



Ireland

Tackling child poverty and promoting the social inclusion of children

A Study of National Policies

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Overview/Summary

This is a policy domain which has seen significant development and innovation — Ireland has been prioritising children and child poverty for some ten years now. The policy portfolio on children is broad-ranging and generally expansive, and children have been prioritised for social welfare increases for a sustained period. Not just income support but also services are seen to be essential to fighting child poverty. In fact the latter are being increasingly emphasised and the scale of their development attests to something of a paradigm shift in the Irish case. While childcare services in Ireland owe their main impetus to the rapid increase in female employment and the resulting demand for childcare, the benefits of early childhood education for children are being increasingly recognised and have been a motivator of recent reform. Ireland's anti-poverty strategy around children is located within a general approach that emphasises children's political rights and participation. Since 2000, new representative institutions for children have been set up and are on an expansionary course, although it must be said that children have had little or no role in the anti-poverty/social inclusion-related policy processes.

In terms of policy approach, Ireland tends to move between generalist and targeted approaches. Both have prevailed historically but the thrust of policy in recent years has been towards increasing the support for all families with children, regardless of their income level. While this is welcome, one can question whether it is a sufficient response to the relatively high level of child poverty that prevails in Ireland (whether measured by a consistent poverty or income poverty definition). The income targets for low-income families with children for example, are rather limited and there is insufficient targeting of childcare places and other services at poor children. Moreover, the failure to set a target in relation to child poverty rates in the latest 'National action plan on inclusion' (NAP inclusion) is to be underlined. The data for Ireland indicate as urgent the task of addressing the duration of child poverty and the replication of child poverty over the life course. The Combat Poverty Agency (CPA) (2006) has suggested that a broader approach is needed, one which centres on four strategic issues:

- reducing the duration of child poverty as well as improving the situation of children in acute poverty at a particular point in time;
- considering more actively the interplay between the broader factors that influence the living standards and wellbeing of children, including family supports, employment and public services;
- reducing the extent of societal inequalities as they are expressed in childhood circumstances, especially those which shape educational opportunity before and during formal schooling;
- placing the interests of children at the centre of policy-making on poverty.

While policy contains elements of all of these, the extent to which it is sufficient can be questioned. There are three 'balances' that need to be reconsidered in Ireland: between giving benefits to all children as against specific 'needy' children, between child-specific as against family-specific measures, between measures to combat income poverty and measures directed more broadly, for example, towards reducing inequality and improving access to services.

1. Extent and nature of child poverty in Ireland

1.1. Figures on child poverty

According to European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC), in Ireland in 2005 10.2 % of all children aged 0-14 years were living in consistent poverty (measured in relation to 60 % of median income together with material deprivation). If the income poverty or 'at-risk-of-poverty' measure is taken, then 21.2 % of children 14 years or younger were living in families with income below 60 % of the median. In terms of trends, the former set of figures, that is those on consistent poverty, showed an increase of 0.7 percentage points between 2004 and 2005. However, if the at-risk-of-poverty measure is taken, then the figures show no change on the previous year. In the case of both the consistent and income poverty measures though, children in Ireland have proportionately higher poverty prevalence than do adults. For example, while children under 16 years account for just 22.5 % of the overall population, they represent 23.6 % of those at risk of poverty and a significantly higher 30.3 % of persons in consistent poverty (Central Statistics Office, CSO, 2006). It is also the case that there are on average more children in poorer households in Ireland than there are adults.

Trends over time suggest that relative income poverty rates in households with children peaked in the mid-1990s (CPA, 2005). The fall has been especially strong in 'consistent' poverty, which recorded a 25 % rate for households with children in the 1980s (and is now down to some 10 %). The patterns for relative income poverty are much more stable, hovering at around the 20-24 % level for most of the last two decades¹.

There is little up-to-date information available in the public domain on the linkages between income poverty and multiple deprivation for Irish children. To some extent the consistent poverty measure gives an indication of this, since it is based on an amalgam of financial and material deprivation. However none of the recent statistics, including those from EU-SILC, give sufficient detail on, or breakdown of particular deprivations experienced by the 0-14 age group. It is possible to deduce this from some of the data on households, though. Of the different deprivations studied, the most widely experienced by families with children were debt problems arising from ordinary living expenses. This has been the most widely-reported type of deprivation since 2003 and it is especially prevalent in households containing children. For example, nearly 40 % of all lone parent households with children reported experiencing this type of problem in the 2005 as compared with 10 % of households with two adults and one to three children (CSO, 2006). Being unable to afford new clothes was the second most widely experienced deprivation among households with children and having to make do without heating at some stage in the past year is the third. In terms of the 'coincidence of deprivations', deprivation levels were higher among households containing children as compared to childless households.

It is also difficult to locate material on how poverty is associated with health or education, housing or sport or leisure related deprivations for children. While the EU-SILC analyses report some of these (especially the health data) linkages for adults, they do not report them for children. While it is known that poverty is related to educational and health problems or disadvantages, there are no recent studies in the public domain outlining these relationships in detail, although naturally statistics are available on health and educational outcomes for children.

In terms of ethnicity and child poverty, there is some indication that children from the Travelling community have significantly poorer outcomes than children in the general population (Office of the Minister for Children 2007: 35-38). The 2002 Census report on the Travelling community, for example,

¹ It is important to note that care needs to be taken when comparing the latest data with earlier data in that being based on a different methodology and sample selection procedures, they are not fully comparable.

showed considerable demographic differences compared with the settled community, including a higher birth rate, lower life expectancy and larger family size. Travellers of all ages have higher mortality rates than people in the general population: Traveller women live on average 12 years less than women in the general population and Traveller men, 10 years less. The Department of Health and Children reported in 2002 that the infant mortality rate for Travellers was 18.1 per 1 000 live births, compared with a national figure of 7.4 in 1987. In 1999, the occurrence of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS) among Traveller families was 12 times higher than that of the national figure. In the 2002 census, 38 % of Traveller households were found to be living in temporary housing units. A recent survey of Traveller education provision found that Traveller children living on unofficial halting sites had lower levels of school attendance rates (on average 68 %) than those living on official halting sites (on average 78 %) or in houses (on average 82 %); the same survey found a learning disability rate of 15 %, which is considered to be some 7 % higher than the overall school-going population.

No information is available on poverty rates on immigrant children. Nor is there, as far as is known, information on the spatial breakdown of poverty and/or social exclusion among children.

A detailed study of the duration of child poverty was published in 2006 (Layte et al., 2006). Based on an analysis of longitudinal data from the Living in Ireland survey over an eight-year period (1994-2001), the study investigated two distinct components of the longitudinal aspect of child poverty: the total number of years children spend in poverty (persistence) and the length of their spells in poverty (duration). The study showed that half of Irish children observed during the eight-year time period spent some time in income poverty. For about a quarter (23 %) this was a relatively short amount of time (one or two years) but 27 % spent three or more years in income poverty. Some 17 % spent at least five years in income poverty (approximately 182 000 children). Analysis of the duration of poverty periods suggests that a majority (60 %) of poverty periods are of a single year, while a quarter (23 %) last for three or more years. Irish children's spells in poverty have an average duration of approximately two years (1.7 years to be precise). Children in poor households are less likely to escape from periods in income poverty than adults but on the other hand, they experience on average fewer years of poverty than do adults — mainly because of their greater likelihood of living in households where parents are employed and so likely to be poor. The research by Layte et al. found that, despite mobility in the child poverty population, almost one in five Irish children live in income poverty for five years or more and that children in lone-parent households spend substantially more time in poverty than do those being raised in two-parent households, but that this was dependent on whether the parent was employed.

In terms of associated factors, a strong relationship was found between welfare dependence and the duration of child poverty. Two thirds of children in households where less than one quarter of the household income was obtained through social welfare payments avoided income poverty. At the other extreme, only 3 % of children in households where social welfare accounted for more than three-quarters of household income avoided income poverty altogether and 62 % were persistently poor.

The persistence of child poverty is affected by other household characteristics also. The age of the child and the presence of other children both impact on the duration of child poverty. Having a youngest child aged under 12 years has a greater impact on a household's experience of poverty than when the youngest child is aged 13-17 years, with no difference between a child aged under 5 versus 5-12 years. Having three or more children in the household has a particularly marked increase on the persistence of child poverty. Secondly, the type of household or family matters. Children in lone-parent households spend more time in poverty than children in two-adult households. Almost half of children in lone-parent households where the parent was not working were in persistent poverty (three or more years in poverty). In addition, the probability of a lone parent with a child under 5 years leaving poverty was 66 % lower than a lone parent with a child aged 12-17 years.

Parental employment status also influences the risk of poverty persistence among children. Children in households where parents are unemployed or inactive have a higher risk of spending time in poverty than those in households where two parents are employed. Analysis over the eight-year period showed that where neither parent was employed, nearly all children spent some time in income poverty and that where both parents were employed children spent no time in poverty. In addition to employment status, the number of working adults in a household has an impact on the level of child poverty. For children who avoided income poverty entirely, the average number of persons employed in their household was close to two but for those experiencing persistent income poverty the average was only 0.5. Parental educational attainment is also important in determining which children experience longer periods in income poverty. Living in a household where parents have lower levels of education increases the risk of children experiencing poverty. Parents with no second-level qualification in particular faced much greater risks of sustained low income than others. In addition, the likelihood of persistent income poverty was higher for children where parents report less than good health. The study also showed that childhood educational opportunities impact on the likelihood of adult poverty.

The study also looked at the childhood background of adults in poverty and the social factors which impact on adult outcomes. The chances of experiencing sustained poverty in adulthood are related to childhood socio-economic environment, especially childhood poverty. The pathways through which such effects operate not only include the financial constraints on parental capacity to invest in their children's 'human capital', but also socio-economic status, parenting styles, home environment and role modeling (CPA, 2006). The effects of social origins work through two rather different mechanisms, the first involving family conditions and parental stimulation in early childhood in particular, the other reflecting the decisions people make at crucial transition points in the education system and labour market.

Some qualitative work also exists on Irish children's experience of poverty (e.g. Daly and Leonard 2002). Based on a qualitative study of children in 30 very poor households, this work emphasises, inter alia, that children have a strong awareness of their family's economic status. It also indicates that children adjust their own behaviour and requests in light of how they perceive their family situation. It is also clear that children in poor households face a range of external pressures and negative experiences, such as peer pressure and bullying for example.

1.2. Ireland's comparative ranking

Comparative analysis of the duration of poverty in Ireland in relation to the first 15 EU Member States showed that the levels of persistent income poverty for children were lower in Ireland than in southern member states and the UK, but Irish levels were higher than in other northern member states (Layte et al. 2006). In addition, when compared with working age adults without children, the likelihood of children being in persistent income poverty was greater in Ireland (and the UK) than in other member states.

Other comparative data are also available. In the latest UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) Innocenti report card, Ireland is third last on the material deprivation indicator of the 21 countries included (with Hungary and Poland lower). It is also in a similarly low position on the 'health and safety' indicator which measures infant health, preventative health services and child safety. Ireland fared best in terms of risk-taking behaviour such as substance abuse or sexual activity (4th place), how children rate their own lives (5th), education (7th place) and relationships with family and friends (7th). Overall, when all the indicators are put together Ireland is placed 9th in the UNICEF league table. However it is important to bear in mind here that the income data refer to the year 2000 and that the situation has improved since then.

Northern European countries dominated the top of the league table, with child wellbeing at its highest in the Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark and Finland. The United Kingdom lagged behind on key measures of poverty and deprivation, health and safety, relationships, risk-taking and young people's own sense of wellbeing. Overall, the study's finding that there is no consistent relationship between a country's wealth and a child's quality of life across developed countries is apposite for Ireland.

2. Policy framework

2.1. Targets and approaches towards preventing child poverty and social exclusion

Children have been high on the political agenda in Ireland for some ten years now and successive governments have made strong commitments to improve the situation of children. In the main the strategy has been both to identify children as a specific target group for policy purposes and also to integrate the needs of children into ongoing policy processes. Children in vulnerable situations have also been targeted, especially by the social inclusion process. It should be noted that focusing on children has not just been a strong current in Irish social policy reform but a source of considerable innovation also. The term 'paradigm shift' has been used (National Economic and Social Forum, NESF, 2005:).

Child poverty has grown as a concern and focus since the first 'National anti-poverty strategy' was introduced in 1997. This document noted the significance of child poverty and planned to eliminate it. The 2002 review of the strategy set a target of reducing the number of children living in consistent poverty to below 2 % by 2007 and if possible to eliminate it. This instituted the recognition of children as a vulnerable group as far as poverty was concerned. Child wellbeing is also a strong focus of the latest national social inclusion plan (published in February 2007) which has as one of its strategic objectives to ensure that children reach their true potential. Notably, no specific commitment is made as regards a child poverty target rate in the latest NAP inclusion, however, although there is an overall target of reducing consistent poverty to between 2 % and 4 % by 2012, with the aim of eliminating consistent poverty by 2016.

The 2007-16 Plan could be said to have a stronger focus on social exclusion among children in that it primarily targets education. Three of the four high-level goals made in regard to children focus on education (which will be discussed below). The fourth renews an older commitment — to maintain the value of the combined child support payments to between 33 and 35 % of the minimum adult social welfare rate (a goal which according to the calculations of the CPA, 2007, has already been met).

The approach taken to child poverty in Ireland is noteworthy in a number of respects. First, the 2006 *National Report for Strategies for Social Protection and Social Inclusion* (NRSSPSI) and the NAP inclusion focus strongly on measures to move poor parents into employment and education. For those of working age, the NAP inclusion sets two high level goals: to introduce an active case management approach to support some 50 000 people who are currently on long-term social welfare payments into education, training and employment; to maintain the lowest social welfare rate at a relative value of at least EUR 185.80 in 2007 terms over the course of the plan. A second feature of the approach to child poverty in Ireland is to focus on services. The NRSSPSI and NAP inclusion and what is arguably the parent process — the latest national social partnership agreement — *Towards 2016*, for example, commit to the provision of additional childcare places, improving educational outcomes for children (by such measures as reducing the numbers of early school leavers, reducing the number of pupils from disadvantaged communities with serious literacy difficulties by half, from the current level of 27-30 % to below 15 % by 2016, full implementation of all measures under the 'Delivering equality of opportunity in schools' (DEIS, the educational inclusion plan) and improving health outcomes for children (by such measures as increasing the number of child and adolescent community mental health teams, launching a national nutrition policy to address children's food poverty and obesity by 2007 and developing the schools meals programme).

There are many positive features of these proposals. Primary among these is that they evidence an integrated approach to the problem of child wellbeing, ranging across early childhood development, health, education and income support. A recognition of connectedness across domains of life and of services and the need for an integrated approach in that regard represents significant policy learning in the Irish case, given that historically, the main thrust of the welfare state in Ireland was to provide cash benefits rather than services. Fragmentation, a product of a slow and relatively piecemeal development of provision over time that was shaped especially by long-term shortages of resources, is also in the process of being overcome in the Irish case.

Looking at the strategic approach more broadly, Ireland in recent years has adopted a lifecycle approach which targets four sectors of the population: children, people of working age, those older than working age and people with disabilities. This is very new and therefore difficult to judge at this stage. At the moment it tends to function as a way of organising the discussion of reform of policies relating to different sectors of the population. The test of the depth of this approach lies in whether policy recognises and seeks to address the cumulative nature of both advantage and disadvantage, and the extent to which it actively engages with the effects of transitions. The recognition of the significance of early childhood care and education bodes well but for this to be other than cosmetic, these and other services need to be designed with the specific intention of influencing the trajectories of children and the inequalities in such trajectories among Ireland's child population.

Judging from the latest documents (the NSSPSI, NAP inclusion and *Towards 2016*), it can be said that elements of a social rights approach as regards children are being put in place. For example, although the NAP inclusion neither explicitly uses the language of social rights, nor goes so far as to give children specific guarantees, it does place children in a societal context and sets out a series of long-term goals in regard to their welfare. These are specifically: growing up in a family with access to sufficient resources, supports and services; leaving primary school literate and numerate; completing a senior educational cycle; having access to world-class health, personal social services and accommodation; as well as quality play, sport, recreation and cultural activities and appropriate participation in local and national decision making.

There is a background in Ireland to a rights approach to children, the 'National children's strategy' (introduced in 2000) being notable in this regard. Highly innovative in an Irish (and even European) context, the Strategy recognises children as individual actors and treats them as a group with interests that need to be reflected in the public policy agenda. It is therefore strong on granting children political rights. Based on what is called a coherent and inclusive view of childhood, a three-fold strategy is pursued so as to:

- give children a voice by enhancing their opportunities for participation in and influence on matters affecting the;
- improve understanding of childhood in Ireland through research, evaluation and information on children's rights, needs and the effectiveness of services;
- offer children and their families better services and supports which are more focused on their needs, encompass a full range of needs and address an agenda of equity and inclusiveness.

Some of the measures taken have been far reaching, even in an international context. In line with the 'voice' proposal for example, a national children's Parliament was set up, bringing together 250 children aged between 7 and 17 years on a regular basis. This is complemented by activities to enhance the representation of children's interests at other levels of decision-making. Following practice elsewhere in Europe, an ombudsman for children, designed to promote the rights and welfare of children and to examine and investigate complaints, has also been established. At governmental level, a children's advisory council has been set up and has been given the task of advising the Minister for Children on all

aspects of policy relating to children's lives. As well as institutionalising the representation of their interests, the strategy was also strong on service provision. Locality-based services are emphasised, as is the degree of coherence and integration among services in different domains. The range of services, especially those which provide opportunities for developmental, play, cultural and leisure activities, is to be improved as is the availability of childcare and early educational initiatives and health services. The strategy also made a commitment to prioritising the needs of children living in disadvantaged situations. A central part of the strategy is to protect or improve the quality of children's family life. In policy terms this is translated into measures such as parenting education and support as well as services targeted on disadvantaged families. The advantages of this strategy are not only that it sets out a detailed policy but that it provides an elaborated policy framework.

The search for full political/legal rights for children continues in Ireland. In the fifteen years since it ratified the UN Convention on the rights of the child, Ireland has introduced a number of reforms in legislation, policy and practice, which serve to advance the implementation of the Convention. However, it has also been increasingly recognised that the full implementation of the Convention will only take place if its principles and provisions are incorporated into domestic legislation and integrated into practice and service provision; this in turn will require an amendment to the Constitution. Children already have rights under the Constitution: they enjoy the same fundamental rights as all individuals living in the State. What was lacking is a sufficiently clear constitutional recognition of the needs of children that are different from, and additional to, those of adults. Efforts to redress this situation are now underway.

On 3 November 2006, the Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern TD, announced the Government's intention to hold a referendum to strengthen the protection of children's rights in the Constitution. On 19 February 2007, the government published proposed wording for the amendment. The main elements of the suggested wording are as follows:

- An acknowledgement by the State of the natural and imprescriptible rights of all children;
- Restatement of the existing protection of children and parents (contained in the current article 42.5) and the extension of this provision to all children;
- Legal authority for the adoption of children who have been in care for a substantial period of time if it is in the best interests of those children;
- Ensuring that all children are eligible for voluntary adoption;
- Legal authority to secure the best interests of children in any court proceedings relating to adoption, guardianship, custody or access;
- Legal authority for the collection and exchange of information relating to the risk or actual occurrence of child sexual abuse;
- Legal authority to create offences of absolute or strict liability in respect of offences against or in connection with children.

As elsewhere, access to social rights — as distinct from political or civil rights — for children continues to be a challenge. Right across Europe an understanding of social rights as they might pertain to children remains under-developed. Does a social rights approach imply, for example, an individual right for the child to a minimum income or a place in childcare or is such a guarantee unworkable? Moreover, where is the balance to be drawn between rights to children as individuals and rights to family members (including children)? These are complex questions, which need to be worked out at national and transnational level.

2.2. Adequate income/social protection

In terms of income support, the main strategy followed in Ireland has been to address child poverty by increasing income supports for all families with children. The centrepiece of the child support package — and the main focus for increased expenditure on family supports — is child benefit. Paid until the child reaches the age of 16 (18 in the case of educational participation, or physical/mental retardation), it was historically a universal benefit but since 2004 is subject to a Habitual Residence Condition². The benefit is untaxed, paid to the mother and administratively is relatively easy as it is not subject either to a means or work test. The only differentiation in the benefit is that a higher rate is paid in respect of a third child and any subsequent children. Notably there is no specific age gradient in the benefit. A second strand in the Irish system is child dependant allowances (CDAs) which consist of additional payments to claimants of social welfare benefits when they have dependent children. These used to vary in value depending on the particular payment being claimed but have been standardised since 2007. The third income support strand for families with children is family income supplement (FIS) which is a means-tested wage supplement paid to families with children where there is at least one person in employment. Approximately two-thirds of child income support in Ireland is distributed through the 'Child benefit programme'.

There have been dramatic shifts in child income support in Ireland over the past decade. Both the level of cash support and the way in which it is structured have been altered. From 1994 to this year the rates of payment for CDAs — a payment received only by those in receipt of a weekly social welfare payment — were frozen, while very substantial additional resources were devoted to increasing the rate of Child Benefit which actually increased fourfold in value (from EUR 40 to EUR 160 per month in the case of the minimum payment, i.e. for the first and second child) during the last decade. The primary underlying rationale for a shift to child benefit is that it is a form of support which is neutral with respect to labour market status. The outcome in terms of the balance between payment rates for CDAs and child benefit is significant (Callan et al. 2006). The rate of payment for child benefit rose from just under 2 % of the average industrial wage in 1994 to just under 6 % in 2005. While CDA payment rates remained constant in nominal terms, rising real and nominal wages meant that they declined as a proportion of the average industrial wage from about 5 % in 2000 to 3 % in 2005.

In terms of the level and relative generosity of different elements of the cash supports, the CPA (2006) has analysed the system that was in place around 2005-06, differentiating by age of child, family size and household income. They show that against a standard equivalent weekly child support package of EUR 34.50, those claiming the FIS fare best, receiving average weekly cash support to the value of EUR 91, compared to EUR 53.60 for those receiving a main social welfare payment. The relative disadvantage of families on social welfare decreases somewhat when there are three or more children in the family and when the children are under six years of age. Overall however the level of support for families on social welfare is a key issue as regards child poverty and poverty in general. The payments to social welfare recipients in respect of their children (CDAs) were increased this year for the first time in over 10 years. The latest budget, which had quite a strong orientation to low-income families, also increased the FIS and the 'Back-to-school clothing and footwear allowance' (to be discussed below). It has been estimated that the maximum total gain for children in welfare dependent households from the latest budget was EUR 8.63 a week (CPA, 2007: 14). These, trends in the right direction, need to be intensified if a significant drop in child poverty is to be achieved.

² The 'Habitual residence condition' as an additional qualifying condition imposed on anyone seeking to avail of child benefit was introduced on 1 May, 2004 associated with the EU enlargement on that date. It applies to families who first claimed child benefit after that date. These mainly include people who are not permitted to work, such as asylum seekers, and those awaiting a residency application decision. FLAC, an NGO undertaking work and offering services in the field of legal advocacy, strategic litigation and analysis, has initiated a campaign to restore universal child benefit.

Research indicates that the value of Ireland's child income support package compares quite favourably with that of other EU countries. Working with data for 2001, Callan et al. (2006) show that the value of the Irish package, averaged over a wide range of family situations, was about 13 % of the average industrial wage, compared with 16 % in Austria, the country with the most generous package. The value of the package in most countries — including the four Scandinavian countries — was between 5 and 10 % of the average wage. However, Ireland's relative placing falls towards the lower end of the international spectrum when the value of the overall child support package, taking into account housing benefits and provision of non-cash services such as subsidised childcare, is the basis of the comparison. Increases in child benefit since then, and the introduction of the 'Early childcare subsidy', will have boosted Ireland's overall child support package. Because support in Ireland is delivered through a cash mechanism, while other countries typically use non-cash mechanisms for childcare, Ireland's position in the ranking of cash income supports will be further enhanced, while its low ranking in terms of directly provided services will remain unchanged.

André Sapir (2005) provides a further perspective on the issue, questioning in particular whether countries engage in a trade-off between equity (the probability of avoiding poverty) and efficiency (the employment rate). Sapir argues that the evidence indicates that the Scandinavian economies and welfare regimes are attaining both equity and efficiency goals. Ireland and the United Kingdom score well on the efficiency front, but not on the equity goal. The continental economies, by contrast, score well on equity but not on efficiency; while the Mediterranean or southern EU countries, by and large, achieve neither efficiency nor equity. According to Callan et al. (2006: 29), the clear message from international comparisons is that, to date, the most effective policy regimes in countering both child poverty and general poverty have been those of the Scandinavian countries. Furthermore, the success in countering child poverty is not due to especially high child income support payments, but to the more general income support regime and to the extent to which the welfare state more broadly reconciles equity and efficiency goals and underpins a high employment rate. A recent review by the OECD of the effectiveness of policy approaches to child poverty suggested that Ireland is one of the countries in which reforms to reduce levels of family joblessness would have a significant effect on child poverty rates (Whiteford and Adema, 2007).

There is considerable discussion in the literature, including the Irish literature (see Callan et al., 2006), about whether child poverty is best addressed by focusing on child specific measures or on a more general approach to poverty. Attention has been drawn to the approach taken in the Scandinavian countries, for example, where relatively large parts of the benefit system which are not child contingent but succeed in keeping children as well as adults out of poverty (Sutherland, 2005). A recent analysis of Ireland in comparative context concluded: 'Tackling child income poverty requires a strategy that takes a broad view of welfare income supports, and "activist" measures to increase participation in employment. Solutions lie not with welfare alone, or employment alone, but a combination of both' (Callan et al., 2006: 36).

There are grounds to suggest also that the targeted approach, that is, using measures to assist the poorest children, needs to be strengthened in Ireland. This is quite widely-supported in the NGO/voluntary sectors. Various options have been suggested and are being considered. Under new proposals being drawn up by the National Economic and Social Council, it is proposed to merge the CDAs and the FIS. The benefits and costings of a more selective approach are explored by Callan et al. (2006). Analyses of the feasibility and effectiveness of an income tested supplement to Child Benefit, set at EUR 33 per week with an income limit of about EUR 500 per week and a withdrawal rate of 20 %, estimate it to have the effect of reducing child income poverty (at 60 % of median income) by almost 4.5 percentage points. Such a policy change is estimated to cost in the region of EUR 450 million per annum — equivalent to the cost of a 20 % rise in child benefit. Expenditure on FIS would be reduced by about one-third, leaving a substantial residual FIS scheme in place. One key difference with respect to

the existing structure is that it is assumed that the new child benefit supplement is paid to all those who qualify, and only to those who qualify. Thus, it is assumed that the child benefit supplement does not experience the problems with take-up which have dogged the Family Income Supplement scheme. Take-up for the latter benefit has been estimated to be as low as 35 % (Comhairle, 2004). This issue of low take-up of FIS is the subject of a study recently commissioned by the department.

Subsidies have not been a strong approach historically in Ireland — in European comparisons Ireland is a relatively low investor in subsidies for children (CPA, 2005). The only real subsidies that exist are for poor families who undergo a discretionary process to get help with special needs. The help available includes a designated programme of assistance with school-related costs — a once-off annual payment, subject to a means test, made on behalf of children aged between 2 and 17 years (22 for those in full-time education). The value of the allowance, substantially increased this year, is EUR 180 for children aged between 2 and 11 years and EUR 285 for those aged 12 and over. Note that research by Barnardos in 2005 showed that the average costs for basic uniform, sportswear, shoes and textbooks for a primary school pupil is EUR 225.60 and EUR 408.75 for a secondary school child (Barnardos, 2006).

A school meals programme for low-income children also exists in Ireland and has been the subject of increased investment in recent years. The aim of the scheme is to provide school meals for children who otherwise would be unable to take full advantage of the education provided due to a lack of food. There are two components to the school meals programme. The first is the 'Urban school meals' scheme which is operated by local authorities. The meals provided are in the form of a light snack (e.g. sandwiches or buns and milk). The second component is the 'School meals' (local projects) scheme through which funding is given directly to national and secondary schools, local groups and voluntary organisations which operate their own school meals projects. In 2004 this provision was extended to nursery schools catering for disadvantaged pre-school children. These meals must be targeted at areas of disadvantage or at children with special needs. Funding is allocated on the basis of a rate per meal per child. In 2005, 62 600 children in 940 schools participated in the scheme. By 2006 this had risen to nearly 70 000 children in over 1 000 schools. There is also a 'School milk scheme' which entitles school-going children to a quarter litre of milk on each school day. Pre-schools, primary and second-level schools are eligible for this provision which is funded by the EU and the Irish government. Crèches and other childminding concerns which are operated for commercial gain are not eligible. Significant extensions of the school meals programme are planned, targeting take-up in the existing schools where the service is provided and increasing the number of participating schools by some 215.

One issue that should be considered, especially in the context of the stated commitment to an integrated and holistic approach, is the danger of fragmentation in the Irish child income support system. The degree of coordination between the four programmes of cash support for families with children needs to be closely monitored as does their variation (in terms, for example, of attaching conditions, frequency and levels of payment).

The situation of children at risk might need to be given more attention, even though these sometimes constitute rather small groups. These would include, for example, separated children (those outside their country of origin who are separated from their parents or caregivers). In Ireland (as elsewhere) these children tend to be of refugee or asylum seeker background. At any one time it is estimated that there are some 200 such children in Ireland. The children of migrants (who constitute a growing group in Ireland) are another group who might be prioritised. Although the latest NAP inclusion spells out the intention to improve language training for these children, the general integration of these children and their families into Irish society remains a major challenge.

2.3. Childcare

A key element of the specificity of Ireland's policy approach is that the system for long favoured cash supports over services. This is still the case but it is changing. Childcare and early educational development have figured very strongly in the Irish approach in recent years. However, it is an uphill struggle to provide sufficient childcare outside the home in Ireland given the very sharp increase in demand over a relatively short period and the very low starting point. The latest NAP inclusion reports that in 2004 some 7 % of children aged three years or under and almost half of four year olds were in pre-school education. Apart from issues of supply, a perspective on childcare as adding quality to children's lives and enhancing their development has gradually emerged in Ireland, although arguably the dominant framing of childcare continues to be as an enabler of maternal employment.

The availability of childcare places has been a very strong focus of policy. Since 2000, the government has invested EUR 500 million in the creation of 32 000 new childcare places and the enhancement of a further 24 500 existing places. This rapid development of the crèche sector has increased the choices available to parents but supply shortages remain in many areas. In recognition of this, over the ten year lifetime of the latest 'National development plan' (NDP), EUR 1.3 billion is to be allocated to the 'National childcare investment programme' (NCIP). This will operate in the same way as its predecessor (the 'Equal opportunities childcare programme') in providing grant assistance (for costs associated with staffing and/or capital) to community based, not for profit and private sector childcare providers. This programme has a budget of EUR 575 million and a target of generating a further 50 000 new places, including 5 000 school-age places and 10 000 pre-school places. If it achieves its targets, the programme should see Ireland well on the way to achieving the 205 000 childcare places needed to meet the EU target. The programme is being run in collaboration with the county childcare committees who are to advise on local needs. The NDP contains funding for the continuation of this programme beyond 2010 to 2013 with new targets to be set taking account of the supply needs at that time. A review of the programme is to be undertaken during 2010, in consultation with the social partners.

In regard to disadvantaged areas in particular, there is an awareness that they need to be targeted. The NAP inclusion plans to target areas covered by the DEIS programme for targeted pre-school education for example. In addition, there are 2 180 pre-school places provided under the 'Early start' pre-school project. Of these places, 1 680 are in 40 primary schools in designated areas of urban disadvantage and a further 500 places in 46 pre-schools for Traveller children. This notwithstanding, issues of affordability and supply of places need to be continually addressed (Barnardos, 2006).

Other measures apart from childcare supply have also been put in place. The 2006 budget made provision for a new early childcare supplement. This, the main innovation of that particular budget, consists of a payment of EUR 1 000 per annum for every child aged under six years. Its purpose is to compensate for the higher childcare costs of young children although it is a universal payment paid for every child, regardless of age, place in family or employment status of parents. Estimated to be paid to about a half of all families with children, it represents a further expansion of the structure of child support in Ireland. This notwithstanding, affordability of childcare continues to be an issue, especially for low income parents. With weekly fees estimated to be in the region of EUR 120 and higher (Barnardos, 2007 budget submission), the new EUR 1 000 annual childcare supplement, while an improvement, is likely to make little significant impact, even for low-income families. Moreover, the childcare programmes that have been undertaken by government have focused mainly on supply and have employed no direct mechanisms to reduce the cost of childcare for low-income families. The question of accessibility, especially for low-income families, is also important. This is not actively addressed, given that childcare funding programme tends to follow requests for funding, rather than actively influencing supply. The main recommendation from the recent National Economic and Social Forum (2005) review of the field was the introduction of a universal quality free childcare/education place for 3.5 hours a day,

five days a week in the year prior to attending primary school for all children. The children's charity, Barnardos (2005), calls for the roll-out of this to begin with children who are from low-income backgrounds. They also argue that all childcare in Ireland should be more actively informed by a perspective of child development (rather than parental employment, and in particular female access to and retention in the labour market, which is strong as a root/motivator of childcare provision in Ireland).

2.4. Education

Early school leaving and absenteeism from school are increasingly being recognised as significant problems in Ireland. In relation to early school leaving, the latest available figures, for the cohort entering second-level school in 1994, suggest that some 18 % of those young people left school without a leaving certificate and 5.7 % left with no qualification at all. This is equivalent to 13 000 and 3 900 children and young people respectively. Furthermore, it is estimated that up to 1 000 children per annum do not transfer from primary to second-level school (NESF, 2002). Children from a Traveller background make up the majority of these children. In relation to absenteeism, the data suggests that primary school pupils miss 11 days on average out of a school year of 183 days and secondary school pupils miss 15 days out of 167. In general the figures highlight the close relationship between absenteeism and disadvantage. Attendance is lower in poorer areas and average attendance in the most disadvantaged post primary schools is 86.1 % (signifying 23 days absence) compared with 94.6 % (nine days absence) in the least disadvantaged schools. Furthermore, 38 % of students in the most disadvantaged schools miss 20 days or more compared with 8.5 % in the least disadvantaged schools, a difference of 29.5 percentage points. The review concludes that there is a strong relationship between the levels of disadvantage in a school and both the general levels of attendance and the number of children who miss 20 days or more. Schools with larger numbers of children from disadvantaged backgrounds tend to have greater problems with attendance. There is also the matter of educational performance. Literacy and numeracy difficulties among pupils are a matter of serious concern with around one in three children in disadvantaged areas experiencing serious problems. In fact recent research reveals that there is no change in national reading standards when 1998 data are compared with those from 2004, despite the reduction in class sizes and an increase in the number of learning support teachers available (Department of Education and Science, 2006). This study found that lower pupil achievement is linked to a number of pupil background characteristics including being a medical card holder, low socioeconomic status, unemployment and low parental educational attainment. Other factors associated with poorer average scores include being from the Traveller community, children for whom English or Irish is not the first language, being a member of a lone parent household or a large family. Home influences were also identified as being a determining factor in achievement scores. Such influences include parents reading to their children, availability of resources at home such as books and magazines and parental rules over watching TV. The study found that 4 % of 5th class pupils watch TV or DVDs for more than five hours on school days and that such pupils scored well below the average.

Against this background, there is quite a lot of activity and significant resources being devoted to 'educational disadvantage' and it is a budget heading that has been growing over the years. There has been new legislation, the setting up of new institutions, the allocation of additional funding and new programmes. The Education (Welfare) Act, 2000, was enacted to provide for the entitlement of every child in the state to a certain minimum education, and, for that purpose, to provide for the registration of children receiving education in places other than recognised schools and the compulsory attendance of certain children at recognised schools. The act also raised the minimum school leaving age from 15 to 16 years. Under the act a new institution was set up, the National Educational Welfare Board, to develop, coordinate and implement school attendance policy so as to ensure that every child in the state attends a recognised school or otherwise receives an appropriate education. Furthermore, the act provided that school managers adopt a pro-active approach to school attendance by maintaining a

register of students attending the school, recording school attendance and notifying the relevant educational welfare officer of particular problems in relation to attendance, supporting students with difficulties in attending school on a regular basis, preparing and implementing a school attendance strategy and preparing and implementing a code of behaviour. To address the concern that many young people enter the labour market without adequate or even basic qualifications, the act made provision for, inter alia, the continuing education and training of young persons aged 16 and 17 years who have left school early to take up employment, preventing employers from employing early school leavers who are not registered with the National Educational Welfare Board for this purpose and obliging employers to notify the board when they employ an early school leaver.

In 2005 the Department of Education and Science launched DEIS, a five-year action plan for educational inclusion. The plan addresses the educational needs of pupils in disadvantaged areas through a more targeted approach covering pre-school through second-level education. Effectively the aim is one of consolidation of existing programmes as well as the expansion of measures to combat educational disadvantage. The DEIS has as its aim a more integrated response to educational disadvantage through channeling funding into a single pool of resources which will be allocated to schools based on their level of disadvantage. The expenditure on targeting educational disadvantage in 2006 was in excess of EUR 640m, which includes the EUR 40m allocated to the DEIS strategy. This strategy, to be phased in over five years, will include extra teachers, greater focus on early childhood education, extension of the 'School completion programme' and literacy and numeracy support such as 'Reading recovery' programmes. It also aims to increase partnerships between the Department of Education and Science and other relevant departments and agencies (statutory and non governmental). In March 2006, 640 primary schools (320 town/urban, 320 rural) and 200 second level schools were identified for inclusion in the programme. A new standardised system has been established for identifying levels of disadvantage in primary and secondary schools. This new identification process uses a variety of indicators such as number of pupils whose families have a medical card and failure or poor results in the Junior Certificate. All schools identified as disadvantaged receive additional funds but the amount allocated is weighted according to the needs and numbers of the pupils identified.

The plan is one of a number of interventions to address educational disadvantage, which include second-chance education and training, increased participation by under-represented groups in further and higher education and the development of provisions for pupils with special educational needs.

Education continues to be a priority for planning and policy in the social sphere in Ireland. Three of the four goals for children in the NAP inclusion relate to education. They focus on providing targeted pre-school education, tackling literacy difficulties in disadvantaged primary schools and increasing completion levels in upper second-level education. In terms of literacy, the goal is to reduce the proportion of pupils with serious literacy difficulty in primary schools in disadvantaged communities with a target of halving the proportion from the current 27-30 % to less than 15 % by 2016. One has to question whether this level of illiteracy is acceptable. Early school leaving is another aspect of educational disadvantage that has been targeted in Ireland by educational and other policy makers for at least a decade now. The 'National anti-poverty strategy', introduced in 1997, identified early school leavers as a target group and set a target of eliminating early school leaving before the Junior Certificate and reducing early school leaving so as to increase the percentage completing the senior cycle to at least 90 % by the year 2000 and 98 % by 2007. The primacy of this target group has been retained. The current target, as set out in the NAP inclusion, is to have 90 % of the cohort completing upper second level or equivalent by 2013. Funding for both the National Education and Welfare Board and the National Educational Psychological Service will be increased. The language needs of migrant children will also be better provided for. The educational needs of Travellers are also to receive greater attention. The NAP inclusion promises that the majority of the recommendations of the *Report and Recommendations for a Traveller Education Strategy* will be implemented between 2007 and 2011. It

also makes a commitment to phasing out segregated provision at primary and post-primary level and to integrate pre-schools for Travellers.

Barnardos (2006) has suggested that the Irish approach to educational disadvantage needs to be expanded and altered. In their view, educational disadvantage policy in Ireland should move beyond the DEIS strategy, which is largely school based, to an approach that focuses on educational equality, which would integrate the school based responses with a whole child approach to educational and social inclusion. A whole child approach means taking all influences which impact on a child's life in and out of school into account in policy design and implementation. A whole child perspective is being explored in other countries such as New Zealand and Canada. In New Zealand, for example, the 'Agenda for children' adopted the whole child approach to be applied to a range of issues including education. Central to the agenda is the recognition that experiences and influences in childhood can affect a person's wellbeing at all stages of their life. Barnardos also recommends that an effective tracking system be put in place to ensure that all children make the transition from primary to secondary school. Apart from Traveller children, others for whom the transition can be particularly daunting are children with a disability. One reason for this is that in the Irish system special needs equipment belongs to the school instead of the child so, for example, children moving from primary to post primary need to reapply for their special needs equipment. Barnardos (2006) has suggested that if the transition of children from primary to secondary school were easier then drop-out at this stage could be minimised. Among the policy suggestions that they offer in this regard are to engage children, parents and schools in some of the following models known to contribute to good practice: introduction of student mentoring systems, participation in induction programmes open to both parents and pupils, provision of a module delivered in 6th class on what to expect in secondary school, encourage and develop availability of extracurricular activities.

2.5. Housing

In putting together a picture of children's housing need in Ireland, one has to draw from different sources. The latest statistics suggest that 22 335 households with children were identified as being in need of social housing in the 2005 assessment of housing needs (Office of the Minister for Children 2007: 228). This represents a 24.2 % (7 149) decrease compared with the 2002 assessment, when 29,484 such households were identified as being in need of social housing. In 2005, 61.4 % of family households in need of social housing were households with one child; 24.1 % were households with 2 children; 8.9 % were households with three children; and 5.7 % of households included four or more children.

Simon Brooke (2004) suggested that some 50 000 children in Ireland were living in accommodation that is over-crowded, damp, in disrepair or in poor neighbourhoods. Such problems were found to be more common among children being reared in one-parent families and those living in private rented accommodation. It is notoriously difficult to obtain figures for children in situations of homelessness and as far as is known no comprehensive figures are available. The total number of young people who appeared to the former health boards to be homeless in 2004 was 495 (Office of the Minister for Children, 2007: 208). The periodic assessment of homelessness in Dublin, where homelessness is highest, carried out in March 2005 indicate a downturn in the number of homeless young people: 62 single persons aged 20 or less were recorded and a further 203 young people were counted in the age group 21-25 (Homeless Agency, 2005), cited in Mayock and Vekic (2006). While the most recent assessment points to a decrease in the number of homeless people of all ages, it is nonetheless significant that, in 2005, young people under the age of 25 accounted for 18 % of the total homeless population (ibid).

One of the children-specific measures is the 'Youth homelessness strategy' which was initiated in 2001. This strategy sets out various objectives and steps to reduce/eliminate youth homelessness in Ireland. The Health Services Executive (HSE) has primary responsibility for implementing the strategy, and two-year strategic plans on how they will achieve this are submitted regularly to the Department of Health and Children. The implementation of the strategy is being monitored and co-ordinated by the Youth Homelessness Strategy Monitoring Committee, chaired by the Office of the Minister for Children. The latest policy developments in this regard, as specified in the NAP inclusion, is that the Office of the Minister for Children will undertake a review of progress on the implementation of the strategy. Barnardos recommends that all children should be removed from emergency accommodation and provided with accommodation of high standard appropriate for them and their families.

Comparative work suggests that while Ireland's local authority housing benefit scheme demonstrates a high degree of progressivity from an earnings perspective it does not appear to take account of household composition and size to the same degree as in other European countries (CPA, 2005: 87). In addition, Ireland has a relatively small proportion of social housing compared with its European neighbours.

2.6. Health

The Irish health system is a mix of both public and private institutions and funders. It is primarily tax-financed and is available to all inhabitants, subject to rules on residency and ability to pay. For those on low income, there exists a means-tested medical card scheme which includes children based on their parents' income and number of dependent children. This is administered by the HSE and provides a range of services free. These include GP services, medicines, in-patient public hospital services, outpatient services, dental, optic and aural services and infant care services. Barnardos call for the extension of the full medical card to all families whose total income is equivalent to that which would make them eligible to pay tax at the standard rate (currently 20 %). They also suggest that a targeted programme of investment is needed to ensure that health services are available, accessible and appropriate for children requiring them.

Towards 2016 makes the following health-related recommendations for children:

- deliver a significant number of child and adolescent community mental health teams (CMHTs) within the context of a 7-10 year target of 1 CMHT per 100 000 of the population by 2008, subject to sufficient resources being made available, and two CMHTs per 100 000 of the population by 2013;
- intensify efforts to achieve the WHO target of 95 % immunisation for children and actively targeting areas where take-up rates are below this level;
- develop a new strategic health promotion policy by end 2007 which will address the lifestyle factors undermining the health of young people;
- launch a national nutrition policy to address children's food poverty and obesity;
- develop a national database to monitor prevalence trends of growth, overweight and obesity;
- develop the 'School meals' programme which will receive EUR 2 million in additional funding in 2006;
- monitor prevalence trends of smoking and substance use;
- carry out a review of secondary care paediatric services outside Dublin.

One of the most innovative aspects of *Towards 2016* is the development of Integrated services and interventions for children at local level. A cross-departmental team chaired by the Office of the Minister for Children is developing an initiative to test models of best practice which promote integrated, locally-led, strategic planning for children's services. The objective of this initiative is to secure better developmental outcomes for disadvantaged children through more effective integration of existing services and interventions at local level. In addition, the agreement overall puts emphasis on services at community level. Among its commitments for example is the plan to develop 500 community care teams by 2011, to provide access to services with particular attention to the needs of medical card holders.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in its last report on Ireland (September 2006) expressed concern about the lack of a comprehensive legal framework in regard to health services and the absence of statutory guidelines safeguarding the quality of and access to health care services as stipulated in article 24 of the UN Convention on the rights of the child, in particular for children in vulnerable situations. It recommended, inter alia, that Ireland adopt all-inclusive legislation that addresses the health needs of children and establish statutory guidelines for the quality of these services. It also underlined the need to pay special attention to needs of refugee and asylum-seeking children, and children belonging to the Traveller community, inter alia, by implementing the existing 'National strategy for Traveller health'. The committee also raised the matter of the mental health of children. While welcoming the *Mental Health Act* of 2001 and noting that Ireland has recognised the lack of adequate programmes and services related to the mental health of children and their families, the committee is concerned that children with mental health difficulties still do not access existing programmes and services for fear of stigmatization, and that some children up to 18 years are treated with adults in psychiatric facilities. It recommends that the government make full use of the findings and implement recommendations of the Expert Group on Mental Health Policy appointed by the Minister of State at the Department of Health in 2003.

2.7 Social Services

Ireland has come through a period of unprecedented inquiry in terms of child abuse, culminating in the recent publication of the report of the Ferns inquiry (Department of Health and Children, 2005). This document described the failure of those in positions of trust in one Diocese to take effective steps to defend and vindicate the rights of the children concerned. The main legislation governing the care and protection of children is the Child care act (Government of Ireland, 1991), which places a statutory duty on the HSE to promote the welfare of children who are not receiving adequate care and protection. In addition, it enables the immediate intervention of the HSE or An Garda Síochána in situations where children are in danger and also enables the Courts to place children who have been abused or who are at risk in the care of, or under the supervision of, the HSE. Reporting of suspected child abuse in Ireland is not mandatory in the legal sense. However, all organisations providing services to children are now obliged to develop and disseminate child-protection policies that are consistent with the *Children First: National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children*. These guidelines were introduced in 1999 to assist people in identifying and reporting child maltreatment, which is categorised into four different types: neglect, emotional abuse, physical abuse and sexual abuse. Any suspected child maltreatment is reportable to An Garda Síochána. A Garda Central Vetting Unit (GCVU) was established in January 2002 to process vetting requests from defined sectors and organisations. However, since the first quarter of 2006, the GCVU has been engaged in a phased roll out of its vetting service to all sectors and organisations involved in the recruitment of persons to work with children and vulnerable adults, and this roll out is proceeding apace. In addition, the joint HSE/Garda training in child protection is ongoing and a joint protocol has been developed to facilitate collaborative working between the two organisations.

There were 6 188 children assessed by the former health board areas (now the HSE) for child welfare and protection concerns in 2004 (Office of the Minister for Children 2007: 132). This represents a rate of 61 per 10 000 children under the age of 18 years.

Social services for children in Ireland have a strong 'at risk' character. The public health service in Ireland is obliged to provide social work services for children considered to be 'at risk' and for other child care services. These services are delivered at a local level by the HSE. The HSE may also provide social work services for other groups or individuals. Social work services in Ireland are delivered by teams of social workers, working with individuals, families and groups experiencing social and emotional difficulties. The majority of social workers employed by the HSE are involved in delivering child care services. This involves identifying and dealing with children at risk, dealing with adoption and fostering services and working with the criminal justice system in the case of child offenders.

The recent NDP made a significant commitment to child protection and welfare, pledging an investment of some EUR 3.4 billion for services for children at risk, with a particular emphasis on early interventions and support for families who are experiencing difficulties. Services and community supports such as springboard projects, teen parenting support and youth advocacy programmes, which are having a real impact, will be enhanced and developed over the lifetime of the NDP. In addition, child welfare and protection services will be further enhanced through initiatives in respect of pre-school regulations and inspections, the implementation of the 'Youth homelessness strategy' and the establishment of the Social Services Inspectorate on a statutory basis. The 'Child welfare and protection sub-programme' contains an allocation of EUR 49 million capital expenditure for the re designation of existing residential institutions for more specialised care and high support. Significant progress was made under the last NDP in this area and over 100 high support and special care places for non-offending children are now in existence.

Another aspect of social services for children in Ireland, and one that has been progressively expanded over the course of the last ten years (especially since the Commission on the Family reported in 1998) is family resources centres. In 2003, the Government established the statutory Family Support Agency which has overseen the expansion of a range of programmes and services to support families. As well as administering the Family Resource Centre programme, a key objective of the Family Support Agency is to develop a strong regional network of accessible counselling services for families. The agency is responsible for the national Family Mediation Service and in addition to raising awareness about family and parenting issues, it also undertakes research on matters pertaining to family wellbeing.

Community based and targeted at areas of disadvantage, these centres essentially aim to help combat disadvantage by supporting the functioning of the family unit. Centres provide services for lone parent families, young mothers and others considered in need of extra support. They can act as a first step to community participation and social inclusion. Since the commencement of the funding programme in 1994, the number of core-funded programmes has increased from 10 to 100. Some EUR 12.94 million was expended under this programme in 2006; further expansion is planned under the 'National development plan 2007-13'. Family Resource Centres are run by voluntary committees made up of members of the local community and the services provided and activities supported by the resource centres are designed to meet the needs of the local community, including the provision of information, advice and support to target groups and families in the area, practical assistance to community groups such as training, information and advice, the provision of education courses and training opportunities, the provision of childcare facilities for those attending courses provided by the project and the running of after school clubs.

Not just the expansion of this service but also institutional reforms underline the increased interest in services for families in Ireland. A new Family Affairs Unit was set up in 1998 within the Department of Social and Family Affairs with the functions of coordinating family policy, pursuing the recommendations of the Commission on the Family, including funding services, undertaking research and promoting awareness about family issues. This represented a significant new development of and for the Department which has tended in the past to have had a classic social protection brief.

2.8. Transport

The only child-specific transport policies relate to school transport — a service based on distance from school. In a scheme administered nationally by Bus Éireann, over 150 000 school children travel on the school bus services each school day: 88 000 post primary and 62 000 primary.

2.9. Sporting and recreational policy and provision

The 'National children's strategy' and the latest national social partnership agreement — *Towards 2016* — contain a commitment to ensuring that children have access to play, sport and cultural and recreational activities to enrich their childhood. The many measures that have been taken to put this into effect, mainly relating to the provision of a play and sporting infrastructure, tend to be focused on all children rather than those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The same is true of the sports and leisure related activities for children contained in the NAP Inclusion. However, the latter document does point out that in 2007 over EUR 87 million is being provided for local and regional sports facilities and sporting organisations with priority being given to projects in disadvantaged areas.

In 2007 the Department of Arts, Sport and Tourism is operating a sports measure for disadvantaged young people from the 'Dormant accounts fund'. This scheme will encourage increased participation among disadvantaged young people, between the ages of 12 and 19 years, in sport and physical activity by way of small scale grants to help clubs purchase sports equipment, hire facilities, develop coaches and other innovative ways to encourage greater participation of young people in sports.

The Office of the Minister for Children is due to publish a recreation policy for young people this year.

2.10. Delivery of services at local level

This is a matter of growing concern. The latest social partnership agreement (*Towards 2016*) announced that a cross-departmental team chaired by the Office of the Minister for Children is developing an initiative to test models of best practice which promote integrated, locally-led, strategic planning for children's services. This has a strong focus on children who are disadvantaged — indeed its objective is to secure better developmental outcomes for disadvantaged children through more effective integration of existing services and interventions at local level. As an initiative for prevention and early intervention in children's lives, the aim will be to avert children succumbing to the risks associated with disadvantage as well as giving them the resilience to overcome those risks. As such, the initiative will focus on children who are at risk of suffering from multiple disadvantage relating to poverty and social exclusion, including children of migrant and Traveller communities.

2.11. Institutional Reform

The policy interest and concern with children has led to significant institutional reform in Ireland. An Office of Ombudsman for Children was set up in 2003. In December 2005, the Government took a decision to set up the Office of the Minister for Children as part of the Department of Health and Children in order to bring greater coherence to policy-making for children. The Minister for Children attends all government Cabinet meetings and is supported by the Office of the Minister for Children especially in regard to:

- implementing the 'National children's strategy';
- implementing the 'National childcare investment programme 2006-10';
- developing policy and legislation on child welfare and child protection;
- implementing the Children act (Government of Ireland, 2001).

The Office focuses on harmonising policy issues that affect children in areas such as early childhood care and education, youth justice, child welfare and protection, children and young people's participation, research on children and young people, and cross-cutting initiatives for children.

Overall, the place of and provision for children has been expanding and growing in importance in Ireland although it is not yet the case that the interests of children are at the centre of policy making, in general or as regards poverty in Ireland.

3. Monitoring

In general Ireland has many elements of a progressive policy in place and as we have seen child poverty and the welfare of children in general is a vibrant policy domain in Ireland. Many of these policies have yet to take effect. Hence they cannot be judged in a definitive fashion at this stage. The NAP inclusion to some extent recognises problems with implementation, however, speaking in terms of an 'implementation gap'.

As far as is known, children experiencing poverty are not selected out as a specific group to be monitored in Ireland at the present time. Hence the situation of children will be monitored only as part of ongoing monitoring. The Office for Social Inclusion (OSI) is the main body that co-ordinates and monitors the NAP inclusion. OSI produces an assessment of how effectively it considers the strategies and targets contained in the inclusion process are being implemented in terms of the results and outcomes achieved. The CPA and the NESF assist the OSI in the consultation process at national and local level. In terms of improving implementation the NAP inclusion contains a significant commitment whereby the Office of the Minister for Children is to provide 'a strong leadership role in improving outcomes for children'. The OSI will produce an annual social inclusion report, which will review and assess progress, identify emerging issues across each stage of the life cycle and report on stakeholders' views.

Monitoring is relatively well institutionalised in Ireland given the very developed nature of the social partnership or national agreement process. Poverty impact assessment is also well established and the procedures have been recently reviewed and renewed. In Ireland stakeholders have mixed involvement in evaluation, depending on their particular identity. The social partners, which in the Irish case includes representatives of the voluntary/community sector have involvement in ongoing monitoring processes, given that much of the monitoring is institutionalised and monitoring under the social partnership process. Local authorities are not as a rule involved in monitoring some impact assessment is being rolled out at that level. Neither are academics specifically included (although it has been practice to make for academic appointments on some of the advisory bodies e.g. National Economic and Social Council, NESF). Children are not involved in monitoring or evaluation relating to poverty or social exclusion specifically. However, child participation is prioritised under the 'National children's strategy' and as specified earlier a number of consultation fora exist (including a children's parliament). The NAP inclusion makes a commitment to extending participation and in particular to 'ensure that hard-to-reach children and young people are included in the participation structures'. In my view a procedure should be instituted to include such children in the planning and consultation procedures in relation to social policy/social exclusion. Perhaps a social inclusion forum for young people could be set up, operated together with some of the youth organizations and based on the model of the Social Inclusion Forum.

Following the commitment in *Towards 2016* the Office of the Minister for Children has recently commenced the development of a new 'National data strategy' to support the planning and delivery of policy and services in relation to early childhood care and education and school age childcare, to identify additional key areas where data is required to inform policy and, in the longer term, to evaluate both the impact of investment on the quality of life experienced by children and where specific targeting of resources is most needed.

For the first time this year Ireland has produced a state of the nation's children report (Office of the Minister for Children 2007). This is a very wide-ranging, and generally comparative, report that presents a detailed analysis and update of data relating to children's socio-demographic situation, relationships, outcomes (including health, education, social-emotional outcomes) and formal and informal supports. The report was published in fulfillment of a commitment made in the 'National children's strategy' (introduced in 2000) to make available a regularly updated statement of key indicators of children's

wellbeing. The report is based on a national set of child wellbeing indicators developed in 2005 and includes 48 indicator areas of children's lives, considered by multiple stakeholders, including children themselves, to be important (Hanafin and Brooks, 2005).

The research functions of the Office for the Minister for Children are relevant here. Pride of place among its research activities is the national longitudinal study on children which will explore the lives of children in Ireland. The study is planned as a study of two specific cohorts; a birth cohort comprising a sample of at least 10 000 children and a nine year cohort comprising a sample of not less than 8 000 children. The study, due to commence this year, will include two data sweeps (at age nine months old and three years) for the birth cohort and two data sweeps for the nine-year cohort (at the time of enrolment and at thirteen years). The aim of the study is to examine the factors which contribute to or undermine the wellbeing of children in contemporary Irish families, and, through this contribute to the setting of effective and responsive policies relating to children and to the design of services for children and their families. The study is expected to take seven years.

There are still some noteworthy gaps in the available information systems, however. For example, there is no comprehensive database of primary school pupils for example, although such a database has been recommended for years, most recently by the Educational Disadvantage Committee. Despite some preliminary groundwork being undertaken no such database is in existence. Therefore, it is not possible to track the transition of children between primary and secondary school and those children who drop out of school at this stage seem to get lost. A secondary school pupil database exists and is based on school principals completing annual returns on the pupils in their school before 30 September. Constructed on this basis, the database is able to track the roll-over of pupils from one academic year to the next.

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