



Children should not pay the price for our economic crisis

In its Pre-Budget Submission the End Child Poverty Coalition (ECPC) says that we must ensure that children are not made to pay the price for our economic crisis.

The Coalition says that further cuts in income and services to low income families will increase child poverty. “Despite some progress in recent times 65,270 children continued to live in consistent poverty in Ireland in 2008. Children are not responsible for the economic crisis and should not be forced to suffer as a consequence of it. Furthermore, reducing the incomes of poorer families will undermine economic activity and lead to reduced consumer spending in the economy” said John-Mark McCafferty, spokesperson for ECPC.

ECPC members include Barnardos, the Children’s Rights Alliance, Focus Ireland, the National Youth Council of Ireland, OPEN, Pavee Point, and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.

The submission addresses five areas of public policy: Social Welfare; Educational Disadvantage; Health; Housing and Accommodation and Early Childhood Care and Education.

Child Income Support

The Coalition calls on the Government to maintain the current rate of Child Benefit and maintain the real value of the Qualified Child Increase for 2011. It says that Child Benefit and the targeted Qualified Child Increase, are crucial to assisting families with the costs of child rearing.

It also calls on the Government to maintain the current adult social welfare rates for 2011. “Poor children grow up in poor families and that is why the adult rate of payment has a direct impact on child poverty.” it says.

ECPC also seeks changes in the way the Family Income Supplement is designed. “As FIS is a targeted payment it is imperative that it is effective in tackling child poverty while also ensuring rewards from low paid employment” said Frances Byrne, ECPC spokesperson. The ECPC seeks to have the FIS thresholds adjusted to compensate for any changes in the rate of, or eligibility criteria for, the income tax system or Child Benefit payment and also towards families of 1-3 children (87% of families) to ensure an effective financial return from work.

In light of the reduction in working hours that many low paid workers now experience the Coalition is also seeking a relaxation of the minimum weekly working hours required for FIS eligibility.

To promote the increased take up of FIS so that eligible families are adequately supported and protected, ECPC says that self assessment for claiming Family Income Supplement should be introduced and ‘sign off’ from the Live Register should be a trigger for FIS (as recommended by the Expert Group on Integrating Tax and Welfare 1996).

Early Childhood Care and Education

The Coalition welcomes the Free Pre-School Year as implemented in January 2010. “The Government must now focus on raising quality standards in services, as variable quality remains a problem,” Frances Byrne said. There should be no further cuts to budgets for early childhood care and education, and the policy of no top-ups in the Free Pre-School Year should be continued.

The latest figures from the Consumer Price Index indicate that education costs increased by 9.2% in the year to July 2010. “For children in poor families full participation in school can be a luxury they cannot afford,” continued Frances. “We call on the Government to safeguard education budgets for 2011. We are particularly concerned that the amalgamated grants which fund schools to provide activities associated with Transition Year, the Leaving Certificate Applied and various other subjects and programmes are maintained so that children in poor households can fully participate in school.”

ECPC also asks the Government to address the lengthy waiting lists children have to endure to obtain a psychological assessment under the National Educational Psychological Service. “We need assurances that all children have access to vital supports such as Special Needs Assistants, resource teachers, and language support teachers at an early stage and that current levels of service must be increased in these areas in order to prevent long term educational disadvantage.” said John-Mark McCafferty.

Health

The Coalition is concerned that prescription fees for medical card holders will have serious consequences for children’s health and put increasing pressure on families to hold off on visiting GPs or buying vital medicines. ECPC urges Government to scrap the 50 cent co-payment for prescription items for medical card holders and double the income eligibility threshold for a medical card for parents of children with ongoing medical conditions.

Housing and Accommodation

Finally, changes made to the Rent Supplement Scheme in recent budgets have resulted in real hardship for families. The onus should be placed firmly on landlords to reduce rents for those on Rent Supplement rather than expect vulnerable tenants to negotiate rent reductions. The ECPC also calls on the Government to: retain tenants’ Rent Supplement contributions at current levels; reduce the time period for eligibility for Rental Accommodation Scheme (RAS) housing from 18 months to 6 months, with a strong emphasis on tenancy sustainment; take advantage of lower land, material and labour costs to increase the stock of social housing and to implement the Homeless Strategy by providing resources for social housing and related supports.

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