



Children's Budget 2025

July 2024

About Barnardos

Barnardos provides frontline services to children and their families. We work with children and families who have been affected by traumatic life situations such as poverty, abuse, parental mental health challenges, neglect, separation, bereavement and parental addiction. We offer a range of early intervention and targeted services across the country, in family homes, schools, early learning and care settings and communities.

Our work combats social, educational and economic disadvantage, minimising the negative impact on children's lives through a range of services and programmes. Barnardos services are needs led, outcomes focused and based on evidence. We enable children and families to build their resilience and meet their behavioural, emotional, educational, physical and social needs. Our approach is to develop and deliver a suite of trauma informed programmes, driven by a culture of hope and possibility. In 2023, Barnardos worked with over 26,000 children and their families.

Introduction

Continued cost of living pressures over the past 12 months have pulled more and more children into deprivation and placed increased pressure on parents. Too many children continue to go without essentials, and too many families and children go without the support they need to have a decent childhood and provide them with the best opportunities to develop. The longer children live in poverty and deprivation, the greater an impact it will have on their health, wellbeing, and future development.

The Taoiseach recently stated he is determined that Ireland will be a European and world leader in progressively eliminating child poverty, and making sure that every child can realise their potential. This Government, in their final budget, has a real opportunity to progress that ambition and make lasting change. Firstly, it can introduce measures to address the issue of children going without essentials by prioritising families struggling most and at greatest risk of going without essentials. Secondly, introduce more supports needed to ensure children can live in secure homes with supportive adults around them and are therefore in a position to realise their potential. That means support to address or mitigate any harm that might be caused by adversities within the home.

Department of Social Protection – Income Supports

Last month, we published our third cost of living report¹ highlighting the growing impact that cost of living increases is having on children across the country. It sets out findings of a nationally representative survey of 1,000 parents conducted by Amárach Research in April of this year.

The survey found that almost half of parents have cut back on social activities for their children (47%), over one-quarter (28%) have cut back on heat, with one in five (20%) cutting back on electricity. Two fifths (40%) revealed they have had to cut back on clothing expenses and alarmingly, almost one in five (18%) have cut back on medical needs.

¹ [Barnardos Cost of Living Report 2024 - Barnardos](#)

Over the past six months, have and or your children/children had to go without or cut down on any of the following due to cost of living increases?	April 2024
Heat	28%
Electricity	20%
Food	20%
Clothing	40%
Medical appointments/medicines/dentist/assessments	18%
Social activities	47%
Participating in local sports groups/clubs	20%
School supplies	11%
School trips/activities	18%
Transport	12%
Rent	7%
None of the above	26%

The survey also found that over 80% of parents said that cost of living increases have negatively affected their children over the past six months. Two in five parents (40%) said that they were moderately or very worried about having enough money over the next 6 months to meet the needs of their children/children in their care.

How worried are you about being able to afford to meet your children's needs over the next 6 months	April 2024
Very worried	21%
Moderately worried	19%
Slightly worried	41%
Not worried	19%

Lone parents were far more likely to report having gone without or cut back on items. For example, 30% of lone parents said they cut back or went without food compared to 17% of two parent families. Similarly, 61% of lone parents said they went without or cut back on clothing, compared to 34% of two parent families. Lone parents were also more than twice as likely to report cost of living issues negatively affecting their child than those in two parent families, 31% compared to 14%. Nearly half of lone parents (46%) said they were always worried about being able to provide their children with daily essentials, compared to 20% of those in two parent families.

Over the past year, Barnardos staff have stated that the majority of families they are working with are continuing to struggle substantially with cost of living problems. More than seven in ten staff (71%) said that the cost of living increases were having an extremely detrimental or substantially negative impact on the health and wellbeing of the children in the families they support.

Staff reported families they support sleeping in living rooms with open fires as they couldn't afford to heat entire houses, or going to bed early as it meant being able to keep themselves warm blankets rather than requiring heating being on. These families were left with no option but to do take those measures. Similarly, parents spoke about having no option but to wait long periods to purchase clothing for their children. Price increases over the past few years

have meant they are left with very little to spend on clothing, never mind other activities for their children.

Many families on low incomes, and a large proportion of those we support, use pay as you go meters for their electricity and heating. They are frightened of receiving large bills that they cannot afford to pay and being disconnected from their energy supplies as a result. Unfortunately, families pay a considerable premium for using these meters, despite being those least capable of affording rates. Recently published research from the Vincentian MESL Research Centre² demonstrates that last year using pay as you go meters led to energy costs being one third higher than if they had been using direct debit bills. Addressing this would enable many children living in low income families to avoid experiencing long periods in cold homes.

Additionally, research we conducted earlier this year regarding food poverty³ found that more than one in seven parents (16%) were regularly unable to afford a main meal for their family/children and one quarter (26%) of parents stated that at some point in the last year, they did not have enough food to feed their children, up from 19% the previous year.

The most recent statistics from the Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) show that there have been positive steps taken in relation to the number of children living in consistent poverty in 2023, while the number of those at risk of poverty remained roughly the same⁴. Government measures introduced in last year's budget did help to prevent more children falling into poverty.

However, the statistics also showed that the number experiencing enforced deprivation and therefore going without essential items actually increased⁵. This is a result of more children living in non-income poor households. So, although less children were technically living in poverty, more children were going without essentials. This is reflective of what staff in our services have witnessed, outlined in more detail below.

It is clear from analysis of SILC that the cost of living supports provided by government have played an extremely important role in preventing more people from entering poverty. The government must continue targeting supports at families most at risk of being pulled into deprivation, whilst simultaneously introducing specific measures that will help reduce those already experiencing deprivation.

It is vital that the government acts, through proactive targeted policies, to ensure that all children in Ireland have the opportunity to achieve a decent quality of life, and at an absolute minimum, live in homes that have sufficient food and can provide regular meals, and live in appropriately heated accommodation with electricity.

Recommendation: As a first step there should be an increase in core social welfare rates⁶ by €15 (Estimated cost of €500 million).

² [Publications | Minimum Essentials Budget for Ireland \(budgeting.ie\)](#)

³ February 2023 [Food Insecurity in Ireland: Impact on Children and their Parents \(barnardos.ie\)](#)

⁴ [Survey on Income and Living Conditions \(SILC\) 2023 - Central Statistics Office](#)

⁵ For example, the number of children that went without heating at some stage last year increased from 8.8% to 12%. More than one in five (20.9%) were unable to afford to regularly participate in a leisure activity that costs money last year, up from 17.5% in 2022.

⁶ State pension, widow/er's pension, Basic supplementary welfare allowance, Jobseekers benefit, Jobseekers allowance, Carer's benefit, Disability allowance.

Recommendation: The Qualified Child Increase Payment⁷ should be increased by a minimum of €10 for over 12s and €5 for under 12s (Estimated cost of €100 million). Over the longer term, the government should benchmark social welfare payments in line with minimum essential standard of living measurements.

Recommendation: Unacceptable that children in lone parent families continue to be disproportionately likely to experience deprivation. Immediate steps to alleviate this include 1) Extending Jobseekers Transition Payment to parents in work, education or training until their youngest child reaches the end of second level education 2) Extending the Fuel Allowance to families in receipt of the Working Family Payment as a targeted measure to reach more families experiencing energy poverty (Estimated cost of €40 million).

Recommendation: Set maximum waiting times for parents seeking Additional Needs Payments where children are at risk of going without essentials.

Recommendation: Ensure that families on low incomes with children living in the house who are using pay as you go meters are automatically placed on lowest tariffs and not charged additional service charges. Introduce additional measures to protect them from self-disconnection.

Department of Education – Reducing Cost of Education

Each year, our Back to School Survey examines the costs associated with attending primary and secondary school in Ireland. Our most recent survey⁸ found that over half of primary (51% - a significant decrease from 69%, reflecting the benefit of free school books for primary students) and almost three-quarters of secondary school parents (74%) are worried about meeting costs.

The announcement in Budget 2024 to extend free schoolbooks to all junior cycle school students was a welcome step in securing a truly free education for all children. However, books remain a significant cost for parents at the start of the school term. The average total cost of secondary school books for those in 4th, 5th and 6th year was €216⁹ last year.

Additionally, schools continue to ask parents to buy crested or branded uniforms, with 75% of primary and 93% of secondary school parents reporting they are required to do so. 76% of parents reported being asked for a voluntary contribution, with 70% stating it doesn't feel voluntary. This can add significant pressure on parents as schools mainly seek payment in September on top of all the other expenses.

The additional €21 million secured as a permanent increase in capitation funding to assist schools now and longer term with increased day-to-day running costs in Budget 2024 was very welcome. This has brought the basic rate of capitation grant to the pre-2011 level of €200 per student in primary schools. However, that is a level that may have been appropriate 15 years ago. It is no longer sufficient, as evidence by recent statistics shows

⁷ Parents receiving social welfare payments may also get an extra amount for each child called an Increase for a Qualified Child (IQC), depending on the payments they are receiving and if their child meets certain conditions.

⁸ [Back to School 2023 - Barnardos](#)

⁹ We will be publishing our Back to School Survey 2024 results next in a few weeks.

that seven out of ten primary schools have run at a deficit at some stage over the past 12 months and had to rely on cash reserves to cover day-to-day costs¹⁰. Unless this is addressed schools will continue feeling forced to make up the difference by asking parents for voluntary contributions.

Recommendation: Increase the Back to School Allowance permanently by €100, so that low-income families can afford to purchase new uniforms and shoes for their children, without jeopardising their ability to pay for daily essentials such as heat, electricity and food (Estimated cost €12 million).

Recommendation: The government should commit to extending free schoolbook access to senior cycle students (Estimated cost €25 million).

Recommendation: Provide schools with sufficient funding to cover their costs so that they no longer have to rely on the voluntary contributions of parents. This would require an increase to the capitation grant (Estimated cost €40 million)¹¹.

Recommendation: Further expand the hot school meals programme to allow all post primary schools interested to partake in the scheme provided they have the local infrastructure to do so.

Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

- Family and Parental Support

Intensive and trauma centred family support can help to improve the current and future health, wellbeing and development of vulnerable children in Ireland experiencing disadvantage. Family support services minimise the amount of trauma and mitigate harm children experience living in families and homes facing adversities¹². These services improve children and young people's current circumstances, physical and mental health and wellbeing and provide them with better opportunities for positive growth and development.¹³ Intensive therapeutic and trauma informed family support can act as an early intervention, mitigating some of the harm children may have faced, and place them in a better position in the future as well as improving their immediate quality of life and childhood more generally.

Children can often be negatively impacted by adversities that their parents experience, such as parental substance issues, poor parental mental health, domestic violence, inter-parental conflict alongside poverty and deprivation. Of the children being supported through our target services, 42% were dealing with parental separation, 20% were experiencing inter-parental conflict and 19% were struggling with bereavement. Over one quarter (28%) had parents with parental mental health issues and a similar number (27%) had a parent with a substance misuse issue.

¹⁰ [CPSMA-Survey-on-School-Finances-Written-Report-2.pdf](#)

¹¹ Calculation based on our previous Back to School Surveys.

¹² [youghalfinalreport.pdf \(barnardos.ie\)](#)

¹³ [Tusla What Works in Family Support.pdf](#)

Family support can help parents better cope with these issues while enhancing their parenting skills and their ability to maintain strong relationships with their children. Without this support, children may not receive the parenting that they need, and the issues they face and harm they are experiencing can increase along with the likelihood of escalating to increased involvement with social workers and care.

Unfortunately, family support, particularly intensive family support, provision remains limited across the country. Community and voluntary organisations providing family support services have to use substantial funds raised through the public to meet the cost of providing family support services. In many rural areas across the country there is extremely limited access to intensive family support. For families to access support they will have no option but to travel long distance.

As a result, services can't match the level of need in local communities. Families who are in a position to immediately engage in and benefit from intensive family support often have to wait long periods to receive it, to the detriment of children. It is important that when families look for support, they can access it promptly. Research demonstrates the importance of responding and providing support quickly to families who are actively looking for help. It can prevent problems and issues growing and ending up in Tusla referrals. Presently, many families who self-refer to intensive family support services are put on relatively long waiting lists due to insufficient resources.

The government should provide additional funds to make sure that family support services can reach all communities in Ireland. In order to direct funds efficiently, it is important that they map provision across the country, aligned to levels of need, to identify where the most pressing gaps are. Families who want intensive support should be able to access it promptly. This has the ability to protect children by preventing issues from further deteriorating. It is also cost effective; it is better to spend money on earlier preventative intervention rather than waiting until children are taken into costly care.

Recommendation: Introduce a specific funding stream through the Department of Children that enables families self-referring to access intensive family support quickly. This would further encourage families to look for support at an early stage in their difficulties and result in children spending shorter periods of time dealing with adversity. This funding should be ring fenced funding. Estimated cost €5 million.

Recommendation: Referrals to Tusla have increased considerably over the past 10 years¹⁴. There is capacity in the voluntary sector to work with more of these referrals at an earlier stage if additional funding were to be put in place. It would alleviate some pressure on other areas of Tusla and make a considerable difference to the lives of children. Aim to support additional 2,000 children, through increase of ring-fenced direct funding of €20 million to voluntary and community sector. By way of comparison, this would be less than half the amount spent annually on paying private providers for Special Emergency Arrangements.

¹⁴ The number of child welfare referrals has more than doubled from 43,630 in 2014 to over 90,000 last year.

- Early Learning and Childcare

The first few years of a child's life are the most critical in terms of development and learning. Research studies have consistently found the early years of life are critical to the emotional and intellectual development of a child, with 75% of children's brain growth occurring during their first few years¹⁵.

The positive influence of quality, early childhood care and education (ECEC) on a child's outcome is well documented, benefitting children's social, emotional, physical and educational development. Participation in ECEC is particularly beneficial for children from disadvantaged backgrounds¹⁶. Quality care and education helps even the youngest children to develop important life skills such as communication, social skills, maintaining friendships and navigating rules and boundaries.

We believe that the ELC system should be accessible for all children and should be adequately resourced to provide a quality service to children and families. Ensuring universal access to affordable and quality early childcare and education would give all children the best possible start in life.

The Access and Inclusion model (AIM) helps support access for preschool age children with additional needs. Targeted AIM support allows children to acquire one or more further supports to ensure that they can participate meaningfully in the ECCE programme. The recently announced increased funding of AIM and extension of hours of support is extremely progressive. However, presently, AIM only applies to children eligible for ECCE. However, we know that children need ELC prior to this age and children who require additional support should have access to it before then.

Currently, early years providers are given an average sum for children who are sponsored under the National Childcare Scheme (NCS). Although there was an increase made to the sponsorship rate recently, unfortunately, in many areas, particularly urban, this average amount does not cover the cost of providing a space for a child. In such circumstances, those providers will have to subsidise the difference through voluntary funds. In areas of substantial disadvantage, providers of early years services are likely to have a disproportionate number of children who are sponsored. They might now struggle to take on as many children who have been sponsored as they have in the past. This means that children living in more economically disadvantaged communities and requiring sponsorship might have reduced early years services available. While we appreciate the sponsorship rate has increased, it has not done so sufficiently.

Recommendation: NCS subsidy thresholds should be increased to reflect recent increases to the national wage. Thresholds have remained the same since 2020.

Recommendation: Extend AIM to include younger children accessing ELC and for children accessing SAC, extend it to all children on NCS.

Recommendation: Sufficient funding must be allocated to allow for actions to be developed and new Equal Start funding stream to make a real difference to the lives of children.

¹⁵ [Brain Development - First Things First](#)

¹⁶ Vandenbroeck, M et al 2018. Benefits of early childhood education and care and the conditions for obtaining them.

Recommendation: Increase sponsorship rate to average hourly fee charged by providers within the local authority and not on a national flat fee, reflecting different costs in different parts of the country.

Department of Housing – Family Homelessness

The latest Government statistics show that over 4,200 children were homeless across Ireland last month, more than a 20% increase compared to the same period 12 months previously (which itself was a 20% increase on the previous year)¹⁷. Just under one third of children we support (32.5%) are homeless and/or live in substandard living conditions.

Children living in emergency accommodation are staying there for longer periods of time, according to statistics. Latest figures for Dublin¹⁸ show that 340 families with children living in emergency accommodation (or 24%), had been doing so for more than two years. At the same time in 2023 that figure was 215 (or 17%). That is an increase of 7 percentage points. But it is an increase of 58% when comparing the actual number of families.

The direct impact on children can be a lack of space to play and develop for young children, little to no privacy for older children, who often have to share rooms with siblings as well as parents. Additionally, there can be considerable trauma for children who are suddenly uprooted from their homes, schools and communities, and forced to move elsewhere overnight.

In addition to those in emergency accommodation, tens of thousands of children are living in poor, cramped, unsuitable accommodation. Again, parents discuss the damaging effect that this can have on their children's lives. For example, living with mould and not having the means to address it.

From our experience, the stress of living in poor and/or emergency accommodation can have a significantly negative impact on parents, causing considerable stress and worry. Over time this can negatively affect their parenting, taking their focus off their children. A recent ESRI report reinforced this, finding that it significantly affected parents and their relationships with their children, and the 'stresses of the parents seeping down to the children'¹⁹. Mothers in poorer quality housing, such as overcrowded or damp conditions found parenting more stressful, reported lower quality relationships with their children, and had more depressive symptoms.

No child in this country should have to spend a single night without a home. Living in homeless accommodation affects every aspect of a child's life. Unfortunately, too many children are living in temporary emergency accommodation. Children are being uprooted from their schools and communities and are sharing single rooms with their parents, often for periods longer than one year. The negative effects are far ranging, with implications for their emotional, social, educational and even their physical development.

¹⁷ [gov.ie - Homelessness data \(www.gov.ie\)](http://www.gov.ie)

¹⁸ [Report-to-Dublin-LAs-April-2024.pdf \(homelessdublin.ie\)](https://homelessdublin.ie)

¹⁹ [Housing, Health and Happiness: How Inadequate Housing Shapes Child and Parental Wellbeing | ESRI](https://www.esri.ie)

Rent increases are making it unaffordable for many families to move out of unsuitable and inappropriate accommodation. Many of the families we support are living in private rented accommodation which they pay for through their Housing Assistance Payment (HAP). However, as this does not usually cover the full cost of the rent, they are forced to top it up themselves from their own income²⁰. This can be particularly difficult in lone parent households, where there is only one source of income.

Recommendation: All families in emergency accommodation should be offered intensive therapeutic family support to help address practical issues as well as any struggles around parenting or trauma suffered by children. Cost of €5 million per year.

Recommendation: No family household should fall into poverty and deprivation after paying for their accommodation. The Government should ensure no household pays more than 30% of their net income on housing costs. The maximum rent limit on HAP properties should be urgently increased to realistically reflect increases in market rents.

²⁰ It is appreciated that local authorities have the discretion to agree to a HAP payment up to 35% above the prescribed maximum rent limit or up to 50% in the case of homeless households in the Dublin region. However, this happens infrequently in many areas, and considerably different levels in different areas.