

## **Strategic Plan 2017-2021**

Summary  
August 2017

## Introduction

Founded in 1995, the Children's Rights Alliance unites over 100 members working together to make Ireland one of the best places in the world to be a child.

We change the lives of all children in Ireland by making sure that their rights are respected and protected in our laws, policies and services.

We identify problems for children. We develop solutions. We educate and provide information on children's rights. We unite our members and put pressure on government and decision-makers to put children first.

Our work in the life of the last Strategic Plan (2012-2016) had a clear and positive impact on the lives of children by:

- Securing a referendum to strengthen children's rights in the Constitution (2012).
- Contributing to the closure of St Patrick's Institution, an adult prison which had been used to detain 16 and 17 year old boys in violation of their rights.
- Encouraging the Government to ratify the Third Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 2014, meaning that children can complain to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child when their rights have been violated.
- Ensuring that children's rights were placed at the heart of the Child and Family Agency Act 2014, the Children First Act 2015 and the Children and Family Relationships Act 2015.
- Supporting the ending of the criminal law defence of 'reasonable chastisement' which allowed parents and persons caring for less than three children in the home to use corporal punishment on them.
- Securing key recommendations to reform the reception process for asylum seeking children as a member of the Government Working Group on the Protection Process. On foot of this work, the Alliance also secured an increase in welfare payments for children and a government commitment to clarify that children in the asylum system could complain to the Ombudsman for Children when their rights have been breached.
- Shaping recommendations from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child for Ireland during Ireland's last examination by the Committee on its record for children by co-ordinating and supporting an international civil society delegation and youth delegation with Unicef Ireland.

Over the same period the organisation managed to remain financially stable, and with the completion of the One Foundation and the Atlantic Philanthropies funding programmes, managed to retain a core staff. The Children's Rights Alliance also bought a building with EPIC – 7 Red Cow Lane, Smithfield, Dublin 7. This enables us to cut our rental costs and create a sustainable base for the membership and organisation to operate from.

## Developing the Plan

This plan was developed based on evidence of need and an analysis of children's rights issues in Ireland. The Board formed a Strategic Planning Sub-Group in April 2016 comprising Michael Barron (Board member, Sub-Group Chair), Tom Costello (Alliance Chair), Noelle Spring, (Katharine Howard Foundation/independent member), and Tanya Ward, Chief Executive. Independent consultants were appointed to undertake an extensive stakeholder consultation, facilitate staff/board workshops and write up the plan. A survey and consultation with members also informed the plan.

## Our Vision

Our vision is that Ireland will be one of the best places in the world to be a child.

## Our Mission

Our mission is to realise the rights of children in Ireland through securing full implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

We will have achieved this mission when children's rights are:

- Protected by our laws
- Reflected in our policies
- Evidenced in wider society
- Integrated into our mind-sets

## Theory of Change

Children have rights but in reality these are not always respected, protected and fulfilled. Children also experience difficulties in claiming and asserting their rights equally. Although there have been a number of important constitutional and institutional reforms, children's rights are still not fully embedded in Ireland. Decisions-makers and services routinely make decisions that affect children without considering their rights and many children experience high levels of inequality and discrimination.

The Children's Rights Alliance will address this 'problem' by adopting four key levers of change:

1. Building political support for the rights of children.
2. Influencing and informing policy and legislation to enhance and protect children's rights.
3. Using national and international mechanisms to hold the government to account and encourage progress.
4. Building public pressure to encourage the State to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of children and public demand for quality services.

Shaping national policy and legislation through advocacy and using international/national mechanisms to deliver accountability have long been at the core of what the Children's Rights Alliance does. These are the areas in which the organisation is strongest and where its work has had the greatest impact. This work will continue under the current plan as a priority. Building political will and garnering sufficient support from the public to empower political leaders to take the necessary steps to protect and promote children's rights are two critical levers for change. The Children's Rights Alliance works closely with politicians, political parties and civil servants to ensure that they have access to quality, solution-oriented legislative and policy analysis. The Children's Rights Alliance also actively works to

highlight gaps and bring policy solutions that will change children's lives to the attention of decision-makers. Indeed, we are highly credible in this regard and already have a strong and respectful relationship with Government officials.

## Priority Issues and Objectives for 2017-2021

We identified four priority issues for the lifetime of the plan which were selected reflecting the interests of our members, gaps in the protection of children's rights, current opportunities for change, financial constraints and where the value and expertise of the Children's Rights Alliance is needed. We then embedded these within our six strategic objectives. The four priority issues are:

1. **Child poverty rates** are a significant socio-economic rights issue for children. The rates of consistent child poverty doubled from 6% in 2008 to 11.5% in 2015. A strong, united voice across society is needed for concerted action and radical rethinking of how we address child poverty which makes this a priority for this plan. This is core work for the Alliance and child poverty can be addressed across the strategic objectives for this period. It will be addressed specifically through strategic Objective 2, ensuring the Government implements a 'whole of government approach' with concrete actions and plans to reduce the numbers of children living in consistent poverty.
2. **Early years' reform** is a priority for this plan because the timing is right to put a push on policy development and investment in the early years. The driver from a children's rights perspective is to ensure that law reform and policy is not solely motivated by labour activation measures, but ensures that it is about the best interests of the child. It also provides leverage for the development of universal services, early intervention and prevention, re-orientating national budgeting approaches, investing in services and educational reform in order to achieve better outcomes for children (see Objective 3).
3. **Access to justice** for children and young people is essential for the protection and promotion of children's rights. With the securing of the children's rights referendum, the reform of the Guardian ad Litem system and the recognition of the need for child friendly courts, now is the time to make a concentrated effort to this critical area for realising rights. This work will be progressed through both the core areas of the organisation's work – monitoring and influencing policy and legislation and specifically through a body of funded work under strategic Objective 4.
4. The rights of **refugee children** to protection, survival and development are seriously at risk in Europe and in Ireland through the direct provision system. As a very vulnerable group, with no political weight, they need a spotlight to be placed on their experiences and lives and pressure to be built within government and in the Oireachtas to address the inhumane direct provision system and provide a reception approach that respects their rights. This work will be progressed under strategic Objective 5, placing a spotlight on grave violations of children's rights which is central to the mission of the Children's Rights Alliance. Other grave violations once identified will be progressed under this strategic objective, organisational capacity allowing.

The identification of these four priorities enables the Children's Rights Alliance to be selective in its choice of areas of work in the face of competing demands, while preserving flexibility to respond to emerging priorities. They sit alongside and integrate with our three cross-cutting objectives which are framed taking account of:

- Our primary role in ensuring that legislation/legal developments/national policy are monitored and reviewed and changes secured so as to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of the child (Objective 1, Objective 2).
- Our commitment to serving our membership professionally and operating to the highest standards in governance, staff development and systems (Objective 6).

The six strategic objectives set out below been developed with the aim of progressing the realisation of children's rights and ensuring a measureable improvement in the State's response on each of the Alliance's priority issues.

1. To secure changes in law to give meaningful effect to children's rights.
2. To shape national policy to give meaningful effect to children's rights and drive momentum across the State to meet its obligations to children and young people.
3. To drive home the need to invest in children early and build political support for greater access to quality services to ensure that children's rights are fulfilled.
4. To promote access to child-friendly justice in civil, criminal and administrative proceedings.
5. To put a spotlight on serious children's rights violations, in particular, the rights of children seeking international protection and in direct provision.
6. To continue to build a strong membership and ensure that the Children's Rights Alliance has the people, systems, structures, procedures and resources in place to deliver on our strategic objectives.

These should set us on a path towards the achievement of our +10 years long-term outcomes, which are ensuring that:

- We have a legislative and policy framework that respects and protects the rights of children and young people.
- Children and young people know and can access their rights.
- The voice of the child informs policy legislation and practice.
- The State progressively realises socio-economic rights and invests in high quality services for children and young people, emphasizing early intervention and prevention.

Achieving our long-term outcomes would mean that:

- All children and young people enjoy their rights on an equal basis and without discrimination including those who are vulnerable due to family background, age, race, disability or any other reason (Articles 2, 23, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child).
- All children and young people enjoy the best possible health and are protected from all forms of violence, abuse, neglect and ill-treatment (Articles 19, 24, 34, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child).
- All children and young people can access high-quality education that enables them to develop their personality, talents and abilities to the fullest extent possible (Articles 28, 29, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child).
- All children enjoy an adequate standard of living (Article 27, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child).
- All children and young people can access remedies when their rights are violated (Article 19, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child);
- All children and young people in conflict with the law are treated with dignity and their rights are respected (Article 40, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child).

## Strategic Objective 1

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*To secure changes in law to give meaningful effect to children's rights.*

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Article 4) requires States Parties to undertake all appropriate legislative, administrative and other measures to implement Convention rights, and research indicates that States which incorporate the Convention directly, indirectly or systematically are associated with a greater degree of implementation. The Irish Constitution (1937) is the fundamental legal document of the land and was recently amended by referenda to strengthen children's rights, particularly in the area of child protection (Article 42A). The amendment also includes a duty to legislate for the voice of the child in childcare, family law and adoption proceedings. Since 2012, the Child and Family Agency Act 2014, the Courts Act 2014, the Children and Family Relationships Act 2015 and the Criminal Justice (Sexual Offences) Act 2017 also give further effect to children's rights in Irish law.

The Children's Rights Alliance has considerable legal expertise and a strong track record of influencing and shaping legislation. However, at the same time, the Alliance does not have the capacity to influence and shape all future legislation that will impact on children and young people and the Alliance will need to prioritise.

***In the next four years the Children's Rights Alliance will seek to ensure that:***

- 1.1 Legislation/legal developments are monitored and reviewed and legal changes secured where there is a significant opportunity to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of the child, and where the Children's Rights Alliance's intervention is necessary.
- 1.2 Children's rights are respected, protected and fulfilled in legislation providing for and regulating early childhood care and education, including the Affordable Childcare Bill.
- 1.3 The children's rights amendment to the Constitution (Article 42A) is adequately provided for in Irish Law including the obligation to legislate for the voice of the child in childcare and private family law proceedings.
- 1.4 Children's rights are respected, protected and fulfilled in childcare law and proceedings, in particular, the Childcare Act review.

## Strategic Objective 2

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*To shape national policy to give meaningful effect to children's rights and drive momentum across the State to meet its obligations to children and young people.*

The effective implementation of children's rights cannot be achieved through law reform alone. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has recommended that national strategies and effective implementation structures are essential to embed children's rights in policy and administrative decision-making. The *National Policy Framework for Children and Young People – Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures (BOBF)* (2014-2020) is the national policy for children and young people in Ireland.

It includes an ambitious commitment to lift 105,000 children out of consistent poverty by 2020. It also includes a commitment to human rights-proof all laws, policies and practice to ensure that they are compliant with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Government is also required to ensure that the ethos, policies and practices of government institutions and state-funded services will promote equal treatment and interculturalism, and will have measures to protect against and remedy all forms of discrimination.

*BOBF* and its implementing structures provide an opportunity to drive momentum across government to meet its commitments to children and young people. In addition, the Government has also made important commitments in a *Programme for a Partnership Government (2016-2019)*.

The most important policy opportunities in the period include the development of a ten-year *National Early Years Strategy*. The development of *BOBF's* successor is likely to take place prior to 2020 and political parties will be developing their political manifestos in advance of the next General Election. The Children's Rights Alliance continues to represent the voice of children on Social Partnership and this offers another avenue to influence national policy and build momentum.

The Children's Rights Alliance has considerable legal and policy expertise and plays a key role on the National Advisory Council for Children and Young People. The Alliance is also well placed to encourage the delivery of key commitments for children under a *Programme for a Partnership Government* through its Annual Report Card series.

***In the next four years the Children's Rights Alliance will seek to ensure that:***

- 2.1 It monitors and reviews policy-related developments and secures changes where there is a significant opportunity to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of the child, and where the Children's Rights Alliance's intervention is necessary.
- 2.2 The Report Card increases its reach with senior decision-makers in Government and with the Oireachtas.
- 2.3 The State complies with its reporting obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and implements key concluding observations from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.
- 2.4 The National Budget and *BOBF* are used as an opportunity to promote a children's rights approach to public budgeting and investment in essential universal and public services, prioritising mainstreaming children's rights, early years, child poverty, refugees and access to justice.

- 2.5 Key commitments in *BOBF* are implemented in the life the plan, namely: human rights/equality, child poverty, early years, education and vulnerable groups.
- 2.6 Political party manifestos and the next Programme for Government include critical commitments for children and young people including tackling child poverty.

### Strategic Objective 3

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*To drive home the need to invest in children early and build political support for greater access to quality services to ensure that children's rights are fulfilled.*

Traditionally the rights of younger children have been overlooked. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recognises early childhood as a distinctive period in human development and has called on States to introduce an integrated approach that respects, protects, and fulfils the rights of individual children in order to give them the best start in life. The ideal approach to early childhood development is integrated, child-centred, family focused, community based, society supported and focuses on health, learning and behavioural development.

The evidence for investing early in a child's life, and in prevention and early intervention services more generally, is accepted and largely recognised in policy. However, transitioning from policy to practice is hard and requires champions. For the period of this plan, the Children's Rights Alliance will work with its members and wider stakeholder groups to achieve this critical objective.

***In the next four years the Children's Rights Alliance will seek to ensure that:***

- 3.1 The Government develops an Early Years Strategy that is rights based and contains a significant commitment to increase investment in early years.
- 3.2 The Government promotes family friendly policies in workplaces, including paid parental leave.
- 3.3 The Government develops a universal affordable childcare scheme and invests in raising the quality of early years' services and childminding, including the regulation of early years services and the recognition of early years' professionals as educators.
- 3.4 The principle of 'progressive universalism' underpins the development of a consortium of child-centred universal and targeted services (child and family community health nursing; therapeutic, educational and parenting support) and that an early intervention/prevention approach is adopted aimed at improving child development and well-being.

## Strategic Objective 4

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*To promote access to child-friendly justice in civil, criminal and administrative proceedings.*

Access to justice is essential for the protection and promotion of children's rights including through the Constitutional amendment on children (Article 42A). It is especially important for protection from discrimination, violence, abuse and exploitation. When faced with the justice system, children are thrown into an intimidating adult world which they cannot understand and are most vulnerable when they come in contact with it as a victim, witness or defendant or when judicial or administrative interventions are required for their custody or protection.

**In the next four years the Children's Rights Alliance will ensure that:**

- 4.1 Children, parents, caregivers and second-tier advice givers are informed about children's rights and entitlements and remedies available when they are violated.
- 4.2 Children have a right to be heard and express views in civil, administrative and criminal proceedings either directly in their own right or indirectly through an appropriate representative.
- 4.3 Professionals in the legal system having direct contact with children are trained in communicating with them at all ages and stages of development.
- 4.4 Children have access to free legal advice, and representation where necessary, either through statutory or NGO sources.

## Strategic Objective 5

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*To put a spotlight on serious children's rights violations, in particular, the rights of children seeking international protection.*

Monitoring and identifying serious violations of children's rights is central to the mission of the Children's Rights Alliance. The Children's Rights Alliance will monitor and document gaps in the protection of children's rights and challenge those violations through advocacy campaigns, for example children with disabilities, undocumented children, children's mental health, Traveller children. The Alliance has identified the treatment of child refugees and asylum seekers in law, policy and practice as its foremost initial spotlight issue for this plan.

The Children's Rights Alliance has played a significant role in delivering critical changes for child refugees and asylum seekers through its contribution to the Government Working Group on the Protection Process. The skills and expertise of the organisation complement those of other groups working on refugees and it is well placed to represent the particular perspective of children and ensure children's rights are a foremost consideration for policy makers. The organisation has strong relationships at ministerial level and within government, as well as the knowledge and track-record necessary to secure additional progress.

**In the next four years *the Children's Rights Alliance will seek to ensure that:***

- 5.1 Reception conditions and accommodation for children, young people and their families seeking protection respects their rights.
- 5.2 Welfare payments to children in the protection process are increased.
- 5.3 The International Protection System adopts child friendly justice principles.
- 5.4 The Government prioritises children and public support for child refugees is increased.
- 5.5 Government services for incoming refugees are organised and delivered in a family-friendly way and the particular vulnerabilities of children are understood and catered for.

## Strategic Objective 6

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*To continue to build a strong membership and ensure that the Children's Rights Alliance has the people, systems, structures, procedures and resources in place to deliver on our strategic objectives.*

In the period of this Plan, the Children's Rights Alliance is determined to maintain its quality, credibility and effectiveness, by paying attention to a number of organisational areas – these include the effectiveness of its Board, its staff and management talent, its membership resource, its communications capacity, the stability and independence of its funding model, and the collaborative environment it provides at 7 Red Cow Lane for staff and members alike.

In the current challenging operating environment, organisations, and especially Boards, in the charities sector are rightly expected to attain and maintain high standards in their governance; this will continue to be a high priority for the Board and Management, through ensuring the organisation has the capacity to provide proper oversight and high-quality outputs. The continued recruitment of high calibre staff and the provision of opportunities for training and continuing professional development are also vital in that regard.

Since the ending of support from The Atlantic Philanthropies and One Foundation, good progress has been made in the Alliance's financial sustainability. Alliance income grew by 31% in 2016 compared to 2015 with funding from government sources now matching philanthropy. Medium-term sustainability is still a challenge and it will continue to be necessary to develop diverse sources of core funding from members and individual supporters, own income and fundraising, and to ensure that any rise in Government funding is matched from other sources, so that the independence of the Alliance is assured.

As a membership organisation, the Alliance will seek both to deepen membership value, while balancing member interests with careful selection of work priorities. The Alliance exists to further the interests of children, including bringing their direct views to the table where practicable. It is informed by the collective experience of members; the Board and experts on children's issues with the view that they must exercise their judgement and prioritise a few issues that the organisation can concentrate on effectively rather than covering many issues lightly.

### **In the next four years the Children's Rights Alliance will seek to ensure that:**

- 6.1 The team is supported and effective, its performance is managed and linked to organizational objectives, and its leadership outward looking and strategic.
- 6.2 Support for the Children's Rights Alliance among members is strong – in terms of levels of participation, engagement and funding support.
- 6.3 Governance is maintained at the highest standards, from Board level, the organisation is legally compliant, strategic, protective of its independence, and invested in growing its reputation.
- 6.4 The Children's Rights Alliance has a strategic communications approach to further the strategic objectives of the plan.
- 6.5 The Children's Rights Alliance has in place a funding model that provides continuity at current levels and promotes organisational resilience and independence.
- 6.6 The Children's Rights Alliance is implementing a development plan for the management of the Alliance offices and the Children's Hub to provide a supportive and positive working environment for staff, the Board and members.