

FROM SURVIVING TO THRIVING

Why young people need
budget 2026 to deliver

LOWER FEES,
BRIGHTER
FUTURES



HOUSING IS A
HUMAN RIGHT



THE HIGH COST
OF LOW LIVING





The National Youth Council of Ireland is the representative body for voluntary youth organisations in Ireland. Our member organisations work with, and for, up to 380,000 young people in every community in Ireland, with the support of 40,000 volunteers and 1,400 paid staff.

NYCI functions to represent the interests of young people and youth organisations and its role as the National Representative Youth Work Organisation is recognised in legislation (Youth Work Act, 2001).

The work of NYCI is based on principles of equality, social justice and equal participation for all. In achieving these aims, the NYCI seeks the emergence of a society in which young people are valued and supported to achieve their full potential.

[youth.ie](https://www.youth.ie)

An illustration of a young woman with dark hair, wearing a purple jumpsuit over a light blue t-shirt and light blue sneakers. She is walking and holding a large, white, rounded rectangular sign above her head with both hands. The sign contains the text 'YOUTH WORK CHANGES LIVES' in a bold, purple, sans-serif font. The background is a light purple gradient with a white curved shape behind the sign.

YOUTH WORK
CHANGES LIVES

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NYCI MEMBERS

| | |
|---|---|
| Amnesty International | Irish Second-Level Students' Union |
| An Óige | Irish Traveller Movement |
| AsIAM | Irish Wheelchair Association |
| BeLonG To | JCI (Junior Chamber International) Ireland |
| Blakestown and Mountview Youth Initiative | Killinarden Community Council Youth Project |
| Boys Brigade | Labour Youth |
| Catholic Guides of Ireland | Localise |
| Central Remedial Clinic | Macra na Feirme |
| Cherry Orchard | Migrant Rights Centre Ireland |
| Church of Ireland Youth Department | No Name Club |
| Coláiste na bhFiann | Ógra Fianna Fáil |
| Crosscare | Ógras |
| ECO-UNESCO | Order of Malta Ireland |
| EIL Intercultural Learning | Scouting Ireland |
| Enable Ireland | Solas Project |
| Feachtas | Sphere 17 Regional Youth Service |
| Finglas Youth Resource Centre | SpunOut |
| Foróige | St Andrew's Talk About Youth Project |
| Friends of Africa | St. Vincent de Paul |
| Gaisce – The President's Award | Swan Regional Youth Service |
| Girls' Brigade Ireland | The West End Youth Centre |
| Girls' Friendly Society | Union of Students in Ireland |
| ICTU Youth Committee | Voluntary Service International |
| Involve, Youth and Community Services | YMCA Ireland |
| Irish Association of Youth Orchestras | Young Fine Gael |
| Irish Girl Guides | Young Irish Film Makers |
| Irish Methodist Youth and Children's Department | Young Social Innovators |
| Irish Red Cross Youth | Youth Theatre Ireland |
| | Youth Work Ireland |

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Young people in Ireland today face many challenges, from housing insecurity and income inequality to mental health struggles and barriers to education and mobility. Budget 2026 presents a critical opportunity to invest in a generation that has shown resilience, creativity, and civic engagement in the face of adversity.

The National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) calls on the Government to deliver a budget that recognises the unique needs and potential of young people. This submission outlines a package of targeted, evidence-based measures that will not only address urgent needs of young people but also lay the foundation for a more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable society.

MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS AND MEASURES

1 END YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

Ringfence dedicated funding for a successor Youth Homelessness Strategy starting January 2026



2 EQUALISE JOBSEEKER'S ALLOWANCE FOR UNDER-25s

Remove age-based discrimination by equalising the Jobseeker's Allowance rate for those under 25.



3 ABOLISH SUB-MINIMUM WAGE RATES

Eliminate lower minimum wage rates for workers under 20.



4 FUND YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

Fully fund the HSE Child and Youth Mental Health Office Action Plan 2024–2027.



5 REDUCE THIRD-LEVEL FEES AND ABOLISH APPRENTICE CONTRIBUTIONS

Reduce third level fees for the 2025/2026 academic year by €1,000 and make this permanent. Abolish student contributions for apprentices in higher education.



6 INTRODUCE FREE PUBLIC TRANSPORT FOR UNDER-25s

Provide free public transport to all under-25s.



By investing in young people today, we build a society that is more resilient, more equitable, and more prepared for the challenges ahead. The measures outlined in this submission are not only necessary, but they are also achievable. With political will and cross-sectoral collaboration, we can ensure that every young person in Ireland can thrive.

INTRODUCTION

Young people in Ireland are a richly diverse population, encompassing a wide spectrum of identities, backgrounds, and lived experiences. They are not a single, homogenous group, but rather represent a mosaic of social, cultural, economic, and geographic realities.

Among them are young people who face significant challenges; those experiencing poverty, unemployment, discrimination, violence, displacement, and systemic barriers to education, healthcare, and housing.

These intersecting disadvantages can entrench cycles of exclusion and marginalisation, particularly for those already furthest away from the support that they need and deserve.



As we look ahead to Budget 2026, it is imperative that the needs, rights, and potential of all young people are placed at the heart of policy and investment decisions.

This requires more than isolated interventions; it demands a coordinated, cross-departmental approach that recognises the interconnected nature of the issues affecting young people's lives.

Youth policy cannot be confined to a single department or initiative. It must be embedded across all areas of government, from education, employment, health, housing, social protection, justice, and the environment, to ensure that young people are fully supported.

Whether it's tackling youth homelessness, improving access to services, ensuring quality education and training pathways, or addressing income adequacy, every policy decision has a ripple effect on the lives of young people.

NYCI believes that Budget 2026 presents a critical opportunity to invest in a generation that has shown resilience, creativity, and civic engagement in the face of unprecedented challenges.

By prioritising young people across all sectors, the Government can lay the foundation for a more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable future; a future where every young person can reach their full potential.

BACKGROUND

NYCI, as the representative body for voluntary youth organisations in Ireland, hears frequently about the challenges young people are facing from our member organisations.

Youth workers, volunteers and campaigners tell us that they are supporting young people from issues ranging from poverty and homelessness to mental health difficulties.

“ We may be younger, but we do have opinions that are valuable and could be helpful”

Respondent to NYCI's Pre-budget consultation

NYCI also consults directly and communicates regularly with young people about the issues that impact them. Unsurprisingly, housing and cost of living repeatedly present as the most pressing issues for young people in Ireland today, along with access to mental health services.

Budget 2026 must include a package of dedicated measures to address some of the most pressing financial issues for young people in Ireland today.

TO PROVIDE A BUDGET THAT ADDRESSES THE NEEDS OF YOUNG PEOPLE, THE GOVERNMENT MUST:

- Ringfence dedicated funding to end youth homelessness
- Equalise the rate of Jobseekers allowance for those under 25.
- Abolish sub-minimum rates of minimum wage
- Ringfence funding for 2026 to implement the HSE Child and Youth Mental Health Office Action Plan 2024-2027
- Commit to permanently reducing third level fees by €1000 and abolish apprenticeship student contributions in 2026
- Commit to free transport for Under 25s

END YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

Action: Ringfence dedicated funding for a successor Youth Homelessness Strategy starting January 2026

Cost: The Department of Housing does not hold details of the specific funding related to the actions in the Strategy.¹

Rationale: Youth Homelessness stands at around 1,800² young people, or 17% of the overall population in state run emergency accommodation. The current youth homelessness strategy ends at the end of 2025, and an ambitious, resourced successor strategy must be in place by 1st January 2026.

Experiencing homelessness during the formative years of 18–24 years can have profound and lasting effects on an individual's development, wellbeing, and life chances. It is not merely the absence of shelter, but the loss of safety, stability, and dignity at a critical stage of life. There is the potential for trauma, negative impacts on educational and employment opportunities, impact on health and social isolation, the cost of which will be felt by the individual and wider society, well into the future.

Launched in November 2022, the 3-year Youth Homelessness Strategy has had some achievements in terms of improving services for young people. However, there are 400 more young people, or 30% more young people, in emergency accommodation now than there were when the strategy was launched.³

Ireland signed up to the Lisbon Declaration to work towards ending homelessness by 2030. Part of that declaration acknowledges that addressing homelessness requires an understanding of how different groups in communities, including youth, are impacted.⁴ Given the enduring and pervasive issue of youth homelessness, there is an outstanding need for an ambitious, successor youth homelessness strategy to ensure cross Departmental collaboration and direction to meet this declaration, and ensure policy responses to the needs of this unique cohort.

This successor strategy must come with an adequate and dedicated funding stream, starting in Budget 2026, to deliver on actions and lower the rates of young people experiencing homelessness. This ask is in line with the Coalition to End Youth Homelessness, of which NYCI is an active member.



1,800

The number of Youth Homelessness amongst young people or 17% of the overall population in state run emergency accommodation.

¹ Parliamentary Question 8762/25

² Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage Monthly Homelessness Report March 2025

³ Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage Monthly Homelessness Report November 2022

⁴ Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. (2022) Housing for All Youth Homelessness Strategy 2023–2025 [Online] Available from: <https://assets.gov.ie/static/documents/youth-homelessness-strategy-2023-to-2025.pdf>

EQUALISE JOBSEEKER'S ALLOWANCE FOR UNDER-25s

Action: Remove age-based discrimination by equalising the Jobseeker's Allowance rate for those under 25.

Cost: €41.2 million⁵

Rationale: Inequality and poverty are still acute problems in Irish society. No less so than for young people. The Roadmap to Social Inclusion 2020-2025 set out commitments to improving social inclusion and wellbeing for people. Income adequacy is a key component to achieving these commitments, irrespective of a person's age. To ensure income security and promote the inclusion of young people, social protection should provide sufficient benefits in case of unemployment and abolish discrimination in terms of age.

There are just over 9,000 young people under 25 years on the reduced rate of jobseeker's allowance⁶. In a context of full employment and educational opportunities, NYCI is concerned that these young people are the furthest away from employment and education opportunities.

The MESL research⁷ identifies the cost of what is required to enable a life with dignity, at a minimum but acceptable level – what we call the Minimum Essential Standard of Living. The research works with members of the public in deliberative focus groups to establish social consensus on what is needed for a minimum living standard.

In 2025, the standard Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) personal rate, €244 per week, meets 85% of estimated MESL needs when in Rent Supplement accommodation. In a Housing Assistance Payment scenario (HAP), the core JA rate would meet 70% of estimated MESL costs in 2025.

Social welfare supports for a working-age single adult household have consistently been found to be inadequate to meet the MESL, and that continues to be the case in 2025. We cannot assume that young jobseekers living at home are doing so without cost, and without informally contributing 'rent' to their families to assist in meeting bills and other household essentials. If €244 is deemed to not meet MESL, then the youth rate of €153.70 most likely cannot be considered to meet a minimum standard of living.

Rather than punitively reducing the access to adequate income for young job seekers, NYCI believe that Budget 2026 must equalise the rate of Jobseekers Allowance for those on the reduced rate, giving them better financial security and income with which to explore and pursue opportunities for education or employment.



There are just over
9,000
young people
under 25 years
on the reduced
rate of jobseeker's
allowance

⁵ Parliamentary Question 8774/25

⁶ Parliamentary Question 21764/25

⁷ Vincentian MESL Research Centre (2025) 'Minimum Essential Standards of Living MESL 2025' [online] available here: [mesl_2025.pdf](https://mesl.2025.pdf)

ABOLISH SUB-MINIMUM WAGE RATES

Action: Eliminate lower minimum wage rates for workers under 20.

Cost: Revenue generation through increased taxation

Currently, in Ireland, young workers under the age of 20 can earn rates of the National Minimum Wage below those of their colleagues aged 20 and over. An 18-year-old working a 40-hour work week would earn over €100 less per week than her colleague aged 20 for an identical work week. Research shows that young people are concerned with cost of living:

“**So, how do I feel about living in Ireland currently? I think currently Ireland is one of the hardest places to live in based on my own experience I would say due to just the basic living. That’s me, working full time in a job since I was seventeen.**”

Respondent in NYCI’s ‘State of Our Young Nation’ research report.

Creating a social and economic environment that provides young people with income adequacy is central to promoting their inclusion. In keeping with NYCI’s call for age segregation to be ended in the social welfare system, it is imperative to end it in how Ireland’s National Minimum Wage is structured, as per the recommendation of the Low Pay Commission in March 2024.

The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) criticised Ireland’s application of this policy in its 2022 conclusion report on Ireland. It argued that these rates fall below 50% of the average earnings and are, therefore, not sufficient to ensure a decent standard of living and do not adhere to the European Social Charter.⁸

NYCI believe that there is an urgent need to address the ongoing issue of inadequate pay for young people on sub-minimum rates, which continues to undermine the living standards of ordinary people, already crippled by a cost-of-living crisis.

Budget 2026 must recognise, and support, those young people living in poverty or social exclusion and facing financial difficulties. Removing sub-minima rates of pay for the small numbers of those still on this rate would represent a positive step towards an Ireland that wants to eradicate low pay employment and improve terms and conditions for all its workers.



An 18-year-old working a 40-hour work week would earn over €100 less per week than her colleague aged 20 for an identical work week.

⁸ European Social Charter. (2022). European Committee of Social Rights Conclusions.

FUND YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

Action: Fully fund the HSE Child and Youth Mental Health Office Action Plan 2024–2027

Cost: Awaiting costing from the HSE

Rationale: Mental Health consistently comes up as a priority issue from young people when consulted. NYCI's 'State of Our Young Nation' report found that half of 18–29-year-olds in Ireland can be classified as having low mental well-being⁹. There is a sense amongst young people that levels of mental illness are rising, and more support is needed:

“**There is a rise in mental illness in young people and not enough funds to support everyone”**

Respondent to NYCI's youth consultation on Budget 2026

NYCI believes that investment in organisations that support young people, such as youth work, plays a protective factor for young people's mental health. However, services are also needed to respond when mental illness and other challenges arise.

In February, the HSE published its Child and Youth Mental Health Office Action Plan 2024–2027. This plan is a comprehensive plan to (re)design and deliver child and youth mental health services which are safe, effective, easy-to-access and which offer appropriate support at all levels of need, through the implementation of actions.

To succeed, this plan must have dedicated funding to ensure the full delivery of the 16 key actions contained within. Budget 2026 must prioritise youth mental health by ensuring the necessary funding is available to implement this plan.



50%
of 18–29-year-olds in Ireland can be classified as having low mental well-being

Found in the research from NYCI's 'State of Our Young Nation' report

⁹ NYCI (2013) 'State of Our Young Nation' Research report [Online] [Accessed here](#)

REDUCE THIRD-LEVEL FEES AND ABOLISH APPRENTICE CONTRIBUTIONS

Action:

Reduce third level fees for the 2025/2026 academic year by €1,000 and make this permanent.

Abolish student contributions for apprentices in higher education.

Action: Awaiting publication of the annual options paper

For the last number of years, the Government have recognised the increased cost of living pressures on students and their families and have provided for once off reduction of third level fees by €1,000 in successive Budgets. These measures were introduced in the broader context of a national cost-of-living crisis, with a clear recognition that students are significantly affected by these economic challenges.



I'm the first in my family to attend university and have worked three part-time jobs over the last four years to support myself in my studies. Every euro counted, and right now it feels like higher education is priced for the privileged rather than designed to support every student who wants to learn and thrive."

22-year-old

The most recent research by the Higher Education Authority in 2023 found that 1 in 3 of student population said they are experiencing serious or very serious financial issues, up from 1 in 4 in its previous report¹⁰.

Despite the implementation of cost-of-living supports, financial pressures persist. 2024 SILC data showing that levels of those at risk of, and living in, poverty have increased since 2023¹¹. Again, students are not immune from this broader economic context.

A survey of over 3,000 students, carried out by the UCC Students' Union in late 2024, found that cost-of-living concerns are affecting the health and wellbeing of two in three respondents.

The survey found that 29% of respondents had cut back spending on healthcare, and 27% on food.

Furthermore, we cannot assume that most families can financially support students with high levels of fees. Notably, the UCC survey found that just under half of undergraduate students paid or contributed to fees themselves through part-time work, loans or savings.



2/3

of respondents agree that the cost of living negatively affects their health and wellbeing.

¹⁰ HEA (2023). EUROSTUDENT SURVEY VIII REPORT ON THE SOCIAL AND LIVING CONDITIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS IN IRELAND 2022. [Online] Available from: <https://hea.ie/assets/uploads/2023/04/Eurostudent-8-Final-Report.pdf>

¹¹ CSO. (2024) Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2024 [Online] [Available here](#)

The uncertainty around levels of fees year to year hampers student's ability to forward plan. Indeed, recent comments by the Minister for Further and Higher Education that third level students will have to pay €1,000 extra in fees this year compared to last year is worrying.

“ I don't think most people know how expensive becoming an apprentice is. You buy your own uniform, your own tools, and in lots of places you have to have a driver's license. Add an apprentice fee and low wages onto those, and you're paying to do some of the hardest work there is.”

20-year-old

NYCI believes that it is essential for student's financial health and wellbeing that Government reduce third level fees for the 2025/2026 by €1,000 and put this on a permanent footing. Moreover, work should begin to plan for the provision of free fees in subsequent budgets.

The cost of further education for apprentices should also be addressed in Budget 2026.

According to the Department of Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform “Apprenticeships are essential to the economy and to support a sustainable pipeline of skilled workers for key sectors such as construction, supporting commitments under NDP Delivery, Housing for All and the Climate Action Plan”¹²

While there are no dedicated apprenticeship fees, there is the student contribution for those who attend a Higher Education Institution as a part of their apprenticeship. For 2025, this included approximately 14,000 apprentices.

Budget 2025 recognised that these students also face cost of living pressures, and a once off 33% reduction to the student fee for 14,000 apprentices attending higher education institutes was announced.

Apprentices are not immune to the wider cost of living pressures faced by society. Therefore, NYCI believe that contribution fees for apprentices should be permanently abolished in Budget 2026, to allow certainty and removal of financial pressures for these apprentices.



¹² Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service (IGEES) (2024) ‘Apprenticeships – Trends and Profiles’ D/PENDR Analytical Note 2024 [Online] [Accessed here](#)

INTRODUCE FREE PUBLIC TRANSPORT FOR UNDER-25s

Action: Provide free public transport to all under-25s.

Cost: unavailable

Rationale: Transport is not just a means to an end; it's a lifeline that connects us to our passions, hobbies, and social circles. It's about the freedom to explore, to engage in leisure activities, and to live vibrant, spontaneous lives. Young people seek increased mobility and diverse transport options that are not only sustainable and climate-friendly but also free and affordable. Young people are not just looking for ways to get from point A to point B; they are looking for a transport system that understands and supports their dynamic lifestyle and responsibilities. They want public transport to be an attractive option, not just a necessity.

“There needs to be more spaces for youth to discuss the fact they are limited on opportunities due to transport in rural areas which limits social gatherings which has a negative effect for them”

Consultation participant¹³

Free public transport for young people is not just about saving money; it's about investing in the future. It encourages independence, facilitates access to education and employment opportunities, and promotes social inclusion. It can be a lifeline for those from lower-income backgrounds, levelling the

playing field and providing equal opportunities for all.

Moreover, free public transport can lead to a long-term cultural shift towards more sustainable travel habits. By introducing young people to public transport early, we foster a generation that is more likely to use it throughout their lives, thus reducing future car dependency and its associated environmental impacts.

Young people's transport needs are typically different from older age groups because they usually have less disposable income; they travel for education, training, apprenticeships and first jobs, which existing transport options may not serve well. Young people may spend time in youth centres, libraries, parks and public spaces with their friends and in places that cost less or are free for leisure. Hence, they need affordable, reliable and safe transport options that connect them to these specific places that serve their needs.

The argument that free travel should be retained only for specific segments like older people, while understandable, overlooks the broader societal benefits of extending such concessions to young people. Young people are the active workforce of today and tomorrow, and supporting their mobility today pay dividends in the form of a more dynamic, connected, and environmentally conscious society.



Transport is not just a means to an end; it's a lifeline that connects us to our passions, hobbies, and social circles.

13 NYCI. (2024). "WE NEED YOUTH" Young Voices Consultation Report Cycle 10 of the EU Youth Dialogue process on European Youth Goal #3 on Inclusive Societies. [Online] Available from: <https://www.youth.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Young-Voices-Report-Inclusive-societies-cycle-10.pdf>

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YOUTH WORK CHANGES LIVES

