



## Children's Budget 2023

August 2022



## About Barnardos

Barnardos provides frontline services to children and their families. We work with children and families who have been affected by traumatic life situations such as poverty, abuse, parental mental health challenges, neglect, separation, bereavement and parental addiction. We offer a range of early intervention and targeted services in our 45 service locations, in family homes, schools, early learning and care settings and communities.

Our work combats social, educational and economic disadvantage, minimising the negative impact on children's lives through a range of services and programmes. Barnardos services are needs led, outcomes focused and based in evidence and research. 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 2021, Barnardos worked with almost 17,000 children and their families.

## Introduction

Over the last 12 months, children and their families faced great uncertainty and disruption to their lives, first through pandemic restrictions and more recently with unprecedented cost of living increases. For some, this has compounded existing disadvantage. For others, it has presented children and parents with and forced them to confront certain adversities and challenges for the first time.

Cost of living increases risks pulling more and more children into poverty and deprivation, and decreasing standards of living. The longer children live in poverty and deprivation the greater an impact it will have on their health, wellbeing, and future development. Growing up in poverty can negatively affect the entire life course of a child, limiting opportunities and making it more difficult for them to realise their full emotional, educational, and social potential.

Budget 2023 must prioritise those most disadvantaged by recent price increases, targeting support measures at those most vulnerable. The Government must provide an appropriate safety net to ensure that all children at the very least have access to daily essentials. Additionally the government needs to make sure that families, once they have secured sufficient finances, have the support they need to address issues in their lives.

## Recommendations

- 1. Recommendation:** Introduce an additional €5 million fund to the additional needs payment to allow low-income families access to immediate, same day funds when they cannot meet essential costs, in particular food and energy costs.
- 2. Recommendation:** The government must increase general welfare rates by €20 and increase the Qualified Child Increase Payment by €12 for over 12s and €7 for under 12s. Over the longer term the government should benchmark social welfare payments in line with minimum essential standard of living measurements.
- 3. Recommendation:** Recently introduced extensions to fuel allowance from 28 to 32 weeks should be continued next year and additional families should be able to benefit from it, in particular parents on working family payment.
- 4. Recommendation:** The Government should: provide Tusla with a further €6 million ring fenced for community and voluntary sector organisations; restore the annual cost of living increase; and begin the expansion of family support services outlined in the Programme for Government in 2021
- 5. Recommendation:** Commit to retaining the recently announced increases set out in Back to School Allowance and expand the pilot free school book scheme nationally by investing a further €20m in this initiative. Provide schools with sufficient funding to cover their costs so that they no longer have to rely on the voluntary contributions of parents.
- 6. Recommendation:** Further expand the hot school meals programme to allow all schools interested to partake in the scheme so long as they have the local infrastructure to do so.
- 7. Recommendation:** Invest €250,000 to upscale Roots of Empathy programme to further targeted locations across the country to help build empathy and reduce levels of bullying within schools.
- 8. Recommendation:** Further funding must be allocated to providing support for children experiencing domestic violence and abuse in their homes.
- 9. Recommendation:** For children on waiting lists a triage system should be adopted. Additional support and funding should be made available for children not reaching thresholds who might benefit from other support and services in the community.
- 10. Recommendation:** Set out details of the plan committed to in budget 2022 to provide low-income families with a specific funding stream to access affordable childcare. Extend AIM to include children under three years accessing ELC and for children accessing SAC.

## Cost of living

Over the past six months, Barnardos staff have highlighted there has been a substantial increase in demand for support around cost of living issues. Staff have stated that the majority of families they are working with are substantially struggling with cost of living problems<sup>1</sup>.

Families we support who were facing financial difficulties in the past are reporting they are struggling considerably more. In addition, many families who have managed well in the past, albeit with tight budgets, are now beginning to look for help with bills and payments, admitting that they are finding things more and more difficult.

We commissioned Amarach Research to carry out a nationally representative survey of parents/guardians with children aged 17 or younger living with them. It found that half of parents have cut back on social activities for their children, over one quarter (28%) have cut back on heat, and almost one in four (23%) have cut back on electricity. Over one third stated they have had to cut back on clothes and alarmingly, one in six have cut back on medical appointments/medicines.

Have you and your children cut back on or gone without any of the following over the past 6 months?	<b>N= 329</b>
Activities/entertainment for your children	50%
Heat	28%
Electricity	23%
Food	16%
Clothing	34%
Rent	2%
Transport	10%
School supplies	8%
Medical appointments/medicines	17%
Other (please specify)	2%
No/none of the above	37%

Research we conducted earlier this year regarding food poverty<sup>2</sup> found 10% of parents were skipping meals weekly and a further 10% reduced their portion size so that their children would have enough to eat.

Across our services, more families on the cusp of poverty are being pulled into real deprivation, their standard of living being drastically affected by inflation. Barnardos staff are reporting more and more families going without necessities or else having to reduce their consumption of those necessities drastically. Services are receiving more and more calls asking for help with food, clothing and basic household items with more and more families asking for assistance heating their homes.

Families on low incomes do not have the money necessary to cover the recent increases. Unfortunately, this inevitably has an impact on the wellbeing of children living in some of those households. In a Barnardos staff survey, two thirds of staff reported that the cost of living increases are having a substantial negative affect on the health and wellbeing of the

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<sup>1</sup> Fifty-one percent of staff said that over 80% of the families they are working with are struggling with cost of living issues; a further 35% said 60-80%.

<sup>2</sup> [Child Food Poverty | Barnardos](#)

children they are supporting. Amarach survey results found that 70% of parents said that cost of living increases have negatively affected their children over the past six months.

Over the past 6 months, have cost of living increases and insufficient income negatively affected your children/children in your care in any way?	<b>N= 329</b>
Not at all	25%
Slightly	34%
Moderately	25%
Significantly	12%
Not applicable to me	5%

All disposable income for the families we support is going towards bills, energy, food and travel. There is nothing left for social activities, such as vital after school activities or trips. For the children we support cutting back on trips and social activities means going without them. These are not luxuries but essential parts of a child’s development and something they should all be entitled to as a decent standard of living.

The families we support are often dealing with numerous adversities and issues, which can at times, draw some of their focus away from parenting. Dealing with the recent cost of living increases is placing an additional strain on them. Parents are constantly struggling to meet essential costs, exacerbating other underlying issues and making it very difficult for them to concentrate on parenting.

Unfortunately, for the families we support, there is nowhere for them to go to quickly access funds necessary to make up shortfall between income and the cost of energy/food. For the vast majority, asking friends or family for help was never an option. More of the families we support are telling staff they must rely on external sources of support than before in order to provide their children with essentials, such as local voluntary organisations, particularly the St Vincent de Paul. Our services are seeing requests for vouchers increase rapidly, with staff saying that some families would be lost without them. Staff are reporting that in some instances this means some families who previously were supported by our service coming back and knocking on our door because they know we provide vouchers.

The Amarach survey found that almost two-thirds (64%) of parents are regularly worrying (28% always worried) about being able to provide their children with daily essential such as food, heat and electricity. Over 75% of parents said, they are in some way worried about having enough money over the next 6 months to meet the needs of their children. Living on the edge, financially, means that for many families if something goes wrong or something crops up in the future they will be pushed over it. They have no safety net.

It is vital that the government acts, through proactive targeted policies, to ensure that all children in Ireland, at an absolute minimum, live in homes that have sufficient food and can provide regular meals, live in appropriately heated accommodation and don’t go without electricity. Government policy and resources must be targeted at lowest-income households to shield children from hardship as much as possible.

**Recommendation:** The Department of Social Protection should introduce an additional €5 million to the additional needs payments programme, to allow low-income families access immediate, same day funds when they can't meet essential costs, in particular food and energy costs. This should be accessible to those most in need to apply for when they cannot meet one of the three bills of electricity, heating or food. The current additional needs payment scheme process can take too long and the process itself can be off putting.

**Recommendation:** Many low-income families do not have sufficient income to provide children with basic necessities. The government must increase welfare supports in order to make sure that families have enough to provide their children with all their daily essentials. As a first step there should be an increase in general welfare rates by €20 (€675 million) and increase the Qualified Child Increase Payment by €12 for over 12s and €7 for under 12s (€150 million). Over the longer term the government should benchmark social welfare payments in line with minimum essential standard of living measurements.

**Recommendation:** Recently introduced extensions to fuel allowance should be continued next year and additional families should be able to benefit from it, in particular parents on working family payment. Many of the families we support are unable to proactively go to energy providers and look for cheaper options/shop around by themselves. Often they are on expensive pre-pay meters. It is unfair and unjust that children living in low-income households are going without heat and electricity because their parents are paying higher tariffs, despite being individuals who could most benefit from lower tariffs. The energy regulator should take action to ensure that families on low incomes with children living in the house are automatically placed on lower tariffs.

## Family Support

Over the past year families have had to deal with considerable adversities, challenges and difficulties. Family support is a key means of tackling adversity and helping parents and their children to address detrimental issues in their lives. It provides help to children and families who are in need of support, without which families may struggle to address their problems and not feel in a position to best help their children and promote their wellbeing.

There is a risk that parental issues such as substance use, domestic violence and poor mental health will become more widespread and continue to worsen as a result of cost of living increases. For example, we have seen many parents we support struggle further with their mental health due to increased pressures and adversity brought along due to rapid inflation. Ensuring families have access to appropriate support is vital, as intervening early will improve outcomes for children.

Unfortunately, family support, particularly intensive family support, provision remains limited across the country. Cuts made to community and voluntary family support services ten years ago are having a protracted squeezing of funds over time. As a result, the State is not paying for the services it requires. Community and voluntary organisations providing family support services have to use substantial funds raised through the public to meet the cost of providing family support services.

In many rural areas across the country there is extremely limited access to intensive family support. For families to access support they will be forced have to travel long distance. The government should provide additional funds to make sure that family support services can

reach all communities in Ireland. In order to direct funds efficiently it is important that they map provision across the country, aligned to levels of need, to identify where the most pressing gaps are.

Finally, we believe that it is important that when families look for support that they can access it promptly. Research demonstrates the importance of responding and providing support quickly to families who are actively looking for help. It can prevent problems and issues worsening and ending up in Tusla referrals. Presently, many families who self-refer to intensive family support services are put on relatively long waiting lists due to insufficient resources.

**Recommendation:** Provide community and voluntary sector organisations specific funding to help families self-referring to family support services. In addition, the Government should provide Tusla with a further €6 million ring fenced for community and voluntary sector organisations, comparable to the increase in Budget 2022.

**Recommendation:** Restore the annual cost of living increase and begin the expansion of family support services outlined in the Programme for Government in 2021 covering the full costs for current and new service provision.

## Education

Each year our Back to School Survey examines the costs associated with attending primary and secondary school in Ireland. This year, over two thirds of primary (69%) and three-quarters of secondary school parents (75%) are worried about meeting costs. Almost half of parents (46% of primary and 48% of secondary) said recent cost of living increases had made it much more difficult to meet costs.

Books remain a significant cost for parents at the start of the school term, the average cost for primary school books was €110 and the average cost of secondary school books was €207. Schools continue to ask parents to buy crested or branded uniforms with 75% of primary and 95% of secondary school parents reporting they are required to do so.

Seventy percent of parents reported being asked for a voluntary contribution, with 70% stating it doesn't feel voluntary. This can add significant pressure on parents as schools mainly seek the payment in September on top of all the other expenses.

Barnardos believes that by providing programme interventions earlier we can have a greater impact in reducing rates of bullying and anti-social behaviour amongst schoolchildren. Deficits in social skills and negative, problematic peer-to-peer interactions are a key risk factor for the early emergence of social, emotional and behavioural difficulties.

**Recommendation:** Commit to retaining the recently announced increases set out in Back to School Allowance, enabling low-income families can afford to purchase new uniforms and shoes for their children, without jeopardising their ability to pay for daily essentials such as heat, electricity and food, at a cost of €21 million annually.

**Recommendation:** The government should commit to expanding the pilot free school book scheme nationally by investing a further €20m in this initiative.

**Recommendation:** Provide schools with sufficient funding to cover their costs so that they no longer have to rely on the voluntary contributions of parents.

**Recommendation:** Further expand the hot school meals programme to allow all schools interested to partake in the scheme so long as they have the local infrastructure to do so. Allocate funding to establish a Small Grants Scheme to improve school infrastructure to ensure appropriate facilities for school food provision. Ensure plans for all new school builds include provision for dining and catering facilities.

**Recommendation:** Invest €250,000 to upscale Roots of Empathy programme to further targeted locations across the country to help build empathy and reduce levels of bullying within schools.

## Housing

No child in this country should have to spend a single night without a home. Living in homeless accommodation affects every aspect of a child's life. Unfortunately, too many children are living in temporary emergency accommodation, and for far too long, often for much longer than six months. The negative effects are far ranging with implications for their emotional, social, educational and even their physical development. Children report feeling shame, sadness, anger and a sense of the injustice of their situation<sup>3</sup>.

The latest Government statistics show that over 1,300 families were homeless living across Ireland last month, and over 3,000 dependent children. These statistics show that in May 2022 there were 47% more families living in emergency accommodation than 2021. The government must do more to ensure that more and more children are not pulled into emergency accommodation.

Rent increases are making it unaffordable for many families to move out of unsuitable and inappropriate accommodation, for example living in cramped conditions with grandparents, or damp inappropriate conditions for a child. Many of the families we support are living in private rented accommodation which they pay for through their Housing Assistance Payment (HAP). However, as this does not usually cover the full cost of the rent, they are forced to top it up themselves from their own income.

**Recommendation:** No household on HAP should pay more than 30% of their net income on housing costs. Where legally allowable rent increases cause these safeguards to be breached. The government must guarantee that no child will be housed in emergency accommodation beyond six months.

## Domestic Violence

Approximately 40% of the families we work with have experience of domestic violence and abuse. Often it is not mentioned when a family is referred to Barnardos for support, but emerges during the course of our work when a child, young person or parent is comfortable enough to tell us what is happening in their family.

We see first-hand the harmful impact domestic violence and abuse can have on all domains of a child's life. Domestic violence and abuse affects every aspect of a child's life, including their health, wellbeing and development from conception through to adulthood. Children are not passive bystanders. Living in an abusive environment generally hinders a child's

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<sup>3</sup> Ombudsman for Children's Office (2019) *No Place Like Home*. Dublin : Ombudsman for Children's Office. Barnardos | 2022

developmental progress and can lead to a range of social, emotional, physical and behavioural problems.

Unfortunately, the true scale of harm to children in Ireland due to domestic abuse is currently unknown. It is vital that a more accurate understanding of the true level and scale of need of children experiencing domestic violence and abuse in this country is developed. Children who experience domestic violence and abuse should have seamless access to support across prevention, early intervention, crisis and recovery through local co-ordinated community responses across the country.

**Recommendation:** Longitudinal research must be funded to get a more accurate picture of the scale and prevalence of children experiencing domestic violence and abuse within Ireland and additional fund provided to services. Additionally, further funding should be provided to roll out the Safe and Together Model.

## Health - Waiting Lists

Many of the children Barnardos works with are in need of assessment or treatment for issues relating to mental health, disability or speech and language among other health conditions. However, all too often these children are left waiting long periods to access even an assessment.

Our services regularly support children who are left waiting several years from the point of first attempting to get an assessment to receiving support for the specific additional need. A year, often two or three, is a significant period of development in a child's life, particularly when many of these children are two or three years old when their parents first seek support for them. For a child with a speech delay, poor mental health or awaiting disability supports this length of time can be devastating to their wellbeing and future development.

The impact of lack of access to timely healthcare has significant repercussions for children's development. It also leads to increased stress and anxiety across entire families. Some parents are forced to turn to private assessments. However, that is not an option to the majority of children and families we support and children living in disadvantaged communities.

**Recommendation:** For children on waiting lists a triage system should be adopted. Additional support and funding should be made available for children not reaching thresholds who might benefit from other support and services in the community.

## Childcare

The first few years of a child's life are the most critical in terms of development and learning. Research studies have consistently found the early years of life are critical to the emotional intellectual development of a child, with 75% of children's brain growth completed during their first few years.

The positive influence of quality early childhood care and education (ECEC) on a child's outcomes is well documented, benefitting children's social, emotional, physical and educational development. Participation in ECEC is particularly beneficial for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Quality care and education helps even the youngest children

develop important life skills such as communication, social skills, how to maintain friendships and how to navigate rules and boundaries.

We believe that the ELC system should be accessible for all children and is adequately resourced to provide a quality service to children and families. Ensuring universal access to affordable and quality early childcare and education would give all children the best possible start in life.

The Access and Inclusion model (AIM) helps support access for preschool age children with additional needs. Targeted AIM support allows children acquire one or more further supports to ensure that they can participate meaningfully in the ECCE programme. Presently, AIM only applies to children eligible for ECCE. However, we know that children need ELC prior to this age and children who require additional support should be able to access it before then and for more than 15 hours a week during term time.

**Recommendation:** Last year the government committed to provide disadvantaged families with a specific funding stream to access and afford childcare. Unfortunately, no further details have been set out. Given the cost of living increases, finances must be set aside within the budget to ensure all children can access quality childcare.

**Recommendation:** Extend AIM to include younger children accessing ELC and for children accessing SAC.

Barnardos' vision is a country where no child has to suffer and every child is able to reach its full potential.

Barnardos' mission is to deliver services and work with families, communities, and our partners to transform the lives of vulnerable children who are affected by adverse childhood experiences

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