



## School Costs Survey 2017

### Briefing Paper



2 August 2017

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## Introduction

The mantra is the same: the back to school costs places a huge financial burden on parents with many feeling stressed at juggling household bills or getting into debt to ensure their children have all they need to start another school year. It is clear that Ireland's free education system is very expensive and adversely affects those on lower incomes often restricting their children from thriving in school.

*“August will be extremely stressful for me as I try to manage food, rent and utility bills as well as back to school costs. I will lose sleep and I will worry.”*

There is a strong awareness by parents that the educational system remains under-funded, but they do not believe that they should be expected to fill the void. It is the Government's responsibility to adequately fund public services – including education. Many parents welcomed the Minister's comments and plans for schools to be more proactive in reducing the costs on parents and were frustrated at not feeling the benefit of it. However, in the absence of support and investment from Government, these plans are not likely to be advanced in full.

*“The cost each year is spiralling ever higher, forcing our family to go to the credit union to cover it as we are entitled to no assistance and expected to pay fully for everything, which is very hard to do as it gets dearer and dearer.”*

## Survey design

This year's online survey was completed by parents with school-aged children from 7<sup>th</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup> July 2017. This survey was widely advertised through various social media channels and via supporters of Barnardos. In total 1,834 parents completed the survey; 1,187 with children in primary school, while the remaining 647 respondents' children attend secondary school. While the sample is not statistically representative it does create an indicative, vivid picture of the burden of school costs on families. The items included in the survey cover school books, school uniforms and footwear, transport, digital technology, and all fees paid to the school. The survey **does not** include costs relating to school bags or sports equipment.

## Survey findings – profile of respondents

Once again the survey proved to be comprehensive with respondents covering all classes and years within the primary and secondary school cycles.

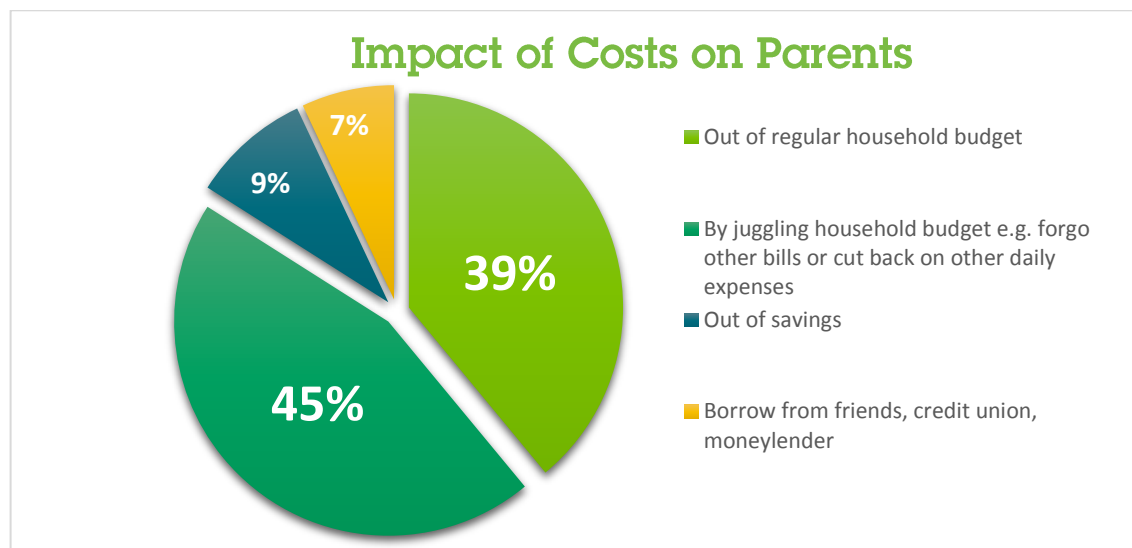
- Parents from every county in Ireland took the survey – with almost a third of responses from Dublin.
- 40% of parents are employed or self-employed full time, 24% are working part-time, 20% are engaged in home duties or are carers, 11% are unemployed and the remaining being students or engaged in casual work.
- At both primary and secondary level, 87% of parents said their child did not attend a DEIS school with 13% attending a designated disadvantaged school.
- 90% of the respondents send their children to non-fee paying primary school but this drops to 81% at secondary level where fee paying secondary tuition continues to be slightly more popular.

### Survey findings – impact on families

*“It is always assumed that just lower income families are suffering with these costs, but as a “middle income” earner I feel crippled by the extent of these back to school costs for three children.”*

The sense of being overburdened by the back to school costs remains the consistent theme among parents. And it is not just low income families that are suffering, our survey shows that middle income families are struggling too.

It is clear that as the child progresses through the school system it becomes more expensive and the more children a parent has going to school the more pressure they feel. Having to juggle household bills and getting into debt is common. When asked how parents pay for the back to school bill the survey found:



*“As a single mother who works full time, I don't qualify for any help at all with back to school costs yet I struggle so much to pay for them and to make ends meet all summer while trying to get these items together for September. The cost of the bus, uniforms and stationery is huge and I have to borrow and be in debt all year and then do it all over again the following year.”*

## Survey findings – no change in high cost of sending children to school

The parents feel the cumulative costs are overwhelming yet they have to meet them somehow.

Feelings of stress, frustration and being overburdened are common as they try to ensure their children have all that is required for September. And the burden doesn't end there as parents have to deal with frequent requests for fundraising or covering the costs for exam fees, extra-curricular activities, trips etc throughout the school year.

This year's calculation of basic costs is largely similar to 2016. School books, stationery and uniform costs remain the largest expenditure items. Seeking voluntary contributions is still common but the amount sought at primary levels has reduced slightly. The cost of footwear has gone down a small amount for primary school parents which reflects the slight reduction recorded by the Consumer Price Index.

## Snapshot of basic costs for 2017

Average costs	Senior Infants pupil	4 <sup>th</sup> Class pupil	1 <sup>st</sup> Year Pupil
	2017	2017	2017
Clothing	€95	€105	€190
Footwear	€45	€45	€70
School Books	€70	€85	€275
Stationery	€25	€30	€55
Classroom resources	€40	€45	€60
Voluntary contribution	€80	€85	€150
<b>Total*</b>	<b>€355</b>	<b>€395</b>	<b>€800</b>
<b>Total * in 2016</b>	<b>€340</b>	<b>€395</b>	<b>€775</b>
<b>Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance</b>	<b>€125</b>	<b>€125</b>	<b>€250</b>

\*Not including extra costs such as transport, school bag, trainers, lunches, extra-curricular activities etc.

## Survey findings – uniform costs

Uniform costs continue to be a bone of contention for many parents even though the majority favour having some kind of uniform. There is still a strong call for switching to plain uniforms or iron-on crests. Such a call has clearly been heard by some schools as 28% of primary school parents can now purchase a plain uniform or has no school uniform but still an overwhelming majority (72%) of primary school parents have to buy a specific school crested uniform. For those parents who must buy a school specific uniform it costs on average €95 and 54% of these feel the costs haven't changed since last year.

*“Our school is very cost conscious. We can buy the crests and ties in the school, which allows us to purchase our uniform anywhere. They also don't ask for a lot of money during the year.”*

School specific uniforms continue to be more common in secondary schools, where 95% of respondents say their school has them. These uniforms are more expensive costing parents on average between €150 and €200. There were little or no savings from last year and worryingly 45% of these parents believed their uniform costs had risen by up to €50 compared to 2016.

*“Generic uniforms would make life a lot easier - there is no need to have expensive branded uniforms; iron on crests would do.”*

According to 84% of primary school parents and 69% secondary school parents, the school uniform policies have not changed in their schools in the past three years. Some schools are still more proactive than others in reducing the costs on parents through hosting uniform swap sales.

*“I approached the school last year about recycling, swapping and donating school uniforms - it worked really well and we also raised money for the school in the process, we are continuing this project annually as it has saved some parents a lot of money.”*

The survey also reveals that parents are spending approximately €45 for shoes for a primary school pupil (down from €50 in 2016) and €70 for a secondary school pupil.

## Survey findings – Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance

The Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance (BSCFA) continues to be a necessary support for many families taking the survey. Over 52% of primary school parents and 64% of secondary school

parents have made applications, slightly higher than 2016. While the majority were successful in their application, over a quarter were unsuccessful. The recently raised rates to €125 for a primary school pupil and €250 for a secondary school pupil are welcomed but still fall short of the real costs incurred.

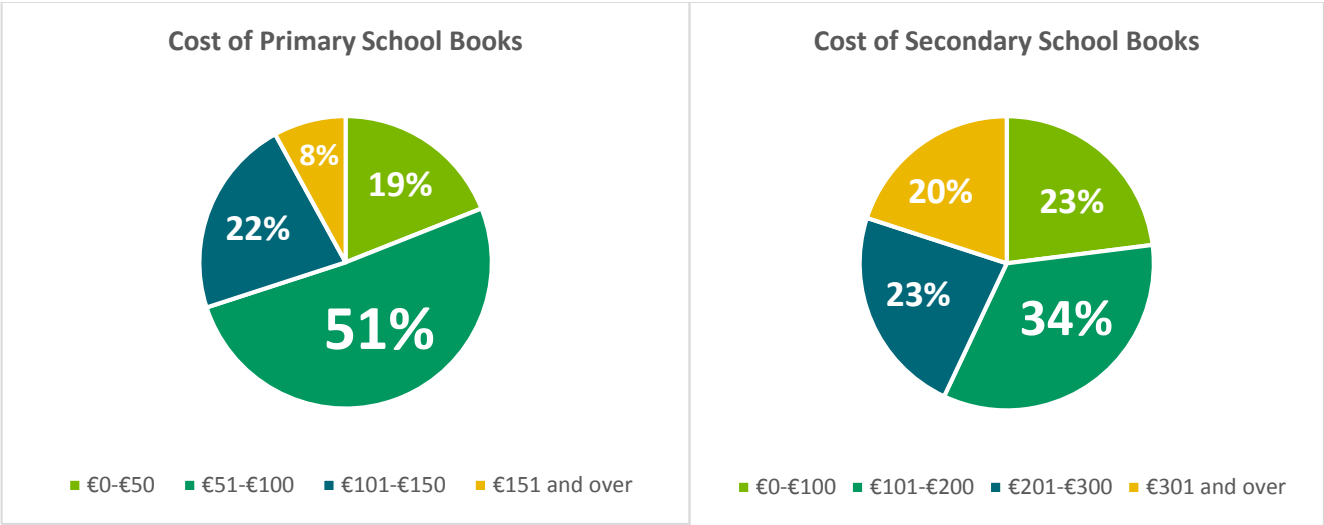
*“The Back to School Allowance does not cover the cost of children going back to school. It should never have been cut in the budget. The cost of sending a child to school is a lot more than what we get in the allowance. It’s a constant struggle and I have three primary school children.”*

The main criticism by parents continues to focus on the strict income thresholds leaving many low income families, including self-employed, not receiving the support. The different thresholds applied adversely affect lone parents thereby increasing the risk of these families feeling overburdened by the costs and potentially getting into debt.

*“There is no such thing as free education, I am a single parent working part time with two school going children. I am outside the band for the Back to School Assistance and I struggle every year with uniform, book costs and also paying for photocopying etc.”*

### Survey findings – book costs

Unsurprisingly, parents remain extremely frustrated with the costs associated with school books:



The first and fifth year are the most expensive as the pupil enters the Junior Cert and Leaving Cert cycles. For 40% of parents (spanning both primary and secondary levels) the costs have remained unchanged from last year. However, 24% of them experienced a slight increase between €0 and €25 in the cost of buying their school books.

Huge variations across the school system remain in terms of the amount parents pay and the volume of books required despite all pupils having to undertake the same curriculum. This lack of consistency and transparency is fuelling parent's frustration as they have to pay the bill without having a choice about it. It is clear some schools are more mindful of parents when choosing the books and others are less so. Many feel the book bill should not be paid by parents and instead the Department of Education should provide all that is required by pupils to undertake the curriculum.

*"Books should be provided free to students, and there should be no examination fees. Schools expect too much support from parents through fundraising etc, many parents are already hard pressed. The State should be providing all that is needed in order for a school to function successfully instead of making the school go to the parents."*

The prevalence of school book rental schemes seems to have plateaued and the items covered within it vary significantly too. Importantly, where they operate they are seen as being very cost effective for parents.

- 71% of primary school parents had access to a school book rental scheme (70% in 2016, 70% in 2015). 56% pay €50 or less to participate. 60% of schemes cover textbooks alone with the remaining 40% including some workbooks and stationery.
- 37% of secondary school parents had access to a school book rental scheme (39% in 2016, 37% in 2015). 48% pay €100 or less to participate. 68% of schemes cover just textbooks with the remaining 32% of schemes including some workbooks and stationery.

*"Book rental schemes should be rolled out in all schools, use of single use workbooks should be restricted and budgets for resources should be increased by the Department of Education. This is not a cost that should be borne by parents, many of whom can't afford it."*

The main barrier felt by parents in operating school book rental schemes is the volume of new editions being published and that these texts are being sought by schools thereby preventing recycling of older books. This is a common source of frustration for many parents regardless of whether their child is in primary or secondary level. It is clear the impact of the Voluntary Code of Practice among publishers in operation since 2011 is not being felt by parents. This Code prohibits the printing of new editions for a minimum of six years and annually the Irish Educational Publishers Association survey shows the volume of new editions reducing, down to 1.9% of titles in 2016. Yet parents have a different experience.



*“Texts should not change from year to year unless absolutely necessary. Having had three kids through secondary school within five years, none of them could use the text books belonging to an older sibling as minor amendments had been made to the texts. Daft!”*

Another perennial issue among parents is the frequent use of workbooks as part of the curriculum. While they may have pedagogical benefits they are seen as more expensive and wasteful as they can't be reused.

*“I have three children in primary school, it would be nice if I didn't have so many work books and instead more textbooks so at least siblings could pass them onto each other and save us some money.”*

### Survey findings – digital devices

The prevalence of children using laptops / tablets has remained largely unchanged with 14% of parents saying their children uses these devices in primary school compared with 12% in 2016. The school provides these devices according to 92% of the parents with 86% reporting that the software is also included.

Their usage in secondary schools is higher with 23% of parents stating their child uses them (also 23% in 2016). However, only 20% of parents said the school provides these devices leaving many having to buy the device required themselves. Similarly, with regard to software only 26% of parents stated the school provides it leaving the vast majority of parents having to pay for these too.

While many parents feel a switch to digital devices reduces the weight of school bags, many are very critical of the initial expensive outlay that the school expects parents to afford. The extra cost of e-books and software means using digital devices are not a cheaper replacement for textbooks. Some textbooks include an e-book as part of the book package.

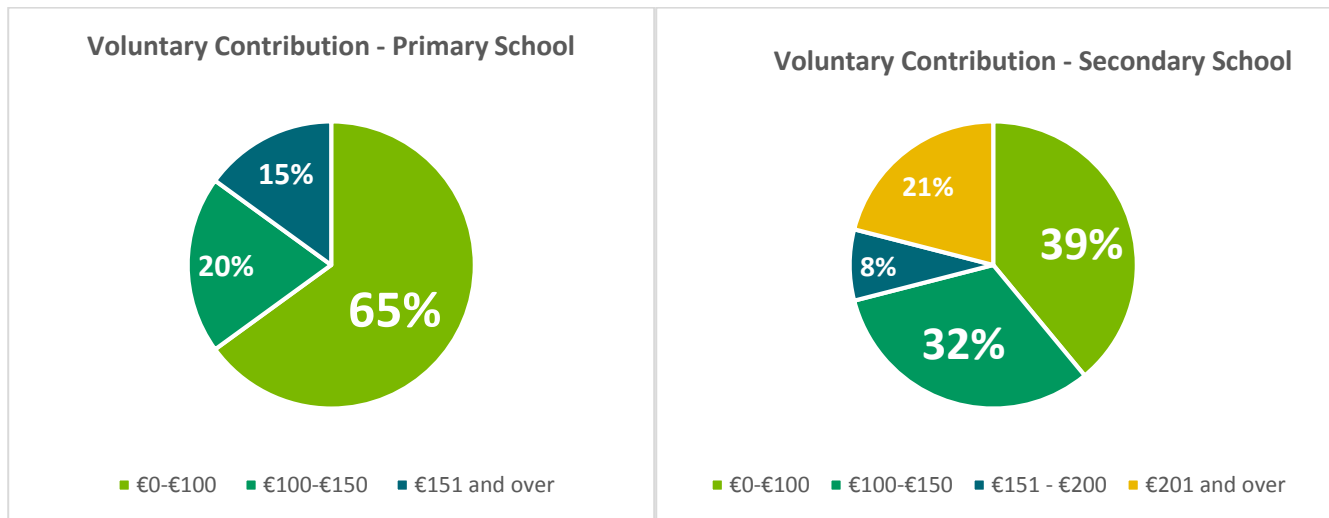
*“The cost to start secondary school is madness, it will cost in the region of €1600 for my child to start first year. Also, is there a real need for each child to have an ipad? Surely books are sufficient and then laptops/ipads should be provided for in school use by the schools if needed for lessons. It is a crippling cost to some parents.”*

### Survey findings – voluntary contribution and registration fees

The variation among schools both at primary and secondary level in seeking a voluntary contribution from parents continues as does the amount being sought. This can add significant pressure on parents as schools mainly seek the payment in September, which on top of all the other expenses can tip many parents to breaking point especially for those with more than one child in the school system.

Thankfully, this year's survey shows fewer parents are being asked for a donation.

- 56% of primary school parents are asked for a voluntary contribution down from 66% in 2016.
- 69% of secondary school parents are asked for a voluntary contribution down from 79% in 2016.



The lack of transparency within the system on where the money goes is a source of irritation for parents as they believe the State should be funding essential school items like heating and lights and not relying on parents to do so.

*“Schools need to be more transparent when it comes to giving a breakdown of where the 'voluntary contribution' and the generic 'stationery and supplies' costs passed onto parents are spent. I'm on the parents association of our school and I still have no idea how these charges are applied to the school budget.”*

*“There is no voluntary contribution in our school, but there are multiple fundraisers held during year as there is simply inadequate funding provided by the Department of Education to meet basic school running costs, like utility bills.”*

Overall parents report that schools do pursue parents for non-payment of their voluntary contribution. This is mainly done through sending general reminder emails, texts and letters to all parents, others opt for sending specific reminders to parents who haven't paid, while others send those reminders via the children. Unfortunately some aggressive tactics, such as denying a child their school journal or locker has also been reported by parents. The pressure to pay voluntary contributions can be intense for some and is a source of embarrassment and stress for many.

*“If the voluntary fee is not paid on the first day of school, my daughter is refused a locker key and has to carry all of her books which are extremely heavy around school. We couldn't pay immediately due to*

*financial constraints and as a result my daughter was made feel uncomfortable and embarrassed.  
Voluntary does not mean 'give it or else', it is a choice"*

Registration fees continue to be more commonly applied at secondary schools with 44% of parents being asked for such a fee to secure their child's place in comparison to 16% of primary school parents. The majority of secondary school parents pay €100 and 64% stated it was non-refundable with a further 29% stating it was put towards the voluntary contribution request if the child accepted the place.

### Survey findings – additional costs

The requests by schools to parents to fund art supplies, photocopying and communal stationery is increasing. It is clear from this year's survey that while there may be fewer parents being asked to pay a voluntary contribution the numbers being asked to pay the mandatory classroom resources fees has increased significantly. These fees must also be paid at the start of the school year and add further pressure on parents to provide the essential equipment their child needs to learn the curriculum.

- 83% of primary school parents pay classroom resources fees to cover photocopying / art supplies etc. (up from 72% in 2016). The average amount sought is €45.
- 76% of secondary school parents pay classroom resources fees to cover photocopying / art supplies etc. (up from 71% of parents in 2016). The average amount sought is €60.

*"One of the items on list to buy was whiteboard markers, we were told to label everything with our child's name apart from these, so can only assume these are for the teacher's use. That means every child is supplying the school with whiteboard markers as well as paying stationery costs."*

Many schools offer a range of extra-curricular activities such as swimming lessons, music lessons, drama classes etc. Unsurprisingly the amount charged to participate in these activities varies considerably, spanning €20-€100 with some schools, particularly secondary schools, charging in excess of this.

### Survey findings – school transport costs

School transport costs adversely affect those living in rural areas as the costs (although subsidised) to avail of the scheme remain very significant. The current fees applicable for the School Transport Scheme are €100 for a primary school pupil (with a maximum of €220 per family) and €350 per secondary school student (with a maximum of €650 per family). Parents have little choice but to pay the fee to secure their child's place on the bus. These fees, which may be paid in July or December, really add to the pressure and are crippling for some families.

*“School transport costs of €650 for my family is a discrimination against rural families who cannot walk to school or avail of public transport. This is a huge expense on top of other school expenses”*

## Government and school responses

The Government’s ambition is to make Ireland’s education system the best in Europe by 2026. A detailed Action Plan has been published and tackling school costs is an element of this by issuing circulars, establishing a Parent and Student Charter and the likely passage of the Education (Schools Admissions) Bill 2017. Tackling school costs as a way to reduce child poverty was also recently discussed at the Cabinet Committee on Social Inclusion.

In April 2017, a circular was issued by the Department of Education and distributed to all schools urging them to reduce the school costs on parents by:

- Opting for “iron on” or “sew on” crests on school uniforms
- Wherever possible, choosing generic rather than branded items (e.g. uniform, clothing, IT tablets, sports equipment etc.)
- Giving parents a list of all required items and indicate the likely costs of these required items at best value stores
- Providing a book rental scheme
- Banning the use of workbooks which cannot be reused
- Where an exclusive supply arrangement applies, it should be tendered for regularly
- The Board of Management in each school will have to review the cost of items which they require parents to purchase and to make this information available to the school community.

Failure by schools to undertake these actions could result in them receiving less funding in capitation rates per pupil. The survey shows many parents were aware of this circular and expected some reform to have been undertaken thereby reducing their bill. However, it appears the circular has had little impact for this year and without clear action undertaken by schools with the support from the Department it is uncertain if parents will see any benefits into the future.

*“I believed this September schools had to improve uniforms by letting parents buy in Tesco, Penny's etc. This change has not occurred in my children's school. I still have to pay €80 for school tracksuits. Schools are not informing us of any changes. I keep up to date with all DES and believed schools funding would be withdrawn if they did not make changes???”*

*“The circular that went out from the Department in relation to getting rid of crests and having to have book rental schemes, made me sigh with relief, but when I asked the principal if they would be implementing this for the new crested school tracksuit, I was told no. When I asked if this stance would*

*change next year (as arrangements may already have been in place for this year) I was told again no as we don't have a crested uniform, but we do as the crested top for the tracksuit was €40. I have three children in the school. School management can still seem to do what they like, despite department circulars."*

Other measures include that every school is to develop a Parent and Student Charter as a way to engage with parents and pupils in a more meaningful, pupil-focused and transparent way. The focus of the Charter is much wider than schools costs but will require at a minimum that every school set out a financial statement, which will include information on how any voluntary contributions are used. The Minister will also have power to give a direction to schools requiring compliance with the published guidelines that will govern the Charters. When these Charters will commence is unknown as the Bill is still progressing through the Dail.

Also the Education (School Admissions) Bill once passed and commenced will prohibit the imposition of registration fees that schools often charge to parents when they are enrolling their children into schools, particularly at secondary school level.

It really remains to be seen how effective these measures will be in reducing the financial burden on parents.

While it is heartening to see school costs are more firmly on the political agenda than before, it is frustrating and disappointing that the Department is absolving itself of its responsibilities by expecting schools to advance these measures with no additional resources to do it. The Department is failing to see its fundamental role in ensuring the education system is adequately funded to ensure all children have what they need to learn the curriculum. The capitation rates were not raised in Budget 2017 leaving schools again inadequately funded and as a result parents will continue to be expected to make up any deficit. No other public service has to subsidise their funding to keep the show on the road, so why should the Department of Education expect schools to have to undertake extensive fundraising activities from parents and staff to fund necessities?

### **Response to addressing uniform costs**

At a school level, as our survey shows the switch to generic uniforms or at least reducing the volume of items that require the school crest is occurring slowly at primary school level, but not getting much traction at secondary school level. To help with these costs low income families continue to rely on the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance (BSCFA). Barnardos welcomed the recent increases in the BSCFA bringing it up to €125 for primary school age children and €250 for secondary school age

children. The Government will spend over €47m for BSCFA in 2017 and see over 194,000 children benefitting from the payment. However, it is worth noting the Government spent 90m in 2011 on this payment when the rates payable were higher.

### Income thresholds for the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance 2017

Family Type	1 child	2 children	3 children	4 children
Couple	€576.90	€606.70	€636.50	€666.30*
Lone parent	€418.10	€447.90	€477.70	€507.50*

\* €29.80 each extra child

Different income thresholds for two-parent and one-parent families mean that one-parent families are often disadvantaged when it comes to applying for BSCFA. Lone parent families are already a vulnerable group so asking them to adhere to stricter eligibility criteria puts these families at an even higher risk of poverty. Other payments targeted at helping low income families, such as the Family Income Support (FIS), have the same threshold for both lone parent and two parent families. The income thresholds for FIS are outlined below:

### Income thresholds for Family Income Supplement

Family Type	1 child	2 children	3 children	4 children
FIS income thresholds for both two parent and lone parent families	€511	€612	€713	€834

On the whole these thresholds are higher than the thresholds for BSCFA. This means some families on low incomes are excluded from BSCFA despite having been identified as being in need of support via FIS. Having different thresholds disadvantages a small but vulnerable cohort of families, it also makes the social welfare system more complex and difficult to navigate for those most in need.

### Response to school book costs

The Government's response to mounting school book costs is the School Book Grant Scheme. There is €15 million distributed annually to schools on a per capita basis.

Type of school	Non-DEIS Primary	DEIS Primary	Non-DEIS Secondary	DEIS Secondary
Payment per pupil	€ 11	€21	€24	€39

The Department strongly encourages schools to use this funding to set up a book rental scheme and published its *Guidelines for Developing Textbook Rental Schemes in Schools* in 2013 to this end. While many have set up book rental schemes, principals can distribute the funding at their discretion to those they feel are most in need through the provision of book vouchers or cash, etc. No additional funding was given to this in Budget 2017 nor was there an extension to the once-off School Book Rental Scheme Fund, which assisted primary schools with the initial set up costs of school book rental schemes. These reduced funding streams will mean some school book rental schemes will become unsustainable or unable to expand and likely to prevent others from establishing such schemes.

### Response to voluntary contributions

The Department of Education's policy is that "no charge may be made, in respect of instruction in any subject of the school curriculum or for recreation or other activities where all pupils are expected to take part." As a result "voluntary contributions may be requested from parents provided it is clearly stated that there is no compulsion to pay."

Barnardos is aware the Department of Education did chase up schools who were identified by the Barnardos 2016 School Costs Survey respondents as pursuing aggressive tactics to have the voluntary contribution paid. While it is positive the Department follows up in a bid to stamp out these practices, it is still failing to realise that an increase in basic funding for primary and secondary schools will reduce this need for voluntary contributions to be paid. Interestingly, while our 2017 Survey finds fewer requests for voluntary contributions and this is to be welcomed, more parents report having to pay for classroom resources. So either way, there is still an expectation by the schools that parents must pay for essential items.

### Response to use of digital devices

The Department of Education is pursuing its Digital Strategy for Schools 2015 to 2020 and in June published the Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020 Action Plan 2017. This Action Plan, the first to be published under the Strategy provides concrete actions to be delivered in 2017 with timelines and responsibilities. The Action Plan offers a welcome and transparent means of tracking progress of the strategy's high-level themes and goals. However, challenges remain with just €30m of grants of the €210m committed under the strategy being dispersed at the beginning of this year. There is a need to accelerate the distribution of this funding in order to realise the strategy's visions and objectives.

Furthermore, the 23% VAT rate remains on ebooks making them more expensive in some cases than textbooks which are VAT exempt. The European Commission has proposed to allow for equal taxing of the electronic equivalent of printed materials (such as books and newspapers) and this will hopefully urge the Irish government to act on this discrepancy as soon as possible.

## **Barnardos recommendations**

Barnardos believes that education unlocks children's potential and that all children should have this key. Succeeding in education is a proven route out of poverty. It creates a more level playing field from which children can progress into adulthood. Unfortunately for many access and participation in education is determined by their parent's ability to pay. Parents want their children to have all the advantages in life that education brings but when so many are forced to scrimp on necessities or go into debt to afford what is a child's basic right, something must be done.

## **Cost of free education**

It is in the child's, the Exchequer's and our country's futures best interest to invest in the education system, yet our school system is buckling under the pressure of chronic under-investment. Schools rely on parent's financial support to prop up the system and where that is not available it is children who suffer in the long-run. The Department of Education strives to address the cycles of poverty and disadvantage that some children are trapped in through the DEIS scheme but with over 56% of children from disadvantaged areas attending non-DEIS schools this is too narrow a focus. We argue that a more universal approach is needed to assist all children to thrive in school. At a basic level, this means ensuring all children have what they need to learn – the books, equipment, art supplies etc., to do the curriculum and there are no artificial barriers to this – such as voluntary contributions and registration fees.

Barnardos has long campaigned for the Government to uphold its Constitutional commitment to providing free primary education to all children. Barnardos estimate it would cost €103m per annum, just €185 extra per pupil, to provide genuinely free primary education. This investment would cover all textbooks and workbooks, remove the need for voluntary contributions, classroom resources fees, transport fees (for those availing of the School Transport Scheme) and restore the capitation rates back to 2010 levels. This statutory investment would alleviate a significant financial burden on parents, ensure all primary children have what they need to learn and ensure Ireland's primary education system is similar to that operating in Northern Ireland or the UK.



The cost to roll out genuinely free secondary education as was first envisaged in 1967, would be just €127m per annum.

	Free School Books	Removing Voluntary Contribution	Free Classroom Resources	Free School Transport	Restoring Capitation Grant Level	Total
<b>Current Exchequer Funding</b>	€20m	€0	€0	€163.5m	€287m	<b>€470.5m</b>
<b>Additional cost to make Primary Education free</b>	€20m	€42m	€19.5m	€5m	€16.7m	<b>€103.2m</b>
<b>Additional cost to make Secondary Education free</b>	€20m	€47m	€19m	€22.4m	€18.5	<b>€126.9m</b>
<b>Additional cost to make education free for all children</b>	<b>€40m</b>	<b>€89m</b>	<b>€38.5m</b>	<b>€27.4m</b>	<b>€35.2m</b>	<b>€230.1m</b>

### Reduce uniform costs

Parents favour school uniforms because they help foster equality among pupils and generate a sense of school identity. However, their call for a switch to plain uniforms or iron-on crests has largely fallen on deaf ears, particularly at secondary school level. School uniform policy is set by the school Board of Management so it is up to the Board to implement the provisions regarding uniform costs contained in the new circular i.e. favouring iron-on crests, generic uniforms and regular tendering of uniform contracts to specialised suppliers. Any savings in this regard would ease significant pressure on parents.

The Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance is a welcomed targeted support but the rates need to keep pace with real costs as it is a lifeline for all recipients.

### Digital media

There is still not widespread use of digital technology by pupils in secondary schools possibly due to problems of broadband, uncertainty among teachers on how to use such devices to teach lessons and the significant outlay on parents to buy the devices and software required. There is also differing schools of thoughts on the learning outcomes for pupils taught using solely digital devices over books or a mixture of both. The concerted effort to roll out of the Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020 is welcomed but will take time. Also, the cost of digital school books are a real concern for parents as they are liable to 23% VAT in comparison to a VAT exemption on printed school books.

### Recommendations:

- Uphold a child's constitutional right to free primary education by committing in Budget 2018 to invest an extra €103.2m annually to make it reality for all children, this can be phased in over a three year period beginning with investing the €20m to provide free school books for all.
- Commit to investing €126.9m annually to make secondary education free for all children once free primary education has been achieved.
- Ensure school Board of Management adhere to the Department of Education circular re school uniform policy and take tangible measures to reduce the costs for parents.
- Restore the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance back to the 2010 rates of €200 for a primary school pupil and €305 for a secondary school pupil. This can be introduced incrementally with a first phase increase of €50 per child at a cost of €14m in Budget 2018.
- Synchronise the income thresholds so all family types and all those in receipt of Family Income Supplement are eligible for the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance.
- Follow the EU Commission proposal to synchronise tax regimes on digital and print materials by applying a 0% to e-textbooks.

### Conclusion

Parents are yet again stressed and over-burdened by the back to school costs. It affects so many families, not just those on low incomes. Further attempts have been made recently by the Minister to urge schools to take a more proactive approach, however the only way the Government can really fix the problem is to invest in the supports which will actually fulfil its constitutional promise of free education. The Government's own target of making the educational system the best in Europe by 2026

will not be achieved without significant investment and it must begin with the basic foundation blocks of ensuring all children have what the need to learn.