

19 October 2005

Barnardos welcomes the opportunity to put in a submission for the 2006-2008 National Action Plan against Poverty and Social Exclusion (NAPSincl). This submission is timely as Barnardos has just launched a national Seven Steps to Ending Child Poverty campaign and much of the material in this submission will draw on these Seven Steps.

In the context of the Government's own target of eliminating child poverty by 2007 and the EU target of making a decisive impact on poverty by 2010, Barnardos believes it is unacceptable that in 2005, one in seven children in Ireland live in consistent poverty¹.

Although increased investment and resources have been allocated to combat poverty, they have not been sufficient to keep up with the pace of economic growth and the shortfalls in services and provision left over from previous decades. That is why Ireland has one of the highest rates of relative income poverty across the EU, with larger families and lone parent families being particularly at risk.

Growing up in poverty can affect every area of a child's development – social, educational and personal and these effects can last a lifetime. Barnardos recognise that as the problem of child poverty is a multi-faceted one so is the solution.

National Action Plan against Poverty and Social Exclusion objectives:

1 Facilitating access to employment

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%. Young people who have left school early without qualifications are more likely to have been children who experienced poverty and exclusion in childhood. To reduce the possibility of this group becoming the long term unemployed of tomorrow and to reduce the cycle of intergenerational unemployment, all unemployment traps must be eliminated.

Suggested policy measures to eradicate unemployment traps include:

- 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excess of €293 sees the value of the One Parent Family Payment being halved for the first six months and then totally withdrawn.

Although the progress of the Equal Opportunities for Childcare Programme is usually reported under this objective, Barnardos believes this is mainly for highlighting the facilitation of female access to and retention in the labour market rather than from the perspective of child development. Therefore the issue of provision of early childhood education and care will be highlighted under NAPSincl Objective 2 for this submission.

2 Facilitating access by all to resources, rights, goods and services

2.1 Income Adequacy

Increasing families' incomes is an immediate way to ensure that the household income does not fall below the poverty line. The Government strategy in the past few years has been to increase the universal Child Benefit payment. However, the downside to this approach has meant that the targeted Child Dependant Allowance, which is paid to families on social welfare, has remained unchanged in 11 years. The value of

¹ Central Statistics Office (2005) EU – SILC study stated 148,000 children under 18 years live in consistent poverty. This equates to one in seven children.

this payment has remained static with the result that it has depreciated because of the increases in the costs of living in the intervening period. A revised effective targeted payment is required to assist the poorest children and under new proposals being drawn up by the National Economic and Social Council² (NESC), it is proposed to merge the targeted Child Dependant Allowance (CDA) and Family Income Supplement payment – 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.

Suggested policy measures for increasing incomes for families with children living in poverty are:

- 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.
- 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.

2.2 Education

Barnardos believes that the work undertaken within the Sustaining Progress, Special Initiative on Tackling Educational Disadvantage has been ineffective in meeting the target of halving the proportion of pupils with serious literacy difficulties by 2006. Admittedly there are variations on the national average however; the extent of literacy difficulties in schools in disadvantaged areas is still a matter of serious concern. Almost one in three third class pupils in disadvantaged areas suffer severe literacy difficulties³. These difficulties, if not addressed, can lead to pupils failing to make the transition to secondary school or can lead to early school leaving. The new Department of Education and Science action plan Educational Inclusion (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS)) aims to address the educational needs of children and young people from disadvantaged communities, from pre-school through second-level education by channeling supports in a more integrated and coordinated approach. Barnardos awaits the full implementation of this plan and will be monitoring its implementation to ensure effectiveness.

Suggested policy measures for improving educational outcomes for all children:

- Introduce an effective tracking system to ensure that all children make the transition from primary school to secondary school.
- Implement fully with sufficient funding the supports outlined in the DEIS Educational Inclusion action plan.
- Adequately resource the National Education Welfare Board to ensure it is able to make a positive impact on children experiencing absenteeism.

2.3 Early Childhood Education and Care

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. 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. The main current Government strategy in this area is the implementation of the Equal Opportunities for Childcare Programme under the National Development Plan. So far the programme has created 24,600 childcare places between 2000 and 2004 in community based playgroups and private crèches. However, issues of affordability and lack of places are still rife.

Suggested policy measures for improving children's access to Early Childhood Education and Care:

- Barnardos echoes the recommendations of the NESF and the National Women's Council for the introduction of a one-year free place for all children in the year prior to attending primary school.

² NESC *Child Income Supports* – final report due November 2005

³ Educational Research Centre (2004) *Reading Literacy in Disadvantaged Primary Schools*

Barnardos calls for the roll out of these Early Childhood Education and Care places to begin with children who are disadvantaged.

2.4 Health Inequalities

A key objective of the National Health Strategy is to reduce health inequalities. However, Ireland's two-tier health system based on an ability to pay reinforces the correlation between poverty and ill health. For children on low-income families the loss of the medical card can have a huge impact on their development because of their parent's inability to pay for medical care. The revised Medical Card income guidelines will extend the full Medical Card coverage while another proportion of families will be eligible for the GP only medical card. This GP only card does not cover costs of medicines or any follow up treatment and therefore Barnardos believes it is inadequate to meet the medical needs of families.

Also, at present the health system is ill equipped to handle the medical needs of families. There are lengthy waiting lists for accessing services publicly e.g. speech and language therapists; a shortage of public health doctors with the result that early detection and intervention is being missed and insufficient child appropriate care settings in the community and hospitals. The impact of lengthy delays or inappropriate care can have a detrimental lifelong impact on the child.

Suggested policy measures for reducing health inequalities and improving children's health:

- Extend the full Medical Card to include all families whose total income is taxed at the standard 20% tax rate.
- Introduce a programme of investment to be targeted at health services for children, so they are available, accessible and appropriate for children needing them regardless of their illness.

2.5 Housing and Accommodation

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 accommodation⁴. Poorer children are more likely to live in sub-standard housing and in areas with few shops and amenities, where children have little or no space to play safely. The Children's Research Centre⁵ 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.

Suggested policy measures for improving housing standards for children at risk

- 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.
- Fully implement the National Children's Strategy - National Play Policy - Ready, Steady, Play, which has seen some playgrounds being developed around the country, but more are needed.

4 Helping the most vulnerable groups

Children and Young People make up over 30% of our population. Every facet of their lives is affected by the actions and decisions we adults take. They are not eligible to vote for policies or parties. We as adults hold those rights and so we hold the responsibility to do right for our children and young people. We cannot be indifferent to the plight of the 1 in 7 children in Ireland who live in consistent poverty. It is a breach of their right to the material and other resources necessary to allow them to experience a childhood free of poverty and deprivation as enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Children must remain an identified 'vulnerable group', to ensure improved access for them to the appropriate health care, education and housing services listed above, thereby reducing their vulnerability to poverty. Children are not a homogenous group. Each child has their own distinct set of needs and these vary depending on their family circumstances e.g. children from the Traveller community, children of asylum seekers, children in lone parent families, children with disabilities and those who experience homelessness. A one size fits all policy approach is inadequate for children.

⁴ Combat Poverty Agency (2005) *Mapping Poverty, National, Regional and County Patterns*

⁵ Children's Research Centre (2004) *Housing Problems and Irish Children*

5 Mobilising all relevant bodies in fighting poverty and social exclusion

The implementation of the NAPSincl 2003-2005 has seen progress of internal coordination across national Government in terms of reporting and gaining a more consistent picture of actions and progress in meeting targets. However, it does not seem to be influencing major Government spending priorities or policy planning. This lack of political influence explains why in the Implementation Report⁶ there is a long list of targets described as 'unlikely to be met' or 'will not be met'. Yet there is no analysis of the reason for this or discussion of how this position can be remedied and when. In fact there appears to be no political ramification from the national Government or EU if a target is not met.

Mobilising all relevant bodies in fighting poverty and social exclusion is required to ensure that the actions and policies of one department or agency 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. This is in line with the National Children's Strategy (2000) that Departments would devise child impact statements.

Suggested policy measures for improving mobilisation of all relevant bodies include:

- 'Child proof' all Government policies to ensure that during their implementation there is no negative impact on children and that the policies 'join up'.

⁶ Office of Social Inclusion (2005) Implementation Report on the Progress of the National Action Plan against Poverty and Social Exclusion 2003-2005.