Babies and Bosses Review Launched by Mary Coughlan TD Minister for Social and Family Affairs

Mary Coughlan, T.D., Minister for Social and Family Affairs today, Tuesday, 4th November, officially launched the OECD comparative review of Family Friendly Policies in Ireland, Austria and Japan, entitled "Babies and Bosses". The review highlights the pressures people experience in balancing the goals of raising children and having a career and includes challenging recommendations for Ireland in assessing current and future policies.

"Rapid and profound changes have occurred in family life over recent decades", said Minister Coughlan. "In Ireland the main changes have begun more recently than in most other OECD countries, but, consequently, the pace at which change is occurring is much quicker".

"In the not so distant past in Ireland, the norm was for the father to care about the boss and the mother to care for the babies. Much of our social and other policies were based on that reality", added Minister Coughlan. "Now families and family life has changed and there is a need to modernise our policies to cater for these new realities."

Family and work lives are greatly influenced by taxation, social welfare, childcare, and employment and workplace policies.

These issues are dealt with individually in the review and the approaches taken in Ireland, Austria and Japan are compared and contrasted.

The review finds that many people decide to have children at a later age, not as many as desired, or not to have children at all. Other people, usually mothers, withdraw from the labour market out of choice, or in many other cases, despite the fact that they would like to work, or to work more hours, but cannot do so because of constraints in terms of time, access to services or limited opportunities to resume career tracks after childbirth. Other parents, often fathers, spend so much time working that they hardly see, let alone give personal attention to, their children.

Developing policies to help parents strike a balance between the demands of home life and work is vital as families form the bedrock of society, parental care plays a crucial role in child development and the expansion of parental employment would promote economic prosperity, especially in the face of looming demographic changes.

ENDS

4th November 2003

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Note for News Editors

Main Policy Recommendations for Ireland

- Introduce an entitlement to part-time work for parents with very young children.
- Reduce the long-term benefit expectation among clients of One Parent Family Payment. This will require a comprehensive employment support approach, intervening more actively at an earlier stage of benefit receipt; provide training and childcare support, whilst ensuring that Family Income Supplement becomes a more effective tool in helping single parents back to work. If introduced, for such a comprehensive strategy to be effective it would need a system of mutual obligations requiring lone parents to seek work actively. This could include, for example, active full-time work-testing from when the youngest child reaches age 6 and in full-time schooling, and from age 4 (when infant classes are available), part-time activity testing (training or work).
- Encourage Employers and Unions to make workplaces more family-friendly, for example, through the introduction of initiatives that provide workplaces with tailored advice on family-friendly policy practices, while ensuring long-term commitment through regular assessment or audits.
- Explore options to use existing education facilities to address out-of-school hours care needs.
- Promoting child development and ensuring that childcare services are of good quality warrant additional public investment in childcare. Such public spending may best be focused on parents rather than providers, to increase their choice of work and care options, as well as providers and types of care; to improve equity in public childcare support across childcare providers; and to improve efficiency among providers. Income testing could be used to target expenditures on those most in need. To ensure quality of formal childcare, benefit payments can be linked to quality-licensed facilities only. There is a strong case for ensuring that 'Childminding' that is currently in the informal sector should be subject to some basic quality controls in return for being eligible for such public subsidies.