



Minister Says Urgent Practical Measures To Address 'Blemish' Of Child Poverty Being Intensified

The Minister for Social Affairs, Séamus Brennan T.D., said today that decisive action to address the unacceptable level of child poverty in Ireland was being accelerated as a matter of urgency. Particular emphasis was being placed on three critical areas - increased and targeted child income supports; measures to encourage lone parents back to education, training and work; and the delivery of thousands of additional childcare places.

Minister Brennan was speaking in Dublin when launching the Combat Poverty Agency policy statement "Ending Child Poverty", the findings of which are based on an analysis of income support packages for families in 22 industrialised countries. The Minister described the statement as comprehensive and wide-ranging and a valuable contribution to the ongoing drive to ending child poverty.

The Minister said that the inescapable reality was that between 60,000 and 120,000 children were affected in some way by poverty at a time when Ireland was continuing to enjoy exceptional economic success and had achieved levels of unemployment that were the envy of most nations. This year his Department is spending over €12 billion - or €1 in every €3 of the State spend - on weekly and monthly welfare payments, entitlements and supports to 1.5 million people. Yet, despite the economic surges and the record spending on welfare supports, child poverty remained a blemish that tarnished the Ireland of the 21st century.

Minister Brennan said: "It is now time for practical, concentrated and targeted proposals that can be implemented without delay. We are making progress on tackling child poverty, and poverty in general, but it is at a pace that will deliver too little too late for many of our most vulnerable and marginalised. That is the reason I am accelerating the implementation of proposals that will reach to the very core of the problems that are resulting in child poverty. I am not interested in further lengthy debates or waiting for the outcome of more exhaustive research to again identify the problem. We know the problem. We know the reality. It is that many children, our most vulnerable citizens, are surviving in a poverty situation in Ireland at the start of the 21st century. Child poverty can blight the lives of the marginalised young, often resulting in early school leaving and sowing the seeds for a serious lack of development later."

Minister Brennan said that while overall strategies to address child poverty and the measures to give effect to them are set out in the National Children's Strategy and in the National Action Plan against Poverty and Social Exclusion, he was especially interested in selecting specific measures within those strategies for immediate consideration and action. The Minister said that he was involved in a series of intensive meetings with senior officials in his Department and with independent advisory bodies, including the National Economic and Social Council (NESc) and the Combat Poverty Agency, to speed up the identifying of practical, targeted proposals



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and to begin bringing about the administrative changes required for implementing the proposals.

"The NESC was commissioned to devise a structure for a second tier of supports, in addition to Child Benefit and other entitlements, aimed specifically at reaching those children most in need and alleviating their plight. By amalgamating social welfare Child Dependant Allowances with Family Income Support payments it is intended to create a second tier of payments through which to channel extra resources to low income families without creating disincentives to employment.

That report is now nearing completion and I am confident that it will deliver recommendations that are practical and hard-headed so that I can move towards putting in place an implementation phase. I have also asked the Combat Poverty Agency to put together solid and practical proposals in this area and I look forward to receiving their submission shortly."

Minister Brennan said that one-parent families, or lone parents, was another critical area in which he was determined to bring about beneficial changes as they were one of the welfare groups at highest risk of poverty. There are now over 80,000 people in receipt of the One-Parent Family Payment at a cost of over €770 million. Included in this group are more than 150,000 children.

"The best way forward and out of the poverty trap that many find themselves in is to encourage lone parents back to education, training and work, if that is what they want. It is time we faced up to the issue of lone parents in an honest, sympathetic and practical way. Lone parents are a resource to this country and not a problem. Detailed research into the obstacles to employment for lone parents and to other issues such as payment, cohabitation, maintenance payments and secondary benefits are almost completed. I am committed to reforms that will improve the quality of life for lone parents and their children by offering them respect, supports and a way out of the welfare trap".

The Minister said that central to helping lone parents and low income families out of poverty, or the serious risk of poverty, was the provision of adequate childcare facilities. The government was now committed to intensifying implementation of the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) which is making very real changes in every corner of Ireland thanks to the efforts of community based not for profit groups working closely to address their local childcare needs.

To date over 2,400 grant applications under the Programme have been approved, making €357 million in capital, staffing and quality improvement grants for childcare nationwide. Over €300 million has been approved for a wide range of capital and staffing projects across the country and, on completion of the EOCP, this funding is projected to create some 36,000 new centre based childcare places and will support over 30,000 existing places.

Minister Brennan concluded: "Today we stand in the doorway of the 21st Century. It is a time to consider how the generations that follow us will look back and assess our contribution. Personally, I don't think they will judge us on how many millionaires, or even billionaires, we created out of Ireland's economic boom period. I believe that,



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rightly, they will judge us on how we harnessed that exceptional economic buoyancy to reach down and lift those left behind by the rising tide of economic growth. How in a sympathetic and practical way we used the fruits of economic success to cherish all our children equally. We are the people who can shape the future for the people of this island. How well we do that will be our legacy".

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