



# Barnardos

Because childhood lasts a lifetime

## Children's Budget 2024

July 2023



## 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 in our 54 service locations, 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 in 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 2022, Barnardos worked with almost 21,000 children and their families.

## Introduction

Continued cost of living increases over the past 12 months have pulled more and more children into poverty and deprivation, placed increased pressure on parents and decreased the standard of living for a significant proportion of families across the country.

The longer children live in poverty and deprivation, the greater an impact it will have on their health, wellbeing, and future development. Growing up in poverty can negatively affect the entire life course of a child, limiting opportunities and making it more difficult for them to realise their full emotional, educational, and social potential.

Budget 2024 must prioritise those most disadvantaged by inflation, targeting support measures at those most vulnerable. The Government must provide an appropriate safety net to ensure that all children are guaranteed a decent standard of living. Additionally the government needs to make sure that families, once they have secured sufficient finances, have the support they need to address issues in their lives.

The Taoiseach stated at the National Economic Development Forum last month that child poverty and well-being would be a major theme of Budget 2024. This is alongside the establishment of the Child Poverty and Wellbeing Programme Office within the Department of the Taoiseach<sup>1</sup>.

Budget 2024 must follow through on this commitment and introduce measures that will make a real difference to children facing disadvantage across Ireland, improve their standard of living and help them reach their full potential.

---

<sup>1</sup> The main priorities within our pre-budget submission match those of the new Programme Office: income supports and joblessness; early learning and childcare; reducing cost of education; family homelessness; enhancing participation in culture, arts and sport for children affected by poverty; and integrating public health, family and parental support and wellbeing services.

## Recommendations

### 1. Income Supports

**Recommendation:** The government must increase core social welfare rates by €25 and increase the Qualified Child Increase Payment by €15 for over 12s and €10 for under 12s. Over the longer term, the government should benchmark social welfare payments in line with minimum essential standard of living measurements.

**Recommendation:** Provide an additional once off targeted lump sum to low income families who are in receipt of the Qualified Child Increase Payment and are most at risk of going without heating this coming winter to cover the continued exceptionally high price of heating. Extend the Fuel Allowance to families in receipt of the Working Family Payment.

### 2. Enhancing participation in culture, arts and sport

**Recommendation:** Develop a social and cultural activity fund to enable children in low-income homes to access subsidised rates for certain sporting and cultural activities. Initially, pilot a programme for 50,000 children.

### 3. Reducing cost of education

**Recommendation:** Retain the increase to the Back to School Allowance and expand free school books to post primary level. Provide schools with sufficient funding to cover their costs so that they no longer have to rely on the voluntary contributions of parents.

### 4. Family and parental supports

**Recommendation:** Restore the annual cost of living increase and begin the expansion of family support services outlined in the Programme for Government in 2021, covering the full costs for current and new service provision, including for families who self-refer to family support services.

### 5. Early learning and childcare

**Recommendation:** Increase subsidies for low-income families to provide equitable access to early years and after school care for children.

### 6. Family Homelessness

**Recommendation:** The maximum rent limit on HAP properties should be urgently increased to realistically reflect increases in market rents over the last 6 years.

## Department of Social Protection – Income Supports

Over the past 18 months, Barnardos staff have stated that the majority of families they are working with are substantially struggling with cost of living problems.

Last month, we published a report<sup>2</sup> highlighting the growing impact that cost of living increases are having on children across the country. It sets out findings of a nationally representative survey of parents (315) conducted by Amárach Research and also includes the voices of 30 parents currently supported through Barnardos services, who participated in 1 to 1 interviews. Both were carried out in April this year.

It found that over half of parents have cut back on social activities for their children, over one-third (37%) have cut back on heat, and almost one in four (23%) have cut back on electricity. Over two fifths (43%) stated they have had to cut back on clothes and alarmingly, almost one in three (28%) have cut back on medical appointments/medicines.

Have you and your children cut back on or gone without any of the following over the past 6 months?	
Activities/entertainment for your children	57%
Heat	37%
Electricity	23%
Food	20%
Clothing	43%
Rent	5%
Transport	14%
School supplies	12%
Medical appointments/medicines	28%
No/none of the above	26%

Parents stated that their quality of living had reduced drastically, finding the constant financial struggles and pressures since the cost of living crisis began a year and a half ago tough to deal with over such a sustained period of time. We are very concerned that more children are being pulled into deprivation and staying there for longer.

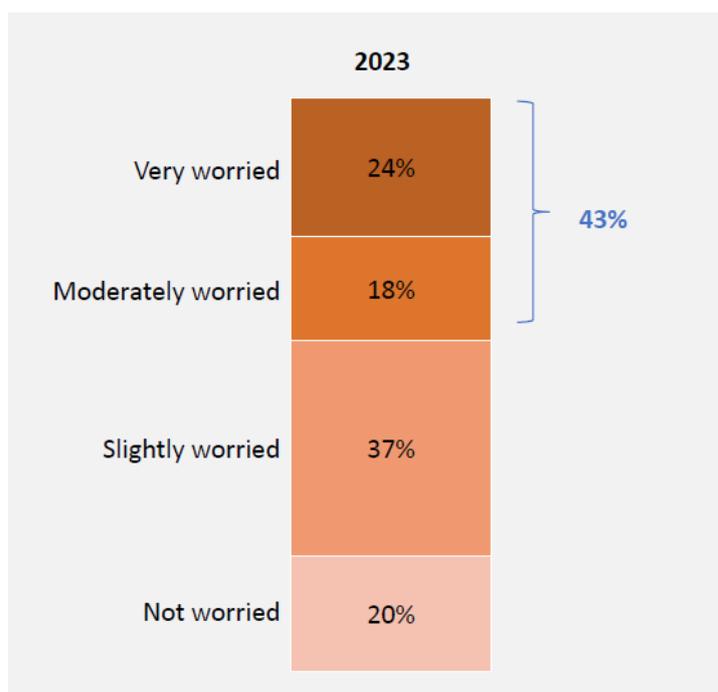
Families on low incomes reported that they are struggling to cover the recent increases to essentials. Unfortunately, this inevitably has an impact on the wellbeing of children living in some of those households. Amárach survey results found that 70% of parents said that cost of living increases have negatively affected their children over the past six months.

Over the past 6 months, have cost of living increases & insufficient income negatively affected your children/children in your care in any way?	
Not at all	25%
Slightly	32%
Moderately	24%
Significantly	17%
Not applicable to me	2%

<sup>2</sup> [Cost of Living Crisis 2023 - Barnardos](#)

All disposable income for the families we support is going towards bills, energy, food and travel. There is little to nothing left for social activities, such as vital after school activities or trips. For the children we support, cutting back on trips and social activities means going without them.

Almost one in two parents (43%) 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.



The families we support are often dealing with numerous adversities and issues, which can draw some of their focus away from parenting at times. Dealing with the recent cost of living increases is placing an additional strain on them. Parents are constantly struggling to meet essential costs, which exacerbates other underlying issues and makes it very difficult for them to concentrate on parenting.

Unfortunately, for the families we support, there is nowhere for them to go to quickly access funds necessary to make up a shortfall between their income and the cost of energy/food. For the vast majority, asking friends or family for help was never an option. Parents we talked to stated it could take months to hear a response from an additional needs payments application, despite the need for essentials.

Living on the edge financially means that for many families, if something goes wrong or something crops up in the future, they will be pushed over that edge. They have no safety net.

Additionally, research we conducted earlier this year regarding food poverty<sup>3</sup> found that more than one in seven parents (16%) were regularly unable to afford a main meal for their

<sup>3</sup> February 2023 [Food Insecurity in Ireland: Impact on Children and their Parents \(barnardos.ie\)](https://www.barnardos.ie/food-insecurity-in-ireland-impact-on-children-and-their-parents)

family/children and one in five (19%) of parents stated that at some point in the last year, they did not have enough food to feed their children.

The most recent Survey of Income and Living Conditions (SILC) results showed that child poverty had increased recently. The number of children experiencing enforced deprivation rose to 236,910.<sup>4</sup> The number of children living in consistent poverty increased from 5.2% to 7.5%, or almost 90,000 children<sup>5</sup>. Children living in households headed by a lone parent are significantly more vulnerable to consistent poverty at a rate of 14.1% compared to 5.3% of two parent families<sup>6</sup>.

Over the past 18 months, the Government has had on three occasions provided additional support for families to prevent more children going without and being pulled into serious deprivation; for example, cost of living measures in 2022, Budget 2023 and cost of living measures 2023<sup>7</sup>. Parents that we spoke to over the last twelve months mentioned that some of those measures did indeed help, enabling them to keep the electricity on.

However, it was clear from parents that they did not feel that the measures had gone far enough. There was appreciation that the measures were only temporary in nature, and there is a need for more permanent supports.

Research published last month from the Vincentian MESL Research Centre<sup>8</sup> found that the core Minimum Essential Standard of Living<sup>9</sup> increased by an average of 10.6% nationally in the year to March 2023, and 18.9% nationally from March 2020 to March 2023. The research demonstrates that increases to social welfare rates in Budget 2023 did not maintain real value of supports relative to inflation or lead to change in minimum living costs inflation. In fact, social welfare rate changes were actually a cut in real terms when measured against inflation and increases to MESL. Deep income inadequacy, where household income meets less than 90% of a household's MESL expenditure need, increased substantially, particularly for households with older children and one-parent households.

It is vital that the government acts, through proactive targeted policies, to ensure that all children in Ireland, at an absolute minimum, live in homes that have sufficient food and can provide regular meals, live in appropriately heated accommodation and don't go without electricity. Government policy and resources must be targeted at the lowest-income households to shield children from hardship as much as possible.

**Recommendation:** Many low-income families do not have sufficient income to provide children with necessities. The Government must increase welfare supports in order to make sure that families have enough to provide their children with all their daily essentials. As a

---

<sup>4</sup> Enforced deprivation is where a household experiences two or more of the [11 deprivation items](#).

<sup>5</sup> The consistent poverty measure is defined as people who are both at risk of poverty and experiencing enforced deprivation.

<sup>6</sup> [Survey on Income and Living Conditions \(SILC\) 2022 - CSO - Central Statistics Office](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Help with the cost of living \(citizensinformation.ie\)](#)

<sup>8</sup> [mesl 2023 - annual update report.pdf \(budgeting.ie\)](#)

<sup>9</sup> The MESL standard represents a socially negotiated consensus on the necessities and essentials which people have generally agreed everyone needs to have for a socially acceptable minimum standard of living. Having a consistently inadequate income means doing without what is required to meet basic needs and to take part in normal day-to-day activities and participate in society.

first step there should be an increase in core social welfare rates<sup>10</sup> by €25 (Estimated cost of €840 million) and the Qualified Child Increase Payment<sup>11</sup> should be increased by €15 for over 12s and €10 for under 12s (Estimated cost of €200 million). Over the longer term, the government should benchmark social welfare payments in line with minimum essential standard of living measurements.

**Recommendation:** To provide additional support to lone parent families most at risk of poverty and deprivation, extend Jobseekers Transition Payment to parents in work, education or training until their youngest child reaches the end of second level education.

**Recommendation:** Set maximum waiting times for parents seeking Additional Needs Payments where children are at risk of going without essentials. This will require increased investment in the Additional Needs Payment Programme, to allow low-income families to access more immediate funds when they cannot meet essential costs.

**Recommendation:** Extend 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 €40.6 million).

**Recommendation:** Provide an additional, once-off targeted lump sum to low income families who are in receipt of Qualified Child Increase Payment and are most at risk of going without heating this coming winter to cover the continued exceptionally high price of heating.

**Recommendation:** Ensure that families on low incomes with children living in the house who are using pre-paid meters are automatically placed on lowest tariffs. It is unjust that children living in low-income households are going with less heat and electricity because their parents cannot afford higher tariffs.

**Recommendation:** Develop a social and cultural activity fund which would provide children in low income homes subsidised rates to access certain sporting and cultural activities. Initially pilot a programme for 50,000 children and young people (Estimated pilot cost: €5 million).

## 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 survey<sup>12</sup> found that over two thirds of primary (69%) and three-quarters of secondary school parents (75%) are worried about meeting costs. Almost half of parents (46% of primary and 48% of secondary) said recent cost of living increases had made it much more difficult to meet costs.

The announcement in Budget 2023 to provide free schoolbooks to all primary school students was a welcome step in securing a truly free education for all children. However,

---

<sup>10</sup> State pension, widow/er's pension, Basic supplementary welfare allowance, Jobseekers benefit, Jobseekers allowance, Carer's benefit, Disability allowance.

<sup>11</sup> 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.

<sup>12</sup> [Back to School Survey 2022 - Barnardos](#)

books remain a significant cost for post primary parents at the start of the school term. The average cost of secondary school books was €207<sup>13</sup> last year.

Additionally, schools continue to ask parents to buy crested or branded uniforms, with 75% of primary and 95% of secondary school parents reporting they are required to do so.

70% 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 the payment in September on top of all the other expenses.

Barnardos believes that by providing programme interventions earlier, we can have a greater impact in reducing rates of bullying and anti-social behaviour amongst schoolchildren. Deficits in social skills and problematic peer-to-peer interactions are a key risk factor for the early emergence of social, emotional and behavioural difficulties.

**Recommendation:** Commit to retaining the increase to the Back to School Allowance, 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 €21 million).

**Recommendation:** The government should commit to expanding free schoolbooks to post primary pupils (Estimated cost €50 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 €80 million)<sup>14</sup>.

**Recommendation:** Further expand the hot school meals programme to allow all post primary schools interested to partake in the scheme as long as they have the local infrastructure to do so. Allocate funding to establish a Small Grants Scheme to improve school infrastructure and ensure that appropriate facilities are available for school food provision. Ensure plans for all new school builds include provision for dining and catering facilities.

## Department of Housing – Family Homelessness

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 for sometimes over a year. The negative effects are far ranging, with implications for their emotional, social, educational and even their physical development.

The latest Government statistics show that over 3,500 children were homeless across Ireland last month, a 22% increase compared to the same period 12 months previously<sup>15</sup>. The government must do more to ensure that more and more children are not pulled into emergency accommodation.

---

<sup>13</sup> We will be publishing our Back to School Survey 2023 results next in early August.

<sup>14</sup> Rough calculation based on our previous Back to School Surveys.

<sup>15</sup> [gov.ie - Homelessness data \(www.gov.ie\)](https://www.gov.ie/en/homelessness-data/)

Rent increases are making it unaffordable for many families to move out of unsuitable and inappropriate accommodation, for example, some families are living in cramped conditions with grandparents, or damp inappropriate conditions for children. 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 income.

**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 over the last 6 years.

## Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

### - Family and Parental Support

Family support is a key means of improving the current and future health, wellbeing and development of children in Ireland. It can tackle adversity and help parents and their children to address detrimental issues in their lives. It provides help to children and families who are in need of support, without which families may struggle to address their problems and not feel in a position to best help their children and promote their wellbeing.

There is a risk that parental issues such as substance use, domestic violence and poor mental health will become more widespread and continue to worsen as a result of cost of living increases. For example, we have seen many parents we support struggle further with their mental health due to increased pressure and adversity brought by rapid inflation. Ensuring families have access to appropriate support is vital, as intervening early will improve outcomes for children.

Unfortunately, family support, particularly intensive family support, provision remains limited across the country. Cuts made to community and voluntary family support services ten years ago have led to a protracted squeezing of funds over time<sup>16</sup>. As a result, the State is not paying for the services it requires. 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 be forced to travel long distance. 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.

Finally, 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

---

<sup>16</sup> Barnardos: Just Economics - Breaking Point: Why Investment is needed now to ensure the sustainability of quality services for children and families.

families who are actively looking for help. It can prevent problems and issues worsening 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.

Families who want intensive support should be able to access it as promptly as possible. It has the ability to reduce issues deteriorating further and protect children. It is also cost effective; it is better to spend money on earlier preventative intervention rather than wait until children are taken into costly care.

**Recommendation:** Restore the annual cost of living increases to voluntary and community sector organisations and begin the expansion of family support services outlined in the Programme for Government in 2021, covering the full costs for current and new service provision, including for families who are self-referring to family support services.

## - 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 intellectual development of a child, with 75% of children's brain growth completed during their first few years<sup>17</sup>.

The positive influence of quality, early childhood care and education (ECEC) on a child's outcomes is well documented, benefitting children's social, emotional, physical and educational development. Participation in ECEC is particularly beneficial for children from disadvantaged backgrounds<sup>18</sup>. 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. 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 be able to access it before then and for more than 15 hours a week during term time.

Currently, early years providers are given an average sum for children who are sponsored under the National Childcare Scheme (NCS). 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

---

<sup>17</sup> [Brain Development - First Things First](#)

<sup>18</sup> Vandenbroeck, M et al 2018. Benefits of early childhood education and care and the conditions for obtaining them.

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.

**Recommendation:** Increase subsidies for low-income families to provide equitable access to early years and after school care for children. Guarantee that providers of early years services are fully funded for sponsored children under the NCS.

**Recommendation:** Extend AIM to include younger children accessing ELC and for children accessing SAC.

**Recommendation:** Provide sufficient funding to fully implement the equal participation model.

Barnardos' mission is to transform the lives of vulnerable children because childhood lasts a lifetime.

Barnardos' vision is to ensure all vulnerable children in Ireland get the support they need to overcome childhood adversity.

Visit our website [www.barnardos.ie](http://www.barnardos.ie)  
or contact our national office at:

Barnardos,  
Christchurch Square,  
Dublin 8.

T: 01 - 453 0355  
E: [info@barnardos.ie](mailto:info@barnardos.ie)