

Distilled Paper on a Whole of Government Approach to Tackling Child Poverty

**BETTER
OUTCOMES
BRIGHTER
FUTURES**

Background

Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People (2014-2020) (BOBF) – is the first overarching national policy framework for children and young people (aged 0-24 years), developed and led by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs on behalf of the Government. Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures sets out 163 key policy commitments and five national outcomes we want to achieve for all of our children and young people, each with a sponsor department:

Active & Healthy

Active and healthy, with physical and mental wellbeing
Department of Health

Achieving

Achieving full potential in all areas of learning and development
Department of Education and Skills

Safe

Safe and protected from harm
Department of Children and Youth Affairs

Economic Security

Enjoying economic security and opportunity
Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection

Connected & Respected

Connected, respected, and contributing to their world
Department of Housing, Planning, and Local Government

While the implementation of Better Outcomes is continuing apace, it was decided that the Framework offers a unique opportunity to identify and address key intractable issues that require a strategic and multilateral approach in ensuring optimum outcomes for children and young people.

Under the Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures Framework child poverty was identified as a priority, and in conjunction with the Advisory Council, the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP) formed an ad hoc group with the objective of working with key officials from other relevant Government Departments and NGOs towards the adoption of a whole of government, multi-dimensional approach to tackling child poverty. The group was co-chaired by DEASP and the Children's Rights Alliance. It should be noted that this working mechanism has resulted in a great deal of shared learning and to a common understanding of the complexities involved in addressing this issue.

Child Poverty Target

In 2014, as part of the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People the Government set an ambitious and challenging child poverty target: to achieve by 2020 a reduction of at least two thirds on the 2011 baseline level of child poverty¹. This means that the number of children in consistent poverty in 2020 should be reduced to at most 37,000.

In order to achieve this target the Government undertook to adopt a multi-dimensional, whole-of-Government approach to tackling child poverty which would build on the lifecycle approach employed in the *National Action Plan for Social Inclusion (NAPinclusion)* and be informed by the European Commission's Recommendation on 'Investing in children: Breaking the cycle of disadvantage', as part of the Social Investment Package.

Progress on Target

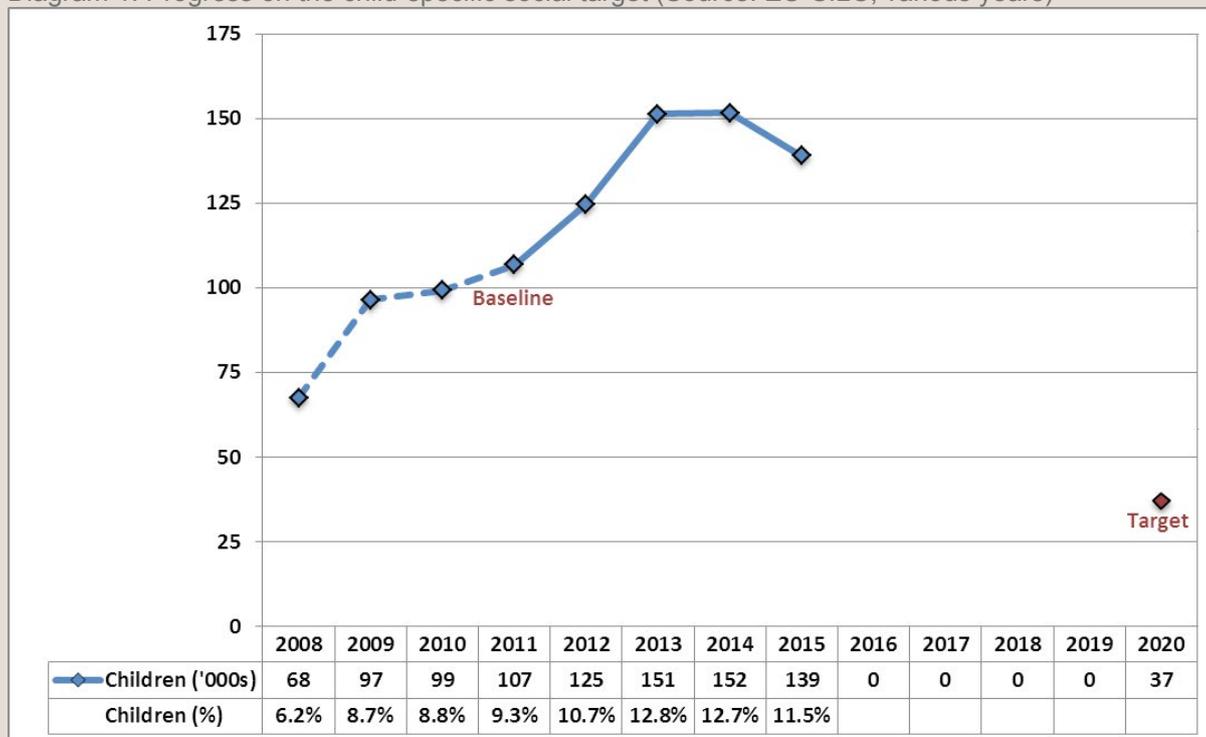
To give some perspective and a sense of the size of the challenge Ireland faces in trying to achieve the child poverty target in Ireland: at the height of the economic boom, in 2008, when the consistent poverty rate for children was its lowest, there were 68,000 children in consistent poverty, so in order to meet the target Ireland will have to be more than twice as effective as our best ever performance.

Since 2008, as the diagram below shows, the percentage of children in consistent poverty peaked in 2014 at 152,000 children or an increase of 6 percentage points, more than double since 2008. It is important to appreciate that this is a relative measure, which moves year on year subject to changes in median income. As median income rises without corresponding proportionate rises in the income of the lowest deciles, then the numbers at risk of poverty and in consistent poverty will rise.

¹ The target population is based on the consistent poverty indicator. This indicator is the overlap of two component indicators: at-risk-of-poverty – which measures individuals whose household income is below 60% of the median – and basic deprivation – which captures individuals lacking 2 or more of 11 basic necessities. A person is in consistent poverty if they are both income poor and deprived.

However, 2015 saw the first reduction in the number of children in consistent poverty since 2008. Compared to the previous year there was a 13,000 or approximately 9 per cent decrease in the number of children in consistent poverty in 2015. In order to achieve the 2011 baseline target a new figure of 102,000 children will have to be lifted out of consistent poverty to meet the child poverty target by 2020.

Diagram 1: Progress on the child-specific social target (Source: EU-SILC, various years)



It is clear that the target to reduce child poverty by more than 100,000 children, or two thirds of the 2011 rate, is unlikely to be met. However, there is nothing inevitable about child poverty, and there is clear evidence about what works in terms of reducing child poverty rates. Ireland's historical approach to tackling child poverty has focused on cash transfers, and this approach has resulted in Ireland consistently ranking as one of the top performing EU countries in the poverty reduction effect of social transfers.

However, and despite the relative success of social transfers, in order to have a comprehensive and sustainable impact on child poverty future strategies must also focus on improving service provision. Doing so can have a meaningful impact on reducing the cost of living for families with children. Key areas to focus on in this regard are housing, health, children's education and childcare. The diverse nature of these challenges demonstrates why a whole of government approach is essential to tackling child poverty effectively.

In addition to helping to make ends meet, greater investment in public services should also help to lower the barriers that prevent some parents from taking up work. This complements the second approach considered here – increasing participation in quality, sustainable employment. While the ultimate goal is to increase participation in full time employment it is also clear that

even some work, when it is complimented by income supports offered by the DSP, should be an effective route out of poverty in the short term. When these supports are reinforced with access to education and training options the likelihood of a longer term solution can be increased.

It is clear from all of the available evidence that participating in quality employment is the best route out of poverty. A concerted, interdepartmental effort to capitalise on this relationship by making work pay would require generous in-work benefits with tapered withdrawals, affordable high quality childcare, and targeted labour activation services.

Whole of Government Approach to Tackling Child Poverty

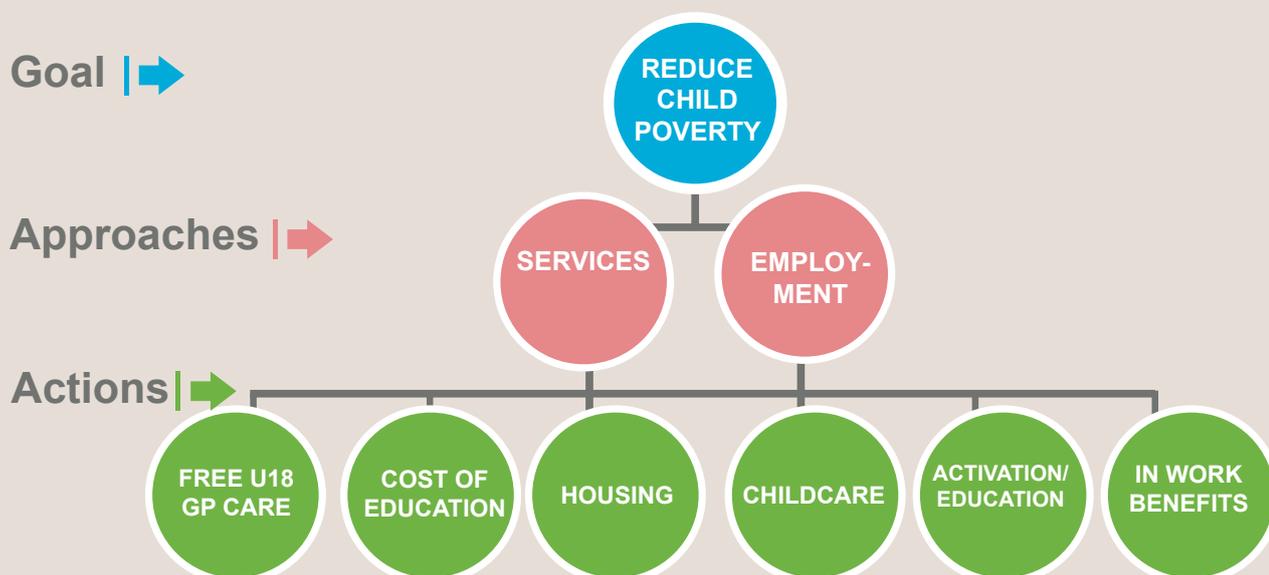
This document seeks to highlight a range of actions that could have a significant, lasting and in some cases immediate impact on reducing levels of child poverty in Ireland. It is an attempt to build linkages between work which is ongoing and planned across a number of departments (outlined in the accompanying paper, A Whole of Government Approach to Tackling Child Poverty, produced under the BOBF framework), that has the potential to generate positive outcomes in terms of reducing levels of child poverty.

This document identifies two linked but distinct approaches:

1. Improving the provision of services with the aim of reducing the cost of living for families with children; and
2. Actions that improve employment prospects for parents.

The following section details these two approaches using recommendations from the European Commission's Investing in Children paper. It attempts to draw out a series of concrete and specific actions across a range of Departments which can improve child poverty outcomes. The actions outlined below do not by any means provide an exhaustive list.

The Role of Employment and Quality Services



A. Service Provision

1) Universal GP care for U6s and the future extension to U12s and U18s

Improve the responsiveness of health systems to address the needs of disadvantaged children — Ensure that all children can make full use of their universal right to health care, including through disease prevention and health promotion as well as access to quality health services.

Free GP care for all children under six years of age commenced on 5 August 2015, currently benefitting approximately 365,900 children. This represents roughly 85% of the under 6 population.

The Programme for Partnership Government commits to extend in phases, and subject to negotiation with GPs, free GP care to all children under 18 years of age. The extension of GP care without fees to all children aged 6-11 years is a priority, however the timetable for implementation will be subject to the outcome of ongoing discussions with GP representatives on this and other contractual matters.

2) Reducing the Cost of Education:

Provide access to high-quality, inclusive early childhood education and care; ensure its affordability and adapt provision to the needs of families.

Support parents in their role as the main educators of their own children during the early years and encourage Early Childhood Education and Care services to work closely with parents and community actors involved in the child's upbringing (such as health and parenting support services).

Reinforcing the learning of literacy and numeracy skills to support engagement with the curriculum as a whole and ensuring early detection of education issues, especially those of low achievers and children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Address barriers which stop or seriously hinder children from attending or completing school (such as additional financial fees in compulsory education).

- Strengthen the focus on reducing school costs for parents by restoring capitation funding over a three year period, as resources permit.
- Place a requirement within a Parents and Learners Charter for schools to take account of the views of their parental communities when making decisions on matters that have a financial impact for parents.
- Issue a new circular to school authorities and ETBs regarding school uniforms policy and other costs.

- Improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the School Meals Programme with a particular focus on breakfast clubs.
- Build on the experience of the ABC programmes across a range of areas and particularly in relation to engaging successfully with parents from disadvantaged backgrounds.

3) Housing

Provide children with a safe, adequate housing and living environment

Make it possible for families with children to live in affordable, quality housing (including social housing).

It is widely acknowledged that access to appropriate accommodation can be an important factor in addressing household poverty; appropriate housing is the bedrock of communities, providing a place of shelter from where people can develop and make the most of life's opportunities, including employment and education.

Addressing issues around housing and homelessness is a key priority for Government and it is recognised that the long-term solution to the current homeless issue is to increase the supply of homes. Government's commitment in this regard is expressed in the multi-stranded, action-oriented Rebuilding Ireland: Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness. This plan provides outlines Government's approach to achieving the key housing objectives and to tackle homelessness in a comprehensive manner.

Rebuilding Ireland is designed to accelerate all types of housing supply – social, private and rental. During the lifetime of the Plan some 47,000 new social houses will be provided, supported by Exchequer investment of over €5 billion, and housing output generally will be progressively increased towards the target of producing 25,000 houses per year through all channels.

In this regard the recent announcement of the completion of the nationwide rollout of the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) scheme with its introduction to the administrative areas of Dublin City Council, Fingal County Council and Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council, is hugely important, and delivers on another key action under Rebuilding Ireland: An Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness.

There are currently more than 18,000 households receiving HAP support; over a third of these households have transferred from the Rent Supplement scheme. Over 10,000 landlords are taking part in the scheme with approximately 300 households joining the scheme every week. The continued rollout of HAP can play an important role in removing a significant barrier to employment, by allowing recipients to remain in the scheme if they gain full-time employment.

4) Affordable Childcare Scheme

Intensify efforts to ensure that all families, including those in vulnerable situations and living in disadvantaged areas, have effective access to affordable, quality early childhood education and care.

Adapt the design and eligibility criteria of childcare services to increasingly diverse working patterns, whilst keeping a strong focus on the child's best interests.

- Budget 2016 resourced a dedicated Project Team to develop a Single Affordable Childcare Programme to provide working families with good quality childcare at a cost they can afford.
- The Affordable Childcare Programme will provide a new simplified subsidy programme, provided through both community/not-for-profit and private childcare providers.
- Subsidies will be available for children aged from 6 months up to 15 years and will meet families' full-time and part-time childcare needs, including outside of school hours and during school holiday time. The highest levels of subsidy will be provided to those on low incomes, approx. €8,000 a year based on the maximum of 40-hours childcare a week.
- There will also be a universal element to the programme which will provide a lower level of subsidy for families who have incomes which are over the income threshold.

B. Increasing Participation in Quality, Sustainable Employment

1) Activation

Provide enhanced support to re/integrate parents into the labour market through training measures and job search support, focusing specifically on those at particular risk.

Continued implementation of Pathways to Work. This Strategy has a number of strands and one is to prioritise the reduction of long-term unemployment. DSP actions in this area include:

- A target to help a further 20,000 people move from long-term unemployment into work has been set for 2017.
- A further 60,000 people will be provided with access to the JobPath service.
- A new action plan for Jobless families will be published to extend the employment services of the State to all adults in families experiencing unemployment.

National Skills Strategy 2025 - As part of the National Skills Strategy the Department of Education and Skills has established a new national and regional skills architecture, which includes the National Skills Council and the Regional Skills Fora. This new architecture provides a new and

innovative opportunity to build bridges between the education and training system and enterprise that identifies the skills needs of employers and prioritises responses to these skills needs within the education and training system.

The National Skills Council was launched in April 2017. It will oversee research and provide advice on the prioritisation of identified skills needs and how to secure the delivery of identified needs. Information is provided to the Council from a range of sources, including the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs, the Skills and Labour Market Research Unit in SOLAS and the Regional Skills Fora. The Regional Skills Fora have been established in the context of the strong focus on the skills agenda as part of Government policy to support economic recovery and development both nationally and regionally.

Under Springboard+ 2017, the eligibility criteria has been expanded to include homemakers and those in employment or self-employment who wish to upskill, reskill or cross skill in the Biopharm/ Med Tech sector and those in employment, or self-employment in the ICT sector who wish to upskill from a level 7 to a level 8 qualification.

2) In-work Benefits

Identify and tackle any specific disincentives parents face when entering, remaining or progressing in the labour market, including those related to the design and interaction of tax and benefits systems.

- Analysis will be undertaken of the effectiveness of the existing system of in-work income supports, including Family Income Supplement, the Back to Work Family Dividend, and supports under a range of other schemes.
- Proposals will also be considered arising out of the work underway to develop an approach to a working family payment which seeks to minimise any disincentives in the current system of supports.
- There is some evidence that DSP customers may not be availing of all of the services and supports that are available to them in this regard. A promotion and awareness campaign may help to tackle this problem.
- Making Work Pay cannot just be about welfare payments and top-ups. It also has to tackle low pay. The Programme for Government also commits to supporting an increase in the minimum wage.
- The Government will also strengthen the role of the Low Pay Commission to examine the gender pay gap and strengthen regulations on precarious work.

Next Steps

Achieving anti-poverty outcomes from investment in quality public services will not yield benefits immediately. However over a sustained period such an approach offers the strongest possibility to address deficits and provide the opportunities necessary for all children to develop and to participate as equals in society. Future investments need to focus on outcomes which impact positively on child poverty.

Clearly then, both the potential for and the necessity to adopt a whole of government approach can provide opportunities and challenges for all departments to find ways to embed a singularly important issue like child poverty into their strategic focus. Both at national and local level, government departments and agencies have specific responsibilities to deliver on key targets and effective monitoring and implementation is essential to reaching these targets. The BOBF Framework aims to achieve a more comprehensive and efficient monitoring process and to ensure that reporting is streamlined. The Framework has established structures to support implementation ensure accountability and enable stakeholder engagement.

The Framework provides an opportunity, through the Sponsors Group and overseen by the BOBF Policy Consortium to construct a solid platform upon which to build an effective and sustainable whole of government approach to tackling child poverty.