

## **Introduction**

Irish political and public discourse has firmly shifted from recession to recovery. This rhetoric is supported by Exchequer accounts, with the Government announcing it expects a substantial surplus in this year's budget.<sup>1</sup> Yet for the families Barnardos works with every day, and hundreds of thousands more like them, the recession hasn't gone away-it has gotten worse. The cumulative effect of years of successive cuts and lack of investment in basic services has pushed these families to the brink. Evidence of this is apparent in the sky rocketing child poverty rate, the rising number of families entering or at risk of homelessness and the high proportion of families who rely on social welfare or low-paid work to make ends meet.

It is unacceptable that 11.7% of Irish children live in consistent poverty. Without meaningful intervention their futures are bleak. Adjustments to social welfare payments and increasing tax cuts will not have any long term impact on these children. Without the necessary investment in quality public services the economy may rise but the tide of poverty, disadvantage and inequality will continue to rise with it.

## **Investment in Services**

Access to quality affordable public services can drastically change a child's future for the better. Too often Government policy has resorted to giving financial assistance to parents instead of investing in public services. Such a pattern ultimately costs the exchequer more and does nothing to increase the availability and improve the quality public service.

As a strategic measure to tackling child poverty, Barnardos firmly believes a portion of the Department of Social Protection should be transferred to the Department of Children and Youth Affairs to assist in the establishment of a subsidised quality childcare and afterschool care system especially in light of the reforms to the One Parent Family Payment. Whilst previous attempts to divert funds to tackle the child care crisis have had limited success, Barnardos believes that by incorporating learning from earlier initiatives into an accessible, outcome focused, quality led scheme with clear timelines and deliverables a key step can be taken towards reducing child poverty levels.

The influence of quality early childhood care and education on a child's outcomes is well documented, and this is particularly true for children who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Availability of such a system also allows parents to take up employment, increasing the family income and contributing to a robust economy. Essentially, investment now will create long term benefits for children and society as a whole. The opportunity Irish people have earned on the hard road to economic recovery must not be squandered. Barnardos is calling on the Government to take a brave approach to this year's budget by investing in services.

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<sup>1</sup> Minister for Finance (Michael Noonan), *Dáil Éireann*, 28<sup>th</sup> April 2015

## Targeted Measures

Barnardos believes Department of Social Protection measures designed to specifically support low income families should be enhanced in this year's budget. These targeted supports benefit those children who are most in need and prove vitally important for families struggling to provide basic necessities like food and clothing.

Each year Barnardos hears from parents who struggle to meet the cost of sending their child to school. The **Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance** helps thousands of low income families during what is a stressful and expensive time. In recent years the rate paid to eligible families has decreased substantially; by half for primary school children and a third for secondary school children. Parents have to subsidise the remaining costs which equate to around €60-€80 per child on average.<sup>2</sup> An increase of €50 per recipient would cost the Exchequer approximately an additional €15 million annually and help bridge the gap for low income families.<sup>3</sup> Partially reinstating this payment should be a priority in this year's budget, with a view to fully restoring the payment to the 2011 level in subsequent budgets.

Tackling childhood malnutrition and obesity through the **School Meals Programme** is another area where further targeted investment by the Department of Social Protection would reap sizeable benefits for those children most at need. Food poverty is on the rise, affecting 13% of households.<sup>4</sup> This figure almost doubles for low income and lone parent households. One in four Irish children is obese with the cause often linked to high fat foods being more affordable for low income families. Having a nutritious meal in school is an effective response to the problems of food poverty and obesity. Barnardos has welcomed budgetary increases to this Programme in recent years; however further investment is needed to ensure that certain schools are not prohibited from supplying school meals. Administration, insufficient staffing resources and lack of space for food storage and equipment are all common barriers to schools accessing the scheme. Further engagement, promotion and investment are required to ensure the scheme is operating in a way that facilitates take up by all schools. Furthermore, schools that wish to do so should be permitted to access more than one meal programme, and actively encouraged and assisted to do so in disadvantaged areas.

## Recommendations

- Divert funding from increasing social welfare cash payments to investing in quality, affordable services as a means of tackling child poverty by creating sustainable structural supports;
- Increase the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance to €150 per primary school pupil and €250 per secondary school pupil;
- Increase funding to the school meals programme to tackle administrative and logistical barriers for schools and increase take up.

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<sup>2</sup> Barnardos School Cost Survey, 2014

<sup>3</sup> Minister of State at Department of Social Protection, (Kevin Humphreys), Ceisteanna- Questions-*Dáil Éireann*, vol.58, 19<sup>th</sup> May 2015

<sup>4</sup> Department of Social Protection, 2015, Social Inclusion Monitor 2013