

Summary of Renua General Election 2016 Manifesto Commitments in Relation to Children¹

This document is produced by the Children's Rights Alliance and is a compilation of the information contained in the Renua manifesto for General Election 2016. As the information is sourced from an external party, we do not accept responsibility for its content.

1. Child Protection and Care

Social care services for vulnerable citizens

RENUA Ireland supports the placing of Children First on a statutory footing. Additionally, RENUA Ireland supports the full implementation of the Ryan Report. Furthermore, we believe that there is a lack of accountability in the social care sector and that a review of the Child Care Act, the Children Act and the Children's Rights Refenda is necessary to ensure that they will be implemented in full.²

Exiting the care system

The poor level of services in place for young adults leaving care is a root cause of many social problems that they experience and that society endures. Current services for young adults leaving the care system must be reviewed so that access to counselling and other vital support services are not automatically withdrawn at the same time that young people are required to leave the care system.³

Preventing abuse

RENUA Ireland supports the use of soft information in the vetting of individuals that work with children⁴

2. Disability

Disability and inclusion policy

RENUA Ireland believes that it is time to make rights for the disabled a reality. This can only be achieved by ensuring that people with disabilities have their rights vindicated in a manner similar to the role played by the Ombudsman for Children. RENUA is proposing the following measures to enhance inclusion and to vindicate the constitutional rights of disabled citizens. RENUA Ireland commits to ratifying the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Our policy is based on equity, access and support.⁵

An Ombudsman for people with disabilities

RENUA Ireland will set-up a new unit dedicated to people with disabilities under the aegis of the Ombudsman's office. Co-location will ensure that this can be done as efficiently as possible. This office will be provided with powers to hold local authorities, public bodies and Government Departments to account for their treatment of disabled citizens. This will include reviewing the

¹ Renua, Rewarding Work Rebuilding Trust, General Election Manifesto 2016
<<http://www.renuaireland.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/RENUA-Manifesto.pdf>> accessed 15 February 2016

² ibid 38.

³ ibid 39.

⁴ ibid 39.

⁵ ibid 36.

performance of the National Disability Authority. Citizens will have a direct right of appeal to the Ombudsman's office.⁶

3. Early Years and Childcare

Childcare

Many Irish families have been trapped with boom time mortgages and unaffordable childcare costs, and RENUA

Ireland is proposing a childcare tax credit to assist them. We only believe in credits and reliefs in areas of market failure and this is one such area. The credit, which will cost €500 million per annum, will be allocated on an 80% service user, 20% service provider basis. The purpose of this relief is to ensure that mothers and fathers who want to work outside of the home can do so. Ultimately this is a supply issue and RENUA Ireland is also proposing to use a social cohesion fund, funded by local property tax, to deliver a network of community crèches across the country. Many of these crèches will have longterm arrangements with workers on community employment schemes. This model works and can deliver affordable childcare by maintaining overall standards and reducing operating costs and costs to working parents.

RENUA Ireland also favours changing maternity leave to make it available to either parent so that they are able to decide how best to split statutory leave between them. RENUA Ireland recognizes the critical role in society played by those who decide or who are in a position to raise their families on a full time basis. RENUA Ireland does this through a graduated basic income which goes to both parents whether they work inside or out of the family home. This formally recognizes the role played by full time care givers.⁷

Early year's provision

Early year's provision needs to become a national issue. RENUA's proposals on childcare are outlined earlier in this document. We must also address the issue of afterhours care. Our school buildings are underused and RENUA Ireland favours the development of a system of afterhours care as exists in other countries.⁸

Qualifications

The quality of early childhood education needs to be standardised. This can be achieved through the introduction of minimum qualifications for staff working in the industry. The qualifications should be directly linked to the national framework of skills. Similarly, there should be minimum standards for instructors on childcare courses including minimum levels of experience so that they can properly instruct their students using both their practical experience and their theoretical knowledge.⁹

Oversight

While a national syllabus has been introduced as part of the partially subsidised pre-school year, the regulatory regime overseeing its rollout is underdeveloped and requires stronger oversight and auditing. The regulatory system for crèches needs to be led by experienced and qualified childcare workers.¹⁰

⁶ *ibid* 36.

⁷ *ibid* 36.

⁸ *ibid* 39.

⁹ *ibid* 53.

¹⁰ *ibid* 53.

4. Education

Primary Education

Primary education covers key periods in learning where vital literacy, numeracy and socialisation skills are developed. The world is changing quickly and Ireland is a country that now lags rather than leads in primary education. Making changes to improve these lagging standards is crucial in any policy.

Renewable terms for Principals: School leadership should be flexible and adaptable. RENUA Ireland is proposing that principals be given eight year long renewable terms. After the eight years, the position of principal must be opened for competition. This is an important way of ensuring that principals do not suffer burn-out and that they are provided with an avenue back to frontline education should they choose to pursue it.

Competition for posts of responsibility and other managerial roles: Posts of responsibility and other managerial roles should be opened to an interview process every five years also. During their tenure, post holders will be expected to make a strong contribution to the structures and culture of the school. These posts should be paid. They will be entitled to reapply for their post or for an alternative post within the school at the end of the five year period. Post holders will have an opportunity to relinquish responsibilities should they choose to do so.

Continuing professional development: Exchange programmes are completely underused in Irish education. Formal links should be established with countries such as Finland and Canada in addition to Leargas exchange programmes with both students and teachers completing exchanges where possible. Teachers should be encouraged and supported in yearlong exchanges with high performing systems so that they can bring back and implement the ideas learned from other systems.¹¹

Performance management and standards

Primary schools will use standardised testing in the area of literacy, language and numeracy twice yearly. Parents will be informed of these results as soon as they are available. Leadership mentoring and remediation programmes will be put in place following evidence arising from Whole School Evaluation, PISA and standardised tests as well as qualitative and quantitative information acquired within schools. The privileges currently available to Deis Schools will be rolled out to all schools. Principals, teachers and boards of management must ensure that the standard of teaching is of the highest level and that assistant teachers are supported and encouraged to up-skill as much as possible. Teachers with special talents and qualifications in specific areas such as music, drama and art will be encouraged and supported to take other classes within a school by local arrangement.¹²

Curricular change and parental involvement

Curricular change needs to become a process that reflects the changing world. As teachers are asked to engage in continuous professional development, the curriculum needs to facilitate:

- Subject content;
- Teaching modalities;
- Parent assisted self-directed learning;
- Monitoring and measuring of student engagement and learning;
- Remediation and intervention with students with learning difficulties and other challenges.

¹¹ *ibid* 53.

¹² *ibid* 54.

Teachers are highly skilled, highly educated professionals performing extremely intense activities with children in classes that are often far too big. The pupil teacher ratio must be in line with best international practice.

Multi-disciplinary support structures for schools (educational psychologists, occupational therapists, speech and language therapists) to be made available to clusters of schools with their allocation based on need. Our aspiration is to reduce student teacher ratios in line with international best practice.¹³

Access to Primary Education

The lack of school places in certain parts of the country where the population is growing rapidly is a cause for huge concern. RENUA Ireland believes that every child is entitled to access a place in their local area. We will undertake an in-depth analysis of the census and of demographic projections across the country to ensure that we plan our school building programme and school expansion schemes based on demand and need. RENUA Ireland also recognises that there is over-provision of certain faith-based schools across the country and that there is an urgent need for more diversity in terms of school ethos. RENUA Ireland supports the rights of families and communities to have access to schools with a religious ethos as well as schools without such an ethos. In government, RENUA Ireland will ensure that the abandoned school divestment process is reignited. This process must respect the needs and concerns of parents, communities, the religious institutions who currently have patronage of 94% of our schools and most importantly the children themselves.¹⁴

Rural Schools

RENUA Ireland would reinstate the pupil teacher ratio in 2, 3 and 4 teacher schools to the levels of 2012. The majority of these schools are in rural areas. Their value is not just educational, their value goes way beyond that. These schools are at the heart of our rural landscape and therefore must be protected.¹⁵

Secondary Education

The Irish education system should facilitate people in achieving success on the path which they have chosen, be it academic or vocational, and RENUA Ireland supports overhauling our outdated structures to expand the options available to all students, while providing Ireland with a highly-skilled workforce ready to compete internationally.¹⁶

Challenging sacred cows – moving to a culture of self-directed learning

What is the purpose of the Junior Certificate and the Leaving Certificate? If the Junior Certificate is to have a role in the future, it will perhaps function as a means of ensuring that minimum standards in essential life skills like numeracy and functional literacy have been achieved. Beyond that however, does the over-reliance on generalist, academically driven content suit the needs of all pupils passing through the system? Furthermore, does it make sense for us to enable a culture where people are not being taught that every assignment and every week matters? The monolithic milestones of the Junior and Leaving certificate reward those who work hard and consistently but these examinations do not demand it. Renua Ireland believes that there is a role for State exams but that they should not count for any more than 30% of the final marks a student achieves when leaving the educational system. School is a place where social and life skills are learned by students. A feature of other high performing school systems is their emphasis on continuous assessment and Renua Ireland strongly supports the inclusion of this ethos into the fabric of our educational system. This progressive measure will mean that one bad exam will no longer ruin a student's chance of being accepted into their preferred college course. Instead it means that in relative terms, every assignment they undertake will count for

¹³ *ibid* 54.

¹⁴ *ibid* 55.

¹⁵ *ibid* 55.

¹⁶ *ibid* 55.

more. It will also mean that students have a good idea of what kind of college courses they can realistically apply for when entering their final year in school.¹⁷

Applied leaving certificates

RENUA Ireland believes that access to applied subjects needs to be greatly expanded. This includes links to industry for people interested in careers in tourism and hospitality, retail, fashion and design, agriculture, car maintenance, or crafts and trades like woodwork, metalwork and construction studies. Students should have access to practical, fit-for-purpose applied leaving certificates that provide for a mix of work experience modules and academic tuition. Poland, Germany and other countries successfully operate this system, and so should we.¹⁸

Special Education

The extension of disability into the Ombudsman's remit will play a key role in enforcing the often neglected rights of the disabled in Irish schools.¹⁹

5. Health

General practice / primary care sector

Move towards fully funding annual dental check-ups and a complete, thorough annual health check via a GP. This means adopting approach where the focus is preventative in nature and ensures the very best patient outcomes per euro invested.²⁰

6. Homelessness

Tackling homelessness

The first challenge for any party seeking to address the needs of homeless people is to identify what people mean by homelessness. RENUA Ireland believes that there are two primary categories: people who sleep rough and people who have become unhoused and that are desperately seeking access to housing.²¹

Homeless supports

There are some people who may be permanently homeless and who are not able to live their lives without assistance. These people should be able to live in dignity with support from the wider community. Each local authority must be mandated to put a plan in place to provide access to hostels and sheltered accommodation that meets the needs of our fellow citizens.²²

A holistic and realistic response to homelessness

The unhoused will be assisted through the policies outlined in the housing section of this document. We propose an integrated plan to help homeless people to deal with many of the problems which affect them. For many of them, issues arise due to their time in institutions or the care system. Some key factors in homelessness include domestic violence, addiction, sexual abuse, mental illness and institutionalisation.

¹⁷ *ibid* 55.

¹⁸ *ibid* 56.

¹⁹ *ibid* 56.

²⁰ *ibid* 61.

²¹ *ibid* 38.

²² *ibid* 38.

Local Authorities will be mandated to put an inter-agency plan in place to ensure a network of supports are made available to enable all those who want to live a full life are provided with avenues to achieve this goal.²³

7. Justice

Making Parents Responsible for Juvenile Crime

It is time that parents are held to account for the anti-social behaviour that causes terror in some of our communities. RENUA Ireland believes that if a child falls foul of the law, their parents can and should be held legally responsible if:

- a) Their child continually gets into trouble.
- b) They do not take reasonable steps to control their child's behaviour. We would introduce laws to make it mandatory for parents of children to attend the hearings where their child faces charges as well as requiring parents to pay the court costs of the proceedings if they are found guilty. It is no longer acceptable that the majority of hard working families should have to suffer at the hands of a minority, who do not take their responsibilities seriously.²⁴

The National Children's Hospital

RENUA Ireland is committed to the construction of the National Children's Hospital as a vital piece of national health infrastructure. We regret the politicisation of this project for more than a decade. After the failed venture at the Mater Hospital in 2012, we fail to understand the logic of choosing St James's Hospital – another congested city centre location with limited access and no scope for expansion in line with projected population growth. A planning decision on this new location is currently awaited. If the application is successful we will support the construction of the hospital in order to serve the urgent needs of our sick children. If the application is unsuccessful, we will seek to fasttrack the construction of the National Children's Hospital on a more suitable site on the outskirts of Dublin, co-located with a maternity hospital as international best practice demands.²⁵

8. Mental Health

Mental health and psychiatric services

Obesity and eating disorders are reaching epidemic levels in our youth population. Suicide and self-harm remains a profound problem in communities throughout Ireland. Systemic intervention is necessary to provide young people with the ability to cope with health issues, be they mental or physical. Child and adolescent psychiatric services need to be significantly enhanced. RENUA Ireland supports the increase of the share of the health budget for mental health services to 7%. Further to this, social care provision needs to be audited and restructured.²⁶

²³ ibid 38.

²⁴ ibid 50.

²⁵ ibid 63.

²⁶ ibid 39.

9. Poverty

The need to address the Causes of Poverty

Poverty has become intergenerational. We must break the cycle. Living in poverty has a negative impact on one's health, education, quality of life and self-esteem. It is difficult to put a cost on the consequences of poverty, but around 200,000 children live in households experiencing poverty. Difficult childhood experiences can lead to lifelong social exclusion. Each year, billions of euros are spent on welfare, yet social exclusion is rising.²⁷

10. Supporting Families

Early Intervention

RENUA Ireland wants to concentrate resources in the early intervention stage for families who are the single most important care unit in society. Social problems begin at an early stage and continue to develop unless there is early intervention. By bringing about reforms which promote early intervention, we can help to tackle some of our society's most pressing problems, while producing life-lasting benefits among our youngest and most at-risk citizens.²⁸

Assisted Families Unit

Stress in the household casts a layer of dejection and hopelessness over both parents and children. In many cases the absence of a consistent father figure adds to these difficulties. Many families see the authorities and agencies that seek to assist them as the enemy. This is not helped by the scenario whereby many different people deal with the family, such as professionals involved in educational assistance, healthcare and social care, as well as juvenile liaison officer and many others.

RENUA Ireland will establish a human face in social policy. We will establish an Assisted Families Unit, similar to Britain's Troubled Family Unit. The unit would have a specific budget and would initially operate on a pilot scheme working with a designated number of families. It would involve the allocation of a dedicated family worker to identified families. This family worker would liaise with the relevant state agencies on behalf of the family and operate on the concept of an expanded public health nurse system. Intervention would be proactive rather than reactive.²⁹

²⁷ *ibid* 35.

²⁸ *ibid* 35.

²⁹ *ibid* 35.

