

Opening Statement to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Employment Affairs and Social Protection

12 July 2018

Introduction

Chairperson, Deputies and Senators, on behalf of Barnardos I would like to thank you for the invitation to speak here today. We welcome the opportunity to discuss how Budget 2019 can improve children's lives. My name is Suzanne Connolly and I am Director of Children's Services in Barnardos and Chief Executive Officer designate. I am joined by my colleague Niamh Kelly, Policy Development Officer.

Barnardos works directly with more than 15,000 children and families, providing services and support in 40 centres around the country. We see first-hand the transformative affect child-centred policy decisions can have on a child's life; but too often we see how a lack of statutory investment means children are lost. When a child is lost, the world takes notice. It's front page news. However, 1 in 7 children in Ireland are already lost.¹ We lose children every day to homelessness, to poverty and to neglect. These children are lost through no fault of their own and it is entirely preventable.

It is ten years on from the economic crash. By adopting austerity policies the State may have ensured Ireland's economy recovered but it also guaranteed those hit hardest by the recession are those who are most vulnerable. Child poverty has risen exponentially during this time from 6.3 per cent of children in 2008 to 11.1 per cent of children in 2016; that's more than 73,000 children.² For a decade these children have been forgotten about, collateral damage of a financial crisis created before they were even born. Budget 2019 offers the opportunity to transform these children's lives.

Income Supports for Families

The most effective way for Government to ensure a child reaches their potential is to support their family. We recommend the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection to focus on two areas; lone parent families and families with teenagers. Lone parent families are consistently among the most vulnerable in society and families with teenagers face increased costs when it comes to food, clothing, school and social costs.^{3 4 5} We are calling for the Government to make changes to the payments and schemes available to lone parents to support them, rather than penalise them when

¹ Cumulative figure of 173,052 children living in poverty, those in care, those referred to family support services, those in direct provision and those experiencing homelessness. All figures relate to December 2016 so likely this to be an underestimate especially given the number of children experiencing homelessness has risen significantly.

² Central Statistics Office (2018) *Survey on Income and Living Conditions 2016*. Dublin: Central Statistics Office.

³ Central Statistics Office. (2017). *Survey on Income and Living Conditions 2016*. Dublin: Central Statistics Office.

⁴ Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government. (2018). *Homelessness Report: April 2018*. Dublin: Department of Housing Planning and Local Government.

⁵ Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice. (2018) *Minimum Essential Standard of Living*. Dublin: Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice.

trying to access employment. For families with children over 12 years of age, we ask the Government to increase the Qualified Child Increase payment by €5 per child at a cost of €35 million.

Paid Parental Leave

Parents have the biggest influence on a child's early life, particularly in their first year. Paid parental leave in a child's first year, shared between both parents, is increasingly recognised as both in the best interests of the child and a social good by policy makers internationally. Here, a 2018 survey found 69 per cent of people are in favour of financial support for parents to stay at home for the first 12 months of their child's life.⁶ Developing strong attachment between parent and child early on is of critical importance in promoting positive outcomes for children.⁷ We recommend the introduction of an additional 8 weeks paid leave in a child's first year to be shared between both parents at a cost of €59.2 million per year, with a commitment to a further 16 weeks split over two consecutive budgets.

Supports for Children in School

Making education a positive experience for all children, no matter how much money their parents earn or where they live, should be a core goal of Budget 2019 if the Government truly intends making Ireland's education system the best in Europe by 2020. While the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection assists some families with the cost of school through the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance, this represents just a portion of the cost of sending a child to school. Barnardos School Costs Survey, which launched this week, highlights the cost of sending children to school in Ireland. School books are essential for children to receive an education yet we know they are expensive, subject to change and increasingly issued in single use format. We recommend €20 million of the Department's budget be diverted to fund free school books for primary school children.⁸

Barnardos welcomed the increase in last year's budget for the School Meals Programme; however there remains a significant shortage of appropriate food preparation and storage facilities in schools. This shortfall threatens the efficacy and sustainability of the School Meals Programme. Barnardos recommends further investment of capital grants to improve school infrastructure and capacity to provide nutritious meals for children at a cost of €2 million.

⁶ Early Childhood Ireland, (2018) *Childcare Barometer 2018*

⁷ Barnardos, (2017) *Birth to 2 years*, Dublin: Barnardos

⁸ Barnardos. (2016) *Making Education Free*. Dublin : Barnardos

Supports for Children while Homeless or in their Home

The Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection has supported families to secure and retain a home through rent supplement. As more and more tenancies switch to the Housing Assistance Payment funded by Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, focus should shift to other supports available to families in the home. Barnardos works with families across the country experiencing homelessness. Food, travel and social costs in emergency accommodation for these families are high. We recommend an Emergency Accommodation Expenses Payment be made available to families experiencing homelessness at a cost of €61 million.

The cost of heating and powering a home is on the rise with a 5.2 per cent increase in the last year.⁹ The last decade has seen a near 20% increase in the cost of fuel and electricity.¹⁰ Fuel and energy costs represent a higher proportion of household expenditure for those who earn the least, and price hikes hit them hardest.¹¹ Fuel poverty impacts children's health, and can mean children have less food, clothes and other basic necessities. We recommend an increase in the Fuel Allowance by €5 per week at a cost of €45.6 million.¹²

Conclusion

In Barnardos our vision is a country where no child has to suffer and where every child is able to reach their fullest potential. Investing in children in Budget 2019 would go some way to realising this vision. My statement this morning has focused on our recommendations to the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection; however Barnardos has made a number of recommendations to other departments which we would be happy to discuss also. We look forward to hearing your thoughts on our proposals and welcome any questions you might have.

⁹ Central Statistics Office. (2018) *Consumer Price Index*. Dublin: Central Statistics Office.

¹⁰ Central Statistics Office. (2018) *Consumer Price Index Dataset*. Available at <http://www.cso.ie/px/pxeirestat/Statire/SelectVarVal/Define.asp?maintable=CPM16&PLanguage=0> [accessed 04 May 2018]

¹¹ Central Statistics Office. (2017) *Household Budget survey 2015-2016*. Dublin: Central Statistics Office

¹² Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection, (Regina Doherty), Ceistenanna- Questions- *Dáil Éireann*, vol 568, 22 May 2018