



Barnardos
No child gets left behind

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2038

A million reasons to get it right
The Barnardos Children's Declaration

Barnardos supports children whose wellbeing is under threat, by working with them, their families and communities and by campaigning for the rights of children. Barnardos was established in 1962 and is Ireland's leading independent children's charity.

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Foreword

The policies pledged and planned during this general election have the power to shape childhoods that will last a lifetime.

The purpose of A Million Reasons to Get it Right – The Barnardos Children's Declaration is to shine a spotlight on the key issues that affect children's lives. Our hope is that the recommendations we are proposing will inform the thinking of the political parties and independent candidates as they enter into this general election. There are a million plus children and young people living in Ireland and each one is a reason to get it right this time round.

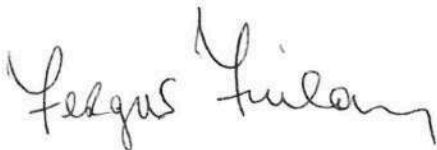
Government policies, social conditions and personal circumstances work together to shape childhoods. There is an increasing recognition from policy-makers that we need to join the dots so that the real picture of children's lives emerges. This shift in perspective can be seen in the:

- New lifecycle approach being adopted in the Social Partnership Agreement Towards 2016
- Development of the Office of the Minister for Children and
- Recently announced longitudinal study of children's lives¹

Even with these steps in the right direction, the fact is there are 110,000 children living in consistent poverty, there are children whose families cannot afford to buy them necessary medicines, there are children who cannot read and write after eight years of formal education and there are children who live in accommodation without heat, cooking facilities or somewhere to play.

Too many children are paying too a high a price for the lack of accessible quality services. Early intervention and prevention strategies that support children and their families are the key to successful and fulfilling lives for children now and into adulthood. Children deserve to be top of the political agenda - the position of Minister for Children should be elevated to full Cabinet status while the Office of the Minister for Children should have a greater role in the commissioning and delivery of services.

We are asking all political parties and independent candidates contesting the next general election to ensure that no child gets left behind. We are asking for public support - your support.



Fergus Finlay,
Chief Executive of Barnardos
April 2007



Norah Gibbons
Director of Advocacy
April 2007

1. Growing Up in Ireland, a joint study to be carried out by the Economic and Social Research Institute and Trinity College Dublin



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Barnardos' Children's Declaration Action Plan

Constitutional Amendment

- Call for cross-party commitment to hold a referendum to amend the Irish Constitution to improve the visibility of children in the Constitution early in the life of the new Dail term

Pre-school – Quality Early Childhood Education and Care

- Introduce a one year free quality Early Childhood Education and Care place for every child in the year prior to starting primary school. The roll-out of these places should begin with children experiencing disadvantage
- Provide professional quality training for all those working with pre-school age children
- Ensure quality Early Childhood Education and Care services are affordable to all parents by providing financial support to childcare providers that adhere to national quality standards
- Implement a comprehensive support system for parents; including 26 weeks paid parental leave in addition to the 26 weeks paid maternity leave implemented from 1 March 2007. This will enable a child to have a parent at home with them during their first year of life and remove some of the stress being experienced by parents

Child Protection

- Place the revised Children First child protection guidelines on a statutory basis

- Introduce a range of supports for children who are giving evidence in court to ensure their voice is heard and that they are not exposed to hostile cross examination
- Extend and resource the Guardian Ad Litem service for children involved in both public and private law proceedings
- Undertake a full review of child protection legislation to ensure all loopholes are closed and children are protected by law from all forms of abuse and exploitation
- Help regulate internet use by putting the Internet Advisory Board on a statutory basis so that the board has monitoring and regulatory functions as well as advisory ones

Poverty

- Increase income to families with children living in consistent poverty through increasing the targeted Qualified Child Allowance payment
- Ensure all families with children living in Ireland receive the universal Child Benefit payment regardless of their parental migration status
- Increase the take-up of the Family Income Supplement to ensure that all those families in low paid employment receive all they are entitled to

Education

- Resource and invest in reading initiatives to fulfil the Government's own target of halving the rate of illiteracy among school children
- Roll-out a national school books rental scheme to ensure all pupils get the best start to their education

- Reduce the waiting period for accessing educational assessments by increasing staff levels in National Education Psychological Service
- Increase the number of Education Welfare Officers to ensure at least every county in Ireland has access to their service
- Invest in Out-of-School Time Services so that children have increased opportunities to develop their social, emotional and educational skills
- Targeted adult literacy schemes should be offered to parents with reading and writing difficulties in disadvantaged communities so parents can more fully support their children's education
- Targeted English as a Foreign Language courses should be offered to non-English speaking parents in new communities so they can more fully support their children's education

Health

- Continue to implement the Vision for Change recommendations to improve the primary care services for children and young people with mental health difficulties
- Improve the community based medical services by introducing two multidisciplinary Community Mental Health Teams per 100,000 population; these teams would comprise of child psychiatrists, clinical nurse/ community psychiatrist nurse, occupational therapists and psychologists amongst others
- Equip parents, teachers and youth workers with knowledge to recognise the onset of psychological/ psychiatric illness in young people through increased public awareness activities about these illnesses
- Extend the full Medical Card to all those families whose total income is taxed at the standard tax rate (20%). This would ensure coverage for all families on social welfare and those who are in low paid employment

Housing and Homelessness

- Ensure no family with children is housed in Bed and Breakfast accommodation longer than the duration of the emergency – alternative appropriate accommodation and quality services need to be provided for all families in this situation
- A fully-resourced, child-focused, 24 hour flexible response service needs to be developed for children and young people experiencing homelessness
- A 'drop-in' centre type service should be established in urban centres to provide initial advice and support for these vulnerable children
- An NCT model for private rental housing to ensure adherence to minimum standards should be developed with clear timelines and targets included

Alcohol

- Implement the recommendations of the Strategic Taskforce on Alcohol (2004), particularly the main child orientated recommendations such as supporting community based initiatives aimed at reducing underage drinking
- Given the strong connections between alcohol abuse and drug abuse, the National Alcohol Strategy and National Drugs Strategy should be reviewed with the view of identifying key areas where both strategies can be integrated to reinforce each other – both national plans are currently being administered separately
- Introduce warning labels on alcoholic drinks to discourage consumption among young people and also among pregnant women in a bid to reduce the incidences of Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder
- Introduce legislation to reduce the exposure of children to alcohol advertising, sponsorship and promotions by establishing a 9pm watershed banning any alcohol related advertising appearing on TV, radio or cinema before that time



Pre-school - Quality Early Childhood Education and Care

The first years in a child's life are the most critical in terms of learning and development. In these first years, children learn, they grow, they explore and they develop. Children's developmental needs at this crucial stage are time-bound, if they go unanswered in these early years, it is difficult to compensate further down the line hence the need for dedicated pre-school age services.

For the children experiencing disadvantage in Ireland today, 110,000 live in consistent poverty, the potential of their early years is being undermined because they do not have access to quality services including Early Childhood Education and Care.

Early Childhood Education and Care has obvious and specific benefits for children and these benefits ripple out across society. Research has shown that early intervention through quality Early Childhood Education and Care improves children's lives in both the short and long term, for example, they stay in school longer and have better employment prospects. The research also shows reduced associated costs to society in terms of reduced need for social services support, fewer teenage pregnancies, fewer children leaving school early and fewer prison places required.

Childcare must be seen as a public service and quality child care must be affordable to all parents. It needs to be funded to ensure there are sufficient adequate quality regulated places available, that staff are trained and able to provide for the development and wellbeing of each child in their care and that parents can be satisfied that all services are being inspected to ensure compliance with state regulations. The current situation in Ireland is a pre-school system which has been shaped by decades of under-investment. The Child Care (Pre-School Services) Regulations 2006 introduce a more comprehensive regulatory system but this still leaves the majority of children who are being cared for outside the home in unregulated care.

Successive governments have shied away from providing a full universal quality Early Childhood Education and Care service despite the proven benefits that early education provides to all children and, in particular, children from disadvantaged backgrounds for whom pre-school might be their only introduction to a learning environment at that stage of their lives. In 2004, only 7% of children aged three and under, and just half of all four-year-olds were in pre-school education.

The pre-school situation in Ireland looks set to improve on its current position but it is coming from a very low base. The Government's National Childcare Investment Programme, 2006-2010 plans to create 50,000 childcare places of all types but only 10,000 of these places are for the three to four years age group and that translates as 2,000 places a year in the lifetime of this plan. In fact according to CSO estimates, there are 112,541 children in the country between the ages of three and four and the simplest maths equation shows that demand is going to outstrip supply leaving some children excluded from the benefits that early education can offer.

The Government is also planning on developing a National Childcare Training Strategy to provide training to 17,000 staff in the childcare sector over the period 2006-2010. Again, the figure of 17,000 is unlikely to meet the real training needs of the sector. Meanwhile a Childcare Services Policy is scheduled for completion in 2007 with roll-out and implementation of the policy by the Health Service Executive.

Fact

There are an estimated 112,541 three and four-year-olds in Ireland but the Government is planning on creating only 2,000 extra pre-school places a year for these children between 2006-2010

1. Schweinhart 2000 The High Scope Perry Pre-school Study Through Age 40
2. Analysis taken from keynote presentation made by Dr John Bennett of OECD, Starting Strong Team II to Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education international conference 2007. The paper was entitled: "New Policy Conclusions from Starting Strong II: an update on OECD early childhood policy reviews"
3. Department of Social and Family Affairs, 2007, National Action Plan for Social Inclusion/ Chapter 2: Children

Actions

- Introduce a one year free quality Early Childhood Education and Care place for every child in the year prior to starting primary school. The roll-out of these places should begin with children experiencing disadvantage
- Provide professional quality training for all those working with pre-school age children
- Ensure quality Early Childhood Education and Care services are affordable to all parents by providing financial support to childcare providers that adhere to national quality standards
- Implement a comprehensive support system for parents; including 26 weeks paid parental leave in addition to the 26 weeks paid maternity leave implemented from 1 March 2007. This will enable a child to have a parent at home with them during their first year of life and remove some of the stress being experienced by parents

"My oldest child went to pre-school and she really benefited from it. She became less shy, more confident and enjoyed what she was taught. My youngest child didn't go to pre-school and she is struggling more in class than her sister did."

Mother of six using Barnardos' services in Cork

4. Ibid

5. CSO population projections

6. Department of Social and Family Affairs, 2007, National Action Plan for Social Inclusion/ Chapter 2: Children

Child Protection

All children have a right to a childhood free from harm and/or abuse and Barnardos believes it is the responsibility of everyone in society to ensure that our children are protected and cherished.

Barnardos believes reform is needed in key areas to ensure our child protection systems offer the highest level of protection to all children. Barnardos also believes that children who have been abused, those who are in the care of the State or those involved in custody or access issues require additional support measures to enable them to live their lives as fully as possible.

Barnardos welcomed the recent Government proposals to amend the Constitution through a referendum to include a number of child protection and welfare provisions. At present children's voices are virtually silent in the Irish Constitution and their rights are not explicit.

The new child protection proposals include:

- The extension of the vetting procedures to include the collection and exchange of 'soft information', which includes information which has come to the attention of the State authorities, which falls short of a conviction of a relevant offence, but indicates a serious concern over the suitability of an individual to have unsupervised access to children
- Introduction of a zone of absolute liability meaning that it will be illegal for an adult to have sex with a child under a certain age

Barnardos seeks a cross-party commitment to hold the referendum early in the new Dail term otherwise there is the danger that these proposals will slip off the political agenda altogether and the Constitution will continue to provide inadequate protection to all children.

The Office of the Minister for Children is currently reviewing the Children First: National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children (1999), Barnardos calls for these guidelines to be put on a statutory basis. The guidelines as they stand are being implemented to varying degrees across the country leading to

inconsistencies and delays throughout the system, all of which can erode public confidence in the State's capacity to deal with child protection issues. Children, whom the guidelines aim to put first, can end up being considered last or forgotten altogether under the current system and can be further traumatised by these delays and inconsistencies.

Children give evidence in court for a number of reasons – personal sexual abuse being one of the most traumatic reasons. A child who has to give evidence in a courtroom can experience profound feelings of intimidation and distress yet initiatives to ease this apprehension such as pre-trial interviews and video link evidencing are limited. There is a strong need for such supports arising from the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences Act) 2006 which allows for victims to be cross-examined in court proceedings.

At the same time the child's own voice can be lost or forgotten in the courtroom - a recent review of the family court proceedings found that in only one out of 21 cases were the child's wishes mentioned in relation to access¹. A Guardian Ad Litem (GAL) system which is independent, provides for the voice of the child to be heard by the Court and gives the Court an independent

Fact

One in three women and one in four men reported some level of sexual abuse in childhood, attempted or actual penetrative sex was experienced by 7.6% of girls and 4.2% of boys

1. Coulter, C, 2006, Family Law Matters, Dublin



professional report on each child's best interests. The GAL system needs to be automatically put in place so that each child's needs and rights are to the fore when critical Court decisions are reached which will affect every aspect of a child's life.

Abuse of children can take many forms, including grooming children for later abuse. Grooming has been made easier with the advent of the internet and mobile phones, placing more children at risk but in many cases the children and their families are unaware of these possible dangers. A survey found that 30% of children had encountered someone online who asked for information such as their photo or phone number representing an increase of 19% on a similar study two years ago². The new Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Amendment Act 2007 attempts to address the legislative deficits in relation to grooming, soliciting and importuning a child for the purposes of sexual exploitation. While this legislation is welcomed, Barnardos is concerned that given the piecemeal and knee jerk approach to introducing child protection legislation a full comprehensive review of the various pieces of legislation is needed to ensure the law protects children from all forms of abuse, neglect and exploitation.

"People could pay more attention to listening to children and we would be heard more then."

Nine-year-old boy in a Barnardos centre

Actions

- Call for cross-party commitment to hold a referendum to amend the Irish Constitution to improve the visibility of children in the Constitution early in the life of the new Dail term
- Place the revised Children First child protection guidelines on a statutory basis
- Introduce a range of supports for children who are giving evidence in court to ensure their voice is heard and that they are not exposed to hostile cross examination
- Extend and resource the Guardian Ad Litem service for children involved in both public and private law proceedings
- Undertake a full review of child protection legislation to ensure all loopholes are closed and children are protected by law from all forms of abuse and exploitation
- Help regulate internet use by putting the Internet Advisory Board on a statutory basis so that the board has monitoring and regulatory functions as well as advisory ones

². National Centre for Technology in Education, 2006, Children's Online Behaviour, Department of Education and Science, www.webwise.ie



Poverty

Over 110,000 children are being denied their right to a childhood every day in Ireland - they are being robbed of their hopes, dreams and potential because they live in what is called consistent poverty¹. Consistent poverty means families existing on less than 60% of the middle income in society as well as being deprived of the basics like heat and food.

For a significant number of children who spend more than five years living in consistent poverty, their whole childhood is shaped by deprivation – unable to afford simple pleasures such as celebrating a birthday or a trip to the zoo². Children who live in poverty are at greater risk of experiencing problems with reading and writing, dropping-out of school at an early age, being unable to find employment and becoming involved in drug and alcohol abuse.

Children in households headed by a lone parent are at a high risk of poverty. So too are children whose parents are unemployed, ill, disabled or where there are three or more children in the family.

Low family income is the main determinant of childhood poverty, as are cost barriers to families, improving their situation through employment such as the high cost of childcare.

Fact

In Budget 2007, the increases in Qualified Child Allowance cost the State €60 million while cutting the top rate of income tax from 42% to 41% cost the State over €180 million.

In response, the Government introduced an Early Childcare Supplement for all parents with children under the age of six which works out at €20 a week per child, however, weekly childcare fees are at least €120.

Children living in consistent poverty in Ireland need their families to receive more money. The Qualified Child Allowance (formerly known as the Child Dependent Allowance) is the targeted allowance given to families with children whose primary income is from social welfare³. Budget 2007 saw this allowance increase to €22 per week per child, the first increase in this allowance since 1994. In the intervening years the real worth of the allowance had been reduced by 34%⁴. For lone parents it represented a rise of €2.70 per child per week. In addition, there continues to be a low take-up of the Family Income Supplement designed to top up earnings from low paid employment.

When it comes to deciding who gets what, children deserve to be a priority – the price of a childhood spent in deprivation is too high a price to ask any child to pay.

Actions

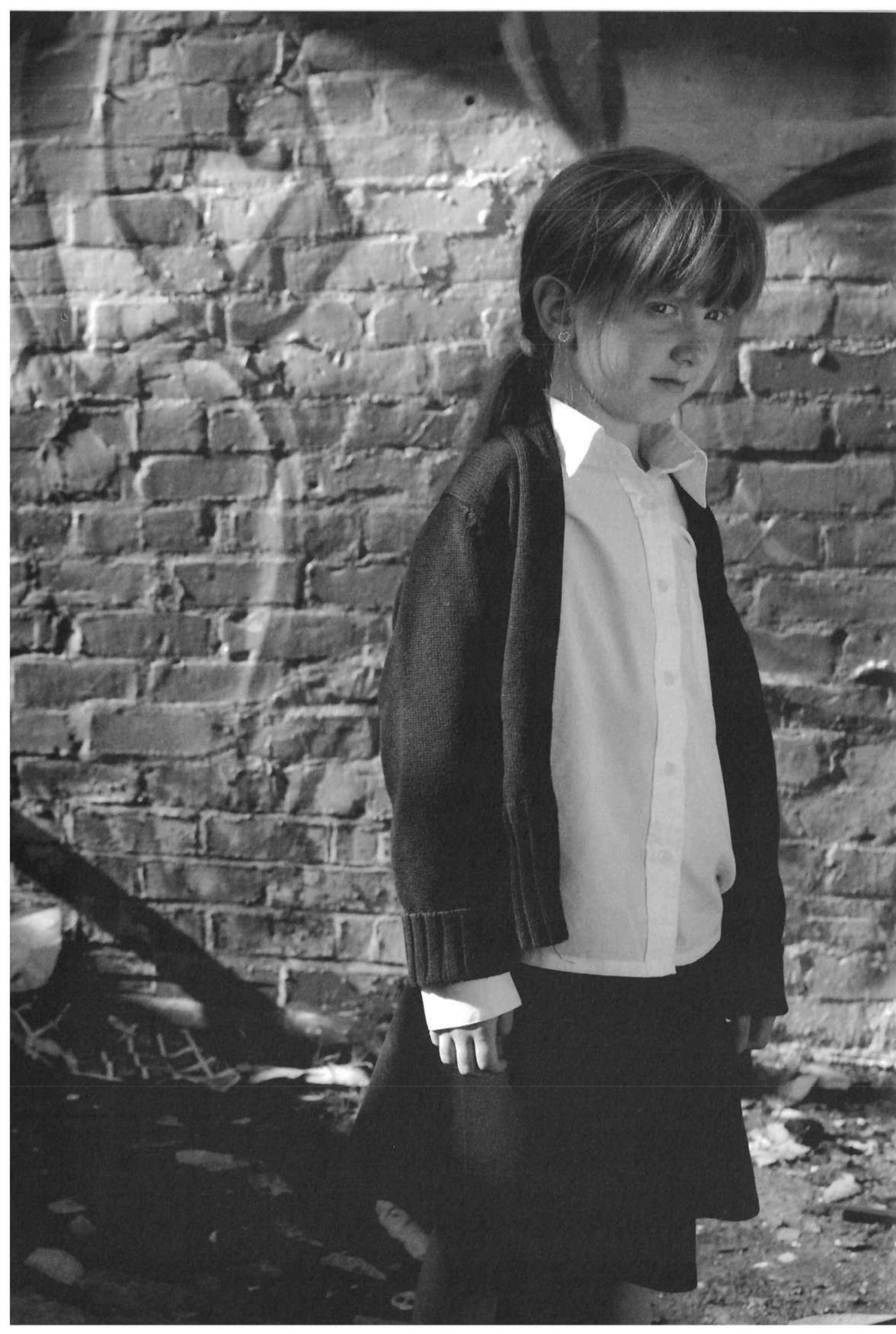
- Increase income to families with children living in consistent poverty through increasing the targeted Qualified Child Allowance payment
- Ensure all families with children living in Ireland receive the universal Child Benefit payment regardless of their parental migration status
- Increase the take-up of the Family Income Supplement to ensure that families in low paid employment receive all they are entitled to

1. Central Statistics Office 2005 EU Survey on Incomes and Living Conditions

2. Combat Poverty Agency and Institute of Public Administration 2006/ Longitudinal study carried out by researchers from Economic Social Research Institute Day In, Day Out: Understanding the Dynamics of Child Poverty

3. Department of Social and Family Affairs or www.welfare.ie/publications/index.html Rates of Payment Booklet 2007

4. Combat Poverty Agency policy statement 2006 Tackling Child Poverty: A Dynamic Perspective



Education

Education has the power to change children's lives. Education is one of the most powerful tools there is in enabling children to reach their developmental potential and enhancing their lives socially and economically into the future. Educational achievement is also a strong determinant for future success and in Ireland that can mean a bar being put on a child's success as early as the age of 12: one in three children in disadvantaged areas leaves primary school with severe difficulties in reading and writing.

Overall standards have not changed since 1980 and the reality is parents are trying to help their children with their homework when they themselves may have severe reading and writing difficulties. The link between family, school and community has to be recognised if intergenerational reading and writing difficulties are to be tackled on a real and structured basis.

Problems with reading and writing and absenteeism, among others, contribute to the early school-leaving rate with around one in five children leaving school before completing the senior education cycle, the vast majority in already economically disadvantaged areas. The economic forecast for those leaving school early are worsening – the ESRI found in 2004, that there were twice as many people unemployed from this group a year after they had left school than for those who left early in 1999. Early school leaving is contributing to the creation of a new generation of children who will experience poverty.

Our classrooms are providing children with new challenges and opportunities. The curriculum in primary school has been updated to provide more interesting and varied experiences. Yet a school's ability to deliver on all aspects of the curriculum can be hindered by their lack of facilities or capacity. For instance, Ireland lies 20th in a list of 30 OECD countries on the provision of computers for schools. The development of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) within schools has been slow and resources committed under the National Development Plan to address this are inadequate¹. Class sizes continue to be a problem with currently 85% of children in classes above the Government target of 20 pupils. At the extreme end of the scale, one in four

children are in classes of over 30 students. Few children can blossom under these circumstances and those with literacy or other difficulties have little chance of reaching their potential. The success of small class sizes is increased for pupils who spend a longer time in this environment².

The classroom profile is also changing rapidly with an increase in the number of children from new communities attending both primary and secondary level schools, many of whom do not have English either as a first or second language. The Government is set to lift the bar of a maximum of two language teachers per school with the target of 550 extra language support teachers by 2009. Early intervention and support is necessary as soon as a child enters the Irish education system. We know that a non-English speaking child joining the Irish education system at primary level stands a much greater chance of school success than a non-English speaking child joining the system at second level.

Every child needs to be given an equal chance to succeed. Children with special needs rely on an educational psychological assessment in order to avail of supports. Waiting lists in the public assessment system are well documented with charities on record as having had to pay for private assessments for children. Improvements have been made in the system but it is still short of its 1999 target of 184 specialist posts and

Fact

Four out of five primary school children are being taught in classes of 20 or more students – the Government target for its term of office was a class size of 20 children or less

1. Irish Times 1 March 2007

2. Educational Disadvantage Committee, 2004, Addressing Disadvantage – A Review of the International Literature and of Strategy in Ireland, Department of Education and Science, Dublin

today over half of all primary schools are still unable to directly access the National Education Psychological Service.

Finally, as it stands, only one in 100 children between the ages of six and 12 is availing of Out of School Time services. Yet we know that children receive a range of benefits from participating in quality Out of School Time services including increased self-esteem, enhanced communication skills and improved school performance. The National Childcare Investment Programme aims to create just 5,000 new Out of School Time places when it is estimated that some 360,000 school-going children are actually going to be in need of such services. We need real investment to develop a wide ranging infrastructure of Out of School Time activities for children and young people.

“My child’s maths teacher understood that my child needed extra one-to-one support but told me that she could not afford the time with him because of the number of other pupils in the class so she gave him a colouring book instead.”

Mother of three using Barnardos’ services, Limerick

Actions

- Resource and invest in reading initiatives to fulfil the Government’s own target of halving the rate of illiteracy among school children
- Roll-out a national school books rental scheme to ensure all pupils get the best start to their education
- Reduce the waiting period for accessing educational assessments by increasing staff levels in National Education Psychological Service
- Increase the number of Education Welfare Officers to ensure at least every county in Ireland has access to their service
- Invest in Out-of-School Time Services so that children have increased opportunities to develop their social, emotional and educational skills
- Targeted adult literacy schemes should be offered to parents with reading and writing difficulties in disadvantaged communities so parents can more fully support their children’s education
- Targeted English as a Foreign Language courses should be offered to parents in new communities so they can more fully support their children’s education

Health

A child's health is determined by many factors including the conditions in which they live, household income and access to quality healthcare services. Prevention and early intervention are always better than a later cure yet the availability of child centred medical services in Ireland is limited, resulting in many children suffering with conditions that go undetected or worsen over time.

The area of mental health illnesses is of particular concern. The scale of mental health illnesses is significant with 20% of children having a disorder at any one time, with varying levels of severity¹. However, the medical services are inadequate to meet these children's needs: over 2,000 children are on waiting lists for psychiatric assessment around the country with waiting times of between 12-18 months². When children do receive treatment it can be inappropriate, for example, children can be placed in adult psychiatric facilities or in general paediatric wards when what they actually need are specialist services for children. There are currently only 20 in-patient beds in the country for the assessment and treatment of children and adolescents under the age of 16 years³. Specialist mental health services such as services for people with eating disorders are extremely limited with only three public beds available to an estimated 8,000 sufferers.

Barnardos welcomed the recommendations contained in the Government's mental health policy *A Vision for Change* (2006), especially the emphasis on developing community based services. While some progress has been made in improving primary care services there is a need to ensure consistency and availability of care for

young people in need, throughout the country. Children and young people are best cared for in their home environment so access to out-patient community based services is crucial and Barnardos believes these young people should be involved in the design of such services.

Low income families with children encounter major problems trying to access even basic primary health care - a situation which has worsened with the reduction in numbers of those eligible to receive a full Medical Card. Low income families that are now ineligible for the full Medical Card can avail of the GP-only Medical Card which covers the cost of visiting a GP but still requires patients to pay for prescriptions and medicines. The fact is, however, that families are unable to pay these costs and so children do not get the early intervention they need and may go on to have much more serious problems. Evidence of the failure of the GP-only Medical Card scheme can be seen in the fact that only 18,000 out of a possible 200,000 GP-only Medical Card have been availed of.

Children in low-income families are more likely to be born small, leaving them with lower life expectancy and poorer health later in life⁴. In order to redress this, all children deserve to have access to quality primary and community health care in order for them to reach their developmental potential. The health system needs to move more towards early prevention and intervention by restoring and expanding full GP services to families on low income as well as developing a community health infrastructure that is accessible and affordable for all.

1. Irish College of Psychiatrists, 2004, *A Better Future Now*, Dublin

2. Quoted in *Sunday Tribune* 08 October 2006

3. Irish College of Psychiatrists, 2004, *A Better Future Now*, Dublin

4. Public Health Alliance, 2007, *Health Inequalities on the Island of Ireland – the Facts, the Causes, the Remedies*, Dublin



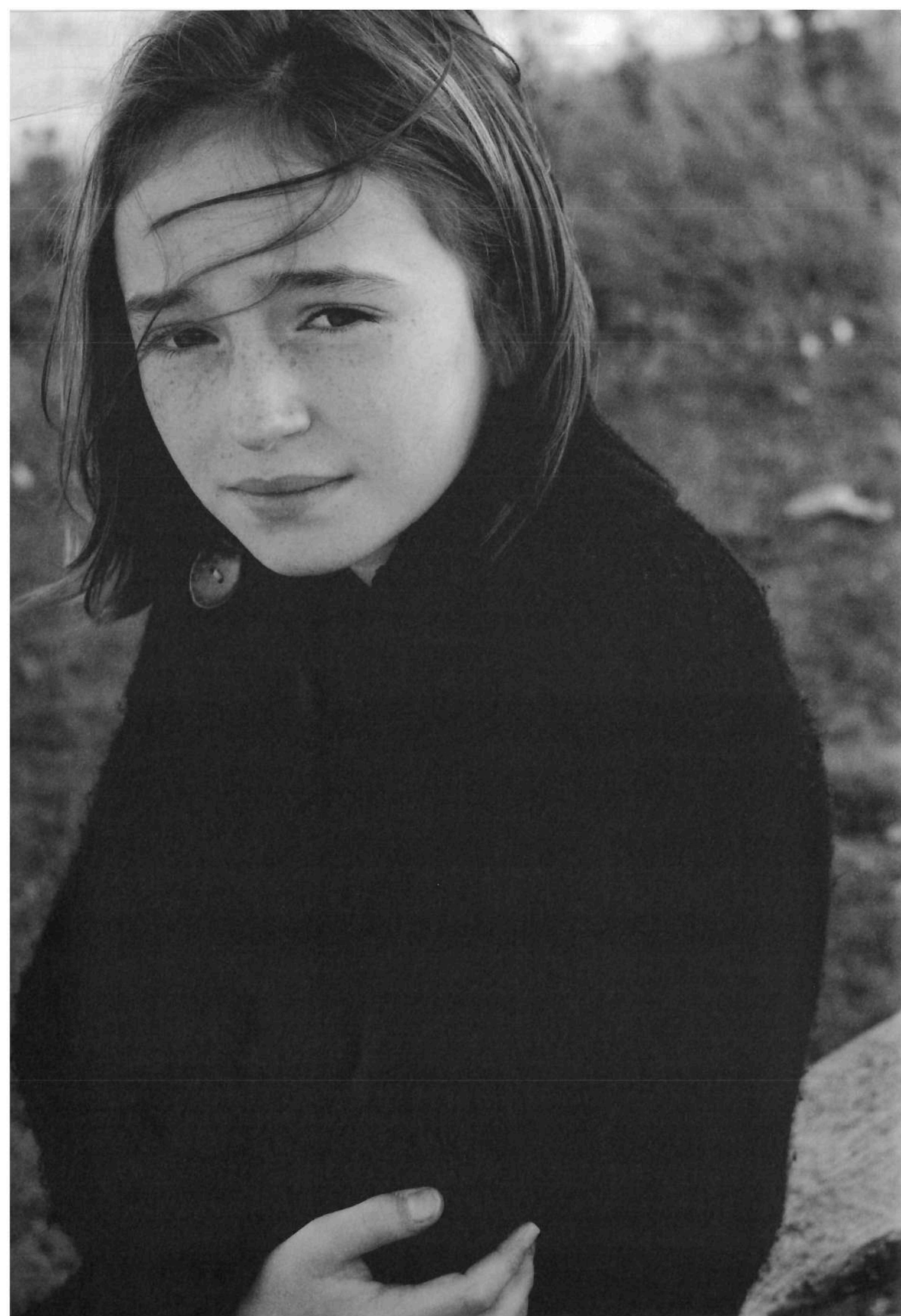
Actions

- Continue to implement the Vision for Change recommendations to improve the primary care services for children and young people with mental health difficulties
- Improve the community based medical services by introducing two multidisciplinary Community Mental Health Teams per 100,000 population. These teams would comprise of child psychiatrists, clinical nurse/community psychiatrist nurse, occupational therapists and psychologists amongst others
- Equip parents, teachers and youth workers with knowledge to recognise the onset of psychological/ psychiatric illness in young people through increased public awareness activities about these illnesses
- Extend the full Medical Card to all those families whose total income is taxed at the standard tax rate (20%). This would ensure coverage for all families on social welfare and those who are in low paid employment

Fact

The rate of youth suicide in Ireland is the fifth highest in the EU at 15.7 per 100,000 for 15-24 year olds⁵, with more boys than girls dying as a result of suicide

5. Health Service Executive and Department of Health and Children, 2005, Reach Out, National Strategy for Action on Suicide Prevention 2005-2014



Housing and Homelessness

Every child deserves a home, somewhere warm, somewhere to have dinner, somewhere to invite friends, somewhere to feel safe... The Homeless Agency's 2005 survey found that in Dublin alone there were 220 homeless families with 463 children - 41% of the children were under the age of five. Homelessness is largely a Dublin and urban problem and three out of four of the homeless families in Dublin were being housed in emergency Bed and Breakfast accommodation¹.

Bed and Breakfast accommodation is particularly unsuitable for housing families with children because there is a lack of space, a lack of appropriate cooking facilities, shared bathroom facilities, a transitory resident population and no available play space. Families with children need appropriate quality accommodation. No child and their family should be housed in Bed and Breakfast accommodation beyond the duration of an immediate emergency.

Children can become homeless with their families or homeless by themselves. For children homeless by themselves, there is the "hidden" homelessness where they can be in ad hoc living situations for example, sleeping on a relative's couch and then there is the "visible" homelessness of children on the streets. Research has shown that children become homeless as the result of a number of life events working together; these can include children coming out of care with no support services, mental health problems with no support services or family conflict again with no support services. Homelessness among children is effectively the result of a systems failure in health, housing and education with the bedrock cause being poverty².

Homelessness renders children and their families politically invisible even when they are on the streets.

For all homeless children and young people there is a need to provide the prompt, responsive, child focused services as envisaged in the national Youth

Homelessness Strategy (2001). While progress has been made vital links are still missing. The reality for a newly homeless child or young person in Dublin is that they have to wait until after 8pm, when they are then expected to go to a Garda station while the Gardai make contact with out-of-hours social work teams to carry out a needs assessment on the child, before the child can be admitted to a place of refuge for the night³. Children on the street are vulnerable to child abuse and exploitation and need services that are easily accessible and are responsive to the child's needs and situation.

The current housing boom/crisis means that social and affordable quality accommodation can be difficult to find for families already living in poverty. According to the Department of Environment's most recent Local Authority Assessments of Social Housing Needs (2005) there were 43,684 households nationally in need of local authority housing – of these almost one in three (31.5%/13,778 households) were in receipt of state-support through Rent Supplement to meet the costs of their housing needs. Despite this high level of demand the output of social and affordable housing is running well behind targets: In 2004, output reached only 30% of the planned figure and this rose slightly to 35% in 2005⁴. The result is families staying longer in private rented accommodation of which a third is reckoned to be substandard.

Fact

Almost one third of private rented accommodation examined by the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government in 2005 was found to be substandard

1. Results from the Homeless Agency's 2005 survey as cited by the Combat Poverty Agency on website

2. Office of the Minister for Children and Children's Research Centre Understanding Youth Homelessness in Dublin City/ Key Findings from the First Phase of a Longitudinal Cohort Study (2006)

3. Same as above

4. Focus Ireland 2006 Building for Inclusion? Housing Output and Part V of the Irish Planning and Development System, Dublin

The substandard accommodation is weighted, in terms of availability, against those with the least market power - Rent Supplement recipients. The nature of the supplement is that it is paid in arrears in a market which demands advance rent payment and allowances do not reflect current market rental rates.

"The three-year-old boy 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 and with no garden or outdoor facilities for the little boy to play in."

Barnardos worker describing the living conditions of one three-year-old little boy and his family

Actions

- Ensure no family with children is housed in **Bed and Breakfast** accommodation longer than the duration of the emergency – alternative appropriate accommodation and quality services need to be provided for all families in this situation
- A fully-resourced, child-focused, 24 hour flexible response service needs to be developed for children and young people experiencing homelessness
- A 'drop-in' centre type service should be established in urban centres to provide initial advice and support for these vulnerable children
- An NCT model for private rental housing to ensure adherence to minimum standards should be developed with clear timelines and targets included

Alcohol

Three out of five Irish 15-year-olds binge drink and have done so on at least one occasion in the last month giving Irish children the unwelcome distinction of being among the top binge drinkers in Europe. Alcohol patterns established during teenage years can set the pattern of adult alcohol abuse and alcohol, when combined with other so-called 'soft' drugs, can act as a gateway to 'harder' drugs such as heroin and cocaine. In addition alcohol abuse is also the most common reason for children coming into official contact with the Gardai¹.

Alcohol abuse causes brain damage in teenagers especially before the age of 16. Binge or harmful drinking can directly cause depression, anxiety, suicide and attempted suicide - 93% of men under 30 who committed suicide had alcohol in their blood stream². Children are at risk from alcohol in their own right as direct consumers but they can also suffer the effects of alcohol abuse within their own family.

Alcohol often plays a key role in domestic violence, road deaths and Accident and Emergency injuries. Growing up in a household where alcohol is a dominant part of life can impact negatively on the child's psychological, educational and social development. Some children can be burdened with having to assume parenting responsibility for themselves, brothers and sisters or even their parents as alcohol abuse can render their parents incapable of carrying out basic domestic and childcare duties. Emotionally, children can often be left feeling confused, rejected, unprotected and unable to trust their parents because their parents are unable to respond to their child's needs. Physically, children can be deprived of such basic necessities as food and clothes because any money coming into the home is then spent on alcohol.

Damage from alcohol can start before childhood even begins, it can start before birth. In Ireland, alcohol consumption among pregnant women is very high at 82%³, nearly four times as many as in the USA. A database of more than 43,300 women presenting at the Coombe Hospital, Dublin from 1999 to 2005 found that over 56% of women drank less than 5 units of alcohol a week but over 7% were consuming six or more alcoholic drinks a week⁴. This can lead to Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder that can cause physiological differences, concentration problems and heart defects.

Fact

In 2005, 83% of 14 to 17-year-olds drank alcohol and the average age of starting to drink was 12-years-old⁵

Underage Irish girls have the second highest binge drinking rate in Europe⁶

1. Data presented in the Office of the Minister for Children's State of the Nation's Children report shows that alcohol was the most common reason for children being diverted to the Garda Juvenile Diversion Programme.
2. Irish Medical Journal, 2006, Blood Alcohol Levels in Persons who Died from Accidents and Suicide, March 2006, Volume 99, No 3
3. Coombe Hospital, 2007, A Study of Alcohol, Smoking and Drug Use among Pregnant Women, Department of Health and Children, Dublin
4. Irish Examiner, 15 January 2007

Actions

- Implement the recommendations of the Strategic Taskforce on Alcohol (2004), particularly the main child orientated recommendations such as supporting community based initiatives aimed at reducing underage drinking
- Given the strong connections between alcohol abuse and drug abuse, the National Alcohol Strategy and National Drugs Strategy should be reviewed with the view of identifying key areas where both strategies can be integrated to reinforce each other – both national plans are currently being administered separately
- Introduce warning labels on alcoholic drinks to discourage consumption among young people and also among pregnant women in a bid to reduce the incidences of Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder
- Introduce legislation to reduce the exposure of children to alcohol advertising, sponsorship and promotions by establishing a 9pm watershed banning any alcohol related advertising appearing on TV, radio or cinema before that time

“With alcohol abuse in a family, children can often take on the responsibility of not only looking after themselves, their brothers, sisters but their parents too. The children end up feeling confused and unprotected because they’re being put into the position of being the parents.”

Barnardos worker, Dublin

5. www.irishhealth.com

6. Source ESPAD survey, survey cited in State of the Nation’s Children , Office of the Minister for Children, Dublin 2006