

INTRODUCTION

The Programme for Government presented by Fine Gael and Labour aims to build a new Ireland built on fairness and equal citizenship where the vulnerable are protected and the burden sharing will be done on an equitable basis. Overall, Barnardos welcomes many of the proposals in the Programme for Government. Like all policy proposals, their merit is only seen when implemented, so Barnardos urges this new Government to live up to the old adage that ‘actions speak louder than words’, as they lead Ireland out of recession.

CONSTITUTIONAL REFERENDUM ON CHILDREN

Barnardos welcomes the Government’s commitment to give priority to “a *referendum to amend the Constitution to ensure that children’s rights are strengthened*”. We particularly welcome the commitment to structure this amendment “*along the lines recommended by the All-Party Oireachtas committee.*”

Barnardos supported the wording published by this Joint Oireachtas Committee in 2010, which includes specific provision for the key principles of voice of the child and best interest of the child. These principles are directly provided for in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and must be included in any Constitutional amendment to strengthen children’s rights in the Irish Constitution.

Despite the absence of a timeline for the holding of a Referendum on children, Barnardos believes this must happen within the first year of office. It has been delayed for too long.

CHILD WELFARE AND PROTECTION

Child welfare and protection system

Barnardos has consistently called for the reform of the child welfare and protection system to ensure that accountability and responsibility are injected into service provision for vulnerable children. We note the new Government’s commitment to such reform reflected in the Programme for Government. The Government’s plan is to “*fundamentally reform the delivery of child protection services by removing child welfare and protection from the HSE and creating a dedicated Child Welfare and Protection Agency, reforming the model of service delivery and improving accountability to the Dáil.*” Barnardos recommends that the principles and work of this new Agency be child centred and focus on addressing the gap between policy reform and implementation.

Barnardos also welcomes the commitment to “*implementing the recommendations of the Ryan Report including putting the Children First Guidelines on a statutory footing and legislating for the use of ‘soft information’*”. To strengthen these proposals, Barnardos believes these must be accompanied by the statutory provision of aftercare services and the development an out-of-hours social work service. Both political parties were strongly in favour of these when in opposition during the discussion of the Child Care Amendment Bill 2010. The ongoing absence of a right and access to such services places very vulnerable children at increased risk of harm, substance abuse, homelessness and crime. The reviving and rewording of the Child Care Amendment Bill must happen in next Dail term. Linked to

this is the necessity for a statutory provision for the mandatory appointment and regulation of a Guardian ad Litem to ensure the voice of the child is heard in judicial proceedings.

Legislative reform

The commitment to introduce legislation to prohibit the practice of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) for the protection of girls and women is welcome. Research undertaken by AkiDWA found that the number of women that have been subjected to FGM has risen to over 3,000 within the last three years. FGM represents a gross violation of human rights and denies women and girls their rights to physical and mental integrity, freedom from violence, freedom from torture, cruel, inhumane and degrading treatments and discrimination on the basis of sex.

It is also planned to “introduce consolidated and reformed domestic violence legislation to address all aspects of domestic violence, threatened violence and intimidation in a manner that provides protection to victims.” Barnardos is aware of the impact of domestic violence on children both as direct victims but also as witnesses and is pleased by this proposed legislative reform.

Structural Reform

The Programme for Government highlights that a “*Patient Safety Authority, incorporating HIQA will be established*”. While it is essential that patients have an opportunity to have their voices and concerns raised, it is unclear whether this will include children in the care system? Already the Social Services Inspectorate within HIQA is a valuable and influential body monitoring the standards within the care system and overseeing reforms.

Separated Children/ Child Victims of Trafficking

Barnardos welcomes the commitment in the Programme for Government to introduce comprehensive reforms of the immigration, residency and asylum systems, particularly the inclusion of a statutory appeals system and the setting out of rights and obligations in a transparent manner. Barnardos believes that any legislation in this area should introduce the principle of the best interests of the child as a primary consideration and should include a clear entitlement to international protection for separated children in Ireland as set out in UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Legislation to reform the immigration, residency and asylum systems must also include specific definition and provision for child victims of trafficking. Such legislative reforms are urgently required so Barnardos calls on the new Government to progress this in 2011.

Family Law

The Government’s commitment to “*modernise and reform outdated elements of family law*”, including the enactment of legislation to consolidate and reform the law on adoption is also welcome. Barnardos stresses that the 2010 Adoption Act must be amended to provide for the needs of a national comprehensive adoption system and to place tracing and family reunification work on a statutory basis.

Management of sex offenders

Barnardos welcomes the inclusion of specific measures to improve the management of sex offenders, in particular the promotion of treatment programmes in prison. However, we believe that treatment programmes must also be extended to community based services following release from prison. Measures outlined in the Programme for Government such as electronic tagging and other restrictions must be combined with support services for sex offenders to reduce the risk they pose to children and others in the community.

Many child sex offenders have never been in contact with the justice system as many have never been caught. Barnardos again welcomes the introduction of legislation to allow for the use of “soft information” in relevant situations which may help to protect children from those

who may never have been convicted of child sex abuse. However, we also believe that support services for those concerned about their own behaviours with regard to children should be established based on the Stop It Now programme in operation in the UK in the interest of protecting children.

CHILD POVERTY

Social Welfare

The increase in consistent child poverty rates to 8.7% (91,954 children) in 2009 was deeply concerning to Barnardos. Poverty is the root cause of many challenges facing children. Child poverty is a complex, multi-dimensional problem affecting all aspects of children's lives. The new Government's commitment to protecting children living in poverty and reducing poverty levels in line with the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion "*to reduce the number of those experiencing consistent poverty to between 2% and 4% by 2012, with the aim of eliminating consistent poverty by 2016*" is welcome.

Barnardos is particularly pleased with the Government decision to maintain social welfare rates and reverse the recent cut in the national minimum wage. These key measures will help to protect families living in disadvantage from slipping further into poverty during the recession. The review of the Universal Social Charge should take place as soon as possible and moves made to protect those on low incomes from this cut to their income.

Barnardos also welcomes proposed changes aimed at eliminating poverty traps, which we have long called for. The Government's commitment to amend the 30 hour rule for Rent Supplement and Mortgage Interest Supplement will reduce the barriers for those trying to move from social welfare to low paid employment. The proposal to replace the One Parent Family Payment with a parental allowance that does not discourage marriage, cohabitation or work is also welcome as long as it does not leave lone parent families in a worse off financial position. Children living in lone parent families are significantly at risk of living in poverty.

The work of the Commission on Taxation and Social Welfare to examine and make recommendations on family and child income supports must be underpinned by a commitment to protect children living in or at risk of poverty. Any recommendations should be child and poverty proofed before implementation to ensure that children are not adversely affected by any change to the income support system.

Barnardos very much welcomes the Government's commitment to "*tightly regulate moneylenders and debt collectors.*" Through our work with children and families, we see daily the impact of moneylenders on vulnerable communities across the country. Tighter regulation is needed to ensure that families are not plunged into debt by exorbitant interest rates from unscrupulous lenders that they have little hope of ever paying back. Linked to this is the plan to "*convert the Money Advice and Budgeting Service to a Personal Debt Management Agency with strong legal powers*".

The proposal of measures to clear the social welfare appeals backlog, and introduce a consolidated appeals process is welcome. Delays in the current system can leave families and children at considerable disadvantage.

Breaking the cycle

Barnardos has long called for holistic, child centred interventions that intervene early to protect children from the impact of disadvantage. Therefore it is heartening to see the Government's commitment to a new area based approach to child poverty which aims to tackle every aspect of child poverty and support children to break the cycle of disadvantage. Models of service such as the Youngballymun programme currently in operation provide a number of services that support families and children at a number of levels. Barnardos

believes that the pilot models proposed in the Programme for Government must be used to develop a cohesive Prevention and Early Intervention Strategy in the future. Barnardos calls for the development of these pilot models and a wider Prevention and Early Intervention Strategy to be devised in consultation with the statutory, NGO and philanthropic sectors. Again no timeline has been assigned to this intervention however, Barnardos knows that the sooner such as programme is operational the greater the benefits on the child and wider community in the long term.

EDUCATION

Education is a proven route out of poverty so Barnardos is pleased that *“education will be a priority for this Government.”* Barnardos welcomes the proposed investment in school buildings and in creating the knowledge society. Such investment is necessary as educational inequality remains stark in Ireland. Children’s educational outcomes continue to be determined by their family’s social and economic status. The Government must make an ongoing commitment to ensure all pupils are encouraged and enabled to reach their educational potential.

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)

Barnardos welcomes the Programme for Government commitment to *“maintain the free pre-school year in Early Childhood Care and Education to promote the best outcomes for children and families”* and the Government’s commitment to *“improve the quality of the pre-school year by implementing standards and reviewing training options.”* This must include measures to ensure implementation of the Siolta quality framework, the Aistear curriculum and the Workforce Development Plan for the ECCE sector. In addition to this Barnardos call on the Government to establish a 10 year national plan for the strategic development of ECCE in Ireland.

Although Barnardos welcomes the Government’s commitment to *“invest in a targeted early childhood education programme for disadvantaged children, building on existing targeted pre-school supports for families most in need of assistance such as the young ballymun project.”* It is disappointing that such an investment will only occur *“as resources allow”*, which is contrary to promoting systems that break the cycles of disadvantage. Holistic, quality early years support services for families living in disadvantage are a key factor in levelling the playing field for children and improving their school readiness. Services like those provided in the Youngballymun programme can significantly improve both the short and long-term outcomes for children experiencing poverty.

Literacy

Barnardos welcomes the commitment to develop a National Literacy Strategy as a matter of urgency, underpinned by continuous professional development for school principals and teachers and realistic targets. Implementation of this strategy is vital and Barnardos urges the Government to incorporate a monitoring and evaluation review into the strategy to ensure consistency of implementation across Ireland. The additional time committed to literacy tuition is also welcome although additional literacy support may be needed for those 56% of children from disadvantaged backgrounds who attend non-DEIS schools¹.

Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS)

Barnardos welcomes the Programme for Government commitment to *“consider recommendations of the review of the DEIS programme and use it as platform for new initiatives to deliver better outcomes for students in disadvantaged areas.”* We urge the Government to publish this review as soon as possible. In the further development of targeted education services for children living in disadvantage, the Government must be mindful of the needs of those children living in disadvantage that attend non-DEIS schools

¹ Written Out, Written Off (2009) Barnardos

and seek ways to ensure that these children receive the supports necessary to reach their potential. The Government must also end the current practice that removes additional funding from schools once outcomes for children improve. This punishes schools who improve outcomes for children and affects their ability to maintain good practice once it is established.

Early School Leaving

Barnardos welcomes the Programme for Government commitment to “*examine how to make existing expenditure on educational disadvantage more effective.*” Barnardos believes that integrated, early intervention supports are the key to supporting children to stay in school. While we support the Government’s suggestion to introduce “*innovative ways in which teenagers at risk of leaving school system can stay connected, for example through use of ICT-based distance learning and projects such as iScoil*” we believe that addressing the underlying issues affecting children at risk of leaving school early must be the priority.

Targeted Education Supports

Barnardos is particularly pleased to see the Programme for Government commitment to “*prioritise access for children with special needs to an individual education plan*” and “*move to a system where necessary supports follow a child from primary to second level and to achieve greater integration of special needs-related services.*” This latter commitment is very important to ensure continuity of support for children. If implemented this will also encourage children who are at risk of early school leaving to stay in secondary school by supporting their learning and easing their transition into secondary school.

Barnardos welcomes the Programme for Government commitment to “*reverse the cut to the number of psychologists in National Educational Psychological Service in Budget 2011*” but believes that this must also extend to Special Needs Assistants and Language Support Teachers. These supports are crucial to supporting children in the classroom and have a significant impact on children’s ability to learn. These services must be covered under the Programme for Government commitment to “*protect frontline services in education, and seek efficiencies in work and school practices, in line with the Croke Park Agreement.*”

Barnardos is pleased with the commitment to “*improve co-ordination and integration to delivery of services to the Traveller community across all Government departments, using available resources more effectively to deliver on principles of social inclusion, particularly in area of Traveller education through the DEIS programme*”. In reality Barnardos hopes this will lead to the reinstatement of the Visiting Teachers for Travellers who provided a vital supportive link between schools and Traveller families and children.

It is also planned to encourage schools to develop anti-bullying policies and in particular, strategies to combat homophobic bullying to support students. Any experience of bullying can be detrimental to a child, weakening their self esteem and preventing them from reaching their full potential.

HEALTH

Barnardos welcomes the Government’s commitment to reforming the health system by introducing a “*Universal Health Insurance with equal access to care for all*” and the end of our current two tier system when service availability and treatment is largely based on the ability to pay rather than on the patient’s need. The introduction of this new system would ensure that a “*Universal Primary Care will remove fees for GP care and will be introduced within this Government’s term of office*”. We believe that the roll out of this scheme should start with families with children, particularly those dependent on social welfare and low incomes.

Primary Care

Primary care service provision is central to the development of an early intervention approach to healthcare. A multi-disciplinary community based system where children are assessed, diagnosed, referred to and seen by appropriate services in a timely way would contribute greatly to the early solution to a range of issues that if left untreated can cause significant difficulties for children.

Barnardos believes that the proposed Universal Primary Care strategy must include the development of fully resourced teams in communities across Ireland. These teams must be able to ensure that children are not left waiting for crucial assessments and services, particularly in relation to developmental checks and speech and language therapy. While this new system is being developed, the Government must ensure that any child under five waiting more than three months for such assessments or treatment can access these services automatically through the National Treatment Purchase Fund.

Once established, primary care teams must include GPs, nurses/midwives, health care assistants, home helps, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, social workers and administrative personnel. A wider primary care network of other primary care professionals such as speech and language therapists, community pharmacists, dieticians, community welfare officers, dentists, chiropodists and psychologists must also be central to the provision of primary care in the community.

Barnardos welcomes the introduction of a cervical cancer vaccination catch-up programme for all girls in secondary school. This proactive approach is welcomed as a means to tackling this largely preventable disease.

Mental Health

Mental health services have been under resourced in Ireland particularly with respect to children and adolescents. Barnardos very much welcomes the new Government's commitment to provide ring-fenced funding *"to recruit additional psychologists and counsellors to community mental health teams, working closely with primary care teams to ensure early intervention, reduce the stigma associated with mental illness and detect and treat people who are at risk of suicide"*. Part of the ring-fenced funding will be used to *"implement Reach Out, the National Suicide Prevention Strategy, to reduce the high levels of suicide"*. Child and Adolescent Community Mental Health Teams must be particularly prioritised to end the current unacceptable lengthy waiting times that leave many children struggling with mental health difficulties for far too long and has lead to self harm and / or suicide. While no clear timeline has been allocated to this, Barnardos stresses the urgency of this issue and calls for immediate action on it.

Barnardos also welcomes the Programme for Government commitment to *"end the practice of placing children and adolescents in adult psychiatric wards."* Inpatient mental health facilities for children and adolescents remain woefully underdeveloped. In 2010, only 52 inpatient beds were available for children and adolescents in need of inpatient care. As a result of inadequate services, 120 children and adolescents were admitted to adult psychiatric units between January and November 2010. Placing children in adult psychiatric facilities at a very vulnerable time in their young lives often places their mental health at greater risk and is wholly unacceptable in the provision of services for children. The new Government must make a firm commitment to developing adequate inpatient services for children and adolescents. Action is long overdue in this area and must be progressed as a matter of urgency.

HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

Social Housing

Barnardos welcomes the Programme for Government's commitment to increase the stock of social housing. The number of households with children in need of social housing increased by almost a quarter between 2005 and 2008 to 27,704, with the largest percentage of those living in Dublin (OMCYA 2010). Properties acquired by the Government for social housing must be fit for purpose and meet the needs of families with children housed in them. Government must prioritise families with children on the waiting list for social housing.

Regeneration

The stagnation of rejuvenation projects through the withdrawal of the Public Private Partnership initiatives over the past two years has resulted in worsening disadvantage for families living in communities such as Dolphin House, Rialto, St. Michael's House, Inchicore, Moyross, Limerick and many others across Ireland. The commitment in the Programme for Government to provide *"urban regeneration to revitalise communities in areas such as Limerick to give families a better quality of life"* is welcome. Regeneration initiatives will help to provide employment, building on existing skills within communities and pay huge dividends on small investments.

Families living in Private Rented Accommodation

Barnardos welcomes the commitment to reduce reliance on Rent Supplement and move eligible recipients to the Rental Accommodation Scheme (RAS). This move must be facilitated by the allocation of units by local authorities. Government must ensure that these properties are of sufficient standard and provide adequate facilities for children and families.

Homelessness

Barnardos very much welcomes the Programme for Government commitment to end long term homelessness and to update the Homeless Strategy with a specific focus on youth homelessness. The focus on prevention and tackling the root causes of homelessness is also welcome.

Barnardos believes that to tackle youth homelessness, Government must address the current system of care for children who are homeless. Currently, these children are frequently placed in unsuitable accommodation and through use of Section 5 of the Child Care Act 1991 are not received into the care of the HSE. Section 5 of the Act was envisaged to be an emergency measure. However, in practice many children remain under Section 5 and in emergency hostels and supported lodgings for considerably longer periods of time. Emergency hostels often require children to depart every morning leaving them on the street for most of the day and exposed to a litany of dangers. These children are left in limbo, often increasing the risk of long term homelessness. Likewise children leaving the care system aged 18 years are at risk of becoming homeless due to the absence of or insufficient availability of aftercare supports

YOUNG PEOPLE

Unfortunately for many of our young people the recession has led to unemployment and emigration. The Programme for Government plans to expand on current *"graduate and apprentice internship scheme, work placement programmes and further education opportunities for our young unemployed providing an additional 60,000 places across a range of schemes and initiatives"*. It is also envisaged that *"within the total to provide 30,000 additional training places across the education and training system, distributed in line with the recommendations of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs"*. Barnardos welcomes these initiatives and hopes that these schemes coupled with an energetic job creation strategy will lead to genuine opportunities for our young people.

It is the intention of the new Government to refer to the Constitutional Convention the issue of reducing the Voting Age to 17 and giving citizens the right to vote at Irish embassies in the presidential election.

YOUTH JUSTICE

Barnardos welcomes the Government's commitment to "*end the practice of sending children to St. Patrick's Institution*" and believes this must be implemented as a matter of urgency. The establishment of new national children's detention facility in Oberstown, Lusk with capacity for 157 boys and 10 girls must be prioritised to facilitate this.

Barnardos also welcomes the Government's emphasis on "*alternative programmes for juvenile offenders through extensions to the Juvenile Liaison Officer Scheme and the Garda Juvenile Diversion Programme, and the extended use of Restorative Justice where appropriate.*" However, we believe that preventative strategies should have a wider focus, encapsulating education and health initiatives as well as models for restorative justice.

Barnardos would welcome further research into the efficacy of the model of "*outcomes-based contracts with community organisations to help reduce reoffending by young people, based on the social impact bond model in the U.K.*"² Any model must be based on the best interest of children as well as on cost savings for the State.

POLITICAL REFORM

Within the Programme for Government there are a number of proposals outlining political reform with the intention to achieve greater effectiveness, transparency and accountability. One such proposal is the introduction of a Petition System, similar to that operating in EU, "*to be managed by a specific Dáil committee that will investigate and report on petitions which raise issues warranting attention*". Such a vehicle is welcomed as a means for raising an issue at a national level. It is a direct example of democracy in action by facilitating that voices are heard and can influence policy and legislative change for the greater good. A petitioning office is in operation within the Scottish Parliament and does act as a conduit for change at both local and national level³.

CONCLUSION

Barnardos believes that with a new Government comes new opportunities which can have a direct positive impact on the lives of children. Barnardos welcomes many of the proposals outlined in the Programme for Government and looks forward to working with the new Government on its implementation. However, Barnardos is cautious and fearful that without clear timelines and resources some of these proposals may not materialise. Barnardos believes that throughout the lifetime of this Government, our children must be on the political agenda and have their voices heard and rights vindicated as the previous Government failed to protect them and prevented them from reaching their potential. Our children deserve no less and as a society we must ensure that the children today can become the adults they wish to be tomorrow.

² Social Impact Bonds are an innovative way of attracting new investment around such outcomes-based contracts that benefit individuals and communities. Through a Social Impact Bond, private investment is used to pay for interventions, which are delivered by service providers with a proven track record. Financial returns to investors are made by the public sector on the basis of improved social outcomes. If outcomes do not improve, then investors do not recover their investment. Social Impact Bonds provide up front funding for prevention and early intervention services, and remove the risk that interventions do not deliver outcomes from the public sector. The public sector pays if (and only if) the intervention is successful. In this way, Social Impact Bonds enable a re-allocation of risk between the two sectors. www.socialfinance.org.uk

³ Here is some information on the Scottish government's petition system: [Petitioning the Scottish Parliament: Making Your Voice Heard](#)