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**END CHILD POVERTY COALITION MEETS JOINT OIREACHTAS COMMITTEE
AND CALLS FOR 'MOST VULNERABLE CHILDREN' TO BE PROTECTED FROM
ECONOMIC DOWNTURN**

The End Child Poverty Coalition (ECPC) - a coalition of seven leading NGOs working to eradicate child poverty – met the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Social and Family Affairs today and warned that the most *vulnerable children must not fall victim to the economic downturn*.

The ECPC coalition (comprising Barnardos, Children's Rights Alliance, Focus Ireland, National Youth Council of Ireland, OPEN - One Parent Exchange and Network, Pavee Point and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul) has six key policy proposals to end child poverty. In addition, in response to the changed economic climate the Coalition is calling for four immediate actions to be taken to protect vulnerable children and their families:

- **STOP LONG DELAYS IN PAYMENT OF NEW WELFARE CLAIMS:** Redeploying civil servants in order to ensure that applications for Job Seekers Benefit and Allowance are processed urgently, within days rather than weeks or months.
- **PROTECT THE FAMILY HOME:** Introducing measures to ensure that no family will lose their home through inability to pay for a period of two years.
- **PROVIDE URGENT BUDGET ADVICE TO FAMILIES AT RISK:** Ensuring that there are sufficient numbers of budget advisors working with MABS (Money Advice and Budgeting Service) to assist people in devising household budget plans and survival strategies – this could involve the secondment of public sector workers to MABS.
- **ENSURE SPEEDY ACCESS TO VITAL SUPPORTS:** Processing applications for secondary benefits such as Rent Supplement, Mortgage Interest Supplement and the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance as a matter of urgency.

ECPC members have also urged the Government to carry out a strategic review of the social welfare system to examine how it links in with the labour market in order to maintain and sustain as many people in employment as possible.

As part of this, consideration should be given to allowing (if even on a temporary basis) greater flexibility in relation to the hours requirement to qualify for FIS.

End Child Poverty Coalition spokesperson John-Mark McCafferty said: "We welcome the fact that child poverty has reduced and that some policies have made inroads in its reduction. However, there is a very real risk that a lack of sustained investment, combined with rising unemployment, will see this good work undone and child poverty levels rising once again."

He added: "We know that difficult choices must be made due to the reality of the economic situation. However, taking difficult choices must not mean taking the easy option; there is a pressing need to protect the most vulnerable, which is a stated priority for Government."

He said: "Strategic decisions must be taken now, which will support all members of society, including children, to take part in the economic recovery. This can be achieved by working to lift more children and families out of poverty and supporting children to receive a good education."

Mr. McCafferty argued that: "In the short term, a number of concerns face families that require urgent action including, among others, social welfare processing times, housing repossessions, people struggling to pay rents in the private rented sector and access to money advice and budgeting services."

He said: "There is a compelling economic and social case for policy initiatives, which will effectively tackle child poverty while also making economic and social sense".

The End Child Poverty Coalition has six key policy proposals which, if implemented, would make serious inroads into tackling child poverty in Ireland more effectively in these difficult times.

Mr. McCafferty said: "These are to increase basic social welfare payments, enhance the family income supplement scheme, broaden the provision of quality early childhood care and education and after-school care, increase access to medical cards, tackle social housing waiting lists and to fully implement the DEIS strategy and Traveller Education strategy in order to seriously tackle educational disadvantage."

He concluded "The question is not whether we can afford to implement these proposals but whether, as a society, we can afford not to address these issues and leave the most vulnerable without adequate support during this recession."

ENDS

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