

**Barnardos Opening Statement to the Joint Committee on Education and Skills  
on Textbook Rental Schemes, the use of technology for educational purposes  
and the necessity to resort to moneylenders to cover school costs**

12 September 2019

**Introduction**

Good morning Cathaoirleach, other members of the Committee and colleagues in the education and community and voluntary sectors. My name is Naomi Feely and I am Barnardos Policy Officer.

Barnardos welcomes the opportunity to address the Joint Committee on Education and Skills regarding these three important issues.

We have made a detailed written submission to the Committee as well as providing the text of our opening statement which I will summarise.

For over ten years Barnardos has been highlighting the issue of school costs and their impact on parents through the distribution, analysis and publication of our Annual Survey. In our submission to the Committee we present further analysis of the 2019 survey data.

**Textbook Rental Schemes**

Funding from the Department of Education under the School Book Grant Scheme allows schools to run such rental schemes or distribute funding at their discretion to those most in need of support.

Our analysis shows that access to book rental schemes for primary schools has grown from 50% in 2012 to 74% in 2019 but remained fairly stagnant around the 40% figure for secondary schools. Therefore we urge the Department of Education and Skills to

provide further guidance and support given the lag in setting up such schemes in secondary schools

In primary schools, 88% of parents contribute less than €100. However, in secondary schools, only four in ten parents stated they contributed under €100; a third, pay between €101 and €150 and one-fifth pay more than €150.

There is also a variation in what is included in the schemes. A further disaggregation of costs by class and school year is available in our submission.

Barnardos Recommends providing free books to all primary school children at a miniscule cost of 0.2% of the Department of Education's overall budget. The infrastructure of the current school book rental scheme provides a mechanism through which to drive this and given continued sufficient funding could now be called a school book distribution scheme. This should be available in all schools.

### **Technology for educational purposes**

Our survey found that similar to previous years, the use of digital devices is more prevalent in secondary schools. The reported proportion in primary schools remains at around 14%- however, Barnardos is concerned that 13% of these were in infant classes – 5 and 6 year olds. There was a jump in usage amongst secondary students to 32% from 25% in 2018.

The costs associated with purchasing a digital device are quite substantial and may put further pressure on parents if they have to pay out of their own pocket. 93% of primary school parents, indicated that the device is provided by the school. In this instance it is assumed that the school therefore pay for the device. However, a quarter of secondary school parents said that the school provides (and therefore pay) for the device. Half of those responding indicated that while the school organises the device, parents pay. The remaining quarter said that they provide the digital device.

It is unclear if the purpose of using digital devices is to defray the use and costs associated with books. If so, this is not being achieved. Overall, parents of primary school pupils who were required to have a digital device, were paying an average of

€80 on book costs compared to €85 for the entire sample. Similarly those requiring digital devices in secondary school spent €170 on books versus €190 overall.

Barnardos recommends the committee explore the pedagogical, developmental and socialisation outcomes on using such approaches in both primary and secondary schools. The financial impact on parents and schools also needs to be examined.

## Moneylenders

Each year parents tell Barnardos about the impact that the costs of getting their child ready to return to school has on their household budget. For many, the costs they must incur means cutting back on household expenses, not paying bills on time, taking money out of their savings or borrowing from various sources.

Worryingly 8% of primary school parents and 14% of secondary school parents stated that they borrowed money. Further analysis of this data found that 3% of parents indicated that they borrow money from a moneylender, a review of our survey data from the three previous years indicates that this figure has remained consistent.

In relation to the previous issue of having to buy a digital device, almost one-fifth (19%) of secondary school parents who are required to do so said they borrowed money - 5% accessed this money through money lenders. Secondary school parents were also slightly more likely to take money from their savings.

Barnardos supports the Society of St Vincent de Paul's recent recommendation that advertisement for moneylenders should have 'Tobacco Style' warnings about the high costs associated with accessing these products.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, Barnardos supports the recommendations from the recent report of this committee in relation to school costs and we would like to see these fully implemented. I am happy to address any questions regarding our submission from members.

To end I would like to share two quotes from parents who completed our survey. The first highlights the impact that school costs has on a household budget:

*“My son is due to start Secondary School in August...I have to go short in other areas like food etc to pay for everything. I usually shop in the reduced section in supermarkets this (is) an added stress as I have to be careful that I use the reduced meat etc. quick enough.....*

*I am very grateful to receive the Back to School Allowance which I should receive today. This money will pay off some of the loans I had to take out in May to buy an iPad, insurance etc.” (Secondary School Parent).*

Finally, while some parents can manage school costs they are acutely aware of that this can be a burden for others:

*"The amount of fundraising has increased so much in the past 2 years and the school is putting pressure on children to sell tickets and support events. My kids are ok as I can afford to support but there are others who cannot. It is not right that schools have to source so much funds themselves"(Primary School Parent)*

**END**