

Submission to the National Child Poverty Target Public Consultation - January 2024



Introduction

One Family welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Department of Social Protection on the National Child Poverty Target Public Consultation. One Family has been working with families for over 50 years, many of whom have experienced poverty and deprivation.

About One Family

One Family is Ireland's organisation for people parenting alone, sharing parenting, and separating. We were established in 1972 as Cherish and provide specialist parenting, therapeutic and family support services around 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. More information on One Family can be found at www.onefamily.ie.

One in six families in Ireland are a one-parent family, compared to one in five in 2016. 85% of one-parent families are headed by a mother, and 15% by a father.¹ One-parent families are unfortunately at a considerable increased risk of experiencing poverty and deprivation.

Our askonefamily helpline service saw a 15.6% increase in calls and messages from service users between 2022 and 2021.² Parents sought advice on housing, finance and social welfare as they strained to keep their heads above water. Queries to the helpline in Q1 2023 were already 30% ahead of 2022 and so the situation is clearly even more dire now. This submission is informed by our direct work with one-parent families and our role representing these families at a local and national level over more than 50 years.

1. Does consistent poverty remain the most appropriate basis for a national child poverty target or are there other indicators that could be considered?

Consistent Poverty as a poverty indicator takes account of both monetary and non-monetary indicators, and therefore offers a more nuanced view of poverty and places that within an Irish context. It seeks to measure not just the number of individuals (or groups) who are at risk of poverty but also how these impacts on their level of social exclusion

¹ CSO 2023

² One Family 2022 Annual Report, https://onefamily.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/AR.2022.final_.pdf

relative to wider society. Consistent Poverty measures at risk of poverty and deprivation levels in an Irish context. As a result, it provides much needed data which underpins and informs Government policy and provides a slightly clearer picture of the lived reality of people experiencing poverty and social exclusion.

The CSO has been using this indicator for the last twenty years and even with recent changes, it continues to act as an important measure in the policy sphere and one that can be tracked over a long period of time. However, we do not think that Consistent Poverty be the only metric when considering and setting targets now or into the future.

It is widely accepted that no one indicator can demonstrate adequately the full scale and depth of poverty. While Consistent Poverty levels can tell us some of the story, it cannot shine a light on it all. For example, we know that child and family homelessness rose exponential between 2014 and 2018, yet Consistent Poverty rates were falling during this time. Similarly, during the same time-period, specific public services became increasingly more difficult to access for many. Rents and mortgage payments as well as food and energy bills have soared in recent years. Therefore, we recommend that other indicators are used alongside Consistent Poverty to better illustrate the multi-dimensionality of poverty.

Consistent Poverty should continue to be the main indicator, complimented using data collected by both CSO and Eurostat, as well as other agencies and organisations including the ESRI. Other measures should include reporting on the levels of homelessness, levels of housing insecurity,³ housing costs, AROPE, food poverty and energy poverty experienced by children, the % of children both in Consistent Poverty and AROP with and without medical cards as well as the % of in-work poverty experienced by households headed by a lone parent.⁴

One Family would also like to see qualitative research conducted, including one-parent families, so as to capture the processes and interactions between social, cultural, political, and economic factors. CSO Spotlights could provide invaluable information on the lived reality of the lives and well-being of such families.

2. Should the target be set on an absolute (number of children) or rate (per cent) basis, or both?

Targets and data should be set on a percentage basis though we believe it is important to also report the absolute number. However, it is easier to interpret an absolute number in more positive terms and so the per cent basis should be the key rate used.

³ Homelessness data should be expanded to include the number of children rough sleeping, in DV accommodation, Direct Provision and Hidden Homelessness.

⁴ Housing insecurity should include the number of Traveller children living in unsuitable accommodation

3. What is the most appropriate timeframe for the target?

It is hugely disappointing that the targets set in BOBF for 2020 were not reached. We acknowledge recent economic shocks such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the Ukraine invasion and rising levels of played a significant part in this failure and recent SILC data clearly demonstrates the impact they have had on a huge number of adults and children across the country. The scars left by the Great Recession resulting from the property and banking crisis, meant that many families and their children were already on the backfoot long before more recent troubles began.

Our economy is built upon an economic system that appears destined to experience reoccurring boom and bust cycles.⁵ Without a significant change in economic direction, it is imperative that Government plan for such economic shocks and ensure that the most vulnerable are provided much greater levels of support and focus during these times.

This way, Child Poverty targets can be set with the knowledge that a contingency plan can be implemented if/when the economy experiences any kind of downturn or pressure with particular focus on vulnerable groups including lone parents and their families.

We welcome the establishment of the Child Poverty and Well Being Programme Office established within the Department of An Taoiseach. We remain hopeful that a co-ordinated, cross-departmental approach will ensure that policies and targets will be monitored annually and the annual Budget set accordingly. Budgets should provide bespoke and targeted supports for vulnerable groups, and this should be monitored accordingly. The establishment of a specific Oireachtas Committee with a focus on child poverty, to further monitor and hold Departments accountable, should be considered as this issue is stated as a priority for this Government.

In terms of a timeframe, it is difficult to put forward one proposal. Given the number of different target dates that have been missed as well as the number of national, European and International policies and targets that exist, and the economic conditions that we currently exist in, we are not well placed to suggest any one timeframe. Whatever is decided should be guided by evidence and should be ambitious. Adequate resources must be provided to ensure that all Departments have available funding and personnel to complete the work needed to reach and hopefully surpass targets and in the quickest time possible. One child living in poverty is too many.

4. Is it feasible to set sub-targets within the child population (e.g. for specific cohorts or groups), which can then be monitored?

It is vital that sub-targets be set for lone parents and their children. Given the clearly demonstrable and shocking level of poverty that pertains to one-parent family households, and the responsibilities and duties owed to children as rights holders, it is imperative that within all indicators, data should be broken down to focus on specific and vulnerable

⁵ National Treasury Management Agency, Characterising the Financial Cycle in Ireland, Rossa White and Lisa Sheenan, 2019.

groups.

We note that within the Concluding Observations of the Un Committee on UNCR published in early 2023, they recommended that the state strengthen its efforts to reduce poverty among children in vulnerable situations and urges the state to:

(d) To ensure that measures to combat poverty comply with a child rights-based approach and include a particular focus on children from disadvantaged families, especially children of single parents, refugee children and children of ethnic minority groups.⁶

We cannot ever begin to tackle child poverty without sub-targets and action plans that prioritises the groups of children who experience poverty the most.

Government recognised within BOBF, that certain families are at an increased risk of poverty, including one-parent families.⁷ The Young Ireland framework launched late last year, acknowledges that children living in households headed by lone parents are significantly more vulnerable to Consistent Poverty than two parent households (13.1% compared to 3%).⁸

SILC 2022 reports that the Consistent Poverty percentage has increased to 5% for the general population and 14.1% for one-parent families. Almost half of one-parent families (43.5%) living in Deprivation. This compares to 17.7% of people in two-parent households. 23.8% of one-parent families are at risk of poverty, compared to 13.1% of the general population. Specific sub-targets must be set to finally begin tackling the high levels of poverty, deprivation and social exclusion faced by this vulnerable group.

We acknowledge that this is more difficult to do due to sample sizes used when collecting data. The CSO advises that in 2022, the sample size to conduct the SILC survey consisted of 4,660 households (some 11,393 individuals). We ask that consideration be given to how data is collected and how best to ensure the lived experience of lone parents and their children are captured. Like other groups, one-parent families are not a homogenous group. Some of these families face greater structural barriers than others. Some own their own homes, others are renting or living in social housing. Some have access to transport and good public transport, others do not. Some have been able to take up suitable employment or educational programmes and have sourced affordable childcare, others are finding this much more difficult. All these factors dictate the level of poverty and deprivation that may be experienced. It is therefore very important to capture all the information needed to better understand and inform policy and sub-targets. Adequate sample sizes and granularity data analysis are key to this.

⁶ Committee on the Rights of the Child, Concluding observations on the combined fifth and sixth periodic reports of Ireland, 2023, P. 12.

⁷ Better Outcomes Better Futures, The national policy framework for children & young people, 2014 – 2020, P.87.

⁸ Young Ireland, National Policy Framework for Children and Young People, DCEDIY, 2023-2028.

5. Are there specific actions required related to meeting the target?

We would like a particular focus on specific groups, including lone parents and their children. Adequate investment in how data is collected and analysed for such sub-groups is critical.

A whole of Government approach to such sub-targets is required and priorities set and monitored annually, mid-way and evaluated at the end of any policy period. We would like the Child Poverty and Well Being unit to co-ordinate such an approach and priority be given to such groups, no matter the economic situation at the time. This could be underpinned by legislation to ensure progress is made. As an example, New Zealand have adopted a well-being approach to their annual national Budgets. They have enacted legislation that requires their Government to measure child-poverty, including at a more granular level for those most likely to experience poverty, such as sole parents and their children. Legislation is also in place that means that the NZ Government must report annually on child poverty targets before the Budget is agreed which holds them accountable and means that changes can be made to ensure ending child poverty remains a priority.⁹ Legislation underpinning policy is not new to this country and for priority policy areas, it makes sense.

We recommend the establishment of a specific Oireachtas Committee to focus on Child Poverty to further support and review the reaching of targets and policy aims.

Government is under obligation to the EU Child Guarantee, to improve access to public services. This must be monitored and should include the impact on sub-groups including lone parents and their children to identify if there is any disproportionate impact on such families.

Government must also periodically report to the European Commission and the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and other conventions that the state has signed up that could help to tackle child poverty. The Child Poverty and Well Being office or other body should consider how to collate the information across all reporting platforms, to help better inform policy and achieve specific targets and sub-targets set.

Sub-groups and their targets should be prioritised and inform the annual Budget. Evaluation of each budget with a specific focus on sub-groups including lone parents and their children is also very important to ensure policy changes have a positive effect and any gaps are acknowledged and rectified in the following years Budget.

⁹ <https://www.treasury.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2019-06/b19-wellbeing-budget.pdf>

Conclusion

Ending Child Poverty forms a major part of the One Family Strategy for 2022 to 2024.¹⁰ We listen to the experiences of one-parent families and hear how worried they are about making ends meet, keeping a roof over their head and making sure that their children have their basic needs met. In 2023 we strongly contend that the level of poverty, deprivation and social exclusion experienced by lone parents and their children is unacceptable.

One Family is a member of the National One Parents Family Alliance (NOPFA) and have made several submissions to the Department of Social Protection and others in relation to the issue of Child Poverty over the years. Further asks can be read [here](#).¹¹

We urge Government, the Child Poverty and Well Being unit as well as all Departments with any role to play in reducing and eliminating Child Poverty to prioritise these families and work together constructively to ensure that all families and children are cherished equally and equitably to ensure that their futures are bright.

Ends.

¹⁰ https://onefamily.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/AR.2022.final_.pdf

¹¹ https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/33/joint_committee_on_social_protection_community_and_rural_development_and_the_islands/submissions/2023/2023-07-12_submission-national-one-parent-family-alliance_en.pdf