

This is Barnardos'
Children's Budget 2008



Barnardos supports children whose well-being is under threat, by working with them, their families and communities and by campaigning for the rights of children. Barnardos was established in 1962 and is Ireland's leading independent children's charity.

Foreword

There are a million plus children in Ireland and one in nine of these children spends their lives in consistent poverty. These are the children whose parents cannot afford to pay for necessary medicines, the children who cannot read or write after eight years of primary school education, the children in homes without heating, cooking facilities or somewhere safe to play.

Barnardos' Children's Budget is dedicated to each of these 1 10,000 children.

The recommendations we are putting forward in the Children's Budget 2008 stand to benefit all children living in Ireland but specifically those living in poverty. Children living in poverty need targeted income help for their families and access to basic health and education services if they are to be lifted out of this situation. That lift will only come when government, politicians and government departments, prioritise children's wellbeing and make the necessary investment in supporting the most vulnerable families.

Solutions to ending child poverty need to take full cognisance of the fact that children live in families which is why Barnardos emphasises specific income support for families on low incomes whether they are on welfare or working.

Barnardos recognises government efforts to improve the lives of children in Ireland but the reality is one in nine children lives in consistent poverty.

Poverty crushes hope and potential and is a big weight for small hands to carry. As a society we need to pull together and shoulder the burden so that we give children a chance to escape from under its weight ensuring children are given the opportunities to live their lives to the utmost of their potential.

Norah Gibbons

Director of Advocacy



Access to health and social services

Children born to parents who are poor are more likely to be small, to get sick more often throughout their lives and to die earlier as adults. For a child to be in good health, they need access to appropriate services when and where they are required. A child needs to be able to go to the doctor when they are sick. Recent research, however, shows that 19% of GP patients who had a medical problem during the year did not visit their doctor due to cost¹.

Barnardos knows from its own work that parents prioritise the health of their children above their own health but the impact of chronic parental bad health on a child, or the family as a whole, cannot be underestimated. Almost 43,000 people living in consistent poverty did not have a Medical Card in 2005² and fewer people are actually eligible for a full Medical Card than before.

The Drugs Payment Scheme, available to families and individuals without a Medical Card, caps the limit spent on medicines, drugs and medical appliances at €85 – the state pays the remainder of the bill. For families on low income even €85 can still be a shocking dent to family finances.

The Irish Medical Organisation and the Combat Poverty Agency have both called for an increase in the income threshold that determines eligibility for a Medical Card.

Access to quality public services are critical if the Government is to reach its target of lifting one in nine children out of consistent poverty – a fact underlined by the Combat Poverty Agency in its annual review of 2006. Twelve months later the Irish Association for Speech and Language Therapists said children are still waiting up to three years for an assessment³.

Early intervention is key in speech and language therapy but children who cannot pay the price of private treatment are being asked to bear the cost of waiting and the currency they are being asked to pay in, is their childhood and their future.

If this is tantamount to neglect on the state's part, then the state's provision of mental health services for adolescents and children is actual neglect. There are currently only 20 in-patient beds in the country for under 16s. While there are only three public beds available to an estimated 8,000 people with eating disorders.

Last year the Inspector of Mental Health Services described the physical conditions in one of Ireland's two residential child and adolescent mental health services as continuing to deteriorate and that "safety issues, the lack of toilet and showers and poor décor must be addressed". The service is not allowed to automatically replace any vacant posts and all routine maintenance of the unit has stopped⁴.

Recommendations

- Improve access to health care for those living in poverty by providing full Medical Cards to the 35% of the population on the lowest income levels by 2012
- Increase availability and access to flexible, quality public services for children, as identified in the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2016, and adhere to the timelines and targets set therein
- Immediate development of child and adolescent Community Mental Health Teams (CMHTs) as set out in the Vision for Change Strategy to guarantee services that are accessible and appropriate. Towards 2016 prioritises the delivery of one CMHT per 100,000 of the population by 2008
- The Department of Health and Children should explore the possibility of providing mental health supports such as advice and counselling in places where young people get together socially such as Youth Cafes
- New media could also be used to provide young people with mental health information, for example, on social networking web sites like Bebo and MySpace

1. O'Reilly et al (2006) cited in Nolan & Nolan (2007) Income, Medical Card Eligibility and Access to GP Services, ESRI
2. Combat Poverty Agency, 27 June 2007, Press Release
3. Irish Examiner 4 April 2007
4. Report of the Inspector of Mental Health Services 2006



Early childhood education and care

Quality early childhood education is good for children, good for families, good for communities and good for society.

The first few years of a child's life are the most critical in terms of learning and development. Developmental milestones are time-bound - they are either reached or missed. Remedial action at a later date can be both difficult and costly, for children, families, communities and the state.

While every child can benefit from quality pre-school, for children living in poverty, pre-school could be the first step on a journey of escape from poverty, a poverty which their own children could easily inherit¹.

For the state, the provision of quality pre-school education makes economic sense since it has a consolidating effect on later investment in primary and secondary education.

Barnardos wants every child to have access to a guaranteed, quality, regulated childcare place, staffed by well-trained individuals capable of providing for the development and wellbeing of each child in their care and inspected to ensure compliance with state regulations.

Recommendations

- Provide every child with a free quality pre-school place by implementing the National Economic Social Forum's blueprint for universal access to Early Childhood Care and Education. Roll-out of these places needs to begin with children who are disadvantaged
- Government should adapt Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education as policy so that children can be guaranteed quality care
- Increase support for parents in the form of an extra two weeks paid parental leave, available to either parent, building towards a total of 26 weeks paid parental leave in 2012. With existing maternity leave, this would add up to a child being cared for in the first year of their lives by one or both parents

1. Layte et al (2007) Poor Prescriptions: Poverty and Access to Community Health Services; NESF (2005) Early Childhood Care and Education, Report no.61; Lynch R.G. (2007) Enriching Children, Enriching the Nation: Public Investment in High Quality PreKindergarten; Heckman J. (2006) The Economics of Investing in Children, Policy Briefing No. 1, UCD Geary Institute; Combat Poverty Agency (2007) Health Policy Statement

Educational Disadvantage

One in three children from disadvantaged areas leaves primary school with severe problems reading and writing. One in four primary school pupils last year was taught in classes of 30 or more students while one in five children leaves secondary school without a Leaving Cert. What these figures add up to is an education system that is letting children down.

Families on social welfare and those on low incomes face enormous financial pressure in meeting back to school costs. The cost of school books alone averages about €144 for a primary school pupil and €302 for a student at second level. School uniforms, footwear, sports gear and equipment, school tours, and voluntary contributions to schools – can also be added to the bill. Children in lone parent families can face particular financial difficulties as the income limit for the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance is set at €139.50 less for lone parent families making it much harder for them to qualify. The income threshold for this payment needs to be the equivalent of the family Income Supplement (see also section on Income Support).

The challenges facing children do not stop at the school gate. Big class sizes continue to be a problem. Despite the last government's promise to reduce the average class size to 20 for all children under the age of nine, 109,376 primary school children were taught in classes of 30 or more last year¹; a challenging environment for any child trying to reach their

potential and even harder for those with literacy and other difficulties.

Education is one of the most powerful influences on a child's current and future wellbeing. It can enable or inhibit a child to reach their developmental potential and can enhance a child's life socially and economically.



Recommendations

- The Department of Education and Science to resource and invest in reading initiatives to fulfill the government's own target of halving the rate of illiteracy among primary school children in disadvantaged communities by 2016
- Increase resources to the National Educational Welfare Board so that it can continue to make a positive impact on children who are experiencing absenteeism
- The Department of Social and Family Affairs should reform the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance scheme so that the same income limit is used for one parent and two parent families. The level of the payment also needs to be increased: to €250 for children aged two to 11 and to €350 for those aged 12 and over

1. Irish Times 24 August 2007, Almost 110,000 pupils in class sizes of 30-plus



Housing and Homelessness

Housing

Homelessness in Ireland cannot be separated from the issue of housing. The 2005 Local Authority Assessment of Social Housing Needs found that 43,684 families were in need of social and affordable housing. The state is falling behind on its own targets: less than 1,500 units of social housing were provided in the first quarter of 2007. Under the National Development Plan and Towards 2016, the state has pledged to provide 27,000 housing units by 2009.

As a result of this housing shortage, many families continue to live in private rented accommodation of which almost a third has been found to be substandard¹. Many of these families are dependent on rent supplement which is a discretionary payment and does not reflect the real costs of rents.

Furthermore, calculation of the level of rent supplement to be paid does not take account of childcare costs, which serves to create a poverty trap for those parents who are trying to work their way out of welfare dependency and poverty.

Youth Homelessness

Homeless children are one of the most marginalised groups of children in Ireland. Children become homeless when a number of different life events coalesce but the root cause is poverty.

Children experience 'hidden' and 'visible' homelessness. Children can experience 'hidden' homelessness either with or without their parents where they are living in temporary informal accommodation situations, for example, B&B accommodation or sleeping on a relative's couch.

Children already on the streets face a litany of risks including exposure to drug and alcohol abuse, violence, crime, prostitution, assault and abuse.

In 1999 there were 774 homeless children². According to the latest figures from 2004³, there were 495 homeless children which shows a strong downward trend in the figures. These figures demonstrate that coordinated strategies to address child and youth homelessness, coupled with adequate resourcing of those strategies, can and do make a difference in taking children off the streets.

Recommendations

- Establish an NCT type model for private rented accommodation to ensure adherence to minimum standards which includes clear timelines for actions and targets
- Acquire/commence new housing units as a matter of urgency if the government is to meet its own target of providing 27,000 social and affordable housing units between 2007 and 2009
- Review the Youth Homeless Strategy for ongoing effectiveness
- Resource new action programme on youth homelessness as promised in the National Action Plan for Social Inclusion

1. Almost one third of private rented accommodation examined by the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government in 2005 was found to be substandard
2. Department of Health and Children (2001) Youth Homelessness Strategy. These figures are for children who are homeless on their own, they are not homeless as part of a family
3. Department of Health and Children, Preliminary Analysis of Childcare Interim Dataset 2004



Income Support

One in nine children in Ireland lives in consistent poverty¹. In reality this can mean going 24 hours without a substantial meal or being cold because parents are unable to afford to heat the home. Children are not poor in their own right: they are poor as part of a family and therefore, if child poverty is to end, families need to be supported². Poverty also affects more children than adults as overall there are more children in poorer households than there are adults.³

Child Income Supports

In the continued absence of a new targeted child income support (as suggested by the National Economic and Social Council) Barnardos recommends a substantial increase in the Qualified Child Allowance (QCA). This payment, (previously known as Child Dependant Allowance) remained frozen from 1994 until Budget 2007 when it was increased to €22 per week.

Barnardos believes that there is a strong need for a targeted payment to support children living with parents who are on social welfare or who are in low-paid employment. This weekly payment, as suggested by the National Economic and Social Council, would merge QCA and Family Income Supplement - a key income support to families at work on low pay. The commitment in the Programme for Government 2007 to target this amalgamated second tier payment at the poorest families is welcomed by Barnardos⁴.

Barnardos believes that families should automatically receive this targeted child income support if their household income falls below a certain threshold, thereby removing the condition that eligibility would be based on either social welfare or employment status.

Family Income Supplement

Family Income Supplement is a key income support to families at work on low pay. Although the take-up of FIS by those in low paid employment has substantially increased over the past number of years⁵, there still exists the need to ensure that those eligible for the payment are in receipt of it. It is important that information on how to avail of the payment is regularly repeated as a means of encouraging take-up.

School Costs

Families on social welfare and those on low incomes face enormous financial pressure in meeting back to school costs. The cost of school books averages €144 for a primary school pupil and €302 for a student at second level. Children who live in lone parent families are less likely to receive income support than children who are parented by a couple, as the income threshold for the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance (BSCFA) is set at €139.50 less for lone parent families making it much harder for them to qualify (see section on Educational Disadvantage).

Recommendations

- Qualified Child Allowance to be increased in Budget 2008 to €30
- Barnardos recommends that the targeted payment to children in poverty start as a priority in 2008
- The Department of Social and Family Affairs to reform the BSCFA scheme so that the same income threshold is used for one parent and two parent families. The income threshold used to assess eligibility for the payment needs to be raised to the income threshold for Family Income Supplement
- Department of Social and Family Affairs build on previous successes by running new awareness campaigns to encourage take-up of Family Income Supplement
- FIS payment to be made automatically when income level falls below a certain level

1. CSO (2006) EU-SILC Figures 2004-2005
2. NESF (2005) The Developmental Welfare State
3. Office for Social Inclusion (2007) National Action Plan for Social Inclusion 2007-2016
4. See also Towards 2016
5. 25 September 2007, DSFA Response to Barnardos' query

Play & Recreation

Every time a child plays, they learn. By sharing and taking turns, negotiating obstacles, exercising imaginations and interacting with others, children develop the skills and experience that in turn lead to enhanced confidence and resilience.

The problem solvers of tomorrow should be honing their skills in the playgrounds of today.

Our National Play Policy 'Ready, Steady, Play!' outlines the vital importance of play in a child's daily life and its role in cognitive, physical, social and emotional development. Therefore it is imperative that children are given quality opportunities to play. For example, in disadvantaged communities where there may be little room at home, with limited opportunities to participate in structured activities or even a safe shared physical space in the community, then children can be denied access to play.

The need to play does not stop when children outgrow the playground. Leisure activities are key to a young person's social and emotional growth, to their sense of belonging, and to the development of their identity.

The friendship bonds created enjoying shared leisure pursuits can play a strong role in maintaining good mental health and if that leisure time is sporting orientated then there are obvious benefits for physical health too.

A public consultation held to inform the development of the National Recreation Policy found that young people identified their single biggest need as the provision of more recreational facilities and activities, in particular, the development of Youth Cafes. When developing facilities and activities – affordability and access should also be addressed.



Recommendations

- Local authorities to be resourced to invest in the development of play and recreational facilities for all children and young people
- Full resourcing and implementation of the National Recreation Policy, prioritising the immediate development of a network of Youth Cafes around the country, their roll-out to begin in rural areas and urban areas experiencing disadvantage

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