



POLICY SUBMISSION

Submission on the National Children's Strategy

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1. Introduction

The Agency welcomes the government initiative to develop a national children's strategy. The strategy aims to map out realisable goals over a ten-year period on all aspects of children and young people and to promote the best interests of children and young people, in accordance with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.¹ The strategy is the responsibility of the Minister of State with responsibility for children at the Department of Health and Children, Mary Hanafin TD, who has established an interdepartmental committee to prepare the strategy.

In responding to the request for submissions on the national children's strategy, the Agency is fulfilling its statutory responsibility to advise on all aspects of social and economic planning in relation to poverty. Our submission prioritises the needs of poor children, drawing on our extensive expertise in this regard. The Agency has produced a number of research reports documenting the extent and impact of child poverty.² It

¹ Department of Health press statement, 18th November, 1999. The key elements identified for the strategy are:

- recognition of the best interest of the child as a first consideration;
- recognition of the intrinsic worth of childhood as a foundation for citizenship;
- promotion of the complementary relationship between the child, the family, the voluntary/community sector, the private sector and the state;
- widespread consultation with all relevant interests.

²Nolan, B and Farrell, B (1990), *Child poverty in Ireland*, Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency; Millar, J et al, (1992), *Lone parents, poverty and public policy*, Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency; O'Neill, C (1992), *Telling it like it is*, Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency; Carney, C et al (1994), *The cost of a child*, Dublin: Combat

also has supported innovative programmes which address aspects of child poverty, notably in terms of educational disadvantage and the violence associated with the Northern troubles. The priority attached to child poverty is reflected in the current Agency strategic plan (objective 3), which sets out the following actions:

- ❑ to identify and promote targets for the reduction of child poverty;
- ❑ to enhance research and policy on child poverty;
- ❑ to develop policy and practice on educational disadvantage;
- ❑ to heighten public awareness of child poverty.

Current Agency initiatives on child poverty include:

- preparation of an up-to-date research report on child poverty;
- examination of how a child poverty target might be drawn up and applied in the review of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy;
- development of a public awareness programme on child poverty together with four voluntary agencies called the *Open your eyes to child poverty initiative*;
- completion of five-year demonstration programme on local interventions to tackle educational disadvantage;
- involvement in an international project to develop a methodology for measuring children's wellbeing.

The submission has six main elements:

- ❑ the need for a national children's strategy;

Poverty Agency; Kellaghan, T et al (1995), *Educational disadvantage in Ireland*, Dublin: Department of Education and Combat Poverty Agency.

- ❑ why child poverty should be a policy priority;
- ❑ a review of the welfare of children;
- ❑ policy proposals to enhance the welfare of children;
- ❑ reform of service provision in relation to children;
- ❑ the institutional framework to support a national children's strategy.

In addition to this written submission, the Agency is willing to provide whatever further information or advice it can offer to those charged with drafting the national children's strategy. It should be noted that the submission focuses on children aged under 18 years, unless otherwise stated in the text.

2. Why a national strategy for children?

A key issue to consider at the outset is the rationale for a national strategy for children. Our understanding of the role and significance of children in society will determine the policy perspective that is subsequently adopted in the strategy.

Children matter in the first instance because of their numerical strength. There are 1.072 million children in this country, representing 29.6% of the total population. In European terms, we have by far the highest proportion of children, with the EU norm being nine percentage points lower at 21.2%. This large youth population is double that of people aged 60+ years (551,828 - 15% of the total). The trend over time is for a decline in the size of the child population. Thus, for example, there are now less than 50,000 children aged under one year, compared to almost 70,000 aged 17 years. This downward trend is forecast to continue.

Another demographic indicator of the importance of children is the number of households containing children.

Almost two-fifths of households (418,861) have at least one child aged under 15 years and there are 405,699 families with children under 15 years. Again, Ireland has the highest share of households with children. The welfare of children is therefore something that impinges on a wide spectrum of society.

Children of course have more than numerical importance. In particular, they are seen as an economic asset that will determine our future wellbeing. Hence, the importance of producing a highly educated population to meet future labour market needs. A key policy driver in relation to children is thus enhancing their economic potential through provision of high quality education and training opportunities.

Children also have a social value, through this is primarily conceived of in terms of their status within families rather than as individuals in their own right. This 'familialisation' perspective is also reflected in social policy, where the function of child welfare services is to supplement the role of the family in meeting the needs of its members, including children. The family thus prevails as the main institution expected to meet the needs of children.³ One consequence of this is the low level of public subvention towards the costs of caring for children in this country, both in comparison to the EU and as between support for children and retired people.⁴ Otherwise, the main social policy intervention in regard to children is re-

³ Richardson, V (1999), 'Children and social policy', in Quin, S et al (eds), *Contemporary Irish social policy*, Dublin: University College Dublin Press

⁴ Bradshaw, J et al (1993), *Support for children: a comparison of arrangements in fifteen countries*. London: HMSO.

Child benefit, at £8-£10 per week, is only one-tenth of the old age pension. This low subvention can also be contrasted with the payment for orphaned children (c£50) and children in foster care (c£70).

actively focused on child protection issues, ie where families are seen not to function properly in caring for their children. Consequently, children's welfare has been a backwater in Irish social policy and has been generally subsumed into general policy as it applies to families and parents.

However, in recent times, this perspective has begun to change with a growing public appreciation of the distinct nature of childhood and of the specific needs and rights of children. The clearest expression of this is the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the international agreement on the rights of children adopted in 1989. It presents a comprehensive view of children's rights, including civil and political rights, social, economic and cultural rights and rights to protection from abuse and exploitation. Ireland ratified the convention in 1992, thereby agreeing to ensure that the rights under the convention would be respected and implemented in our legal code.

The guiding principles of the convention are:

- all children should be entitled to basic rights without discrimination;
- the best interests of children should be the primary concern of decision-making;
- children have the right to life, survival and development;
- the views of children must be taken into account in matters affecting them.

The convention contains a number of important social rights for children:

- a right to an adequate standard of living (with a duty on the state to assist parents, where necessary, in fulfilling this right);
- a right to benefit from social security;
- a right to the highest attainable standard of health and to have

access to health and medical services (with a particular emphasis on primary health care);

- a right to education, including free primary education and access to appropriate secondary education;
- a right to participate in leisure, recreational and cultural activities.

The radical new understanding of children contained in the UN Convention signals a significant policy shift in how society views its responsibilities towards children. As Richardson notes,

A change from conceptualising children in terms of familialisation to one of citizenship with individual autonomy, the right to participation and consultation affecting their lives, and the possibility of choosing among alternatives, will radically alter welfare policies for children.⁵

Progress to-date in translating children's rights into public policy has been slow. This was acknowledged in the concluding observations on the implementation of the convention in Ireland by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. In particular, it highlighted the need for a national children's strategy to develop a proactive policy framework for improving the position of children, based on an understanding of the distinct rights of children outlined in the convention.

3. Child poverty: a priority for policy

The national children's strategy occurs within the context of the priority afforded poverty in current government policy, such as the National Anti-Poverty Strategy

⁵ Ibid, p189

(NAPS)⁶ and the Action Programme for the Millennium. The NAPS is a cross-departmental strategic policy initiative which places the needs of the poor and the socially excluded at the top of the national policy agenda. It is directed by a cabinet committee on social exclusion and co-ordinated by an interdepartmental policy committee. Under NAPS, it is a requirement that all government policy proposals are poverty proofed, i.e. their likely impact on poverty and on underlying inequalities is assessed in advance, with a view to maximising the reduction of poverty.⁷ The national children's strategy clearly falls within the remit of this procedure.

A focus on child poverty is in keeping with the recent government decision to include child poverty actions and a reduction target in its forthcoming revision of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy, a commitment subsequently reinforced in the new social partnership agreement.⁸ Meanwhile, there are emerging proposals under the Portuguese presidency for an EU-wide initiative to cut child poverty by half by 2010. Finally, action to tackle child poverty was highlighted by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in its recent commentary on the welfare of children in Ireland.

The NAPS defines poverty as follows:

⁶ Government of Ireland (1997), *Sharing in progress. National Anti-Poverty Strategy*, Dublin: Stationery Office, p3

⁷ Poverty proofing was included in 1998 as a requirement in the Cabinet handbook. It obliges government policy memoranda to 'indicate clearly the impact of the proposal on groups in poverty or at risk of falling into poverty'. Guidelines for poverty proofing are set out in the 1998/9 annual report of the Interdepartmental Policy Committee on the National Anti-Poverty Strategy (appendix C).

⁸ Foreword by the Minister for Social, Community and Family Affairs, Dermot Ahern TD, *Social inclusion strategy. 1998/99 Annual Report of the Interdepartmental Policy Committee*, Dublin: Stationery Office and *Programme for Prosperity and Fairness*.

People are living in poverty, if their income and resources (material, cultural and social) are so inadequate as to preclude them from having a standard of living which is regarded as acceptable by Irish society generally. As a result of inadequate income and resources people may be excluded and marginalised from participating in activities which are considered the norm for other people in society.

The NAPS specifically notes the significance of child poverty:

Lack of an adequate income is only one aspect of child poverty. Poor children have been shown to do less well educationally, are more likely to suffer ill health, are vulnerable to homelessness and delinquent behaviour and fewer opportunities in life. Child poverty can seriously damage the life chances of many children, leading to a cycle of deprivation which repeats itself from generation to generation.
(p47)

Why should child poverty be the key policy consideration in regard to children? In the Agency's view, child poverty matters for five main reasons:

- First, child poverty is a denial of the basic right of a child to an adequate standard of living. The UN Convention obliges government to intervene when families are unable to guarantee this right from their own resources. To be effective, government intervention must include both measures specifically targeted at poor children and general policy responses which address poverty in families (eg employment, childcare, support services).

- Second, child poverty is a multi-dimensional problem, centred on inadequate income, but with knock-on 'exclusionary' effects in terms of access to resources and participation in everyday activities, eg education, play. Exclusion is especially evident where child income poverty persists over a period of time. Of particular note here is the underlying link between child abuse - the issue which has dominated child policy in recent years - and child poverty.⁹ Improving the material conditions of children and their families is thus critical to promoting child welfare.
- Third, child poverty is not just of immediate concern, it is also fundamental to the life chances of the next generation. The longer a child is poor, the greater the subsequent deprivation in later life. This has obvious implications for those affected, but also implies a waste of human capital, with knock-on economic costs and costs of remedial measures. A US review of the life-time effects of child poverty concludes that raising the incomes of poor children, especially in a child's early years, enhances their abilities and attainments. Improved health, better education and reduced teenage pregnancies all depend on tackling child poverty.
- Fourth, child poverty is not an individual problem but a structural one arising from inadequate income. It requires specific policy measures which redistribute resources and opportunities towards households with children and, in particular, towards poorer families. This includes more employment opportunities and

higher levels of child income support.

- Fifth, child poverty can be exacerbated by other social inequalities in society, especially as they relate to race, ethnicity, disability and location. Poor children who are also, for example, disabled, can experience a double disadvantage.

Another Agency policy concern is with the contribution of community and voluntary organisations in tackling child poverty. This theme is highlighted in the Green Paper on voluntary activity, where it notes how

*(a)n active voluntary and community sector contributes to a democratic, pluralist society, provides opportunities for the development of decentralised institutional administrative structures and fosters a climate in which innovative solutions to complex social problems and enhancement of quality of life can be pursued and, hopefully, realised.*¹⁰

The voluntary and community sector has a long tradition of tackling child poverty and it is important that the positive aspects of this engagement are acknowledged and developed. In particular, there is a key role for organisations which represent the views and experiences of children, especially those experiencing poverty.

In making child poverty a priority policy concern of the national children's strategy, the Agency identifies six principles which should be paramount:

- statutory recognition of the social needs and rights of children;

⁹ Buckley, H (1999), 'Child protection', in *Child poverty: issues and solutions*, EAPN Ireland

¹⁰ Department of Social Welfare (1997), *Supporting voluntary activity. A Green Paper on the community and voluntary sector and its relationship with the state*. Dublin: Stationery Office, p7.

- guarantee of a basic living standard for children in need;
- commitment to an equitable public contribution to the costs of all children;
- promotion of equality of opportunity and non-discrimination for children;
- partnership between community and voluntary interests and the state in policy making and service provision on behalf of children;
- participation of children in decisions and activities that affect their lives.

4. The welfare of children in Ireland

It is timely to review the welfare of children in Irish society. The socio-economic conditions are now much more favourable for enhancing children's welfare than in previous generations. However, there are also many challenges facing children, notably the scale and the persistence of child poverty. It is also useful to take stock of child welfare using comparative data from a European context.

4.1 *Key opportunities and challenges*

There is an unprecedented opportunity at the start of the new millennium to build a better future for children. Recent economic, social and demographic changes provide a positive context for new measures to enhance the welfare of children. Among the recent changes which provides opportunities for the betterment of children are:

- the enhanced education and training services provided for children;
- the greater public affordability of children arising from demographic trends;¹¹

¹¹ First, the decline in the child population - a result of falling fertility rates - creates a dual

- the general improvement in family (and child) living standards, especially with increased employment for adults, but also older children.

These conditions present a unique and unprecedented opportunity to improve the lot of children at a societal and an individual level. More resources and services available for the betterment of children are, however, only side of the picture. At the same time, there is a number of trends which threaten the welfare of children:

- the large numbers experiencing poverty, particularly on a persistent basis;
- the higher costs of children being borne by families;¹²
- the additional needs of families caring for children in difficult situations;¹³
- the discrimination experienced by particular categories of children;¹⁴

policy benefit: a decrease in the support requirements for children and an increase in tax returns arising from greater female participation in the labour market. Second, the decrease in child welfare dependency due to falling unemployment among families creates significant welfare savings (though partly offset by the increased incidence of lone parenthood). The overall result is to make welfare provision for children more affordable, especially given its low base (Fahey, T and Fitzgerald, J, 1997, *Welfare implications of demographic trends*, Dublin: Oak Tree Press and the Combat Poverty Agency.

Arising from the fall in the child population, there are an estimated savings of £60 million per annum in expenditure on child benefit alone. This would fund a £5 per month increase in this payment.

¹² These include direct costs, eg extended participation in education, childcare, and indirect costs, in terms of employment opportunities foregone by stay-at-home parents.

¹³ Lone parent families, families with an ill or otherwise dependent parent, unemployed families and families who are remote from public services all face additional needs.

¹⁴ The scope for discrimination arises from the increased social and cultural diversity of Irish

- the acute situation of some children facing neglect, abuse and exploitation.

The main threat posed to children is that of poverty. Poverty is both an immediate problem, in terms of inadequate living standards, and a long-term issue, by damaging the children's life chances in terms of educational attainment, health status and job opportunities. The nature and extent of child poverty is explored in the next section.

4.2 *The nature and extent of child poverty*

The Agency has commissioned an up-to-date report on child poverty drawing on data collected through the ESRI Living in Ireland Survey, part of the European household panel survey (thereby facilitating a comparative European picture on child poverty).¹⁵ Income poverty - defined as less than half of average income - affects 22% of the population, with 11% experiencing a combination of income poverty and resource deprivation.¹⁶ However, the risk of poverty for children and adults is not the same, with significant differentials as are illustrated in the accompanying tables.

society. There is also a greater awareness of indigenous discriminatory practices.

¹⁵ B Nolan (1999), 'Child poverty in Ireland.' A forthcoming report by the Combat Poverty Agency.

¹⁶ Callan, T et al (1999), *Monitoring poverty trends*. Dublin: Stationery Office and Combat Poverty Agency.

Table 1: Percentage of children and adults in poverty (50% line), 1973-97 (%)

	1973	1980	1987	1994	1997
Children	16.2	18.5	25.5	29.5	26
Adults	15.1	15.2	16.1	18.2	20.5

Table 1 reveals that one-in-four children (defined as under 14 years) are in poverty, compared to one-in-five adults. This makes children 1.27 times more likely to be poor than adults. Since 1973, there has been a gradual worsening of the position of children, peaking in 1994 with 29.5% in poverty, but falling in 1997 to 26%, still up by half on the baseline 1973 figure. In addition, the gap between children and adults has widened over time, again with the greatest difference in 1994 (1.62) and a narrowing in 1997 (1.27).¹⁷

Of particular concern are children who experience persistent or chronic poverty. One measure of this is children in households who have low income and are deprived of basic necessities (see table 2).¹⁸ In 1997, 16.9% of children were in households below 60% of average income and experiencing basic deprivation, as compared to 23.5% in 1994 and 24.8% in 1987. The comparable figures for adults are 9.4%, 14.8% and 14.6%.

Thus, the percentage of children in households experiencing chronic poverty is two-thirds lower than those experiencing income poverty and has recently fallen more rapidly. The gap between children and adults on this measure of poverty is wider, with a persistent poverty risk for children almost twice that of adults.

What are the household characteristics of children in (income) poverty? In economic terms:

- non-working households account for half of all poor children;
- households headed by an employee and by someone engaged in home duties each account for one-sixth of the total;
- self-employed households, including farmers, represent the remaining 10%.

Accordingly, the recent fall in unemployment is the main driver behind the decline in child poverty witnessed between 1994 and 1997.

Turning to household composition:

- larger families (3+ children) account for almost 40% of poor children, mainly in two adults + three children households (24%);
- a third of poor children are in households with three or more adults - many of which are in fact two adult families with older (ie 14+) and younger children;

¹⁷ Taking a lower (40%) poverty cut-off line reveals a different trend, with a significant rise in the poverty risk for children (from 8% to 13.2%), while the adult rate also increases to 9.1%. Meanwhile, up-rating the 1987 60% poverty line by inflation to 1997, shows a marked fall in the poverty risk for children (from 37.8% to 17.2%), but still substantially higher than for adults (11.4%).

¹⁸ Basic necessities include items such as food and clothing. These are measured at household level only, as to-date, there are no child-based measures of deprivation.

Table 2: Percentage of children and adults experiencing poverty (60% line) and deprivation, 1987-97 (%)

	1987	1994	1997
Children	24.8	23.5	16.9
Adults	14.6	14.8	9.4

- children in lone parent families represent a tenth of the total as, though a small percentage of all children, they face a higher risk of poverty;
- poorer families are slightly larger than non-poor families, with an average size of 3.5 as compared to 2.8.

The trend in recent years has been for an increase in the proportion of poor children in smaller two-adult families, with a decline in the share in families with 4+ children and those with a mixture of older and younger children.

A key factor underlying child poverty trends is the level of social welfare, especially the value of child income support relative to adult rates. In recent years, welfare rates have fallen behind the rise in average incomes. This is especially the case in regard to child dependant allowances payable to welfare families, where the policy has been to freeze these payments at between £13 and £17. While child benefit rates have been increased - in some cases quite substantially - these have not been sufficient to ensure that the combined value of child support for welfare families has kept pace with adult rates (or, in a more general way, with increases in earnings). Hence, families on welfare have seen their relative position worsen, especially where older children are involved. This

pattern is reflected in the increase in child poverty at the 40% line.

Comparative European data on child poverty (1994) reveals that Ireland had the highest share of children (in this case defined at under 16 years) in households below half average income at 30%, substantially ahead of the EU average of 19%.¹⁹²⁰ Only the UK and Portugal approximated to the Irish rate of child poverty, at 28% and 27% respectively. More recent data on comparative rates of child poverty in Europe is not yet available. Given the recent fall in Irish child poverty levels, it is important to get an updated picture on where Ireland ranks in terms of European child poverty.

4.3 The welfare of Irish children in an European context

Child poverty and deprivation is one indicator of a broader notion of child welfare, as is suggested by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The measurement of child welfare provides a useful antidote to more convention indicators of economic progress: GNP, inflation, employment,

¹⁹ Eurostat (1999), *Statistics in focus: population and social conditions*, No 3, Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities

²⁰ The Irish figure is not comparable to the other data previously presented for technical reasons.

Table 3: Child welfare indicators for Ireland and the EU, 1990-96

	GDP per capita (PPS) as % of EU average 1996	% children in poor households 1993	% families with no working adult 1996	% of all 20-24 year olds unemployed 1994	Mortality for under 5s (deaths per 1,000) 1995
<i>Ireland</i>	99.8	28	15.4	16.1	7.3
<i>EU (15)*</i>	100	20 (12)	10.5 (13)	13.8	7.5
<i>Rank</i>	9	11	12	11	10

	Traffic deaths all 5-14s (per 100,000) 1994	Male suicides 15-24 (per 100,000) 1994	Education expenditure as % GNP 1994	% of 16 year olds enrolled in education 1994	Teenage fertility (births per 1000) 1995	% life satisfaction on 15-19 yrs 1990-4
<i>Ireland</i>	3.5	23.4	4.6	91	15.1	90
<i>EU (15)*</i>	3.6	15.2	5.2 (14)	89.5 (14)	10.7	87.7 (12)
<i>Rank</i>	7	11	12	8	12	8

* Data for 15 EU states is not available for all indicators. Where this occurs, the total number of countries included is indicated in brackets. For example, Ireland ranks 11th out of the 12 countries for which data on child poverty is available.

personal incomes. It also specifically relates to the needs of children, rather than being solely adult-based measures of social progress.

Research on this area is at an underdeveloped stage, particularly in Ireland. However, a recent UNICEF report has developed a cross-country index of child welfare based on the four domains of material wellbeing, health and survival, education and personal development, and social inclusion/participation.²¹ These correspond to the themes of the UN Convention and are also similar to those covered in the UN *Human Development Report* index of deprivation for industrialised countries. The figures for Ireland and for the EU

average (15 countries) are illustrated in the accompanying tables, along with the overall ranking of Ireland.

Across the range of indicators, Ireland generally falls into the bottom half of countries in terms of performance, with the worst results being recorded for material wellbeing (child poverty, family unemployment and unemployment among young people), education (government expenditure and participation rates) and health (male suicide and teen fertility).

Much of these data relate to the early to mid 90s. Since then, Ireland's economic wellbeing has improved considerably. Whether this enhancement in general material wellbeing has been translated into progress in other areas is a moot question. Already, we have seen that the rate of child poverty has fallen in the late 90s. Along with updating, there is a need to expand the range of

²¹ Micklewright, J and Stewart, K (1999), *Is child welfare converging in the European Union?* Innocenti Occasional Papers, Economic and Social Policy Series no 69, Florence: UNICEF Child Development Centre.

indicators of child welfare to cover other aspects of childhood (see section 5.1.3 below).

5. Policy proposals to enhance the welfare of children

5.1 Promoting the rights of children

The Convention on the Rights of the Child marks a major departure in terms of the public policy perspective on children. The convention recognises for the first time the distinct needs of children and provides a minimum framework to meet these. However, it is essential that these rights are now translated into key legal and policy documents. Three essential actions are required to achieve this.

5.1.1 Accord specific recognition to the rights of the child in the constitution

Our primary legal text is the constitution. However, the constitution does not give any expressed recognition to the rights of the child, even though these have been set out by the courts in certain instances. The Constitutional Review Group has recommended that the rights of the child - in particular the primacy of the best interests of the child in matters affecting children - should be incorporated into the constitution. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has proposed a similar line of action.

5.1.2 Strengthen the focus on children in law and policy

Outside of the constitution, there are various legal and policy instruments which impact on the rights of the child. Recent legislation relevant to children includes the Child Care Act 1991, the Children's Act 1996, the Educational Act 1998 and the Education (Welfare) Bill 1999. All current and proposed legal instruments which pertain to children should be reviewed to ensure that they are in accordance with the rights of the child and that they reflect the best interests of children.

Public policy should also have specific regard to the rights of the child. This would apply at national (government departments, state agencies), regional (health boards, regional authorities) and local levels of public administration. In particular, budgetary policy should have particular regard to the welfare of children. The needs of children should also feature in the growing number of para-public welfare agencies, such as community development projects, local partnerships. These agencies should be required in their annual reports to account for their actions as they impact on children. For example, they should record the number of children they had contact with during the year and the impact of that contact in terms of promoting the welfare of children.

The national children's strategy should provide a framework for ensuring that public policy adequately reflects the rights of children. It should set out certain core principles, as well as a monitoring system to ensure their implementation. An Oireachtas committee (or sub-committee) on children should also be established, which would review all government legislation and policy as to its impact on children (see section 7 below for details on institutional measures in support of children).

5.1.3 Provide a database on children's welfare

Having comprehensive and current information to monitor the implementation of children's rights is a basic requirement if the status of children is to be enhanced in society. What is needed here is twofold: first, agreement on a number of core indicators of child welfare and second, production of an annual report indicating progress on these. The Agency has done some preliminary research on this topic.²² A possible list

²² Costello, L (1999), *A literature review of children's wellbeing*, Dublin: Combat Poverty

of indicators, grouped in four domains central to a child's welfare, might be as follows:

Category I: material wellbeing

- child poverty (income and deprivation)
- unemployment among families
- children in families in receipt of social welfare, in particular SWA
- children's participation in the labour force

Category II: health and survival

- mortality rate for children under 5
- child suicide
- child pedestrian/bicycle deaths
- birth rate for teenagers
- children using alcohol or drugs
- children on hospital waiting lists

Category III: education and personal development

- attendance at pre-school education
- child literacy
- participation in education at age 15 years
- non-attendance at school (including children excluded from school)
- children with disabilities attending mainstream schools
- involvement in non-school activities (clubs etc)

Category IV: participation, quality of life and social inclusion

- friends in local neighbourhood
- ability to influence decisions
- children in care
 - children in detention
 - children out of home

Most of the above data should be readily available or collectable by public agencies.²³ Quality of life data

Agency. The Agency is also collaborating with an international research project on this topic.

²³ The Agency has already contacted the relevant state bodies in regard to data on these

and information on smoking habits would require a specific research instrument, with a strong qualitative component. For this reason, it is proposed that the government commission a national survey of the quality of life of children, which could be conducted on a longitudinal basis. There is also a need for other, more specific, research on aspects of children's lives. This would require the establishment of a children's research fund, along the line of the family research fund.

We see the collection of data on children's welfare as being a core responsibility of the Department of Health and Children, in consultation with other relevant interests. Annual reports on children's welfare should be debated at appropriate policy fora, such as an Oireachtas committee and the National Economic and Social Forum (which, it is proposed, would include the welfare of children as part of its remit).

5.2 Eliminating child poverty

We noted earlier how extensive child poverty is - affecting one-in-four children - by national and EU standards. Child poverty denies the social rights of children and also undermines their civil and other rights. It also leads to a waste of human resources, a critical issue in a time of labour shortages and increased economic competition. Tackling child poverty should thus be a priority in the national children's strategy.

Child poverty is not a specific focus of the NAPS, though it does appear under the various themes of the strategy. In the Agency's view, the strategy should be expanded to incorporate a specific theme on child poverty. This is argued for on two accounts: the extensive scale of child poverty and the distinct experience

topics. Further information on the outcomes of these contacts can be got from the Agency.

and effects of child poverty as compared to adult poverty. A child poverty strategy should adopt a multi-dimensional approach and focus on underlying structural causes. The Agency makes four specific proposals in regard to a co-ordinated strategy to tackle child poverty.

5.2.1 Set a specific child poverty reduction target

A commonly identified weakness in the NAPS is the absence of a government target for the reduction of child poverty reduction. The government, in its first annual review of the strategy, has agreed to review this omission. The goal should be to totally eliminate chronic child poverty (currently affecting 16.9% of children) over a ten-year period and to halve child income poverty (now 26%). By the year 2020, the target should be the full elimination of child income poverty. These targets would be in keeping with new EU proposals for a 50% cut in child poverty. Also, in Britain, which has a similar rate of child poverty to Ireland, the government has a target of ending child poverty in twenty years and halving it in ten.

5.2.2 Provide a minimum income for children in need

The primary issue in addressing child poverty is to enhance child income support. Here, the first step is to establish a minimum cost of a child, which the state would agree to provide where parents do not have an independent income source outside of social welfare. Surprisingly, there has never been an official investigation of the minimum costs of a child, in contrast to the focus on adult adequacy rates. The Agency has, however, conducted its own research on this, using the budget standards methodology developed by Bradshaw et al at the University of York. Accordingly, in 1992, a basic minimum budget standard for a child was estimated at between £16.60 to £38.30 depending on age, with an average of

£28.11.²⁴ Up-rated by inflation to 1999, these figures are £19 to £43.70, with an average of £32.10. (Inflation can be seen as a minimum increase, which does not take account of rising living standards for children).

Over one-third of children live in households with weekly child equivalent incomes of less than this basic figure.²⁵ This figure can also be compared to the current basic combined welfare payment (child dependent allowance and child benefit) of £21.16, which leaves an average shortfall of £11 per week.²⁶ Currently, this deficit can only be made up through redirecting scarce resources from adult family members. Evidence for this is contained in nutritional research, which showed how mothers, in particular, did without food items in order that their children would have adequate nutrition.²⁷ Meanwhile, studies of poor children attending school have illustrated inadequate nutritional resources, which need to be compensated by in-school meals.²⁸

On the basis of its research, the Agency proposes that the minimum child income payment for welfare-dependent children should be in the region of £30-£40 per week, depending on the age of the child. This range should not vary by the welfare

²⁴ Carney, C et al, 1994, *The cost of a child*, Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency

²⁵ The 50% and 60% income poverty lines were the child equivalent of £25.89 and £31.08 respectively in 1997. Between 26% and 37.2% of children are in households with equivalent incomes below these poverty lines.

²⁶ It excludes education-related welfare benefits such as clothing and footwear (equivalent of £1 per week) and also secondary benefits such as medical card, differential rent, etc.

²⁷ Lee, P and Gibney, M (1989), *Patterns of food and nutrient intake in suburb of Dublin with chronically high unemployment*, Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency

²⁸ Gormley, T et al (1989), *Assessment of school meals and growth, food intake and food likes/dislikes of primary school children in inner city Dublin schools*, Dublin: Combat Poverty Agency

status of families, as is current the situation. However, a more up-to-date estimation of a minimum income for children should be explored by the working group on the adequacy of welfare payments, as proposed under the *Programme for Prosperity and Fairness* (p80).

The particular combination of policy instruments to achieve a minimum income for children requires careful consideration. The current mix of means-tested child dependant allowances (with three rates), in-work family income supplement and universal child benefit requires rationalisation. In the longer-term, the Agency supports combining all three payments into a universal child benefit, in effect a basic income for all children. This would avoid all work disincentives and also replace current anomalies in child income support between different family types. However, reform of this magnitude would be costly and take some time to implement.

A medium-term strategy would be to have a single means-tested child supplement and an enhanced child benefit. The financial value of a minimally adequate child payment would be made up of two-thirds child benefit and one-third child income supplement (see discussion of child benefit below). A single means-tested payment would help to minimise disincentive effects and could be withdrawn on a tapered basis as income increases. It would also ring-fence the payment for expenditure on children via the primary carer, unlike the current situation. The payment could also incorporate top-up child income measures such as clothing and footwear grants and assistance with childcare costs.

5.2.3 Enhance the employment prospects of low-income families

Family unemployment is the main economic cause of child poverty. It is important, therefore, that a longer-term

strategy should be pursued to enhance the employment prospects and returns from employment for low-income families. This is already a key theme in government policy through the provision of active labour market measures, in-work benefits and targeted childcare supports. This mix of policies should be continued. Particular consideration should be given to the needs of one parent families returning to work and low waged working mothers in dual income households.

5.2.4 Provide support for childcare costs in low-income families

Children can often impose additional costs in low-income families where parents are unable to access low-cost childcare services. This is especially the situation in lone parent families, where there is only one parent available to care for children. This is partially responsible for the low participation rate of lone parents in the labour market, which in turn is reflected in their high risk of family poverty. This difficulty is acknowledged to a considerable extent in the earnings disregard under the One Parent Family Payment. However, low-income two-parent families can also be affected by this problem, especially where parental earnings potential is limited due to low skills. One mechanism for addressing this problem is through the introduction of a childcare disregard under the Family Income Supplement. Other forms of targeted childcare support could also be considered in this context.

5.2.5 Develop specific indicators of child deprivation

There is a need to develop specific indicators of child deprivation. Child indicators are important on two accounts: first, to better understand the impact of deprivation on children and, second, to explore the extent to which children experience deprivation due to the unequal sharing of resources in families, in particular in non-poor households. Proposed items that could be included on such a list would be:

- a birthday party with friends and relations
- participation in after-school classes (drama, swimming, music)
- involvement in organised sports or a club (scouts etc)
- school outings
- an occasional family outing to the zoo, cinema or similar special event

- a breakfast with cereal and a packed school lunch
- fruit and vegetables four times a day
- regular pocket money
- new toys on birthdays, Christmas or other special occasions
- books and related school materials
- new school clothing and shoes once a year
- a bedroom of their own for older children (10+)
- attendance at a doctor when a child is ill
- any special equipment relating to a disability
- a safe area in which to play with friends.

These child-specific indicators would facilitate a better understanding of deprivation as it affects children in poor households or in better-off households where resources are not well shared in terms of meeting the specific needs of children. They also relate to the minimum social and developmental rights of a child.

5.3 *Enhancing public subvention of the costs of all children*

Society has traditionally contributed to the costs of rearing children through various tax and welfare supports. This reflects the social investment that children represent for future generations, the additional costs they give rise to in families as compared to non-child households, and also the need to balance the ebbs and flows associated with family formation. The main policy instrument here is child benefit, along with some minor tax reliefs. Ireland's level of generic child income support is amongst the lowest in Europe. Furthermore, compared to other age-related income supports (eg old age pensions), child benefit, at £8-£10 per week, is less than a tenth of their value. It also significantly lower than payments for children who are orphaned or in foster care. The

following package of measures is proposed.

5.3.1 Increase universal child benefit to £25 per week

A reformed child income policy should incorporate an enhanced universal benefit for all children, set at a given proportion of the total costs of raising a child. In the short-term, this proportion should be in the region of a two-thirds of the total costs, which would be the equivalent of £25 per child per week or £100 per month. (As noted above, the long-term goal would be a basic income for all children.) Already the government has agreed to introduce a child benefit of £100 per month for the third and subsequent children, under the *Programme for prosperity and fairness*. We propose that this level of child benefit should be extended to all children. A supplement for children in larger families could still be paid, though the case for this would be less if the combined value of child benefit and child dependant allowances is minimally adequate. An age-related child benefit might then be more appropriate.

5.3.2 Provide a self-financing universal childcare subsidy of £32.50 per month

The limited public contribution to the costs of a child was thrown into sharp relief in recent times through the childcare debate. The public subsidisation of childcare has emerged as a policy issue due to a) the substantial costs associated with childcare, b) the implications of childcare for equality of opportunity and c) the pre- and after-school development needs of children. The Agency has previously argued that childcare costs should not be seen purely as a labour market issue. For example, the recent introduction of tax individualisation has been justified in terms of the higher costs associated with dual earners, including childcare. However, it is a poorly targeted benefit in terms of childcare costs, something that was recognised with the

subsequent provision of a parallel £3,000 tax relief for carers of dependent children in the home. The common theme in these measures is the exclusive focus on supporting families who are liable to tax, rather than on children in all families, whether at home or outside. By contrast, an equitable strategy for childcare costs in all families was advocated by the Commission on the Family, through the medium of child benefit.²⁹

In the Agency's view, state support for childcare costs should be integrated into a universal package of child income support. Previously, the Agency proposed that an additional £32.50 per month 'childcare' element in universal child benefit could be fully funded by restructuring the tax/welfare treatment of households (this figure would be additional to the £100 per month child benefit proposed above). We advocated restricting the transferability of bands between married couples and directing the resources into an enhanced child benefit for families with children. This would have the effect of redistributing resources from non-child households to those with children and from richer to poorer families.³⁰ Alternative options, which would be more specifically targeted at childcare costs but still within a universal system of child income support are:

- a child benefit supplement for children under five or
- a higher child benefit for the first child in each family (this option would, in effect, represent a family benefit paid to the primary carer of children and could subsume the new

²⁹ Commission on the Family (1998), *Strengthening families for life. Final report to the Minister for Social, Community and Family Affairs*, Dublin: Stationery Office

³⁰ Combat Poverty Agency (1999), *From wealth creation to wealth redistribution. Submission on Budget 2000 to the Minister for Social, Community and Family Affairs*.

£3,000 stay-at-home carers' tax allowance).

5.3.3 Enhance assistance with the costs of education, healthcare and housing

The state supports the costs of children through indirect means, such as the provision of education, healthcare and housing. However, in no case is there full provision, with varying levels of parental contributions required. Only in regard to education does the state come close to paying the full costs of the service. Even then, there is a substantial shortfall to be made up in the form of participation costs (uniforms, books, meals) and voluntary contributions towards running costs.

In healthcare and housing, there is a two-tier model of provision, with the use of means-tested benefits to target low-income families, along with a rudimentary level of universal support. However, these means tested benefits often leave low-income families with a significant financial burden to carry, along with creating a poverty trap. Furthermore, there are substantial public subsidies for better-off children/families, mainly through various tax reliefs for health insurance, medical and mortgage costs.

The Agency recommends that the government eliminates educational costs for low-income families, beginning with those sectors of education where participation is greatest, ie primary and secondary. The current mix of subventions towards clothing, footwear, meals and books should be enhanced and integrated. At third-level, the reintroduction of fees could be considered, with the revenue being redirected into a comprehensive grants scheme. Meanwhile, tax-based subsidies in healthcare and housing for children should be abolished and the resources used to fund enhanced support for low-income families along with basic universal provision (eg free

access to doctors for all children). Also, in assessing eligibility for means-tested schemes, the income disregard for children should be increased to the equivalent of the minimum costs of a child. This would result in more assistance being targeted at families who are least able to afford healthcare and housing costs.

5.3.4 Consider the introduction of a payment to assist with the costs of children with disabilities

It has frequently been argued that disability gives rise to additional costs.³¹ At present, there is no comprehensive payment to meet these additional costs for children. The Agency suggests that the additional costs of disability for children should be researched and appropriate support considered.

5.4 Advancing equality of opportunity for children

Protecting children against discrimination is a key article in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Non-discrimination, however, is only one element of a wider right of equality of opportunity. A commitment to the equal treatment of children is an oft-espoused aspiration of the Irish state, though seldom implemented in practice, notably in policy areas with a high level of public intervention, eg education. It is clear that this aspiration requires more detailed elaboration and that more forceful advocacy is required if it is to be implemented in contemporary Ireland.

5.4.1 Extend anti-discrimination legislation to specifically include children

The government has established the Equality Authority to enforce anti-discrimination legislation, initially in relation to employment and subsequently in relation to the provision of services (as proposed

³¹ Commission on the Status of People with Disabilities (nd), *A strategy for equality*.

under the Equal Status Bill, 1999). This legislation comprehensively identifies nine possible grounds for discrimination. This equality framework, however, does not include a specific focus on children. Indeed, children are excluded from the provisions of the Employment Equality Act, though they may legally work for up to 14 hours per week. Children can not alone experience indirect discrimination through how their parents are treated, but can be victims of discrimination in their own right. The Agency therefore recommends that children be included as a specific focus of the Equality Authority.

5.4.2 Ensure mainstream access to services for all children

Public services for children should be accessible by and appropriate to all children. These services include education, health and housing in particular. Access to services is the gateway to full participation in society for children. Access is determined by a range of physical, social and economic issues. For example, few school buildings are physically accessible to children with disabilities. Also, the physical location of a child can provide an obstacle to accessing services. Equally, not all services are socially accessible: children from different backgrounds and social needs are treated differently. For instance, children of minority religions or non-religious have limited access to multi-denominational forms of education, especially at second level. Finally, financial barriers to accessing services, such as arise due to direct or indirect costs, can also be an obstacle. Education is an example of where the costs of uniforms, books, etc can deter participation of low-income children. The Agency proposes that service providers audit their services to identify and remove barriers to access.

5.4.3 Introduce affirmative measures for children facing acute discrimination

Along with a commitment to equal access to services, there is a need for additional affirmative measures for children who have a legacy of multiple forms of discrimination and disadvantage. Such measures are not a substitute for mainstream access, but are a mechanism of affirmative action to ensure that children with special needs get equal treatment. We identify four such categories of children: children with disabilities, Traveller children, children in disadvantaged urban or rural areas and children of refugees and asylum seekers.

□ *Children with disabilities*

Children with disabilities represent an estimated 4% of the school-going population. However, they do not have the same access to education as other children and are often confined to special schools and classes apart from mainstream provision.³² Among the specific needs faced by this category are:

- physical requirements;
- appropriate curricula;
- educational needs assessment
- financial support.

Children with disabilities also have particular needs regarding housing and health.

□ *Traveller children*

Traveller children face multiple difficulties:

- most Traveller children live in households dependent on social welfare, which immediately places them at high risk of poverty;

³² Kitchin, R and Mulcahy, F (1999), *Disability, access to education and future opportunities*. NUI Maynooth and Kildare Network of the Irish Council of People with Disabilities.

- approximately 5,000 Traveller children live in temporary accommodation, often without the basic amenities of running water and toilets;
- Traveller children have the highest rate of infant mortality and also report above-normal levels of sickness and hospitalisation;
- Traveller children have low levels of educational attainment and only a small proportion progress to second-level education;
- Traveller children experience discrimination because of their ethnic status.

The proposals in the Task Force on Travellers in regard to Traveller children should be fully implemented, along with further measures as needed.

□ *Children in disadvantaged communities*

Poverty is not uniformly distributed, but is concentrated in particular localities, in particular public housing estates. Recent research reveals that up to seven-in-ten households living in public rented housing are in poverty, compared to only one-in-ten for households who own their own home.³³ The spatial concentration of poor households can impact on the social conditions for children in a number of ways. For example, local schools will contain a far higher degree of children from a disadvantaged background, placing additional demands on educational resources. Similar patterns can occur in regard to health, transport, housing and recreation services, with the result that they may be of poorer quality.

In addition to the impact of poverty concentrations on service provision, there is evidence to suggest that the housing and physical environment in such communities is inferior to that in other areas. Thus, problems to do with crime, vandalism, drugs and joyriding can be more widespread in disadvantaged areas that are the norm. Many of these have a direct impact on children. A third aspect of spatial disadvantage is social stigma, especially in urban areas. Children from poorer urban areas can find themselves labelled and ostracised just because of the locality that they come from. This can limit opportunities for social interaction and for participation in mainstream services and employment. In rural areas, stigma is less prevalent, but can be replaced by problems of social isolation due to declining population and physical remoteness from public services.

There is a need for a programme of measures to enhance service provision for children in disadvantaged communities. The Young People at Risk Programme, which funds the Young People's Facilities and Services Fund and the Springboard initiative, should be further developed to respond to these needs.

□ *Children of refugees and asylum seekers*

Other children who experience discrimination are children of refugees and asylum seekers. There should be special measures introduced to enhance the status of children in these circumstances.

6. Reform of service provision and delivery for children

Promoting the general welfare of children - as outlined in the UN Convention - should be a key concern

³³ Nolan, B et al (1998), *Where are poor households? The spatial distribution of poverty and deprivation in Ireland*, Dublin: Oak Tree Press in association with the Combat Poverty Agency

of the national children's strategy. The Agency identifies seven operational policy areas which are key to the welfare of children: healthcare, housing, education, play and recreation, childcare, family support and protection of vulnerable children. We also suggest some new service initiatives and better ways of delivering services, which would improve the situation of children, in particular that of poor children.

6.1 Healthcare

The achievement of the highest attainable standard of health is one of the rights of the child under the UN convention. There is considerable evidence to show that health status is affected by socio-economic factors, in particular child poverty. Primary healthcare services are of crucial importance in addressing the health deficit for disadvantaged children, since early intervention can maximise subsequent health gain for children. In this context, the Agency is currently researching the public health needs of low-income families.³⁴ In anticipation of the findings of this study, the Agency suggests that a health strategy for poor children should be prepared. Such a strategy would include the following children's healthcare issues:

- *public healthcare services for children*

There is a limited range of primary healthcare services provided by the health boards. These relate to immunisations, periodic health and dental check-ups and support for children with special needs. Existing services should be expanded and the particularly difficulties with regard to dental treatment for children should be addressed.

- *access for children to GPs*

Children in low-income families have free access to GPs and prescription medicines under the medical card system. However, there is scope to enhance this service, in particular by a greater focus on preventative health measures. In principle, the Agency believes that universal free access to GPs for all children should be considered. This could take the form of a public health insurance scheme, where children can avail of free or subsidised access through the PRSI system.

- *waiting lists for children in public hospital system*

While there is no charge for public hospital services, the waiting lists for treatment can often be significant. Long waiting periods impact most on low-income children, whose families are not in a position to avail of the privileged access granted to those in private healthcare schemes. The Agency proposes that additional funding is provide to reduce hospital waiting lists for children and, in addition, that there should be no discrimination in access between insured and uninsured children.

6.2 Education

The UN Convention recognises the right of children to education, based on a principle of equal opportunity. This right is seen as axiomatic in the Irish education system, where access to education is provided free up to third-level (undergraduate). A key gap in education provision in Ireland is in regard to early childhood education. Early childhood education deals with the care, educational and social needs of young children. In recent years, the contribution of early childhood education in fostering children's development, especially those from a poor background, has become widely recognised. The government has published a White Paper on this topic, which outlines a comprehensive range of measures to enhance the quality

³⁴ This is a joint research project with Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed, and has an expected completion date of autumn 2000.

provision of early childhood education.³⁵ In particular, the White Paper places special emphasis on the provision of early education for poor children as an instrument for tackling incipient educational disadvantage. The Agency welcomes these proposals and believes that their implementation should be made a priority in the national children's strategy.

The comprehensive provision of education masks significant differentials in education attainment between social groups. Differences in participation rates between social groups intensify as children move up the education system, with the greatest disparities apparent at third-level. In addition, children's school performance varies considerably with, for example, 10% of children in primary school having literacy difficulties and 5,000 children leaving school every year without a basic educational qualification. Recently, the government launched a comprehensive strategy for tackling educational disadvantage, *The New Deal - a plan for educational opportunity*. This should be the priority issue in education policy, with action focused on the following issues:

- access to pre-school education;
- additional resources for schools with disadvantaged pupils;
- programme to promote literacy and numeracy;
- measures to promote school attendance and to counter early school leaving;
- additional educational supports for poor children and children with special needs;
- targeted involvement of parents of poor children;

- fairer access to third-level education, including affirmative action initiatives.

Arising from its pilot programme on educational disadvantage, the Agency is convinced of the necessity to establish multi-agency local structures to co-ordinate the above measures.

Another aspect of children's educational rights relates to the content of education, ie the values and attitudes that education fosters. Among the objectives to be considered here are the holistic development of the child, the fostering of respect for human rights, the natural environment and cultural values and the preparation for citizenship. In this context, the Agency believes that social justice, peace and reconciliation, inter-culturalism and community development should be given particular emphasis in the education system. It is important that these ideals should be reflected in both theory and practice within the education system. In particular, there should be linkages between schools and local projects which promote these ideals. A commitment to and experience of these ideals among children is crucial if we as a society are to address the persistent problems of poverty and social exclusion. This is an area in which the Agency has some expertise through its schools' poverty awareness programme and its delivery of aspects of the EU Peace and Reconciliation programme.

6.3 Housing

Access to housing and shelter is basic to the welfare of children. Recent statistics indicate that there are 40,000 households in need of housing, the majority of whom have children. Tackling the housing needs of children is primarily addressed through meeting the housing needs of families. In that context, the provision of social housing should ensure that the specific needs of children are catered for in terms of:

³⁵ Department of Education and Science (1999), *Ready to learn. White Paper on early childhood education*, Dublin: Stationery Office.

- giving older children their own rooms as far as is possible;
- making houses as safe as possible for children to live in;
- providing children with safe and secure places to play;
- ensuring that planning regulations have special regard to the needs of children, eg bicycle lanes, pedestrian crossings;
- incorporating childcare and recreational facilities in housing developments.

6.4 Play, recreation and sports activities

The UN Convention includes children's right to leisure, play and recreation. There is limited public provision of play and recreational facilities, especially in areas of disadvantage. Yet, play is essential for the healthy development of children. The opportunities for informal play have been constricted for a variety of reasons (eg safety, TV/computers, vandalism, built-up environment). A children's play strategy is required to reverse this and to fill the current national and local policy vacuum in regard to the provision of play facilities.³⁶ This would involve:

- ensuring safe access for children to community facilities and schools;
- including play areas in residential developments;
- developing equipped playgrounds within supervised parks;
- support for after-school clubs and holiday play schemes.

Provision of active sports and recreational facilities is more associated with voluntary and private clubs. As a result, access to facilities is highly variable and often depends on

the voluntary resources of an area or the ability of parents to access private facilities. Recently, a number of national sports bodies have begun to target disadvantaged communities with weak sports infrastructures, with government support. This is a welcome development. However, there remain many poor children in non-poor communities who may encounter similar difficulties. All voluntary sports providers should develop policies to ensure that no children are denied access due to financial barriers, including indirect costs such as purchase of playing gear.

6.5 Childcare services

Childcare, while not specifically mentioned in the UN Convention, is central to the rights of the child. To-date, childcare has largely been discussed in the context of facilitating labour market participation of parents. This emphasis needs to be balanced by a recognition of the rights of children to quality childcare which, in the Agency's view, should be the primary concern.³⁷ Thus, childcare should meet the physical and developmental needs of children, as well as ensuring that children are safeguarded against any form of abuse or neglect. A child-centred approach also implies that there should not be a differentiation between parent-provided childcare and childcare provided by others. Each should have equal value in terms of meeting children's developmental need, while supporting the choice of parents in the combination of ways in which quality childcare is provided.

Accessibility, affordability, flexibility and cultural appropriateness should be guiding principles in the provision of

³⁶ Richard Webb and Associates (1999), *Public policy on children's play in Ireland*, Dublin: Children's Centre and Centre for Social and Educational Research.

³⁷ Combat Poverty Agency (1998), The role of childcare in tackling poverty, a submission to the Expert Working Group on Childcare and 'Poverty proofing childcare in the context of the National Anti-Poverty Strategy', *Poverty Today* Supplement, July/August 1999, 44.

childcare. In this context, the Agency is particularly concerned that public involvement in childcare provision should prioritise the needs of poor children. This would have a number of benefits: primarily, it would promote the social and educational development of such children; it would alleviate family stress; and it would facilitate parental involvement in the labour market, all of which would confer significant gains for poor children. Thus, in terms of the supply of childcare, public provision should be targeted at low-income families, with a key role for the community and voluntary sector. This should take a variety of forms: after-school clubs; low cost care centres in disadvantaged areas; and reservation of subsidised places in commercial creches.

6.6 Family support services

While the primary guardian of child welfare remains the family, the role of parents in providing care and nurturing for their children has been largely neglected. The provision of services to families in support of its caring role is only a recently emerging aspect of child welfare policy in this country. Otherwise, the main policy focus is on intervention in families where children are at risk of abuse. As such, family support policy has been more reactive than preventative in its focus.

An important departure in this regard was the report of the Commission on the Family, which contains a range of proposals which outline how the role of families in caring for children can be strengthened.³⁸ Underlying the Commission's approach is the view that families should be pro-actively supported in caring for children. In addition to increased financial support for the caring work of families (see section 5.3.2 above), the Agency advocates the following reforms:

- expansion of family-friendly employment policies;

- introduction of paid parental leave and enhanced maternity leave;
- provision of parenting support programmes;
- provision of additional financial and other supports for lone parents;
- equitable treatment of families irrespective of marital status.

The special responsibility given to family policy within the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, including the establishment of a family affairs unit, is a positive development. However, it would be important that policy in regard to families and to children is closely co-ordinated between various government departments.

Within the overall policy framework of supporting families, there should be particular attention to the position of families raising children in difficult situations, in particular those experiencing unemployment and poverty or consisting of only one parent. The negative social context in which many families function must therefore be addressed. As noted by Richardson, various studies and reports show that

(p)olicies which improve levels of low parental incomes, promote employment, provide educational opportunities and improve the community environment may both prevent neglect and abuse and also promote children's welfare.³⁹

The main instrument in this multi-dimensional approach to families under pressure is the growing network of family resource centres and related programmes under the auspices of the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs. The health boards are also developing their role in supporting families, through initiatives such as the

³⁸ Commission on the Family (1998), op cit.

³⁹ Richardson, V, op cit., p187

community mothers programme and, more recently, the Springboard pilot initiative. Again, these supportive policies for families should be expanded.

There is a question mark, however, over the administrative framework for targeted family support services, arising from the separate responsibilities of the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs on one hand and the health boards on the other. There is a clear need for better linkages between these two arms of the state in supporting families at the local level. Also, the contribution of community and voluntary organisations should be recognised, along with parents themselves.

6.7 Care and protection services for vulnerable children

There is a growing number of children who require special care and protection due to their vulnerability to any of the following:

- ☐ drugs
- ☐ crime
- ☐ prostitution
- ☐ homelessness
- ☐ begging
- ☐ exploitative labour
- ☐ displacement
- ☐ domestic violence
- ☐ armed conflict

The Agency has some expertise on the above issues, mainly from our pilot programme on community responses to drugs and the EU Peace and Reconciliation programme in the border counties. Research on the effects on children of the conflict associated with Northern Ireland has demonstrated a high level of direct and indirect effects. For instance, a quarter of all deaths associated with 30 years of Northern violence have been among children and young people under the

age of 21 years.⁴⁰ Children have also been traumatised by violence and sectarian conflict, with alcoholism and drugs often used as 'coping mechanisms'. The Peace and Reconciliation programme has supported a number of projects which work with children affected by these issues in Northern Ireland and the border counties.

Children in the above situations have very specific needs that can't be addressed in a general way. Existing provision of services for vulnerable children, while expanding, requires additional resources and better co-ordination. In addition, general services directed at social problems should incorporate an explicit focus on children and give equal consideration to the specific needs of children, especially where children's needs may differ from and even be in conflict with the needs of adults.

6.8 New initiatives for children

The Agency has identified a number of new initiatives for children.

6.8.1 A national children's fund

The development of services to meet the targets in the national children's strategy is principally the responsibility of the government departments and agencies which have statutory responsibilities for the welfare of children. The Agency believes that the strategy should also provide support for the development of innovative community-based projects which pilot new approaches to working with and for the benefit of poor children and which could provide valuable lessons for the development of mainstream services. For this purpose, the Agency proposes the establishment of a national children's fund, financed through the national lottery, from which community and voluntary groups could draw down grants for innovative

⁴⁰ Details taken from a newspaper report on a study entitled *Cost of the Troubles*, carried out by Community Conflict Impact on Children.

actions that would contribute to meeting the strategy's overall objectives. It would be important that such a fund would be linked to the work of the National Youth Foundation and the Foundation for Investing in Communities (which has children as one of its key concerns). An indicative figure of £10 million per annum is suggested.

6.8.2 Community-based services for children

The emergence of community-based initiatives for children is a feature of recent local policy. These cover a range of needs, including after-school activities, childcare and youth programmes. These initiatives emphasise community involvement, local access, prevention and an integrated approach. A variety of government departments and agencies are involved in supporting these initiatives, along with local groups. Community-based services for children have considerable potential to improve the quality of life for disadvantaged children and warrant further expansion. A number of problems surround such initiatives in relation to on-going funding, local co-ordination and identifying models of good practice.

The Agency wishes to highlight in particular the role of community development in the provision of services for children. Community development is recognised as having an important role in helping disadvantaged groups and communities to tackle local aspects of poverty. In particular, it facilitates participation in local decision-making, supports community-led responses to poverty and fosters local skills and expertise. While community development projects seldom have an explicit children's focus, many have developed initiatives aimed at children, including childcare, after-school clubs, youth programmes, etc. There is scope to further develop these initiatives by including children as a

specific target group within the community development programme. A similar targeting on children could be adopted as part of local development strategies.

7. Issues of institutional reform

New institutional structures and procedures are required to underpin the national children's strategy. These relate to seven main issues.

▪ children's affairs unit

A children's affairs unit, with the status of a strategic management team, should be responsible for implementing the national children's strategy in the Department of Health and Children, as the lead government department for children. This would build on the child care policy unit already in existence, but with an expanded remit to be, in effect, the champion of children within the policy-making and administrative system. It would produce an annual report on the implementation of the national children's strategy, including comprehensive information on children's welfare (see below).

▪ programme of research on children's welfare

The government should fund a programme of research on children's welfare which would have the following components:

- national database of indicators on children's welfare
- national survey of the quality of life of children
- one-off studies on children funded by a children's research fund.

Research on children should be the core responsibility of the Department of Health and Children, in consultation with other relevant interests.

- **interdepartmental policy committee on children**

Children's issues cut across a number of government departments, in particular health, education, social welfare and justice. We see the need for a formal committee which would bring these interests together and to ensure a co-ordinated approach on issues of child policy. Representation should also be drawn from voluntary organisations and regional and local government. The committee should be chaired by the minister of state with responsibility for children.

- **Oireachtas committee on the rights of the child**

An Oireachtas committee on children should be established, possibly as a sub-committee of the existing Joint Committee on Health and Children. This committee would review progress reports on the national children's strategy and investigate legislation and policy on specific issues in relation to children.

- **Office of Ombudsperson for Children**

The Agency supports the establishment of an ombudsperson for children. The office would be responsible for the promotion of the rights of children in all areas of public policy. It would also investigate individual complaints.⁴¹

- **National Economic and Social Forum to focus on disadvantaged children**

The NESF, as the policy forum involving national and local government, politicians and the social partners on economic and

social initiatives, should extend its remit to include a specific focus on the needs of disadvantaged children.

- **child welfare policy committees in health boards**

The Agency's sees health boards as having the lead role to play in promoting children's welfare at regional and local levels. Already, they operate child care advisory committees. We see the remit of these committees being expanded considerably to include all issues relating to the welfare of children and to incorporate co-ordination and monitoring roles in the provision of services.

- **children's organisations as social partners**

Children's organisations are represented as social partners by the National Youth Council of Ireland. The Council covers an extremely broad remit and it might be advisable if there was separate social partner representation for groups which specifically promote the rights and welfare of children. However, this is an issue which should be best adjudicated upon by the sector itself.

8. Conclusion

A national children's strategy is clearly needed to promote the general welfare of children, who represent 30% of the population. Despite much rhetoric, children are an undervalued asset in society, with Ireland having among the lowest levels of child income support in Europe. Yet, greater public investment in children has never been more affordable, with additional public resources now available and savings accruing from a smaller child population.

The priority for child welfare policy must be the elimination of child poverty. Child poverty is critical

⁴¹ See the discussion and recommendations on this issue in Cousins, M (1996), *Seen and heard. Promoting and protecting children's rights in Ireland*. Dublin: Children's Rights Alliance

because it denies the basic right of a child to an adequate standard of living, leads to social exclusion from everyday activities, has long-term effects on life chances, and is rooted in societal inequalities in the distribution of resources. A focus on child poverty would be in accord with the National Anti-Poverty Strategy, EU social policy and the Irish report of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.

Recent Agency-funded research reveals that a quarter of Irish children is poor, with 17% experiencing chronic poverty and that children are almost twice as likely to be persistently poor as adults. By European standards, Ireland has among the highest rates of child poverty and also scores badly on other indicators of child welfare.

In order to promote the overall welfare of children, the Agency proposes that the national children's strategy

- strengthens the rights of children in our laws, policies and practices;
- develops a co-ordinated strategy to eliminate child poverty;
- enhances public subvention of children;
- combats discrimination and ensure equal opportunity for all children.

In particular, the Agency proposes a ten-year government target to end chronic child poverty and to halve child income poverty. To achieve this, it proposes:

- a composite minimum income for children in need (£30-£40 per week depending on age)
- greater employment opportunities for unemployed families
- a child benefit of £25 per week for all children
- a childcare supplement of £32.50 per month via child benefit.

The Agency also makes proposals in regard to countering discrimination against specific groups of children and

to improving the provision of services for children.

Finally, the Agency outlines an institutional framework to support children, including a children's affairs unit located in the Department of Health and Children (as the lead government department for child welfare), a national database on child welfare, an interdepartmental policy committee for children, an ombudsperson for children and separate social partner status for children's organisations.

