

I'm Still
hungry



Aoife says Teddy wrote it.

1 in 7 children in Ireland live silently in poverty.
Give them a voice. Yours.

Seven Steps to Ending Child Poverty



FOREWORD

In 2005, Barnardos launched a 12 year strategic plan with the ultimate vision of making Ireland a place where childhood is valued and all children and young people are cherished equally.

Barnardos' mission is to challenge and support families, communities, society and Government to make Ireland the best place in the world to be a child, focusing specifically on children and young people whose well being is under threat.

Our Advocacy Department contributes to advancing the mission and vision of the organisation, by promoting positive change in the areas of policy, legislation and practice. We work pro-actively on identified priority policy areas: child poverty; educational disadvantage; child protection and the effects of alcohol abuse in the family on children.

While Barnardos works directly with 12,000 vulnerable children and parents in Ireland every year, we seek to improve the lives of all children. We do this by speaking out for children and proposing policy changes that will better their lives. Children's well being is influenced by a wide range of Government policies including income and employment, health and welfare, housing and accommodation, education, play, recreation and community facilities. It is for this reason that Barnardos *Seven Steps* plan towards ending child poverty calls for investment and policy development in different areas of children's lives.

We believe that investing in children is an investment in the future – because every childhood lasts a lifetime.

Norah Gibbons
Director of Advocacy, Barnardos
October 2005

SEVEN STEPS

to ending child poverty

1 Raise incomes for families with children living in poverty

- Honour and increase outstanding child benefit commitments
- Introduce a revised targeted child income support

2 Improve educational outcomes for all children

- Ensure all children make the transition to second level education
- Adequately assist parents with the costs of sending their children to school
- Adequately resource the National Education Welfare Board

3 Introduce comprehensive quality Early Childhood Education and Care

- Introduce a one year free quality Early Childhood Education and Care place for all children in the year prior to attending primary school

4 Eradicate health inequalities so that every child has access to health care

- Extend the full Medical Card to include all families whose total income is taxed at the standard 20% tax rate
- Ensure health services for children are available, accessible and appropriate

5 Improve housing standards for children at risk

- Remove all children from B&B emergency accommodation
- Enforce the Residential Tenancy Act 2004 to protect the interests of vulnerable tenants in the private rental sector

6 Make work pay enough so families escape poverty traps

- Extend maternity leave and introduce paid parental leave
- Eliminate unemployment traps

7 Ensure all policies relating to children impact positively and 'join up'

- Place the National Children's Office on a statutory independent basis
- Increase funding to the Office of the Ombudsman for Children

Current Situation

Since 1997, the issue of child poverty has remained high on the political agenda with the result that there has been a strong commitment by Government to tackle it. This can be seen from the range of strategies and policies that have been produced, including the National Children's Strategy (2000), which promises that *'children will be provided with the financial supports necessary to eliminate child poverty'*. Also the revised National Anti-Poverty Strategy (2002) sets a target of reducing the number of children living in consistent poverty to below 2% by 2007 and if possible to eliminate it. The Government's commitment to achieving this target is reiterated in the current social partnership agreement *Sustaining Progress 2003-2005*, where one of the Special Initiatives is dedicated to 'Ending Child Poverty'.

Barnardos feels that tackling child poverty requires the **full implementation** of the varied strategies and policies. Childhood is time limited yet the effects on children experiencing poverty on a daily basis last a lifetime.

Childhood is a time to be cherished and should not be viewed as a waiting period for adulthood.

"The area has not changed much since I was a child! There is still nothing in it for children, no parks or playgrounds. We would love to give our children more, but we simply can't. We want to give our children what we did not have but everything costs so much."
(Mother with four children living in the Midlands)

Extent of child poverty in Ireland

The full extent of child poverty means that in 2003 (the latest year for which figures are available):

- 148,000 children under the age of 18 were living in consistent poverty – this represents one in

seven children (or 14.6% of all children). These are children who were living in households with incomes below 60% of the national median income and experiencing deprivation based on the agreed eight deprivation indicators.¹ This total of 148,000 is equivalent to the populations of Louth and Carlow combined.²

- In 2003, Ireland had the highest rate of relative child poverty (23%) in the EU-15, this equates to 242,000 children.
- Children in households where parents are unemployed, ill, disabled or where there are three or more children are particularly at risk of poverty. In addition, children raised in lone-parent households are at a high risk of experiencing poverty. In 1994, one in 20 households in consistent poverty were headed by a lone parent, by 2001 this had increased to one in five households.³

Why is there so much child poverty in an era of economic growth?

Ireland has experienced substantial economic and employment growth in the recent past. This combination of a buoyant economy and low unemployment is fuelling a public myth that there is no child poverty in Ireland. However, in reality the divide between the rich and the poor has grown considerably because for those reliant on social welfare their increases have not kept pace with increases in wage rates. This means that many families on social welfare or low incomes cannot pay for everyday items without falling into debt.⁴

"One of our children no longer goes to football, which he loved, because he was being bullied by the other children because his runners were not the right brand name."
(Father with four children living in the Midlands)

1. Combat Poverty Agency (2005), *Ending Child Poverty*, figures adapted from the EU-SILC 2003
2. Central Statistics Office (2002) *Census 2002*
3. OPEN (2004) *One Size Fits All?*
4. Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice (2004) *Low Cost but Acceptable Budget*

Unlike many other European countries, which operate a dual stranded approach of raising family incomes and investing in public services, Ireland's main strategy for combating child poverty is to increase income supports for families with children. The result is it invests little in subsidised quality services for children e.g. childcare and education. Ireland's level of subvention for childcare and healthcare for children is amongst the lowest in the EU, and Ireland is also behind when net education costs are considered.⁵

"Everything that you would like to do with your children, you can't – even a trip to the beach involves carnivals and all of the amusements are €1 or €2 a go. This restricts them to our immediate area as also there is the cost of public transport to start with. But while there may be some sports in the community I don't have the money to put them in there. I would love to include my kids, but it is not possible on my budget. Times are very different to when I was a child."
(Mother of three living in Cork)

Barnardos' Seven Steps plan

Combating child poverty is more than just raising family incomes, it also requires the delivery and accessibility of high quality public services. Barnardos' *Seven Steps* plan covers different areas of children's lives where policy development and investment in services will succeed in lifting one in seven children out of consistent poverty.

"Life is an everyday struggle; the odd day is all right. I am thinking ahead all of the time about what is coming next and how to deal with it. My child was in hospital for a few days and that cost a lot with travelling back and forth, getting my two other children minded etc. It is a constant worry and stress."
(Mother of five living in Cork)

5. Combat Poverty Agency (2005), *Ending Child Poverty*

STEP 1

Raise incomes for families with children living in poverty

Increasing families' incomes is an immediate way to ensure that the household income does not fall below the poverty line. Ireland's child income supports come in two forms, firstly the universal Child Benefit payment paid to all parents and secondly the Child Dependant Allowance (CDA), which is a targeted means tested payment, paid to those in receipt of social welfare. Recently, Government policy has been to significantly increase the Child Benefit payment, which is paid to all parents while the rate of CDA, has remained static since 1994.

Child Benefit

The aim of the payment is to contribute towards the cost of child-rearing and childcare. The monthly rate for 2005 is €141.60 for the first two children and €177.30 for third and subsequent children. The Government had set a minimum Child Benefit target of €149.90 and €185.40 by 2003, which has been deferred twice and is still outstanding. These targets are already being devalued given increases in the costs of living and inflation. Taking an average rate of inflation at 4% between 2003 and 2005, these targets have risen from €149.90 to €155.92 and €185.40 to €192.85 respectively.⁶

BARNARDOS RECOMMENDATION

In Budget 2006, increase the Child Benefit rates to €155.92 for the first two children and €192.85 for third and subsequent children. All future increases in Child Benefit should be raised in line with the real costs of rearing a child.

"The cost of everything has risen; this makes it very difficult to keep up. My daughter is going to college in October and there has been a break in the Child

*Benefit so I received no benefit for her between June and September *, that is €140 down for each of these months. I know I will get it back in October but it makes it so hard for the summer because on my budget I have to live week to week."*

(Mother with two children, Cork)

* Child Benefit is paid in respect of all children aged up to 16 years-of-age or 19 if they are in full time education, but the gap between finishing the Leaving Certificate and entrance into third level education means parents go without the payment.

A revised targeted child income support

It is recognised that the increases in the universal Child Benefit payment are insufficient to lift some families out of poverty and a more targeted approach is needed to assist the poorest children in Ireland. Under new proposals being drawn up by the National Economic and Social Council⁷ (NESCC), it is proposed to merge the targeted Child Dependant Allowance (CDA) and Family Income Supplement – the top-up payment targeted at those on low pay. Barnardos believes the advantage of this merger is that it would benefit two sets of children, those whose parents are on social welfare and those whose parents are in low paid employment. It is expected that in 2005 the expenditure on these separate payments will be nearly €400m.

At present, the current targeted payments are ineffective. The weekly rate of the CDA payment of between €16.80 to €21.60 (depending on which payment the main claimant is receiving), has remained unchanged since 1994 resulting in the value of the payment being totally depreciated. Also the Family Income Supplement has a very

6. Central Statistics Office, *Consumer Price Index unit 2005*

7. NESCC *Child Income Supports* – final report due November 2005

low take up rate. It is estimated that only one third of eligible families claim this payment and this is largely due to lack of awareness of its availability.

“ I am thinking ahead all of the time about what is coming next and how to deal with it. ”

(Mother of five, Cork)

Under the new proposal, families would automatically receive this targeted child income support if their household income was below a certain threshold. This would remove the condition that eligibility would be based on either social welfare or employment status. In reality it could assist over 430,000 children.⁸ Barnardos believes this payment should be set at a minimum of €33 per week. This figure is based on up-rating the CDA from the 1994 values in line with inflation and costs of living.

Barnardos echoes the recommendation of the NESC that the withdrawal of this payment should be tapered once the income ceiling has been exceeded. This would facilitate the take-up of employment and reduce some unemployment traps. The NESC estimates annual expenditure for this payment would be between €373m and €468m depending on the rate of payment and the rate of withdrawal.

“I get a weekly allowance of €63 for three children and the monthly child benefit of €283 for two of my children, but get no child benefit for my 17 year-old as she is no longer in school but she is still dependent on me, as she has no money.”

(Mother of five, Cork)

BARNARDOS RECOMMENDATION

Introduce a targeted child income support in Budget 2006 at a minimum rate of €33 per week. Also ensure that the income thresholds, which will determine eligibility, are set sufficiently high to ensure that all children living in poverty will benefit from the payment. These thresholds should be reviewed every two years to ensure consistency in line with the real costs of child rearing.

8. Number of CDA beneficiaries in 2003 was 405,126 and number of child beneficiaries of FIS was 26,409

STEP 2

Improve educational outcomes for all children

The link between poverty and educational disadvantage⁹ is very strong and can have a lifelong detrimental impact on the child in terms of personal and skills development and labour market participation. Despite the existence of a number of Government initiatives and strategies to tackle educational disadvantage including the *Sustaining Progress – Special Initiative on ‘Educational Disadvantage’*, the extent of literacy difficulties and early school leaving is still a matter for serious concern.

Ireland's public investment in education at post primary and, in particular, primary level is well below the OECD average. Annual rates of expenditure for education per student are €3,042 at primary level, €4,263 at secondary level and €8,131 at third level.¹⁰ This is despite the evidence that investment in diverting a child from leaving school early has a long-term positive effect on both the economy and society.

- Almost 1,000 pupils per year fail to make the transition between primary and secondary school
- Almost one in three third class pupils in disadvantaged areas suffer severe literacy difficulties.¹¹
- Early school leaving is estimated to affect nearly one in five young people in Ireland. Fifteen per cent of young people leave school without a Leaving Certificate and 3% with no qualification at all.¹²

“My main priority now is for my eldest to stay in school because he knows if he does he will have options open to him for his career. If he stays in school he will be a role model for his brothers and sisters to see what they can do.”

(Mother of five, Dublin)

There is no doubt that a family's economic status impacts on a child's capacity to participate fully in school; a Barnardos employee speaking about an 11-year-old girl said:

“The extent of poverty for this child meant that she attended school for a full year with torn runners, no socks, and no school bag and never had a pencil.”

A recent study in the US found that increasing a family's annual income by €1,000 improved children's maths test scores by 2.1% and their reading score by 3.6%.¹³

The transition between primary and secondary school can be particularly hard for pupils experiencing literacy and numeracy difficulties. As a Barnardos employee, running a programme to help children make the transition between primary and secondary school, commented:

“All four of the young people (aged 11 and 12) attending the group found huge difficulty in understanding worksheets given to them that required them to read and write. One boy asked me to spell his home address. All four needed extra support from the two workers running the programme. When meeting up with the young people two months later, they commented on how isolated they felt, how they were taunted and bullied by other children in the school because they attended the special needs class.”

BARNARDOS RECOMMENDATION

Introduce an effective tracking system to ensure that all children make the transition from primary school to secondary school.

9. Saint Vincent de Paul (2003) *Learning to Make Do – A Survey on Educational Disadvantage*

10. OECD, 2004, *Education at a Glance*

11. Educational Research Centre (2004) *Reading Literacy in Disadvantaged Primary Schools*

12. NESF (2002) *Early School Leavers*

13. University of Rochester (2005) quoted in *The Independent* on 22nd August 2005

Even the costs of sending children back to school can be a struggle for parents especially when there are a number of siblings returning. The costs of textbooks, uniforms and stationery can be exorbitant resulting in some families getting into debt. The current value of the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance (€80 for a primary school pupil and €150 for a secondary school pupil) is not reflective of the true costs of uniforms, sportswear and footwear. Recent Barnardos research shows that the average costs for basic uniform, sportswear, shoes and textbooks for a primary school pupil is €225.60 and for a secondary school child it is €408.75. For those entering first year in secondary school the costs are substantially higher.

Also the School Book Rental Scheme, which can significantly reduce the financial burden on parents to purchase books, operates on an ad-hoc basis.

“ I get a loan of €1,000 from a loan shark for uniforms, books and other stuff. ”

(Mother of five, Dublin)

BARNARDOS RECOMMENDATION

- Increase the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance to €150 for primary school children and €200 for secondary school children to reflect costs of clothing and footwear.
- Roll out the school book rental scheme nationally to reduce costs of textbooks.
- Provide a once off payment of €300 to all pupils entering first year in secondary school to reflect the additional costs incurred in beginning the secondary school cycle.

The National Education Welfare Board

Absenteeism among children living in areas of disadvantage is a serious issue and has been identified as particularly acute for children among the Traveller community and other ethnic minorities. The National Education Welfare Board (NEWB) was established to monitor and combat absenteeism by working with parents, teachers and pupils. However, its resources are too limited to fulfil all of its objectives therefore restricting its ability to make an impact on combating absenteeism. There are 83 Education Welfare Officers throughout the country and some counties do not have any for example, Roscommon.¹⁴

BARNARDOS RECOMMENDATION

Adequately resource the National Education Welfare Board to ensure it is able to make a positive impact on children experiencing absenteeism. Barnardos supports the NEWB request that a budget of €12.6m is needed for the Board to be fully effective.

14. National Education Welfare Board (2005) www.newb.ie

STEP 3

Introduce comprehensive quality Early Childhood Education and Care

The issue of Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is now firmly placed on the political agenda. Barnardos considers the immediacy to address this issue appears to be for reasons of facilitating female access to and retention in the labour market rather than from the perspective of child development.

For the child, the benefits of quality pre-school education and care are far reaching and can assist towards breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty. Quality pre-school experience appears to be a stronger force in the lives of children from low income families than those in high income families. Evaluations of ECEC programmes have shown that attendance and participation in the programmes have a positive impact on children with regard to cognitive, social and emotional development, school readiness and school performance.¹⁵ This is particularly true for children who are most disadvantaged.

As a Dublin-based Barnardos employee noted: *“For the children participating in our Early Years Programme, from two years-of-age onwards, there is a positive effect on their all round development. In our experience, this contact directly improves outcomes for children such as building self-esteem, developing independence, promoting problem-solving, and the parent/child and peer relationships. Children who*

experience an Early Years Programme within our services, are more likely to succeed in school.”

Public expenditure in Ireland on pre-school education and care is near minimal. Less than 0.2% of Irish GDP is invested in childcare, half of that of most other industrialised countries and just a fifth of the EU target of 1% GDP. However, international research has shown that the rate of return to society in the long term is significant. For instance, Schweinhart’s review of the Perry Pre-school programme found that the rate of return to society was \$17 for every \$1 spent on each participant attending the programme.¹⁶

“I can see the benefit this programme has been to my child and other children. There are so many activities they can do that it really improves their development. They learn to become more independent while also learning to share and to play together. The experience really helped my older child who has now started primary school.”

(Father with three children in Dublin)

The main current Government strategy in this area is the implementation of the Equal Opportunities for Childcare Programme under the National Development Plan. This has a budget of €500m spanning from 2000 to the end of 2006. So far the programme has created 24,600

“ I can see the benefit this programme has been to my child and other children. There are so many activities they can do that it really improves their development. ”

(Father with three children in Dublin)

15. Sheila B Kamerman, Michelle Neuman, Jane Waldfogel and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn/OECD (2003) *Social Policies, Family Types and Child Outcomes in Selected OECD Countries*

16. Schweinhart (2000) *The High Scope Perry Pre-school Study Through Age 40*

childcare places between 2000 and 2004 in community based playgroups and private crèches. However, issues of affordability and lack of places are still rife. Childcare costs to parents in Austria equate to 5% Gross Average Industrial Earnings and in Japan it is 8% but in Ireland it is 20% and this rises to 50% with two children in day care.¹⁷

The National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) 2005 report on Early Childhood Care and Education issued a number of recommendations to span a 10 year period that would formalise and improve the sector in the interests of children. The principles of flexibility of choice for parents, diversity of provision and quality are central to any reform of this sector. The main recommendation from NESF is the introduction of a universal quality free ECEC place for 3.5 hours a day, 5 days a week to all children the year prior to joining primary school. For the younger children it is recommended that current facilities should continue to be resourced and improved.

BARNARDOS RECOMMENDATION

Although Barnardos agrees with the NESF recommendation, it is a long-term objective. In the short term Barnardos calls for the roll-out of these universal quality free Early Childhood Education and Care places to begin with children who are disadvantaged.

Barnardos echoes the NESF's call for curriculum reform in the infant classes in primary schools. Such reform should include a standard framework and pedagogy, lower adult/child ratios and increased facilities for play, particularly outdoor play.

BARNARDOS RECOMMENDATION

Reform the curriculum for infant classes in primary schools.

17. OECD (2003) *Babies and Bosses*

STEP 4

Eradicate health inequalities so that every child has access to health care

Ireland spends less on public and private health as a proportion of GDP than most other EU countries. In 2002, Ireland spent 7.3% of GDP on health. Ireland had the seventh lowest expenditure in health according to the OECD data.¹⁸ Although the expenditure has increased since then, the health inequalities are as prevalent as ever.

Ireland has a two-tier health system based on an ability to pay. This reinforces the correlation between poverty and ill-health with the result that:

- Many of those on low incomes cannot afford to bring their child to the doctor, dentist or optician.
- Women from economically poorer backgrounds who are outside the labour market are more than twice as likely to give birth to low birth weight children as women in the higher professional group.¹⁹
- Infant mortality amongst Traveller children is two and a half times that for the settled population. A large majority of Traveller children live in conditions that are far below the minimum required for healthy child development.²⁰

"He is in poor physical health. He is frequently unwell, is underweight, and suffers from constipation, headlice and skin rashes such as ringworm. His speech and language is delayed. Also the mother is in poor health, and there is difficulty accessing and paying for a doctor."
(Barnardos employee about a boy aged three, Dublin)

The Medical Card

In 1997, 34% of the population were covered under the Medical Card scheme, that figure is now down to 28% despite an increase in population.

The Government pledged in the last election to extend the coverage of the Medical Card system to an additional 200,000 people. That proposal has been modified so what is now currently being rolled out is a GP-only Medical Card which will cover the costs of going to visit a GP but does not include the costs of prescriptions or any follow-up treatment. The loss of the full Medical Card can place a huge burden on low income families as they are unable to meet their medical needs.

"I was working for a year, but when I lost the Medical Card I had to give up work. We have four children including a baby so losing the Medical Card was not an option for us."

(Father with four children living in the Midlands)

In recognition of this burden on low income families, Barnardos calls for the full Medical Card to be extended to all families whose income is based on the National Minimum Wage (€7.60 per hour) and also those whose income is below the cut-off point for paying the higher rate (42%) of tax. Presently these tax bands are €29,400 for a single person, €38,400 for married couples with one income, €58,800 for married couples with two incomes and €33,400 for lone parent families.

18. OECD (2004) Health Data

19. Public Health Alliance Ireland (2004) *Health in Ireland – An Unequal State*

20. Department of Health and Children (2002), *Traveller Health*

BARNARDOS RECOMMENDATION

Given that in the majority of cases, visits to the GP result in medicines being prescribed, Barnardos calls for the extension of the full Medical Card to all families whose total income is taxed at the standard tax rate (20%). This would ensure that not only families reliant on social welfare would keep the Medical Card but also those whose income is on the National Minimum Wage and those who are on the Average Industrial Earnings.

Child specialist services

Children whose parents are unable to pay for specialists and who have to rely on accessing these services publicly are experiencing lengthy delays. Such services include orthodontists, opticians, speech and language therapists and these delays can seriously impede their personal development.

“My 13 year-old son has a hole in his eardrum that was discovered when he was seven. We were told they couldn’t operate on him until he turned 11, but he is now 13 and we still haven’t heard back. The hole is growing as he grows and is affecting his hearing and needs urgent attention.”

(Mother of five, Dublin)

“Children referred for psychological and educational assessments are placed on a waiting list and our experience is that this is at least a two year waiting period. Consequently the child, although referred at initial point of contact with our services, may enter the school system without appropriate assessment and the corresponding developmental ‘windows and opportunities’ are passed by. This delay also impacts on securing the appropriate resources where needed – e.g a Special Needs Assistant.”

(Barnardos employee based in Dublin)

There is a shortage of public health doctors with the result that early detection and intervention is being missed. The loss of opportunities to pick up on developmental problems early could have a life-long negative impact on the child. It is reported that delays in public health checks have

resulted in one area having no nine month developmental checks on babies since 2003.²¹

“My daughter has been waiting for nine months already for an educational psychological assessment and has been told she has to wait another two and half years. This is impacting on her development as she should have started school this year but without the assessment there will be no resource teacher for her. If we wait the two and half years it will be too late as she will be struggling too much in school so now I have to find €300 to pay for a consultant to give me the assessment which will then let me know what supports my daughter needs. Why should she have to wait this long?”
(Mother with one child, Dublin)

Also there is a severe shortage of child appropriate care settings within the community and hospitals. For instance, over 2,650 children and teenagers were admitted to adult psychiatric hospitals and units in general hospitals between 1998 and 2000. Over 200 of these were aged 15 and under. In 2000 alone, almost 800 teenagers and 50 children were admitted to adult psychiatric facilities. A report from the Working Group on Child and Adolescent Psychiatry²² recommends that seven child and adolescent inpatient units need to be developed in the country, each providing 20 beds. There are currently just three centres of a residential nature for children requiring psychiatric treatment throughout the country. In addition the newly passed Disability Bill is criticised for not guaranteeing funding to ensure appropriate disability services and this could have long-term implications for children with disabilities.

BARNARDOS RECOMMENDATION

In light of the National Children’s Strategy goal to ensure that children receive quality supports and services, a targeted programme of investment is needed to ensure health services are available, accessible and appropriate for children needing them regardless of their illness. Services provided must be of the highest quality and proven to be able to deliver positive and measurable outcomes for children.

21. *Irish Times*, 6th September 2005

22. Department of Health and Children (2001) Working Group on Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Services

STEP 5

Improve housing standards for children at risk

Private ownership continues to be the preferred housing tenure in Ireland. However, for children living in poverty, accommodation in the social housing sector and private rental sectors are more likely. Local authority tenants are five times more likely to be living in consistent poverty than people living in other types of accommodation.²³

"I have been living in my house for five years now even though I was told it would be for around six months as these houses are condemned for demolition. There is no control in the area, houses are left derelict and are often set on fire, rubbish is dumped in the gardens, lots of traffic speeding and kids just want to be kids and explore their area but it is too dangerous for them."

(Mother with three children, Dublin)

There are obviously difficulties in estimating the exact number of children experiencing homelessness and sometimes those who are sleeping rough are not counted. Bearing this in mind, there is still a significant number of children who experience homelessness and/or live in emergency accommodation. In 2002, there were 5,581 people homeless. Of these 1,405 were children who were homeless with their parents in Ireland - 1,140 of them in Dublin. Approximately 56% of children homeless with their parents in Dublin are aged five years or less.²⁴

The implications of homelessness for children are bleak; regular moves from one emergency accommodation unit to another threatens their familial, social and educational stability. Temporary accommodation can be totally unsuitable for a child's well being, as one Dublin-based Barnardos

employee describes the living conditions of one three year-old boy:

"The child was living in temporary accommodation with both parents in a one bedroom basement flat which was dark, in a poor state of repair, sparsely furnished with no garden or outdoor facilities."

Frequently these children have histories of incomplete vaccinations, poor nutrition, retarded weight and height growth, and they suffer from emotional and mental distress. A revised set of statistics on the number of homeless children is due by December 2005 and these are expected to be lower following the implementation of the *Homeless – An Integrated Strategy* which works with children and their families experiencing homelessness.

BARNARDOS RECOMMENDATION

Remove all children from emergency accommodation and provide alternative appropriate accommodation of high standard for them and their families.

Within the private rental sector, a two-tier system seems to operate between tenants who are in receipt of rent supplement allowance and those who are not. Frequently the former are in accommodation that is of poorer quality and standard. The Children's Research Centre²⁵ found that 50,000 children were living in accommodation that is overcrowded, damp, in disrepair or in poor neighbourhoods. These problems were more common among children in one-parent families and those living in private rental accommodation.

23. Combat Poverty Agency (2005) *Mapping Poverty, National, Regional and County Patterns*

24. Department of Environment, and Local Government (2002) *Assessment of Homelessness*

25. Children's Research Centre (2004) *Housing Problems and Irish Children*

“Parents want to be housed in their own home and can wait up to eight to ten years for this to happen. They are often under pressure from the housing authorities to accept private rented accommodation which means they are removed from the housing waiting list, directly resulting in losing their opportunity of a permanent home. This is a very poor outcome for families and not in children’s interests.”
(Barnardos employee, based in Dublin)

Local Authorities are responsible for inspections under housing legislation. Officials monitor and inspect premises of registered landlords to ensure that the accommodation meets quality standards. Threshold stated that 30% of the private rented properties inspected by Local Authority officials

were found to be below the minimum standards but legal proceedings were only taken against four landlords.²⁶ Also, if the landlord fails to register there is no indication of the quality of accommodation that is on offer.

BARNARDOS RECOMMENDATION

Enforce the adherence to the Residential Tenancies Act to ensure all vulnerable tenants are being protected. The Local Authorities and the Private Residential Tenancies Board must ensure all landlords are registered and that minimum quality standards are complied with.

“ Kids just want to be kids but the area is too dangerous for them to explore.”

(Father with three children in Dublin)

26. Threshold (2005) *Annual Report*

STEP 6

Make work pay enough so families escape poverty traps

The Irish labour market has experienced an employment boom over the past decade with a drastic fall in unemployment rates. However, work alone is not necessarily a guaranteed route out of poverty given such factors as level of wages received, childcare costs, transport costs and loss of the Medical Card. The risk of poverty amongst households with parents working has increased from 8.3% in 1994 to 18.8% in 2001.²⁷ It is also these extra costs that can prevent people from taking up employment and trapping them into welfare dependency.

“After school care would make a difference as I would be able to further my education and get out of the poverty trap but to pay for childcare would place me in a worse position than I am already.”

(Mother of two, Cork)

In addition to increasing the access to the labour market for disadvantaged groups it is important to retain parents in the labour market. The introduction of family friendly practices is slow in Ireland. There is no formal paternity leave and any parental leave is unpaid. Generous parental leave policies are recognised as having an important role in attracting and maintaining women in the labour market. It is also in the child's best interests in

terms of their social, emotional and cognitive development if they are cared for full time by one of their parents for the first year of life.²⁸ To help facilitate this, the National Economic and Social Forum's 2005 report calls for the extension of maternity leave from 18 weeks to 26 weeks.

BARNARDOS RECOMMENDATION

To enable full time parental care during the child's first year of life, maternity leave should be extended to 26 weeks and paid parental leave for 26 weeks should be introduced and be available to either parent.

Despite Ireland having a low national unemployment rate of 4.3%, the unemployment rate for those who left school early and aged between 15-19 is 13.4%. To reduce the possibility of this group becoming the long term unemployed of tomorrow and reducing the cycle of intergenerational unemployment, all unemployment traps must be eliminated. Measures include:

- Once introduced, the withdrawal of the proposed revised targeted child income support must be on a gradual basis.
- Significantly increase the threshold for the retention of secondary benefits.
- Increasing the income disregard from €293 for those in receipt of One Parent Family Payment so that the household income does not substantially decrease upon the take up of employment. At present income earned in excess of €293 sees the value of the One Parent Family Payment being halved for the first six months and then totally withdrawn.

27. CORI (2005) *Pathways to Inclusion*

28. Sheila B Kamerman, Michelle Neuman, Jane Waldfogel and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn/ OECD (2003) *Social Policies, Family Types and Child Outcomes in Selected OECD Countries*

"I was in a job for over a year but left because my family lost the Medical Card. This along with excessive transport costs especially with petrol costs rising and no public transport and increased rent meant the family income was no better off. I have looked for work closer to home but there is nothing available and now I am back on the dole but at least we get the secondary benefits."

(Father with four children living in the Midlands)

BARNARDOS RECOMMENDATION

To increase the employment rate amongst early school leavers and thereby break the cycle of poverty, all unemployment traps must be eliminated.

STEP 7

Ensure all policies relating to children impact positively and 'join up'

In line with one of the key goals of the National Children's Strategy that '*Children's lives will be better understood*' all '*departments are required, where relevant, to identify the impact of their policies on children*'. The value of child impact statements is derived from the early identification of the potential impacts of policies on children and their families. It also ensures that children's issues are kept to the fore in Government decision-making processes.²⁹

However, there are frequent examples of where policies were not 'child proofed' with the result that their implementation has impacted negatively on children. Such examples therefore question the Government's commitment to eliminate child poverty as one Dublin mother's experience of trying to access care for her child who has developmental difficulties demonstrates:

"I was told by the public health nurse to apply for the Domiciliary Care Allowance because my child needs constant attention and this payment will just help me meet some of the financial costs of looking after her. However, I cannot get the allowance until I have proof of her illness through an assessment by the Senior Medical Officer but there is a really long waiting list. The medical assessment is in addition to the educational one which also has a really long waiting list. All of this impacts on the whole family and I'm worried about the effects of the delays on my child."
(Mother with one child, Dublin)

Another example is the amendments made to the social welfare system under Budget 2003. These changes eliminated or restricted the availability of supports such as the crèche supplement and rent supplement. Only after extensive lobbying were some of these changes partially readdressed. For instance, the crèche supplement which was initially abolished is now only available to children following a recommendation from a public health nurse or social worker. The lack of supports to parents has a negative knock-on effect on the child.

It is essential that the actions and policies of one department do not impact negatively on the actions of another. While all Government departments have a duty to poverty proof, gender proof and disability proof their policies, the proofing process has to be extended to assess the impact on children.

In addition, another key goal of the National Children's Strategy is to '*give children a voice in matters which affect them*'. The involvement of children in policy design can improve decision making and subsequent implementation. The National Children's Office plays a central role in this.

The Ombudsman for Children is a welcome development for protecting the rights and welfare of children. The functions of the Ombudsman for Children are: to conduct investigations of

" My son has a hole in his ear drum which was discovered when he was 7. They were supposed to operate on him when he was 11 – he's now 13. "

(Mother of five, Dublin)

29. Department of Health and Children (2000) *National Children's Strategy*

complaints regarding actions by public bodies; to promote children's rights; and to provide research and policy advice.³⁰ It is vital that this Office be adequately funded to ensure it can fully meet its objectives. In addition the remit of the Office needs to be extended because at present the Ombudsman for Children Act 2002 precludes the office from investigating cases involving children who are detained in prisons and Garda stations and from investigating any action on decisions relating to status in the refugee appeals process.

BARNARDOS RECOMMENDATION

- 'Child proof' all Government policies to ensure that during their implementation there is no negative impact on children and that the policies 'join up'.
- The National Children's Office should be placed on a statutory independent basis.
- Increase funding for the Office of the Ombudsman for Children and extend its remit.

30. Ombudsman for Children (2005) *Annual Report 2005*



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