

Thank you for inviting us here today to speak on such an important issue.

Last year Barnardos supported 18,000 children and families across Ireland. We work with children and families to help address issues affecting their children and young peoples' development and wellbeing.

The majority of families receiving our support services are experiencing poverty, living in cramped, overcrowded and unsuitable accommodation<sup>1</sup>, with parents struggling to meet essential costs such as electricity, heating, transport, clothes and food, not to mention the costs associated with sending their children to school.

Research shows that living in poverty significantly affects a child's wellbeing and future development.<sup>2</sup> It worsens children's physical and mental health, educational attainment and causes social exclusion and isolation. It is associated with reduced life chances and increases the likelihood of poverty as adults. Our staff see first-hand the damaging impact that living in poverty can have on a child's life.

Reducing and ultimately ending child poverty should be a fundamental aim and commitment of Government. Children living in poverty are often far more dependent on state supports for meeting essential needs. Unfortunately, the state all too often fails to meet these needs, and children are waiting for unacceptable lengths of time for assessment and support around speech and language and psychological and mental health services.

The children and parents we support deal with poverty on top of considerable additional adversity in their lives, including parental mental health issues, parental addiction, domestic violence, homelessness and parental separation.

Our recent Back to School Survey of almost 1,500 parents highlighted the financial challenges they faced last year, with 54% stating they experienced financial concerns. Over 50% of parents reported they had been concerned about the cost of returning to school, and 20% had to take out some form of loan to meet those costs.

Our support services intervene to improve the life chances of children and parents experiencing poverty by providing direct support to families. We provide them with the practical support to address immediate needs; this might be through the direct provision of items, including furniture and food, or linking with energy providers to try to reduce payments.

One such service is our teen parent service in Finglas, Tallaght, Waterford and Wexford that works with young mothers remain in education through the provision of a range of practical supports, funding childcare costs, contributions towards travel expenses, purchase of laptops and support as needed. We know from research that the likelihood of experiencing childhood poverty is closely linked to maternal educational attainment.

In order to address child poverty the government should as a priority:

- Reduce the number of children experiencing homeless, placing a 6 month limit on the time they can spend in emergency accommodation and ensuring they have access to family support workers.

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<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, over the past few months we have seen the return of housing pressures. Statistics show from August to September this year there was a 7% increase in the number of children living in emergency accommodation.

<sup>2</sup> The dynamics of child poverty in Ireland: Evidence from the Growing Up in Ireland survey. ESRI

- Further roll out the hot school meals programme.
- Provide free education to all children, including free schoolbooks, ending voluntary contributions and high cost uniforms.
- Enhance welfare supports for lone parents, whose children are at heightened risk of poverty.
- Increase access to free childcare for low-income families.