

# Labour's Manifesto for Children



**Labour**

**One Ireland**  
jobs, reform, fairness

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ireland has the highest proportion of children in the EU, with almost one-quarter of our population below the age of 18. Yet, for too long, Ireland has fallen short of the aspiration that an independent Ireland would be one that treats all the children of the nation equally. Even during the boom years, thousands of Irish children left school unable to read and write; almost 200 vulnerable children died during the past decade whilst in state care; and Ireland continued to have one of the highest levels of child poverty in Europe.

Labour believes that children should have the best possible start in a world that has become vastly more uncertain and precarious. They deserve the joy and fulfilment that goes with a happy and healthy childhood.

A real commitment to the welfare of children today will have a lasting effect on their future lives as adults. In many crucial respects, the welfare of tomorrow's citizens – right up to old age – depends on the quality of their childhood and teenage years. Investment in children is an investment in all our futures. For Labour, the protection of families, children and childhood will continue to be a priority, even in these difficult times.

### Child Benefit

Labour believes that our children should not be made to pay for the current economic crisis. **Labour will not cut child benefit**, because we acknowledge that:

- Some extremely harsh budgets in recent years have meant that family incomes have already taken a substantial hit.
- Despite our current economic problems, Ireland remains a very expensive place to raise a child, and child benefit is the only recognition by the State of this high cost.
- Cutting child benefit will create poverty traps, work disincentives, and will substantially increase the already high number of children in poverty.

Instead, Labour will ensure that we chart a way out of this recession that is **equitable** and that does not deprive struggling families of the means to weather this storm.

### Protecting Children

- Ensure that a children's rights referendum is urgently progressed.
- Introduce legislation to provide for the exchange of 'soft information' in suspected child abuse cases.
- Significantly raise the level of proof required from an accused person claiming 'mistake as to age' in a prosecution for sexual offences against a minor.
- Expedite the implementation of the actions and policies set out in the Ryan Report Implementation Plan, in order to improve how child abuse allegations are dealt with in Ireland.
- Ensure that the 270 additional social workers promised by the Government are brought into the system, and that emergency care is consistently available outside of standard working hours.

### **Childcare and Pre-School Education**

- Ensure that all children have the opportunity to avail of the pre-school year.
- Ensure implementation of Siolta standards and the sufficient availability of training options for staff, with a view to improving the quality of early childhood education and early childhood care.
- When resources permit, develop a comprehensive, national pre-school service focused on early childhood development.

### **Primary and Second-Level Education**

- Reform the Junior and Senior cycle, in order to prepare our children for the 21st century labour market, where problem-solving, flexibility, innovation and creativity are key, beginning with the reform of maths and science teaching at second level, including making science a compulsory Junior Cert subject by 2014.
- Reverse the cut to the number of psychologists in the National Educational Psychological Service in Budget 2011, at a cost of €3 million.
- Support schools, parents and children with special educational needs by ensuring that the necessary supports follow a child from primary to second level.

### **Literacy**

- Develop a national literacy strategy, with school-level targets, which will involve refocusing some existing spending on literacy goals.
- Require every school to have a literacy action plan, with demonstrable outcomes. DEIS primary schools will be mandated to teach literacy for up to 120 minutes per day; non-DEIS schools for 90 minutes per day.

### **Breaking the Cycle of Child Poverty**

- Adopt a radical new area-based approach to tackling child poverty, based on the *youngballymun* project in Dublin, which will be rolled-out to up to ten of Ireland's most disadvantaged communities.

### **Children's Health and Well-Being**

- Introduce Universal Health Insurance, beginning with insurance for patients visiting their family doctor. This will mean that, by 2014, no family will pay upfront GP fees when their child is sick.
- Tackle childhood obesity through a National Nutrition Policy, which brings together government departments, agencies and educators in a major and sustained educational campaign targeted at children and young people, and which addresses advertising standards and the nutritional content of food sold in retail outlets.

### **Supporting Modern Irish Families**

- Introduce a legal right to a career break, subject to reasonable conditions, which would allow parents to take time out of the workplace, without risking future benefits or job security.
- Introduce a paternity leave model, where parents can share paid leave when a new baby is born, as resources allow.
- Strengthen the rights of non-marital families by ensuring the passing of the Guardianship of Children Bill (2010).



## LABOUR'S PLAN FOR CHILDREN

*'There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children'*

Nelson Mandela

What does Ireland's treatment of its children reveal about our society? Every year thousands of Irish children leave school unable to read and write. Almost 200 vulnerable children have died during the past decade whilst in state care. An entire generation of Irish children is growing up in suburbs where safe places to play, childcare facilities, schools and even pathways are either grossly inadequate or sadly lacking, because building houses was deemed to be more important than those who would live in them. Even during the boom years, Ireland had one of the highest rates of child poverty in the EU.

Our children are our greatest asset. As citizens of our state, it is our duty to care for them, protect them and nurture them. Investment in children is a win-win bet on our own future. We must ensure that we work for a future where young children will have the very best childhood possible and the opportunity to grow and achieve the best possible future for themselves. Even in tough economic times, it is important – indeed perhaps more important – to recognise that quality care and education for our children is both a long-term investment for our society and key to building a knowledge-based economy.

The Irish people are now faced with a choice - a choice about fairness; a choice about the value we place on children, and the support we give to parents; and a choice about how we share the burden of this crisis. Labour does not believe that that burden should be placed on the shoulders of children, nor should parents be forced to sacrifice the well-being of their families, in order to make ends meet. In hard economic times it becomes even more important to protect our smallest citizens.

The Labour Party believes that it is time to put aside the 'me first' philosophy of Fianna Fáil, and to work together to build an Ireland that is a safer place for our children. Labour believes that Ireland should be the best place in the world to grow up. A Labour government would put children, and the needs of the 21st century family, at the heart of our agenda. What we have set out in this document is ambitious, but achievable. We believe that our children deserve nothing less.

### Child Benefit

Child benefit serves a critical purpose. For the overwhelming majority of parents, it is money that they count on to pay for childcare, for trips to the doctor, for food and clothing for their children or to make it worthwhile to take up paid work. For tens of thousands of families in this recession, it is a crucial source of household income that helps keep them afloat.

Labour believes that our children should not be made to pay for the current economic crisis. Family incomes have already fallen significantly over the past few years. Families throughout the country have been hit with a reduction in mortgage interest relief; the abolition of child benefit for eighteen year-olds and the Early Childcare Supplement; a significant increase in school transport costs; as well as the income levies. For many families, including those where one or both parents are amongst the hundreds of thousands of people who have lost their job, child benefit is often the lifeline which helps keep food on the table and the house warm. For young parents, with a large mortgage and high childcare costs, any further cut in child benefit would be a genuine crisis.

In government, **Labour will not cut child benefit**, because we acknowledge that:

- Family incomes have already taken a substantial hit in the last few, essentially 'anti-child' budgets.
- Despite our current economic problems, Ireland remains a very expensive place to raise a child, and child benefit is the only recognition by the State of this high cost.
- Cutting child benefit will create poverty traps, work disincentives, and will substantially increase the already high number of children in poverty.

Labour will ensure that we chart a way out of this recession that is equitable; that does not deprive struggling families of the means to weather this storm; and that distributes the burden of our recovery, according to the ability to bear it. This means avoiding targeting the most vulnerable in our society, namely our children.

### Protecting Children

The protection of children will be a matter of priority for Labour in government.

The delay in proceeding with the referendum on children's rights is totally unacceptable. Labour in government will ensure that a children's rights referendum is urgently progressed.

Labour believes that Ireland's child protection code and system should be more robust. The Labour Party is committed to putting in place the strongest, child-centred legal framework to protect children from sexual, physical, and mental abuse. Labour's child-centred legislative programme includes:

- Provision for the exchange of 'soft information' in cases where abuse of children is suspected;
- Significantly raising the level of proof required from an accused person claiming 'mistake as to age' in a prosecution for sexual offences against a minor;
- Post-conviction restrictions on the use of the Internet by those convicted of child sex offences.

Recent years have exposed many institutional failings in caring adequately for the children of the nation. Both the Ryan and Murphy reports identified significant inadequacies in how child abuse allegations are dealt with in Ireland. The Ryan Report Implementation Plan set out 99 actions and policy objectives, which, if delivered, will radically change the child protection service. Labour in government will expedite the implementation programme.

Labour will also update the Children First guidelines with three objectives in mind:

- To restore the importance of family support, prevention and early intervention as key objectives of child protection;
- To clarify the 'threshold of concern' requiring a report to be made to the HSE;
- To ensure compliance with the HIQA Guidance report of 2010, which deals with crisis intervention for particularly vulnerable children.

A critical issue which afflicts our childcare system is the fact that at any one time there are hundreds of children who are in the care of the HSE, but who have not been allocated a social worker. Labour will ensure that the full complement of the 270 new social workers, which have been promised by the Government, are brought into the system, and that emergency care is consistently available outside of standard working hours. The particular problems faced by separated children – that is, children who are outside their country of origin – will be taken into account.

### Childcare and Pre-School Education

Investment in children, particularly in their early years, consistently demonstrates a high return to the individual, to society, and to the economy. Indeed, investment in high quality pre-school pays for itself seven times over, in the form of reduced spending on education, social welfare and prisons and higher income tax receipts. Investment in education from a child's earliest years unlocks their potential, and with it their ability to contribute fully to our society.

Despite a decade of unprecedented economic growth, there are still huge gaps in investment and services for children in Ireland. In 2008 UNICEF ranked Ireland in last position out of 25 OECD countries as regards meeting 10 'minimum standards' for early childhood education and care. What is more, Ireland is one of the most expensive countries in the EU as regards care and education services for children up to 3 years old.

Labour has long believed that every child should be guaranteed a high-quality pre-school place with:

- Clear curriculum requirements;
- Appropriate staffing by early childhood education professionals, and;
- Conducted in an appropriate setting.

In fact, the Labour Party was the first party to propose a free, universal year of pre-school for all 3-4 year olds as a vital first step in a child's education, advocating the idea as early as 2004.

This Free Pre-School Year was eventually introduced by the Government in January 2010 and already has a participation rate of 94%. However, Labour wants to raise this participation rate even further. Labour is committed to ensuring that **all** children have the opportunity to avail of this pre-school year, wherever their location, and will review the age structure of the scheme to ensure that any rigidities do not work to the disadvantage of families. When resources permit, Labour will build on the 2010 Early Childhood Education and Care scheme to develop a comprehensive, national

pre-school service that is focused on early childhood development. In the meantime, we will focus on improving the quality of early childhood education and early childhood care through the implementation of Siolta standards and by ensuring the sufficient availability of training options for staff.

### **Primary and Second-Level Education**

Labour is committed to protecting children's education, because we believe they deserve the best start that their country can give them. Labour will put improving educational outcomes at the heart of our education reforms.

We will build on existing Vocational Educational Committees, and progressively transform them into Local Education Boards, which will carry out many of the administrative duties currently carried out by principals, such as maintenance, school building projects and human resources. School principals will be given greater autonomy to manage their school's resources and will draw up five year development plans for their schools and staff.

Labour has committed to safe and warm schools for our children. We will prioritise school building projects in our revised national development plan. In cases where schools spend hundreds of thousands of euro renting prefabs, Labour will enable schools to build permanent school accommodation instead. New schools will be built to grow with their communities, and to provide for a more interactive, child-friendly model of education. Labour will develop existing standardised designs for new schools, which will be the blueprint for future greenfield developments.

Labour in government will progressively implement the reform of the Junior and Senior cycle, as envisioned by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. The objective of these reforms is to help prepare our children for the 21st century labour market, in which they will be expected to compete and where problem-solving, flexibility, innovation and creativity are key. Labour will prioritise the reform of maths and science teaching at second level, including making science a compulsory Junior Cert subject by 2014, and progressively upgrade the information communications technology (ICT) infrastructure of schools.

Labour is committed to reversing the cut to the number of psychologists in the National Educational Psychological Service in Budget 2011, at a cost of €3 million. Labour will support schools, parents and children with special educational needs by ensuring that the necessary supports follow a child from primary to second level, and achieving greater integration of special needs-related services. Labour will also look at innovative ways in which teenagers at risk of leaving the school system can stay connected, for example through the use of ICT-based distance learning and projects such as iScoil.

### **Literacy**

Literacy is the key that unlocks a child's education. It is the most basic, and the most important, life skill that our schools teach. Yet, one in ten Irish children - almost 50,000 primary school pupils - has serious difficulty with reading and writing. This figure rises to as many as one in three children in some disadvantaged schools. At second level, 17% of fifteen year-olds – and as many as one in four teenage boys –

do not have the literacy skills necessary to function in today's knowledge-intensive society.

Inadequate literacy is a key driver of early school leaving. It has a permanent scarring effect on life prospects. Inadequate literacy across a population can also act as a potential drag on economic growth.

The good news is that improving literacy does not require new technology, new infrastructure, or very large sums of money. We have the ingredients for success already: a teacher in every classroom; and the means to develop literacy-rich communities through local authorities and existing community initiatives.

Labour in government will make literacy a national cause, with a medium-term goal of ensuring that no child leaves an Irish school unable to read and write. Labour's approach is three-fold: putting literacy policy at the heart of our agenda in government; embedding literacy in our communities; and focusing on the teaching of literacy in our classrooms.

Labour will develop a national literacy strategy, with school-level targets, which will involve refocusing some existing spending on literacy goals. Every school will be required to have a literacy action plan, with demonstrable outcomes. Responsibility for these outcomes will be vested in school principals. DEIS primary schools will be mandated to teach literacy for up to 120 minutes per day; non-DEIS schools for 90 minutes per day. DEIS schools will have dedicated literacy mentors to support ongoing professional development and improved teaching practice.

Labour will also work with local authorities to develop Labour's Right to Read campaign and community supports for literacy, such as longer opening hours for libraries, homework clubs and summer camps which improve literacy through sport and games.

### **Breaking the Cycle of Child Poverty**

Child poverty in Ireland is unacceptably high. Recent levels of high unemployment in our society have meant that increasing numbers of children are being forced into poverty, which will affect their life chances long after the economy has recovered. In 2009, 18.6% of children under 18 were considered to be at risk of poverty. Moreover, children under 18 had a higher risk of being poor than the population as a whole (18.6% compared to 14.1%). However, even during the boom years, Ireland had one of the highest rates of child poverty in the EU.

The persistence of child poverty even during a time of unprecedented public spending demonstrates that, where child poverty is most entrenched, the cycle cannot be broken simply by throwing money at the problem. We also have to look at the other aspects of a child's life that can turn child poverty into lifelong poverty – namely, early developmental skills, literacy, health, the quality of their home environment, the quality of their community.

Labour will adopt a radical new area-based approach to tackling child poverty, based on the *youngballymun* project in Dublin, which involves all of the existing state services, such as public health nurses, schools, childcare professionals, and social



workers coordinating their efforts, with expert Irish and international support, to tackle every aspect of child poverty within Ireland's most disadvantaged communities.

Labour will seek philanthropic partners to co-fund and manage the rollout of this model to up to ten of Ireland's most disadvantaged communities, at a cost of up to €15 million.

### **Children's Health and Well-Being**

Data from April 2010 indicated that 2,591 children were on hospital waiting lists, awaiting treatment. Unlike most other EU nations, Ireland does not have free medical care for children. The Labour Party has been proposing Universal Health Insurance for children since 2002. Labour in government will introduce Universal Health Insurance as a way of delivering more effective and affordable care for every patient, including our children.

From our first day in office, Labour will begin the phased introduction of a Universal Health Insurance system, starting with GP care. Under Labour's plan, GP fees will be covered by universal primary care insurance, funded by existing Exchequer monies and savings in the health budget. This universal primary care insurance will be extended to the portion of the population who do not have a medical card, which includes many Irish children, on a phased basis. This means that, by 2014, every child registered with a GP will be insured for primary care and patients will no longer pay upfront fees when they visit their GP.

Labour will prioritise investment in the National Children's Hospital, and supports the policy objective of relocating maternity hospitals to acute hospital campuses in Limerick and Dublin.

Recent years have seen obesity become the most common illness amongst Irish children and young people. According to the WHO European Childhood Obesity Surveillance Initiative conducted by National Nutrition Surveillance Centre, in 2008, almost one-quarter of our 7-year-olds were either overweight or obese. Labour will take action to tackle the public health time bomb of childhood obesity. In government, we will publish a National Nutrition Policy, and will bring together government departments, agencies and educators in a major and sustained campaign to address this fundamental aspect of childhood health and well-being. The National Nutrition Policy will address advertising standards and the nutritional content of food sold in retail outlets. Most importantly of all, the Policy will include a strong educational campaign targeted at children and young people.

The huge increase in the number of outlets supplying alcohol is of grave concern. The more recent restrictions on opening hours have had little discernible impact on teenage drinking. Labour will take action to further restrict sales to under-age persons, notably in off-licences. We will also work at EU level to develop a European-wide agreement to phase out, or substantially reduce, alcohol-related sponsorship of sporting events.

### **Supporting Modern Irish Families**

Irish family life has changed enormously over the past two decades. Case in point is the fact that, according to our most recent census figures (Census of the Population 2006) approximately one in 6 children under 18 years of age in Ireland (or 17.8%) live in a lone-parent household. However, despite these huge changes in Irish family life, changes in employment and legal rights have not kept pace

Labour favours moving to a paternity leave model, where parents can share paid leave when a new baby is born, as resources allow. More immediately, Labour will introduce a legal right to a career break, subject to reasonable conditions, which would allow parents to take time out of the workplace without risking future benefits or job security. This would have the added benefit of creating mobility in the labour force. We will also explore the option of introducing a right to part-time work, subject also to reasonable conditions.

Labour will legislate to guarantee that the State respects family life, whether based on marriage or not, by passing our Guardianship of Children Bill (2010).