services or social spaces may no longer be available.

In Ireland, there are approximately 500,000 adolescents aged between 12 and 18, with a further approximate 800,000 young people between the ages of 18 and 30. This population is notably underserved in terms of third spaces.

Research commissioned by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration, and Youth, published last year, found that play and recreation amenities targeting adolescents are under-resourced and under-facilitated in relation to their play and recreation needs compared to younger children.

This absence of third spaces has profound implications for young people in Ireland. The EU Loneliness Survey, published in 2023, found that Ireland is the loneliest country in the EU, with young people more at risk of loneliness than the elderly. A recent UNICEF report found that Irish teens are some of the least happy among the world's high-income countries. Overall, Ireland placed 24th for the mental health of its adolescents. However, these hubs would not simply be social spaces. They would also provide access to key state services. These could include on-site mental health support, such as access to counsellors, peer support groups, and referral services, sexual health clinics offering confidential advice, contraception, and STI testing, and career and educational guidance, including CV workshops, apprenticeship information, and information on pathways to further and higher education. Other supports could include housing advice, legal information, and help navigating social welfare or immigration systems.

The one-stop shop approach of Youth Hubs would make state services more approachable and relevant to young people's lives, encouraging engagement and uptake.

The government can address these issues by investing in the creation of Youth Hubs across the country, operating under a national framework.



Each Youth Hub would serve as a multifunctional, inclusive space tailored to the diverse needs of young people. These hubs would act as community anchors, offering a wide range of creative, recreational, educational, and support services under one roof.

We propose an initial pilot phase that would involve establishing one Youth Hub per region, covering the Dublin, West, North West, South West, South East, and Midlands regions. Based on current construction and fit-out costs, we estimate that a total investment of approximately €60 million would be required to develop each Hub from a greenfield site.

However, we recognise that many towns and cities already have vacant or underutilised State-owned buildings that could be refurbished and repurposed for this initiative. Taking advantage of existing infrastructure would significantly reduce the upfront capital costs and accelerate the rollout of these vital supports. This pilot model enables a phased and cost-effective implementation, while also providing an opportunity to evaluate the impact, refine the operating model, and ensure the Hubs are responsive to local needs before committing to a national-scale rollout. This measured approach can ensure sustainability, maximise value for money, and build strong foundations for long-term, youth-led impact in every part of the country.

Provide €60m of capital funding to develop 6 regional Youth Hubs

CASE STUDY

The Network of Youth Centres in Ljubljana, Slovenia, offers a valuable case study for proposed Youth Hubs in Ireland. This city-supported framework integrates various youth services under a shared set of values. It includes youth centres operated by the Public Institution Young Dragons and NGOs, all embedded in local communities to address specific needs for young people aged 15 to 29.

The network provides structured cooperation to individual centres through regular inter-centre meetings, which move between centres for collaboration and idea sharing. They also provide tailored services, including safe spaces for LGBT+ youth, illustrating the inclusive ethos of the network.

This model provides a framework for how youth hubs in Ireland could operate independently and together as part of a broader network. Many of the Ljubljana youth centres are run by a city-founded institution, while others are run by NGOs but funded by the city. Applying this to Ireland, Youth Hubs could be run in collaboration with local authorities and/or youth-focused NGOs, while receiving state-allocated funding.

Investing in nationwide youth work services

Youth work services have also suffered from a lack of sufficient government investment. Properly funded youth work is a major investment in our country's future. Youth work changes the lives of young people, while also demonstrably saving taxpayers' money in the medium-to-long term by helping young people reach their full potential.

Despite the incredible work carried out by the sector, Ireland's level of youth work funding has still not recovered to pre-austerity levels. Adjusted for inflation, the Irish government spent approximately €100 million (€72m allocation) on youth work in 2008, significantly above the €85 million allocated in Budget 2025.

The lack of third spaces also presents a major challenge for youth work services. While a growing proportion of youth work and service provision has an online or remote element, the lack of physical meeting spaces drives up costs, particularly insurance premiums, especially for smaller or more specialised services. All of this has led to a culture where in-person activities and services are scaled back, while loneliness and alienation are allowed to grow.

Youth work is a proven way to help tackle the systemic issues affecting children and young people, particularly for young people growing up in poverty. It addresses a range of social issues across the country and acts as a vital link between so many state services. However, in order to reach as many young people as possible, the youth work sector needs greater support and investment.

The youth work sector has an important role to play in delivering on the Government's commitments in the areas of child poverty and well-being, as set out in *From Poverty to Potential: A Programme Plan for Child Poverty and Well-being 2023-2025*. Particularly relevant to youth work services is the focus on ensuring that children have access to supports and services which promote physical, mental, emotional and social wellbeing, and that they are able to participate in enriching activities outside of school, including art, music and sport, regardless of cost.

The provision of adequate youth work services is also in alignment with the *Young Ireland National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023–2028*. Youth work supports the learning and development of young people, protects them from harm and provides them with a means

to connect, respect and contribute to their world. This aligns with the National Outcomes stated in the Policy Framework. Similar to Youth Hubs, youth work in particular supports the provision of high-quality and inclusive youth opportunities, spaces and services.

Opportunities for Youth: The National Strategy for Youth Work and Related Services 2024-2028 sets out a number of actions to promote youth work services in Ireland. However, in order for this strategy to be effective, adequate funding needs to be behind it.

Increased funding needs to be provided for the rising operational costs associated with youth work, to allow youth work services to expand and provide opportunities to Ireland's growing youth population, and to ensure that youth workers, who are key in ensuring that these services can be delivered, are adequately remunerated for their work.

Our ask to invest €21.3 million into the youth sector would allow for a 20% increase in Existing Levels of Service, €2.1 million additional funding to ensure more young people benefit from youth work, and an additional €2 million in capital investment needed outside of the NDP.

Invest €21.3 million in the youth sector



Developing skills for healthy relationships



Young people deserve the tools and support to build healthy relationships, challenge harmful stereotypes, and cultivate positive gender norms. While the new senior cycle Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) programme has been launched, schools have until September 2027 to implement it. The new curriculum needs to be further supported by learning and campaigns outside of the classroom.

According to research published by The Observatory on Cyberbullying, Cyberhate and Online Harassment, Anti-Bullying Centre, Dublin City University, there is a need to create a more positive culture around masculinity and what it means to be a man — especially for teenage boys and young men, which should involve promoting positive male role models and a masculine identity they can aspire to.

A teenager's personal experiences and their 'offline' social environment (e.g. home, school, communities, peer networks) will likely influence their willingness to engage with harmful ideas and behaviours on social media, such as those associated with online masculinity influencers. For instance, teenage boys who have contact with strong male role models in their local communities, who express positive forms of masculinity that they find supportive, nurturing, and healthy, may be less likely to seek out and engage with harmful online masculinity influencers who they feel may give them support and guidance.

While there has been progress made with the updated RSE curriculum, it is clear that we can't rely solely on schools to help young people develop skills and qualities to support healthy relationships and positive gender norms.

That is why we are seeking financial support to launch a new three-year programme dedicated to equipping young people with essential relationship and gender-awareness skills. This initiative will directly impact thousands of young people, providing structured education, mentorship, and access to vital mental health resources.

The programme will feature workshops on emotional intelligence, consent, and communication. We will establish mentorship networks, foster peer-led dialogues that tackle gender equality and relationship dynamics head-on, and provide access to essential mental health resources, thereby improving resilience and well-being.

Invest €405,000 in a 3 year programme, employing a project lead, conducting primary research, and developing a new media campaign.

Until recently, young people in Ireland have been limited in the options available to them after leaving school, with the CAO route to university being seen as the norm. However, it is vital that young people are offered more pathways beyond university and that students are better skilled and prepared for work and life after school.

Apprenticeships provide an alternative pathway for young people outside of university and allow them to gain valuable practical skills, which are invaluable once they enter the world of work.

While historically apprenticeships were associated with trades and crafts, they are expanding into a wide range of industries including ICT, finance, hospitality, social work, marketing, farming, the public service and more.

There are high satisfaction rates among Irish apprentices with the latest National Survey of Apprentices reporting overall satisfaction levels at 7.5 out of 10, and 80% of respondents saying they would recommend the route to family or friends. 94% reported that their apprenticeship gave them good employment opportunities.

Apprenticeships are not just of benefit to the young people who avail of them. They also benefit employers by bringing talent into their business and the wider economy through engaging more people in the national workforce.

The Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2021 - 2025 is a positive Government initiative which has been successful in encouraging employers to offer apprenticeships and promoting apprenticeships more broadly as an option for school leavers and people looking to change career path.

As the current Action Plan comes to an end, it is essential that the Government develop an Action Plan for 2026 - 2030 and provide appropriate funding to support its implementation. The development of this plan should involve a public consultation so that young people, employers and other relevant stakeholders can contribute. This will ensure that the apprenticeship system continues to grow and deliver for both learners and employers.

Commit to funding the development and implementation of an Action Plan for Apprenticeship 2026-2030

Accessible and affordable housing for young people

The housing crisis in Ireland has become one of the defining social issues of our time, and its impact on young people is both acute and far-reaching. The crisis is impacting the private rental sector, student accommodation, and residential care, with more and more young people living in unsuitable accommodation and being pushed to the margins. For many young people, the traditional markers of independence, moving out of the family home, renting their own space, or purchasing property, are no longer achievable goals but increasingly distant aspirations. This crisis is reshaping the trajectory of young adulthood and threatening the wellbeing, security, and potential of an entire generation.

Rents in Ireland remain among the highest in Europe. According to Daft.ie the average rent for a property in Ireland in Q1 2025 was €2,023, increasing 7.3% in the past year. High rental costs are forcing many young people to live in overcrowded or substandard accommodation. For students and young workers, especially in urban areas, the situation is particularly stark. The average rent in Dublin sat at €2,470 in the city centre, €2,497 in the north city and €2,620 in the south city. For some students and young people the only option is to remain in their family home.

The effects of the crisis extend far beyond housing itself. The lack of secure accommodation has serious implications for young people's mental health, education, employment prospects and personal development. It makes it harder to take up job opportunities, attend college, form relationships, or build a stable life.

Despite the introduction of the first ever Youth Homelessness Strategy 2023-2025, youth homelessness is also on the rise. Homelessness figures released in May 2025 revealed that 1,849 young people between the ages of 18 and 24 were living in emergency accommodation in Ireland. We call on the Government to fully implement the existing strategy and develop a new ambitious successor strategy from 2026 to eliminate youth homelessness.

Those between the ages of 16 and 24 are especially vulnerable to risks caused by experiences of homelessness, such as dropping out of education and training, poor mental health and addiction. Local Authorities need to be supported to build housing specifically committed to meeting the housing needs of vulnerable young people in their area.

Due to their age, young people are often left behind. Moving from homelessness to the private rental sector by using rental subsidies such as the Housing Assistance Payment has reduced dramatically. While

social housing is mostly allocated based on time spent on the social housing list, meaning young people in emergency homeless accommodation with a housing application may face long waiting times before being allocated a Local Authority or Approved Housing Body tenancy.

spunout's Housing Survey, taken by over 1,000 young people across Ireland in 2023, highlighted several realities. It revealed that four out of five young people surveyed said the housing crisis significantly negatively impacts their mental health. Additionally, 83.85% of respondents expressed doubt that they will be able to own a home within the next ten years. Furthermore, 34.11% have trouble finding housing that meets their needs, and 87.59% have considered moving abroad due to high housing costs.

Homeownership, once a reasonable expectation for young adults in Ireland, has become unattainable for many. A combination of high house prices, stagnant wages, and an increasingly competitive property market has led to a dramatic collapse in home ownership among younger cohorts. In Census 1991, the age at which two-thirds of the householders owned their homes (with or without a loan) was 28 years. By the time of Census 2022, this age had risen to 44.

While it is positive to see ambition in the programme for government regarding housing policy, in order to tackle the challenges faced by younger generations, the Government must rapidly escalate the level of intervention in the housing market. Far more homes are needed to keep up with demand across society, and action is required to curb the bulk-buying of homes by institutional investors where these prevent young people from acquiring their own homes within reasonable distance from the places in which they live, work and socialise.

Invest €4.1 billion to deliver 8,500 affordable purchase/cost rental homes for young renters and/or first-time buyers and build housing stock specifically committed to meeting the housing needs of vulnerable young people

“I have a job, a degree, and still live at home because I can't afford rent. We keep hearing about a housing crisis, but for us, it's not a headline — it's our everyday reality.”

Following our lead to address the climate crisis

The climate crisis is no longer a distant threat, it is a lived reality with profound implications for young people in Ireland today. While Ireland's per capita greenhouse gas emissions have declined slightly in recent years, they remain among the highest in Europe, according to the Central Statistics Office. The ongoing gap between emissions targets and actual reductions signals a failure to fully align policy with the scale of the crisis. For young people, this disconnect between ambition and action is deeply felt.

The health and wellbeing implications of climate breakdown are staggering. The Lancet Countdown Report 2024 found that children born in Ireland today and their peers around the world face malnutrition, a shorter life expectancy, and a myriad of other health hazards caused by the climate crisis.

Young people are acutely aware of this reality, and it is having a significant impact on their mental health. Research from ECO-UNESCO carried out in partnership with spunout found that 96% of young people are concerned about the climate crisis. Over half of young people reported feeling anxious and fearful when they thought about it.

Nonetheless, young people continue to be on the forefront of climate activism. Millions of students across the globe were inspired by Greta Thunberg, pushing the climate crisis up the political agenda. The Paris Agreement now binds almost all the countries of the world, including Ireland, to reduce the rise in global temperatures to below the expected catastrophic forecast of 2 degrees. While many factors, including the covid-19 pandemic and barriers to participation, have caused the momentum behind these strikes to wane in recent years, the majority of young people in Ireland are either involved or want to get involved with climate action.

However, the responsibility to stop the climate crisis cannot land on our young people, while governments and corporations continue to burn fossil fuels and ignore their binding Paris climate targets. It is clear that urgent government action is needed to tackle the climate crisis that we are facing.

ECO-UNESCO's research found that 75% of young people felt there was not enough being done to tackle the climate crisis. They identified changes in government policy as one of the key areas that needed to be addressed. While some positive progress has been made, more action is needed.



Climate inaction is no longer just an environmental issue, it's a mental health crisis, a public health concern, and a threat to future generations. It is now time for the Government to listen, to act, and to deliver on its promises with urgency, ambition and intergenerational responsibility.

One meaningful way the Government could take action regarding the climate crisis would be to invest in making all public transport free for young adults under 25 years of age. The transport sector is one of the leading causes of emissions in Ireland. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, between 1990 and 2019, road transport emissions increased by 142.4%. Private cars account for almost half of all road transport emissions. Free public transport for this age group would encourage uptake, reducing private car emissions.

This initiative would also be a significant step in easing the cost of living crisis that young people are facing. The cost to a young adult using their leapcard in Dublin is capped at €12 per week. Using that as a guide, if all public transport was free, it would save at least €624 per person per year.

Luxembourg offers free public transport for all. Scotland offers free bus travel to under-22s, resulting in 62 million journeys in the first 18 months, significantly expanding youth mobility. It is possible to do – it just requires political support to achieve it.

Invest €786 million in making public transport free young adults

We didn't create this crisis, but we're the ones who'll live with its consequences. We need politicians to show us that they care about the planet we'll inherit — fund climate solutions that are fair, fast, and future-proof.



CONCLUSION

This submission has laid out a set of eight key investment priorities, grounded in both evidence and lived experience, that we believe are essential to improving the lives of young people in Ireland. It is informed by policy expertise, but more importantly, by the lived experiences of young people across Ireland. Through our Action Panels, surveys, and daily conversations, young people have made it clear what they need. Through our Budget campaign, we're asking you to listen and to act.

Ireland has long taken pride in its young generation — their creativity, resilience, and potential. But the truth is, potential alone is not enough. Without the right investment and support, even the most resilient young people can feel left behind or burned out by systems that were not built for them.

The choices you make over the coming months, as Budget 2026 takes shape, will say a great deal about the kind of Ireland we want to be. One that listens to its young people. One that invests in mental health supports, in spaces for young people to socialise, in secure housing, and in addressing the climate emergency.

Right now, too many are being let down by services that don't meet their needs, by unaffordable housing that delays independence, by education and employment systems that don't account for the reality of their lives and by services that could do more to connect with them to help them have healthy relationships and respect for each other.

This isn't about asking for special treatment. It's about fairness. It's about recognising the social and economic costs of failing to invest in this generation and the potential return when we do.

Budget 2026 is the first opportunity for this Government to invest in addressing the issues affecting young people. We recognise that there are competing priorities, but investing in areas that young people identify as having a negative impact on their lives is not a cost; it is an investment in supporting them today and in the future.



REFERENCES

The costs outlined in this submission are all based on information received by state agencies in response to PQs submitted to the relevant Minister. These include the length of waiting lists for CAMHS, the salary costs for mental health staff the cost of free public transport for young adults. All other costs are estimates based on publicly available information. The cost of delivering 8,500 homes for young people (as outlined in Knight Frank's Living Sectors Market 2024) is based on the 2025 Budget provision to the LDA to develop housing.



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