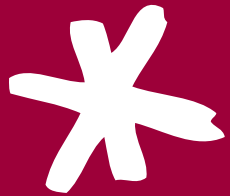




This is Barnardos'
Children's Budget 2007





Introduction

Barnardos is putting forward a Children's Budget for 2007. This budget submission prioritises the key factors that determine the quality of children's lives - household income, education, medical needs and play/recreation. Adults make the decisions that impact on children's lives and children live with the consequences – we think it's time to put children's interests and voices at the centre of decision-making.

Household Income

Help Combat Child Poverty

The fact that one in ten children (approximately 100,000)¹ are living in consistent poverty at a time when Ireland is one of the richest countries in Europe is unforgivable. The elimination of child poverty is essential not only because it has a major impact on children's current quality of life but also because it can literally shape their futures. Children who experience poverty are more likely to develop literacy problems, leave school early and, without qualifications, become involved in alcohol or drugs misuse and experience unemployment.

Child Income Supports

The government strategy has been to increase the universal Child Benefit payment significantly to the detriment of the targeted Child Dependent Allowance payment. Barnardos believes there is a strong need for a targeted payment, directly for children whose parents are on social welfare or in low paid employment.

This payment would assist families who find it hard to make ends meet and who have been identified as being most at risk of poverty. This weekly payment, as suggested by the National Economic and Social Council (NESCC), would merge Child Dependent Allowance (CDA) and Family Income Supplement (FIS).



Barnardos calls for the introduction of a new targeted child income support that would assist towards eliminating child poverty.



'Life is an everyday struggle; the odd day is alright.'

I am thinking ahead all of the time about what is coming next and how to deal with it.'

(Mother of five, Cork)²

The commitment in the new Social Partnership Agreement 'Towards 2016' to examine this further is welcomed. Barnardos believes that families should automatically receive this targeted child income support if their household income is below a certain threshold, thereby removing the condition that eligibility would be based on either social welfare or employment status.

Fuel Allowance

Household heating bills are escalating again, with gas prices set to increase by 34% and electricity prices by 20% in October. These price hikes place an additional strain on families already financially stretched often resulting in children living in cold and damp conditions. The payment which is only made from the end of September to mid-April can leave households in a very vulnerable position. Barnardos believes that the current rates of €14 per week applicable to the Fuel Allowance are insufficient to meet these charges. Lone parent households (with children under 16 years) are more likely to suffer from fuel poverty in Ireland than any other social group, with one in five such households affected by chronic fuel poverty.³



Barnardos calls for the rates of the Fuel Allowance to be increased substantially in line with the price hikes and index linked to ensure their value keeps pace with price changes.

Educational Disadvantage

Barnardos ran a national campaign on educational disadvantage 'Make the Grade' in April 2006 to highlight the extent and effects of educational disadvantage on children. While the initiatives being rolled out under the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) strategy will have some positive effect, Barnardos believes more can be done to ensure all children can reach their full educational potential.

Tracking The Children Who Fall Out Of The System

It is unacceptable that up to 1,000 children fail to make the transition to secondary school every year and there is no tracking system to identify where they have gone to. One in three children from disadvantaged backgrounds have serious literacy problems and this can lead them to leave school early.

School Book Costs

There is a huge financial burden on families to meet the costs of going back to school. The expense of uniforms, books, materials, voluntary contributions and sportsgear can be crippling, particularly for those families on social welfare and in low paid employment, and is sending families into debt. The cost of school books for a primary school pupil is approximately €137, and for a secondary school pupil the amount can total €286.⁴ The current system of allocating some schools funding under the School Book Grant scheme is very complicated and is not widespread.



Barnardos calls on the Department of Education and Science to introduce a comprehensive primary school pupil database as a matter of urgency.



'They say we have free education but I haven't seen anything that's free. We don't want our children to feel any different from other children.'

(Mother of three, Dublin)⁵



Barnardos recommends the introduction of a national school book rental scheme that would ensure all children get the best start to their education and relieve some of the financial pressure on parents.

7th September 2006

Dear Minister Cowen

I am writing to ask you not to forget about me and other children like me this Budget. I hear grown ups say Ireland is a rich country but I haven't seen any. Why does everything cost so much? I hear my parents talk about it all the time. Like our house is always cold, our street is always dirty and I can't join the dancing club because my mum says it costs too much but it is only 5 Euro a day.

I like school because I can be with my friends but I don't like all the homework. I find it hard to do it because my mum hasn't been able to afford all the books and there is no space at home for me to do it or I have to look after my sister who is sick again. She has been waiting years for an operation and is often out of school because she gets sick.

If I had a magic wand I would give people a better life. Make food, houses and going to the doctor cheaper and more places for children to play.

Please make my wish come true this Budget.

Thank You,

Aoife (aged 11)

This letter is compiled from the experiences of many children working directly with Barnardos.

Medical Needs of Children

Full Medical Cards

The government initially promised 200,000 extra full Medical Cards in 2002 but in fact the population with Medical Card coverage has decreased from 31.24% in 2001 to 28.07% in 2005 despite ever increasing costs of healthcare. There has also been a low take up of GP only Medical Cards with only 29,000 out of a possible 200,000 being availed of. This is mainly because the cards do not cover the costs of medicines or prescriptions. Access to available primary health care is essential for children to reach their developmental potential.

Child Appropriate Services

The scale of mental health illnesses and suicides among young people is significant yet the services available to them are totally inadequate. In 2005, 80 people aged 15-24 years took their lives, 69 of these were young men. In fact up to 9% of teenagers are engaged in suicidal behaviour.⁶ Age appropriate services for other illnesses such as Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and Anorexia or developmental delays such as speech and language difficulties are also equally insufficient with waiting times for attending services between six and 18 months. These waiting times can seriously impede the child's personal development.



Barnardos recommends the extension of the full Medical Card to all those families whose total income is taxed at the standard tax rate (20%). This would ensure coverage for all families on social welfare and those who are in low paid employment.



Barnardos recognises the commitment under 'Towards 2016' for the establishment of Child and Adolescent Community Mental Health Teams and calls for their immediate development to guarantee services are available, accessible and appropriate for the child regardless of their illness.

Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

The benefits for children of quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) are far reaching and can assist towards breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty. Participation and attendance in ECEC programmes have a positive impact on children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, with regard to cognitive, social and emotional development, school readiness and school performance.⁷

Although the roll out of the National Childcare Investment Programme will see up to 50,000 new ECEC places by 2010, this does nothing to address the affordability issue and with weekly fees averaging €120 and higher in Dublin,⁸ this results in many children from low income families being excluded from the benefits of ECEC. Even the new annual Early Childcare Supplement of €1,000 to all parents with children under six is insufficient as it equates to €20 per week. Of the 50,000 new ECEC places, 10,000 are for those aged three to four years, effectively equating to 2,000 new places each year.



Barnardos recommends the National Economic and Social Forum blueprint for ECEC development in Ireland, including the introduction of universal quality free ECEC places for all children the year prior to joining primary school, and the roll out of these places beginning with children who are experiencing disadvantage.



'I can see the benefit this programme has been to my child and other children. There are so many activities they can do that it really improves their development.'

(Mother of three, Dublin)⁹

Play and Recreation

The vision underpinning the National Play Policy, 'Ready, Steady, Play!'¹⁰ is one where the importance of play is recognised, so that children experience a range of quality play opportunities to enrich their childhood. Children and young people's participation in play and recreational activities improves their personal development, health and wellbeing.

Local authorities, as a group, are one of the primary drivers of the National Play Policy and a study of county councils showed that of the 26 councils surveyed, 11 had a published play policy. However, there were great regional disparities regarding public playgrounds for example with Limerick City Council and County Council combined having just three playgrounds.¹¹ Monaghan County Council provides one playground to every 2,932 children while Limerick County Council has one to 121,471 children.



Barnardos calls for increased investment by local authorities in the development of play and recreational facilities for all children and young people.

Reference

- 1 Central Statistics Office (2005) EU SILC study, Cork
- 2 Barnardos (2005) 'Seven Steps to Ending Child Poverty', Dublin
- 3 Open (2004) 'Fuel Poverty', Dublin
- 4 Barnardos (2006) 'Back to School Costs', Dublin www.barnardos.ie
- 5 Barnardos (2006) 'Make the Grade', report 2006, Dublin
- 6 Joint Oireachtas Committee on Health and Children (2006) 'High Level of Suicide in Irish Society', Dublin
- 7 Sheila B Kamerman, Michelle Neuman, Jane Waldfogel and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn/OECD (2003) 'Social Policies, Family Types and Child Outcomes in Selected OECD Countries'
- 8 Central Statistics Office www.cso.ie
- 9 Barnardos (2006) 'Make the Grade', report 2006, Dublin
- 10 National Children's Office (2004) National Play Policy, 'Ready Steady Play!', Dublin
- 11 National Play Resource Centre (2006) quoted in 'The Irish Times', 29th June 2006



Barnardos supports children whose wellbeing 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.

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