

## **Political Manifestos – Essentials for Children**

**1 December 2015**

### **1. Infrastructure**

Much progress has been made in recent years. This progress should be consolidated and built upon.

- Maintain the post of Minister for Children and Youth Affairs with full Cabinet status.
- Ensure Tusla – Child and Family Agency is adequately funded and its services are having a positive impact on the lives of children and their families. Consider bringing the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) under the remit of Tusla.
- Commit to implementing the commitments contained in *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014–2020*.
- Establish a family court division, based on a network of regional courts and operating in compliance with the Council of Europe Guidelines on Child Friendly Justice, and address delays in court hearings on family law matters.

### **2. Child Poverty**

One child in every eight lives in consistent poverty. The rate of poverty among one-parent families is disproportionately higher than in other family types.

- Reduce the number of children living in consistent poverty by 50%. Adopt a multi-dimensional rights-based plan to achieve the national Child Poverty Target, in line with the EU *Recommendation on Investing in Children*, with a focus on both investments in enhanced access to affordable public services as well as income supports.
- Increase the rate of the Qualified Child Increase for families with children over 12 years.
- Undertake a review to assess the impact of the One Parent Family Payment reforms on child poverty rates and work activation.
- Remodel the funding system for the School Meals Scheme to cover both capital and non-food operating costs. Extend the Scheme to enable the provision of affordable and nutritious breakfast, lunch and dinner meals in DEIS schools and more limited provision to all publicly-funded schools. Extend access to the Scheme to early years and non-formal education settings for young people. Develop a national strategy on school food provision.
- Hold a constitutional referendum on whether or not economic, social and cultural rights should be given enhanced protection in the Irish Constitution.

### **3. Homeless Families with Children**

Over 1,500 children are living in emergency accommodation.

- Conduct a child protection and welfare audit of emergency accommodation provided to families with children.
- Enact legislation to prohibit the placement of families with children in inappropriate emergency accommodation, including hotel rooms.
- Prevent more families becoming homeless by increasing area-based Rent Supplement limits to realistic levels, as a temporary measure pending sufficient increases in housing stock.
- Carry out a review of the Social Housing Strategy 2020 to ensure it is delivering sufficient, affordable, quality housing (including social housing) for families with children
- Put in place step-down and supported accommodation options for young care leavers.

#### 4. Direct Provision

Over 1,500 children are living in direct provision accommodation. Research tells us asylum-seeking children experience high rates of poverty and have a significantly higher referral rate of child protection and welfare cases than for the general population.

- Implement the recommendations relating to children from the Working Group to Report to the Government on Improvements to the Protection Process, including Direct Provision and Supports for Asylum Seekers (Mc Mahon Report), in particular
  - Increase the weekly payment allowance from €9.60 to €29.80 for children.
  - Extend the remit of the Ombudsman for Children to allow the Office to hear complaints from children living in direct provision.
  - Establish an independent inspection regime against new standards.
  - Ensure families are provided with self-contained units with cooking facilities or family quarters together with communal kitchens; and adequate recreational space for children.

#### 5. Education

A person's socio-economic background remains a strong determining factor in their educational attainment. Children have no voice in decision making in schools. The lack of choice in education remains problematic.

- Continue investment in early childhood care and education to reach the Organisation of Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) average of 0.8 % of GDP (Gross Domestic Product).
- Invest in supports to improve quality in early childhood care and education such as the full roll-out of the national quality and curriculum frameworks for early years – Aistear and Síolta – and the Diversity and Equality Guidelines for Childcare Providers.
- Consolidate existing targeted childcare subsidies to develop a new single affordable programme, in line with the recommendations of the *Report of Inter-Departmental Working Group: Future Investment in Childcare in Ireland*.
- Introduce paid parental leave for all children under the age of one as an extension of Maternity Benefit provision, in line with the recommendations of the *Report of Inter-Departmental Working Group: Future Investment in Childcare in Ireland*.
- Develop a national strategy on educational disadvantage and the DEIS programme, with a particular focus on Traveller and Roma children, migrant children, early school leavers and children with special educational needs, including Deaf children.
- Conduct a feasibility study to identify the benefits and cost of publishing and providing free school books to all children.
- Restore the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance to the 2012 level; expand eligibility grounds in line with the Family Income Supplement; and amend its income limits to ensure equitable access by one-parent families.
- Commence Section 28 of the Education Act 1998 to establish a formal Grievance Procedure in schools. Children should be permitted to make complaints in their own right, through the available mechanisms.
- Develop a national strategy on access to multi-denominational education. Create a national network of schools that guarantee equality of access to children irrespective of their religious or non-religious belief.

#### 6. Health Services, including Mental Health

Access to healthcare in Ireland is severely undermined by a two-tier system.

- Extend free GP care to children between the ages of 12 to 17 years of age. Extend the reformed eligibility criteria for a Medical Card to all children with high-level health needs (eg serious health conditions, disabilities and severe developmental delays).

- Introduce legislation to clarify the child’s right to consent to or refuse health care, including mental health care.
- Set the age limit for treatment in the National Children’s Hospital up to the age of 18 years.
- Introduce a tax on sugary sweetened drinks as a measure to address childhood obesity. Introduce measures to subsidise healthy food.
- Complete the passage and commence in full the Public Health (Alcohol) Bill 2015.
- End the practice of treating children in adult mental health units other than in exceptional circumstances where it would be in the best interests of the child to do so.
- Address waiting lists for children and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) through workforce development.
- Amend the Mental Health Act 2001 to provide a stand-alone section on children’s rights.

## 7. Child Protection and Family Life

Inadequate services continue to leave vulnerable children and families unsupported.

- Address waiting lists for victims of abuse to access therapeutic supports.
- Conduct a review of the Child Care Act 1991 to reflect international best practice.
- Undertake a review of services to identify ways to better support children with emotional or behavioural difficulties and so reduce the need for admissions to Special Care and for overseas mental health treatment.
- Commission research into the quality of access arrangements for children in care to enable them to maintain a relationship with their birth family.
- Address the shortage of domestic violence refuge accommodation for parents and children.
- Introduce legislation to provide a framework for family reunification for migrant children and their families.

## 8. Traveller and Roma children

Outcomes for Traveller and Roma children are below those for the general population across all areas including health and education.

- Grant recognition of Traveller ethnicity.
- Establish a national Traveller Agency to drive urgent improvements culturally appropriate Traveller accommodation.
- Review the impact of cuts made to dedicated Traveller education supports since 2011.
- Develop an implementation plan with a monitoring and evaluation tool for the *Report and Recommendations for a Traveller Education Strategy*.

## 9. Children with Disabilities

Data on outcomes for children with disabilities is limited.

- Undertake an audit of services and supports for children with disabilities across the health, education and housing domains to identify if their rights are being respected, protected and fulfilled and to assess the effectiveness of the current spend on disability supports.

## 10. Youth Justice

There has been little public scrutiny of how our youth justice services operate.

- Commission an independent review of the use of remand for children under 18 years.
- Conduct a review of the Garda Diversion Programme as it operates for children under 18 years to assess its effectiveness.