

Introduction

Barnardos welcomes the opportunity to present to the Committee and I would like to thank Deputy White and members for inviting us this morning. Barnardos provides services to children and families in 42 projects across Ireland. We work in some of the most disadvantaged areas of the country and we are hugely concerned about the ongoing impact the recession is having on the lives of the children we work with.

The Cost of Present Policies for Children and Families

2011 has been a harsh year for families and children in Ireland. Recent cuts to social welfare rates, reduced working hours and increased taxes have all meant more families are struggling to survive on less; less income and fewer support services in health and education. Already 90,000 children in Ireland are living in consistent poverty, but Barnardos knows that many more are at risk. By the end of this month, CSO figures for 2010 are likely to show a significant increase in the number of children living in poverty. We predict that this could show an increase to over 130,000 children, a figure that could fill both Croke Park and the Aviva Stadium.

For many children this means living on poorer diets, missing their developmental milestones, suffering from more ill-health, struggling in school and increasing isolation because they are unable to participate in many activities such as going to friend's parties, swimming etc. The short-sighted savings of successive budgets are jeopardising children's futures.

Presently it costs about €80,000 per year to keep a child in care, €90,000 per year to detain a child in St. Patrick's Institution, €250,000 per year to keep a child in secure care. Yet it only costs approximately €7,000 per year to roll out preventative approaches to the poverty and disadvantage that often create the need for measures like detention or secure care. In a climate of austerity, why are we not pursuing the most cost effective long term solution to the benefit of children, their families and society?

What strikes us time and again is that it is the same children who are hit by continuous cuts to social welfare, education and health spending. Poverty and disadvantage have an insidious affect on young lives; the intergenerational impact of these have created communities where hope is often in short supply and children's aspirations are limited before they even get to primary school. Services for children have developed in an ad-hoc, often chaotic, manner, and this has hindered the kind of prevention and early intervention models of service provision that is proven to make an enormous difference in children's lives in both the short and long term.

Five key fundamental systemic problems can help to consider the implementation difficulties in the current system:

1. There is no reference model for the development of children services- the basis for how services should be planned, organised and delivered. Although there is a widespread acceptance of whole-child approaches, there is a lack of agreement on key fundamental issues, such as appropriate staffing levels for social workers, out-of-hours services, assessment frameworks and service responses to tackling poverty.

2. There is a weak information base, with no common system for assessing the needs of children or reporting on outcomes.
3. There is no resource allocation model for children's services and the proposals tabled make little reference to how children's services should be determined. There is no 'input model', making it impossible to assess or measure outcomes.
4. Structural problems - significant variation in services and standards delivered by local services, this being most evident in assessment systems, conferencing, relationships with voluntary organisations, proportions of children in care and the structuring of services.
5. Historically, a closed and centralised political culture was not prepared to allow external participation in the implementation of policy. Although there is abundant advice available to Government departments and the HSE from NGOs, civil society, the practitioner and the academic community, there has been limited demonstrative interest to take such advice in a whole-hearted way.

The State has missed opportunities to reshape our services for children and family and it is our hope that the newly established Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the proposed Child and Family Support Agency, which we warmly welcome, will establish a much needed national framework for consistent, cohesive and accountable children and family services. However, the success of this Agency will depend on its resources and the full transfer of budgets from the HSE child welfare and protection units to the new Agency.

Already there is deep concern that work of the Agency will be compromised due to insufficient budgetary allocation and that the overspend currently plaguing the health services will have an adverse affect on the development of child welfare and protection services. Services for children and families across both the statutory and voluntary and community have sustained numerous cuts in the past two years. These services are down to the wire now and any further cuts will impact directly on the ability of services to meet the increasingly complex needs of vulnerable children. We have no doubt that failure to protect services for children and families in 2012 will threaten the safety and welfare of already very vulnerable children.

The Benefits of Prevention and Early Intervention

Barnardos believes that the cycle of intergenerational poverty and deprivation can be broken through preventative interventions such as targeted family support, supports to keep children in school and support for organisations engaged in such preventative work. At an individual level, it means greater educational attainment and better employment prospects along with improved health outcomes. At a societal level, the benefits can include savings yielded from less reliance on social welfare, fewer early school leavers and reduced criminal activity. Additional public revenue is also generated through higher taxes paid as a result of more people engaged in higher skilled employment.

A shift in focus to prevention and early intervention has proven to yield substantial savings and provide the best value for money approach to service provision. In the UK, the Action for Children¹ report examined the investment benefits of preventative services for children and young people on addressing social problems and delivering wider benefits to society. It found that an investment of £191 billion in targeted interventions would deliver a net return of £269 billion (almost double), and that, if the UK invests in targeted interventions, universal childcare and paid parental leave, a saving

¹ Action for Children (2009) *Backing the Future: why investing in children is good for us all*, in conjunction with the New Economics Foundation, England

of £486 billion would be made over 20 years; this is compared with the £4 trillion expenditure on continuing with the current policies and services and meeting the costs of addressing existing problems.

Reorganising Child and Family Services Along Prevention Lines

Establishing a Child and Family Support Agency under the aegis of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs provides an opportunity to streamline services for children and families. As we know, traditionally services that tackle child poverty and disadvantage and child welfare and protection services have been approached as separate initiatives. It is crucial that any reform begin with an understanding of child welfare in its broadest sense to allow for a national framework that encompasses a range of interventions that move across a continuum of care from prevention and early intervention to targeted support and protection services including youth justice services and State care.

One of the key challenges in the development of holistic children and family services is getting the right balance between universal and targeted services. This is particularly difficult when trying to restructure such services across education, family support and child welfare and protection lines. Specific education and family support services largely target communities experiencing disadvantage to offset the impact of that disadvantage on children. While child welfare and protection services often work in the same communities, the remit is also necessarily broader in recognition of the fact that child neglect and abuse can happen in any family regardless of region or socioeconomic background. Addressing the balance between universal and targeted services in a national policy framework will be crucial to ensuring that service providers are clear on the remit of services for children and families.

National Structure

All children and family services must be underpinned by policies that establish clear national standards for service provision, assessment and referral models for consistent use among services on the ground and coordination of good practice across services, including coordination of research, training, service design and dissemination of information. Leadership and co-ordination roles and structures must be put in place through an effective governance and monitoring function. At the national level, the Child and Family Support Agency must carry adequate authority and be accountable for success, reflecting the connection between national programmes / policy and effective implementation. Clear lines of accountability, responsibility and reporting must be developed to link practice work on the ground to the agency.

Local Architecture

While the national framework must underpin the development of local services and must form the framework for such services, it should not be too prescriptive. The benefits of locally developed initiatives are that they are sector-led, with increased buy-in and cooperation between communities and the agencies that work with them. The development of holistic children and family services must be child centred, designed to meet the needs of the children and families they seek to serve, culturally reflective and evidence based. Services should be delivered in the home, school or in purpose built services. They need to be flexible, available and delivered through a co-ordinated response from inter-disciplinary statutory and non-statutory agencies working together with families.

Effective interagency working is critical to the success of implementing services for children and families and dependant on all agencies and professionals striving toward the same end goal, namely to improve the lives of children and families. We must develop an articulated system of services for children and families with clear links between each stage and level of service. The ability to share information between agencies and professionals and to engage with the community through streamlined services will improve the effectiveness of any intervention.

Conclusion

The State is spending tens of millions picking up the pieces for individual children and families whose lives are blighted by poverty and disadvantage. Ireland has been a one trick pony when it comes to tackling poverty; throwing good money after bad in a system that is inefficient, chaotic and sloppy. It should have been eminently possible for Ireland to reduce consistent child poverty to under 2% during the Celtic Tiger. The failure to adequately invest in services infrastructure in education, health and family support or to adequately redistribute wealth through an equitable system of child income support has pushed more children into poverty as the cracks in the system have shown during recession. We now have an opportunity to change how we do things. We need to look at prevention and early intervention models, not just because they will potentially save us money, but because they really work for children and for society. We need better ways to support families in trouble, better ways to help children get the best from their education, better ways of supporting organisations who provide quality services to children and families in the community and voluntary sector. We must not waste yet another opportunity to revolutionise the way we do things for children and families in Ireland. We squandered millions over the past twenty years but we don't seem to be learning from our mistakes. When looking at what savings can be made for next year, it is crucial that the State focuses on what real, fundamental changes can be made in how we do things in the best interests of our children and our society rather than simply where we can make vast cuts across budgets.