

## **1. Introduction**

One Family welcomes the opportunity to make a submission on the next national policy framework for children and young people. The development of Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures (BOBF), was a landmark step forward in making Ireland a better place to be young. It built on the achievements of its predecessor, The National Children's Strategy: Our Children-Their Lives and set out ambitious targets and commitments. The next framework must again capitalise on the achievements of its predecessors but avoid repeating their shortfalls.

## **2. About One Family**

One Family is Ireland's organisation for people parenting alone, sharing parenting and separating. This year One Family celebrates 50 years of providing specialist parenting and therapeutic family support services in Ireland. Children are at the core of our work and we seek to improve their lives by empowering, supporting and up-skilling their parents. We campaign against child poverty, for reform of the family justice system and for the State to recognise and cherish all families equally, regardless of their marital status. One Family's CEO chairs the Child Poverty Committee of the BOBF National Advisory Council.

## **3. Building on Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures**

Many of the core BOBF aims and Government commitments should be renewed in the next framework. This is particularly true of ongoing policy areas. For example, significant progress has been made under BOBF in the provision of free school meals. This should lay the groundwork for a more ambitious goal of expanding the programme to include more children and hot meals. Other BOBF commitments which were not actioned, such as to "*reform the One-Parent Family Payment Scheme so that lone parents have access to a range of supports and services to provide them with pathways to work while acknowledging their caring responsibilities*", should be re-committed to in the new framework.

BOBF was a comprehensive and ambitious plan; however, plans and frameworks are only fully effective once they are implemented; a significant number of commitments in BOBF remain unimplemented. Having effective implementation structures and processes, with clear responsibilities and guaranteed buy-in and action from relevant Departments, in place must be a central part of the next framework. Deliverables and commitments should be timetabled, with responsibilities, milestones and monitoring processes clearly defined.

**Recommendation:** Include incomplete and unactioned commitments from Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures in the next national policy framework for children and young people and update or replace them with more ambitious targets where necessary.

**Recommendation:** Create an implementation structure for the next framework which allows for rigorous centralised oversight by the Department of Children, Equality,

Disability, Integration and Youth, which requires regular reporting from all Departments on targets and commitments.

#### **4. Prioritise Vulnerable Children**

Some children experience greater challenges and disadvantages than others. The next national policy framework should prioritise those children who are most marginalised, disadvantaged or vulnerable to harm. These include children in one-parent families, migrant and ethnic minority children, children who are members of the Traveller and Roma communities, children with disabilities, children experiencing homelessness, and children and young people who have been or are in care. In line with the EU Child Guarantee, such groups should be subject to prioritised, targeted actions and commitments within the next framework.

**Recommendation:** Include a dedicated pillar in the next framework for children and young people who are vulnerable or at risk with specific actions and commitments. Ensure that all commitments in the framework include targeted activities to level the playing field.

#### **5. Children's Participation**

Children's participation should be a cross cutting goal of the next framework. Children's participation rights are enshrined in law, including their rights to have their voices heard in the decisions and policies that affect them.<sup>1</sup> The Government has committed to recognising and upholding these rights.<sup>2</sup> The next framework should not only include commitments and targets for the participation of children and young people; but also set out the mechanisms and structures for doing so. This is particularly important to ensure the inclusion of children and young people from marginalised backgrounds. Too often the voices of these children are not the ones heard in national policy dialogues.

**Recommendation:** Develop a new National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation to mirror the life span of the next framework. Include specific commitment to the participation of vulnerable and marginalised children and set out a plan to achieve this from the outset.

#### **6. Child Poverty**

Reducing child poverty should form a central strategy of the next framework. Children in one-parent families are consistently over-represented in poverty and deprivation figures, as well as other measurements such as homelessness, fuel poverty; and poor living standards. Today children in one-parent families are six times more likely to live in poverty than children in two parent families.<sup>3</sup> This shows child poverty, particularly in one-parent families, has not been adequately addressed by BOBF.

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<sup>1</sup>United Nations, (1989). *The United Nations Covenant on the Rights of the Child*.

<sup>2</sup> Department of Children and Youth Affairs, (2015). *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision Making*.

<sup>3</sup>Central Statistics Office. (2021). *EU SILC 2020*.

Since 2016 there have been more than ten national research reports on one-parent families; all indicating the poorer outcomes experienced by one-parent families and urging immediate action. This includes recommendations from the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Social Protection in 2017 referenced in current Programme for Government.<sup>4</sup> We know the causes and remedies to poverty in one-parent families; the next framework must include clear, actionable targets on child poverty, particularly in one-parent families.

**Recommendation:** We support the recommendation of the BOBF National Advisory Council Child-Poverty Sub-Committee that the next framework should include a broad National Action Plan on child poverty. The Plan should complement the Government's commitments under the EU Child Guarantee, but be broader, more ambitious and tailored to the unique circumstances of children in Ireland.

**Recommendation:** As well as a monitored target on overall child poverty reduction, this plan should include a strategic target to reduce poverty and improve outcomes for parents and children in one-parent families. The one-parent family target should focus on four areas:

- a) **Address income inadequacy:** Benchmark social welfare rates against the cost of a Minimum Essential Standard of Living and by establishing a child-centred statutory child maintenance service.
- b) **Ensure free access to childcare:** Grant free access to quality, accessible early years and school aged childcare for all one-parent households, as part of a broader commitment to a fully publicly funded early years care and education system.
- c) **Create pathways to education and work:** Tailor employment and training supports. improve in-work income supports, support lone parents to take up and increase their working hours, and introduce a living wage. Take an 'education first' approach to activating lone parents and expand eligibility for grants, specialist bridging programmes and other educational supports.
- d) **Reduce housing insecurity:** Include a commitment to a Family Homelessness Strategy and a housing-first approach to increasing the output of built and acquired Local Authority and Approved Housing Body social housing units.

## 7. Family Law Reform

Reform of family law and the court system are long overdue and urgently needed. Recently, there have been a suite of family law reform consultations; however, very little has changed for children and families. The needs of the child are often not prioritised in a family law system which is adversarial and where few services are available to support families to resolve disputes themselves, outside of the courts. Furthermore, the absence of a dedicated family court which is user centred and bolstered by wrap around specialised family support and dispute resolution and mediation services, increases acrimony and ultimately harms children. The CAFCASS system in the UK gives an idea of

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<sup>4</sup>Government of Ireland,(2020). Programme for Government – Our Shared Future.

what is possible; however, despite being years ahead of Ireland there is still much need for development and reform in that system and these shortfalls should be studied also.

**Recommendation:** The next framework should commit to creating a world- class, child-centred family law and court system.<sup>5</sup> This should include;

- Statutory provision for assessments to court regarding child welfare.
- Ensuring the voice of the child is also placed on a statutory level and is heard at all points in the system (court, mediation etc.).
- Creating a child friendly family law system to include physical spaces and infrastructure, culture, staff skills and knowledge.
- Wrap around specialist family support services, including therapeutic and parenting services. .
- Provision of mediation and alternative dispute resolution services as appropriate.
- A national system of Child Contact Centres.
- Specialised supports for families who have experienced domestic abuse.

## **8. Child Protection and Welfare**

Child protection and welfare legislation and services advanced significantly during the lifetime of the BOBF framework; most notably with the implementation of the Children First legislation and national guidance. Yet there remains considerable policy and service gaps. The benefits of prevention and early intervention (PEI) policies and services for children are well documented; ensuring children’s essential needs are met in early life can reap massive return on investment rewards for the State in terms of lower welfare, health, social care and crime expenditure into adulthood.<sup>6</sup>

**Recommendation:** The next framework must commit to the resourcing, promotion and development of PEI approaches to child welfare and protection. This should include but not be limited to:

- Recognition of children who witness domestic abuse as victims and accordingly include measures to protect and support these children in all relevant national strategies.
- Resource the First Five strategy and the National Parenting Model.
- Provide specialist parenting and therapeutic services for families with shared parenting or who are experiencing separation or divorce.

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<sup>5</sup>One Family, (2021). *Submission to the Family Justice Oversight Group on Family Law and Justice Reform*. Available at

<sup>6</sup> Harvey, B. (2014). *The Case for Prevention and Early Intervention: Promoting positive outcomes for children, families and communities*. Dublin: PEIN.

## 9. Education

Children have a right to education.<sup>7</sup> This right is enshrined in the Irish Constitution.<sup>8</sup> The cost of sending children to school is an issue commonly raised by our frontline service users. Around half of all parents report being concerned about the cost of school and around one in five parents take out a loan to pay for their child's school costs.<sup>9</sup> School costs are higher for adolescents, as are other costs such as groceries.<sup>10</sup> DEIS provides a good model for supporting disadvantaged students in school; however the gap between DEIS and non-DEIS schools is extreme and we know that many children who are disadvantaged do not attend a DEIS school.<sup>11</sup>

**Recommendation:** Expand the Free School Books Pilot Scheme to all primary and secondary schools and develop a new model of funding for schools to end "voluntary contributions" being sought from families.

**Recommendation:** Taper DEIS supports to reduce the sharp distinction between DEIS and non-DEIS schools.

## 10. Housing and Homelessness

The housing and homelessness crisis began escalating for children at the beginning of BOBF. The next framework must prioritise the prevention of family and youth homelessness as a key goal. One-parent families are more likely to experience homelessness, housing insecurity and poor-quality housing than the rest of the population.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, there are specific housing issues relating to shared parenting families. Both parents in these families need adequate housing for their children, but we know this is too often beyond the reach even in higher income families.

**Recommendation:** Develop a Family Homelessness Strategy which will eliminate child homelessness in the lifetime of the framework.

**Recommendation:** Ensure both parents in shared parenting families can access appropriate family homeless accommodation should they need it and expanding access to housing support schemes to anyone separated or divorced.

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<sup>7</sup>United Nations (1989), *Convention on the Rights of the Child*.

<sup>8</sup>Government of Ireland, (1937). *Bauknecht na hEireann: Article 42.4*.

<sup>9</sup>Barnardos, (2021). *Back to School Survey Report 2021*.

<sup>10</sup>Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice, (2021). *Budget 2022 MESL Impact Briefing*. <https://www.budgeting.ie/publications/budget-2022-1/> [Accessed: 14 December 2021]

<sup>11</sup> Smyth, E., McCoy S., and Kingston, G. (2015) *Learning from the evaluation of DEIS*. Dublin: ESRI.

<sup>12</sup>Russell, H., Privalko, I., McGinnity, F. & Enright, S. (2021) *Monitoring Adequate Housing in Ireland*. Dublin: Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission.