

Programme for Government Recommendations

May 2020

Introduction

The Covid19 crisis has had widespread implications for children and families in Ireland. Children are bearing an enormous burden placed on them by this pandemic. Vulnerable and at risk children, such as those Barnardos works with, have been particularly hard hit. These are the children who already experienced educational disadvantage prior to school closures, or who are dependent on school meals, or whose home is not a safe place, or who have no home at all. Barnardos has been at the forefront of national supports and services to at risk children and their families during the pandemic. In this context this document sets out Barnardos' priority recommendations for the next Government.

Covid19 and Children

While not a high-risk group in relation to Covid19, from a physical health perspective, the pandemic has forced emotional, social and/or financial hardship on children everywhere.¹ School closures, travel restrictions and being prevented from seeing family and friends have hit many children hard. Recent research carried out by Barnardos found that 84% of children miss their friends, 68% miss school, 53% are having difficulty with bedtime routine and 38% are experiencing more tantrums and outbursts.²

The effects are far more severe for vulnerable children, for example our research found lone parents reported more negative impact than two parent households. There is mounting evidence children who were already at risk of harm, those exposed to trauma or experiencing Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), are suffering disproportionately from the shutdown of schools and social supports. A large proportion of child welfare and protection referrals to Tusla come from schools and early years services. In April it was reported Tusla referrals had fallen by at least a third.³ Children are still experiencing neglect, abuse and mental health issues. Likewise, poor parental mental health, alcohol and substance misuse and domestic violence have not gone away; they are now behind closed doors. In many cases these issues have been compounded by the restrictions placed on movement and the break in accessing support structures and relationships. Barnardos expects an increase in child welfare and protection concerns post- Covid19.

¹ OECD. (2020). *Combating COVID-19's effect on children*. Paris: OECD.

² Barnardos. (2020). *Impact on family life during Covid19 pandemic*. Available at <https://www.barnardos.ie/policy/the-issues/covid19-impact-survey>

³ The Irish Examiner (2020) 'Fears for vulnerable children as Tusla referrals drop by third', *The Irish Examiner*, 27 April [Online]. Available at <https://www.irishexaminer.com/breakingnews/ireland/fears-for-vulnerable-children-as-tusla-referrals-drop-by-third-996344.html> [Accessed 19 May].

These at risk children and their parents are absent from the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business and rarely mentioned in discussions on supports necessary in a post-Covid Ireland.⁴ These families are still living with cuts to their services as a result of the last recession. With a deep recession looming, now is the time to bolster the services, supports and protections available to these at risk children and families.⁵

Barnardos' response to Covid19

Barnardos is well placed to support families through crisis. We have been providing practical services and emotional support to children and parents for almost 60 years in Ireland. We enable children and families to build their resilience and meet their behavioural, emotional, educational, physical and social needs. Our approach is to develop and deliver a suite of trauma informed programmes, driven by a culture of hope and possibility. In 2019, Barnardos worked with over 21,000 children and their families. Demand for our services is increasing, with the number of children on our waiting list exceeding previous years every month so far in 2020.

Barnardos has adapted swiftly to the outbreak of Covid19. Ensuring the children we work with are safe and their families continue to be supported is our top priority; however, we have looked beyond our core cohort of families in our response to this crisis. We have also been able to develop new services in response to the crisis. Our parent helpline is open to the public to support parents who are struggling to manage and we have developed a suite of online resources for parents and children to help them cope emotionally and physically with the strain they are under.

We have been able to do all this firstly, because innovation is at the core of our new strategy- it's what we do and do well. Secondly, our focus and expertise as an organisation is on recognising and responding to childhood trauma and toxic stress which puts us in a unique position to respond to this crisis. Exposure to trauma and experience of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) (such as inappropriate or abusive caregiving, chaotic environments, unpredictable stress, persistent fear or physical threat) is proven to have a negative and defining impact on the developing brain of children. This can damage a child's emotional, social and cognitive development and follow them into adulthood. We must not let the generation of children growing up through the pandemic and its aftermath to become collateral damage.

Barnardos' Recommendations

1. Support children and their families during recession and recovery

As the country lifts the restrictions imposed because of Covid19 it is apparent life will be dramatically changed for the foreseeable future. Reducing the risk of infection and combatting recession will undoubtedly be priorities for the next Government. Children bore the brunt during the last recession, when vital support services were cut and the percent of

⁴ Government of Ireland. (2020). *Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business*. Dublin: Government of Ireland.

⁵ ESRI. (2020). *Quarterly Economic Commentary, Summer 2020*. ESRI: Dublin

children living in poverty doubled, and many are still living with the consequences.⁶ Children must not bear the brunt of this crisis. Instead, the incoming Government should invest in services for children and maximise existing resources by incorporating innovative responses.

Recommendation: Recognise the additional trauma experienced by vulnerable children and families during the last recession and current crisis by investing in community based prevention and early intervention and family support services to combat the effects of issues such as domestic violence, poor mental health, homelessness, neglect and abuse on children. Develop a funding model that adequately and equitably funds organisations delivering these services on behalf of the state.

Recommendation: Reduce unsustainable waiting lists by triaging lower risk children to receive the appropriate support services within the community. By developing a referral pathway for children requiring additional support due to developmental delay, behavioural, social and emotional needs or disability to support them being triaged in the community the Government could free up much needed health resources in areas such as speech and language and mental health. This approach should be incorporated into a refreshed version of A Vision for Change.

Recommendation: Ensure intensive, targeted Family Support services are available in communities where families are coping with complex and traumatic life experiences such as parental separation, addiction, domestic abuse and homelessness which will have been exacerbated by Covid19.

Recommendation: Make provision for the delivery of a whole family approach to mental health and addiction services.

Recommendation: Benchmark social welfare payment rates against the cost of a Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) ensuring a socially acceptable minimum standard of living for all.

2. Strengthen Child Protection Infrastructure

Children need protection in times of crisis more than ever. Too often in our past we have seen how systems have failed children. It is imperative that as the next Government steers us through the pandemic, certain recession and into recovery, it strengthens the infrastructure which protects children and gives them a voice.

Recommendation: Retain the Department of Children and Youth Affairs to ensure the needs and best interests of children, particularly at risk children, shape the policies which affect their lives.

Recommendation: Reform the family law system, including completion of the specialist family law courts at Hammond Lane, and establish a Court Welfare Service. A high quality Court Welfare Service should include a national system of Child Contact Centres, utilising existing services where possible and providing for new services and infrastructure where necessary; a system for the statutory assessment and management of child maintenance payments; the management and resourcing of necessary court assessments in relation to children and

⁶ Central Statistics Office. (2018). *Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC)*. Dublin: Central Statistics Office

parents; a range of ancillary family support services including parenting courses, counselling, mediation, and mentoring; and expert training for all relevant staff and stakeholders.

Recommendation: Enact legislation to establish a Digital Safety Commissioner to protect children online.

Recommendation: Guarantee all children and families seeking international protection in Ireland receive a family support service for the duration of their application process and beyond where necessary.

3. Realise Educational Equality

Children's access to education has been severely curtailed due to the pandemic. The impact of this is worse on those children who were already experiencing educational inequality before the outbreak of Covid19. Research shows children of better-off parents spend more time on at home learning, have access to more resources and are more likely to use technology for home-schooling.⁷ Every child should have equitable access to education and the quality of access should not be dependent on a parent's ability to pay. Furthermore, as children return to school some bring with them the trauma of their experience; children who have been locked at home with abuse or neglect, children who have been locked in a room due to homelessness or Direct Provision or children who were unable to access the mental health or developmental services they required. In the interests of these children, teachers must not be expected to cope with these issues without support.

Recommendation: Formally link schools with services providing family support services and provide principals and teachers access to trauma informed CPD, wellbeing training and other resources to enable them to cope with children returning to school after restrictions, the on-going impact of the pandemic on children's mental health and wellbeing and to manage an increase in child protection and welfare issues arising.

Recommendation: Implement free primary education for all children by investing in free school books for all primary school children in year one and rolling out free classroom resources, increased school capitation to reduce the need for voluntary contributions and make the Transport to School Scheme free in subsequent years.

Recommendation: Develop a roadmap for the introduction of free second level education for all young people during the lifetime of the next government.

Conclusion

Children have suffered during the pandemic restrictions in order to keep adults safe. They must not now be sacrificed for the sake of the economy during recession. Some children, those who were already coping with the legacy of cuts to services due to austerity, will experience more stress and trauma than others. Ireland owes a debt to these children which the next Government must repay by prioritising service provision and investment in solutions which offer long-term benefits for children and families.

⁷ Andrew, A. Et Al. (2020) *Learning during the lockdown: real-time data on children's experiences during home learning*. Institute for Fiscal Studies. Available at <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/14848> [Accessed 22 May]