

# Pre-Budget 2016 Submission to the Department of Social Protection

June 2015



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.

Ag Eisteacht  
Alcohol Action Ireland  
Alliance Against Cutbacks in Education  
Amnesty International Ireland  
Arc Adoption  
The Ark, A Cultural Centre for Children  
ASH Ireland  
Assoc. for Criminal Justice Research and Development (ACJRD)  
Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland (ASTI)  
ATD Fourth World – Ireland Ltd  
Atheist Ireland  
Barnardos  
Barretstown Camp  
BeLonG To Youth Services  
Bessborough Centre  
Carr's Child and Family Services  
Catholic Guides of Ireland  
Childhood Development Initiative  
Children in Hospital Ireland  
City of Dublin YMCA  
COPE Galway  
Cork Life Centre  
Crosscare  
Dental Health Foundation  
DIT – School of Social Sciences & Legal Studies  
Down Syndrome Ireland  
Dublin Rape Crisis Centre  
Dun Laoghaire Refugee Project  
Early Childhood Ireland  
Educate Together  
School of Education UCD  
EPIC  
Focus Ireland  
Forbairt Naíonraí Teoranta  
Foróige  
Gaelscoileanna Teo  
GLEN - Gay and Lesbian Equality Network  
Headstrong - The National Centre for Youth Mental Health  
Healthy Food for All  
Immigrant Council of Ireland  
Inclusion Ireland  
Independent Hospitals Association of Ireland  
Inspire Ireland  
Institute of Community Health Nursing  
Institute of Guidance Counsellors  
International Adoption Association  
Irish Association of Social Care Workers (IASCW)  
Irish Association of Social Workers  
Irish Association of Suicidology  
Irish Autism Action  
Irish Centre for Human Rights, NUI Galway  
Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU)  
Irish Council for Civil Liberties (ICCL)  
Irish Foster Care Association  
Irish Girl Guides  
Irish Heart Foundation  
Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO)  
Irish Penal Reform Trust  
Irish Premature Babies  
Irish Primary Principals Network  
Irish Refugee Council  
Irish Second Level Students' Union (ISSU)  
Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children  
Irish Traveller Movement  
Irish Youth Foundation (IYF)  
Jack & Jill Children's Foundation  
Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice  
Kids' Own Publishing Partnership  
Law Centre for Children and Young People  
Lifestart National Office  
Marriage Equality – Civil Marriage for Gay and Lesbian People  
Mary Immaculate College  
Mental Health Reform  
Mounttown Neighbourhood Youth and Family Project  
MyMind  
National Childhood Network  
National Organisation for the Treatment of Abusers (NOTA)  
National Parents Council Post Primary  
National Parents Council Primary  
National Youth Council of Ireland  
One Family  
One in Four  
Parentline  
Parentstop  
Pavee Point  
Peter McVerry Trust  
Rape Crisis Network Ireland (RCNI)  
Realt Beag  
SAFE Ireland  
Saoirse Housing Association  
SAOL Beag Children's Centre  
Scouting Ireland  
Simon Communities of Ireland  
Society of St. Vincent de Paul  
Sonas Housing Association  
Special Needs Parents Association  
SpunOut.ie  
St. Nicholas Montessori Teachers Association  
St. Nicholas Montessori Society  
St. Patrick's Mental Health Services  
Start Strong  
Step by Step Child & Family Project  
Sugradh  
Teachers' Union of Ireland  
The UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, NUI Galway  
The Guardian Children's Project  
The Prevention and Early Intervention Network  
Treoir  
UNICEF Ireland  
Unmarried and Separated Families of Ireland  
youngballymun  
Youth Advocate Programme Ireland (YAP)  
Youth Work Ireland

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Who we are

The Children's Rights Alliance unites over 100 organisations, 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.

## 1.2 Introduction

The Children's Rights Alliance welcomes the opportunity to submit its views to the Department of Social Protection in relation to the development of Budget 2016. The Children's Rights Alliance is deeply concerned about the unacceptably high number of children living in poverty in Ireland and believes the reduction of child poverty must be a key Government priority.

Since 2008, the rate of child poverty has almost doubled from 6.3 per cent<sup>1</sup> to 11.7 per cent in 2013 (the most recent year available).<sup>2</sup> In addition, a further 17.9 per cent of children are at risk of poverty.<sup>3</sup> Children are 1.4 times more likely than adults to live in consistent poverty.<sup>4</sup>

The recession has brought poverty, hunger, debt, unemployment, emigration, homelessness and anxiety about the future to the lives of many families and their children. A clear link can be drawn between the cuts to social welfare payments and the Child Benefit payment and the increase in child poverty rates.<sup>5</sup> A 2014 UNICEF report found families with children in Ireland lost the equivalent of ten years of income progress.<sup>6</sup> Despite social transfers, the State failed to adequately protect children from the worst impact of the recession.

Last year, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Brendan Howlin TD, announced that Budget 2015 'marks the end of an era of budgetary austerity'<sup>7</sup> and indeed it was a more reasonable budget for children and families. This year's budget choices are being made in a much more positive economic climate and so Budget 2016 can make a significant investment to address child poverty by supporting families who are suffering the cumulative effects of cuts to social welfare payments and public services as well as unemployment and wage reductions.

In compiling Budget 2016, the Children's Rights Alliance urges the Tánaiste to consider the effect that her budgetary decisions will have on the child's right to grow up free from poverty; the impact of those decisions on the increasing number of children growing up poor in Ireland; and how she can limit the already devastating impact of the recession on children and their families. There is a moral and legal obligation on Government to protect children from the impact of further cuts to vital supports and services.

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1 Government of Ireland (2009) *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) 2008*, Dublin: Stationery Office, p. 7.

2 Central Statistics Office, *Ireland: At risk of poverty and consistent poverty rates by age group*, 2013, [online], <http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-mip/measuringirelandsprogress2013/society/society-socialcohesion/#.VUpn0fIVhBc> [accessed 6 May 2015].

3 Central Statistics Office (2015) *EU Survey on Income and Living Conditions 2013*, <http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/silc/surveyonincomeandlivingconditions2013/#.VMpOnV0kvOF> [accessed 29 January 2015].

4 Office for Social Inclusion (2014) *Social Inclusion Monitor 2012*, Dublin: Department of Social Protection, p. 15.

5 B. Harvey (2014) *Universalism - the preferred and most effective option* Dublin: Barnardos p. 5.

6 UNICEF Office of Research (2014) *Children of the Recession: The impact of the economic crisis on child well-being in rich countries, Innocenti Report Card 12*, UNICEF Office of Research, Florence.

7 <file:///T:/Research,%20Policy%20&%20Campaigns/Budget/Budget%202015/Post-Budget%202015/Budget%202015%20-%20Statement%20on%20the%20Estimates%20by%20the%20Minister%20for%20Public%20Expenditure%20and%20Reform.html>

## 2. Child Poverty Target and Children’s Rights-Budgeting

### 2.1 International and European Obligations

*UN Committee on the Rights of the Child:* Under Article 27 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, Ireland has an international legal obligation to protect a child’s right to an adequate standard of living. While the provision recognises that parents and guardians have the primary role in providing financially for a child, states must take appropriate measures to assist parents and guardians according to its means, including the provision of material assistance and support programmes. The Committee has stated that ‘economic policies are never neutral in their effect on children’s rights’.<sup>8</sup>

Ireland is due to be examined by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in January 2016. Budget 2016 is the final budget before that examination – the final opportunity for the Government to take decisive action that will demonstrate to the UN Committee that it is taking its obligations to children seriously.

As part of the preparations for the examination, in June the Committee issued a ‘List of Issues’ to Ireland which the State is obliged to respond to by mid October 2015.<sup>9</sup> The List of Issues includes a request by the Committee that the State provide information on measures taken to ‘mitigate the negative impact of austerity measures on the implementation of the Convention, including for children of migrant and ethnic minority backgrounds.’<sup>10</sup> It has also sought ‘updated comparative information, in percentage terms, on the increase or decrease in budget allocations for programmes, activities and services relevant to the implementation of the Convention for the past three years’, including in relation to social welfare payments.<sup>11</sup>

*European Commission:* In May 2015, the European Commission published the country-specific recommendations for each Member State.<sup>12</sup> The recommendations of relevance to child poverty is:

*Take steps to increase the work-intensity of households and to address the poverty risk of children by tapering the withdrawal of benefits and supplementary payments upon return to employment and through better access to affordable full-time childcare.*

Budget 2015 responded to the 2014 ‘Country-Specific Recommendations’ by introducing the Back to Work Family Dividend which provides a tapered two-year cushion for parents returning to, or entering, the labour market – a welcome development. To further the above 2015 ‘Country-Specific Recommendations’, more will need to be done to ensure that all eligible parents can take up work, education or training opportunities, such as the introduction of tapered withdrawal of other payments and the provision of affordable childcare and after-school care which continues to act as a barrier for many to.

#### *Recommendation:*

- Implement the Country Specific Recommendation by taking steps to increase the work-intensity of households and to address the poverty risk of children by tapering the withdrawal of benefits and supplementary payments upon return to employment and through better access to high quality affordable childcare and after-school care to enable parents to take up employment, training or education.

8 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2003) General Comment No. 5, para. 52.

9 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2015) *List of issues in relation to the combined third and fourth periodic reports of Ireland*, CRC/C/IRL/Q/3-4, p. 1.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

12 European Commission (2015) *Council Recommendation on the 2015 National Reform Programme of Ireland and delivering a Council opinion the 2015 Stability Programme of Ireland*, Brussels: European Commission, COM(2015) 258 final, p. 6.

## 2.2 Child Poverty Target

Under the *EU 2020 Strategy*, Ireland has committed to lift 200,000 people out of poverty by 2020.<sup>13</sup> In April 2014, a new national child-specific social target was introduced in *Better Outcomes: Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020*.<sup>14</sup> The national child-specific social target commits 'to lift over 70,000 children out of consistent poverty by 2020, a reduction of at least two-thirds on the 2011 level.'<sup>15</sup> This target will need to be adjusted upwards to take account of the recent increases in child poverty.<sup>16</sup>

It is now over a year since the Government set the child poverty reduction target. Budget 2015 took some positive steps – an increase in Child Benefit, an introduction of a Back to Work Family Dividend, adjustments to the Universal Social Charge and increased investment in social housing. However, more will need to be done. More than one in every nine children are growing up in poverty in Ireland today. An Implementation Plan to achieve this target was promised but has yet to be published.

The implementation plan should outline the objectives, actions and agreed timelines for each Department and Agency with responsibility for delivery across Government. The Plan should be rights-based and draw on the 2013 European Commission Recommendation 'Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage'.<sup>17</sup>

The implementation plan must also include measures focused on specific cohorts of children who are particularly at risk of poverty, including children in one parent families, children in jobless households, Traveller and Roma children, migrant children, children living in direct provision centres,<sup>18</sup> young care leavers, children with a disability and homeless children.

### *Recommendation:*

- Develop a cross departmental rights-based Implementation Plan and allocate necessary resources to achieve the Child Poverty Target, in line with the EU *Recommendation on Investing in Children*, with a focus on both investment in public services as well as income supports.

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13 Department of Social Protection (2012) *National Social Target for Poverty Reduction: Policy Briefing on the Review of the National Poverty Target*, Dublin: Department of Social Protection, p.3. The Irish figure is based on the 2010 baseline rate of 6.3 per cent. The EU will be tracking the 'at risk of poverty' measure.

14 Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2014) *Better Outcomes Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014–2020*, Dublin: Department of Child and Youth Affairs.

15 Ibid. Commitment 4.2.

16 Office for Social Inclusion (2014) *Social Inclusion Monitor 2012*, Dublin: Department of Social Protection, p.15.

17 European Commission Recommendation, 'Investing in Children: Breaking the Cycle of Disadvantage', 20 February 2013, C(2013) 778 final.

18 Direct provision is a scheme whereby asylum seekers and people seeking other forms of protection are provided with accommodation on a full board basis with all their basic needs apparently provided for directly. Direct provision residents receive a weekly payment of €19.10 for an adult and €9.60 for a child.

## 2.3 Children's Rights-Budgeting

The budgetary process should be based on the principles of participation, transparency, accessibility and universality. To be effective, such a process requires greater coordination between the government departments and agencies involved in the execution of the budget as well as an increased awareness of Ireland's children's rights obligations. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has made clear the obligation on States to undertake targeted measures to move as expeditiously and effectively as possible towards the full realisation of economic, social and cultural rights of children and that a financial crisis should not be used as a reason to postpone the State's obligations and actions to tackle child poverty.<sup>19</sup> The Committee has also recommended that children be made visible in budgets, pointing out that: 'No State can tell whether it is fulfilling children's economic, social and cultural rights 'to the maximum extent of ... available resources' ... unless it can identify the proportion of national and other budgets allocated to the social sector and, within that, to children, both directly and indirectly.'<sup>20</sup>

The national Budget in Ireland is not disaggregated to show the proportion of the budget devoted to expenditure on children. In 2014, the Government committed to explore the development of a mechanism to track and analyse expenditure on children across departments, agencies and non-governmental organisations.<sup>21</sup>

It is welcome that the Department of Social Protection has begun to carry out social impact assessments following the Budget.<sup>22</sup> The Department should, however, build on this by conducting and publishing assessments in advance of decisions being made. This model should be replicated by other government departments whose budgetary decisions have an impact on children.

### *Recommendations:*

- Proof all Budget 2016 proposals for their impact on children's rights, with a particular focus on child-poverty proofing.
- Provide a social impact assessment of the potential impact of the Department's budgetary proposals on children's rights in advance of decisions being made.
- Disaggregate the departmental Vote to show the proportion of the budget devoted to expenditure on children.

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19 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2007) *Day of General Discussion on 'Resources for the Rights of the Child – Responsibility of States* [online] <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/CRC/Pages/DiscussionDays.aspx> [accessed 1 May 2015].

20 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2003), *General Comment No. 5 (2003) General Measures of Implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child*, CRC/GC/2003/5, para. 51.

21 Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2014) *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures, The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020*, Dublin: Department of Children and Youth Affairs, p.113.

22 Department of Social Protection (2014) *Social impact assessment of the main welfare and tax measures for 2014*: Department of Social Protection.

### 3. Child and Family Income Supports

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in its General Comment 7 reminds States that children's rights and well-being are dependent on the support and resources available to their parents.<sup>23</sup> The social welfare system continues to provide a vital safety net and is responsible for protecting many families from being pushed even deeper into poverty.<sup>24</sup> A Department of Social Protection 2014 report demonstrated that social transfers were found to reduce the 'at-risk-of-poverty rate from 55 per cent to 16 per cent' in 2011.<sup>25</sup> Of concern, however, is a finding from research by Trinity College Dublin and the Family Support Agency that 40 per cent of families 'at risk of poverty' reported that they did not receive any social welfare supports in addition to the Child Benefit payment, while 30 per cent of those families relied on social welfare for all of their household income.<sup>26</sup>

More must be done to ensure that the social welfare system alleviates poverty for those who need it most. However, incomes support measures will not work in isolation and must be accompanied by improved access to affordable services including childcare and after-school supports, housing, education and health care.

#### 3.1 Child Benefit

Child Benefit is the only regular, reliable payment that goes to families regardless of employment status, income or means. This is in line with Article 18 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which obliges states to support parents and guardians in caring and providing for their children. The Child Benefit payment was significantly reduced from a rate of €166 for the first and second child and €203 for the third and subsequent child prior to Budget 2010. Since 2009, €618.5 million has been cut from Child Benefit payments representing a staggering 24% drop in the payment over five years.<sup>27</sup> In a welcome move, Budget 2015 provided an increase of €5 per child for the Child Benefit payment, bringing it up to €135 per month. The Government also committed to a further additional €5 in Budget 2016 if 'circumstances allow'.<sup>28</sup> The 2015 increase to Child Benefit, added €2.31 to the household's average weekly income. However, the cumulative decrease from 2008 is €20.93.<sup>29</sup>

The Vincentian Partnership has noted that while the increase to Child Benefit, of €5 per month, has helped move some social welfare dependent household compositions with a pre-school child to income adequacy, child income supports do not meet the direct cost of a child in three of the four age groups examined.<sup>30</sup> The cost of full time private childcare for an infant in an urban area is approximately €11,000 per annum. In this instance, Child Benefit, which is paid at €135 per month, meets 15% of the annual cost of childcare.<sup>31</sup>

#### *Recommendation:*

- Keep the Government's commitment made in Budget 2015 to increase the Child Benefit payment by an additional €5 a month per child.

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23 17 UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, (2005) General Comment No. 7: Implementing Child Rights in early Childhood, UN Doc. CRC/GC/2005/7.

24 D. Watson and B. Maître (2013) *Social Transfers and Poverty Alleviation in Ireland: An Analysis of the CSO Survey on Income and Living Conditions 2004-2011*, Social Inclusion Report No. 4. Dublin: Department of Social Protection and the Economic and Social Research Institute.

25 Department of Social Protection (2014) *Social impact assessment of the main welfare and tax measures for 2014*, Dublin: Department of Social Protection, p.2.

26 L. Swords, B. Merriman and M. O'Donnell (2013) *Family Wellbeing on a Limited Income: A Study of Families Living at Risk of Poverty in Ireland*, Dublin: Children's Research Centre, Trinity College and the Family Support Agency, p.58.

27 The overall cost of Child Benefit to the State in 2009 was €2.5 billion, in 2013 it was €1.9 billion.

28 <http://www.budget.gov.ie/Budgets/2015/Documents/Budget%20Speech%20Final.pdf>

29 Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice (2015) *Minimum Essential Standard of Living 2015*, pp.9-10.

30 Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice (2015) *Minimum Essential Standard of Living 2015*, p. 14

31 Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice (2015) *Minimum Essential Standard of Living 2015*, P. 14

### 3.2 Habitual Residency Condition

Child Benefit is described as a universal payment but it is no longer paid to the parents of all children living in Ireland following the introduction of the Habitual Residency Condition (HRC) in 2004 and changes to the law in 2009.<sup>32</sup> This policy clearly discriminates against children based on their parents' immigration status and thus is in contravention of Article 2 on non-discrimination of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Children of asylum seekers, newly arrived migrants and some Traveller and Roma children are blocked from accessing Child Benefit. As asylum seeking families are not entitled to work, they have no legitimate means of supplementing the direct provision payment (Adult €19.10/Child €9.60 per week) they receive to provide basic necessities for their children. Research has documented that children living in direct provision are experiencing high rates of poverty.<sup>33</sup>

#### *Recommendation:*

- Remove habitual residency as a condition for child benefit qualification to address poverty among vulnerable children in particular asylum seeking, Roma and Traveller children or introduce an equivalent new payment to support these children.

### 3.3 One Parent Family Payment

Children living in lone parent households suffer the highest rates of consistent poverty and deprivation, with 63.2% being at risk of poverty rate (31.7%).<sup>34</sup> The rate of poverty among lone parent households is disproportionately higher than other family types.<sup>35</sup> This level of inequality is unacceptable.

Changes to the means-tested One Parent Family Payment since 2012 have led to about 60,000 recipients losing the payment. To be eligible for the payment the age threshold of the youngest child is now seven years and the earnings disregard has been reduced from €146.50 per week in 2011 to €90 in 2014. It is planned to reduce it to €60 per week in 2016 for both new and existing recipients.

There is grave concern that the reforms are contributing to the rising rate of child poverty in Ireland. For example, the reforms effective from July 2015 will lead to a reduction in the income of approximately 11,000 parents, ranging from over €100 to €30 per week – a significant amount for a low income family.<sup>36</sup> No poverty impact analysis has been undertaken on recipients who have transitioned from the One Parent Family Payment to a different payment.<sup>37</sup>

Under the reforms, a key difficulty for many claimants moving to a new payment is that they no longer qualify for the same level of support. For example, for many, while they are working part time, they are not working the full 19 hours a week to qualify for the Family Income Supplement. There is also concern that the reduction in the earnings disregard is acting as a work disincentive.<sup>38</sup> In 2012, 60 per cent of lone parents receiving the One Parent Family payment were working at least part time outside the home: this figure fell to just 36 per cent in 2014.<sup>39</sup>

32 The Habitual Residence Condition (HRC) is set out in Section 246 of the Social Welfare (Consolidation) Act 2005. In 2009 the legislation was changed to exclude anyone in the asylum process from being habitually resident.

33 Irish Refugee Council (2012) *State sanctioned child poverty and exclusion*, Dublin: Irish Refugee Council.

34 CSO, 2015. SILC Survey on Income and Living Conditions 2013. P.18 Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice (2015) *Minimum Essential Standard of Living 2015*.

35 F. McGinnity et al. (2014) *Winners And Losers? The Equality Impact of the Great Recession in Ireland*, Equality Authority and ESRI

36 K. Kiernan, Today, our Government will condemn thousands of children to even deeper levels of poverty, The Journal [online] <http://www.thejournal.ie/readme/changes-to-one-parent-family-payment-2180118-Jun2015/>

37 Ibid.

38 One Family (2014) *One-Parent Family Payment & Income Disregards*, Dublin: One Family, [http://www.onefamily.ie/wp-content/uploads/One-Family-Survey-Results-Feb-2014\\_Income-Disregards.pdf](http://www.onefamily.ie/wp-content/uploads/One-Family-Survey-Results-Feb-2014_Income-Disregards.pdf)

39 See F. O'Toole, 'Poorest will be hardest hit by lone-parent cut', *The Irish Times*, 23 June 2015, [online], <http://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/fintan-o-toole-poorest-will-be-hardest-hit-by-lone-parent-cut-1.2258968> [accessed 29 June 2015].

Structural barriers also persist that are preventing the reforms from having the desired effect of moving parents from welfare-dependence to employment. Key among these barriers is access to affordable high-quality childcare and after-school supports, which are necessary to support labour activation. Childcare costs for parents in Ireland are among the highest in the OECD.<sup>40</sup> Depending on the age-group of the children in the household, full-time childcare can account for over 40 per cent of household income.<sup>41</sup> The high cost of childcare for parents is acting as a barrier to employment and training for some parents, preventing them from exiting poverty.<sup>42</sup> Other barriers include access to affordable housing and well paid family-friendly employment opportunities.

Given these findings and the unacceptable rate of poverty among one parent families, a re-think is needed on the One Parent Family Payment reforms. A review should be undertaken to assess the impact to date of the reforms on poverty rates and work activation.

#### *Recommendations:*

- Undertake a re-think and review of the One Parent Family Payment reforms to ensure its measure are not pushing families with children into poverty.
- Equalise the earnings disregard at €90 for all One Parent Family claimants regardless of payment, including Job Seekers Transition Allowance claimants.
- Reduce the qualifying hours for Family Income Supplement to 15 hours per week.

### **3.4 Family Income Supplement**

Family Income Supplement (FIS) is an important in-work benefit support specifically designed to assist low wage-earning employees with children. Reform of 'in-work' income supports, for example by introducing a refundable working tax credit, is urgently needed. We understand that the Advisory Group on Tax and Social Welfare is currently exploring reform options for 'in-work' benefits. As FIS is both a child and employment support payment any reform of the payment would require both a child and an employment response.

In addition, measures for reform and increasing take-up of FIS should include: simplify the application process, as highlighted by the Advisory Group on Tax and Social Welfare<sup>43</sup>; introduce self-assessment for claiming FIS; and use the 'sign off' from the Live Register as a trigger<sup>44</sup>; adjust the thresholds for the FIS to compensate for any changes in the rate of, or eligibility criteria for, income tax or the Child Benefit payment; and reduce the minimum weekly hour requirement for eligibility for FIS for a set period of time in light of the reduction in working hours that many low paid workers now experience.

#### *Recommendation:*

- Adjust the eligibility criteria for the Family Income Supplement by reducing the qualifying hours from 19 to 15 hours per week, and by increasing the earnings disregards to enable more low income families to access the payment.

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40 Start Strong (2014) *The Double Dividend* [online], [http://www.startstrong.ie/files/Double\\_Dividend\\_Policy\\_Brief\\_Web2.pdf](http://www.startstrong.ie/files/Double_Dividend_Policy_Brief_Web2.pdf) [accessed 19 May 2015]. Full OECD data is available at: [http://www.oecd.org/els/soc/Childcare\\_2012\\_EN\\_20141212.xlsx](http://www.oecd.org/els/soc/Childcare_2012_EN_20141212.xlsx).

41 Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice (2015) *Minimum Income Standard and the Cost of Childcare* [online], [http://www.budgeting.ie/images/stories/Publications/Papers/VPSJ\\_2015\\_MIS\\_-\\_Cost\\_of\\_Childcare.pdf](http://www.budgeting.ie/images/stories/Publications/Papers/VPSJ_2015_MIS_-_Cost_of_Childcare.pdf), p.29 [accessed 19 May 2015].

42 European Commission (2015) *Country Report Ireland 2015, Commission Staff Working Document* [online], [http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/pdf/csr2015/cr2015\\_ireland\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/europe2020/pdf/csr2015/cr2015_ireland_en.pdf) pp.59-61 [accessed 19 May 2015].

43 *Ibid.*

44 As recommended by the Expert Group on Integrating Tax and Welfare, 1996.

### 3.5 Qualified Child Increase

The Qualified Child Increase (QCI) supports children who live in families that rely on social welfare as their only income — often due to a parent’s illness or disability, or full time caring responsibilities. It is a critical targeted measure for addressing child poverty. For these families, adult social welfare rates are the key component of household income and are, therefore, critical in reducing child poverty. The impact on children must be considered when making any changes to adult payments. Given the current uncertainty and unpredictability of the economy, the social welfare system must be able to respond to trends in patterns of employment, such as the growth in atypical employment.

Child income supports (with the exception of the BSCFA) do not take account of increasing costs in adolescence and at this age the gap between minimum essential expenditure and income supports widens. According to the Vincentian Partnership, many social welfare dependent families with adolescent children face severe income inadequacy in 2015 as a consequence.<sup>45</sup>

*Recommendation:*

- Increase the rate of the Qualified Child Increase for families with children over 12 years.
- Maintain the real value of the Qualified Child Increase at existing levels, by adjusting the payment to compensate for any changes to the rate of, or eligibility criteria for, the Child Benefit payment or social welfare payments.

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<sup>45</sup> Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice (2015) *Minimum Essential Standard of Living 2015*, p.18.

## 4. Supports for Children at School

### 4.1 Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance

The Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance (BSCFA) is the only targeted payment dedicated to supporting parents with the school costs by helping families meet the cost of uniforms and footwear for children going to school. It is a once-off payment costing €45 million per annum – a fraction of the almost €20 billion annual budget of the Department of Social Protection.<sup>46</sup>

The BSCFA was cut in both Budgets 2012 and 2013 resulting in an overall reduction of €105 (34%) for children aged 12 or more and €100 (50%) for children aged 4-11 years. Research shows that, in 2014, going back to school costs €345 for a child in senior infants and €735 for a 1st year pupil in secondary school.<sup>47</sup> The cuts hinder children from fulfilling their right to education under Article 28 of the UNCRC, and their right to be free of poverty.

In addition, there is an anomaly with the payment whereby income thresholds differ between two-parent and one-parent families, making it more difficult for one-parent families – which face the greatest risk of poverty – to access the payment.<sup>48</sup>

#### Recommendations:

- Restore the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance to the 2012 rate to reverse the regressive cuts in Budgets 2012 and 2013 – at a cost of approximately €15 million.
- Bring the income limits for Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance in line with those for the Family Income Supplement (FIS) and make the income limits the same for one- and two-parent families.

### 4.2 School Meals Programme

Since 2008, the prevalence of food poverty has increased dramatically, with nearly ten per cent of the Irish population unable to afford food at some stage in 2014.<sup>49</sup> The rate of food poverty increased to 18% for households with three or more children and 23% for lone parent families.<sup>50</sup> Research with children, aged between 10 and 17 years, found that one in five had gone to school or to bed hungry.<sup>51</sup>

The cost of good quality, nutritious food is a key contributor to food poverty. Healthy foods such as fruit, vegetables and lean meat are up to 10 times more expensive than poorer quality foods with high concentrations of sugar, fat and salt.<sup>52</sup> Families from lower income backgrounds are priced out of a healthy diet and so rely on a cheaper, energy dense and micronutrient-poor foods, compared with that of higher income families. Research has found that the rates of social welfare and

46 See F. O'Toole, 'Poorest will be hardest hit by lone-parent cut', *The Irish Times*, 23 June 2015, [online], <http://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/fintan-o-toole-poorest-will-be-hardest-hit-by-lone-parent-cut-1.2258968> [accessed 29 June 2015].

47 Barnardos (2014) 'School Costs Survey Briefing' [www.barnardos.ie](http://www.barnardos.ie).

48 This means that a couple with one child can earn €563.60 and be eligible for the payment, while the earnings threshold for a lone parent is €410.10. This trend continues as family size grows. This discrepancy was noted in the Joint Committee on Social Protection (2010) Fourth Report, Financial Disincentives to Cohabitation and Marriage, but no clear recommendations were made to address it.

49 Organisation for Economic Development and Co-operation (2014) *Society at a Glance 2014 Highlights: Ireland – The crisis and its aftermath*, Paris: OECD, p. 3.

50 C. Carney and B. Maitre (2012) *Social Inclusion Technical Paper No. 3 Constructing a Food Poverty Indicator for Ireland using the Survey on Income and Living Conditions*, Dublin: Department of Social Protection.

51 M. Callaghan & S. Nic Gabhainn (2013) *Appendix 1: Nutrition behaviours and outcomes: a special analysis of the HBSC survey as part of the implementation of the National Strategy for Research and Data on Children's Lives, 2011-2016*. Dublin: Department of Children and Youth Affairs, p.53. The figures in Table 185 were used to calculate the overall percentage.

52 Food Safety Authority of Ireland (2011) *Scientific Recommendations for Healthy Eating in Ireland*. Dublin: FSAI.

minimum wage in Ireland were such as to make eating a healthy diet almost impossible.<sup>53</sup> As a result, children living in lower-income families are more likely to suffer from higher levels of poor health and obesity.<sup>54</sup> Experiences of food poverty will be intensified for families depending on the age of their child, with infants and adolescents pushing up the overall spend on food due to special dietary requirements or the amount of food required.<sup>55</sup>

Under Article 27(3), the State is obliged to provide material assistance and support programmes [to parents], particularly with regards to nutrition.’ Further, Article 24 recognises the right of the child to the highest attainable standard of health and obliges the State ‘to combat disease and malnutrition... through the provision of adequate nutritious foods...’. The Government has committed to address the issue of food poverty in *Better Outcomes: Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014-2020*.<sup>56</sup>

The School Meals Programme provides regular and healthy food services for almost 207,000 disadvantaged school children who are unable to benefit fully from their education due to a lack of access to quality food.<sup>57</sup> However, the programme does not cover the cost of kitchen equipment, facilities or salaries, training for staff or repurposing of space within the school to provide food in a safe and social way. In addition, there are no mechanisms to support the food poverty needs of non-formal education and early years settings.

In a welcome move, Budget 2015 provided an increase of €2 million for the Programme bring its allocation to €39 million. However, given the scale of the problem more needs to be done in terms of providing direct food support to children in poverty.

*Recommendation:*

- Continue to invest in the School Meals Programme and expand its reach to non-formal education settings, such as early years settings.

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53 S. Friel, O. Walsh & D. McCarthy (2006) ‘The Irony of a Rich Country: Issues of Financial Access to and Availability of Healthy Foods in the Republic of Ireland’, *Epidemiology and Community Health*, 60, 1013 - 1019 as quoted in E.A Dowler & D. O’Connor (2012) ‘Rights based approaches to addressing food poverty and food insecurity in Ireland’ *Social Science and Medicine*, 74, 44-51.

54 Safefood (2008) *Food and Nutrient Intake and Attitudes Among Disadvantaged Group on the Island of Ireland. Summary Report*, Cork: Safefood.

55 Infants in an urban setting require €31.22 weekly spend on food, while post-primary school pupils require €35.44 per week. The price increases for children living in rural settings. Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice (2012) *The Cost of a Child* <http://www.budgeting.ie/images/stories/Publications/cost%20of%20a%20child%20-%20full%20report.pdf>, p.32 [accessed 20 April 2015].

56 Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2014) *Better Outcomes Brighter Futures: The National Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2014–2020*, Dublin: Department of Child and Youth Affairs. Commitments 1.1 to 1.3.

57 Department of Social Protection, *Schools Meals Programme* <http://www.welfare.ie/en/Pages/School-Meals-Programme.aspx> <last accessed 24 June 2014>

## 5. Supports for Families in Need of Housing

Ireland is experiencing a housing and homelessness crisis. The rate of families with children becoming homeless jumped dramatically in 2014,<sup>58</sup> with on average over 40 families becoming homeless each month, twice the number per month than in 2013.<sup>59</sup> By March 2015, there were 471 family units, with 1,054 children, living in emergency accommodation.<sup>60</sup> The great majority of these homeless families were in Dublin, where there were 411 families with 911 children, in emergency accommodation. An indication of the worsening situation in Dublin is that in the short time between December 2014 and March 2015, the number of families with children in emergency accommodation rose by 24 per cent (increasing from 331 to 411).

The rise in homeless numbers is set against the backdrop of a very large number of households on the social housing waiting list – 89,872 households in 2013, with 47% waiting seven years or more.<sup>61</sup>

The drivers behind the increasing number of homeless families include low levels of rent supplements in an era of rapidly increasing rent prices, increased demand for rental accommodation, landlords refusing to accept rent allowance, lack of availability of social housing and personal indebtedness.<sup>62</sup> In some areas rent supplement levels are as much as 20% below market rents.<sup>63</sup>

In 2014, the Government published a Social Housing Strategy 2020 which provides the basis for an enhanced approach to social housing provision and contains clear actions to be taken to increase supply and most importantly, reduce the number of people on waiting lists.<sup>64</sup> While this is welcome, urgent action must be taken in Budget 2016 to stop families with children from becoming homeless.

### *Recommendation:*

- Increase area-based Rent Supplement limits to realistic levels as a temporary homelessness prevention measure, pending sufficient increases in the provision of social and private rented supply and undertake a review of rent supplement payments.

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58 RTE, 'Over 450 families made homelessness in Dublin last year', RTE News [online], 29 January 2015, <http://www.rte.ie/news/2015/0129/676543-homeless/> [accessed 09 February 2015].

59 P. Duncan, 'Family Home Lost Every Day, says Focus', *The Irish Times* [online], 5 August 2014. <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/family-home-lost-every-day-says-focus-1.1888185> [accessed 09 February 2015].

60 Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government (2014) *Breakdown of homeless persons in emergency accommodation*, <http://www.environ.ie/en/Publications/DevelopmentandHousing/Housing/FileDownload,40111,en.xls> [accessed 11 February 2015].

61 Housing Agency, *Summary of Social Housing Assessments 2013, Key Findings*, Dublin: The Housing Agency, December 2013, Table A1.1: Net Household Need 1993–2013.

62 K. Holland, 'Homeless Crisis in Need of Urgent Action', *The Irish Times*, 26 April 2014, [online]

<http://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/homeless-crisis-in-need-of-urgent-action-1.1774572>, [accessed 09 February 2015].

63 Focus Ireland (2015) No Homeless Family Turned Away campaign see <http://focus.revolutionaries.ie/takeaction/no-homeless-family-turned-away/>

64 Department of Environment, Community and Local Government (2014) *Social Housing Strategy 2020: Support, Supply and Reform*. <http://www.environ.ie/en/PublicationsDocuments/FileDownload,39622,en.pdf>