



Charities seek greater efficiency in social welfare system

KITTY HOLLAND

THERE IS a "real risk" that "a whole new generation will be living in poverty" if the Government does not make immediate moves to reform the social welfare system, making it both more efficient and more supportive, an umbrella group working against child poverty has warned.

John-Mark McCafferty, head of social justice and policy with the Society of St Vincent de Paul - one of the NGOs that make up the End Child Poverty Coalition - told *The Irish Times* there was an urgent need to increase the "speed and efficiency" with which the system gave support to people who lost their jobs.

The other charities in the coalition are Barnardo's, Focus Point, the National Youth Council of Ireland, Open and Pavee Point.

Addressing the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Social and Family Affairs earlier this week, Camille Loftus of the one-parent organisation Open said the welfare system needed immediate reform to make it more proactive and supportive of keeping people in work. Training should be worked into the system, she said.

"There is a lot of talk about the 'new poor', but we need to remember there are those who never moved out of poverty during the Celtic Tiger and who are really bearing the brunt now.

"They didn't receive the attention they ought to have during the good years. We assumed the buoyant economy would take care of them, but unless we take action now I don't think any of us would like to contemplate how awful a situation we could be in.

"The numbers dependent on social welfare by the end of the year may make any option of reform impossible," she said.

The group said there were key steps the Government must take immediately to protect vulnerable children and their families. These are:

- Public sector workers should be redeployed to the Money Advice and Budgeting Service to cut waiting lists which are running at over a month-long in some regions.

ondary benefits such as rent supplement and back-to-school clothing and footwear allowance urgently.

- Civil servants should be redeployed to ensure applications for unemployment benefit are processed urgently - "within days rather than weeks or months".

- Measures should be introduced to ensure no person loses their home through inability to pay, for a period of two years, rather than just one.

- There should be a strategic review of how the welfare system interacts with the labour market, to make it maintain and sustain people in work.