



Estimating the MESL costs for families in Direct Provision

Working Paper

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Introduction

This Working Paper outlines the findings of the first, desk-based, stage of a project to establish the Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) needs for families with children living in the Irish Direct Provision system. This initial stage of the project has produced the estimated MESL costs, based on a desk-based examination of the MESL baskets for families and adjusting the contents to reflect living within the Direct Provision system.

Following a review of relevant literature and documentation on the Direct Provision system and consultation with an Expert Group made up of representatives from various organisations that work directly with, and advocate for, those living in the Direct Provision system, adjustments were made to the MESL baskets to remove the goods and services not applicable and to add additional or different goods and services required when living in this context. This Working Paper details those deliberations and resulting adjustments to the MESL basket, and, based on the family's MESL need, examines the adequacy of income supports provided by the State to these families.

It is intended that this Working Paper will inform a subsequent stage of the project, where deliberative focus groups of people with experience of living within Direct Provision will review and adapt the MESL baskets, to reflect their lived experience.

Methodology

This section outlines the background of the MESL research, and outlines how this method was used and adapted for the purpose of this Working Paper.

MESL Research Background

The Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) consensual budget standards research establishes the cost of a socially acceptable minimum standard of living. The research collaborates with members of the public in deliberative focus groups to reach consensus on the minimum basket of goods and services people need to live and partake in Irish society, at a standard of living which people agree no one should be expected to live below. It represents the minimum required to meet physical, social, and psychological needs, and enable a life with dignity.

The research is iterative, working through multiple phases of deliberative focus groups, to establish a negotiated social consensus on what people regard as essential for households to have a minimum, but socially acceptable standard of living. In this way the MESL is a tangible measure, grounded in lived experience and derived from social consensus, of what is required for participation, dignity and avoiding poverty.

The MESL operationalises the concepts which underpin the Irish Government definition of poverty and the principles set out in the European Pillar of Social Rights that all have a right to an adequate minimum income which enables a life with dignity. It specifies the average weekly cost of the goods and services agreed as essential for enabling a socially acceptable minimum standard of living. In practical terms, the MESL establishes a direct measure of the cost of a decent standard of living providing a benchmark of what is required for a life with dignity, to enable participation, and to

avoid poverty. It also provides a vital evidence-based benchmark for gauging the adequacy of social welfare supports and minimum rates of pay.

Working Paper Approach – Scenario and Assumptions

Throughout the course of the project, during both the desk-based research and consultation with the Expert Group, a large variation in the standard and type of service provided to those living in Direct Provision accommodation across the country became clear. This made the adaptation of the existing MESL baskets complicated, as depending on the level of service being provided, the contents of the baskets could vary. In order to address this, it was necessary to create a specific scenario that the family being considered were in, with a number of associated assumptions:

This scenario is modelled on how the Direct Provision system “should” work, based on desk-based research and a review of a number of key documents, including the National Standards for Direct Provision, which are discussed in the following section. It is important to acknowledge that due to the large variation in the standard and type of service being provided across the country, this scenario may portray a “best case” situation that many people living in Direct Provision accommodation may not receive.

- This study will examine the MESL need of families made up of both one and two parents, with two children, one of primary school age and one of secondary school age.
- It is assumed that the families in question are within their first six months of living within the Direct Provision system and rely solely on income provided by the state.
- It is assumed that the family in question are living in an International Protection Accommodation Services (IPAS) Accommodation Centre, rather than the other forms of accommodation provided to those in the Direct Provision system.
- It is assumed that the IPAS Accommodation Centre in which the family are living has shared self-catering facilities, with access to an in-centre shop and kitchen facilities for residents to choose, prepare and cook their own food.
- It is assumed that the family in question rely on the transport service provided by their accommodation provider, as well as some use of public transport.

Relevant Documentation

The following key documents, alongside other desk-based research, were used to inform the scenario and assumptions made about the family being considered. They also inform the adjustments made to the MESL basket for a family living in Direct Provision accommodation, outlined in the Expenditure section.

- National Standards for Direct Provision – this document outlines the standards which apply to the living conditions and services provided to the residents living in IPAS accommodation. The purpose of the National Standards is to improve the quality of care and ensure consistency across accommodation centres, as well as to provide a framework for any future assessments to determine whether service providers are providing high-quality, safe and effective services and supports for residents.
- IPAS House Rules and Procedures – this document is provided to International Protection applicants staying in IPAS accommodation. It explains to residents the services that their accommodation provides, the rules they must follow, and various procedures, such as health and safety and the complaints process.
- White Paper to End Direct Provision and to Establish a New International Protection Support Service – published in 2021, the White Paper outlines the plan of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability and Youth on how it will end Direct Provision, while transitioning to a new not-for-profit reception system grounded in a human rights approach, with key supports geared towards ensuring integration and independence. It proposes a new two-phase approach to accommodate 3,500 International Protection applicants annually. Phase One proposes applicants living in a Reception and Integration Centre for a maximum of four months, with own room accommodation for single people, and own door accommodation for families. Phase Two proposes all accommodation for families will be own door, self-contained houses or apartments, with single people housed in either own door or own room accommodation.

Context of Assumptions

This paper assumes that the example family types are within their first six months of being in the Direct Provision system, as International Protection applicants can be granted a permission to access the labour market if they have been waiting six months or more for the first decision on their protection application (Department of Justice 2023).

The alternative forms of Direct Provision accommodation include Emergency Accommodation Centres, a National Reception Centre, a Transit Hub and Temporary Tented Accommodation. As of 26th March 2023, 20,304 people were living in Direct Provision accommodation. The majority of these were living in Emergency Accommodation Centres (11,878), while 7,067 people were living in IPAS Accommodation Centres. As of the 26th of March 2023, slightly more children (2,096) were living in IPAS Accommodation Centres, in comparison to Emergency Accommodation Centres (2,036) (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth 2023). Current IPAS Accommodation Centres are the most similar to the Reception and Integration Centres proposed in Phase One of the White Paper to End Direct Provision, therefore it is assumed that the family in question are living in this accommodation type.

With Regards to food, there are two potential arrangements available in the various accommodation types: self-catering or meals prepared by the accommodation provider. As of July 2021, 71% of people living in Direct Provision Accommodation were living in centres providing cooking facilities (Houses of the Oireachtas 2021). Due to the large increase in the number of people entering the Direct Provision system since 2021, which has led to an increased reliance on Emergency Accommodation centres, this percentage could potentially have changed. There were 130

Emergency Centres in March 2023 (DCEDIY 2023) compared to 25 Emergency Centres in December 2021 (DCEDIY 2021).

As it is assumed the example family types are living in an IPAS Accommodation Centre and not Emergency Accommodation, it is assumed they have access to self-catering facilities. Alongside this, the White Paper to End Direct Provision proposes that food provision in both Phase 1 and Phase 2 should be self-catered, with access to cooking facilities (Government of Ireland 2021).

Although Asylum Seekers can apply for a Driver License as of December 2021, it is assumed that this family do not own a car and rely on the transport service provided by their accommodation provider, as well as some use of public transport (Department of Transport 2021). This is because Standard 7.2 of the National Standards for Direct Provision states that “The service provider ensures that public services, healthcare, education, community supports and leisure activities are accessible to residents, including children and young people, and where necessary through the provision of a dedicated and adequate transport service.” Indicator 7.2.2., which outlines how a service provider may be judged to have met this standard, states that “The service provider makes available a transport service that meets the reasonable needs of residents.” (Department of Justice and Equality 2019).

Findings - Expenditure

The review of the MESL baskets for this project found that in the context of living in Direct Provision accommodation, there are a range of costs included in the MESL budget which are not applicable. This is due to the goods and services included in the MESL baskets being provided by the accommodation provider, or due to the limitations on residents’ activities. This discussion outlines the adjustments made within each MESL basket category following this review, based on the Scenario and Assumptions, as well as the key documents, listed above.¹

Food

The MESL Food basket for a family is based on a 7-day food menu including breakfast, lunch and dinner, as well as snacks throughout the day. The menu is agreed by focus groups, and a nutritionist is then consulted to ensure it is based on a varied, healthy and balanced diet.

As stated within the scenario and assumptions section, it is assumed that the family in question live in an IPAS Accommodation Centre with access to self-catering facilities and an in-centre shop for residents to choose, prepare and cook their own foods. In-centre shops within Direct Provision accommodation work on a points system, where residents are given a card with a number of points on it, based on family size and composition, and items in the shop are then priced using this points system (Office of the Ombudsman 2022).

Although it is unclear exactly how this points system works across different accommodation centres, for example if items are priced the same across different centres’ shops, or if families of the same composition are assigned the same number of points across all centres, this report assumes that the

¹ The pricing of all items from the existing MESL baskets, that remain within the baskets of the family living in Direct Provision, is based on pricing from “general shops,” not specific to the shops within Direct Provision Centres.

family in question are assigned enough points to meet the cost of the food basket included in the existing MESL budgets.² Therefore, the cost of all food items, excluding food purchased outside of the accommodation, have been removed from the food budget.

Food purchased outside of the accommodation include a monthly take-away for the whole family, and a deli lunch once a week for the secondary school aged child. Focus groups for the existing MESL budgets highlight these items as important, as they acknowledge the social aspect of food, and that their inclusion ensures that households can participate in activities that are considered to be a part of everyday life. Therefore, it is appropriate that these food costs should remain in the MESL Food budget for a family living in Direct Provision accommodation.

Clothing

The MESL Clothing budget for a family living in Direct Provision accommodation has remained the same as the MESL Clothing budget for the general population, with no costs being removed from or added to the budget. The MESL Clothing basket contains all clothing items an individual would need from day to day, including seasonal clothing like a coat, hat, scarf and gloves for winter, and shorts, flipflops and sunglasses for summer.

The Expert Group highlighted that the clothing need is widely not being met and that families in Direct Provision are often going without certain clothing items. They noted a high reliance on donations from charitable organisations to access clothing and a reliance on Additional Needs Payments (ANP)³ from the State to cover clothing costs. Access to clothing for growing children, accessing appropriate clothing for job interviews and important appointments, as well as accessing suitable winter clothing were all highlighted as issues being experienced on the ground.

Personal Care

The MESL Personal Care basket includes all hygiene and toiletry items that focus groups have agreed are essential at a minimum level. This includes soap, body wash, shampoo, conditioner, toothpaste, toothbrush, hairbrush, razors, moisturiser, sun cream, deodorant, period products etc. It also includes the cost of a haircut a few times a year, as well as some cosmetic items, including some makeup items, perfume and aftershave.

Standard 4.9 of the National Standards for Direct Provision states that “The service provider makes available sufficient and appropriate non-food items and products to ensure personal hygiene, comfort, dignity, health and wellbeing,” while indicator 4.9.1. suggests that “The service provider makes available sufficient and appropriate personal hygiene products and toiletries, including feminine hygiene products” as a way to meet this standard (Department of Justice and Equality 2019). The IPAS House Rules states that “The centre will provide you with soap, shampoo and toothpaste when you arrive. They will give you new supplies when you need them, if you are living in an independent living centre you may use your point allocation to purchase what you require.” (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth 2023).

² It is beyond the scope of this stage of the research to seek further information on the functionality of the points system. Therefore, the assumption that families are assigned enough points to meet the cost of the MESL food basket could potentially underestimate the food cost faced by families on the ground.

³ S.I. No. 230 of 2018 includes provision for financial assistance for clothing under the ANP scheme, see Current Income Supports page 12 for further discussion on the treatment of ANP in this study.

The Expert Group highlighted issues being experienced by Direct Provision residents with in-centre shops, including items being over-priced or more expensive than they would be in external shops. The Expert Group also noted that in-centre shops were often the only shop available to residents due to the remote location of many accommodation centres and transport issues. Due to this overpricing, the Expert Group noted that residents were often foregoing purchasing non-food items like personal care items in order to use their points to buy food.

Following the National Standards, the Personal Care budget is adjusted to remove the cost of soap, shampoo, toothpaste, a toothbrush and period products for a family living in Direct Provision accommodation. However, to reflect the experience of the Expert Group the cost of the remaining Personal Care items is retained in the Personal Care budget.

Health

The MESL Health basket includes the cost of health care services, including GP, dentist and optician care, as well as prescription charges. It also includes the cost of some over the counter health items, such as first aid kits, pain relief, waterproof plasters, cough medicine, etc.

Those living in Direct Provision accommodation are entitled to a Medical Card and are also exempt from paying prescription charges (Citizens Information 2023). Therefore, the health care services and prescription costs have been removed from the MESL Health budget for a family living in Direct Provision accommodation. The cost of the first aid kit has also been removed as it is assumed it would be available within Direct Provision accommodation.

Similarly to the Personal Care budget, the Expert Group noted that as food is often prioritised with regards to families spending their points allowance in the in-centre shop, the cost of the remaining over the counter health items is retained in the Health budget.

Household Goods

The MESL Household Goods basket includes the cost of furniture, flooring, soft furnishings, appliances, kitchenware, stationery and paper goods and cleaning materials.

Due to the nature of living in Direct Provision accommodation, and according to National Standards 4.2 “The service provider makes available accommodation which is homely, accessible and sufficiently furnished,” and 5.1 “Food preparation and dining facilities meet the needs of residents, support family life and are appropriately equipped and maintained” (Department of Justice and Equality 2019). Therefore, the cost of the majority of this budget area has been removed from the MESL Household Goods budget for the example family types.

The cost of some miscellaneous household items, including a suitcase, wrapping paper, birthday cards, pens, batteries, an umbrella, an extension lead, have remained in the Household Goods budget. Additionally, the cost of some cleaning products, such as bleach, toilet cleaner, disinfectant spray, dish cloths and toilet paper have also remained in the MESL Household Goods budget for a family living in Direct Provision accommodation. House Rule 1.13 states that “The centre’s cleaning staff will clean your room if needed. However, all residents are expected to tidy up after themselves and keep their rooms reasonably clean and tidy” (DCEDIY 2023). Therefore, it is assumed that the family would need to purchase some of their own cleaning materials in order to keep their own space clean.

Communications

The MESL Communications basket includes the cost of both national and international stamps, the cost of a mobile phone and monthly phone credit for the parent(s) and the secondary school aged child, as well as the cost of broadband for the household. The cost of the stamps and mobile phone are retained in the MESL Communications budget for a family living in Direct Provision accommodation.

Indicator 4.2.7. of Standard 4.2 of the National Standards for Direct Provision states that “The service provider ensures high quality wi-fi is accessible throughout the centre” (Department of Justice and Equality 2019). Therefore, the cost of broadband is removed from the MESL Communication’s budget for a family living in Direct Provision accommodation.

It is important to note, however, that the Expert Group did report inconsistencies in internet access in some Direct Provision accommodation, where wi-fi may only be available in certain areas, and not throughout the centre as mentioned in the indicator.

Education

The MESL Education basket for the parent(s) includes the cost of a laptop and a printer for the family’s use. The Expert Group noted that the pandemic clearly highlighted the technology gap and the inconsistency in access to computers, tablets, adequate wi-fi etc., present in Direct Provision accommodation. They did note that some improvements had been made in this area since the beginning of the pandemic, but that inadequacies remained. Due to this it was decided that the cost of the laptop and printer would remain in the MESL Education budget for parent(s) living in Direct Provision accommodation.

The MESL Education basket for children includes the cost of school books, stationary, school uniforms, school trips, school fee, voluntary contribution etc. Children in Direct Provision are entitled to the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance (BTSCFA) which, as its name states, is intended to meet the cost of school uniforms and footwear. Despite this support however, the Expert Group highlighted that families living in Direct Provision accommodation still face difficulties in covering children’s education costs. (BTSCFA is discussed further in the Income section below).

The Expert Group noted a large reliance on donations and back to school collections from charities and community groups to access the items needed for children to attend school. The cost of all education items have remained in the MESL Education budget for children living in Direct Provision accommodation.⁴

Social Inclusion

The children’s MESL Social Inclusion basket accounts for the cost of the child partaking in afterschool sporting and exercise activities, being able to have a birthday party and attend birthday parties of others, going on family outings like to the cinema or the zoo, and having their own toys. The parental MESL Social Inclusion basket also includes the cost of partaking in exercise/sporting

⁴ The Government announced the introduction of free school books for Primary School children in Budget 2023, to be rolled out in September 2023. This could reduce the Primary School aged child’s MESL Education budget by €3.22 a week. However, it has not been included as it is not in place at the time of writing. <https://assets.gov.ie/235799/c3c285c8-63ae-4173-8dec-7f4485dcb51c.pdf>

activities, going on family outings, having household items used to celebrate a religious or cultural holiday, and the cost of socialising (babysitting and spending money).

The standard MESL Social Inclusion basket also includes a week-long self-catering holiday in Ireland. However, House Rule 2.13 states that “accommodation is offered to you on the understanding that you will be living there in the normal course. It is IPAS’s responsibility to ensure that accommodation is available to all protection applicants without sufficient means and that all allocated beds are used. Please let the centre manager know if you or your children are away overnight.” (DCEDIY 2023). Due to this rule, as well as the temporary nature of being in the Direct Provision system, the cost of the family holiday was removed from the MESL Social Inclusion budget for a family living in Direct Provision Accommodation.

The cost of a TV licence was also removed from the MESL budget of a family living in Direct Provision accommodation, as it is assumed that this would be provided by the accommodation provider.

The Expert Group highlighted the importance of social integration both within accommodation centres and with the wider community, but noted that this need was often not being met. One of the largest areas of issue the Expert Group noted around this budget area was in relation to transport, which is discussed in the Transport budget section below.

National Standard 7.3 states that “The service provider supports and facilitates residents, including children and young people, to integrate and engage with the wider community, including through engagement with other agencies”, with indicator 7.3.1 stating “A centre integration action plan is in place to develop and maintain reciprocal linkages between residents and the local community. During and after the development of the plan the service provider will engage with other agencies to facilitate residents’ access to a range of services and activities,” and 7.3.4. stating “The service provider has partnership agreements in place to facilitate residents’ access to leisure centres, youth clubs/services, sports clubs or other relevant recreational facilities and voluntary groups.” (Department of Justice and Equality 2019).

The Expert Group strongly highlighted the important work that local community organisations, charities, youth groups, sports clubs etc. are doing with regards to social inclusion for families living in Direct Provision accommodation, however noted that this was not the case across all Direct Provision accommodation.

The cost of all remaining Social Inclusion items, excluding the holiday and TV license, are retained in the MESL Social Inclusion budget for a family living in Direct Provision accommodation.

Transport

The MESL Transport basket for households in an urban area is based on the use of Public Transport. For adults, a weekly fare is included and for children there is an allocation for one return trip per week. As stated in the scenario and assumptions section, it is assumed that the family living in Direct Provision accommodation do not own a car, that they can rely on the transport service provided by their accommodation provider and will also make use of public transport.⁵

⁵ This assumption may underestimate the transport costs experienced by those living in particularly remote Direct Provision accommodation who do not have easy access to reliable public transport services.

Following consultation with the Expert Group, it became clear that Transport was a huge area of concern for families living in Direct Provision. They noted transport related issues with regards to accessing healthcare appointments and hospitals, accessing important appointments regarding their International Protection application, as well as issues for adults accessing education courses.

Perhaps the largest transport issue they noted was in regards to social inclusion both for adults and children. They highlighted that due to the cost of public transport, families living in direct provision accommodation often did not partake in social or extra-curricular activities outside of the centre. They noted that when families did partake in these activities, there was often a reliance on the community to provide lifts or transportation.

Alongside this, the Ombudsman for Children's report "Direct Division", published in 2020, found in their consultation with children living in Direct Provision accommodation that "a number of accommodation centres that participated in the consultation have buses that provide transport to and from school for the children. However, these buses tend to operate only at times closely related to the school day. They do not facilitate the children's engagement in social activities, including spending times with friends, joining sports teams and clubs and extra-curricular activities at school." (Ombudsman for Children 2020).

For these reasons, the MESL Transport budget for a family living in Direct Provision accommodation retains the weekly public transport allowance in the parent(s) basket. An increase in the children's public transport allowance is included, from one to three return journeys per week to enable participation in extra-curricular activities and to facilitate social inclusion.

Personal Costs

The MESL Personal Costs basket includes the cost of a passport for all family members, as well as other costs for the parent(s) including bank account fees and a trade union subscription for those in employment. The cost of a passport has been removed from the MESL Personal Costs budget, as it is not an applicable cost for someone in the Direct Provision system. The cost of a trade union subscription for the parent(s) has also been removed as the scenario under consideration does not include employment.

As of May 2021, a new guide was published whereby banks can accept alternative ID documents to driving licences or passports, which meant that it became easier for those living in Direct Provision to open bank accounts (Department of Justice 2021). Therefore, the cost of bank account fees remains in the MESL Personal Costs budget for a family living in Direct Provision accommodation.

It is recommended that individuals and families applying for International Protection status in Ireland get legal advice as soon as possible. Applicants can apply for Legal Aid through the Legal Aid Board. Those applying for asylum services pay a contribution of €10 for legal aid and advice in relation to their application. This fee can be waived at the discretion of the Legal Aid Board (Legal Aid Board 2023). The Expert Group agreed that this fee was typically being paid by applicants and therefore the cost is included within the MESL Personal Costs budget for a family living in Direct Provision accommodation.

Savings and Contingencies

The MESL Savings and Contingencies basket includes the cost of life assurance in the parent(s) budget, as well as a small amount weekly, €10 per adult and €5 per child, to be put aside for any emergencies or unexpected expenses that may arise. The cost of life assurance has been removed

from the MESL Savings and Contingencies budget for a family living in Direct Provision Accommodation as it is not an applicable expense for someone within the Direct Provision system.

The Expert Group agreed that emergency and unexpected expenses arise for those living in Direct Provision accommodation just as they do for those who are not. They also noted that some level of savings for those in Direct Provision is very important, particularly if they are successful in receiving their status in Ireland and can move on from Direct Provision accommodation. They may need to have saved money for any expenses that arise during this process, e.g. deposit for renting. Therefore, the weekly savings cost is retained in the MESL Savings and Contingencies budget for a family living in Direct Provision accommodation.

Inapplicable Budget Areas

The cost of the basket areas of Household Services, Household Energy, Insurance and Childcare are not included in the MESL budget for a family living in Direct Provision accommodation. The existing MESL Household Services budget includes the cost of waste charges and a boiler service. The existing MESL Household Energy budget includes the cost of electricity and gas. The existing MESL Insurance budget includes the cost of home contents insurance, health insurance and car insurance. The childcare budget is included in the existing MESL budget for a primary school aged child, and includes the cost of either part-time or full-time childcare depending on the employment status of the parent(s).

Based on the assumptions made about the family living in Direct Provision accommodation within this study, as well as the practicalities of living in a Direct Provision accommodation setting, these costs are not applicable for a family living within the system, and are therefore not included in the MESL budget for a family living in Direct Provision accommodation.

Caveats

The discussion above has detailed the adjustments made to the MESL basket for the first phase of this project. In interpreting the results it is important to be cognisant this initial phase is informed by a review of official literature and consultation with an expert group. However, focus groups made up of individuals who have experience of living within the Direct Provision system were not engaged with during this stage of the project.

At this point in the project a number of assumptions about the day-to-day practicalities of living within the Direct Provision system have had to be made. These are detailed above, but include assumptions regarding:

- The allocation of points for 'in-centre shops' is adequate to meet the cost of the MESL food basket. This could potentially underestimate the food cost faced by families on the ground.
- Access to reliable public transport and the adequacy of centre provide transport services.
- Ability to access shops and services in the community, to purchase goods rather than relying on 'in-centre' shops.

Working with deliberative focus groups is the central method used within the MESL research, which allows the research to present a negotiated consensus on what people agree are the goods and services needed to achieve a socially acceptable Minimum Essential Standard of Living. As focus groups were not engaged with at this point, it is important to note the limitations of the current findings. The next phase of the project will entail deliberations with focus groups, to test the

assumptions and adaptations outlined above and examine the minimum needs of people living within Direct Provision to enable a life with dignity.

Income Adequacy

Following the adjustments made to the MESL baskets, the cost of the total MESL need for the two household types being examined was estimated; One Parent and Two Children and Two Parents and Two Children. This section outlines the current income supports provided to families living in Direct Provision accommodation, and examines the adequacy of this income in relation to the cost of the estimated MESL need of both household types.

Current Income Supports

International Protection applicants living in Direct Provision accommodation and awaiting the decision on their application are entitled to receive the Daily Expenses Allowance (DEA). The rate of the allowance is €38.80 per week for an adult and €29.80 per week for a child (Citizens Information 2023). The latest increase in the DEA was announced in Budget 2019 and implemented in March 2019 (Citizens Information 2018).

Those living in Direct Provision accommodation with children in education are entitled to the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance (BTSCFA), an annual payment which helps to meet the cost of uniforms and footwear for school. The BTSCFA payment rate for 2023 is €260 for a child aged 4-11 years, and €385 for a child aged 12-22 years in full-time second-level education (Department of Social Protection 2023). Families living in Direct provision are also entitled to a Medical Card and are exempt from paying prescription fees. This was taken into account within the cost of the MESL Health basket.

Those living in Direct Provision accommodation can also apply for an Additional Needs Payment if they have essential needs which they cannot afford using their weekly allowance (Citizens Information 2023). This is a one-off discretionary payment, awarded by a Community Welfare Officer. There is no set rate for an Additional Needs Payment as the amount depends on the circumstances of the person applying and what it is they need help to afford. It can be used to cover clothing costs, essential travel costs and other unexpected expenses. If an Additional Needs Payment was awarded to cover clothing costs for the example family types included in this Working Paper, it could potentially reduce the total estimated MESL cost for a One Parent, Two Children household by €30.38 per week, and the Two Parent, Two Children household by €39.09 per week. As it is not possible to determine the payment's amount, or whether all families living in Direct Provision receive these payments, Additional Needs Payments have not been included in the income of the family living in Direct Provision accommodation being considered in this Working Paper.

As stated, the family being considered are within the first six months of living in Direct Provision accommodation and therefore are not in employment and rely solely on income received from the State. If the parent(s) have been waiting 6 months or more for the first decision on their protection application, they can receive permission to access the labour market, which could improve the income adequacy of the family.

Table 1 MESL expenditure need, estimated, per week

	1 Parent	2 Parent	Secondary School Child	Primary School Child	1Parent 2Children	2Parent 2Children
Food	€1.90	€3.80	€7.49	€1.17	€10.57	€12.47
Clothing	€9.55	€18.26	€12.22	€8.61	€30.38	€39.09
Personal Care	€4.42	€9.89	€3.65	€1.43	€9.50	€14.97
Health	€0.26	€0.47	€0.77	€0.37	€1.40	€1.62
HH Goods	€2.40	€3.16	€0.71	€0.73	€3.85	€4.61
Communications	€6.05	€11.65	€5.60	€ -	€11.65	€17.25
Social Inclusion	€24.75	€38.38	€25.51	€16.17	€66.44	€80.07
Education	€3.13	€3.13	€18.46	€11.13	€32.72	€32.72
Transport	€24.00	€48.00	€8.10	€8.10	€40.20	€64.20
Personal Costs	€1.58	€2.98	€ -	€ -	€1.58	€2.98
Savings and Contingencies	€10.00	€10.00	€5.00	€5.00	€20.00	€20.00
Total MESL Need	€88.06	€149.73	€87.52	€52.72	€228.30	€289.98
Income	€38.80	€77.60	€37.20	€34.80	€110.80	€149.60
% of MESL	44%	52%	43%	66%	49%	52%
Shortfall	-€49.26	-€72.13	-€50.32	-€17.92	-€117.50	-€140.37

Income Adequacy

Table 1 shows the cost of each MESL budget area, for each individual family member; One Parent, Two Parents, secondary school aged Child and primary school aged Child. The household MESL budgets for both household types are also presented: One Parent and Two Children (one child of primary school age and one child of secondary school age) and Two Parent and Two Children (one child of primary school age and one child of secondary school age). Table 1 also shows the Total MESL Need, Income, Income as a percentage of MESL Need and the Shortfall, for each individual family member, and for both the example family households.

Table 1 shows that the estimated MESL need of One Parent amounts to €88.06 weekly. The adult-rate DEA received for One Parent covers 44% of this estimated MESL need, leaving a potential shortfall of €49.26 weekly.

The estimated MESL need of Two Parents is €149.73 weekly. The two adult-rate DEA payments received for Two Parents covers 52% of this estimated MESL need, leaving a potential shortfall of €72.13 per week.

Table 1 shows that the estimated MESL cost of a secondary school aged child amounts to €87.52 per week. The income received for that child, children's rate DEA and the higher rate of BTSCFA, amounts to €37.20 per week, which covers 43% of the secondary school aged child's estimated MESL need.

The estimated MESL cost of a primary school aged child is €52.72 per week, with the income received for that child, children's rate DEA and the lower rate of BTSCFA, amounting to €34.80 weekly, covering 66% of the primary school aged child's estimated MESL need.

Based on the scenario and assumptions made in this report, a One Parent and Two Children household living in Direct Provision accommodation's total weekly MESL need is estimated to be €228.30. The One Parent and Two Children household's average weekly income, consisting of one Adult DEA payment, two Children DEA payments, and two BTSCFA payments (spread over the year), amounts to €110.80/week.

This income covers 49% of the household's estimated MESL need, leaving a potential shortfall of €117.50 per week.

A Two Parent and Two Children household living in Direct Provision accommodation's total weekly MESL need is estimated to be €289.98. The Two Parent and Two Children household's average weekly income, made up of two Adult DEA payments, two Children DEA payments, and two BTSCFA payments, amounts to €149.60.

This income covers 52% of the household's estimated MESL need, leaving a potential shortfall of €140.37 per week.

Cost of a Child

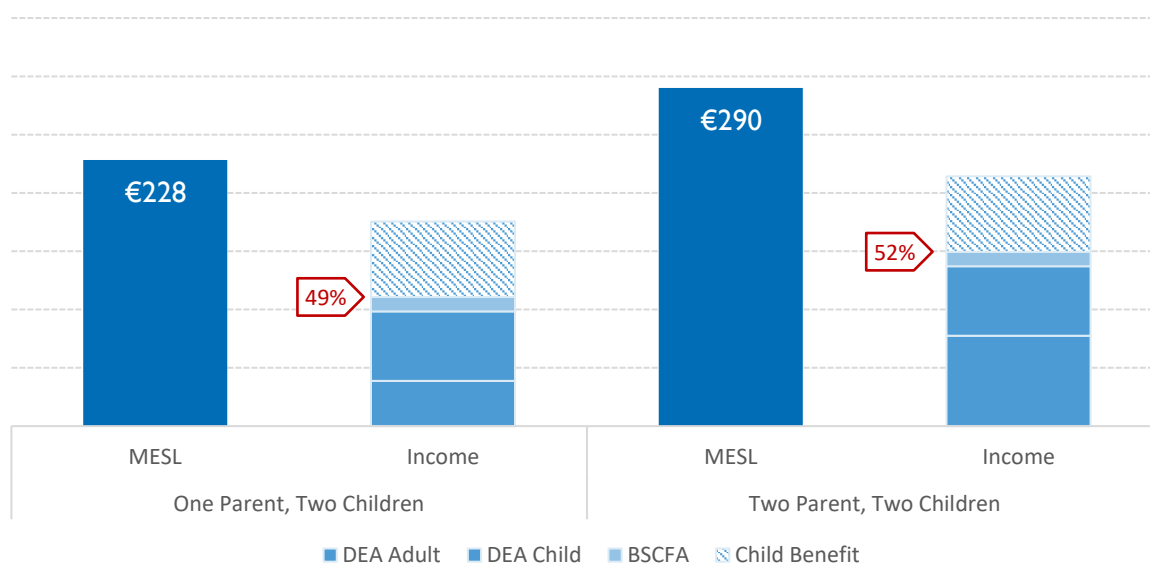
The White Paper to End Direct Provision proposes that in Phase Two of the new International Protection system, applicants who have dependent children will also receive an additional monthly payment per child in the form of an International Protection Child Payment. The rate of this payment will be aligned with that of Child Benefit (Government of Ireland 2021). The payment of Child Benefit to children in Direct Provision has long been suggested and campaigned for by many organisations

working directly with families living in Direct Provision accommodation, including NASC, Children’s Rights Alliance, SVP, and the Irish Refugee Council.

Graph 1 shows the change that receiving Child Benefit would make to the current Income of families living in Direct Provision accommodation. The One Parent, Two Children household’s weekly income would increase to €175.42, and would cover 77% of their estimated MESL need, while the Two Parent, Two Children household’s weekly income would increase to €214.22, covering 74% of their estimated MESL need (demonstrated in the crosshatched section of the Income column of Graph 1).

The children’s rate of DEA, payment of BTSCFA and Child Benefit would cover 79% of the cost of the MESL need of a Secondary School aged child. The children’s rate of DEA, payment of BTSCFA and Child Benefit would cover 127% of the cost of the MESL need of a Primary School aged child.

Graph 1 Household MESL, estimated, and Household Income, average per week



Conclusion

The findings show that for each individual family member living in Direct Provision accommodation, the income supports provided are inadequate to meet their estimated MESL need. This inadequacy is compounded at a household level.

Due to the scale of the inadequacy shown in the findings (income meeting approximately 50% of estimated MESL needs for the two household types examined), it seems inevitable that families living in Direct Provision accommodation are going without goods and services that people need to live and participate in Irish society, at a standard of living which no one should be expected to live. This supports the Expert Group’s account of families in Direct Provision going without certain personal care and clothing items, as well as not partaking in social or extra-curricular activities, due to their limited incomes.

As stated, due to the large variation in the standard and type of service being provided across the country, the scenario and assumptions adopted within this Working Paper may portray a “best case” situation that many people living in Direct Provision accommodation may not receive. If

accommodation providers are providing a lower standard of service than that outlined, a greater income shortfall is experienced.

The introduction of a Child Benefit-like payment for families with children living in Direct Provision accommodation would improve the level of both household type's income, however it would not be enough to provide them with an adequate income which would meet their estimated MESL need.

If a Child Benefit-like payment was introduced alongside the current child-rate DEA and BTSCFA, the income supports provided would be adequate to cover the estimated MESL need of a primary school aged child (127% of the estimated MESL need covered.) However, household income would remain inadequate due to the shortfall in adult and older-children rates.

As stated, it is important to note that this Working Paper is the first, desk-based stage of a project to establish the MESL needs of families with children living in Direct Provision accommodation. No focus groups of families with experience of this living situation were held and therefore, there are limitations to the findings of this paper as they are not truly grounded in the lived experience of those within the Direct Provision system. At the next stage of the research, when focus groups are held, the findings may change.

The prices of the goods and services within the MESL baskets are based on the 2022 MESL data, with prices as of March 2022, as the 2023 MESL data has not been published at the time of writing. The rates of the income supports included are as of 2023. The prices and income support rates of the relevant year will be applied to any further stage of this research.

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Appendix 1 – Expert Group Members

Representatives from the following organisations were members of the Expert Group consulted with throughout the completion of this Working Paper:

- Irish Refugee Council
- UNHCR
- Doras
- NASC
- Let’s Match Mums / Let’s Help Direct Provision
- Children’s Rights Alliance
- SVP

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