



TOMORROW STARTS WITH US

Ombudsman for Children's Office
Annual Report 2024



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do leanaí
for children



Message from the Ombudsman for Children

Dr Niall Muldoon
Ombudsman for Children

2024 marked an important milestone for the Ombudsman for Children's Office (OCO), as we celebrated 20 years since our establishment to promote and protect the rights of all children living in Ireland.

The OCO first opened its doors on St. Stephen's Green in April 2004 against a backdrop of a decade of devastating revelations in relation to the treatment of children, and a vow that never again would the systemic abuse of the past be repeated. This was six years after the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child expressed concern in 1998 that Ireland lacked an independent monitoring mechanism that would be accessible to children and would deal with complaints in relation to violations of children's rights. Following huge efforts by NGOs and children's rights advocates, the Government committed to establishing an Ombudsman for Children's Office here.

Anniversaries like these are important, because as well as providing an opportunity to pause and reflect on what's come before, they provide a fresh impetus to focus on the future. This is highlighted through our 20th anniversary theme of *Tomorrow Starts with Us*, which was decided upon with the help of our brilliant Youth Advisory Panel and reminds us of our raison d'être in working

towards a better tomorrow for all children in Ireland. Throughout the year we celebrated our anniversary with a series of campaigns, publications and events, with highlights including two wonderful children's parties in Inner City Dublin and Cork City and a three-day Summer School dedicated to young voices in education at Mary Immaculate College in Thurles.

In our *Tomorrow Starts with Us* survey we also asked over 1,000 secondary school children for their views on life in Ireland and what sort of country they'd like to see in the future. Unsurprisingly, the important issues for children and young people are also among the big issues for most of us today, like concerns about the cost of living and access to housing and mental health supports.

I am exasperated and utterly dismayed with the year-on-year rise in the number of families in emergency accommodation and the fact there were upwards of 4,500 children availing of homeless services at the end of 2024. We still get complaints from people trying to access emergency accommodation. It's clear that the delays these families are experiencing, due to the lack of available and affordable housing, is having a significant adverse impact on their children's lives. This is something we have been consistently highlighting, calling on the Government to review the supports in place for children and families in homeless services in its Rebuilding Ireland plan, one year after it was first put in

place in 2017 and subsequently through its Housing for All strategy. In a country as well off as Ireland economically, we must surely be able to better funnel our resources into where they are needed most. If a society is judged on how we treat our most vulnerable citizens, what does our record on these issues say about us?

That is why a key objective for us in 2024 was to again raise these and other issues with politicians and to ensure that children's rights were front and centre in the new Programme for Government. Our team met with political parties and party leaders throughout the summer, and again during the General Election campaign, and we were pleased to see many of our recommendations reflected across the various party manifestos. We also began our push for the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) to be, fully and directly, incorporated into domestic law here in Ireland. Looking to Scotland who enacted the UNCRC Act in July 2024, we hosted a briefing for TDs and Senators at Leinster House with Bruce Adamson, former Commissioner for Children and Young People in Scotland. The discussion looked at the Scottish experience and the important role played by legislators in the process. We will be ramping up our campaign in 2025 and the years to come for full and direct incorporation of the UNCRC into Irish law to make this monumental change for children's rights in Ireland a reality.

2024 saw another very busy year for the OCO in the delivery of our Rights Education workshops and outreach work, and we were delighted to meet with almost 2,500 children through workshops, at our Office and visits to schools around the country. Our outreach work continued in Direct Provision centres and Oberstown Children Detention Campus and we also focused our work on Northeast Inner-City Dublin, holding workshops and complaints clinics in the community.

It is often said that the more things change, the more they stay the same. Looking back, it is striking that the first Annual Report produced by this Office in 2005, featured many of the same issues and concerns that we are dealing with today, two decades on. Of the 177 complaints received in 2004, a quarter of all complaints made about education related to Special Education, while on the Health front, issues around access to services and the standard of services for children dominated. Around 17% of complaints back then related to access to services for children with disabilities. While there has been progress made for children on many fronts, the consistency of the issues raised 20 years apart highlights for us again the need to properly place children's rights, all of them, at the fore of policy decisions and service provision, which is why we are seeking the full and direct incorporation of the UNCRC into Irish law.

Finally, as we reflect on the work that has been done and all that is left to do, it would be remiss of me not to mention the hard working and dedicated staff who have come through the doors of the OCO over the years. Our Office began with just seven staff, now growing to nearly 40, and each one has made a huge contribution to improving children's lives in Ireland.

The American writer, Denis Waitley once said: "There are two primary choices in life; to accept conditions as they exist, or accept the responsibility for changing them". The Irish State, in setting up our Office 20 years ago was making a commitment that they would no longer accept conditions for children as they existed, but it is our job to remind them that their responsibility, for changing conditions, is an ongoing one.

Who we are

The Ombudsman for Children's Office (OCO) is an independent human rights institution that promotes the rights and welfare of all children and young people under 18 years of age living in Ireland. The OCO investigates complaints about services provided to children by public organisations. The service is free and independent. Dr Niall Muldoon is the Ombudsman for Children.



OCO Statistics and Highlights

In 2024 the OCO received 1,772 contacts in relation to complaints. This is almost identical to the number received in 2023. Within this figure are 1,401 individual complaints, alongside 371 complaints that were made as part of a campaign about the same issue, the SPHE syllabus. Once again the OCO has noted an increase in the complexity of the complaints being made to the office. Last year, 16% of complaints related to more than

one agency, while 33% included multiple categories of concern. The OCO Complaints and Investigations team are required to engage with each department or agency individually seeking a response, which adds to the time required to deal with these complaints. This is another example of the importance of interagency cooperation in dealing with children's issues.

What were complaints about?

Topic	2024
Education	33%
Tusla	19%
Health	15%
DCEDIY (IPAS, Oberstown)	6%
Local Authorities	4%
Foreign Affairs (Passport Office)	4%
Early Learning (Creche)	3%
Justice (Courts, An Garda, Dept of Justice)	3%
Other Departments	3%
Out of Remit	10%

Education remained the most complained about issue, accounting for 33% of all complaints in 2024. 13% of all complaints were about primary schools and 10% related to secondary schools. As in previous years, the most complained about issues in education were special educational supports, communication, bullying and complaints management in schools. 10% of complaints concerned school transport, the Department of Education, the National Council for Special Education (NSCE) and the State Examinations Committee.

Tusla made up 19% of all complaints received by the OCO. These related to children in residential and special care, interagency work between services, Education Support Services (TESS), access to interventions and support, as well as concerns from young people about complaint handling.

In 2024, 15% of complaints to the OCO were about Health services. These included issues over access to Children and Adult Mental Health Services (CAMHS), children in hospital beyond medical need, a lack of access to an Assessment of Need and other HSE funded services. 3% of all complaints received in 2024 concerned Children's Disability Network Teams.

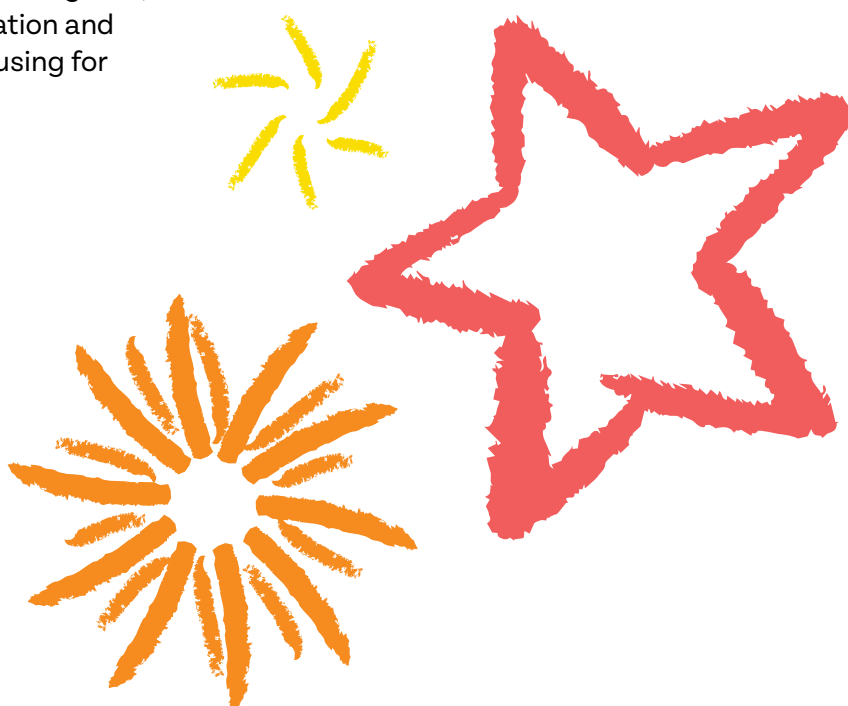
4% of complaints received by the OCO in 2024 concerned local authorities and the Department of Housing. These complaints related to the quality of housing, waiting lists, accessing emergency accommodation and a lack of access to appropriate housing for children with disabilities.

In 2024 we also received complaints about conditions at International Protection Accommodation Services (IPAS) centres, which included concerns over poor accommodation and the quality of food, and families being unable to secure transfers to other centres.

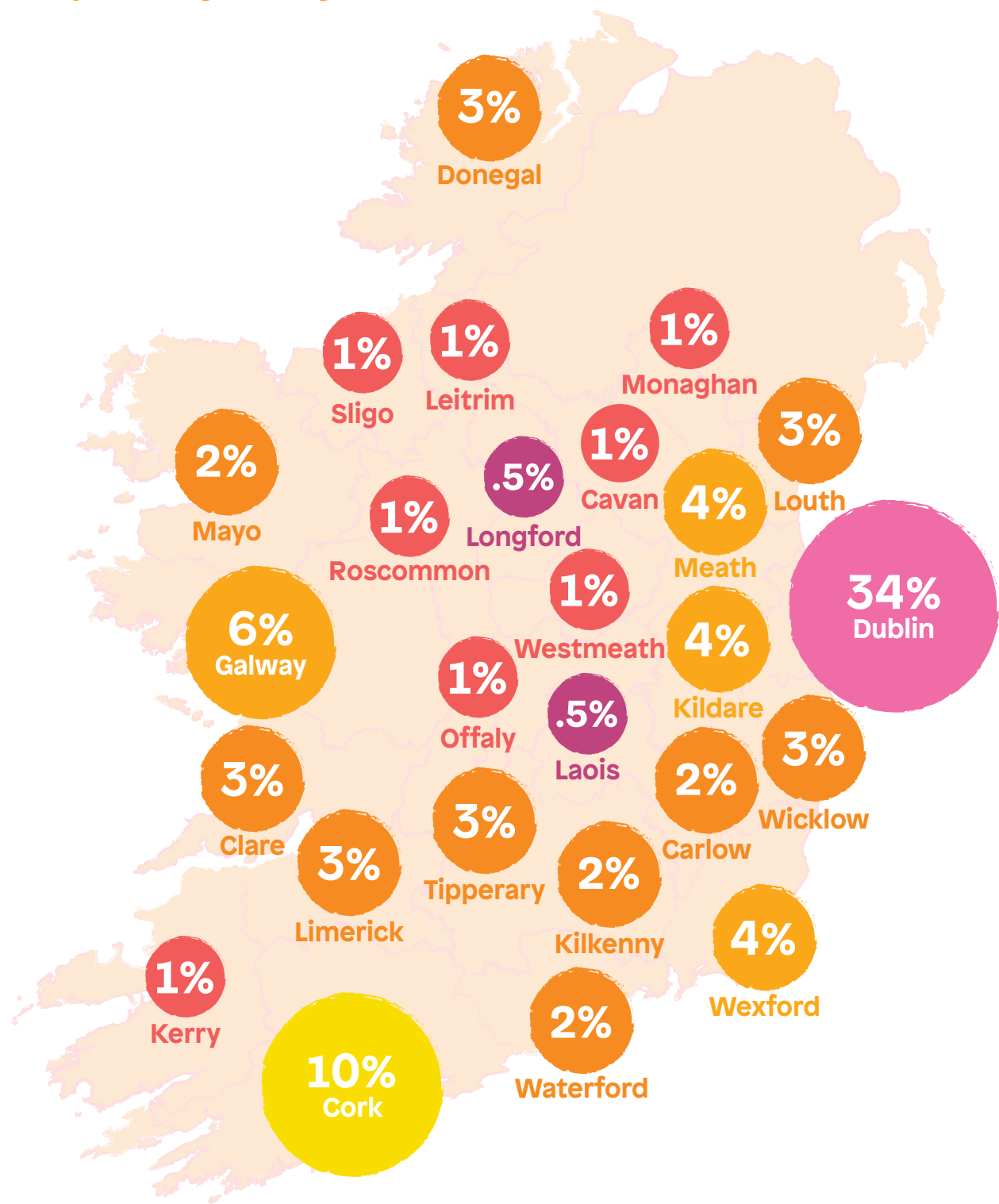
We also continued to receive complaints from people seeking passports for their children.

As in previous years, complaints about Early Years settings (private creches, Montessori and pre-schools) made up 3% of all complaints received by the OCO in 2024. That's despite the OCO not having a remit to examine these settings. We are continuing to engage with the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) on this issue.

While not counted as complaints to the OCO, it is significant that there has been an 88% rise in Child Protection and Welfare concerns received in 2024 compared to the previous year, with the figure jumping to 140. These are handled separately to the issues raised in a complaint and add to the complexity and time spent processing that complaint.



Complaints by County



*Not all complainants register what county they are from, therefore the county breakdown reflects the information we have received

Who were Complaints from?

Parent	79%
Professional	6%
Child	3%
Extended Family	3%
Unrelated Adult	2%
Adult about own childhood	1%
Anonymous / Unspecified	5%
Organisation	1%

Age of the children we received complaints about:

1 - 4	17%
5 - 9	25%
10 - 14	32%
15 - 19	25%



Complaint outreach visits and their impact

Outreach statistics demonstrate that proactive contacts with agencies not only raise awareness of the OCO but also result in complaints from communities that find the OCO harder to reach.

Dublin North East Inner City

3

VISITS

18

COMPLAINTS

Oberstown Centre

8

VISITS

24

COMPLAINTS

Direct Provision

5

VISITS

23

COMPLAINTS

Rights Education workshops



We met nearly
2,500 children

86

schools attended workshops

(64%) Primary (36%) Secondary

63% DEIS schools
(up from 49% in 2023)

74%

**schools coming
from outside Dublin**

5 Irish Language workshops

22 visits to schools in Cavan, Monaghan, Cork,
Clare, Limerick and Tipperary, Galway and Meath

15

**3rd level
seminars**

11 visits from youth groups


**Advised NGOs and professional
bodies** on the establishment
of youth participation structures

Education outreach visits to deliver rights workshops

Direct Provision

Seven visits to centres in Dublin, Clare, Mayo, Tipperary and Cork

Unaccompanied Minors

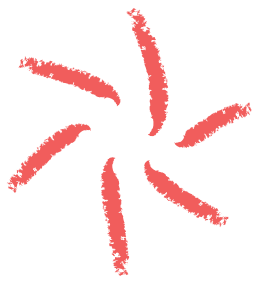


Five visits to accommodation centres for Unaccompanied Minors in Dublin, Monaghan and Tipperary

CAMHS

Two visits to CAMHS inpatient centres

Community and Voluntary



Visits to West Clare Family Resource Centre, DORAS Limerick, Bedford Row, Tipperary Comhairle Na nÓg, Babaro Galway, KidsOwn Sligo

Policy and legislative engagement in numbers

- **Seven submissions** to Government on children's rights issues.
- **40 letters** to Government Ministers or Departments promoting the rights of children on issues including, the eviction of families from Direct Provision, surrogacy legislation, waiting lists for scoliosis, the past pupil criteria, Special Education teacher allocation, and proposed amendments to the Housing Act 1988.
- **22 cases** from the public examined under section 7 of our legislation and remit for promoting the rights and welfare of children. Some examples were the impact of defective blocks on child well-being, provision of hot school meals for children with specialised diets, full entitlement to parental leave for children in one parent families, and access to CAMHS services for children with dual diagnosis.

OCO in the Oireachtas

7th March - Committee on Public Petitions
Annual Report 2022

23rd April - Oireachtas Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
OCO Youth Advisory Panel presentation on Pieces of Us and AI

2nd July - Oireachtas Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
Annual Report 2023

2024 Publications

Priorities for Children in the 34th Dáil Term – Key Asks from the Ombudsman for Children's Office

Scoliosis Treatment For Ivy 2024 Update

No End in Site 2024 Update

Two Years On Plan for Places – Progress Update on Forward Planning for the Provision of Schools Places for Children with Special Educational Needs

Tomorrow Starts With Us – A children's survey on the future of Ireland to mark the 20th Anniversary of the OCO

Annual Report 2023 – Uncertain Times

Beyond Limits – Accessible and Inclusive Event Guide

Beyond Limits – How to run a mixed ability Youth Advisory Panel: key learnings from the Ombudsman for Children's Office

Pieces of Us – What's Next?

Report from the Ombudsman for Children's Office to the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights

OCO online and in the media



Ombudsman for Children
@OCO_ireland

Today the Ombudsman for Children's Office is celebrating our 20th anniversary.

We invited 100 children to join us for a birthday party!



The Ombudsman for Children
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Face painting, dancing, pizza and cake was party at the Swan Regional Centre in Dublin Anniversary this month. ...more



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Michael O'Leary

Published: Wed 16 Oct 2024, 2:41 PM

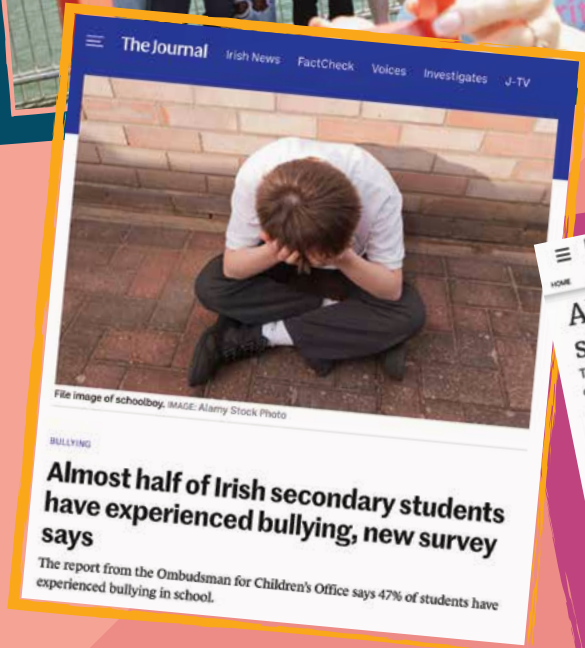
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Anyone seen my glasses?
Ombudsman for Children's Office marks 20 years

20th Anniversary Celebrations

20th Anniversary Survey



MIC Thurles Summer School



Pride



OCO in the Oireachtas



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Uncertain Times, our Annual Report for 2023 was up for discussion at the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth last week. ...more



31



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Great to see the Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth report on safeguarding children in the age of AI published last week. Our YAP met with the committee to share their views on AI - pictured here making ...more



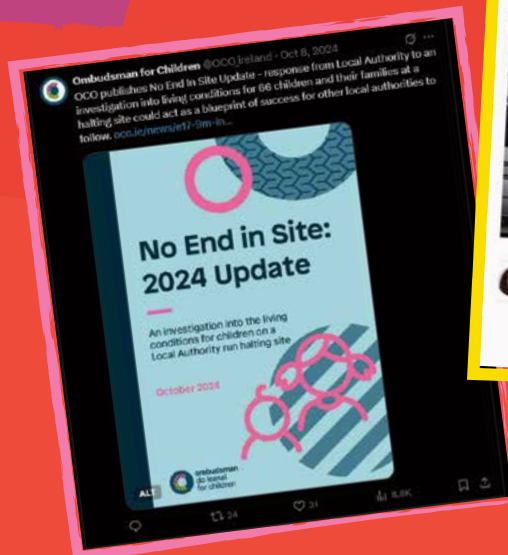
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Two Years On - Plan for Places Report



No End In Site Update



Scoliosis Report Update

Scoliosis Treatment for Ivy

Update on actions following an investigation into the effectiveness of the HSE multi-disciplinary planning process by Children's Health Ireland (CHI) at Temple Street in providing scoliosis treatment to Ivy.

October 2024

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Situation for children needing scoliosis surgery critical, says ombudsman for children



'DEEPLY CONCERNED' Serious scoliosis wait lists concerns as heartbreaking new details reveal woman, 22, 'managing pain' for rest of life

Last year, the Ombudsman published a new report.
Adam Higgins, Political Correspondent
Published 17:58, 16 Oct 2024 | Updated 17:58, 16 Oct 2024

ANSWERS WANTED



Child Talks



2

Case Studies

1. Baby James and the use of Restraints in Paediatric Intensive Care Units (PICU)

Baby James

James had a heart condition and was in the Paediatric Intensive Care Unit (PICU) after becoming very unwell soon after he was born. James' parents contacted us because they were concerned about the use of soft 'posey' restraints on their son while he was in the PICU. Posey restraints are limb restraints that are designed to limit the movement of wrists and/or ankles in patients assessed to be at risk of disrupting life-saving treatment, pulling lines/tubes, exacerbating skin conditions, compromising wound site integrity, or self-injury. Children's Health Ireland (CHI) told us that the use of physical restraint in its hospitals is limited to exceptional situations where it is deemed necessary for the medical safety of the child in the PICU. James' family said they were concerned that restraining James was unnecessary because he was already highly sedated. They said there were also times where a family member was present and could have helped medical staff to hold James

instead of him having to be restrained. James' family felt they were dismissed by staff when they tried to intervene and that they were not made aware that James would need to be restrained when he first entered the PICU.

The complaint

The family complained to CHI and asked what guidelines or policy was in place around the use of restraint in the PICU ward.

CHI advised the family that restraints are used judiciously to maintain patient safety and to avoid the dislodgement of breathing tubes. They are used in conjunction with sedatives, using a comfort score to determine same. They also advised that nurses provide rationale to families about the use of restraints and that this is recorded on a child's electronic chart and is reviewed regularly. The use of restraint also forms part of orientation for all new nurses on the unit.

James' family were not satisfied with CHI's response as they did not feel the nurse gave enough information on why James needed to be restrained while in the PICU and they believed

they should have been provided with this information on James' arrival to the ward. They were also unhappy that there was no specific policy or official guidance in place.

What we did

We met with the Director and Assistant Director of Nursing and the Patient, Experience and Feedback Lead. We sought information about:

- Whether or not there was a policy in place in CHI governing the use of restraint in PICU
- How the use of restraint is governed and monitored by CHI
- How the hospital determines when the use of restraint is appropriate

Outcome

CHI accepted that they should have addressed the concerns raised by Baby James' parents at the time and appreciate it caused them distress.

- They offered to meet with James' family to apologise for their poor handling of the complaint and reviewed their response to the complaint.
- They acknowledged there was no policy in place and formed a cross-site multi-disciplinary working group including a research nurse, staff nurses, clinical nurse managers, clinical nurse educators, physiotherapists and a PICU non-consultant hospital doctor.
- CHI reviewed literature and guidelines from PICUs internationally, to ensure best international practice is followed.
- They undertook a research study and over a period of six months created CHI guidelines for the use of soft posy restraints in the PICU ward in CHI.

- The Assistant Director of Nursing (ADON) offered to meet with baby James' family to advise of the new CHI Guideline that had been developed following their complaint.

OCO comment

We are satisfied that the guidelines developed by CHI around physical restraint aim to:

- Ensure staff receive appropriate induction training in the use of restraints in PICU and are aware of their responsibilities in ensuring families are consulted and kept informed
- Prioritise Patient Safety and Alternatives to Restraint
- Adhere to Best Practices and Guidelines
- Ensure Regular Monitoring and Evaluation

We have also been given assurances by CHI that:

- Education and training will be delivered at departmental/unit level using existing educational resources around the use of restraint
- Education is included in induction packages for relevant clinical areas /staff around the use of restraint
- A training and refresher record will be stored with the PICU

2. Enda secluded at school in junior infants

Complaint

We received a complaint from a mother about her son Enda, aged 6 years old. Enda, who was in junior infants at the time, told his mother that he was locked in a side room off the main classroom when he had become disruptive. Enda said this had happened many times. Enda was a student in an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) class in a mainstream school.

Enda's mother complained to the school's Board of Management (BOM) that her son was secluded in a locked room without her permission or knowledge. The BOM said they were aware of the issue and had been briefed by the principal that it was a once off incident. They said a multi-disciplinary meeting was planned with the psychologist, class teacher and principal, to discuss how to safely regulate Enda's behaviour.

At the meeting, the psychologist suggested that if Enda needed space outside the classroom he should go to the yard or shared space. While Enda's mother agreed with this approach, it transpired that the school was not following the psychologist's recommendations and was instead using a secluded, locked room off the classroom. Enda's mother was deeply unhappy with how her complaint was responded to by the BOM and felt she had no other option than to contact the OCO.

What we did

The OCO asked the school for the following:

- Details of actions taken to address the concerns raised by Enda's mother about her child allegedly being locked in a seclusion room without her knowledge or consent.
- Details of how the school determined the appropriateness of the practice and how this was communicated to Enda's parent.
- Information on any policy or procedure regarding children who require support with behaviour and how this is managed, to include any policy that involves the practice of locking a child in a room to address alleged inappropriate behaviour.
- Information on how the school managed the complaint in line with its complaints policies and procedures.

Outcome

The BOM agreed that their approach to managing this complaint fell below standard. They confirmed that a letter of complaint was not read aloud to the BOM, and they took the word of the principal that the matters were being dealt with accordingly.

They acknowledged they were a relatively new BOM with a new chairperson and advised that they have since made changes to their practice. The school provided extra supports to Enda and his mother to ensure that his experience in senior infants was in line with his Individual Education Plan (IEP) and that there was regular communication between all parties.

We were assured by the Chairperson of the BOM that such seclusion practice is no longer in place and that any letter of complaint is now read aloud to the BOM, and a collective decision reached as to required management action.

They agreed to meet with Enda's mother and apologise for their poor handling of the complaint and any impact that the seclusion may have had on Enda and his integration into the school community.

We encouraged the school to reflect on how vitally important it is that all members of the BOM are aware of their collective and individual responsibility regarding complaints. We asked the BOM to consider reviewing their own role and responsibilities in relation to this case and to consider what actions should happen to ensure robust operational and governance oversight on the use of any restrictive practices with children in this school. We further encouraged the school to consider how it communicates with parents regarding these types of issues. This was all accepted fully by the school. The complaint was closed with the above encouragements.

3. Marcus in Hospital beyond Medical Need

Background

In 2022 we received a complaint from the family of 6-year-old Marcus, who said he was in hospital beyond medical need. Marcus was in the care of Tusla and had a range of medical needs, which meant he was dependent for all aspects of his care. The complaint was closed in 2023 when Marcus was discharged from hospital to a residential unit established to cater for his complex needs. By that time Marcus had spent over 500 days in hospital beyond medical need. In 2024 Marcus had to return to hospital when concerns arose about the quality and safety of the care he was receiving in the residential unit. He remained in hospital for a further 200 days.

What we did

We met with Marcus and his mother, his care staff and the medical team. We then wrote to the HSE and Tusla, requesting they set out their separate and joint efforts to find a suitable placement for Marcus. We also asked them to outline how they sought to minimise the negative impact of long hospital stays on Marcus.

Outcome

Both Tusla and the HSE acknowledged that the hospital setting was not an appropriate placement for Marcus. They detailed the efforts they made to ensure his broader needs were being met while in hospital and importantly, what they were doing to ensure he was moved to a safe, supported placement, appropriate to his needs. Subsequently, the HSE and Tusla advised that Marcus would be returning to his prior placement with significant changes, agreements and



training to address the problems that had arisen. This also included a change in management at the residential unit. The OCO has again written to both agencies to encourage them to consider Marcus' longer-term needs, which they have committed to doing.

4. Long Term Illness card denied to ADHD children who are entitled to it

Background

The Long-Term Illness (LTI) Card allows recipients to get sanctioned medicines and medical appliances under the scheme for free. Children (under 16) with ADHD are included in the scheme. The scheme is administered by the HSE's Primary Care Reimbursement Service.

Complaints

The OCO received a number of complaints from parents whose children were denied access to an LTI card because their child had been diagnosed by a Consultant Paediatrician, some at private clinics, and not by a Consultant Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist.

Families outlined the devastating impact of having to continually pay for the medication, and questioned how the scheme could discriminate against their children who had a medically certified diagnosis. Some were on waiting lists for CAMHS but went private for a diagnosis as their children were being adversely impacted by the delays.

What we did

We reviewed the LTI application form, which did not specify the requirement for the diagnosing professional to be a psychiatrist but a 'Specialist in Childhood Behaviour Disorders'

and wrote to the HSE Primary Care Reimbursement Scheme about the issue. We also asked the HSE for written guidelines on the qualifying criteria and to specify who had oversight of this.

The HSE supplied the qualifying criteria, which have been in place since 2013. The criteria state that 'the assessment and diagnosis of ADHD (and responsibility for the ongoing care of the patient) is carried out by a specialist in childhood behaviour disorders (i.e. a Consultant Child and Adult Psychiatrist)'.

We wrote again to the HSE to outline our concern that while the guidelines had included reference to a Consultant Child and Adult Psychiatrist, this was in brackets and prefixed with an 'i.e.'. We also pointed out that the guide did not specify this as the only qualifying criteria, nor did it discount other specialists in childhood behaviour disorders. Despite this we highlighted that the HSE reimbursement scheme considered this as the only professional diagnosing criteria.

The HSE told us that following on from our engagement with them, the requirement for certification by a Consultant Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist would now be reviewed by The National Clinical Advisor and Group Lead (NCAGL) for Mental Health and the NCAGL for Children and Young People.

Outcome

The HSE told us that the review resulted in a change to the qualifying criteria for the Long Term Illness cards. This meant that a Paediatrician who is registered as a specialist with the Irish Medical Council and has training in the diagnosis and management of ADHD could now certify a child or young person as having ADHD for the purpose of Long-Term Illness eligibility.

The OCO urged the HSE to reach out to all families impacted, with the HSE noting that they had written to relevant clinicians seeking information to confirm that their practice aligns with the revised position. The families told us that this change was hugely significant for them and their children.



Quick Wins

In line with ombudsman principles, the OCO encourages the local resolution of complaints and respects local complaint processes of public bodies. We receive a lot of complaints about delays in complaint handling. In these cases we encourage local and early resolution of complaints as appropriate, which would usually result in quick wins for everyone. Sometimes these complaints can be resolved by a simple phone call or letter.

Below are examples of complaints resolved at early resolution:

1. Zac, an unaccompanied minor denied an aftercare plan

Background

A young person named Zac came to the OCO as he was unhappy with the delays he experienced when he made a complaint to Tusla about not receiving an aftercare plan. Zac arrived in Ireland as an unaccompanied minor two years before contacting the OCO. Despite being under the age of 18, Zac's initial age assessment mistakenly determined that he was over 18. Zac later provided Tusla with proof of his age but was denied an aftercare worker following the result of his initial age assessment.

What we did

The OCO wrote to Tusla asking when Zac could expect to a response to his complaint.

Outcome

Tusla informed us that they had since responded to Zac's complaint and that he had now been allocated an Aftercare worker who discussed his complaint with him. Tusla said that Zac was now entitled to full Aftercare, and that the Date of Birth he provided was accepted by Tusla and the International Protection Office (IPO). Zac would also remain in a Tusla placement until the following summer.

The OCO discussed the response with Zac who was happy to close the complaint.

2. School Transport Scheme

Complaint

Noah didn't get a place at the two closest secondary schools to his home because they were full and had to accept a place for a school further away. As a result, Noah was told he wasn't eligible for the School Transport Scheme.

What we did

We wrote to the School Transport Appeals Board on Noah's behalf and issued a letter of enquiry. They reviewed Noah's case.

Result

Bus Éireann since confirmed that Noah's school is the third closest school to his home but that they had been using the wrong address for a fourth school to calculate the distance. As the other closest schools to his home were oversubscribed, Noah was eligible for and was given the Remote Area Grant to get to school.

3. Reasonable Accommodations at Certificate Examinations (RACE)

Complaint

Ella had Cerebral Palsy and only had use of her left arm. She applied to use a voice to text device for the Leaving Cert but was refused. Her parents appealed and wrote to the State Examinations Commission (SEC) but never got a response.

What we did

We contacted the SEC and asked them to provide an explanation to Ella's family.

Result

The SEC granted the accommodations for Ella. The issue was resolved days before the exam started.



Spotlight Issues



Child defendants getting support in Youth Justice

We warmly welcome the introduction of a new court accompaniment for child defendants, which is being rolled out across the 100+ youth diversion projects nationwide throughout 2025. The OCO has pushed for a more child-friendly justice system to guarantee the effective implementation of children's rights at the highest attainable level. This is essential to upholding the principles of informed understanding and participation as well as to ensure the right to a fair trial.

The change will mean that every young person before the courts (District/Circuit/ Children's Court) will be offered access to this support. It will also have a presence in the Criminal Court and has been included in the new protocol to expediate rape and murder cases involving victims and defendants under 18 years of age.

Through our outreach work, it became clear to us that some children, who were alleged to have committed a crime, did not always understand what was being asked of them, or said about them, in court. Advocates working with children shared with us similar concerns and warned that this lack of understanding can lead to increased rates of reoffending.

Child-friendly justice systems ensure child-friendly court proceedings, where proceedings take explicit consideration of a child's age, special needs, level of

understanding and any communication difficulties they may have. They also ensure that the pace and structure of the court sessions consider the cognitive capacity of the child. The OCO welcomes the positive and child-centred response from the Department of Justice in our engagement with them.

Emergency Centres not subject to HIQA Inspections

The OCO has expressed our concern on many occasions about children seeking international protection living in insecure and unregulated settings. The OCO is very dissatisfied with the current situation, which remains hazardous and is putting children at risk.

In 2021 we investigated the Irish direct provision system and determined that it was not in the best interest of children. In a letter to the Taoiseach in 2023, we raised serious concerns about the placement of children seeking international protection in inadequate emergency accommodation; the exclusion of emergency accommodation from the remit assigned to HIQA; and the delays in implementing vulnerability assessments in line with EU law for all children residing in international protection accommodation.

We subsequently laid the OCO's *Special Report on the Safety and Welfare of Children in Direct Provision* in front of the Oireachtas in 2023, a first in the history of the office,

due to the ongoing failures to address key recommendations from that investigation that were adversely impacting on children.

In February 2024 we wrote to the Minister for Children highlighting that every day that children spend in unsuitable living conditions compromises their rights and well-being, and calling for the urgent need for a new plan.

In 2024, the OCO undertook six outreach complaint clinics within commercial/emergency IPAS accommodation settings. Individual complaints taken at these clinics and systemic issues noted across numerous accommodations, have identified significant concerns for the children and families living there with respect to child health and development, accommodation, and safety.

Child Health and Development

Access to appropriate food for children was a systemic issue across services. Families reported the food was not nutritious or healthy, with processed and fried foods repeatedly served. Food provided to adults was not differentiated from food provided to children, with no provision of age-appropriate food for toddlers and infants who are weaning. This resulted in children being unable to eat the food, losing weight and being diagnosed with nutritional deficiencies.

In one location both lunch and dinner were delivered from an external service at 1pm. Families told us the reheating of the food hours after delivery had caused food poisoning in their children. A child struggling with the food provided in this service was observed as appearing malnourished by his GP, occupying the lowest weight percentile for his age.

A lack of facilities for mothers who are breastfeeding their infants was reported in the clinics. In one place, a mother was told to remove the fridge she had purchased for her room to store her breastmilk and to instead store it in the accommodation's communal fridge, disregarding concerns with respect to hygiene, access and dignity.

Access to facilities for formula fed babies was also noted as an issue with most locations having a limited number of microwaves for resident use. In one accommodation residents who need to warm milk at night for their infants, had to exit the building onto the main street to access the singular microwave in the basement of the building. Lone parents would in this case, need to bring their infants with them, throughout the night.

Quality of Accommodation

Accommodation standards, notably the presence of mould across many of the services, was reported as impacting children's health. Many of the families reported their children as having repeat respiratory illnesses because of the mould in their rooms. The mould was visible to OCO staff during visits. In one of the centres, there were families living in rooms with no windows or natural light. Lack of communal space for the children to play, socialise and complete homework was a repeat concern across services. Families said they were worried about their children reaching developmental milestones such as crawling and walking, because they spent most of their time in one room, with limited space and multiple family members.

Safety and Welfare

The safety of children living in overcrowded rooms with their families, was a significant concern across locations. Sleep safety was a notable concern, with instances of babies and infants not being provided with cots and instead sleeping with their parents in shared beds/bunkbeds. The HSE have clear guidelines with respect to sleep safety and co-sleeping to reduce the risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. Families also reported children having to share bathrooms with adults and other families, including shared toilets and showers. Access to facilities to wash clothes, particularly for young babies and infants with illness was noted as a huge concern. In one accommodation there was just one washing machine between 48 residents.

Complaints Management

Lack of effective complaint management systems was noted by families across services. In many cases complaints made to centre management had not been responded to in a timely fashion (months), had not been responded to in writing or had been ignored completely. Many families told us that they feared reprisal from centre management if they submitted complaints to IPAS as there was no indication of oversight or accountability for actions/inactions taken by management, and no independent agency to voice this to.

In their status as emergency and non-permanent accommodations, we understand that none of the locations we visited were subject to an independent complaints mechanism or inspectorate. We believe this has made the children living in these locations uniquely vulnerable and has adversely impacted their right to health, development and safety.

What we did

We brought the concerns raised by the complainants directly to IPAS. We liaised with IPAS until measures had been put in place to help resolve the issues raised by the complainants. The OCO continues to receive complaints on behalf of children living in emergency centres and we will continue to keep bringing these complaints to IPAS and DCEDIY. The OCO remains concerned that, despite longstanding recommendations, HIQA still does not have remit to inspect emergency accommodation centres.



OCO School Workshops

Our Education Rights workshops and outreach programme are an important way for us to engage directly with children every year. In 2024, we engaged with almost 2,500 children in this way. Every week in the academic term, children from primary and secondary schools around Ireland visit the OCO office for rights education workshops delivered by our Participation and Rights Education team. Our workshops are a chance for children to learn about their rights in an interactive and age-appropriate way. In our Office, we delivered workshops to 86 schools in 2024 and, in addition, our team made 22 visits to schools around the country. 63% of all schools we engaged with were DEIS schools, a 14% increase on 2023, and nearly two thirds of the schools that travelled to the OCO Office, came from outside Dublin. In 2024 we delivered workshops directly through the Irish Language to three gaelscoileanna.

Workshops to groups and presentations on children's rights

Our workshops with youth groups are a positive way for us to engage with more vulnerable children and raise awareness of their rights, with 11 visits from youth groups to the OCO in 2024. The Participation and Rights Education team also presented to NGOs and professional bodies interested in developing child and youth participation structures. In 2024 the team was also pleased to present at 3rd level seminars for students who will be working with children in the future, which

typically include Nursing, Early Childhood Education and Social Work students.

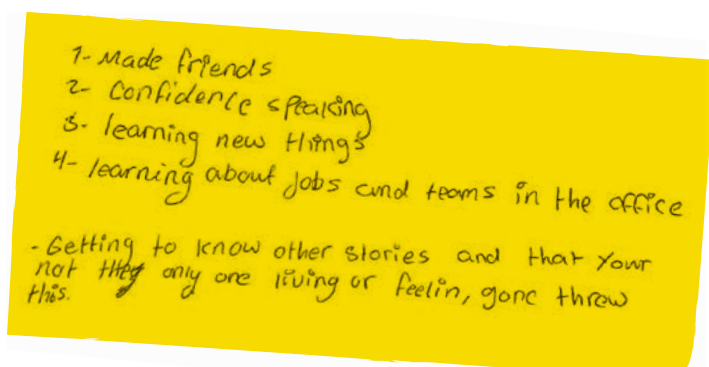
TY Work Experience

In 2024 we welcomed 12 Transition Year students to the office on Work Experience in February, March and November. Over the course of a week, the students met with Niall and members of each unit to learn about the variety of work carried out at the OCO. They completed various tasks relating to the work of each unit including:

- Helping behind-the-scenes at Child Talks and designing a poster
- Writing their own blog posts on a rights issue of their choice
- Conducting research on Government supports for Ukrainian refugees and the impact of child and family homelessness
- Delivering presentations on children's rights issues in Ireland
- Scripting and filming their own social media reel
- Assessing the eligibility of mock complaints with the help of our Complaints and Investigations team



Here's some of the feedback we received from our TY students in 2024.



Targeted outreach – North East Inner-City Dublin

Throughout 2024, our outreach included a focus on Northeast Inner-City Dublin and included:

- Niall engaging with various NGOs and Youth Groups working with children and young people in the area
- Three rights workshops for children of all ages who lived or attended services in the area
- Three complaint clinics in the community
- OCO staff meetings with key groups working with children and families such as community centres, youth groups and family resource centres
- Engaged with the relevant public bodies on the issues raised
- Provided information to professionals and organisations working in the area on how to support children, young people and their families to access local complaint procedures

Plan for Places Update Report

In September 2024, the OCO published *Plan for Places, Two Years On* which examines whether progress has been made on recommendations in our 2022 report *Plan for Places: Forward Planning for the Provision of School Places for Children with Special Educational Needs (SEN)*. Our report was launched at Powerstown Educate Together Primary School in Dublin 15, an area with a notable shortage of school places for children with SEN. The report welcomed several notable improvements in 2022, including the enactment of the Education (Provision in Respect of Children with Special Educational Needs) Act 2022, the publication of National Council for Special Education (NCSE) Policy Advice on Special Schools and Classes, as well as the recent establishment of a Cabinet Committee on Children, Education and Disability. However, the unacceptable situation faced by children with SEN and their families in securing appropriate school places close to their homes, as is their right, has not gone away. There is still no comprehensive and coherent plan to ensure that every child with SEN has a school place locally in a timely manner. We are also concerned about insufficient data for both the planning for, and monitoring of, the quality of these school places, as well as the emphasis on increasing the number of special schools and classes, which moves Ireland further away from achieving an inclusive system. There are welcome commitments to address these issues in the new Programme for Government and we hope these will be actioned without delay.





OCO Youth Advisory Panel (YAP)

The Youth Advisory Panel (YAP) continues to be an integral part of the Office and in 2024 had a membership of 24 young people from across the country. The YAP has two primary functions: advising on an ongoing basis about the emerging issues and concerns which face children and young people; and sharing their views on topics and themes which have been identified by the office as having importance.

In 2024 the YAP contributed to a variety of work across the office including:

- Helping to launch our *Tomorrow Starts with Us* survey as part of our 20th anniversary celebrations.
- Informing the development of our new strategic plan.
- Advising on updates to our website.
- Drafting a Youth Manifesto to outline their key demands for the new Government.

We are very proud of the contribution made by all our YAP members in 2024:

• Ailis Malone	• Bel Nabulele
• Ciaran Smith	• Molly Brereton
• Karolina Byrne	• Killian Byrne
• Mia Harding	• Sienna Keane
• Rachel Fleming	• Christopher Garvey
• Toby Murphy	• Beth Clancy
• Alicia Kellett	• Princess Ogumefu
• Faith Langdon	• Esther Tamadoe
• Sinead Murray	• Eoin Carpenter
• Luke Fagan	• Hassan Ali
• Murphy Alade	• Fionn McWeeney

Here's what members told us they enjoyed most about being part of the YAP:

"The YAP has given me real direction in how I want to proceed in my life, the connections and skills I've developed are unmatched, thanks so much, the group has really changed my life and perspective on things. I'm so happy to be able to contribute."

Sienna



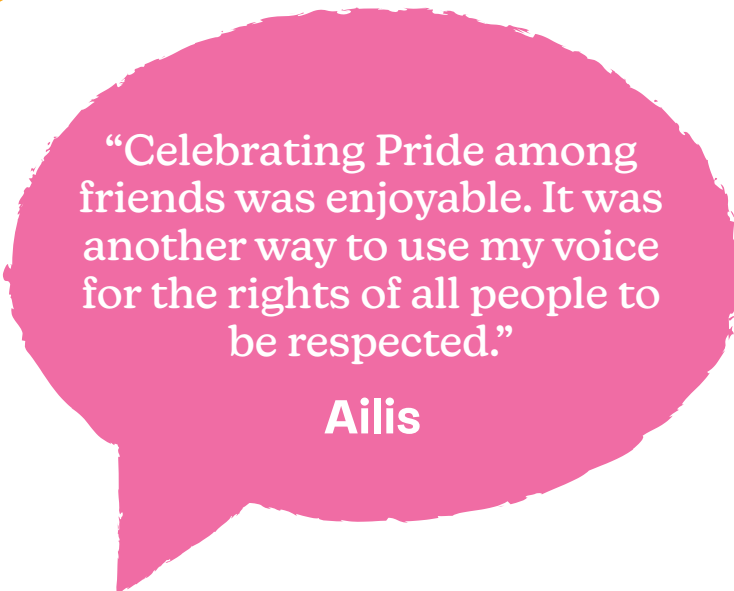
"My favourite activity was simply talking to the other members and getting along with each other which we did all of the time I was there."

Ciaran



"Celebrating Pride among friends was enjoyable. It was another way to use my voice for the rights of all people to be respected."



Ailis





“I’d say the best thing that I ever did with the YAP was public speaking as it helped me come out of my comfort zone”

Karolina



“Being invited both to learn about and in addition have influence on the methods by which our rights are respected, protected and fulfilled is a massive privilege, one which I was granted by the OCO.”

Rachel



“I think my favourite activity over the past year has been talking and debating about Irish politics in my last YAP.”

Beth

2024 YAP Highlights

Pieces of Us – What’s Next? report launch

The OCO’s Pieces of Us- What’s Next report brought together all the young peoples’ views gathered at our event hosted by the YAP at Croke Park in 2023. Here young people discussed how they believe the Government should take on board recommendations made in the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child Concluding Observations. The YAP helped us to analyse these views and promote the report on our socials.

February

YAP at the Oireachtas Children’s Committee

The YAP were invited to Leinster House to present the ‘Pieces of Us – What’s Next?’ report to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Children, Disability, Equality, Integration and Youth. They shared their views on issues facing young people today, including the use of smartphones and AI, reform of the RSE curriculum and racism at school.



April

Access to Justice submission

The YAP gave their views on how the court system and complaints procedures in Ireland can be made more child-friendly. This was for the OCO’s submission to the UNCRC on General Comment no. 27 on ‘Children’s Rights to Access to Justice and Effective Remedies’.

August

Psychological Society of Ireland, Annual Conference

Some of our YAP accompanied Niall to the Psychological Society of Ireland conference in Athlone. Here they took part in a Q&A session on issues impacting young people today, including mental health and the housing crisis.

November



March

Engagement with Tokyo Metropolitan Government

The YAP took part in a knowledge exchange day with a delegation of young people representing the Tokyo Metropolitan Government. Both groups shared insights into their work to promote children’s rights, particularly around education, healthcare and equality.



June

YAP and the OCO celebrating LGBTQI+ children’s rights at Dublin Pride

The YAP and OCO staff took part in Dublin Pride again in 2024 to promote the rights of young LGBTQI+ children and young people in Ireland. Along with representatives from youth organisations across the country, the group marched from O’Connell Street to Merrion Square. The YAP designed their own placards and even met the then Taoiseach, Simon Harris along the way!



YAP and OCO Visit to Áras an Uachtaráin

In June members of the YAP were invited to attend the annual summer garden party at Áras an Uachtaráin, hosted by President Michael D Higgins. The President spoke about the importance of community activism in building inclusive communities across Ireland.

September

YAP at the National Youth Assembly on Gender Equality

One of our YAP was a guest delegate at the National Youth Assembly on Gender Equality at Richmond Barracks, where she presented the YAP’s views on how to achieve gender equality in Ireland today.

December

Eco-UNESCO Earth Gala

In December, some of our YAP attended Eco-UNESCO’s Earth Gala event at the Irish Museum of Modern Art (IMMA). They took part in discussions with policymakers and other young people from across Ireland on climate justice and climate advocacy, as well as a panel discussion on youth advocacy.

YAP advisory work - YAP members have also been involved in:

- The Advisory Board for the EU Children’s Participation Platform
- Acting as youth advisors for an Irish Research Council-funded research project on child-inclusive mediation run by University of Galway
- Advising Child Rights Connect on the development of a child-friendly version of the Council of Europe’s guide to children’s participation on decisions about their healthcare

OCO School Ambassador Programme

Now in its second year, our School Ambassador Programme sees us team up with sixth class groups from two primary schools who work with us to raise awareness of children's rights. This is done through fun activities in the class, at school and on social media, and includes visits from the OCO team and Niall throughout the year. We also deliver a Rights Education workshop to our Ambassadors and explain the work of the OCO. Primary schools from around the country apply to take part in the programme and we are delighted to be working with our 2024/2025 School Ambassadors, Kilbride National School in Meath and Scoil San Phroinsias in Galway.



Child Talks 2024

Our seventh annual Child Talks celebrating World Children's Day has become a major event on the OCO calendar and takes place in front of a live audience of 1,000 school children at the Helix in Dublin. On November 20th 2024, five young people took to the stage to share their personal and inspiring stories on topics like single-parent families, young carers, growing up as a neuro-divergent child in rural Ireland, girls in sport, and loneliness. Hosted by RTÉ's Mark Langtry 'the Science Guy' and our past speaker Eoin Murphy, Child Talks 2024 saw a special performance of the viral summer hit 'The Spark' from the Lisdoonvarna Crew, and entertainment from young Irish superstar magician Cillian O'Connor from Britain's Got Talent. Child Talks raises awareness of children's rights and promotes the work of the OCO to a new and widespread audience of young people every year. Child Talks was named Best PR Event at the 2024 PRCA Awards for Excellence in Public Relations.

20th Anniversary Children's Parties

To celebrate our 20th Anniversary in 2024 we hosted two children's parties in Dublin's Inner City and Mayfield in Cork. First up was a party at the Swan Regional Youth Centre in Dublin 1, where we welcomed over 100 children from local primary schools for an afternoon of facepainting, dancing, balloon making, magic, pizza, popcorn and more! Later in the year we travelled to the Mayfield Sports Centre in Cork City where first class pupils from local schools joined us for another brilliant bash. The OCO team met with all the guest schools before the party for a special rights workshop and to introduce the children to the work of the OCO. Our children's parties were an opportunity for children to have fun, and for us to re-emphasise our focus, which is always on who the OCO is working for; children themselves.



OCO at the BT Young Scientist Exhibition

The OCO hosted our first stand at the BT Young Scientist Exhibition (BTYSE) in 2024 and were delighted to partner with BT to create a special Children's Rights award for a project that highlights or promotes children's rights. With over 2,000 students taking part in the BTYSE and several thousand more attending, this was a terrific chance for us to educate school children from across Ireland, and to promote awareness of the work of our Office. Our first ever Children's Rights award at the BTYSE went to Kayleigh McNamara from Athlone Community College for her project *Giving Girls a Voice: How Successful is the HSE at treating girls with endometriosis*. The OCO also welcomed Kayleigh into our Office on Great Strand Street later in the year to present her project to staff.

Tomorrow Starts with Us- a survey of secondary school children on the Ireland they would like to see

As part of our activities marking the OCO's 20th Anniversary, we surveyed over 1,000 secondary school children around Ireland on their views and hopes for Ireland's future. A total of 1,036 children from 23 schools, based on regional spread, DEIS and non-DEIS, gaelscoileanna, private schools and schools that had taken part in Education Rights Awareness workshops, took part in our survey. The cost of living, mental health services and future housing needs were the top three concerns for students we spoke to. The survey focused on children's experiences on a wide range of topics including education, bullying, racism and discrimination, mental health in schools, online safety, accessibility, public transport, the student voice and how Ireland rates as a country for young people. We also invited children to give their views on the solutions and changes they want to see.



MIC Summer School- celebrating the 20th Anniversary of the OCO

We partnered up with the Mary Immaculate College (MIC) Thurles Summer School in June to celebrate the 20th Anniversary of the OCO. With an education focus, the theme for 2024 related to how children's voices have changed the landscape of education and participation over the past two decades. Over the course of the three-day event in Thurles, we heard from a diverse range of speakers including Professor Laura Lundy, Professor Philip Jaffé from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, Bernie McNally, Secretary General of the Department of Education, Adam Harris, CEO of AslAm, Fiacre Ryan, writer and poet and Suzanne Garcia Imbernon from the European Network of Ombudsman for Children. There were also panel discussions featuring representatives from groups like Traveller Voice, the GAA, Doras, Oberstown, the National Parents Council and HIV Ireland.





Advocating for Children's Rights in National Policies and Laws

Key Asks for the new Programme for Government

A key objective for the OCO in 2024 was to ensure children's rights were front and centre in the new Programme for Government. This work started with a review of our recommendations over the past two years and prioritising our key asks for the next Government. Over the summer and early autumn of 2024, we met with political parties to ask that their manifestos include a clear focus on children and their rights. It was great to see many of our recommendations reflected in various ways across all these manifestos.

Our key ask was that the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) be fully and directly incorporated into domestic law here in Ireland. This follows the example of Scotland who enacted the landmark UNCRC Act in July 2024. In September, we held a briefing in Leinster House with politicians and invited Bruce Adamson, former Commissioner for Children and Young People in Scotland, to speak about the experience in Scotland, the positive impact of UNCRC incorporation and the role played by legislators in the process.

After the General Election in November 2024, we reengaged with political parties and party leaders focusing on our key asks. We were

pleased to see many of our recommendations make it into the Programme for Government particularly in relation to the need for a statutory Child Death Review mechanism, mental health services, supports for children with disabilities and kinship carers. Unfortunately, calls from the OCO to include incorporation of the UNCRC have been left out of the Programme for Government, which is a missed opportunity to strengthen the legal framework for children. The OCO will continue to push for the full and direct incorporation of the UNCRC into Irish law under our new strategic plan.



Budget 2025

In the run up to Budget 2025, the Ombudsman for Children wrote to the Minister for Finance and the Minister for Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform seeking a children's rights focus in the budget. The letters highlighted key budgetary changes that would transform children's services and supports in Ireland as well as the need to roll out Child Rights Impact Assessments to ensure that fiscal and budgetary decisions are compliant with obligations under the UNCRC.

The OCO called for multi-annual and ring-fenced budgets for children's services, an evidence-based approach to improve outcomes for the most marginalised children. We also called for effective resourcing of the Child Poverty and Well-Being unit to ensure a joined-up approach to Government decision making. Child rights compliant budgeting continues to be a priority for the OCO.

Guidelines on Behaviours of Concern

In 2024, we engaged with the Department of Education on their new Guidelines on Understanding Behaviours of Concern and Responding to Crisis Situations. Every year we deal with complaints from parents who are deeply unhappy with the use of seclusion and restrictive practices with their child, and we also hear from schools who are at a loss on how best to keep everyone safe. We welcomed the focus on prevention and de-escalation in the guidelines to minimise the need to restrain a child and the explicit ban on the use of seclusion on children in any circumstances. However, there were a number of areas identified that need to be strengthened, including the lack of an adequate oversight mechanism, clarity around child protection measures, inadequate complaints procedures and the absence of independent appeals. We will continue to engage with the Department as part of the ongoing monitoring and review of the guidelines as they are used by schools.

Online Safety Code

Children's rights in the digital environment continues to be an area of focus for our office and in 2024 we made a submission to Coimisiún na Meán (the Commission) on their draft of the new online safety code and guidance. We recommended that the Commission include explicit reference to the rights and principles contained in the UNCRC when referring to children's rights that apply to the Commission and Video Sharing Platform Services (VSPS) in implementing the code and guidance. Our submission also includes recommendations on safety by design, parental controls, complaints, literacy and age verification. The Code was published in October 2024. We believe that it lacks a detailed framework that engages with children's rights and welfare and fails to outline exactly how VSPS providers can demonstrate best practice when it comes to children's rights standards and guidance. The OCO will continue to promote the adoption of rights-based regulation and guidance for online service providers to ensure they are in a position to fully respect children's rights, with a particular emphasis on children in the codes and guidance the Commission produces.

Climate Action Plan

The Climate Action Plan 2024 is a pivotal part of tackling climate change, which impacts both present and future generations, especially children. However, while the plan shows dedication to addressing climate issues, we believe it must better integrate children's rights into all aspects of policy and action in this area. Emphasis on proactive measures to shield children from environmental harm and involve them in decision-making is necessary to ensure their well-being, uphold their rights and empower them as active participants in addressing climate change.

LGBTQI+ Inclusion Strategy

Building on the progress of the previous National LGBTI+ Inclusion Strategy 2019-2021 and LGBTI+ National Youth Strategy 2018-2020, we recognised the need for a renewed and even more ambitious approach as the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) developed a new LGBTI+ Inclusion Strategy. While the previous National LGBTI+ Inclusion Strategy laid a strong foundation, our submission outlines how Ireland can strive for a future where LGBTI+ children experience full inclusion, equality, health, and safety in all aspects of Irish society and can fully enjoy their rights.

National Strategy for Women and Girls

The OCO welcomed the development of a new National Strategy for Women and Girls along with the stated intention that it will expand on the progress made by the previous Strategy and to help advance the rights of women and girls. The purpose of our submission was to highlight some of the issues which we believed should be considered when developing the new Strategy to ensure that the rights of girls are more fully protected in this area. Our key asks for the new strategy include:

- Improve access for girls to STEM subjects at school and make more STEM subjects available in all-girl schools;
- Increase leadership opportunities for girls;
- Extend free contraception to girls under age 17;
- Promote equal access for girls and boys to healthcare and mental healthcare; and
- Support teenage girls to continue playing sport as they get older.

National Disability Strategy

The OCO made a submission to the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) on a new National Disability Strategy to highlight the measures needed to ensure that disabled children are seen, heard and counted. The measures we recommended included:

- A rights-based strategy, grounded in the UNCRC and the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities;
- Adopting a human rights-based model of disability across law and policy;
- Ensuring that opportunities for child participation in decision-making processes are accessible to disabled children; and
- Requiring data collection on children to be disaggregated by disability.

Mental Health Bill

In 2024, we continued our work on the Mental Health Bill to ensure it was child centred and rights based. The Bill was published in August 2024 and we wrote to the Minister of State for Mental Health and Oireachtas Committee with our recommendations to strengthen it for children. While in need of further refinement, among the proposals that we regard as broadly positive are: Part 4 of the Bill dedicated to children, the Guiding Principle related to the best interests of the child, the provisions made for children aged 16 years and older to be able to consent to their treatment and provision to regulate CAMHS. However, we sought to see the Bill strengthened in a number of ways for children and their rights. This included the need to respect the views of children at all stages including admission, care and treatment, an explicit prohibition on the admission of children into adult mental health services and the need to recognise the right of all children with an independent advocate.

The Bill fell with the last Government after proceeding to stage 2. We continue to follow closely the legislative process of the Mental Bill in the Oireachtas in 2025 and our focus is on ensuring it protect, respect and fulfills the rights of children under 18 years.

Children born through surrogacy

Our work on surrogacy continued in 2024 through engagement with the Minister for Health on the Health (Assisted Human Reproduction) Bill 2022. In May, we wrote to the Minister and the Oireachtas Committee on Health highlighting the ways in which the Bill could be strengthened from a children's rights point of view. Though we were pleased that some of the issues we highlighted were raised in the Oireachtas with the Minister, the OCO's recommendations were not included in the Health (Assisted Human Reproduction) Act 2024 that was enacted in July. In September, we wrote to the Minister as the Department planned to introduce a supplementary Bill providing for issues not covered by the 2024 Act. Here we highlighted our outstanding concerns with the regulatory framework. These relate to the best interests of the child and the post-birth framework, the criminalisation of non-permitted surrogacy, access to information on origins and the timeline for commencement. In November, we met with the Minister to discuss our concerns, and reached some agreement on areas of the Act that could be strengthened. This engagement will continue in 2025, as it is crucial that the regulatory framework put in place following the passing of the supplementary Bill is child-centred and fully rights-based, and takes on board the lessons to be learned from other jurisdictions.

Family Courts Bill

In 2024, we made a submission on the Family Courts Bill 2022. The OCO believes that reform of the family justice system is long overdue. In our submission to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in 2022, we noted that the current family justice system is not child-friendly and has not been designed with children in mind. The OCO therefore welcomed the publication of the Family Courts Bill as it represents the foundation to establish a specialized family court system in Ireland, and is an important step in the realisation of the commitments and overall vision of the Family Justice Strategy 2022-2025. We will continue to engage with the Department of Justice as family justice reforms progress.





International Engagement

ENOC work – alternative care

In 2024, the OCO was involved in the European Network of Ombudspersons for Children (ENOC) Working Group on Alternative Care and the drafting of ENOC's Policy Position Statement, contributing to a wide-ranging survey on alternative care. This brought together all the work throughout the year on the rights of children in care by the OCO and our European colleagues in different jurisdictions. ENOC made 7 key recommendations for children in alternative care, which we and all European members have adopted:

- Ensure they have a say in decisions around their lives and living conditions in care
- Support efforts to keep children in, or return them to, the care of their family, when it's in their best interest
- Guarantee available and timely alternative care solutions and provide a thorough and careful assessment of the most appropriate form of alternative care
- Ensure quality alternative care
- Maintain the child's meaningful relationship with their family, other close people, and child's ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic roots

- Systematically aim at preparing children in alternative care for independent living and integrating into the community
- Strengthen the inspection and monitoring of alternative care.

This is an important framework for us in this area as we focus on the development of a new alternative care strategy here in Ireland and the proposed review of the Childcare Act in 2025.

UN General Comment on Access to Justice (with YAP)

The purpose of this submission was to contribute to the guiding questions raised in the UN Committee's call for submissions on the development of General Comment Number 27 regarding:

- Children's understandings of justice and remedies; and
- Barriers preventing children from gaining access to justice and effective remedies.

The OCO submission was informed by the findings of a consultation undertaken by our Participation and Rights Education team with the OCO Youth Advisory Panel on 13 August 2024. The submission focused on the legal

barriers to justice, lack of full incorporation on UNCRC meaning children's rights are not justiciable, socioeconomic barriers including poverty and financial barriers and a lack of child friendly avenues for accessing justice and remedies.

UN Committee on Economic, Cultural and Social Rights

In January 2024, the OCO submitted an alternative report to the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) as part of the Committee's periodic examination of Ireland's record in relation to these rights. Our report aimed to bring to the Committee's attention the State's progress and shortcomings in implementing children's economic, social and cultural rights under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Some of the areas of concern raised by the OCO included Government expenditure allocated to children, discrimination against children, domestic violence, access to education, mental health, disability services, and child poverty. In March 2024, the CESCR published its Concluding Observations reflecting some of the OCO's recommendations, including asking the State to ensure availability, accessibility and affordability of childcare services through increased public funding; ensure targeted supports for groups of children that are disproportionately affected by poverty; prioritise inclusive education for all children with disabilities; and ensure that Roma children, Traveller children, and children from disadvantaged backgrounds have access to quality education that is culturally appropriate and adapted to their needs.

ENOC work on the EU Migration Pact

In early Autumn we worked with our colleagues in ENOC to develop a joint statement on the new EU Migration Pact. The Pact will have wide ranging implications for children in Ireland and across the EU when it comes fully into effect in 2026. It was important to ensure sufficient safeguards are in place to protect the rights of children seeking international protection. The EU Pact on Migration and Asylum raises concerns about the treatment of children at European borders and may lead to human rights violations as Member States may prioritise deterrence, border closures and swift returns over the protection of migrant children's rights and access to asylum procedures. The joint statement highlighted why the rights of all children should be respected, protected and fulfilled, regardless of their status, without discrimination of any kind. This includes equal access to territory, asylum, reception services and protection under the law. Specific concerns were raised in the statement about the potential detention of children at borders, separation from their families and the additional vulnerabilities of unaccompanied minors. In 2025, the OCO will continue to push for sufficient safeguards for children as the Government publish their implementation plan and new International Protection Bill.



Budget 2024

The OCO's budget is allocated through the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth and drawn down on a regular basis throughout the year. In 2024, our budget was €4.317 million, of which €4.032 million was drawn down by the year end (2023: €3.9 million budget which was fully drawn down).

As set out in Sections 17(1) and (2) of the Ombudsman for Children Act 2002, the Ombudsman for Children is responsible for preparing Financial Statements, for ensuring the regularity of the Office's transactions, and ensuring compliance with the Code of Practice for Governance of State Bodies. The Financial Statements are subject to audit by the Comptroller and Auditor General. The audit of the 2024 accounts will take place in July and August of 2025 and will be conducted by the Comptroller and Auditor General. In accordance with Section 17 (2) of the Ombudsman for Children Act 2002, the draft Financial Statements for the year ended 31st December 2024 were submitted for audit by the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General by 31st March 2025. Once approved by the Comptroller and Auditor General, the Financial Statements for 2024 will be published on the OCO's website. Mazars Chartered Accountants provided our internal audit function for 2024. Mazars undertook a review of internal controls in Q1 of 2025 (for 2024) and a review of our HR policies and procedures in Q4 2024.

The breakdown of our expenditure (after apportionment of corporate services costs including the role of the Ombudsman) is as follows:

- 43% Complaints and Investigations
- 20% Policy and Research
- 19% Communications
- 18% Participation and Rights Education



In December 2024, the OCO approved its Corporate Procurement Plan (CPP) 2024-2026. The CPP, published on the OCO website in February 2025, sets a strategic approach to procurement for the Office.

Recruitment 2024

At the start of 2024, the OCO had 34 permanent staff members, with that figure rising to 36 by year end. We ran several recruitment campaigns throughout 2024, and welcomed 10 new staff members throughout the year, at various grades. Unfortunately, we also had to say goodbye to a number of staff, mostly due to promotion, a testament to the hardworking and incredible staff at the OCO.

Strategic Planning for 2025-2027

2024 was the final year of our Strategic Plan 2022-2024, with work beginning on our new plan in May. Building on the previous plan, we set about ensuring we had an extensive stakeholder consultation and that all staff were fully involved in the process. The OCO now has an ambitious new Strategic Plan for 2025-2027, which takes a systemic approach and focuses on our strengths. We have been clear on how we will hold ourselves to account for the implementation of our activities and achievement of our goals.

Freedom of Information

In 2024, the OCO received and processed 11 requests under the Freedom of Information Act 2014.

Child Protection and Welfare Obligations

In 2024 we received 140 child protection reports, which are dealt with by our Designated Liaison Officers (DLPs). This compares with 74 child protection reports in 2023.

These reports arise mainly through our complaints handling function, with a number of them relating to more than one child.

In 2024 we received 40 allegations of physical abuse; 36 allegations of sexual abuse; 24 allegations of neglect and 17 allegations of emotional abuse. We also received 23 reports related to child welfare concerns. Last year we formally notified Tusla of 19 of those reports.

Irish Language

The Ombudsman for Children's Office's (OCO) continues to implement our Irish Language Scheme. Section 10A of the Advertising by Public Bodies came into effect in October 2022 and the OCO is working to comply with the provisions of this Act.

Public Sector Duty

The OCO is committed to fulfilling our Public Sector Duty, which is reflected in our Strategic Plan for 2025-2027. Training and upskilling of relevant staff is in progress and a cross-unit working group has been established to support the implementation of the Duty.

We commit to completing an assessment of the equality and human rights issues that are relevant to our purpose and functions of our staff and to those we provide services in 2025. We will address the issues raised in this assessment and report annually in a manner that is accessible to the public.

Climate Action and Energy

In the context of global climate change and through the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021, Ireland is committed to achieving significant reductions in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030, climate neutrality no later than 2050, and increasing energy efficiency in the State.

The Act establishes a legally binding framework that reaches public sector bodies. In that regard, the OCO is committed to developing a Climate Action Roadmap, keeping it updated annually and reporting on progress on our climate action activities.

Climate Action Roadmap

In 2024, and in preparation for our first ever Climate Action Roadmap, we engaged with our Partnership Support Manager appointed by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland. We put in place an internal governance structure to support our climate action activities, and we delivered leadership training for senior staff members.

Energy and air travel carbon emissions

In December 2009, the Minister for Communications, Energy and Natural Resources gave effect to Directive 2006/32/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 April 2006, and made the ‘European Communities (Energy End-use Efficiency and Energy Services) Regulations 2009 (S.I. 542 of 2009)’. The Regulations require public sector organisations to report annually from January 2011 on their energy usage and actions taken to reduce consumption.

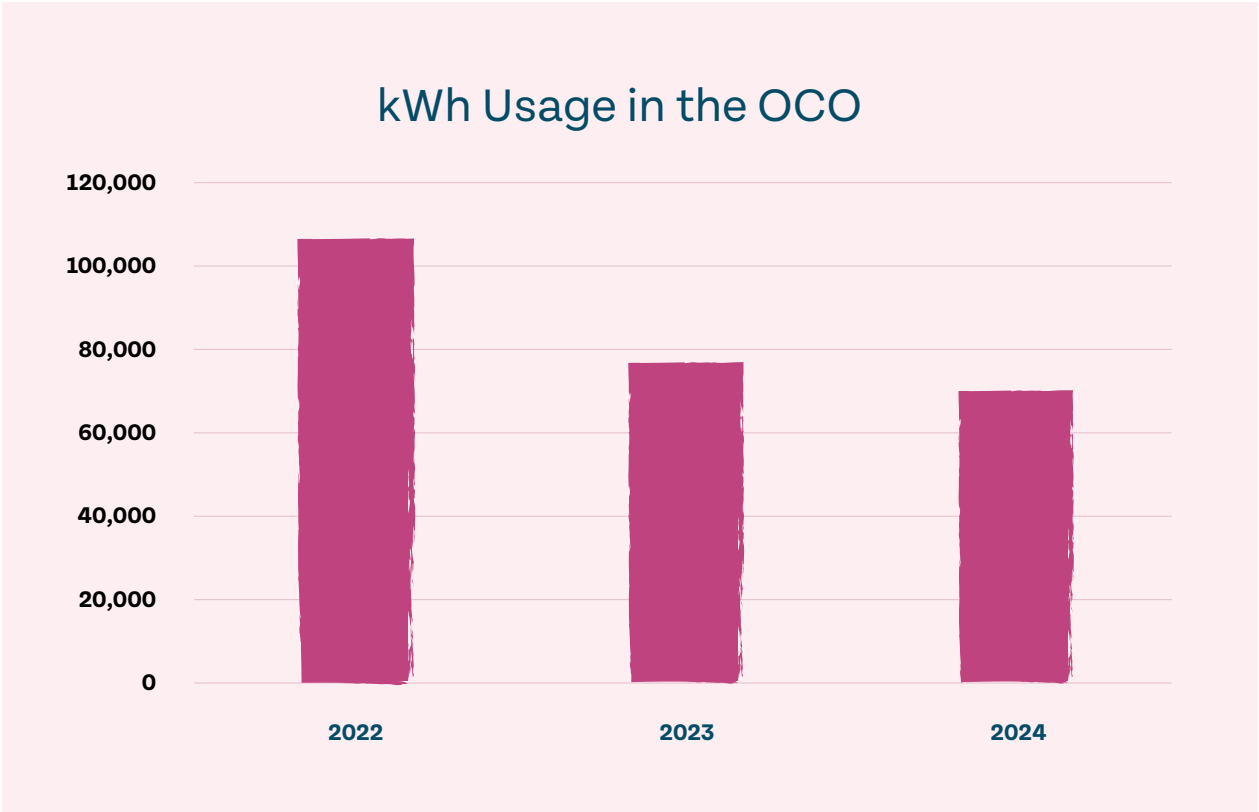
Our premises are 100% electric. In 2024, we used 67,897.92KWh of electricity, which is decrease of 10% from the previous year (2023: 75,078kWh, 2022:103,365kWh). We continued our internal energy awareness campaign. We also started swapping out old, less environmentally friendly lightbulbs with newer LED lights that consume less energy. In 2024, air travel carbon emissions (offsetting emissions) were 7.6 tonnes.

Customer charter

In 2024 a cross unit working group began work on updating the OCO’s Customer Service Charter for the next two years, which is aligned with the public sector’s Customer Service Charter Initiative. The document outlines the processes and procedures the OCO follows to help us achieve a high-quality customer service. The OCO’s Customer Service Charter for 2024 - 2026 in PDF format received the official Plain English mark from the National Adult Literary Agency (NALA) for accessibility and is available on our website.

ICT

Improvements in ICT in 2024 included replacement laptops for a large number of devices that had reached end of life according to the OCO laptop replacement policy. As part of this policy, the older laptops were recycled for use by the TCD Give Tech to Schools programme. The re-use of these devices by a future generation demonstrates significant sustainability and environmental benefits. There were also important software and system improvements made during the year.



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