

# CHILDREN'S POLICY FRAMEWORK 2024-2030

INVESTING IN OUR CHILDREN FOR A BETTER TOMORROW



GOVERNMENT OF MALTA  
MINISTRY FOR SOCIAL POLICY  
AND CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

# Contents

- Minister's Foreword..... 5
- Permanent Secretary's Message..... 7
- Executive Summary..... 9
- List of Abbreviations .....11
- Our Vision..... 14
  - 1.1 Introduction..... 15
  - 1.2 Why do we need a Policy Framework for Children?..... 15
  - 1.3 Our Approach..... 15
  - 1.4 Guiding Principles of the Policy Framework..... 16
    - 1.4.1 Children's Rights..... 17
    - 1.4.2 Best interests of the Child ..... 17
    - 1.4.3 Equal Opportunities..... 17
    - 1.4.4 High Quality Support ..... 17
  - 1.5 National Priorities for Better Prospects..... 18
  - 1.6 The Success of Future Generations..... 19
- Chapter 2: National Context..... 22
  - 2.1. Population ..... 23
  - 2.2. National Policies Supporting Children ..... 24
  - 2.3. Children's Wellbeing ..... 26
    - 2.3.1. Children within the Family ..... 27
    - 2.3.2 Socio-Economic Background ..... 27
    - 2.3.3 Health ..... 28
    - 2.3.4 Education..... 29
    - 2.3.5. The Environment..... 30
    - 2.3.6. Play, Leisure, Culture and Spirituality ..... 33
    - 2.3.7. Democratic Participation..... 34
- Chapter 3: National Priorities..... 38
  - Improving Child Wellbeing ..... 40
  - Supporting Families with Children ..... 54
  - Providing a Better Environment for Children ..... 64
  - Strengthening Child Participation..... 76
- Chapter 4: Implementation, Monitoring and Evaluation..... 84
  - 4.1 Implementation..... 85
  - 4.2 Monitoring and Evaluation ..... 85
  - Next Steps ..... 86

## List of Tables

Table 1: National Priorities for Better Prospects..... 18  
Table 2: National Priorities of the Children's Policy Framework 2024-2030..... 39

## List of Figures

Figure 1: Distribution of the Child Population as per Age Brackets 2013-2021 ..... 23  
Figure 2: Alternative Care Placements in 2020 and 2021..... 27  
Figure 3: Environment ..... 66



# MINISTER'S FOREWORD



## Hon. Michael Falzon

Minister for Social Policy and Children's Rights

Children of today play a pivotal role in shaping both the present and future of our society. One of the main priorities of our State has always been to serve and protect our children and young persons; for them to have a good quality of life and grow to realise their full potential. This **Children's Policy Framework 2024-2030** will be a further step in this direction. By placing an emphasis on the well-being, happiness, and health of our children, it aligns with our broader national mission, which is to bring to life the goals of Malta's Social Vision 2035.

Every child and young person should have the same rights and opportunities to thrive, free from discrimination and hindrances of any kind. The main intention of this Policy Framework is to address persisting and emerging challenges and propose concrete policy measures for children to live a safe, healthy and fulfilling life in today's ever-changing world. We have to keep investing on a society that empowers and uplifts our youngest members, ensuring they can grow into active, fulfilled, and productive contributors to our nation's prosperity.

In line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), this Policy Framework also adopts a child-centred approach and prioritises the best interests of the child in all proposed actions in order to provide special protection for children in any context while acknowledging their unique vulnerability.

This consultation document is a result of a number of pre-consultations held with the main stakeholders, in particular those who work closely 'with' and 'for' children. However, I also believe that no policy regarding children should be designed without their voices. Within this context we have created new digital platforms for children to be able to give us their views to further ensure that this Policy Framework takes their views into consideration.

Our child population is a significant resource for our country. Children are an indispensable element of today's and tomorrow's society. Ensuring the best possible outcomes for children and young people is not only an important aspect for our economic planning but also a moral imperative that will lead to long-term social benefits for society. The Children's Policy Framework 2024-2030 is a tangible demonstration of the State's dedication to ensuring that children are at the heart of its social and developmental aspirations. The success of future generations is the responsibility of society. Whilst cognisant that Government is a key stakeholder, we all have an important role to play in supporting children to have the best possible outcomes in the future to come. I hope that this public consultation will result in fruitful feedback from all relevant stakeholders that benefits Government policymaking for children.

# PERMANENT SECRETARY'S MESSAGE



## Mark Musù

Permanent Secretary  
Ministry for Social Policy and Children's Rights

In times of rapid change and emerging challenges, Government's policy tools have to be constantly updated to adequately support the dynamic needs of our children. Children have diverse realities and often face distinct and complex challenges. Through effective policymaking we have the duty to positively impact the life prospects of every child, leaving no one behind, steering them towards a better society to live in. Within this context, a child-centred approach to social policy is fundamental if we really want to safeguard and promote the welfare of every child.

By focusing on the unique needs and rights of children, this **Children's Policy Framework 2024-2030** seeks to prioritise their well-being, growth, and opportunities, fostering an environment that nurtures their physical, emotional, and cognitive development. This is a vital step towards creating a society where children are not only protected but also empowered, ultimately paving the way for them to become responsible and active adults.

Besides setting Government's agenda for the next 6 years for all children under the age of 18, the Policy Framework employs a targeted approach to address the circumstances of the most vulnerable children, in line with the National Action Plan for a Child Guarantee 2022-2030.

While complementing and aligning with other policies across various sectors, this Policy Framework establishes four National Priorities along with a set of associated targeted measures. The identified **National Priorities** have been developed in collaboration with relevant stakeholders during a pre-consultation event held in March 2023. Although children have also been canvassed a wider consultation process is envisaged through the use of the recently launched **Empowering Children's App**. The National Priorities focus on enhancing **children's wellbeing, strengthening families**, providing a **better environment**, and encouraging **child participation**. The priorities further encompass other aspects, including child-friendly justice, healthy nutrition, security, skills, health and education.

Our children deserve the best – now and in future. Such an endeavour would not be possible without an extensive consultation with all stakeholders. To this end, this public consultation process will provide the opportunity for all interested parties and citizens to contribute towards our collective vision for children.

I am confident together we can build a better present and future for our children.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



'The Children's Policy Framework 2024-2030' outlines the Government's plan of action to ensure that the State serves and protects our children. The Government will seek to consolidate its efforts towards improving the quality of life of children by dedicating the necessary resources for children to succeed.

Positive childhood experiences are crucial for a person's future learning, behaviour, and lifestyle. The 2024-2030 Children's Policy Framework operates under four core principles. It emphasises the importance of upholding children's rights, and it places the best interests of the child at the forefront of all actions. The framework also promotes equal opportunities and aims to deliver high-quality support, encompassing various areas like social support, education and healthcare.

Taking into account the above guiding principles, desk-based research, and pre-consultation feedback, the 2024-2030 Children's Policy Framework has established four critical national priorities to support Malta's vision for children:

- **Priority 1 focuses on improving children's well-being** and encompasses multiple aspects such as health, education, social connections, and safety. Children require recognition, care, and support to lead meaningful lives with a sense of purpose. To achieve this, substantial investment is necessary to promote well-being. The goal of improving child well-being is to invest in initiatives that empower children to thrive and reach their maximum potential.

- **Priority 2 focuses on families with children.** The family is considered the natural environment for a child's growth. Families play a crucial role in developing children's social skills and understanding of themselves and the people around them. Supporting families with children encompasses the provision of high-quality parenting, access to quality services and improved financial security. The goal is to empower parents and caregivers to achieve the best possible outcomes for their children while addressing potential challenges. Every child should have the opportunity to grow in a nurturing and protective environment that allows them to reach their full potential. The continuous implementation of the National Action Plan for a Child Guarantee is also highlighted under this priority.

- **Priority 3 focuses on providing a better environment for children** to promote safe and healthy physical and digital settings. It is crucial to invest in policy measures that create a child-friendly environment, ensuring children's physical, social, and emotional security. This includes more green spaces, reduced pollution levels, and safer physical and digital surroundings.

- **Priority 4 focuses on strengthening child participation.** It is recognised that children possess valuable knowledge about their needs and concerns, stemming from their life experiences. Children's active involvement in decision-making processes enriches society and aligns with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Policy Framework underscores that child participation is crucial for promoting their rights, nurturing their self-esteem, and enabling them to have control over their lives.

The implementation of the Children's Policy Framework 2024-2030 involves a coordinated approach using national and EU funds to maximise its benefits. The framework will be monitored and evaluated through inter-ministerial collaboration to guide improvements.



## List of Abbreviations

<b>CDAU</b>	Child Development Assessment Unit
<b>CPAT</b>	Child Participation Assessment Tool
<b>CYPS</b>	Child and Young People's Services
<b>EMCDDA</b>	European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction
<b>ESI</b>	European Structural and Investment Funds
<b>ESL</b>	Early School Leaving
<b>ESPAD</b>	European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs
<b>EU</b>	European Union
<b>FSWS</b>	Foundation for Social Welfare Services
<b>GDP</b>	Gross Domestic Product
<b>HBSC</b>	Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children
<b>ITU</b>	International Telecommunication Union
<b>MATSEC</b>	Matriculation and Secondary Education Certificate
<b>MCAST</b>	Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology
<b>MSPC</b>	Ministry for Social Policy and Children's Rights
<b>NEET</b>	Young People Not in Education, Employment or Training
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organisation
<b>NSO</b>	National Statistics Office
<b>OHCHR</b>	United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner
<b>PP</b>	Positive Parenting
<b>SILC</b>	Statistics on Income and Living Conditions
<b>SME</b>	Small to Medium Organisation
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNCRC</b>	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
<b>UNESCO</b>	United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children's Fund
<b>UNODC</b>	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime





01

# OUR VISION

# OUR VISION

Malta's Social Vision 2035  
aspires to improve the  
overall experience of childhood.

Improving the quality of life of children requires  
appropriate targeted support with a view to enable  
children to realise their full potential.

It is within this context,  
that Government is presenting this  
Children's Policy Framework 2024-2030.

## 1.1 Introduction

The children of today are the adults of tomorrow who will reflect the future of our society. Positive childhood experiences are the foundation of an individual's development that will have a bearing on all future learning, behaviour and lifestyle. The Children's Policy Framework 2024-2030 is intended to contribute towards the implementation of Government's Vision for children to have an improved quality of life by upholding their rights and supporting them to fulfil their potential.

This Policy Framework sets out the Government's agenda and priorities in relation to all children under 18 years of age for the next years. While highlighting the challenges, opportunities and the future needs of children, the Policy Framework also outlines a number of measures to be implemented with the objective to improve outcomes for better prospects and for the wellbeing of the children. The ultimate aim is to enable and empower children to become contributors towards the enrichment of society as active citizens.

In embracing a general approach to address the needs of 'all' children, the Policy Framework also adopts a targeted approach to address the situation of the most vulnerable children, giving priority to marginalised and disadvantaged groups. Through identified national priorities, the Policy Framework promotes better outcomes for all, acknowledging that some children require additional support in line with the National Action Plan for a Child Guarantee 2022-2030.

## 1.2 Why do we need a Policy Framework for Children?

Our child population is a significant resource for our country and an indispensable element of today's and tomorrow's society. Ensuring the best possible outcomes for children and young people is not only an important aspect for our economic planning but also a moral imperative that will lead to long-term social benefits for society.

Investment in children is a social responsibility and, while making good economic sense, requires a medium to long-term perspective. In this regard, Government has developed this Policy Framework to outline a plan of actions which is expected to contribute towards life chances of children within a rapidly changing environment.

By also taking in due consideration the lessons learnt from past experiences, in particular during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Policy Framework is expected to contribute towards Malta's national target to reduce the total number of children at risk of poverty or social exclusion by 6%.

## 1.3 Our Approach

The Policy Framework 2024-2030 is Government's response towards the implementation of the 'Childhood' thematic identified within Malta's Social Vision for 2035. The Policy Framework builds upon Malta's 2017 National Children's Policy as well as the National Action Plan for a European Child Guarantee 2022-2030 while taking into account EU and international obligations, in particular; the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the

Child (UNCRC)<sup>1</sup>, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)<sup>2</sup>, the Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2022-2027)<sup>3</sup> and the European Pillar for Social Rights<sup>4</sup> amongst others.

## A Policy in full Consultation

A pre-consultation event (involving various thematic focus groups) was held in March 2023 to gather feedback and ideas from the stakeholders who work closely 'with' and 'for' children. This Public Consultation is also hereby being launched to further guarantee a holistic Policy document that provides the necessary direction for the years to come.

While the Office of the Commissioner for Children has already obtained preliminary feedback directly from children, wider consultations with children will be undertaken to ensure that the Policy Framework takes the best interests of the child.

This Policy Framework aims to implement child participation at national level as an integral and fundamental part of the policy making process. It is within this context that as part of the Empowering Children's Participation Project in Malta, the Ministry for Social Policy and Children's Rights has launched a new digital tool where all children will be able to submit their feedback on a child friendly version of the Policy Framework. Through the Empowering Children App<sup>5</sup> that will be installed in all tablets and laptops that will be given to all children as part of a Government scheme, children will have a secure digital space where to express their ideas and opinions on Government policymaking process in various forms, such as, written messages, voice messages, videos, and drawings/pictures). To further motivate child participation, support in schools will be provided.

## 1.4 Guiding Principles of the Policy Framework

The following guiding principles have been identified with a view to facilitate the implementation and monitoring of the Policy Framework. These are:

<sup>1</sup> Together with its Optional Protocols. Source: United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner (OHCHR). 20 November 1989, Convention on the Rights of the Child. Accessed at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child> [Accessed on 26/10/2022]

<sup>2</sup> United Nations. N.d. Convention On The Rights Of Persons With Disabilities (CRPD). Accessed at: <https://social.desa.un.org/issues/disability/crpd/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities-crpd>

<sup>3</sup> Council of Europe. March 2022. Council of Europe Strategy for the Rights of the Child (2022-2027). Accessed at: <https://rm.coe.int/council-of-europe-strategy-for-the-rights-of-the-child-2022-2027-child/1680a5ef27> [Accessed on 26/10/2022]

<sup>4</sup> European Commission website. 20 January 2021. European Pillar of Social Rights. Accessed at: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/economy-works-people/jobs-growth-and-investment/european-pillar-social-rights\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/economy-works-people/jobs-growth-and-investment/european-pillar-social-rights_en) [Accessed on 26/10/2022]

<sup>5</sup> <https://empoweringchildren.gov.mt>



### 1.4.1 Children's Rights

**Principle:** Adopting a child-centred approach by upholding Children's Rights throughout the implementation of the Policy Framework in line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989). In particular, emphasis will be made in ensuring the:

1. **Protection of** all children from any physical, psychological and emotional abuse.
2. **Provision of** necessary resources and needs for the wellbeing of children.
3. **Participation** of children to voice their views on matters that directly or indirectly concern them.

The Policy Framework will aim to develop appropriate laws, policies, services, and initiatives which take due consideration of the rights of children and young people.

### 1.4.2 Best interests of the Child

**Principle:** Prioritise the best interests of the child in all actions that impact children. The State is obliged to consider the best interest of a child when different interests are considered.

The Policy Framework prioritises children's best interests as a primary consideration in order to provide special protection for children in any context while acknowledging their unique vulnerability. The best interests of the child have to be at the centre of the decision-making process.

### 1.4.3 Equal Opportunities

**Principle:** Ensure equality of opportunity for all children to succeed.

The Policy Framework prioritises equal chances for every child, in all aspects of life, free from any form of discrimination and structural disadvantages. Providing fully accessible opportunities throughout childhood has a wide-ranging influence. Equal opportunities for all children will seek to break barriers and especially uplift the most vulnerable according to their needs.

### 1.4.4 High Quality Support

**Principle:** Ensure the provision of appropriate quality support provided to children and their families, including amongst others social support, education, nutrition and healthcare.

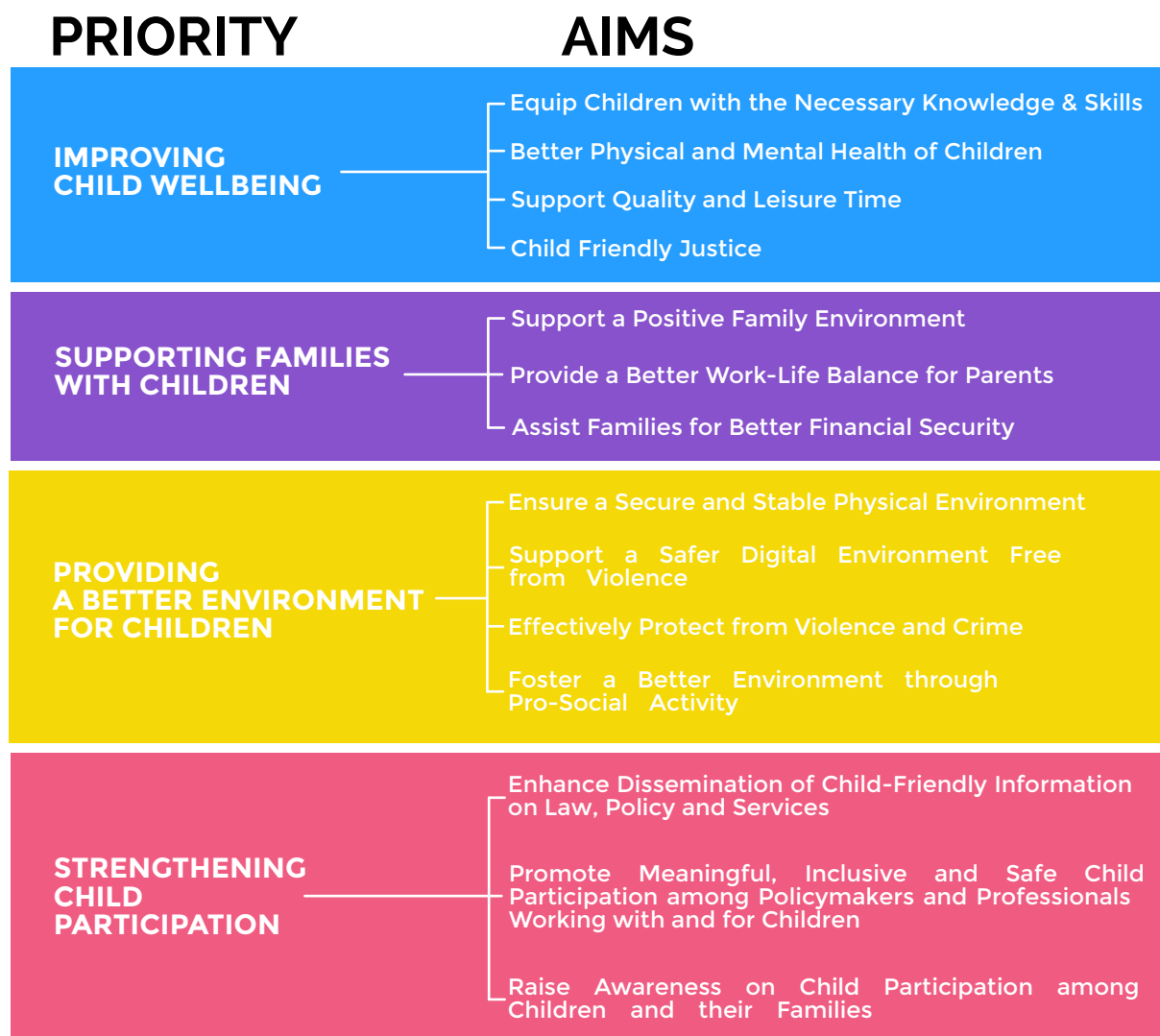
The Policy seeks to continuously improve the quality of services to meet the diverse and ever-changing needs of children. High quality rests on a constructive yet innovative approach that builds on existing strengths and robust operations and seeks to creatively advance as well as construct new strong measures and forms of procedure.

The Policy Framework prioritises the importance to improve quality of support provided to children and their families.

## 1.5 National Priorities for Better Prospects

Based on the above guiding principles, the desk-based research carried out and the feedback received during the pre-consultation phase, the Children's Policy Framework 2024-2030 identifies four national priorities which are key contributors towards achieving Malta's vision for children. The national priorities and accompanying aims have been purposefully designed to be interconnected and in many instances reinforcing. Each national priority has a number of aims (as per Table 1).

Table 1: National Priorities for Better Prospects



The attainment of the identified national priorities and associated aims is expected to contribute towards significant improvement in the quality of support to children and to the effectiveness of policy and service provision.

## 1.6 The Success of Future Generations

The success of future generations is the responsibility of society. This success hinges on appropriate, concrete actions which aim to equip children with the necessary skills to

flourish. Sustainable development lies at the core of all crosscutting policy areas that impact children. Whilst cognisant that Government is a key stakeholder, it is imperative that a culture of stakeholder collaboration is fostered. Co-operation with relevant Ministries, NGOs, civil society, parents/guardians, caregivers and professionals working with and for children amongst others is a pre-requisite to succeed. Better coordination is also key to ensure that this Policy Framework is adequately implemented and evaluated.

The next chapter will highlight the challenges and opportunities faced by children.



02

# NATIONAL CONTEXT





02

# NATIONAL CONTEXT



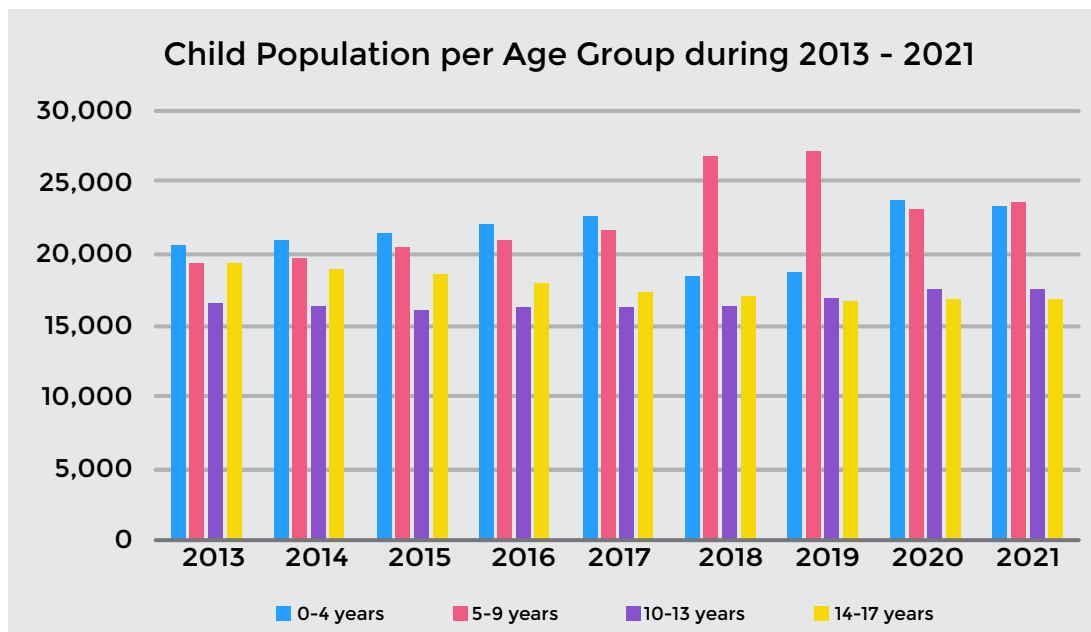
# NATIONAL CONTEXT

This chapter will outline the current national policy context and present an analytical insight through available statistical data.

## 2.1 Population

In 2021, children (0-17 years) made up 15.9% (82,130)<sup>1</sup> of the total population contributing to the second lowest share of children amongst EU countries<sup>2</sup>. Figure 1 below shows the Distribution of the Child Population per Age Bracket for 2013-2021<sup>3</sup>.

Figure 1: Distribution of the Child Population as per Age Bracket 2013-2021



The total child population is projected to increase to 16% (94,306 children) of the total population by 2030, and subsequently exhibit a slight decrease by 2050 (93,864)<sup>4</sup>. The main reason contributing to the increase of the total child population is migration. Foreign children living in Malta constituted 15% (12,295) out of the total population of children in 2019, with the majority being from non-EU countries and aged less than 9 years.

Malta's Total Fertility Rate has seen a precipitous decline over the last 50 years. In Malta, the Total Fertility Rate was at 2.14 births per woman in 1977, just above the Fertility

<sup>1</sup> 42,484 boys and 39,646 girls.

<sup>2</sup> Eurostat. 22 June 2022. Population on 1 January by age and sex. Accessed at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/DEMO\\_PJAN\\_\\_custom\\_4047639/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/DEMO_PJAN__custom_4047639/default/table?lang=en)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> NSO. 2020. News Release 186/2020: World Children's Day. Accessed at: [https://nso.gov.mt/en/News\\_Releases/Documents/2020/11/News2020\\_186.xls](https://nso.gov.mt/en/News_Releases/Documents/2020/11/News2020_186.xls) (Spreadsheet).

Replacement Rate<sup>1</sup> of 2.1. This has now fallen to 1.13 births per woman in 2021<sup>2</sup>, the lowest fertility rate in Europe, and one of the lowest globally. Malta has also seen the long-term decline in the crude birth rate<sup>3</sup> (from 9.7 in 2015 to 8.5 in 2021)<sup>4</sup>.

## 2.2 National Policies Supporting Children

Launched in 2017, the National Children's Policy served as a basis to safeguard and promote the rights and general wellbeing of children. The 2017 Policy contains a number of policy measures targeting the home environment, social wellbeing, health and environment, education, and leisure and culture.

The realities surrounding children cannot be viewed in isolation from other policies such as health and education amongst others. Thus, the adoption of a holistic approach is key to ensure that children's interests are safeguarded.

In fact, from a health perspective, significant investment towards ensuring accessibility to health services through the provision of free healthcare is undertaken. Furthermore, Government recently launched the National Health Systems Strategy for Malta 2023 – 2030: Investing Successfully for a Healthy Future which places an increased focus on the health of children. Similarly, the National Alcohol Policy (2018-2023) is also another endeavour to promote healthy lifestyles away from the excessive use, abuse, and addiction of alcohol, starting from prevention among children.

**Education**, is a core element in childhood. Children have access to free public education, from childcare and pre-primary to primary, secondary and tertiary education. In addition, Government also supports families with children with 'before', and 'after' school programmes as well as the provision of free school transport to children aged 3-16 years.

The Respect for All Framework<sup>5</sup> is the main education policy which seeks to ensure a safe and conducive educational environment for all. Multiple inclusion efforts as from the early ages are established for children having diversified backgrounds and needs, such as children with disability and/or mental health challenges, children in alternative care, children experiencing poverty or undergoing familial difficulties, LGBTIQ children and migrant children amongst others.

Besides inclusive education, recent educational strategies also focus on **digitalisation**. In fact, the National Strategy for Digital Education and Transversal Skills 2030 focuses on the development of digital technology that is required by children and their families to access learning, employment and other life opportunities.

When it comes to **parenting and adoption**, parents are supported in various ways to fulfil their role to the best of their abilities through the National Strategic Policy for Positive Parenting 2016-2024. This policy has provided for: i) a Positive Parenting Committee (PP) consisting of professionals in the field to oversee the implementation of the strategic policy; ii) more awareness about children's positive upbringing; and iii) research in the field<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> OECD (2016), "Fertility", in OECD Factbook 2015-2016: Economic, Environmental and Social Statistics, OECD Publishing, Paris. Available at: <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/docserver/factbook-2015-2-en.pdf?expires=1651847879&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=4151CA2262C376ADE67CFDDE655DF91> Accessed on 06/05/2022

<sup>2</sup> Eurostat defines the Total Fertility Rate as "The mean number of children that would be born alive to a woman during her lifetime if she were to survive and pass through her childbearing years conforming to the fertility rates by age of a given year." Available at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/TPS00199\\_custom\\_2661388/default/line?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/TPS00199_custom_2661388/default/line?lang=en) Accessed on 06/05/2022

<sup>3</sup> Number of live births per 1,000 total mid-year population.

<sup>4</sup> Eurostat. 1st December 2022. Live births and crude birth rate [TPS00204]. Accessed at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tps00204/default/table?lang=en>

<sup>5</sup> On addressing school absenteeism, bullying and challenging behaviour in schools, healthy eating and physical activity, as well as trans, gender variant and intersex students in schools.

<sup>6</sup> Positive Parenting Malta & Ministry for Social Policy and Children's Rights. N.d. Positive Parenting Taskforce Progress Report 2016-2024. Accessed at: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/>





Vulnerable children and their families remain a core priority for Government policy. In this regard, Government outlined its efforts towards children at risk of **poverty or social exclusion** in its National Action Plan for a Child Guarantee (2022–2030). The national action plan builds upon existing policy frameworks, primarily the National Strategic Policy for Poverty Reduction and for Social Inclusion 2014–2024, for which children were one of the four main target groups.

The needs of children with **disability**, and their families are catered for by multi-sectoral inclusive policies, through the overarching policy in the field entitled Freedom to Live: Malta's 2021–2030 National Strategy on the Rights of Disabled Persons. This Policy supports multi-sectoral endeavours for the short, medium and long-term towards the achievement of more disability rights.

Besides the above-mentioned policies, the **Social Vision for Malta 2035: Shaping the Future of Our Society**, which was published in December 2022, outlines Government aspirations to address the future challenges of the Maltese society. The Social Vision addresses vulnerabilities occurring across multiple cross-cutting realities as well as throughout the life-course, including childhood. The future policy goals put forward within Malta's Social Vision 2035 under the theme of childhood are thus central to this Policy Framework.

## 2.3 Children's Wellbeing

A childhood lasts a lifetime. The living conditions and the ways children develop physically, emotionally, socially and cognitively manifests itself in adult health, job opportunities, family life and relationships. It is important to analyse data on children's wellbeing at different ages and stages of development to design better policies that generate lifelong impact, especially for children in the most vulnerable settings. The following section will analyse the multiple domains of children's wellbeing, including health, socio-economic status, learning and educational outcomes.

### 2.3.1 Children within the Family

When compared to other countries, children in Malta live in relatively smaller families. In 2021, the most common type of household with dependent children was made up of two adults and one dependent child<sup>1</sup>. The number of single parent households remained generally stable when compared to the previous years<sup>2</sup>. During 2017/2018, the majority of children aged 11–15 years lived with both parents (76.3%), 15.4% lived with a single parent, 6.2% lived with a stepfamily and 2.1% had other family living arrangements such as fostering or were under the care of non-parental family members<sup>3</sup>. Of particular note is the small fraction of parents (12% of fathers and 5% of mothers) who live or work away from home for more than a month<sup>4</sup>.

Not all children in Malta have the opportunity to live with their birth family. The 2020 Minor Protection (Alternative Care) Act (Cap. 602) reflects the State's commitment to ensure that

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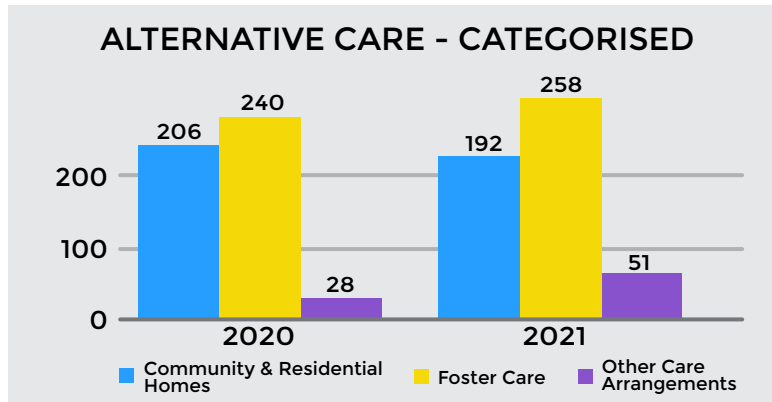
<sup>1</sup> NSO. 12th October 2022. News Release 181/2020: EU-SILC 2021: Main Dwellings. Accessed at: [https://nso.gov.mt/en/News\\_Releases/Documents/2022/10/News2022\\_181.pdf](https://nso.gov.mt/en/News_Releases/Documents/2022/10/News2022_181.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> NSO. 2016–2020. EU-SILC: Main Dwellings. Accessed at: <https://nso.gov.mt/en/Pages/NSO-Home.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> University of Malta: Centre for Resilience and Socio-Emotional Health. 2020. International survey of children's subjective wellbeing. Accessed at: <https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/bitstream/123456789/70282/3/The%20resilience%20of%20Maltese%20children%20during%20COVID%2019%202021.pdf>

all children in Malta are given the possibility to thrive within an alternative family environment. Table 1 below provides information on the number of children in alternative care in 2020 and 2021<sup>1</sup>.

Figure 2: Alternative Care Placements in 2020 and 2021



Preventive efforts to lower the overall number of children in care and the promotion of family-based options are essential to continue to address the diverse needs of children and contribute towards further deinstitutionalisation of children, including for children with disabilities.

### 2.3.2 Socio-Economic Background

An inadequate socio-economic background of a family strongly influences the outcomes of a child, significantly increasing the risk of poverty and social exclusion in adulthood and for future generations.

Poverty and social exclusion among children declined from 27.8% in 2015 to 23.2% in 2021<sup>2</sup>. A higher risk of poverty is recorded among those children with single parents (50.7%) and in low-skilled households (42.7%)<sup>3</sup>. Children experiencing material and social deprivation decreased from 19.8% in 2015 to 10.4% in 2021 and children experiencing severe material and social deprivation decreased from 11.6% in 2015 to 7.2% in 2021<sup>4</sup>.

It is to be acknowledged that the situation of vulnerable children was negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. During this challenging period, children experienced school closures and social distancing that in certain exceptional cases increased exposure to domestic violence, stress and anxiety, as well as online exploitation and bullying.

In line with the European Pillar of Social Rights, Malta set a national target to reduce child poverty by approximately **6% by 2030** compared to 23.7% in 2019<sup>5</sup>.

Government will keep on providing the necessary support for all children with a particular focus on the most vulnerable groups. In this regard, Government will continue to provide Children's Allowance to all families, with a doubled rate for households that do not exceed

<sup>1</sup> Eurostat. 22 June 2022. Population on 1 January by age and sex. Accessed at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/DEMO\\_PJAN\\_\\_custom\\_4047639/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/DEMO_PJAN__custom_4047639/default/table?lang=en)

<sup>2</sup> Eurostat. 3rd March 2023. Persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion by age and sex [ilc\_peps01N]. Accessed at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ILC\\_PEPS01N\\_\\_custom\\_5236062/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ILC_PEPS01N__custom_5236062/default/table?lang=en)

<sup>3</sup> European Commission. 2022. Country Report Malta. Accessed at: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/system/files/2022-european-semester-country-report-malta\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/info/system/files/2022-european-semester-country-report-malta_en.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> Eurostat. 20th December 2022. Material and social deprivation rate by age and sex [ilc\_mdso07]. Accessed at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ILC\\_MDSD07\\_\\_custom\\_4457682/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ILC_MDSD07__custom_4457682/default/table?lang=en)

<sup>5</sup> Eurostat. 3rd March 2023. Persons at risk of poverty or social exclusion by age and sex [ilc\_peps01N]. Accessed at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ILC\\_PEPS01N\\_\\_custom\\_5236062/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ILC_PEPS01N__custom_5236062/default/table?lang=en)

the means test on a yearly basis. Moreover, a strong range of direct financial assistance to families with children will keep on being sustained in the form of grants and allowances in cases of birth, adoption, fostering, orphans, children with disability and widowhood.

### 2.3.3 Health

Children's health is an integral part of their overall wellbeing as it supports their development and optimal growth. Locally, free public healthcare services are available to all children and their families. Healthcare provisions are delivered during pregnancy, childbirth, the neonatal period as well as during childhood. Free screening and programmes, immunisation, medicinal products and other inpatient and outpatient treatment for both physical and mental health issues are provided free of charge.

Despite Government providing free health services, children in Malta still rate low in surveys on health and life satisfaction. Children in Malta manifest high rates of physical and mental health complaints and injuries<sup>1</sup>.

Smoking and second-hand smoking are low among children in Malta. Major health issues during childhood relate to obesity and overweight issues, binge drinking and lack of physical activity coupled with intensive electronic and social media use. Unhealthy habits are thus the distinguished root causes, which are highly likely to result in poor health in adulthood.

Efforts to improve mental health and prevent mental health issues should start from ensuring a good quality childhood, together with the provision of the necessary treatment for children with mental health issues. Childhood and adolescence constitute critical years for mental health and mental development, since it is during this time that children acquire cognitive and socio-emotional skills which shape their future mental health. Recent research<sup>2</sup> found that 62% of children are at risk of emotional problems, including a number of issues which fall short of a mental disorder. While the study found that 60% were unlikely to have a mental disorder, the survey also reported that 23% of 5-10 year olds and 39% of 11-16 year olds children were at risk of emotional problems. Around a quarter of 5-16 year olds were likely to have hyperactivity or anxiety problems. Additionally, acute involuntary care admissions within licensed mental health institutions fluctuated between 12 and 36 children per year during 2015-2020, standing at 19 children in 2020<sup>3</sup>. In general, the number of male child entrants was double the number of females entrants.

<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization. 2020. Spotlight on Adolescent Health and Well-being: Findings from the 2017/2018 Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children Survey in Europe and Canada: International Report: Volume 2. Key Data. Accessed at: <https://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/Life-stages/child-and-adolescent-health/health-behaviour-in-school-aged-children-hbsc/publications/2020/spotlight-on-adolescent-health-and-well-being.-findings-from-the-20172018-health-behaviour-in-school-aged-children-hbsc-survey-in-europe-and-canada.-international-report.-volume-2.-key-data>

<sup>2</sup> The study was conducted by the Association for Child and Adolescent Mental Health and the Malta Council for the Voluntary Sector, searching for the prevalence of mental disorders among Maltese children and adolescents, supervised by Dr Nigel Camilleri. Source: Calleja, L. 6 September 2021. Nationwide study says one in two children suffers from anxiety. Accessed at: [https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/national/111870/nationwide\\_study\\_says\\_one\\_in\\_two\\_children\\_suffers\\_from\\_anxiety#Y2y1NMvMLIV](https://www.maltatoday.com.mt/news/national/111870/nationwide_study_says_one_in_two_children_suffers_from_anxiety#Y2y1NMvMLIV)

<sup>3</sup> Office of the Commissioner for Mental Health. Annual Reports 2015-2020. Accessed at: <https://deputyprimeminister.gov.mt/en/CommMentalHealth/Pages/Annual-Reports.aspx>

### 2.3.4 Education

The ease of access to education in Malta seeks to eliminate financial and non-financial barriers and provide equal opportunities for all as from the early years. Such access to education is reflected in:

- almost a quarter of children aged under 3 years attending childcare centres<sup>1</sup>.
- two-thirds of children attending pre-primary education (kindergarten)<sup>2</sup>;
- almost all children of primary and secondary school age attending school; and
- over 80% of children aged 15-17 years following post-secondary education<sup>3</sup>.

Strategic planning has been directed towards addressing school absenteeism, inclusion, increasing skills attainment and reducing ESL (Early School Leaving) and NEET (young people Not in Education, Employment or Training) rates. Despite high schoolwork pressure, children's attainment in reading, mathematics and social skills has been low for the past years, which may also be a stumbling block towards completing secondary schooling, pursuing further education, as well as participating in employment. Even though there were significant decreases in ESL (from 16.3% in 2015 to 10.7% in 2021) and NEET rates (from 10.7% in 2015 to 9.8% in 2021) as well as few 15-17 year olds work while not in education or training, the struggle to mitigate these challenges remains.

In relation to migrant children, despite efforts to improve the inclusion of migrants in education, linguistic and socio-cultural barriers still persist<sup>4</sup>. Several situations may hinder access to education for migrant children such as delays in the registration of asylum applications<sup>5</sup>, the lack of balance between the early integration of migrant children in mainstream education and the focus on the provision of induction and language programmes.

### 2.3.5 The Environment

The quality of the environment where children and adolescents grow up shapes their wellbeing and development. The environment influences the relationships of children, such as those with their families and friends, as well as with the various other aspects of their lives, like play and behaviour. For the purposes of this Policy document, the environment will be clustered into the following: children's natural and urban surroundings, their neighbourhood and home, as well the digital world.

<sup>1</sup> Eurostat. 20th December 2022. Children aged less than 3 years in formal childcare [TEPSR\_SP210]. Accessed at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tepsr\\_sp210/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/tepsr_sp210/default/table?lang=en)

<sup>2</sup> NSO. 4 October 2021. News Release 177/2021: Pre-Primary, Primary and Secondary Formal Education: 2019-2020. Accessed at: [https://nso.gov.mt/en/News\\_Releases/Documents/2021/10/News2021\\_177.pdf](https://nso.gov.mt/en/News_Releases/Documents/2021/10/News2021_177.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Eurostat. 11th October 2022. Participation rate of young people in education and training by sex, age and labour status (incl. NEET rates) [EDAT\_LFSE\_18]. Accessed at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/EDAT\\_LFSE\\_18/bookmark/table?lang=en&bookmarkId=e5db6292-3834-48a1-b8f4-bf99ca718f91](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/EDAT_LFSE_18/bookmark/table?lang=en&bookmarkId=e5db6292-3834-48a1-b8f4-bf99ca718f91)

<sup>4</sup> Migrant Learners Unit. 2023. First step towards providing access to mainstream education. Accessed at: <https://migrantlearnersunit.gov.mt/>

<sup>5</sup> Asylum Information Database-aida- & European Council of Refugees and Exile - ecre. 23rd May 2022 Country Report: Access to education. <https://asylumineurope.org/reports/country/malta/reception-conditions/employment-and-education/access-education/>

## The Physical Environment

Children thrive in a physical environment characterised by safe open spaces. Children's health and wellbeing are becoming increasingly impacted by pollution and other environmental threats. Children are increasingly becoming more conscious of environmental challenges. In Malta, around 83% of 15-year-olds are aware of climate change and global warming, while between 40% and 50% of this cohort sign environmental or social petitions online, choose products for ethical or environmental reasons, and participate in activities in favour of environmental protection<sup>1</sup>.

Due to children's natural process of growth and development, the effects of environmental threats may be cumulative and affect their health into adulthood. Despite an increase in air quality, children are 10 times more likely to suffer outdoor than indoor air pollution<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, in 2020, 29.1% of households with dependent children (compared to 13.8% in the EU)<sup>3</sup> reported that they had been exposed to pollution, grime and other environmental problems in their local area<sup>4</sup>. Such exposure increases to 30.2% (and 16.9% in the EU) for households with dependent children who are at risk of poverty, confirming the correlation between socio-economic status and environment as a social determinant of health. These challenges have resulted in a growing acknowledgement that mitigation measures need to be introduced, such as further investment in green open space.

A recent study on environmental conditions that affect children's wellbeing<sup>5</sup> highlighted that Malta has:

- low water pollution, but above average air pollution and lead poisoning;
- low overcrowding and dampness or mould at home, low housing deprivation, low road traffic accidents among children aged 0-14 years, but shows a high lack of urban green space; and
- a high ecological footprint, low renewable energy, and average waste generation and consumption-based CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, despite the highest governmental expenditure on environment protection as a percentage of GDP.

## Urban Environment: Home and Neighbourhood

Healthy childhood development rests upon a secure and safe home environment. The stable and supportive social environment and the access to resources within the home, help children to enhance their cognitive, emotional, and physical development. However, children's health and development are negatively affected by unstable, noisy, and chaotic home environments. Over 30% of children in Malta live in households which are affected by noise<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> UNICEF Office of Research. 2022. Places and Spaces: Environments and children's well-being, Innocenti Report Card 17. Accessed at: [https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/RC17-EN\\_Places-and-Spaces\\_Environments-and-childrens-well-being\\_Report-Card-17.pdf](https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/RC17-EN_Places-and-Spaces_Environments-and-childrens-well-being_Report-Card-17.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> UNICEF Office of Research. 2022. Places and Spaces: Environments and children's well-being, Innocenti Report Card 17. Accessed at: [https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/RC17-EN\\_Places-and-Spaces\\_Environments-and-childrens-well-being\\_Report-Card-17.pdf](https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/RC17-EN_Places-and-Spaces_Environments-and-childrens-well-being_Report-Card-17.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Eurostat. 20th December 2022. Pollution, grime or other environmental problems - EU-SILC survey [ILC\_MDDW02]. Accessed at: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ILC\\_MDDW02\\_custom\\_3813901/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ILC_MDDW02_custom_3813901/default/table?lang=en)

<sup>4</sup> The indicator on 'People reporting pollution, grime or other environmental problems in their area' measures the proportion of the total population that self-assesses exposure to problems like smoke, dust, unpleasant smells or polluted water in the area in which the respondent lives.

<sup>5</sup> UNICEF Office of Research. 2022. Places and Spaces: Environments and children's well-being, Innocenti Report Card 17. Accessed at: [https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/RC17-EN\\_Places-and-Spaces\\_Environments-and-childrens-well-being\\_Report-Card-17.pdf](https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/RC17-EN_Places-and-Spaces_Environments-and-childrens-well-being_Report-Card-17.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

Children in Malta experiencing material deprivation are less likely to have places where they can play in their neighbourhood<sup>1</sup> and a very small minority experience severe housing deprivation<sup>2</sup> standing at 1.5% in 2020 (compared to 6.7% in the EU)<sup>3</sup>. Children of households with low socio-economic status that amounted to 19.6% (16,300) in 2021 are also likely to experience inequalities related to the physical home environment. Children from low-socio-economic status backgrounds are more likely to face poor quality home environments (2.2% in 2020), such as overcrowding, badly maintained buildings and crime, violence or vandalism in the area, than those children from higher socio-economic backgrounds (1.3% in 2020)<sup>4</sup>.

Crime, violence and vandalism may limit children's attainment of academic and soft skills. Certain features found within the physical environment can prevent or contribute to the occurrence of a crime. These features include the level of infrastructure (safety, security, maintenance and cleanliness) of homes and neighbourhoods. In 2020, the number of Maltese households with children reporting crime, violence or vandalism in their area (10.7%) was similar to the EU average (11%)<sup>5</sup>. Households with children below the poverty line report a higher rate of crime, violence and vandalism; 12.8% in Malta compared to 15.2% in EU in 2020<sup>6</sup>.

## Violence and Abuse on Children

There is a high risk that abuse goes unreported, especially abuse among children, when the abuse happens by an adult over a child, and when family members are the perpetrators. The year 2021 saw a significant increase in the number of reported incidents of violence against children, with the majority of victims being boys and girls between the ages of 11 and 15 years<sup>7</sup>. Most of these incidents were reported by the Southern (392 cases) and Northern Harbour Districts (387 cases), with Gozo seeing the lowest (57 cases). The Child and Young People's Services (CYPS) handled 433 instances<sup>8</sup> of violence in 2021, predominantly against children aged 11 to 15 years<sup>9</sup>.

All forms of violence against children have significant negative effects on a child's development, their health and overall wellbeing, lasting into adulthood. Subsequently, there is a likelihood that children who grow up in an abusive environment, would also transmit some form of violence on those around them, such as peer bullying. In Malta, bullying among children aged 11, 13 and 15 years is not predominant, however physical fighting and cyberbullying are above average<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> UNICEF Office of Research. 2022. Places and Spaces: Environments and children's well-being, Innocenti Report Card 17. Accessed at: [https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/RC17-EN\\_Places-and-Spaces\\_Environments-and-childrens-well-being\\_Report-Card-17.pdf](https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/RC17-EN_Places-and-Spaces_Environments-and-childrens-well-being_Report-Card-17.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> The Severe housing deprivation rate is defined by Eurostat as the percentage of the population living in the dwelling which is considered as overcrowded, while also exhibiting at least one of the housing deprivation measures. Housing deprivation is a measure of poor amenities and is calculated by referring to those households with a leaking roof, no bath/shower and no indoor toilet, or a dwelling considered too dark. Source: [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Severe\\_housing\\_deprivation\\_rate](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Severe_housing_deprivation_rate)

<sup>3</sup> Eurostat. 2021. Severe housing deprivation rate by age, sex and poverty status - EU-SILC survey [ILC\_MDHO06A]. Accessed at: [Statistics | Eurostat \(europa.eu\)](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&code=ilc_mdho06a)

<sup>4</sup> Eurostat. 2021. Severe housing deprivation rate by age, sex and poverty status - EU-SILC survey [ILC\_MDHO06A]. Accessed at: [Statistics | Eurostat \(europa.eu\)](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&language=en&code=ilc_mdho06a)

<sup>5</sup> Eurostat. 20th December 2022. Crime, violence or vandalism in the area - EU-SILC survey [ILC\_MDDW03]. Accessed at: <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/bookmark/c8db1c67-bc47-49dd-a656-da4dc3d8b44b?lang=en>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Foundation for Social Welfare Services, Malta. February 2022. Directorate Child Protection: Yearly Statistical Report: January to December 2021. Accessed at: [https://fsws.gov.mt/en/Documents/StatisticalReports%20by%20Agency/Cps/CPS%20Yearly%20report%202021%20\(online\).pdf](https://fsws.gov.mt/en/Documents/StatisticalReports%20by%20Agency/Cps/CPS%20Yearly%20report%202021%20(online).pdf)

<sup>8</sup> A 43% increase from the previous year.

<sup>9</sup> Foundation for Social Welfare Services, Malta. February 2022. Agenzija Appoggj: Yearly Statistical Report: January to December 2021. Accessed at: [https://fsws.gov.mt/en/Documents/StatisticalReports%20by%20Agency/Appoggj/APPOGC%20Yearly%20report%202021%20\(online\).pdf](https://fsws.gov.mt/en/Documents/StatisticalReports%20by%20Agency/Appoggj/APPOGC%20Yearly%20report%202021%20(online).pdf)

<sup>10</sup> World Health Organization. 2020. Spotlight on Adolescent Health and Well-being: Findings from the 2017/2018 Health Behaviour in School-Aged Children Survey in Europe and Canada: International Report: Volume 2. Key Data. Accessed at: <https://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/Life-stages/child-and-adolescent-health/health-behaviour-in-school-aged-children-hbsc/publications/2020/spotlight-on-adolescent-health-and-well-being-findings-from-the-2017-2018-health-behaviour-in-school-aged-children-hbsc-survey-in-europe-and-canada-international-report-volume-2-key-data>

Violence in childhood is becoming a particular area of concern in Malta when considering that 89.6% of young people aged 18 to 24 years in 2022 reported at least one abuse during their childhood, while 70.2% reported more than one type of abuse and 12.5% experienced five or more forms of abuse<sup>1</sup>. The most prevalent types of violence during childhood were being victims of peer and sibling violence (75.3%), maltreatment (61.4%)<sup>2</sup> and witnessing family violence (54.3%) and domestic violence (52%)<sup>3</sup>. Sexual abuse during childhood followed at 43%. Girls were found to have significantly experienced more frequent and more types of abuse than boys. Females were also more aware of all forms of violence and were more likely to respond as being very afraid when exposed to abuse.

Out of the 52% of children witnessing domestic violence mentioned above, 46% witnessed their parents' intimate partner violence and 30.5% witnessed violence by parent/guardian on sibling<sup>4</sup>. The father was the main abuser in around half of the cases of child maltreatment (45.7%) and the witnessed physical domestic violence (50.7%), while a third refused to identify the main perpetrator<sup>5</sup>. Children whose parents/caregivers were perceived as suffering from mental health illness and/or drug addiction were more likely to witness their parents' intimate partner violence.

Although a significant number of children who experienced domestic violence yelled (56.4%) or intervened physically (36%) to stop their parents during an argument, most children (79.1%) did not seek help outside the home<sup>6</sup>. Upon witnessing domestic violence, children were more likely to be absent from school and not complete their homework<sup>7</sup>. Ultimately, children who witnessed intimate partner violence, family violence, child maltreatment and neglect at home, were more likely to be involved in peer and sibling violence<sup>8</sup>. Links also exist between these different types of violence and with sexual victimisation during childhood<sup>9</sup>.

## The Digital Environment

Screen time and virtual connectivity are taking over physical play and interaction among late pre-teens and teens. As they get older, especially after 10 years of age, children in Malta participate more in social media and electronic games, whilst engaging less in outside play, sports or physical exercise. The impact of increased digital exposure during childhood and early adolescence is seen among 13 and 15 year olds who score high in intensive electronic media communication and problematic social media use. 15 year olds also score high in screen times, with girls engaging more with social media, and boys engaging more with gaming<sup>10</sup>, both these factors contribute to lower rates of mental wellbeing and happiness<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Sammut-Scerri, C., Grech Lan franco, I., Pace, L., & Borg, M. (2022). Safety in childhood: A prevalence study of childhood abuse experiences in Malta. A quantitative research study. Malta: Dept of Child and Family Studies, University of Malta. PowerPoint Presentation delivered at the launch of the study on 24th April 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Psychological/emotional abuse (45%) and physical abuse (43%) by a caregiver were the most prevalent types of child maltreatment.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> The ESPAD Group; EMCDDA. 2020. 'ESPAD Report 2019 - Results from the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs'. Accessed at: [http://www.espad.org/sites/espad.org/files/2020\\_3878\\_EN\\_04.pdf](http://www.espad.org/sites/espad.org/files/2020_3878_EN_04.pdf) European Commission, OECD and WHO. 2019. Malta Country Health Profile 2019. Accessed at: [https://www.euro.who.int/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0005/419468/Country-Health-Profile-2019-Malta.pdf](https://www.euro.who.int/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/419468/Country-Health-Profile-2019-Malta.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> UNICEF. 2020. Innocenti Report Card 16: Worlds of influence: Understanding What Shapes Child Wellbeing in Rich Countries. Accessed at: <https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/pdf/Report-Card-16-Worlds-of-Influence-child-wellbeing.pdf>



The imbalance between sedentary behaviour and physical activity has reached its peak during the COVID-19 pandemic due to school closures and social distancing. This reality increased the probability of online risks among children, despite the acknowledged positive and necessary elements of online platforms<sup>1</sup>. In this regard, awareness amongst children, educators, parents/primary caregivers and other stakeholders on how to make safe use of the internet is being undertaken by the BeSmartOnline! Project that includes the Child Web Alert Hotline.

### 2.3.6 Play, Leisure, Culture and Spirituality

Children's play, leisure, culture and spirituality are seen to take diverse forms across time and space. Schoolwork pressures, digital communication and the lack of safe open spaces contributed to the physical-to-virtual shift in play and leisure as well as the engagement variations in culture and spirituality. Changes in childhood play, leisure, culture and spirituality have contributed to children's sedentary behaviour and lack of satisfaction with how they spend their free time, particularly during pubertal years (10-12 years of age)<sup>2</sup>.

A major change was brought by the increase of digitalisation, exacerbated due to the pandemic. Children in Malta spend more time on TV, social media and electronic games (71%-74%) than on playing outside, sports or physical exercise (61%-62%)<sup>3</sup>. Less than half of children carry out exercise and sports activities every day, while a quarter of children do not meet the required amount of physical activity per week since they exercise and do sports less than once a week or never<sup>4</sup>.

Other frequent activities which children engage in also include caring for family members (61%) and household chores (58%) as well as attending religious places or services (40%)<sup>5</sup>. This scenario further shows that a conducive natural and urban environment is a prerequisite for adequate play, leisure, culture and spirituality amongst children. Correspondingly, an important value lies in supporting children to actively care about the people and the environment that surrounds them.

### 2.3.7 Democratic Participation

Children in Malta feel that as they get older, they have more decision-making opportunities at school and less decision-making opportunities in their locality. Children also do not feel listened to and taken seriously within their family<sup>5,4</sup>.

It is clear that meaningful, inclusive and safe child participation is needed for every child to be able to affect policymaking. This participatory approach to facilitate child participation would not be holistic without capacity building for adults and structural consultation with caregivers as well as professionals working for and/or with children. Indeed, in Malta, whilst effective child participation opportunities are insufficient, adults are wilfully enabling

<sup>1</sup> University of Malta: Centre for Resilience and Socio-Emotional Health. 2020. International survey of children's subjective wellbeing. Accessed at: <https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/bitstream/123456789/60621/4/ISCWEB%20National%20Report%202020.pdf> UNICEF, ITU, GPEVAC, UNESCO, UNODC, WePROTECT Global Alliance, WHO and World Childhood Foundation USA. April 2020. COVID-19 and its implications for protecting children online. Accessed at: <https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Cybersecurity/Documents/COP/COVID-19%20and%20Its%20Implications%20for%20Protecting%20Children%20Online.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> University of Malta: Centre for Resilience and Socio-Emotional Health. 2020. International survey of children's subjective wellbeing. Accessed at: <https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/bitstream/123456789/60621/4/ISCWEB%20National%20Report%202020.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.54 Ibid.

greater child participation in the best interest of children<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, the participatory needs and opportunities of vulnerable groups of children, particularly minorities, require careful attention<sup>2</sup>.

Measures related to the implementation of the Optional Protocol to the UNCRC on a Communications Procedure are also important to raise the prevalence of the voice of the child concerning any violations of - and necessary improvements to - children's rights.

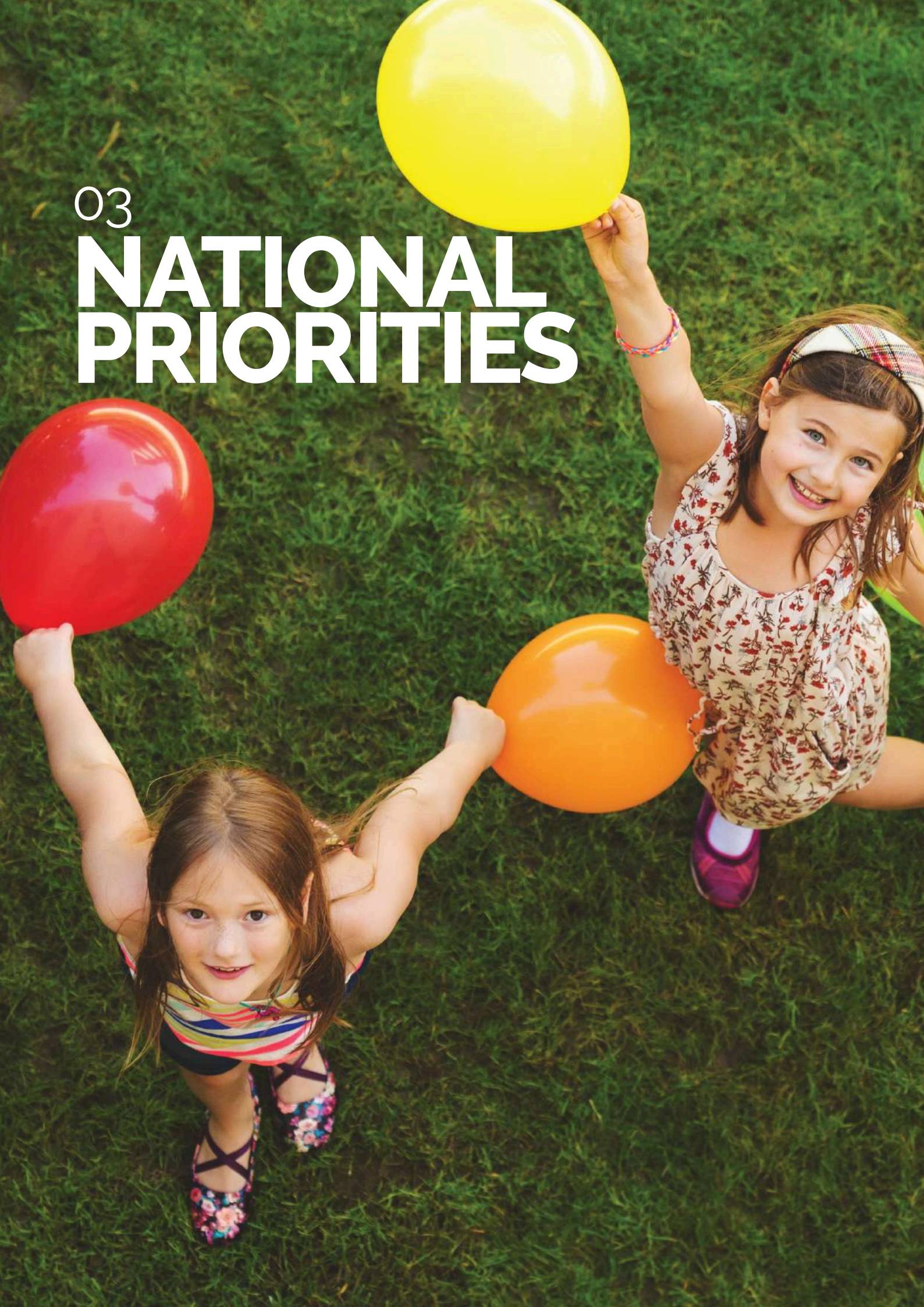
<sup>1</sup> 2019 Council of Europe Child Participation Assessment Tool (CPAT) Report for Malta: [Child Participation Assessment Tool - Children's Rights \(coe.int\)](#)

<sup>2</sup> European Commission. 2021. Study on Child Participation in EU political and democratic life. Accessed at: [Study on child participation \(europa.eu\)](#)



03

# NATIONAL PRIORITIES





03

# NATIONAL PRIORITIES



Building upon the analysis presented in Chapter 2 and after taking into account the feedback received during the pre-consultation sessions (including children's views), the Children's Policy Framework 2024-2030 identifies the following **four main National Priorities**:

Table 2: National Priorities of the Children's Policy Framework 2024-2030

<p><b>1 IMPROVING CHILD WELLBEING</b></p>	<p>Ensure the provision of adequate support and empower children to improve their quality of life.</p>
<p><b>2 SUPPORTING FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN</b></p>	<p>Children should grow up in a positive family environment, with access to sufficient resources and access to quality services (and support). Families require to have the best conditions to adequately nurture and care for their children and foster child's development.</p>
<p><b>3 PROVIDING A BETTER ENVIRONMENT FOR CHILDREN</b></p>	<p>Children are to grow up in a safe physical and digital environment that fosters a healthy development, opportunities for growth and wellbeing.</p>
<p><b>4 STRENGTHENING CHILD PARTICIPATION</b></p>	<p>Children are to be supported to freely express their views on all matters and decisions that affect them, and to have those views taken into account at all levels of society.</p>

The identified National Priorities provide a holistic forward-looking approach, whereby a clear plan of action through policy measures is formulated, targeting the needs and rights of children and their families.

The attainment of the identified national priorities and associated aims is expected to contribute towards significant improvement in the quality of support to children and to the effectiveness of policy and service provision.

NATIONAL PRIORITY 1

# IMPROVING CHILD WELLBEING





# IMPROVING CHILD WELLBEING

**“Children are to be supported to improve all aspects of their general wellbeing. Through the provision of the necessary support and services children are to be empowered to lead a better quality of life”**

For the purposes of this Policy Framework, wellbeing refers to positive social relationships; emotional security, meaningfulness and resilience within a dynamic and ever changing environment.

Ameliorating children's wellbeing hinges on various facets including health, education, family, social life, safety and security amongst others. Children need to feel valued, cared for, and supported to create a meaningful life with a sense of purpose. In this regard, appropriate investment is required to encourage the fostering of well-being. Understandably also the other National Priorities will interlink and dovetail with the improving of child wellbeing.

**National Priority 1 - Improving Child Wellbeing** aims to invest in measures which contribute towards empowering children to thrive and maximise their potential.

## Aims

- 1.1 Equip Children with Necessary Knowledge and Skills
- 1.2 Better Physical and Mental Health of Children
- 1.3 Support Quality and Leisure Time
- 1.4 Child Friendly Justice

Making child wellbeing a national priority, reinforces the social fabric, and will further contribute to combat intergenerational poverty and exclusion. The Children's Policy Framework 2024–2030 has identified key areas in which will have a positive impact on children's wellbeing, whilst at the same time ensuring that children fulfil their full potential regardless of any barriers encountered. The identified aims will provide improved access to quality resources through appropriate measures.

## 1.1 Equip Children with the Necessary Knowledge and Skills

Children are to be supported to acquire the necessary skills, knowledge, competencies, and abilities needed to carry out practical tasks that help them cope better with life challenges and situations.

Children must be provided with appropriate education and skills which prepares them for life. Whilst academic subjects have relative importance, it is to be stressed that more focus is to be given to life-skills subjects, instilling in children a mature and sound judgment and good habits for long-term stability, wellness, and success.

It is crucial for children to acquire competencies and interpersonal skills that enable them to make informed decisions, solve problems, think critically and creatively, communicate effectively, build healthy relationships, empathise with others, cope with and manage their lives in a healthy and meaningful way.

It is important to encourage resilience in children. Resilient children have the ability to cope positively to life challenges and difficult times. Resilience in children is facilitated when they have particular intellectual skills, self-regulation skills, positive thoughts about themselves and their abilities, and a sense of meaning in life. Resilient children are also likely to have better physical and mental health than children who struggle to be resilient.

This Policy Framework acknowledges that children in need, and/or with poor physical health, a disability or a serious illness require specific support to develop the skills required to maximise their independence and potential.

### Proposed Measures

**Measure 1.1.1** Initiate a study to identify the key life skills that are critical for the well-being and development of children. The study should propose ways how children can acquire these skills and how these can be incorporated in the education system.

**Measure 1.1.2** Continue to develop and implement curricula in the education system (and to support initiatives in out of school settings), to teach children knowledge and skills relating to effective communication, collaborative working independent/critical thinking, creativity, problem-solving and analytical skills as well as sexual education.

**Measure 1.1.2.1** Promote social skills in all classrooms starting at a young age, for children to learn how to resolve conflicts, bond with others, make friends, and be part of a group, help protect against negative outcomes.

**Measure 1.1.2.2** Strengthen educational activities in class by ensuring that games, lessons and activities are tailored for children with different abilities.

**Measure 1.1.2.3** Introduce an educational program for adolescents with disability regarding their sexuality and sexual health. The parents of these individuals will have access to separate learning on the subject to help them understand the sexual needs of their children.

<sup>1</sup> Raising Children Network (Australia) Limited. 24/04/2021. Resilience: how to build it in children 3-8 years. Accessed at: <https://raisingchildren.net.au/school-age/behaviour/understanding-behaviour/resilience-how-to-build-it-in-children-3-8-years>

**Measure 1.1.2.4** Introduce additional measures to support the diverse educational and inclusion needs of migrant children.

**Measure 1.1.3** Introduce a mechanism where pupils are not only evaluated on academical knowledge but also put more emphasis on the skillset acquired.

**Measure 1.1.3.1** Accredite learning and active participation in informal and extra-curricular activities such as sports, art and culture. These must be recognised as part of the children's educational path in their advancement.

**Measure 1.1.4** Give greater and individual attention to those children who are failing to attend school without any reason and with the help of schools and a team of professionals address the cause of absenteeism among these children rather than simply imposing fines.

**Measure 1.1.5** Identify and address specific barriers to further encourage students to continue their studies at both post-secondary and tertiary levels by providing them greater assistance.

**Measure 1.1.5.1** Strengthen the vocational programs such as the Alternative Learning Program and GEM16+ which are intended to help those students who have learning difficulties or have just finished compulsory school without any qualifications.

**Measure 1.1.5.2** Design an individual program intended to prepare and evaluate children with disabilities along the educational path and which should lead them to enter the world of work together with professionals and educators to ensure that the transition from one phase to another of the educational journey should be as easy as possible.

**Measure 1.1.6** Open evening centres in collaboration with MCAST to teach trades at secondary level.

**Measure 1.1.7** Modernise libraries in classrooms and encourage children to suggest the titles of books they want to read. More Open Library Boxes are to be fitted in the gardens. Organise read-class sessions outside the school environment.

**Measure 1.1.8** Distribution of a book set every year to all children of the primary level, to build a library at home.

**Measure 1.1.9** Devise a strategy to reduce the disparity in the results obtained between girls and boys as well as between students who attend different schools.

## 1.2 Better Physical and Mental Health of Children

An active and healthy lifestyle is a key contributor to the overall child wellbeing. It is fundamental to support better physical and mental health for all children by empowering them to be responsible of their own health through education, health literacy, the development of personal resilience and the promotion of protective factors. All children are to be supported and encouraged to take action to improve their own health.

### Physical Health

The most challenging public health issue concerning children is obesity. Malta stands amongst the highest rated obese and overweight children<sup>1</sup>, while drinking and substance abuse are a concern amongst adolescence<sup>2</sup>. Another challenge faced among children is the lack of culture of physical activity<sup>3</sup>. Government is committed to address these challenges in a holistic manner and thus this Policy Framework will also contribute towards mitigating these challenges particularly through preventive measures. In this regard, the promotion of healthy lifestyles including through the adoption of a balanced diet and lots of exercise from an early age positively contribute towards improved health.

In addition, specific attention will also be given to children with health difficulties particularly children with disability or chronic illness who require specific care and services designed to help them to achieve the greatest possible self-reliance and to lead a full and active life.

### Mental Health

Good mental health is a key requirement if children are to realise their full potential and lead a life filled with great experiences. The incidence of self-harm among children and young people, as well as the recent increase in demand for mental health services, highlight the need for specific action<sup>4</sup>.

It is clear that support towards children's good mental health is required with a view to allow them to think, feel, and behave in ways that enable them to cope with life challenges. Children who are mentally healthy are more likely to have a high quality of life and to perform well at home, at school, and in their communities.

This Policy will address from an early-stage children's mental health challenges to avoid serious consequences, such as difficulties in school, problems with relationships and social interactions, and a higher risk of developing mental health problems later in life.

<sup>1</sup> World Health Organisation. Europe Region. WHO EUROPEAN REGIONAL OBESITY REPORT 2022. Accessed at: <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/353747/9789289057738-eng.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

<sup>2</sup> University of Malta. Substance use in adolescence and emerging adulthood TRENDS, DEVELOPMENTS AND TRANSITIONS 2021. Accessed at: [https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/bitstream/123456789/76692/1/Substance\\_use\\_in\\_adolescence\\_and\\_emerging\\_adulthood\\_trends\\_developments\\_and\\_transitions\\_2021.pdf](https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/bitstream/123456789/76692/1/Substance_use_in_adolescence_and_emerging_adulthood_trends_developments_and_transitions_2021.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> MALTA PHYSICAL ACTIVITY FACTSHEET 2021. Accessed at: [https://cdn.who.int/media/docs/librariesprovider2/country-sites/physical-activity-factsheet---malta-2021.pdf?sfvrsn=f4a25e4f\\_1&download=true](https://cdn.who.int/media/docs/librariesprovider2/country-sites/physical-activity-factsheet---malta-2021.pdf?sfvrsn=f4a25e4f_1&download=true)

<sup>4</sup> Camilleri, N., & Sacco, R. 2020. National study on the mental health of children and young people in Malta. Accessed at: <https://www.um.edu.mt/library/oar/handle/123456789/92679>

## Proposed Measures

### Healthy Living

**Measure 1.2.1** Empower all children to be able to do basic exercise on their own to foster a healthy lifestyle while combating obesity.

**Measure 1.2.2** Schools to continuously monitor children's physical activity and physical health and inform parents on the progress of their children (as in any other subject).

**Measure 1.2.3** Teach all children in primary school to ride a bicycle as part of the plan to further encourage the use of alternative means of transport.

**Measure 1.2.4** Develop extensive awareness campaigns about healthy living, utilising various media platforms to reach as many children and adults as possible. Further efforts are also required to fight childhood obesity and obesogenic environment.

**Measure 1.2.4.1** Introduce an educational campaign among children in schools and nurseries against unfair practices and substance abuse in sport.

**Measure 1.2.4.2** Raise awareness among parents and guardians on effective ways to lead their children towards a healthier lifestyle. In particular, how to cook wholesome meals with low budget and within their busy schedule.

**Measure 1.2.4.3** Ensure that food programmes at school, such as the Breakfast Club, distribute only nutritious food to promote healthy eating habits.

**Measure 1.2.5** Incentivise children and young people to make better use of the sports facilities (including gyms) available to the public.

**Measure 1.2.5.1** Extend the opening times of sports centres.

**Measure 1.2.6** Create incentives to lower the cost of healthy food options while increasing investment in raising awareness about the risks of consuming unhealthy products.

**Measure 1.2.7** Develop incentives for restaurants to offer healthy menus for children.

**Measure 1.2.7.1** Launch a pilot initiative to provide one healthy meal every school day in all schools for all children. Upon assessment of the results, consideration should be given to extend the measure to all schools.

**Measure 1.2.8** Reduce the amount of time that children spend static on their desks during the school day and design new programmes within the education system for children to have more physical activity time.

**Measure 1.2.8.1** Increase the Physical Education lessons in schools. Children are to have a single session of physical activity daily.

**Measure 1.2.9** Further provide financial incentives to encourage parents to enrol their children in physical activity programmes.

**Measure 1.2.10** Invite more often coaches from different associations and clubs to conduct school introductory and training sessions in the teacher's presence, with the aim of encouraging children to pursue sporting discipline.

**Measure 1.2.11** Strengthen sport games between schools, including through broader participation in the Active School Flag Award. Establish a national program for sport activities during children's holiday periods.

**Measure 1.2.12** Launch a school campaign with the participation of young athletes to promote the benefits and values of physical activity and sports as alternatives to screen time.

**Measure 1.2.13** Young Athletes are to have full support during their educational journey, including psychological, medical and nutritional guidance. These students need more flexible times to better cope between their study and training. In this regard, there should be greater cooperation between educational institutions, MATSEC, SportMalta and the Malta Olympic Committee to help them overcome the obstacles they are facing in their parallel careers.

**Measure 1.2.13.1** Set up a program to identify those athletes who have the potential for high performance. These promising athletes will be given individual attention & training and their performance will be continuously monitored to help them develop their full potential.

## Physical Health

**Measure 1.2.14** Strengthen the function of the Child Development Assessment Unit (CDAU) by consolidating the services offered by different entities in a new and adequate building for today's needs.

**Measure 1.2.14.1** Extend as much as possible the occupational therapy service provided by CDAU in schools. The children will start receiving this therapy in a school environment and no longer in a hospital, so they feel included and not different from other children.

**Measure 1.2.14.2** Set up a CDAU centre in Gozo to reduce the inconvenience or any drawbacks for the children and their families in Gozo who use this service regularly.

**Measure 1.2.15** Open more support classrooms and units in every college in Malta and Gozo with the aim of better addressing the individual needs of children with disabilities without replacing learning in the classroom with other children.

**Measure 1.2.16** Intensify the screening program among children at an early age to identify physical, intellectual, social and educational challenges in line with best practices. Artificial intelligence and assistive technology can be used with children with learning difficulties, particular behaviours or disability so they also have the best learning experience.

**Measure 1.2.16.1** Promote research in assistive technology and artificial intelligence and launch a program to purchase assistive technology such as laptops for those who use Braille and sticks equipped with Bluetooth technology for children with disabilities to facilitate independent living.

**Measure 1.2.17** Strengthen early professional intervention measures that are evidence-based and research-based to identify and address any learning difficulties as early as possible.

**Measure 1.2.17.1** Develop training for general healthcare professionals on how to provide a service with a child-friendly approach.

**Measure 1.2.17.2** Start offering the service of learning support educators in childcare centres to encourage children to reach their potential.

**Measure 1.2.17.3** Provide the service of Learning Support Educators (LSEs) at post-secondary level for children who need this support to further their education.

**Measure 1.2.18** Strengthen cooperation between schools, the Foundation for Social Welfare Services (FSWS) and the Department for Public Health, among others, to take the necessary preventative steps in the best interest of the children.

**Measure 1.2.19** Initiate discussions at national level to ban cigarette sales to individuals born after a due date agreed by all stakeholders. This will positively impact the health of all future generations.

## Mental Health

**Measure 1.2.20** Organise awareness-raising campaigns on children's mental health.

**Measure 1.2.20.1** Create programs and campaigns that combat the detrimental impacts of media portrayals of the ideal self-image and their impact on mental health and healthy living, with a focus on body positivity and self-esteem.

**Measure 1.2.21** Strengthen the home therapy service offered to children and young people while relocating the Psychiatric Care Unit for children and adolescents out of St Luke's Hospital to a more suitable location.

**Measure 1.2.22** Strengthen the presence of psychologists and youth workers in schools in order to help and support those children who are going through a period of anxiety, stress, excessive anger or mental health challenges.

**Measure 1.2.22.1** Provide training to educators to be in a position to recognise the signs of mental health challenges and bring this to the attention of parents in order to access professional help for their children. Schools can be a benchmark for referring children to timely professional assistance with parental consent.

**Measure 1.2.22.2** Develop targeted training for professionals working with or for children on how to deal with challenging behaviour, parental alienation, and childhood trauma.

**Measure 1.2.23** Design programs together with schools and a team of multidisciplinary professionals aimed at addressing the challenges faced by children. The schools that are receiving the largest number of students coming from a difficult environment will receive an allocation of larger funds, as well as all the resources necessary to carry out this program.

**Measure 1.2.24** Strengthen and further resource free child mental health services in the community.

**Measure 1.2.24.1** Conduct an in-depth analysis on the current child mental health services, to explore possible measures to improve the existing services while ensuring that the current realities and challenges faced by children are being taken into account.

### 1.3 Support Quality and Leisure Time

Providing children with the necessary quality and leisure time encourages physical, mental and emotional development. This Policy Framework recognises that play is not an add-on in the life of the child, and more policy focus should be placed on this topic, which is seldom given the desired attention.

Children can develop deep emotional ties, feel appreciated, and learn about the world around them by spending **quality time** with their parents and/or other caregivers. Quality time is the key to meaningful connections.

On the other hand, children also have the right to **leisure time**, playtime, and unrestricted participation in the arts and other forms of culture. Children are to be provided with an environment which encourages them to play and to enjoy themselves in activities which are enriching, and which have no extrinsic goals.

Within this context, this Policy Framework encourages the improvement of play opportunities and quality time for all children with a view to:

**Improve mental health:** Engaging in leisure activities and having quality time with caregivers will help children to feel more relaxed and happier, which can in turn have a positive impact on their mental health.

**Increase social skills:** Participating in leisure activities with other children can help children to develop their social skills and make new friends.

**Enhance physical development:** Leisure activities that involve physical activity, such as sports or outdoor play, will help children to develop their physical skills and coordination.

**Improve cognitive development:** Engaging in leisure activities that involve problem-solving, such as puzzles or board games, can help children to develop their critical thinking and decision-making skills.

<sup>1</sup> Martin, H. 22/07/2020. The importance of spending quality time with your children. Accessed at: <https://www.talentedladiesclub.com/articles/the-importance-of-spending-quality-time-with-your-children/>



**Enhance creativity and self-expression:** Engaging in leisure activities that involve creativity, such as art or music, will help children to express themselves and develop their creative skills<sup>1</sup>.

## Proposed Measures

**Measure 1.3.1** Plan new open areas dedicated to children's play and leisure time. Repurpose derelict and abandoned structures as family-friendly recreational areas to provide the possibility and encourage families with children to spend more quality and leisure time in other areas besides their home.

**Measure 1.3.1.1** Create separate spaces for children of different ages in existing playing fields.

**Measure 1.3.1.2** Identify areas and locations that can be utilised as open spaces for children and families in specific days and times.

**Measure 1.3.2** Incentivise local councils and other communities to plan local cultural events for children (of different age groups) and their families.

**Measure 1.3.3** Increase the number of school outings, like field trips to historical sites, cultural events, parks, buddy activities, seminars, and sporting events.

**Measure 1.3.4** Increase time dedicated to school breaks and give more importance to leisure time, activities and connections between students.

**Measure 1.3.5** Adolescents are to have a safe entertainment choice. Create more recreational spaces such as the Adventure Park announced near the Cottonera Sports Complex, Leisure Centres and Youth Cafes.

**Measure 1.3.6** Continue discussions at a national level on homework and children's free time to move towards an education system without the need for homework.

**Measure 1.3.7** Introduce a voluntary neighbourhood system in all localities across Malta and Gozo whereby one-hour walks to local public places (including play time) are organised at least twice a week after school hours. This initiative can also be converged with Klabb 3-16 to cater for children who attend it. To encourage attendance by children, their participation in the walks will be visible within their education portfolio.

1. American Academy of Paediatrics. 01/01/2012. The importance of play in promoting healthy child development and maintaining strong parent-child bond: focus on children in poverty. Accessed at: <https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article/129/1/e204/31545/The-Importance-of-Play-in-Promoting-Healthy-Child?autologincheck=redirected>

## 1.4 Supporting a Child-Friendly Justice

Children within the national legal system often encounter adoption, violence, migration and divorce experiences. Often such proceedings are contentious. In all cases, children are to be able to benefit from special protection, be empowered to exercise their rights and have their best interests respected.

This Policy Framework supports a modernised justice system that adopts a child-centred approach. Ensuring a Child-Friendly Justice that seeks to guarantee a justice system that serves all children is fundamental for fulfilling children's rights. In this regard, further efforts are required to ensure a justice sphere that is not intimidating and incomprehensible for children. Furthermore, it is crucial to avoid any causes of unnecessary stress that impact children's experiences and negatively affect their wellbeing.

While children have free access to a lawyer and are informed of their rights and the decisions in an understandable manner; the right of children to participate safely in judicial and administrative proceedings requires further attention<sup>1</sup>. During judicial and administrative proceedings, it is imperative to provide children with the appropriate support from relevant qualified professionals, child-friendly locations and information that is sensitive to age, gender and disability with properly implemented procedural safeguards throughout proceedings<sup>2</sup>.

### Proposed Measures

**Measure 1.4.1** Raise awareness on children's rights within the judicial system on a national level.

**Measure 1.4.1.1** Organise a child-friendly information campaign and launch a child-friendly version of laws that protect their interests in the event of abuse, separation and parental alienation.

**Measure 1.4.2** Further support vulnerable teenagers who spend time in the YOURS facility and in alternative care institutions, to help them fully integrate back into society.

**Measure 1.4.2.1** Invest in new programs of basic learning to help them fully integrate back into society.

**Measure 1.4.2.2** Invest in efforts to secure children's positive relationships of trust and emotional security with caregivers.

**Measure 1.4.3** Support and protection is to be provided to unaccompanied minors seeking refuge, in order to provide a smooth transition with the community.

**Measure 1.4.3.1** Minors are not to be placed in detention centres. Appropriate alternatives to detention are to be found, ensuring that closed centres are only a last resort.

<sup>1</sup> UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner. 16/05/2019. Committee on the rights of the child examines report of Malta. Accessed at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2019/05/committee-rights-child-examines-report-malta>

<sup>2</sup> European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. N.d. Child-friendly justice: Perspectives and experiences involved in judicial proceedings as victims, witnesses or parties in nine EU Member States. Accessed at: [https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra\\_uploads/fra-2017-child-friendly-justice-children-s-perspective\\_en.pdf](https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2017-child-friendly-justice-children-s-perspective_en.pdf)

**Measure 1.4.4** Continue evolving a national child-friendly legal system whereby children are properly informed through age-appropriate child-friendly information and language on their rights and process.

**Measure 1.4.4.1** Fostering a child friendly arrangement for eliciting child narrative at the pre-trial stage, enhancing the evidentiary validity of the child's testimony by avoiding unduly delay and applying evidence-based interview protocol by a trained interviewer.

**Measure 1.4.4.2** Fully revise the procedure used before the Family Court so that no one is allowed to unnecessarily prolong the procedures and ensure effective and efficient justice in the best interest of the minors being affected.

**Measure 1.4.5** Further resourcing and strengthen child advocacy services to empower children to exercise their rights.

**Measure 1.4.5.1** Appoint a child advocate with an advanced background in child psychology, with every child who is undergoing legal procedures, to ensure the best interests of the child.

**Measure 1.4.6** Provide a legal guardian to support children, placing their needs first during the full proceedings before the Family Court.

**Measure 1.4.7** Further efforts on legislative solutions to give the term 'parental alienation' greater importance in the Courts.

**Measure 1.4.8** Develop initiatives, as part of anti-trafficking action plans and policies, that prioritise the fight against the sale, prostitution and pornography of children.

**Measure 1.4.9** Propose the mandatory use of the Children's House in Malta to coordinate parallel criminal and child welfare investigations and help produce valid evidence for judicial proceedings by eliciting the child's disclosure. Emphasis needs to be made on audio-visual recording the child's testimony with the aim of avoiding repeated questioning during court hearings.

**Measure 1.4.9.1** Provide child victims and witnesses of violence support and assistance, including medical evaluation and treatment, in a safe environment for children.

**Measure 1.4.10** Give everyone the opportunity to rebuild their lives as quickly as possible, always in the best interest of the children by binding the Court with fixed timeframes to decide on separation cases, custody, access and maintenance of minor.

**Measure 1.4.11** Revisit child law with a view to develop harsher penalties for child sex offenders with longer prisons sentences under the same conditions as other serious offenders. Such penalties need to be appropriate sentences in accordance with the severity of the crimes of sexual abuse against children.

**Measure 1.4.12** Establish a coordinating office within the Ministry for Social Policy and Children's Rights to ensure the proper implementation of children's rights, policies and inter-ministerial collaboration.

**Measure 1.4.13** Enact new legislation and mechanisms to protect children from parent abuse in relation to the scheduled visitation time and relevant child maintenance.

**Measure 1.4.13.1** Provide a basic maintenance to the parent who is raising their child on their own during the legal proceedings of the separation. This will ensure financial support for the child until the legal process is finalised.

**Measure 1.4.13.2** Establish an authority with the power to enter into and enforce maintenance agreements and collect payments directly from the non-compliant parent (to pass on to the other party). This would allow for more direct monitoring of the situation, and any parent who unjustly refuses to pay would be subject to additional penalties, including separate administrative charges and possible seizures if deemed capricious and without just cause.

**Measure 1.4.13.3** Enact new laws to penalise parents who do not fulfil their financial obligations towards their child's health and education expenses.

**Measure 1.4.13.4** Amend Chapter 16, Article 3(b) of the maintenance law to encompass children who are born outside of marriage.



NATIONAL PRIORITY 2

# SUPPORTING FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN



# SUPPORTING FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN

**“Children should grow up in a positive family environment, with access to sufficient resources and access to quality services (and support), for families to adequately nurture and care for the child and foster child's development”**

The family is the natural setting for the growth and wellbeing of children. A 'Family' is considered to be a combination of two or more persons who are bound together over time by ties of mutual consent, birth and/or adoption or placement and who, together, assume responsibility for various combinations<sup>1</sup>. The life of a child is hugely affected by the first human interactions, which are typically the experiences with family members and/or associated care givers. The family is also vital for the development of the child's socialisation skills and the understanding of their inner selves and people around them.

The following aims have been identified to provide support to families to lead towards good-quality parenting, access to quality services, as well as better financial security for those families with greatest needs. The objective is to enable parents (and care givers) to realise the best possible outcomes for their children while addressing challenges that may arise.

## Aims

2.1 Support a Positive Family Environment

2.2 Promote and Facilitate Better Work-Life Balance for Parents

2.3 Assist Families for Better Financial Security

Several horizontal policy dimensions impact on families and parenting, including healthcare, education, housing, employment and social policies<sup>2</sup>. As a result, a coordinated approach is key to implement policy initiatives and measures that will aim to enable parents to parent confidently and positively.

<sup>1</sup> Spitzer D. L. (2018). Family Migration Policies and Social Integration: United Nations Expert Group Family Policies for Inclusive Societies. Accessed at: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/family/wp-content/uploads/sites/23/2018/05/Family-Oriented-Migration-Policies-and-Social-Integration.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Effective parenting support can also be a way of addressing the negative impacts of intergenerational poverty.

Particular attention will be provided to children in alternative care. All children should have the opportunity to have a supportive, protective and caring environment that helps them develop their full potential. When a child's own family is unable, even with support, to provide adequate care for the child, the State is responsible for ensuring appropriate alternative care and relevant support while prioritising the deinstitutionalisation of children, including children with disabilities.

## 2.1 Support a Positive Family Environment

Children's lives are primarily centred on the **family environment** in which they grow-up in and are cared for. For children to succeed and maximise their potential, a positive family environment is a must. During the early years of children's lives parents influence and are the foundation for good child outcomes. As a result, parents need support at each stage of the child's development, from pre-natal to early childhood and on to adolescence that will lead to a better family environment that sustains children's development. In this regard, investing in skills - particularly in life and parenting skills - has a positive impact on the quality of life of children.

In the current constantly changing social, and economic environment, the development of life skills is important to be able to address the challenges faced by parents.

On the other hand, investing in parenting skills is expected to ameliorate parents' abilities in providing care, protection and psychological support to their child according to the age and state of development.

### Relationships

Positive family relationships also play a crucial role in the family environment. Parents face many diverse pressures and challenges emanating from changing needs and realities. From balancing work and family life to trying to understanding the changing stages of childhood, family life passes through different challenges that might put stress on family relationships.

The quality of children's interactions with family members, caregivers, educators, peers, and the larger community is central to their well-being. In order to create the conditions that support children to thrive both within and outside the family it is crucial to foster warm and responsive family relationships.

### Outreach and Information

While the provision of the necessary support to foster healthy family environments is fundamental, it is also important to ensure that those who need or want to seek assistance are indeed aware of the support that is available.



## Proposed Measures

**Measure 2.1.1** Create a central coordination system that lists all support schemes, training and programs that are available for parents. This will avoid duplication of efforts and will encourage parents to be better informed of the help that is available.

- **Measure 2.1.1.1** Further develop training programmes (age specific) for parents to be equipped with better life skills and parenting. Parents need to be incentivised to attend the training courses.

- **Measure 2.1.1.2** Introduce a training programme for prospective parents to safeguard the holistic development of the child. Programmes and interventions used should be proven to increase parenting skills, confidence and capacity; reduce parental stress; improve child wellbeing and behaviour; and increase the enjoyment of, and satisfaction in, parenting.

- **Measure 2.1.1.3** Further develop appropriate and dedicated parenting skill courses for parents and guardians of children with difficult behaviour.

- **Measure 2.1.1.4** Organise an introductory session aimed at children and parents a few days before the opening of the school year in the first year of kindergarten and primary school to allow the children to familiarise themselves with their new environment and the parents to better understand what is expected of them and how they can help their children.

**Measure 2.1.2** Further strengthen the provision of free Family Therapy to families in distress, with a particular focus on families with children under 7 years of age to assist in strengthening family relationships.

- **Measure 2.1.2.1** Conduct an in-depth analysis on the current Family Therapy free services, to explore possible measures to improve the existing services while ensuring that the current realities and challenges faced by children are being taken into account.

**Measure 2.1.3** Develop a National Alternative Care Strategy with a particular focus on deinstitutionalisation and aftercare support. Young people in alternative care are to have access to equitable, holistic and integrated tailor-made services that support their changing needs and their pathway to adulthood.

**Measure 2.1.4** A National awareness raising campaign on services available that contribute towards a positive family environment. The National campaign should underline the benefits and importance of a positive family environment free from hate and promote the values of respect and dignity.

**Measure 2.1.5** Develop effective solutions to combat the cycle of intergenerational poverty within families.

**Measure 2.1.6** Create programmes for the re-integration of homeless families with children to promote independent living and employment opportunities.

**Measure 2.1.7** Evaluate in detail key risk factors for poor outcomes for children as well as develop practice tools to assist professionals in identifying and – working with families – mitigating these risks.

**Measure 2.1.8** Ensure the visibility of non-traditional families (which are increasing in Malta) in all policy and initiative formulation, media campaigns, educational material etc. It is imperative to boost acceptance of all diverse families that children come from.

**Measure 2.1.9** Strengthen legal safeguards so that where it is in the best interest of the children, both parents spend the same amount of time with their children when they are not living in the same house with the aim of not separating children from any parent.

## 2.2 Promote and facilitate Better Work-Life Balance for Parents

Modern families encounter a lot of pressure due to unbalanced work/education schedules. Working parents with children aged 0-4 years often face challenges such as fatigue, stress and depression<sup>1</sup>. The transition from couple to parents is undoubtedly one of the major life transitions involving a big adjustment, the reality of which usually hits soon after the birth of the baby. Coping with this transition provides a number of challenges, including maintaining and caring for the mental well-being of both parents. Supporting working parents to blend work and life hours together to create a cycle that works for their profession and families becomes therefore a priority.

Apart from incentivising family friendly measures that will result in more flexibility for working parents, it is also important to support parents at the workplace to further incentivise working parents to remain in employment after the birth of their first child. This will in turn have positive impacts on the female employment rate.

### Proposed Measures

**Measure 2.2.1** Develop national guidelines for a better workplace for parents that will serve to create awareness and information at national level. The proposed national guidelines will promote an inclusive work environment for working parents and/or prospective parents. It is important to create a culture that values a healthy work-life balance and makes working parents feel comfortable at their work.

**Measure 2.2.1.1** Incentivise employers to develop a Workplace Wellbeing Strategy targeting parents' needs and challenges to facilitate parenthood in the workplace through the provision of the right support; from guidance to parents (starting from the early stages of planning) to conversation tools for managers. Companies need to create a culture of support for working parents throughout the journey from parental leave to working parenthood.

<sup>1</sup> 'Parenting stress among child welfare involved families: Differences by child placement' (accessed at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4498480/> on 23 November 2022)

**Measure 2.2.2** Initiate a dialogue at national level involving social partners and relevant stakeholders on the introduction of the option for working parents with children under 5 years to work a four-day week.

**Measure 2.2.3** Evaluate current policy in relation to Family Leaves with a view to giving consideration to the introduction of further family friendly and work-life balance policies for working parents with children under 4 years of age.

**Measure 2.2.3.1** Extend the urgent family leave from 15 hours to 30 hours per year. In case of illness, instead of the hours being deducted from the annual leave, they will be deducted from the sick leave if a medical certificate of the dependent person is presented.

**Measure 2.2.3.2** Incentivise employers to encourage remote working and flexible working arrangements for working parents with children so that parents/guardians would be able to spend more time with their children.

**Measure 2.2.4** Continue to increase investment in high-quality free child-care services and after/before school programmes for all children, prioritising families on low incomes.

**Measure 2.2.4.1** Assist businesses that subsidise the cost of childcare for their employees through a tax reduction up to a maximum of €35,000.

**Measure 2.2.4.2** Expand the Klabb 3-16 and Skola Sajf services to reach more children and promote learning outside school hours.

**Measure 2.2.4.3** Engage and involve parents - including parents who work or attend training programs - in the design of childcare facilities.

**Measure 2.2.4.4** Extend remote working practices in Government departments and entities where the nature of the work allows so that the public service serves as a model when it comes to the balance between life and work for employees, with levels of excellence when it comes to flexible work practices and remote working.

**Measure 2.2.5** Initiate a Pilot Initiative to Establish a 'Take Children at Work' Day to expose children to future job possibilities and the value of education.

**Measure 2.2.6** Initiate a Pilot Initiative to incentivise employers to implement programs (where possible, appropriate and a child friendly environment can be ensured) in which parents can bring their children to work every day and care for them while doing their jobs.

**Measure 2.2.7** Initiate discussions at national level, involving the main stakeholders, on the wellbeing of children in particularly the impact of schooling on children and families both in terms of content and school hours.

## 2.3 Assist Families for Better Financial Security

The financial security of a family with children is central and a direct determinant of positive child outcomes. Throughout the years Government implemented various measures and initiatives with the aim to better the financial security of families.

Families' economic resources strongly influence children's developmental trajectories. Research suggests that children in low-income homes consistently fare less well on measures of cognitive, social-emotional, and physical development than children in higher income homes.<sup>1</sup> Income instability is likely to interfere with healthy development, particularly if parents do not have the economic or psychological resources to maintain parenting practices and consistent spending on goods that promote children's well-being.<sup>2</sup>

From an economic perspective, parents who have consistently low incomes may be less able to invest in resources that promote healthy development, including nutritious food and cognitively stimulating materials.<sup>3</sup> It is acknowledged that a number of 'teen parents' may need additional and targeted support to access education, employment and housing, and to support their own parenting.

Ensuring all parents are appropriately supported to care for their children is central to maximising children's potential for better prospects. This Policy Framework will promote further income supports, as well as opportunities for further education and employment, to further deliver financial security to families with children.

### Proposed Measures

**Measure 2.3.1** Support parents financially, through improved benefits and/or tax credits.

**Measure 2.3.1.1** Financially support parents of children with disabilities by giving them a tax credit of €200 per year for each child with a disability.

**Measure 2.3.1.2** Improve the in-work benefit again by increasing it by €50 per year for each child for four consecutive times.

**Measure 2.3.1.3** Help working parents by raising the amount on which they do not pay tax from €10,500 to €12,200.

**Measure 2.3.1.4** Help parents whose children continue their education after the compulsory age through a tax credit or a grant of €500 per year for three years. Those students who live on their own will receive this help in the form of a grant.

**Measure 2.3.2** Further increase the Children's Allowance. Additional income should be linked to parents/care givers attending healthy eating training programmes and/or other training programmes supporting the Child Wellbeing.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7546433/>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Bradley RH, & Corwyn RF (2002). Socioeconomic status and child development. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 53, 371-399.

**Measure 2.3.3** Study and assess the effects of the child related benefits with a view to improve the benefits system and ensure that the investment is targeting the children's wellbeing.

**Measure 2.3.4** Launch a Pilot-Project for a 'Single-Parent Card Scheme' to provide teen single parents at risk of poverty and social exclusion with a range of supports and services. The aim is to provide financial assistance (topped up to the Card) for certain eligible goods and services (ex; healthy foods, baby products; training programmes; books; internet service; etc).

**Measure 2.3.5** Implementation of the National Action Plan for a Child Guarantee 2022-2030.

**Measure 2.3.6** Sustain financial support of up to €10,000 to families who choose to adopt children from other countries and work to add to the list of countries from where adoptions can be made easily.

**Measure 2.3.7** Increase the grant for adoption and raise it to a minimum of €500 for each child.

**Measure 2.3.8** Allow money saved for children in savings plans offered by banks to be automatically transferred to private schemes of personal pension when the children turn 18 years old.

**Measure 2.3.9** Increase the number of hours per week that a full-time student can work from 25 to 30 hours while still remaining eligible for stipend.

**Measure 2.3.10** Increase stipends by 15%.

**Measure 2.3.11** Increase the student supplementary aid by 15% and expand the eligibility for this grant to reach more students who come from low-income families.

**Measure 2.3.12** Set up a special fund so that students in postsecondary or tertiary institutions who are going through a difficult period in their lives are given the necessary help, including immediate material support, until they can start receiving social aid or other services.



NATIONAL PRIORITY 3

# PROVIDING A BETTER ENVIRONMENT FOR CHILDREN

# PROVIDING A BETTER ENVIRONMENT FOR CHILDREN

**“Children are to grow up in a safe physical and digital environment, that fosters a healthy development, opportunities for growth and wellbeing.”**

Investing in appropriate policy measures that foster a child-friendly environment, where children are physically, socially, and emotionally secure, is essential to fulfil Government's vision of having a society that maximises children's potential.

This Policy Framework aims to stimulate an environment where children grow up with opportunities that are focused on children's dynamic needs and interests. For this to be truly effective, the collaboration of different stakeholders is a must.

Sustainable development lies at the core of all crosscutting policy areas that impact children. A better environment for children through more green areas, less levels of pollution, and safer physical and digital spaces has a positive effect on children's health, as well as their social and emotional wellbeing.

The Children's Policy Framework 2024-2030 has identified the following aims to support a better overall environment for children and their families.

## Aims

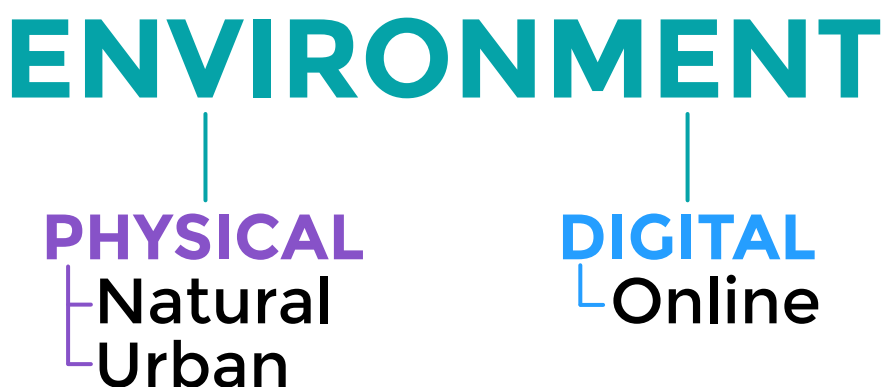
- 3.1 Ensure a Secure and Stable Physical Environment
- 3.2 Support a Safer Digital Environment
- 3.3 Effectively Protect from Violence and Crime
- 3.4 Foster a Better Environment through Pro-Social Activity

The objective of this priority is to stimulate a safe and healthy **physical** and **digital** environment in which children live and interact. Every environment should provide children with opportunities for self-growth, empowerment and the overall realisation of their full potential.

### 3.1 Ensure a Secure and Stable Physical Environment

For the purposes of this policy document, the term 'physical environment' refers to the external surroundings/conditions (natural and urban) in which children live and influence their wellbeing. Factors such as clean air, green surroundings, safe spaces and accessible urban areas<sup>1</sup> with no noise pollution are vital for children's physical and mental health.

Figure 3: Environment



Government has the overall responsibility to support children to live in a healthy and sustainable environment. In this regard, Government efforts will be directed towards facilitating and promoting access to more safe green spaces, pedestrian and cycle-friendly streets, increasing community cohesion and enhancing community safety.

This Policy Framework will also aim to promote and communicate environmental awareness amongst children and adults. Children are to be educated on the benefits attached to the protection of the environment and are to be encouraged to prevent the depletion of resources by reducing waste as well as energy and water consumption, reusing and recycling amongst other initiatives.

<sup>1</sup>In line with the Accessibility Standards for All in a Built Environment Regulations (Subsidiary Legislation 413.03 of the Laws of Malta). Accessed at: <https://legislation.mt/eli/sl/413.3/eng/pdf>



## Proposed Measures

### Public Open Spaces

**Measure 3.1.1** Develop safer lanes for bicycles, in order to encourage children to exercise in a safe environment. This would make it easier and safer for teenagers to commute.

**Measure 3.1.2** Create more green and open spaces that are accessible and inclusive. Children with different abilities and ages will be taken into consideration. This investment will translate into parks, urban greening projects and pedestrian areas in every locality.

**Measure 3.1.2.1** Invest in a program of extensive afforestation and identify a site in which a planting project can be carried out of thousands of native trees and shrubs.

**Measure 3.1.2.2** Ensure that public spaces (e.g., nature trails, gardens, playgrounds and parks) are safe for all children.

**Measure 3.1.3** Further strengthen efforts to improve air quality and reduce noise pollution for the benefit of children's health and wellbeing.

**Measure 3.1.3.1** Establish different car-free zones and car-free days across the calendar year within each locality in Malta and Gozo. This will improve air quality, help make our streets more child-friendly.

**Measure 3.1.4** Extend a secure Wi-Fi connection in public areas across Malta and Gozo.

**Measure 3.1.5** Support local councils to increase urban greening within towns and villages. Urban greening can include the laying of turf, plantation of trees and flowers, the creation and maintenance of wall gardens, and the application of art and colours within urban environments.

**Measure 3.1.5.1** Incentivise primary schools and local councils to plant a number of trees in different areas around all localities across Malta and Gozo. This initiative will foster more knowledge about endemic trees and shrubs among children.

**Measure 3.1.6** Review the current legislation to harshen penalties for persons who are caught littering. This will reduce the amount of littering and especially influence the long-term environmental impact.

**Measure 3.1.6.1** Allocate funding to local councils to be specifically disbursed for enforcing anti-littering laws.

**Measure 3.1.7** Enhance the public transport system to make it safer and more accessible for children of all ages, particularly for children with disability.

**Measure 3.1.7.1** Work closely with disability organisations, persons with disability and relevant entities to develop a range of initiatives to make the transport system more accessible, especially for children with disability. Children with disability are to

be empowered to co-design mobility solutions for inclusive urban transport for all, to address the problems they face in using public transport.

## Educational Places

**Measure 3.1.8** Continue to renovate and build schools around Malta and Gozo in a timely manner. This action will strengthen and improve the educational environment for children.

**Measure 3.1.9** Modernise science laboratories in schools so that students receive the highest level of teaching in science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

**Measure 3.1.10** Install air conditioning systems in classrooms and staff rooms of all schools in Malta and Gozo.

**Measure 3.1.10.1** Carry out an energy audit as well as ensure that double glazed windows and roof insulation are fitted in all schools.

**Measure 3.1.11** Continue to invest in building a student village at the Junior College in Msida to provide a significantly better learning environment that promotes an active student life.

**Measure 3.1.12** Create a new open space at the Higher Secondary School in Naxxar, new sports facilities as well as parking which is expected to alleviate the parking problem in the surrounding area.

**Measure 3.1.13** Finalise the construction and finishings of the 'Institute for Art and Creativity' as well as the 'Institute for Community Services' as part of the new MCAST campus in Paola.

**Measure 3.1.13.1** Invest in improving the sports facilities and the college auditorium of MCAST in Paola to also include a new space for the performing arts.

**Measure 3.1.14** Provide all schools with the necessary equipment such as lifts, ramps, and signs in braille so that children with different impairments would be able to move around independently.

## Living and Recreational Urban Spaces

**Measure 3.1.15** Introduce new rules in construction planning, for buildings, to include green areas or spaces.

**Measure 3.1.16** Strengthen and widen the eligibility of the Sens-Ability Scheme to help more parents of children with disability create a multi-sensory room in their home. Children have a lot to benefit from this assistance because these rooms are specially equipped to help in their development.

**Measure 3.1.17** Increase underground multi-story parking spots to reduce the number of vehicles parked on the streets.

**Measure 3.1.18** Deter crime and have safer neighbourhoods by installing CCTV security cameras in public spaces and establishing neighbourhood police patrol, even during the night.

**Measure 3.1.19** Develop sport pitches and sport facilities in all localities free for everyone's use.

**Measure 3.1.20** Continue to invest in new personal assistance services and schemes which enable people with disabilities to live an active life in the community.

**Measure 3.1.20.1** Open a new community hub in the north of Malta where people with disabilities can receive specialised training to live a more independent life.

## 3.2 Support a Safer Digital Environment

The Internet and social media platforms provide opportunities for children to access information and stay connected. However, the digital environment also provides a number of subtle channels for online threats that may result in sexual, psychological and emotional violence, abuse and exploitation. Child victims of these online behaviours are likely to experience a devastating impact on their mental health, with intense fear or anxiety to the point of social isolation, substance abuse, self-harm, or even suicide.

A safer digital environment characterised by **positive social norms during online interactions**, can be achieved by fostering among children a healthy self-esteem and more positive values - primarily respect, tolerance and inclusion.

Parents and educators have a significant role in hindering the occurrence of online violence by taking **preventative measures**, dealing with situations before they escalate. Strengthened knowledge and skills on cybersecurity and cyber norms among parents and the general public, especially educators, is essential.

Children and young people are to be equipped with the knowledge and skills to **identify** and **prevent** online threats to protect themselves. In particular, children have to be guided

to develop the ability to stand up against any form of online threat in particular cyber hate speech, bullying, grooming and sexual harassment amongst others.

Children can be both victims as well as perpetrators of online threats, with minorities having a higher risk of being victims. Within this context, also child perpetrators need to be supported through knowledge and sensitised about the consequences of online violence.

## Proposed Measures

**Measure 3.2.1** Establish standards for children's content creators to ensure a safe online environment that is child-friendly and free from sexual, violent and hatred connotations. The standards will be regularly reviewed and updated as necessary.

**Measure 3.2.2** Strengthen the Cyber Crime Unit and update criminal law on cyber bullying, hate speech and revenge porn.

**Measure 3.2.2.1** Provide continuous support and child-friendly mechanisms for children to be able to address online threats.

**Measure 3.2.3** Raise awareness for children and parents to be able to recognise online content with sexual and violent connotations (including hate speech and cyber bullying) as well as to be aware of the importance of internet safety and its good use to protect children's dignity and privacy.

**Measure 3.2.3.1** Introduce media ethics as a school subject.

**Measure 3.2.3.2** Hold seminars and workshops on media ethics (including internet safety and balance of technology use) that bring together parents and educators.

**Measure 3.2.4** Initiate a dialogue at national level on the proper enforcement of the legal provisions on online hate crime and hate speech. Discussions should focus how to ensure a safer online environment that protects children, including minorities that face higher risks such as children with disability.

**Measure 3.2.4.1** Invest in a specialised software system that immediately detects online hate speech and online bullying.

## 3.3 Effectively Protect from Violence and Crime

Violent and criminal acts against children have lifelong impacts on children's health and well-being and obstruct life opportunities. Children who experience violence and crime

within their physical environment are more predisposed to being a victim or a perpetrator of abuse in adulthood.

Coordinated early intervention and prevention responses are required to provide a secure, stable and caring environment that protects all children from crime, abuse, neglect and exploitation. Awareness, research, interventive helplines and positive parenting, all serve as initiatives that seek to produce safer physical and virtual spaces. Besides diverse forms of prevention and intervention, collaboration and involvement of different professionals as part of **multidisciplinary teams** are key to assist the child who experienced violence.

### Domestic Violence

Children may experience harm and abuse through the multiple forms of domestic violence that involves their immediate family members. Both the direct victims and/or witnesses of domestic violence require support services that are well equipped to give effective and timely responses.

Further to early intervention, prevention measures are necessary to ensure a positive family environment with supportive relationships and free from domestic violence. Awareness and education about self-growth and relationships from an early age and throughout a person's lifespan are crucial to prevent aggressive behaviour among families with children.

### Neighbourhood Crime

Every child benefits from living in a neighbourhood environment free from criminal activity, that may also include violence, abuse and exploitation of children. This Policy Framework deems the safety of children as a priority that needs to be safeguarded not only within families and the home environment but by preventing and addressing crime within the communities where children reside and recreate. Preventive and interventive measures are to primarily aim at addressing the root causes of crime towards children as well as crime caused by children, including child to parent violence. Besides causing a detrimental effect on others, young people involved in criminal activities have a higher risk of significantly affecting their future life outcomes by having conflicts with the law and/or putting their lives in danger.

### Bullying

Bullying during childhood negatively impacts the life of children being bullied and their families. Witnessing acts of bullying can also influence children's behaviour and life decisions.

Besides cyberbullying, addressed within the previous aim (3.2), more action is required to prevent bullying in all its other forms among children, be it physical, verbal and social.

Children and young people have to be protected from experiencing or witnessing bullying as well as from becoming involved in this form of anti-social and violent behaviour. Children can be primarily safeguarded by a secure and stable home environment that offers caring

relationships. Parents, significant adults, and the wider community have the responsibility in creating a climate that does not tolerate or encourage bullying. Bullying must also be addressed in schools, youth organisations, communities, at work, and online.

## Proposed Measures

**Measure 3.3.1** Increase public awareness and education on all forms of bullying including exclusion, physical and psychological abuse. This campaign should also target peer pressure.

**Measure 3.3.1.1** Strengthen awareness regarding child sexual exploitation and abuse by commemorating each year the European Day for the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse on 18 November.

**Measure 3.3.2** Strengthen services in the community, especially for cases in relation to child protection, shelter to victims of domestic violence and assistance to victims of crime. Through appropriate services, children experiencing struggling situations will be identified and assisted earlier in terms of prevention and intervention.

**Measure 3.3.2.1** Prioritise the strengthening and expansion of services for cases of family breakdown, abuse (including parental alienation) and domestic violence. To address the impact on children from such crises, child-centred strategies will be strengthened, ranging from protection to trauma-informed programs and therapy support.

**Measure 3.3.2.2** Ensure that prevention and intervention services place special emphasis on female clients, who have a higher risk of experiencing all forms of abuse.

**Measure 3.3.3** Carry out continuous training programs for professionals who may come in contact with child victims of domestic violence in their work, including police officers, health and social professionals, educators and the judiciary.

**Measure 3.3.4** Conduct local research on the contemporary realities of abuse and crime within the environments of children, particularly the home and neighbourhood, to be able to formulate and implement increasingly effective policies on violence and its effect on children, young people and families.

**Measure 3.3.4.1** Conduct research to identify the reasons behind victim withdrawals to more effectively assist victims of violence, particularly domestic violence/intimate partner violence.

### 3.4 Foster a Better Environment through Pro-Social Activity

This Policy Framework recognises that an essential aspect for a better environment lies in raising our children to be aware that the common good is the concern of all.

**Pro-social behaviours** are voluntary caring actions that support or improve the wellbeing of other individual/s or the society in general, thus reflecting a sense of responsibility towards each other and the external surroundings.

This Policy Framework acknowledges that pro-social actions will lead to better environmental care and social cohesion. For this to happen children need an environment with conditions that foster pro-social behaviour.

#### Pro-Social Environment: Conditions for Pro-Social Behaviour

Fostering a pro-social behaviour in children is an essential foundation for future competencies, skills and values such as empathy, tolerance, collaboration and social cohesion amongst others. It is crucial to provide children with more opportunities and conditions to develop prosocial skills which will ultimately benefit the environment and society as a whole.

This Policy Framework will promote a pro-social environment for children by stimulating healthy behaviours, positive environmental interaction and the avoidance of risks and dangers.

#### Pro-Environmental Action through Pro-Social Activities

Children have to be guided from an early stage on the importance of caring for the environment. This Policy Framework endeavours to invest in measures and initiatives which contribute towards empowering children to participate in activities that will lead to pro-environmental action and care.

#### Proposed Measures

**Measure 3.4.1** Give greater importance to civic education and active participation in civil society by accrediting children's engagement in voluntary work, civil society as well as pro-social and intergenerational activities.

**Measure 3.4.2** Raise awareness among children and parents/primary caregivers on the traits and benefits of pro-social behaviour as well as to promote the application of pro-social actions.

**Measure 3.4.3** Support schools, local councils and NGOs to organise and hold pro-social activities (including intergenerational activities).

**Measure 3.4.3.1** Introduce garden activities in schools to highlight the importance of environmental protection, nurturing healthy eating habits.

**Measure 3.4.4** Promote more sustainable practices by encouraging the purchase of second-hand and recycled clothing as well as introduce basic tailor work in schools for all children.

**Measure 3.4.5** Incentivise small to medium organisations (SMEs) to apply the principles of Reduce, Reuse and Recycle.

**Measure 3.4.5.1** Organise school outings for children to visit and be sensitised on organisations applying the principles of Reduce, Reuse and Recycle.





A young boy with brown hair and blue eyes, wearing a blue V-neck sweater, is raising his right hand. He is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background is a dark green chalkboard. In the foreground, there are blurred hands of other children, suggesting a classroom environment.

NATIONAL PRIORITY 4

# STRENGTHENING CHILD PARTICIPATION

# STRENGTHENING CHILD PARTICIPATION

**“Children are to be supported to freely express their views on all matters and decisions that affect them, and to have those views taken into account at all levels of society.”**

Children hold a unique body of knowledge about society, needs and concerns, as well as ideas and views that directly derive from their life experiences. The participation of children in decision-making processes is a vital asset that will enrich society. It is therefore critical to further encourage the active participation of children in society, as individuals and as a group.

Empowering children to actively participate in society is a prerequisite to fully adhere to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Article 12 of the UNCRC gives all children the right to express their views freely and have them considered and taken seriously in accordance with their age and maturity. Article 24 of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights also declares that children, depending on their age and maturity, should have the opportunity to have their opinion heard in situations that affect them.

This Policy Framework upholds that child participation is principal for promoting children's rights, building their self-esteem, and empowering them to take control of their own lives. The aim of this national priority is to ensure that policies and programs are responsive to the needs and perspectives of children.

## Aims

- 4.1 Enhance Dissemination of Child-Friendly Information on Law, Policy and Services
- 4.2 Promote Meaningful, Inclusive and Safe Child Participation among Policymakers and Professionals Working with and for Children
- 4.3 Raise Awareness of Child Participation among Children and Their Families

National Priority 4 on 'Strengthened Children's Participation', identifies the above four associated aims to prioritise and take action to ensure all children, particularly vulnerable children, are able to exercise their right to participate in decision-making that affects them. To accomplish these aims, it is important to provide children with accessible information, rights, conditions and necessary tools, so they can make informed choices and understand their rights within society.

#### 4.1 Enhance Dissemination of Child-Friendly Information on Law, Policy and Services

Dissemination of child-friendly information is the process of making information accessible and understandable to children. This can include using language, illustrations, and other visual aids that are appropriate for children's developmental level and abilities. The goal is to ensure that children can access and understand important information that affects their well-being, such as health information, safety information, and information about their rights.

National legal and policy frameworks are often written in a way that is difficult for children to understand, making it challenging for policymakers and professionals to involve and consult with children on issues that affect them. To facilitate effective child participation in decision-making processes, it is essential to provide information to children in a format that is appropriate for their maturity and level of understanding, as it is in their best interest.

This Policy Framework emphasises the importance of providing children with information that is tailored to their age and background, presented in simple language and various creative mediums (such as videos, books, campaigns, and web tools) that are engaging and easy for children to understand. This includes providing children with child-friendly materials and services.

### Proposed Measures

**Measure 4.1.1** Create and distribute informative and interactive content for children in schools and on digital platforms, pertaining to laws, policies, and services that impact them directly or indirectly.

**Measure 4.1.2** Increase understanding among policymakers and professionals who work with and for children of the significance of children's rights and the need to provide materials, surroundings, and practices that are suitable for children's age and developmental needs. Workshops and seminars will be used to inform how child participation in decision-making processes can benefit both the child and the community.

**Measure 4.1.3** Raise awareness amongst parents and primary caregivers about how to increase children's opportunities for participation in their home environment. As part of this initiative, parents are to be empowered to participate in decision-making processes that impact their children (e.g., school boards) and support their children's involvement in decision-making processes.

## 4.2 Promote Meaningful, Inclusive and Safe Child Participation among Policymakers and Professionals working with and for children

Policymakers and professionals who work with and for children play a critical role in promoting child participation. To achieve this, policymakers need to be provided with the necessary capacity building and tools, to develop child participation practices and mechanisms that respond to the needs, expectations, and challenges of diverse groups of children.

Child participation should be meaningful, and it should take place in a safe, ethical, and inclusive environment. This can be achieved by strengthening the training and skills of policymakers and professionals to fully understand the importance of child participation and how to effectively involve children in decision-making processes. Building on existing initiatives, this Policy Framework encourages partnerships between policymakers, professionals, and organisations that work with children to strengthen the sustainability and impact of child participation mechanisms at the local and national levels.

### Proposed Measures

**Measure 4.2.1** Integrate the principle of child participation in decision-making within Government policy making by providing training and resources to policymakers and other government officials.

**Measure 4.2.2** Create online tools and mechanisms that will facilitate and enable a safe, inclusive, and meaningful child participation in national policymaking.

**Measure 4.2.3** Establish child-led groups within schools to foster child participation in decision-making across various subjects and topics.

**Measure 4.2.4** Organise regular local and international events to disseminate best practices among policymakers and professionals working with and for children.

**Measure 4.2.5** Recognise outstanding policymaking and programs, as well as individuals who excel in implementing innovative safe, inclusive and meaningful child participation processes through a yearly 'Child Participation Award'.

**Measure 4.2.6** Establish a child participation evaluation tool to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of activities that promote child participation.

### 4.3 Raise Awareness of Child Participation among Children and their Families

Parents play a crucial role in protecting their child's rights by making decisions on their behalf. For children to be able to have an impact on their own lives, it is important for them to have awareness and knowledge of their rights. For the right to participate to be effective, both adults and children must be aware of it, and understand it. Therefore, it is essential for both adults and children to have a solid understanding of children's rights, the concept behind them, and the ability to put them into practice.

#### Proposed Measures

**Measure 4.3.1** Create and manage multiple-channel awareness initiatives aimed at educating parents and children about the opportunities available for children to be actively involved in decision-making processes.

**Measure 4.3.2** Set up a child advisory board to increase understanding and awareness of child participation among children, parents, educators, policymakers, and other key stakeholders such as community leaders.



04

# IMPLEMENTATION, MONITORING AND EVALUATION







04

# IMPLEMENTATION, MONITORING AND EVALUATION



## 4.1 Implementation

A coordinated and complementary approach through national and EU funds is necessary with a view to maximising the benefits of the implementation of the Children's Policy Framework 2024-2030. Complementarity between European Structural and Investment Funds (ESI) Funds and other centralised EU and National funding instruments will be sought in various areas to ensure synergies and coordination between different actions.

### EU Funds

Specific EU Funds have been made available in particular to alleviate negative social inheritances and promote inclusion for all. By focusing primarily on children and young persons, EU Funds will be utilised for measures pertaining to healthcare, healthy meals, sports and education amongst others.

Support will also be provided for measures fostering the children's active participation in civic and democratic life and other measures to ensure equal access to school-based activities such as artistic and cultural activities.

Initiatives supported will be in line with Malta's National Action Plan for a Child Guarantee 2022-2030.

## 4.2 Monitoring and Evaluation

The Policy Framework 2024-2030 is a cohesive plan that aims to enable and empower children to thrive and reach their full potential.

The achievement of the set goals necessitates the development of new policies/programmes and implementation of identified measures across multiple sectors. This requires cooperation and commitment by all key actors at various levels.

Within this context, the Ministry for Social Policy and Children's Rights (MSPC) will facilitate inter-ministerial cross collaboration to monitor and report on a bi-annual basis the implementation of the set objectives defined in the Policy Framework. The results of the monitoring of the implementation will be used to evaluate the policy outcomes to guide possible improvements.

# NEXT STEPS



## Next Steps

This draft of the Children's Policy Framework 2024-2030 for public consultation aims to outline Government's agenda for the next 6 years. Once adopted it will serve as an overarching policy framework, that will lead to tangible and concrete results to ensure that every child has the opportunity to reach their full potential and live a safe, healthy and fulfilling life.

Within this context, relevant stakeholders are invited to provide their feedback in relation to the Children's Policy Framework 2024-2030 by 21 December 2023.

Written submissions can be made as follows:

Electronic submissions may be sent to: [research.rpod@gov.mt](mailto:research.rpod@gov.mt)

Postal submissions should be addressed to:

Director General  
Strategy and Implementation Division  
Policy Development and International Affairs Directorate  
Ministry for Social Policy and Children's Rights  
Palazzo Ferreria, 310, Republic Street Valletta

## Child Participation

One of the aims of this Policy Framework is to promote and improve the inclusive and systemic participation of children.

Cognisant of the fact that actions must be taken to actively include children's voices, concerns and recommendations, the Ministry for Social Policy is inviting all children to submit their opinions through the **Empowering Children App**: <https://empoweringchildren.gov.mt/>

