



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
26 February 2024

Original: English

Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights Seventy-fifth session

Summary record of the 9th meeting**

Held at the Palais Wilson, Geneva, on Friday, 16 February 2024, at 10 a.m.

Chair: Mr. Emuze (Vice-Chair)

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* Reissued for technical reasons on 12 March 2024.
** No summary record was issued for the 8th meeting.

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Mr. Emuze (Vice-Chair) took the Chair.

The meeting was called to order at 10 a.m.

Consideration of reports (*continued*)

(a) Reports submitted by States parties under articles 16 and 17 of the Covenant
(*continued*)

Fourth periodic report of Ireland (continued) ([E/C.12/IRL/4](#); [E/C.12/IRL/Q/4](#);
[E/C.12/IRL/RQ/4](#))

1. *At the invitation of the Chair, the delegation of Ireland joined the meeting.*
2. **A representative of Ireland** said that intersectionality was a core principle of the National Action Plan Against Racism, which included, for example, intersectional approaches to combating racism in the education system and measures that used census data on intersectionality to inform government action. National and local government was responsible for implementing the Plan, which had been developed through extensive consultation and research, including during events focusing on intersectionality. The National LGBTI+ Inclusion Strategy, which included more than 100 actions to address discrimination, promote inclusion and improve quality of life, had been extended and would remain in force until its successor had been developed. The steering committee for the Strategy continued to meet.
3. **A representative of Ireland** said that there were plans to draw up, by mid-2024, a national equality data strategy that would improve and standardize such data in order to highlight inequality and intersectionality and therefore inform policy actions and interventions. The working group tasked with drafting the strategy comprised representatives of public bodies, research institutes and civil society, among others. The National Action Plan Against Racism also addressed equality data, for instance through action to determine the data sources to be used to monitor racial equality, create legal safeguards for data on ethnicity and standardize the ethnic group classifications used in its collection. Other initiatives to improve data collection included a research project on the care system intended, inter alia, to improve the tracking of children's pathways through the system and facilitate studies on children and adults with experience of care. Furthermore, the aims of a research project launched under the National LGBTI+ Inclusion Strategy included identifying data gaps and research priorities, surveying public attitudes and studying conversion practices. A longitudinal study of children that had begun in 2006 would incorporate a third cohort of children in 2024.
4. **A representative of Ireland** said that while discrimination cases could be heard by both labour and circuit courts, the Workplace Relations Commission provided an alternative to the court system. Parties were not required to have legal or other representation, although they could choose to be represented by a third party. Despite not having the power to award costs, the Commission could grant certain expenses in exceptional circumstances. Discrimination claims must normally be lodged with the Commission within six months of the alleged incident, or the final alleged incident in cases of ongoing discrimination. The Commission also functioned as a labour inspectorate and in 2023 had undertaken almost 5,000 inspections, organized campaigns in several sectors and recovered almost €2 million in unpaid wages. The number of inspectors within the Commission would rise from 26 to 80 in 2024. With regard to the *Revenue Commissioners v. Karshan (Midlands) Ltd. t/a Domino's Pizza* case, an employment law review group was being established.
5. **A representative of Ireland** said that spatial planning and capital investment were being linked under the Project Ireland 2040 strategy, as illustrated by the €3.5 billion allocated to the transport network, which included €1 billion for fully accessible bus, rail and tram services.
6. **A representative of Ireland** said that the Government had accepted 25 recommendations made by an expert group tasked with developing a new funding model for the early learning and childcare sector. The new model for the privately operated system had been launched in 2022 with the aim of increasing public funding and public management

of the sector through a multi-year investment plan. The early learning and childcare budget for 2024 totalled €1.1 billion and provided for up to two years' free preschool education for every child, including children with disabilities, who also benefited from support outside term time. Work was under way to significantly reduce out-of-pocket childcare costs for parents through universal and targeted subsidies; the minimum childcare subsidy would increase to €2.14 per hour in September 2024.

7. **A representative of Ireland** said that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working on domestic and sexual violence and trafficking in persons made up the majority of members of the Victims' Forum. However, rather than focusing on those issues, which were dealt with via different consultation mechanisms, the Forum allowed organizations to discuss common issues relating to victims of crime and provided an opportunity for smaller organizations to engage in dialogue with the Government. The new Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Agency had a staff complement of 36 and a budget amounting to €59 million for 2024, including €47 million for grants – incorporating funds from the Child and Family Agency to be allocated to, for instance, rape crisis centres and from the Department of Justice and Equality to provide support to victims of crime – and almost €7 million for prevention and awareness-raising campaigns. Its budget did not cover the capital cost of the construction of women's shelters, which was funded through a centralized multi-year budget.

8. The awareness-raising campaigns run by the Department of Justice were evaluated independently. A recent campaign on intimate image abuse had been deemed effective by 90 per cent of respondents, representing a 10 per cent improvement on the results of a previous evaluation. Those evaluations had already demonstrated some progress in meeting the Government's target of zero tolerance of violence against women; rather than tackling gender stereotypes, efforts in that regard focused mainly on addressing misogyny and consent and encouraging victims to come forward. Stereotypes were tackled under the National Strategy for Women and Girls.

9. **A representative of Ireland** said that a research programme was looking at the issue of persistent poverty in specific groups; its report would be published in the coming months. As for consistent poverty, as well as related indicators such as poverty risk, there had been a decrease each year between 2015 and 2021, followed by an increase in 2022. However, as the 2022 survey data related to income from the 2021 calendar year, that increase ought to be considered in the context of the continued impact of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic on incomes. Consistent poverty was higher than the national average among single-parent families, children and persons with disabilities and, although it was below the national average for older adults, their risk of poverty had been above average in 2022. The Roadmap for Social Inclusion, along with various sectoral strategies, contributed to poverty reduction. Distributional impact assessments were undertaken for annual budgets to determine their impact on different types of households, and independent analysis had demonstrated that the 2024 budget most benefited the poorest and most vulnerable groups.

10. Poverty among persons with disabilities was addressed through assistance in finding employment, such as reviews of funding for reasonable accommodations and a wage subsidy scheme and a five-year programme intended to improve their access to the labour market. Consultation was under way on proposed reforms to disability benefits that would help to reduce poverty and increase employment. A child poverty and well-being programme prioritized action in areas that had the greatest effect on children living in poverty. A scheme that provided financial incentives for employers had been extended to include the recruitment of workers from the Traveller and Roma communities, and a consultative forum provided advice on the provision of employment services to those communities. Employment services staff underwent cultural awareness training, and the use of internships, apprenticeships, work placement programmes and a community employment programme across government had increased.

11. **A representative of Ireland** said that the Energy Poverty Action Plan comprised short- and long-term measures, including targeted lump sum social protection payments totalling more than €1 billion, enhanced consumer protection and three Electricity Costs Emergency Benefit Schemes; difficulties in access to those schemes by the Traveller community had been resolved through a grant agreement with local authorities, and any

missed payments had been backdated. The energy efficiency of more than 47,000 homes had been improved, including under a scheme for households at risk of energy poverty. More than €430 million had been allocated to the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland and more than €90 million to local authorities to that end.

12. **A representative of Ireland** said that a commission on housing had been established to examine matters including tenure, standards, sustainability and quality of life and to propose wording for a referendum on housing. The Housing for All plan had received record levels of State investment and involved an expansion of the social housing sector and increased provision of affordable rental accommodation with security of tenure. Under the plan, the greatest number of social homes since the 1970s had been constructed in 2022, along with more than 1,750 affordable homes.

13. **A representative of Ireland** said that the Housing for All plan included measures to support social inclusion in the housing sector. Capital funding for designated accommodation for the Traveller community had risen to almost €30 million in 2023, and that community also had access to a pilot caravan loan scheme. A Traveller identifier had been included on the social housing application form to help monitor access to such housing by Travellers; the number of Travellers residing in social housing had increased by almost 25 per cent over the previous four years. The National Housing Strategy for Disabled People Implementation Plan set out more than 100 actions to be undertaken. Local authority allocations for housing for persons with disabilities increased year on year. The law required all public bodies, including local authorities, to address the need to eliminate discrimination.

14. **A representative of Ireland** said that an interdepartmental working group had examined the Government's efforts to eradicate food poverty. Although there was no food poverty indicator, an annual survey on income and living conditions contained relevant questions on the phenomenon. As part of the Sláintecare Healthy Communities Programme, nutritionists were deployed to the country's most deprived areas. The Programme also involved efforts to help individuals acquire the necessary skills and knowledge to eat healthily. Furthermore, the school meals programme reached 441,000 children, and a hot school meals programme was being scaled up with the aim of giving all primary and secondary school children access to daily hot meals at school. Under a pilot project, case officers had been deployed to three food banks to assess users' situations, ensure that they had access to the necessary services and gather data on the drivers of food bank use.

15. **A representative of Ireland** said that life expectancy in Ireland stood at 81 years for men and 84 years for women, which was well above the average in the European Union. Between 80 and 85 per cent of the population reported being in good or very good health, which was the highest level in Europe.

16. Since its previous dialogue with the Committee, Ireland had adopted a policy of universal health care, under which everyone who was ordinarily resident in the country had access to public health services. Primary care, mental health services, hospital treatment, maternal and infant health care and public health vaccinations were all made available at no or low cost. Services were provided free of charge to anyone earning below the median annual household income, which currently stood at €44,000, children under the age of 8 years and adults aged 70 years or older. That threshold currently encompassed 42 per cent of the population; the Government was aiming to ensure that that figure rose to above 50 per cent. Spending on public health had increased from €14.2 billion in 2015 to a current total of €26 billion; during the same period, the population had grown by 10 per cent. The budget allocation for mental health services had increased by €84 million to €1.3 billion in 2024, including €10 million for youth mental health.

17. Since 2017, drug use had been addressed as a public health issue rather than a criminal justice matter. In 2023, a Citizens' Assembly on Drugs Use, which included persons with lived experience of drug use, had been established to consider potential harm reduction measures. The key recommendation set out in the Assembly's report, which had been published in January 2024 and would be considered by the legislature, was the application of a comprehensive health-led response to drug use rooted in three pillars, namely diversion, dissuasion and decriminalization. The Government regularly consulted with organizations that represented the views of drug users and, as a result, had conducted an equality review of

the drug services offered by the Health Service Executive. The country's first medically supervised injecting facility had been set up, and a 100-bed medical facility designed to treat persons with addiction who were homeless would open in April 2024.

18. **A representative of Ireland** said that the bill on safe access zones around medical facilities providing abortions would be enacted in the near future. Following a review of the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018, 17 of the 19 maternity hospitals and more than 420 primary care facilities now provided termination services. The National Social Inclusion Office provided additional support to marginalized groups. Women who, for any reason, were unable to schedule an appointment could obtain free contraception from women's health clinics. Sexual health services were also made available to persons working in the sex trade and persons in need of international protection.

19. Almost €1 million was allocated annually to combating period poverty. Plans were under way to make free period products available in public buildings, with the most urgent efforts being focused on providing support to marginalized groups including homeless persons, Travellers, Roma and refugees.

20. A programme had been set up to transform health care provision throughout the country, including in rural areas. Six new strategic health regions were to be created in 2024 with the aim of aligning community and hospital services with local needs, improving efficiency, maximizing the use of resources and providing more focused delivery of services. The reforms also included implementation of the Healthy Communities programme, which targeted the most disadvantaged communities in Ireland. In 2023, a new public-only contract had been introduced for hospital consultants which would result in the phased removal of private consultant services from public hospital settings. Forty per cent of consultants had already signed up to the contract.

21. **Mr. Nonthasoot** (Country Rapporteur) said that it was unclear whether the State party's policy on universal health care was underpinned by legislation. He would also welcome clarification of whether the new definition of the family, which was to be put to a constitutional referendum, would provide protection for the housing rights of Travellers and Roma. It would also be interesting to hear more details of how the Government intended to decriminalize drug use. Lastly, he would be grateful for an update on the compensation scheme that had been set up in connection with the Magdalene Laundries.

22. **Ms. Lemus de Vásquez** (Country Task Force) said that she wished to know what measures the State party was taking to ensure that all children, including Roma, had access to health cards and child benefit even if they did not meet the requirements of the habitual residence policy. She would also appreciate details of how the Government ensured that all housing options for persons with intellectual impairments met international human rights standards.

23. **Mr. Windfuhr** said that he would like to know what efforts were being made to reduce the long waiting times for gender-related health-care services for transgender and non-binary persons. He would welcome information on what was being done to ensure that non-consensual surgery was not performed on children.

24. **Ms. Rossi** said that she would welcome more details of the measures being taken to address the health inequalities faced by Roma. It was unclear whether a specific mental health policy was in place for the Roma population.

25. **A representative of Ireland** said that the policy on universal health care coverage was underpinned by legislation. Further efforts were needed to ensure that private health-care provision was fully removed from the public health-care system. All of the 130,000 refugees who had arrived in Ireland in the previous two years were entitled to free health care; that number represented a population increase of 2.5 per cent.

26. With a view to achieving the decriminalization of drug use, a programme was being developed to ensure that anyone found in possession of drugs would be referred to the health system, rather than to the justice system, and would not be prosecuted.

27. Work was under way to develop a new health-care model for transgender persons, with the aim of providing seamless care from childhood into adulthood. Children and young

persons with intersex conditions were given only medically necessary treatment, which might include surgery; such treatment was provided only with the unanimous agreement of parents, consultants and interdisciplinary teams and always in line with relevant international best practice. Consent was also sought from any patients aged 16 years or over.

28. Traveller organizations were central to the design and delivery of the National Traveller Health Action Plan. Of the Plan's 45 actions, 6 related to mental health in the Traveller population. The authorities were committed to developing a national implementation plan for the mental health of Travellers, with input from the National Traveller Mental Health Network.

29. **A representative of Ireland** said that it was not yet possible to provide specific details of the wording of the question on the definition of the family that would be put to a constitutional referendum.

30. **A representative of Ireland** said that the aim of amending the constitutional definition of the family was to provide adequate protection to unmarried couples and single-parent families.

31. **A representative of Ireland** said that the State had made two formal apologies to the women who had spent time in Magdalene Laundries, for the hurt done to them and for any stigma they had suffered as a result of having resided in such institutions. The Government was committed to fully implementing the recommendations that had been issued by the Ombudsman with regard to the Laundries, and an ex gratia payment scheme had been set up in 2013, under which a total of €33.2 million had been paid out to 827 applicants. It was not necessary for applicants to prove that they had suffered harm in the Laundries; evidence that they had lived and worked there was sufficient.

32. With regard to the decongregation of residential institutions, the number of persons with disabilities living in such settings had fallen from more than 4,000 in 2009 to 1,532 by the end of 2023. It was expected that approximately 375 residential homes would be required to complete the decongregation process. Data from July 2023 had shown that 1,228 persons under the age of 65 years resided in nursing homes. While that setting was sometimes appropriate, the Government was providing funding to support people to live in their own homes. The Health Service Executive was engaging with 575 individuals to review whether they needed to remain in a nursing home or could transition to community living.

33. **A representative of Ireland** said that one of the core elements of the vision of the National Housing Strategy for Disabled People was to help persons with disabilities to live independently. The Health Service Executive and local authorities worked together to plan and deliver on housing targets for persons with disabilities in the community.

34. **A representative of Ireland** said that anyone, irrespective of their ethnic or national identity, who sought to obtain social assistance payments or child benefit must meet the residency requirements of the Habitual Residence Condition and demonstrate that they had strong ties to Ireland as their main centre of interest. The Habitual Residence Condition was underpinned by the jurisprudence of the European Court of Justice on Regulation (EC) No. 883/2004 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 29 April 2004 on the coordination of social security systems and by Directive 2004/38/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 29 April 2004, which related to freedom of movement.

35. **A representative of Ireland** said that medical cards were issued to all persons, including members of the Roma community, who satisfied a means test that took into account income, family situation and living conditions, among other factors. The children of cardholders were automatically covered up to the age of 16 years, and beyond that if they continued to be dependants in full-time education.

36. **A representative of Ireland** said that, while Ireland had good life expectancy rates overall, the life expectancies for Traveller men and women were 15 and 11 years lower, respectively, than for the general population.

37. **Mr. Shen** (Country Task Force) said that he would welcome a response to the request in paragraph 26 of the list of issues ([E/C.12/IRL/Q/4](#)) for statistical data on education disaggregated by age group, disability, sex, ethnic origin, national origin and socioeconomic

status. He wished to know whether the review of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 had been completed and, if so, what the outcome had been, what problems had been identified and what measures had been or would be taken to address them. Given the high number of children still being taught in segregated classes, an indication of whether the review would lead to the development of a more inclusive education policy would also be welcome.

38. It would be interesting to receive information on whether the State party had identified barriers to education for Traveller and Roma children, on any steps taken to eliminate those barriers and on how a balance was struck between ensuring such children's right to education and respecting their lifestyle. He would be glad to receive details of any measures taken to ensure equal access to education for all children, including an indication of whether the State party intended to include all schools in the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools programme and to remove discriminatory criteria from school admissions procedures.

39. He invited the delegation to describe any measures taken to implement the recommendations on sex education contained in paragraph 39 (c) of the concluding observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women on the combined sixth and seventh periodic reports of Ireland (CEDAW/C/IRL/CO/6-7). It would be useful to know whether the Department of Education would provide guidance and supervision to schools to ensure respect for the constitutional right of every child to attend a denominational school receiving State funding without having to participate in religious instruction.

40. Lastly, he would welcome a response to reports that Traveller history and culture were not adequately included in school curricula and that Shelta was not taught or used as a teaching language in preschool or primary education, together with a description of the measures planned to address those concerns.

The meeting was suspended at 11.40 a.m. and resumed at 11.50 a.m.

41. **A representative of Ireland** said that statistics were published on school examination entries by county and gender and on the enrolment and retention rates of Traveller children from primary school through to the end of secondary education. The Department of Education was considering the development of a centralized approach to the collection of data on ethnicity, which had, since 2015, been gathered in an inconsistent manner by schools at the time of enrolment. The provision of such data by parents was voluntary. More statistics would be released as they became available. However, the Department was reluctant to publish league tables, which failed to provide a rounded picture of schools' performance and could cause reputational damage, thereby undermining efforts to improve.

42. **A representative of Ireland** said that the review of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 had commenced in December 2021 and had been expected to be finalized by the end of 2023. It remained ongoing, however, owing to the huge level of engagement in the process from children, schools, civil society and other stakeholders. A survey conducted as part of the review had received 28,000 responses. Consultations were being held with focus groups with the aim of completing the review by the third quarter of 2024 and publishing a report containing recommendations, including on the language used in relation to children with special educational needs and the types of supports provided to them.

43. Following the 2018 ratification by Ireland of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the National Council for Special Education had issued policy advice to the Government on drawing up a road map for inclusion. While the Government wanted to promote inclusivity to the extent possible, it was also mindful of the right of parental choice in schooling and of the need to have the best supports in place for all children. The teaching of special classes and the opening of special schools were not viewed by the Government as being part of a policy of segregation, but rather as means of providing intensive supports within inclusive school environments. Seven special schools had been inaugurated over the previous three years, and a further four would be opened in September 2024.

44. To enhance quality inclusive education, the Department of Education, in consultation with partners, advocacy groups and civil society, was carrying out activities with the

European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education under the European Union's Technical Support Instrument programme.

45. **A representative of Ireland** said that, among the cohort of Traveller students who had entered post-primary education in 2016, the rate of completion of the junior cycle, which covered the first three years of secondary school, had stood at 72.7 per cent, 10 per cent higher than for the cohort of five years previously, while the proportion of students sitting the Leaving Certificate examination had risen by the same percentage to 31.4 per cent. The Department of Education, in close partnership with civil society, was developing a Traveller and Roma education strategy that it hoped to publish in summer 2024. As part of the development process, the Department was holding targeted consultations in which the Traveller and Roma communities were well represented. A specific strand of the consultations was devoted to hearing the voices of children and young people, in line with the Department's ongoing efforts to ensure the meaningful participation of children and young people in all decision-making that affected them. The Department intended to implement the strategy through a series of short-term plans with measurable targets.

46. The Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools programme had expanded significantly, to cover over 240,000 students in 1,200 schools. In 2024, the Department of Education would spend in excess of €180 million on the programme, 20 per cent more than in 2020. In addition to funding under the programme, an additional €8 million had been secured specifically to address the impact of developments over recent years on students at risk of educational disadvantage, of whom some 72 per cent were enrolled in primary schools supported through the programme.

47. Universal supports were available to children in all 4,000 schools in the country. Schools had the autonomy to select the supports best suited to meeting their students' needs. In advance of the 2023/24 academic year, a free primary schoolbooks scheme had been rolled out nationwide. From September 2024, free books would be provided to all children in State-funded schools at the junior cycle level. Further supports included access to medical cards and reduced school transportation fees for certain groups, such as children under international protection and those with special educational needs. The Department had invested heavily in English-language provision for students who were newly arrived in Ireland and had allocated almost 2,000 posts to schools for that purpose.

48. The Well-Being Policy Statement and Framework for Practice set out a whole-school approach to student well-being and mental health. Through a pilot programme funded in the amount of €5 million, one-to-one counselling services were being provided in primary schools. To help to achieve its vision of an inclusive education system, the Department of Education had invited the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, as part of a project entitled Strength through Diversity: Education for Inclusive Societies, to review the policy approach for the allocation of resources to support students at risk of educational disadvantage in Ireland. Over the previous decade, thanks to a range of targeted supports provided at the local level, the gap between student retention rates in schools covered by the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools programme and other schools had been halved.

49. In response to an increase in the number of children under international protection arriving in the country, including an influx of children from Ukraine, regional education and language teams had been established to ensure immediate access to education and the provision of necessary supports to schools. The teams had proved successful in coordinating State and community-based services to create a welcoming environment for new arrivals.

50. **A representative of Ireland** said that the Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018 had introduced a more parent-friendly, equitable and consistent approach to school admissions. Pursuant to the Act, all schools that were not oversubscribed were obliged to accept students regardless of age, ethnicity, ability and, in the case of primary schools, religion. The vast majority of schools were not oversubscribed. There were currently 3,647 school students under international protection. While the Act did give schools discretion to reserve up to 25 per cent of places for past students' children, the quota was optional, must be included in the school's admission policy and had to be the subject of consultation within the school community.

51. **A representative of Ireland** said that the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science had been formed in 2020 with a remit that included establishing pathways to further and higher education for underrepresented groups, with access for all. Traveller and Roma communities were priority groups, which meant that they could benefit from a number of funding opportunities. The National Access Plan 2022–2028, launched in August 2022, sought to increase the number of Traveller new entrants in higher education to 150 by 2028. Under the Programme for Access to Higher Education, a special funding stream had been created to increase the participation and progression of Traveller and Roma students in higher education and help to meet the objectives of the Plan in that regard. The Plan was complemented by the Higher Education Access Route and the Disability Access Route to Education, two schemes that aimed to improve access to higher education for school leavers from disadvantaged backgrounds and school leavers with disabilities, respectively. Moreover, a broad range of supports were provided to regional education and training boards to boost the participation of all learners, including those with disabilities, in adult literacy, community education, specialist training and other programmes. The Fund for Students with Disabilities was used to provide assistive technology equipment and software and various other medical and non-medical supports to learners with disabilities. Literacy, numeracy and digital literacy skills were a key aspect of learning programmes for refugees, asylum-seekers, members of Traveller and Roma communities and other disadvantaged groups and persons with disabilities. The Adult Literacy for Life strategy set out a cross-government, cross-economy and cross-society approach to achieve the vision of an Ireland where all adults had the skills required to engage in society, participate in the labour market and realize their potential. Persons with disabilities were one of the vulnerable cohorts identified for targeted supports under the strategy. The previous week, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science had announced the roll-out of higher education courses specifically for students with intellectual disabilities, to be delivered in 10 colleges across the country.

52. **A representative of Ireland** said that relationships and sexuality education was taught as part of the social, personal and health education curriculum, which was mandatory for students up to the end of the junior cycle. Although schools were required to develop a relationships and sexuality education policy in consultation with the school community, a school's ethos could not be used to justify omitting elements of the curriculum, which included modules on family planning, sexually transmitted infections and sexual orientation. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment had rolled out an updated curriculum for the junior cycle in September 2023. Consultations were ongoing on the development of a curriculum for students aged 15–18 years in time for the 2024/25 academic year.

53. **A representative of Ireland** said that one of the key goals of the National Sexual Health Strategy was to ensure that everyone had access to appropriate sexual health education and information. The implementation group for the Strategy had contributed significantly to the development of relationships and sexuality modules in the social, personal and health education curriculum for the junior cycle. It had also supported the development of online resources for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons and had collaborated with the health services, the Department of Education and various non-governmental organizations in updating publications such as *Busy Bodies*, a resource providing information on the physical and emotional changes that children might experience during puberty.

54. **A representative of Ireland** said that the State party had denominational, or single faith, schools, a few interdenominational schools cosponsored by two religions and multid denominational schools for children of all faiths or none at all. The Government was committed to increasing the number of multid denominational schools and, to that end, two schools had been reconfigured as part of a pilot project in 2023. A plan for further action would be devised in light of the findings from the review of that process that would be published in the first quarter of 2024. The Education (Admissions to Schools) Act 2018 had introduced an equitable decision approach which meant that a recognized school could not give priority to applicants of a particular religion, in other words it could not discriminate on the basis of religion. If schools provided religious instruction, they must make arrangements for pupils whose parents wanted them to attend the school without their taking part in religious instruction and for pupils who expressed that wish on reaching the age of 18. Since schools were independent bodies with their own boards of management, each school must

determine the arrangements that were most appropriate for its individual circumstances, having regard to issues such as available space, supervision requirements and the organization of classes. If the Department of Education was informed of instances where requests that a child attend a particular school without taking part in religious instruction had been refused, the department contacted the board of management directly to resolve the outstanding issues.

55. **A representative of Ireland** said that, in pursuance of the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment had conducted an audit to identify how to incorporate the teaching and learning of Traveller culture and history in early, primary and post-primary education. The Traveller culture and history research report sought to capture what an expert group comprising representatives of the Traveller community had identified as key aspects that should be covered by the curriculum, and examples of good teaching practice were being gathered. The National Council was in the process of updating its guidelines on the integration of intercultural education in the curriculum in order to promote a society which held a shared belief in the value of linguistic, cultural and ethnic diversity. More general material on the promotion of Traveller and Roma culture would be provided in writing.

56. **Mr. Abdel-Moneim** said that he would like to know whether the State party had a strategy on possible ways in which international human rights monitoring mechanisms might be improved in order to encourage greater compliance with international human rights law.

57. **Mr. Nonthasoot** said that he wished to know whether an assessment had been made of whether measures to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic had really worked for Roma, Travellers and LGBTQI+ persons. He wished to emphasize that it was important for the State party to ratify the Optional Protocol; as it had already introduced universal health coverage, there no longer seemed to be any obstacle to taking that step.

58. **Ms. Lee** said that she wished to know whether the 60 per cent of the population who did not have free access to medical treatment could nevertheless obtain affordable health care. She would appreciate information on the overall trend in the health budget over the previous five years. The Committee had received information that many asylum-seekers could not obtain health care owing to the inadequacy of services in the area where they were living. She would therefore be grateful for information on measures to remedy that situation and to provide accommodation for asylum-seekers who were reportedly sleeping rough.

59. **Mr. Shen** said that he wished to know whether the State party would consider the possibility of teaching or using the Traveller language in preschool or primary education.

60. **A representative of Ireland** said that the COVID-19 pandemic had indeed highlighted the significant inequalities faced by socially excluded and marginalized groups, including the homeless and others, notwithstanding the fact that the Department of Health had provided significant additional funding for the provision of health services for the homeless during the pandemic. The Government had announced a comprehensive inquiry into the approach taken to the pandemic to pinpoint successes and failures. Moreover, the Public Health Reform Expert Advisory Group had recommended the establishment of an emergency threats agency.

61. **A representative of Ireland** said that international studies had shown that, while Irish pupils had generally maintained a good educational status during the COVID-19 pandemic, it had, nevertheless, had a disproportionate effect on some of them. Once the emergency was over, in the summer of 2021, children with special educational needs and children from disadvantaged backgrounds had received additional teaching to help them catch up through the Summer Programme. In addition, under the Covid Learning and Supports Scheme, €14 million had been distributed to schools to assist children who had been identified as being at risk of falling behind owing to the pandemic or whose learning needs had suffered as a result of it. That scheme had been found to have had a beneficial effect on the well-being of the participant children. Another positive aspect had been the pupils' involvement in identifying their own needs and choosing their learning activities.

62. **A representative of Ireland** said that, as soon as movement restrictions had been imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic, the police force had mounted a special operation

that took the form of calling on every house where a case of domestic violence had been reported in the previous two years, thereby letting victims know that support would still be available and warning perpetrators that an eye was being kept on them. NGOs had acknowledged that special operation as a step change, as it was the first time that the State had been seen, formally, to take responsibility for dealing with domestic violence. It was true that the rates of reported incidents had gone up by between 20 and 25 per cent during that period, but some of that increase could be attributed to a greater willingness to report acts of violence.

63. **A representative of Ireland** said that, at the peak of the pandemic, over the half of the labour force had been in receipt of the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment, the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme or the job seekers' benefit. The impact of those measures had lowered the risk of poverty by an average of 7 per cent, or as much as 13.5 per cent for some disadvantaged groups such as lone parents. The payments had successfully maintained the link between employers and their workforce and there had not been any long-term labour market scarring.

64. **A representative of Ireland** said that the Government was committed to making progress on ratification of the Optional Protocol in the coming review period.

65. **A representative of Ireland** said that consideration was likewise being given to ratification of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

66. **A representative of Ireland** said that, from the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government had introduced a range of public health measures to prevent the spread of the virus in congregated settings and among the homeless. In such a situation, it was clearly necessary, on the one hand, to have targeted, client-friendly vaccination programmes and, on the other, to provide access to housing. The aim of the Housing First scheme was to provide care and accommodation for 50 per cent of the long-term homeless.

67. The 60 per cent of the population who did not benefit from free medical treatment might be eligible for a refund of the cost of medication, and the chronically sick could obtain drugs free of charge. The health budget had risen by 43 per cent between 2019 and 2024 to currently stand at €25.8 billion. Applicants for international protection were automatically entitled to a medical card that gave them free access to health-care services.

68. **A representative of Ireland** said that, despite intensive efforts to find emergency accommodation, some applicants for international protection had to be placed in alternative reception facilities in keeping with Directive 2013/33/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection. As of 14 February 2024, 915 persons awaiting an offer of State-supported accommodation were eligible for an additional payment of €113.80 per week. On arrival, all applicants who could not be offered such accommodation received an initial voucher worth €100 in advance of the daily expense allowance. The State had contracted numerous homeless day services to give unaccommodated applicants access to meals, showers, clothing and personal hygiene products.

69. **A representative of Ireland** said that, owing to the war in Europe, the State party was accommodating 100,000 people who were beneficiaries of temporary protection or entitled to international protection. Currently it was over-reliant on private landlords but, in the medium term, it would probably try to buy property in order to provide more State-owned housing.

70. **A representative of Ireland** said that the State party was standing for election to the Human Rights Council in 2026, as it believed that the Council and the treaty body system were essential to a healthy human rights ecosystem. It had made several pledges on the occasion of seventy-fifth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, including to mainstream human rights in its foreign policy and to champion civil society engagement through its multilateral engagements at the United Nations. It had published updated guidelines for Irish embassies and missions on how to protect and promote the work of human rights defenders and it had made a commitment to increase its funding for the

Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. Its second National Plan on Business and Human Rights would be ready by the end of 2024.

71. **A representative of Ireland** said that many schools already used a variety of methods to support children with diverse heritage languages. The education authorities would be looking at those practices to ensure that the Traveller language was celebrated and promoted in the same way as many others.

72. **Mr. Nonthasoot** said that the members of the Country Task Force appreciated the delegation's comprehensive answers to most of its questions. The Committee looked forward to seeing real progress in the field of human rights and greater prosperity in the State party.

73. **A representative of Ireland** said that the interactive dialogue had helped to identify areas where further work was needed to protect and promote economic, social and cultural rights. After it had received the Committee's concluding observations, the Government would meet with civil society to gather further information and clarify outstanding issues. An active and engaged civil society was the key to the delivery of the Government's goals and an essential partner in its work. The treaty body system and, in particular, the human rights standards that the United Nations protected and upheld were increasingly important in a world where, sadly, there was open disregard of such standards by some States.

The meeting rose at 1 p.m.