



## Children's Rights Alliance Report Card 2011 Executive Summary

24 January 2011

The *Children's Rights Alliance Report Card 2011* examines whether the Government has honoured the promises it has made to children living in Ireland. *Report Card 2011* – the third in a series of annual publications – analyses 30 key commitments in the areas of education, health, material wellbeing and safeguarding childhood.

Unfortunately, *Report Card 2011* found the Government's performance to be barely acceptable, and awarded it an overall 'D-' average. This poor performance is deeply disappointing, especially given that the Government is being graded on its own policy commitments in the Social Partnership Agreement, *Towards 2016*; the *Programme for Government 2007-2012* and the *Renewed Programme for Government, 2009*; the *National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2016*; and the *Ryan Report Implementation Plan, 2009*.

A 'D-' grade means that too many children in Ireland are being denied the fundamental building blocks to live healthy and productive lives. It means that thousands of children will fail to reach their unique potential, it means that Government failed to put children first in the economic crisis, and too often during 2010 it ignored their rights.

In Ireland, we believe that we value children, but the startling evidence shows otherwise. Of the 30 commitments, eight have made progress or shown improvement, 15 have remained static or cannot yet be monitored, and alarmingly backwards steps have been taken on 7 commitments. In times of crisis and emergency, it is only natural that we would expect children to come first, but the evidence shows the opposite is true.

*Report Card 2011* outlines 36 immediate actions the Government must take if it is to deliver on its own promises. While some of these actions are dependent on increased funding, 15 – almost half – require no additional money, but rather call for departments to work together, processes and practice to be reformed, transparent decisions and monitoring, and accountability in the face of inaction.

The changed economic climate is no excuse to stop spending on children; indeed, it leaves us with no other sensible option but to invest in children. Investing now will reap rewards for the individual children during their childhood and as adult members of society. In an election year, it is vital that politicians hear this message.

The vision of the Alliance is that Ireland will be one of the best places in the world to be a child: a country where the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is a reality. We hope that all political parties will join us in this vision, and make it real in their manifestos. Honouring commitments made to our children is a key step to making real the vision of a decent childhood for all children. We truly believe that our Government can do better than a 'D-' average. Our children's future depends on it.

## EDUCATION: GRADE 'C'

This is Government's best overall grade, but **it is a drop from last year's 'C+'.**

This section looks at early childhood education and care, child literacy and language support, early school leaving, children with special educational needs, and school buildings.

### The Government got a 'C' grade because it has:

- Successfully implemented the universal free pre-school year and maintained funding for the year in 2011
- Fallen from 5<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> place in the internationally recognised PISA rankings on child literacy, and cut the number of language support teachers
- Made slow progress in addressing the persistent problem of early school leaving
- Failed to make any progress on commencing 'priority' sections of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act, 2004, despite commitments to do so
- Secured investment in school buildings in response to demographic demand.

### To do better next time, the Government must:

- Dedicate resources to ensuring that the universal pre-school year is of high quality
- Steadily increase public investment in early childhood services and supports, so that Ireland reaches the European and UNICEF targets of 1% GDP by 2016
- Increase the time spent on literacy skills in schools in disadvantaged areas to 90 minutes per day
- Ensure that the *National Plan to Improve Literacy and Numeracy in Schools* is child-centred
- Ensure that provision of language support teachers is based on pupils' needs
- Introduce a national tracking system to follow all children's educational and training pathways
- Develop a process for ongoing evaluation of the work of the National Education Welfare Board (NEWB) and the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS)
- Urgently implement the sections of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004 relating to individual education plans and the appeals process
- Protect special educational and care supports for children with special needs at school
- Work creatively to identify and procure new school sites in response to demographic demand.

### Key research findings:

- GDP invested in education was 4.7% in 2010; well below the OECD average of 5.7% GDP
- The number of children enrolling in primary school is set to double in the next four years
- The ESRI estimates that €280 million in crime costs could be saved by keeping children in school
- 4,300 providers (95%) took part in the free pre-school year in 2010, with capacity to provide 98,000 places. 63,000 children took part in the scheme in September 2010; 94% of all those eligible
- Middle class children are exposed to 30 million more words before starting school than their low-income counterparts. This leads to an 18-month gap in language ability before starting school
- Ireland fell from 5<sup>th</sup> place in the OECD PISA rankings on child literacy in 2000 to 17<sup>th</sup> place in 2009: the sharpest fall among all participating countries, suggesting one in six students has poor reading skills
- Almost 9,000 children leave school early every year in Ireland. Gender and social class heavily influence school completion: for every 14 girls who leave school early 23 boys do
- In 2007, 'newcomer' pupils made up 10% of the primary school population and 6% of the secondary school population; nearly all or more than half of these pupils have reported language difficulties.

## HEALTH: GRADE 'D-'

The Government gets a 'D-' in this section, **an improvement on last year's 'E'**.

This section looks at primary care, mental health, childhood obesity, alcohol, and relationships and sexuality education.

### **The Government got a 'D-' grade because it has:**

- Sped up delivery of the promised Primary Care Teams and exempted key therapeutic posts from the public service moratorium
- Delivered a promised child and adolescent mental health unit in Galway and protected child and adolescent mental health from the most serious cuts in the health sector
- Failed to deliver the National Nutrition Policy. It is now six years since this policy was announced
- Failed, again, to recognise the serious problems of alcohol consumption among teenagers and took no steps to address the impact of harmful parental drinking on children
- Yet to evaluate its Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) programme.

### **To do better next time, the Government must:**

- Ring-fence multi-annual funding for the delivery of the promised Primary Care Teams
- Urgently deliver the remaining promised Child and Adolescent Community Mental Health Teams
- Urgently end the practice of accommodating children in adult psychiatric units
- Establish a clear line of budgetary accountability for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
- Deliver a National Nutrition Policy and provide political leadership and adequate resources for its implementation
- Implement the recommendations from the Strategic Task Force on Alcohol in relation to 'protecting children'
- Introduce a legislative ban to protect children from exposure to alcohol marketing
- Undertake a comprehensive analysis on the prevalence, and impact, of parental alcohol problems on children
- Evaluate the impact of the Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) programme
- Reform the law so that adolescents can access sexual health information and services.

### **Key research findings:**

- More than 23,000 children were on HSE waiting lists for speech and language therapy in 2010, with almost 4,000 of those waiting between 12 months and two years
- In the first nine months of 2010, 120 children were admitted to adult psychiatric units
- 22% of new cases referred to child and adolescent community mental health teams include deliberate self-harm or suicide as reasons for referral
- There has been a 500% increase in obesity among Irish boys in the past four years. In 2009 alone, a quarter of all nine-year olds were overweight or obese
- 31% of primary school students and 40% of post-primary students now walk or cycle to school, up by 5% and 10% since 2004 respectively
- In Ireland, one in every six cases of child abuse is attributed to alcohol. Between 61,000 and 104,000 children aged under 15 are estimated to be living with parents who misuse alcohol
- 91% of participants in a Dáil na nÓg survey felt it was important or very important to learn Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in school.

## MATERIAL WELLBEING: GRADE 'E+'

The Government gets an 'E+' in material wellbeing this year, **an increase on last year's 'E'**. This increase is due to re-organisation of this year's Report Card – moving access to play and recreation into this section – rather than any significant achievement in improving children's wellbeing. This section looks at financial supports to families, access to education, access to healthcare, access to housing and access to play and recreation.

### The Government got an 'E+' grade because it has:

- Failed to protect children in poor families from the cuts to Child Benefit in Budget 2011
- Failed to take steps to address the cost of school for families
- Ignored its own commitment on medical cards
- Demonstrated no creativity in the housing sector, despite opportunity in recession and failed to address youth homelessness
- Made progress on recreation by investing in and supporting youth cafés.

### To do better next time, the Government must:

- Compensate low income families for the cut to the Child Benefit payment
- Commit to strategic integration of the tax and welfare systems by end 2012
- Compel schools to introduce a book rental scheme
- Make better use of existing money by streamlining school spending
- Finalise and publish the Medical Card Review as promised
- Improve access to medical cards for children with certain illnesses
- Provide a national framework for financing the social housing output committed to in *Towards 2016*
- Produce a new Youth Homelessness Strategy and put in place a new programme of work to seriously address youth homelessness
- Ensure adherence to the commitments on aftercare in the Ryan Report *Implementation Plan*
- Mainstream the principles of the National Play Policy
- Fully implement the National Recreation Policy.

### Key research findings:

- In 2009, child poverty increased for the first time since 2004, reaching 8.7%
- Over 90,000 children – 1 in 11 children – live in consistent poverty, that means they cannot afford basic necessities like food, warm clothing or heating
- Over 185,000 children – 1 in 6 children – are 'at risk' of poverty, that means they live in households where the family income is less than 60% of the national median income per adult (€231.30 per week)
- For families with children, life in rural areas is €70 more expensive per week than in urban areas
- Consistent poverty among children in jobless households is 30%, compared to 3% in households where at least one adult is in employment
- In 2007, 65% of children in consistent poverty were in lone parent families
- In 2010, 20,000 additional families claimed the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance
- EU SILC data shows that, in 2005, 16% of those in consistent poverty and 30% of those at risk of poverty did not have a medical card
- 75% of nine-year-old children are involved in organised sport, but rates of participation increase with family income: 86% from high income families and 61% from families on the lowest incomes.

## SAFEGUARDING CHILDHOOD: GRADE 'D+'

The Government gets a 'D+' in safeguarding childhood this year, **an improvement on last year's 'D'**. This section looks at the Ryan Report *Implementation Plan*, and specifically the plan itself, social work provision, separated children and the *Children First* Guidelines.

### The Government got a 'D+' grade because it has:

- Delayed in its delivery of certain key aspects of the Ryan Report *Implementation Plan* and the weak accountability structure
- Delivered the promised 200 social workers by the end of 2010
- Employed Crosscare care staff in the separated children's hostels, and commenced implementation of the 'equity of care' policy for separated children, but the lack of supports for these children around the country remains an issue
- Failed to place the *Children First* guidelines on a statutory footing, despite commitment to do so and countless calls by experts for this to happen.

### To do better next time the Government must:

- Intensify action leading to the full and timely delivery of the Ryan Report *Implementation Plan* and strengthen transparency and accountability measures
- Maintain momentum to complete this action in 2011 by filling the additional 70 promised social work posts and ensuring that every child in care has an allocated social worker and a written care plan
- Adequately support and evaluate the equity of care policy for separated children
- Publish draft legislation to put the *Children First* guidelines on a statutory footing
- Establish an independent national authority to monitor compliance with the *Children First* guidelines.

### Key research findings:

- The HSE did not have up-to-date figures on the number of children who died while in State care since 2000. In June 2010, it was stated that this figure was 37. By December it was understood to be 199.
- At the end of September 2010, 92% of all children in care had an allocated social worker – up from 83% in 2009; and 88% of children in care had a written care plan – up from 81% in 2009
- 63 separated children were referred to the HSE South in 2010 (up to August). This compares with 201 children in 2009 and a startling 1,085 children in 2001
- 503 separated children have gone missing from State care since 2000; 441 of them remain missing.

## REPORT CARD 2011: GRADING

### Grade for Report Card 2011 = D-

Area	Subsections	Grades	Average grade	
<b>EDUCATION</b>	Early Childhood Education and Care	B	<b>C-</b>	Free pre-school year is a success; but budgetary cuts will affect the most disadvantaged pupils.
	Child Literacy and Language Support	C-		
	Early School Leaving	D		
	Children with Special Educational Needs	D		
	School Buildings	C-		
<b>HEALTH</b>	Primary Care	D	<b>D-</b>	Welcome progress in child and adolescent mental health; but policy in alcohol and childhood obesity continues to undermine children's wellbeing.
	Mental Health	C		
	Childhood Obesity	E		
	Alcohol	F		
	Sexual Health and Relationships	C-		
<b>MATERIAL WELLBEING</b>	Financial Support for Families	F	<b>E+</b>	Failure to compensate poor families for cut to Child Benefit in Budget 2011 is unforgivable.
	Access to Education	E		
	Access to Healthcare	D		
	Access to Housing	E		
	Access to Play and Recreation	C		
<b>SAFEGUARDING CHILDHOOD</b>	Ryan Report Implementation Plan	C	<b>D+</b>	Delivery of promised social workers to be commended; but failure in Children First is inexcusable.
	Social Work Provision	B		
	Separated Children	C-		
	Children First Guidelines	F		

#### Explanation of Grades

- A – Excellent, making a real difference to children's lives
- B – Good effort, positive results for children
- C – Satisfactory attempt, but children still left wanting
- D – Barely acceptable performance, little or no positive impact on children's lives
- E – Unacceptable, taking steps in the wrong direction, no positive impact on children
- F – Fail, taking steps that undermine children's wellbeing

The Children's Rights Alliance is a coalition of over 90 non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working to secure the rights and needs of children in Ireland, by campaigning for the full implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. It aims to improve the lives of all children under 18, through securing the necessary changes in Ireland's laws, policies and services.

**For full copies of *Report Card 2011*, contact: Children's Rights Alliance, 4 Upper Mount Street, Dublin 2  
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