

Children's Rights Alliance
PRESS RELEASE
For Immediate Release

Missed opportunity: Budget 2004 indifferent to the rights and needs of children

The Children's Rights Alliance today criticised Budget 2004 for its indifference to the rights and needs of children, particularly those children living in poverty. Key examples include the following:

Child Benefit – Despite the availability of resources, Child Benefit was increased less than half of what is required just to keep pace with the commitments made in Sustaining Progress. As a result, the 6 euro per month is actually less than what was provided in 2003 and barely keeps up with inflation. Child Benefit, which is expected to do triple duty as the Government's principal anti-poverty support to children, childcare support to parents and allowance to families for the cost of raising children, is now barely keeping up with inflation.

Child Dependant Allowance – This payment, which is targeted to children in families living in deepest poverty, was frozen for the ninth consecutive year. Combined with the failure to make adequate Child Benefit increases, this effective cut (given the impact of inflation) in assistance to poor children throws into serious question the Government's ability to make good on its commitments to end child poverty and to reach the targets established in the National Anti-Poverty Strategy.

Medical Card for children – Budget 2004 fails to meet the commitment made in the Health Strategy and the Programme for Government to extend the Medical Card to an additional 200,000 people living in poverty, with an emphasis on families with children.

The Government has now broken its promise on the Medical Card for the third year in a row. This disregard for the health care rights of children living below the poverty line is unacceptable.

Medical Card coverage needs to be extended to more children because it will improve their health. Too often the decision to see the doctor or to obtain prescribed treatment is made on the basis of financial considerations. Removing the issue of affordability will eliminate a major obstacle to equal access to health care for children.

As a result of the failure to extend the Medical Card, families on very low incomes will continue to find themselves having to allocate up to a third or more of their weekly income to cover the cost of a visit to the GP if a child gets sick.

Juvenile Justice - The 2004 budget for juvenile justice programmes stands in sharp contrast with stated Government policy in this area and with the resource requirements of implementing the Children's Act 2001. Cuts in the Community Service Orders Scheme and Educational Services of nearly 8% (including the impact of inflation) will only undermine efforts at prevention, early intervention and diversion - all of which are at the policy core of the Children's Act. From a financial standpoint, the failure to adequately fund these services is incomprehensible, since any short-term savings will be statistically insignificant when compared to the long-term costs to the taxpayers and to the victims of crime in connection with property loss, the diversion of Garda resources and the enormous expenses associated with prosecution and incarceration. Coming only days after the Prime Time programme on young offenders, these Budget cuts suggest a deep indifference to taking the already identified and agreed steps required to seriously address youth crime and juvenile justice.

Educational Welfare Board - Despite years of planning and general agreement that the new Board will require approximately 25 million euro per annum to provide a critically important service to Ireland's schoolchildren, Budget 2004 will provide less than 25% of necessary funding. As a result, some counties will be covered by a single school attendance officer, leaving countless children unserved and without assistance.

Sixteen social welfare cuts in the Book of Estimates - Budget 2004's failure to reverse any of the 58 million euro in cuts in the area of rent supplement, lone parent support and creche and dietary assistance will push more children into poverty and homelessness. With 70,000 children already living in deep, consistent poverty, hardship levels can be expected to increase when these cuts are implemented in the months ahead.

The Children's Rights Alliance is a coalition of 75 non-governmental organisations concerned with the rights and needs of children. The Alliance works to secure the full implementation in Ireland of the principles and provisions of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

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