

## **INTRODUCTION**

2011 marks an opportunity for significant change in Ireland. The new Programme for Government must reflect this opportunity. Much of the coverage of election 2011 focused on candidates' experiences of going door to door in communities across the country. What they heard reflected the increasing hardship too many families are now facing. Barnardos knows these stories all too well. We work in some of the most marginalised and disadvantaged communities in Ireland. We see daily the increasing difficulties families face as the recession increasingly squeezes family incomes and the public services they rely on. We know that there are children sleeping in cold houses because their parents can't afford the utility bills. We know that there are children going to school hungry because there isn't enough food in the house. We understand the challenges facing the country and the new Government. But we believe that brave political choices must be made to change the long standing political culture that has sheltered those with the most and targeted those with the least. This Programme for Government must undo the legacy of the last fourteen years. It must stand for children and make them the priority for the future of Ireland.

## **CONSTITUTIONAL REFERENDUM**

Children must be put at the heart of Irish law. The Constitution represents the bedrock of the social and legal mores of our society; it is the document that should represent the core principles that we as a nation stand for. The conspicuous absence of distinct children's rights in the Constitution represents the ongoing failure of our society to adequately prioritise children. It is time to change this. Barnardos believes that the Programme for Government must prioritise the Referendum on children's rights with the aim to hold the Referendum in 2011.

The wording for the Referendum must not represent a dilution from that proposed by the Joint Oireachtas Committee on the Constitutional Amendment on Children in 2010. In particular, any wording put to the people for consideration must enshrine the principles of best interest of the child and the voice of the child in keeping with the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child.

## **COMMUNITY SERVICE MODELS: BREAKING THE CYCLE**

Ireland needs a new approach to thinking about children and their issues. We must develop a holistic framework that looks at the various factors that impact on children and build our systems of support around them. The key to this is rethinking how we view children, their needs, rights and protection. The new Programme for Government provides an opportunity to rethink how we do things and to make children a national priority.

### *Prevention and Early Intervention*

Barnardos very much welcomes Fine Gael's support of the UK *First Steps* model and the Labour Party's proposals to roll out community based programmes modelled on the Youngballymun project. Both of these models of service provision understand the crucial importance of intervening early in children's lives to prevent the difficulties that living in disadvantage can cause.

A national Programme of Prevention and Early Intervention must be developed to underpin the roll out of service provision models that aim to intervene early on in children's lives. This Programme must deliver a strategy for the development of services based on:

- Integrated service delivery across all health, education and welfare services affecting children and families from birth;
- Community service models where service delivery is planned and targeted at local needs to achieve positive outcomes for children and families;
- Rigorous, independent evaluation that identifies how models are working, where the gaps are and what needs to be done to improve services over the lifetime of the Programme.

The overall aim of such a Programme must be to overhaul Ireland's approach to services for children living in disadvantage. If we are to break inter-generational cycles of poverty and disadvantage we must develop a cohesive strategy for prevention models that work.

#### *Early Childhood Care and Education*

A crucial part of the models outlined above is early childhood care and education (ECCE) services. Barnardos welcomes both Fine Gael and Labour commitments to maintain the free pre-school year currently available to all children the year before they start school. This scheme is an important equaliser for children living in disadvantage, giving them an opportunity to start school on a more level playing field than they might otherwise have. Barnardos also welcomes Labour's commitment to roll out SIOLTA and the Workforce Development Plan which is vital to professionalising the early years sector and ensuring that all children have access to high quality early years services.

Barnardos believe that a ten year strategy for the development of ECCE services for children in Ireland must be established to give vision and focus to the development of this sector and ensure that high quality services are consistently available to children throughout Ireland.

#### *Supporting Families*

Barnardos welcomes Fine Gael and Labour proposals to review current parental leave opportunities when a baby is born and to revisit some elements of family law. Barnardos also welcomes current moves to review Guardianship laws and has supported a number of proposals set out by the Law Reform Commission in 2010. While Barnardos believes that an overhaul of legislation with regards to parental rights and responsibilities is necessary, any Bill must be based on the best interests of the child.

### **CHILD WELFARE AND PROTECTION**

Barnardos is heartened to see that both Fine Gael and Labour are keen to ensure the findings identified in the Ryan, Murphy and Roscommon reports are addressed, with a commitment to strengthen the child welfare and protection systems through legislative and policy reform. The current inconsistency and lack of trust in the child welfare and protection system has been exacerbated by the gap between policy reform and implementation. The new Programme for Government must address this failing by improving accountability and responsibility through the establishment of the Department of Social Care.

The placing of Children's First on a statutory basis is of paramount importance to ensure consistency of care across the country. The full implementation of the 99 recommendations in the Ryan Implementation Plan is also essential if Ireland is to ensure that children are adequately protected now and in the future. This means guaranteeing that all children in care have an allocated social worker and active care plan, the establishment of an out of hours social work service and the entitlement and availability of aftercare services.

### **CHILD POVERTY**

Poverty is the root cause of many challenges facing children. Child poverty is a complex, multi-dimensional problem affecting all aspects of children's lives. Therefore solving it requires a multi-faceted approach that is coupled with actions to break the intergenerational cycle of disadvantage. For the 91,954 children living in consistent poverty<sup>1</sup>, the recession has meant that

---

<sup>1</sup> CSO (2010) EU SILC 2009

their family incomes have been slashed by cuts to social welfare, increased taxes and increased family debt. At the same time, the public services many of them rely on for support in their education, health and housing have been cut back.

Poor children grow up in poor households, so Barnardos is against any further cuts to the adult social welfare rates as these families have experienced significant cuts already. Likewise any reform to child income supports must protect children at risk of poverty while also removing potential poverty traps to ensure that the take up of low paid employment leads to improved household income. Barnardos welcomes both Fine Gael's and Labour's commitment to assist those in low paid employment by reinstating the National Minimum Wage to €8.65p.h. and reviewing the impact of the Universal Social Charge on work incentives.

Given that childhood is time limited, Barnardos stresses the urgency of ensuring that children have access to appropriate supports in a timely fashion. Presently children experience lengthy delays in accessing assessments and treatments to the detriment of their health and education. Barnardos welcomes the notion of educational supports following the child between primary and secondary school as this child centred approach will help ensure the child makes an effective transition. A new universal health system would be welcome as it would eliminate the current two-tier system whereby the level of care received is based on the patient's ability to pay. Lastly, the proposed removal of dependency on rent supplement towards a more long term solution, namely the Rental Accommodation Scheme, is positive so long as it presents realistic options for families in good quality accommodation.

## **CONCLUSION**

2011 must be a year of action. Ireland has numerous policies that prioritise children and promise a great many things for them. Policy is important but implementation is crucial. We need strong policies that underpin services with the principles and values we want to set out for children but implementation must be the core priority for this Government. Children have waited long enough for the proper attention to be paid to the services that make a difference to their lives. They must now be put at the centre of reform in all areas that affect them: protection services, social welfare, education, health and housing. We must end the culture that has based policy and service provision decisions on the agendas of others and refocus our attention on the child at the centre of every decision; the child whose life and well-being depends on the system. The new Programme for Government must reflect that responsibility and duty to the children of Ireland. There is a renewed sense of hope following election 2011 and real possibility for change.