

Introduction

Unlike previous years, the issue of school costs have remained high on the political agenda throughout this year with the Minister encouraging the setting up of school book rental schemes and the Joint Oireachtas Committee examining it and issuing recommendations for reform. While these efforts are welcome, Barnardos believes much of it is paying lip service to the problem and both the Minister and Department of Education needs to do more to tackle the high costs of education at a local level, particularly challenging the Patron Bodies and school's Boards of Management to make real changes that would ease the financial burden on parents.

'As a single parent trying not to be a burden on the system, but I wake up most mornings crying because I have not enough to feed, clothe and put my children through school and only with the help of family can I pay for their school stuff, no such thing as free education in this country.'

Barnardos' survey, now in its 8th year, again highlights the extent of these expensive costs on parents and how little has changed despite parent's own incomes and benefits diminishing. With less income and increasing bills comes a sense of despair that their children's educational opportunities will suffer greatly because of lack of money. This sense of hopelessness together with cuts already made to educational supports for children who require additional assistance leaves many parents feeling that this Government cares more about meeting Budget deficit targets than educating our children.

'It breaks my heart to think that in 20 years' time we will be trying to build a generation's self esteem because of insane educational costs that has prevented some children reaching their potential now.'

Survey Design

Barnardos conducted an online survey with parents of school age children from the 1st to 19th July 2013. This survey was widely advertised through various social media channels and through some radio interviews. In total, 1,104 parents completed the survey. While the sample is not statistically representative it does give an indication of the average costs incurred. These costs do not include school bags, sports equipment or transport costs. In our survey, 18% of children were attending a DEIS school (designated disadvantage).

Survey Findings – Overall Costs

The survey reveals an on-going frustration felt by parents that nothing is being done by Government to address the costs associated with going back to school and that they have to shoulder these significant costs themselves. Failure to address this issue in a meaningful way left many parents feeling that the Government was out of touch with the real lives of many people in Ireland.

'Education costs need to be a priority for the government my eldest had to drop out of school last year because I couldn't afford the costs.'

Many parents expressed anger that as each school is receiving less financial support from the Department of Education there is a presumption that this shortfall will be made up by the parents with little recognition of the financial strain that parents are under. Parents, particularly those engaged in low paid and / or casual work, stressed that their ineligibility for supports such as Family Income Supplement and / or Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance was forcing them into debt as the school costs are too high for them to bear.

'It cost us €800 to send our 2 children (senior infants and 2nd class) to our local national school. We are not eligible for any back to school allowances. We had to take out loans to cover this cost.'

Getting into debt, forgoing bills and / or taking out loans to meet these costs are becoming more common as parents feel the strain of these costs and their own income has gone down. Many parents expressed despair and dread at being able to manage future costs of books, uniforms etc as their child moves up through the system knowing that the costs rise exponentially each year. The cutback to the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance has compounded this¹. As a result, it is unsurprising that the majority of parents felt that the costs associated with sending their children back to school had increased from last year, even though the figures reveal only marginal differences.

'My child missed 17 days of school last year due to not having a lunch. How are the real poor people of Ireland to keep up with these costs. Secondary school costs scare the hell out of me already with 3 years to go.'

The survey showed huge price differences with regard to school books and voluntary contributions between schools and even within classes. This could imply some schools are more mindful of the costs on parents than others with regard to choosing books or that some schools are running such a deficit that they are requesting high voluntary contributions from the parents.

Basic Costs for 2013

2013 average costs	Senior Infants pupil	4th Class pupil	1st Year Pupil
Clothing	€95	€120	€275
Footwear	€45	€60	€60
School Books	€80	€120	€275
Classroom resources	€30	€50	€50
Voluntary contribution	€100	€50	€125
Total*	€350	€400	€785
Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance	€100	€100	€200

*Not including extra costs such as school bag, trainers, extra-curricular activities etc

Survey Findings – Uniform costs

The vast majority (74%) of parents had their children in primary schools that require uniforms with the school crest on them, 18% attend schools that request a plain uniform and the remaining 8% have no school uniform. A similar picture is evident in secondary school, where 97% of respondents have to buy

¹ The rates payable were reduced in Budget 2013 from €150 to €100 for 4-11 year olds and from €250 to €200 for children aged 12 – 22years.

a school specific uniform, 0.3% use a plain uniform and just over 2% have no school uniform. Having to buy school specific uniforms significantly adds to the cost as parents are forced to go to particular retailers and are prevented from buying plain coloured jumpers, tracksuits and other items available in high street stores. For instance, the cost of a crested tracksuit range from €30 - €45 for a primary school pupil and a crested school jumper usually cost around €45 for a secondary school pupil, while the school jacket costs around €65. Whereas plain coloured uniforms available in high street stores are much cheaper, with school jumpers starting at €8 and tracksuits from €10.

'I was shocked by the cost of badly and poorly made school uniform. For the money I spent on school uniform I could get clothes for my son for 3 years. €50 for synthetic poorly made sweater is a joke. There must be some clever resolution to this nonsense in 21st century'.

Parents are paying approximately €100 for a primary school pupil's uniform (21% are paying between €76-100, 20% are paying €101-125). For secondary school pupils uniform costs are higher with 17% of parents paying €150-€174, 15% spending €175-€200 and 16% exceeding over €250. The first year of secondary school is the most expensive for parents as all items must be bought in one go. In some schools, the jumpers change after completing the Junior Cert for going into the Senior Cycle. In addition to this, most parents indicated that the amount spent on school shoes for a primary school and / or a secondary school pupil is between €40-60.

'The colour of his jumper has changed as he moves to 5th year therefore needed replacing even though he hadn't outgrown last years at a cost of €38. Waste, waste and more waste'.

Parents urged for a change in uniform policy and questioned the need for both a school crested uniform and crested tracksuit as it is an unnecessary expense. Reducing the number of items requiring a crest or opting for a plain coloured uniform is being strongly recommended. Some parents highlighted that they feel ashamed that they can't afford the complete uniform and are afraid that their child will be singled out by teachers or pupils for being different.

'A tracksuit should only have to be worn in schools not a tracksuit and a uniform.....its costly especially if you have more than one child.'

"I think that school uniforms ought to be plain and easily bought in department stores rather than school specific shops which are usually nearly 3 times the cost. If the school wants to differentiate, logos or crests can be sewed or ironed on to the plain uniform."

Survey Findings – Book costs

Similar to our findings in earlier years, the cost of school books is usually the biggest expense for parents especially those with children entering 1st and 5th year in secondary school, as they are beginning the Junior and Leaving Certificate cycles. Again parents criticised the inability to pass books on between siblings due to new editions being prescribed by the teacher or the teacher choosing different books altogether for that subject. Likewise the continued use of workbooks, particularly in primary schools, is regarded as wasteful and expensive as they cannot be reused.

'I think that workbooks are an absolute disgrace and the single biggest waste in terms of back to school'.

Barnardos found that the majority of parents are spending on average between €76-€100 for books for a primary school pupil and over €250 for a secondary school pupil. Interestingly, the survey found huge variance between the costs of school books within classes. For instance in 4th class, some parents are

paying around €70 for books while others are paying over €130 for books to cover the same curriculum. This difference may be due to school book rental schemes being in operation or some teachers consciously choosing cheaper and fewer books to put on the booklist. Again parents felt that this was an increase in the amount spent on books last year. This is unsurprising as the costs rise as the child moves through the system and parent's own resources have reduced as a result of less income and supports and it is this combination that is putting such a huge financial strain on parents.

'The cost of schoolbooks is appalling. every year, either the editions change; or the teachers change to a different set of books; both of these things make a mockery of any attempt to run a book rental scheme'.

The efforts to tackle the issue of school book costs have not fully borne fruit so many parents have not felt the benefit of any savings. These have included the implementation of a voluntary Code of Practice among publishers which prohibits the printing of new editions for a minimum of six years. The Irish Educational Publishers Association's recent survey found that only 42 books just from more than 2,000 were revised during 2012 and in fact book prices have remained frozen since 2009². Also the Department of Education issued its *Guidelines for Developing Textbook Rental Schemes in Schools* to encourage the set-up of such schemes as they have proven to yield significant savings for parents.

'All schools should run a book rental scheme. Books should not be re-published on such a regular basis'.

Our survey, did find a slight increase in the number of respondents who said they had access to a school book rental scheme in comparison to last year. In 2013, 55% of respondents have access to such a scheme in primary school, up from 50% in 2012 and 42% of parents had such a scheme in secondary school, up from 40% in 2012. The annual contribution was less than €50 for a primary school scheme and between €76-€100 for a secondary school scheme. With regard to the management of these schemes, the parents stated that it was the principals and teachers who ran the scheme in 48% of primary schools and 46% of secondary schools. The Parent's Association led it in 16% of primary schools and 9% of secondary schools, while the Board of Management ran it in only 2% of primary and secondary schools. Understandably, the rest of the respondents did not know who ran the scheme.

For schemes currently in operation, the majority just cover the textbooks required (65% in primary schools and 66% in secondary schools). Some schemes include textbooks and workbooks (16% in primary schools and 25% in secondary schools) others include textbooks, workbooks and some or all of the stationery (19% in primary schools and 9% in secondary schools).

Interestingly, for the parents who did know it appears that the majority of these schemes have been in operation less than five years (45% of primary schools and 27% of secondary schools). Also some parents highlighted that these schemes were just in a pilot stage and subsequently not open to all classes in the school yet. The establishment of more schemes is likely to be in response to the recession and the fact that these schemes can significantly reduce the costs of buying books, encourages recycling of books and reduces any stigma or further disadvantage for children and young people whose parents struggle to meet the costs of sending them to school. However, these schemes are not widely available yet and there is wide variation in their design and roll out and the contribution sought to participate in the schemes.

² Irish Educational Publishers' Association Survey Results July 2013.

'A school near us charges €35 for the cost of book rental compared to €100.00 that I have to pay to buy all the books This does not make sense'.

Survey Findings – Digital Books

The use of tablet devices is growing in schools and while using digital technology is quite progressive it is being used in the absence of a national digital strategy and subsequently variations exist across the system. Our survey found that 11% of respondents had a child using a tablet in secondary schools and these devices were either supplied by the school or sourced by the school and paid for by the parents. In primary schools, only 75 parents said their child used a tablet in school and in the majority of cases this was supplied by the school. The Irish Educational Publisher's Association survey also found a significant rise in the sale of e-textbooks from less than 100 e-textbooks in 2010 to almost 40,000 in use in 2012. The cost of these e-textbooks especially with a higher VAT rate on top of having to pay for the tablet was raised as an additional expense on parents.

'The biggest cost is the iPad, which she needs for her books which I also have to pay for, so it's going to cost around €600 for all her books and a glorified school bag to download them onto. I just wish they could maybe use an e-reader like a kindle or something instead of an iPad. It would be so much cheaper.'

Survey Findings – Voluntary Contribution

The survey found that 68% of parents of primary school pupils and 74% of parents of secondary school pupils have been asked for a voluntary contribution. It is also very evident that the amounts sought vary significantly within primary schools; €50 for most parents whilst others are asked for a donation of €100-€150. This could indicate that some schools are more aware than others of the pressure parents are under. In secondary schools, the majority of parents are being asked to donate €100-€150. This voluntary contribution is usually expected to be given in September / October but the option to spread the payment over a number of instalments is available in some schools.

'Also voluntary contributions which are needed to pay basic school running costs such as heating and toilet roll is a disgrace. Why are the government not providing the basic funding to run a school with my hard earned tax money which has increased substantially over the past couple of years'.

Tactics to pursue parents for non-payment of the voluntary contribution are common in both primary and secondary schools. These include sending reminder letters / emails / texts directly to the parents (41% of primary schools and 53% of secondary schools) or sending such reminders via their children (32% of primary schools and 23% of secondary schools).

'I feel that the "parental contribution" as our principal calls it as she insists it is not voluntary should be regulated. How can one school ask for €50 per year and another ask for €225? Very angry that my daughter was humiliated on the occasion where we were late with this payment'.

Survey Findings – Additional Costs

Over 82% of parents of primary school children and 71% of secondary school children stated that they had to pay towards classroom resources such as stationery and photocopying costs. The amount sought on average in primary schools seems have to increased especially for the older classes from approximately €25 in 2012 to €50 in 2013. In secondary schools, the charge has remained at €50. Charges can also apply for participating in extra curricular activities such as swimming, speech and

drama classes etc, with primary schools seeking on average €26-50 per pupil per term but secondary schools seeking over €100 per pupil per term.

Parents expressed significant frustration at all the other range of expenses imposed on them which cumulatively is often too much to bear and can impact on their child’s participation levels in school. These include registration fees, more applicable in secondary schools with parents often charged €100 to register their child which is non refundable in most cases. Other charges include the costs of materials/ equipment required for specific subjects on the curriculum such as music, home economics and woodwork, sports equipment, exam fees, non-uniform days and Transition Year fees. Some parents with children with special needs also face additional expenses with having to pay for some equipment that the child requires.

‘It should be unnecessary for parents to have to pay a charge towards classroom materials. The costs of all these additional fees on top of uniforms and books are a constant drain on what are exceptionally tight resources within our home.’

Survey Findings – Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance

Over 48% of parents of a primary school pupil and 56% of parents of a secondary school pupil had applied for the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance. While this payment helped towards the costs, having the rate reduced again this year to €100 for a primary school pupil and €200 for a secondary pupil means that the payment is not a true reflection of the actual costs and subsequently parents have to make up a bigger shortfall out of their own limited budgets.

‘Going into 1st Year is astronomically expensive. This was the case for me last year costs amounted to €1200. As I am a lone parent, the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance does not come close to covering costs meaning people are forced to borrow money.

Similar to previous years, parents criticised the strict eligibility criteria for the payment which excluded them despite being just over the income threshold and their need for the payment to help cover school costs for their children. Without this assistance, it is forcing parents into debt or relying on families or moneylenders for a loan.

Class / Year	Average Costs	BSCFA	Shortfall
Senior Infants	€350	€100	€250
4 th class pupil	€400	€100	€300
1 st year secondary school pupil	€785	€200	€585

‘I’m struggling this year even more than others. Child allowance is paying my mortgage, not sure where I’ll get money for everything. Back to School Allowance tell me I’m €5 over the threshold but they don’t take into account outgoings like mortgage & car loan, medication not covered by medical card, etc’

Survey Findings – Afterschool Care Costs

For the first time, Barnardos asked questions about use of afterschool care to facilitate working parents and to highlight this is an additional cost on parents throughout the school year as well as at holiday time. Of course, the afterschool care is needed more for primary school pupils given their age. The

survey found that 30% of respondents with primary school children need afterschool care and of these 14% use an afterschool club in a crèche or youth club setting with 10% using a minder and another 7% using a family member to look after their children. While the majority of parents worked full time and required afterschool care for 5 days a week others worked part time and availed of it for less than 3 days. Understandably the fees varied depending on part time or full time care and the arrangements in place, but on average parents are paying less than €50 per week or between €50-€100 per week per child. Having to pay these fees on top of school costs does place a huge strain on the household budget and means that the take up of a low paid job is not an option for some parents, especially lone parents, if it means all wages are going on afterschool care fees.

'I am a single Mum of two young children getting crucified by high tax, high childcare and after-school care and back to school costs. Would like to see school facilities made available to childcare providers for after school. After all tax payer's fund these buildings and they could be used to provide a safe and convenient service for working parents. I don't expect the teachers to provide afterschool and I am happy to pay, but some joined up thinking would be nice!!'

School Transport Costs

While the survey did not examine school transport costs it must be highlighted that these charges are significant and disproportionately affect rural pupils. Fees for availing of the school transport scheme is €100 for a primary school pupil (with a maximum of €220 per family) and €350 per secondary school student (with a maximum of €650 per family). It has already been proven that it is more expensive for families to live in rural areas, especially those with teenage children³. Being burdened with school transport costs adds to this pressure and is crippling for some families.

Current Government Supports

The recession has led to a reduction in direct funding and supports to schools. These have included lower capitation grants as well as reduction in teacher numbers and withdrawal of specific supports to students such as Visiting Teachers for Travellers and Guidance Teachers. The ongoing impact of this has meant children are waiting longer to receive any required assistance and Ireland's class sizes remain second highest in the EU. Barnardos believes that these cuts are short sighted because although they will garner short terms savings to the exchequer the long term impact will be more costly as these children may never reach their full educational potential and may leave school early, become welfare dependent, suffer greater illhealth etc.

A cut in the provision of educational services is a false economy. If this generation are deprived of a proper chance of an education our economy and worse again our society will pay well in to the future.

The Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance (BSCFA)

This means tested payment is aimed at assisting those reliant on social welfare or in low paid employment with school costs. However, there are strict eligibility rules meaning that many in need are ineligible including some low paid employees, self-employed and foster parents. The value of the allowance has been halved for primary school pupils and reduced by 35% for secondary school pupils since 2011. The rates payable for 2013 are now €100 for 4-11 year olds and €200 for children aged 12 – 22years. The reduced rates also mean that parents have a greater deficit to make up from their own resources.

³ Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice (2010) Minimum Essential Budgets for Households in Rural Areas, Dublin

This year €48.8m has been allocated to the BSCFA and already it has been paid automatically to 117,000 eligible families in respect of 211,000 children as their circumstances has remained unchanged while any new applicants will have to complete an application form. Already there has been a surge in applications this year with up to 6,000 being received weekly.

To qualify for the BSCFA, the total household income must be below the amounts set out in the table below. The income thresholds continue to remain different for two-parent and one-parent families leaving already vulnerable one-parent families at increased risk of poverty.

The BSCFA income thresholds are still less than those applicable to the Family Income Supplement (FIS). These lower thresholds can result in many low income families being ineligible to apply for the BSCFA and plunging them further into debt as they struggle to meet all the costs of sending children to school.

Income Thresholds for the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance

Family Type	1 child	2 children	3 children	4 children
Couple	€563.60	€593.40	€623.20	€653.00*
Lone parent	€410.10	€439.90	€469.70	€499.50*
FIS income guidelines same for 2 parent and lone parent families	€506.00	€602.00	€703.00	€824.00

* €29.80 each extra child

School Book Grant Scheme

The Department of Education and Skills again ringfenced €15m for 2013-2014 school year to be distributed amongst schools to assist with the costs of school books. Each school has already received their annual lump sum calculated on a capitation basis of €11 per pupil in non-DEIS primary schools and €21 in DEIS primary schools and €24 per pupil in non-DEIS secondary schools and €39 in DEIS secondary schools.

The distribution of these funds is solely at the discretion of the principal. However, the Department strongly encourages each school to use this fund to set up a school book rental scheme and published its *Guidelines for Developing Textbook Rental Schemes in Schools* in February 2013. Nevertheless, the principal can also disseminate this funding to pupils he/ she deems 'needy' in the form of book vouchers or cash.

Since 2011, a voluntary Code of Practice for the Irish Educational Publishers Association has been in operation committing publishers not to revise textbooks for a minimum of four years and to co-operate with individual schools in the development of textbook rental schemes. Barnardos strongly welcomed this Code but believes it should be on a mandatory basis to ensure greater compliance and better savings for parents. The survey clearly shows that parents are not benefitting from the operation of this code. The Minister for Education also intimated that the code of practice may become mandatory if not fully implemented⁴.

⁴ Dail Debate 28th May 2013

Barnardos has consistently advocated for the operation of school book rental schemes in all schools and believes that schools, particularly secondary schools, should only receive their School Book Grant on condition that such a scheme is in operation. It is positive that the survey revealed more schools are setting up such schemes yet there is a wide variation in how schemes are operating across schools. However, these schemes are still not widely available and obstacles to setting up such schemes include high set up costs, perception that such a scheme could stigmatise the school and / or resistance from some patron bodies to change.

Although the School Book Grant is limited funding it is essential to think innovatively and use this money as a stepping stone towards developing a system comparable to Northern Ireland and Scotland where all textbooks are provided to pupils for free or at minimal rental costs.

Barnardos Recommendations

Barnardos' 5 Year Vision towards school books for all

Barnardos strongly endorses the recommendation of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Social Protection report on school costs which calls for a five year template for the delivery of an entirely free school book system to be produced⁵.

Barnardos believes this vision is possible as long as the School Book Grant budget is maintained or ideally increased. It is based on ensuring each school uses its School Book Grant to operate a school book rental scheme. While the amount given to each school is too little to cover all books initially, it is sufficient to be a start up fund and then reinvested in the scheme every year. This would ensure that a suite of books available to all pupils is achieved and the fee charged to parents would be reduced year on year. A cap on scheme fees would have to be imposed to ensure that parents would benefit from savings from the outset.

The following are the key ingredients Barnardos believes are central to achieving this vision:

- A) Political will and school leadership from Patron Bodies, principals, Boards of Management and teachers to roll out school book rental schemes.
- B) Commitment from the school to reinvest its school book grant back into the scheme on an annual basis.
- C) Schools must to be supported to set up and run school book rental schemes especially to deal with the administration, storage and distribution of the books.
- D) Teachers having chosen their preferred textbook would have to stick with it for a number of years to ensure it can be reused.
- E) Publishers would have to ensure that no new editions were printed.
- F) Use of workbooks would have to be reduced as they cannot be recycled and instead copies or exercise books should be used as they are far cheaper.
- G) This system can be supported through the more frequent use of additional free resources such as online learning materials for use on classroom whiteboards, photocopying worksheets and availing of public libraries where some class novels can be borrowed.

Recommendation:

- Implement a five year vision towards achieving free school books for all, through ensuring schools use their School Book Grant to invest in school book rental schemes so to incrementally build up a set of textbooks for all their pupils;

⁵ Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Social Protection (2013) Report on Tackling Back to Schools Costs

- Place the Code of Practice for publishers on a statutory basis to ensure no new editions are published in the next four years;
- Adequately resource implementation of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategy.

Digital Media

It is evident from the survey that some schools are progressing towards using digital devices quicker than others. Barnardos recognises the value of using different mediums to teach and to introduce children into the technological world their usage but this should not be determined by the parent's ability to pay. Instead a national strategy is required ensuring consistency across all schools. To proceed without leadership from the Department of Education will only lead to greater inequality between pupils and their exposure to technology and place greater financial burden on parents. A national strategy led by the Department must explore low cost, robust devices designed specifically for the school market as opposed to the current tablet options. Such strategies were already undertaken in similar projects for developing laptops in developing countries. The model should be not-for-profit and in the best interest of developing equality of opportunity across Ireland's education system. Also the issue of 23% VAT applicable to e-books must be removed as it is at odds with the current VAT exemption on printed school books and makes the move to digital school books more expensive for families.

Recommendation:

- Department of Education to devise a digital strategy applicable in all schools covering how and when various forms of technology is used in the classroom including devices used, content, broadband compatibility etc.

Uniform Costs

Barnardos would agree with the parents comments in the survey that all uniform policies must be reviewed. It is an unnecessary expense on parents at time when everyone is struggling financially. A child's education should not suffer because of a uniform issue. A school's identity and ethos would not be jeopardised by the Patron Body and / or Board of Management deciding to reduce the amount of clothing requiring the school crest or choosing a plain coloured uniform that could have a crest sewn or ironed onto if desired. Barnardos together with the St.Vincent de Paul, the National Parent's Councils and other educational stakeholders developed a checklist for use by schools when undertaking a review of their uniform policy.

Recommendation:

- Ensure all schools review their uniform policy from a value for money perspective.

Additional Costs

The accumulative charges of classroom resources, voluntary contribution and extra-curricular activities are too much to bear for some parents. Schools should be adequately financed from the exchequer not to need to expect the parents to pay for all these additional costs.

Recommendation:

- Implement the recommendations of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education and Social Protection on tackling school costs, specifically around eliminating voluntary contributions.
- Do not increase the school transport charges in Budget 2014 as this adversely affects children from rural backgrounds.

Afterschool care costs

The provision of afterschool care is ad-hoc and expensive in Ireland. It is a sector that is characterised by underinvestment and subsequently varies significantly in quality in terms of facilities and staff / volunteer training and is unregulated. Yet the benefits to child for participating in such activities include better school performance and social-emotional development. Investment in quality affordable service provision for 6-12 year olds is required not only for the child's benefit but also to facilitate parents back into the labour market.

Recommendation:

- Invest in quality subsidised out of school services in different settings such as schools, crèches, youth clubs and sports clubs.

Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance

Barnardos was appalled at the slashing of the BSCFA in Budget 2013 as it does assist families coping with these costs. While the payment never covers the full costs its value has diminished further, putting more low income families into debt. Also as it is a targeted payment more low income families should be eligible.

Recommendation:

- Raise the rate applicable for Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance
- Synchronise the income thresholds up to those applicable to Family Income Supplement so all family types and all those in receipt of Family Income Supplement are eligible for the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance;

Conclusions

As Barnardos' survey has shown yet again, the stress and pressure on parents associated with getting children ready for school is excessive and sends many families into debt, especially those dependent on social welfare or in low paid employment. The continuing high costs of education are unacceptable. The financial burden of education colours many children's experience and perception of education and reinforces inequalities in Irish society.

This issue has gained significant public attention and remained high on the political agenda, so the time is ripe for action to be undertaken to take practical steps that would ease the financial pressure on parents. The priority must be on ensuring that all children receive the quality education that they are entitled to.

'Reduce the cost of school uniforms and school tracksuits. Introduce a generic school uniform and tracksuit and introduce book rental schemes in all schools. The cost of sending any child to school is far too high for the average parent'.