

## **Introduction**

Every year ahead of drafting the Barnardos Children's Budget (our pre-budget submission) I have the privilege of meeting some of the families Barnardos works with. I hear their experiences and hopes for the future. I hear what changes in policy would make a real difference to their lives and that of their children. I frame the Children's Budget bearing in mind their wishes, the experience of Barnardos staff and with regard to Ireland's obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This year we put an emphasis on the need for this Budget to make choices that were fair and sustainable to ensure Ireland's economic recovery benefited all families, not just the well off. For us, this primarily meant ensuring an adequate income and improved investment in public services.

What was delivered? Generally Budget 2015 is heralded as marking a turning point in Ireland's fortunes. We have been told by the Taoiseach and his Government it is the point where austerity ends and the foundations for an economic and social recovery is being laid. While that remains to be seen certainly some welcome decisions were delivered after many years of damaging announcements.

## **Free from poverty**

For Barnardos, we work with families experiencing poverty on a daily basis so their right to live life with dignity and free from poverty is being undermined. So for us the increase in Child Benefit payments was particularly welcomed. The UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights and Extreme Poverty, Magdalena Sepúlveda Carmona visited Ireland in 2011 and explicitly named flat rate cuts in child benefit as a major concern. She noted that, even then, austerity measures were already beginning to reverse the trend of reducing child poverty rates. But by 2014 Child Benefit had been whittled down to €130 per month per child, from a high of €166, and it can be argued a direct effect of this is that nearly one in 10 children in Ireland are now living in consistent poverty.

So a €5 increase may be small, especially when rises in inflation and taxes such as water charges and property tax are considered, but it is a step in the right direction. A further €5 rise is pledged for Budget 2016 and we would certainly be calling for continued increases to regain the ground lost in seven austerity budgets.

While Ms Carmona acknowledged other payments such as the Qualified Child Increase in providing much needed relief for welfare dependent families, she was clear that universal payments are the most effective and non-stigmatising way to address child poverty. And as we now know, since her visit the impact of three further austerity Budgets have been disproportionately felt by children living in low income households.

To accompany Barnardos Children's Budget this year, we commissioned research examining the benefits of universal supports and services over targeted measures. This research shows that not only do alternatives to universalism present serious and costly practical problems, but that targeting leads to worse results, lower levels of benefits for poor households and also reinforces inequality. There is compelling evidence that universalism – both in terms of cash supports and the delivery of quality public services – works best.

Countries with the lowest rates of child poverty are those which have invested most in both cash benefits and public services for children.

With regard to those who are in employment, a human rights based approach to budgeting suggests increasing taxation rates instead of making swingeing cuts to public expenditure, which affect the poorest and most vulnerable with the most severity.

So Tuesday's tax measures appear to be a mixed bag. While it is welcome to see a restructuring of the USC taxes that raises the entry threshold to €12,036 and a reduction in the rate for subsequent bands, cuts to the higher rate of income tax will not deliver relief to hard pressed families.

### **Public Services**

With regard to investment in public services, Barnardos would agree at the criticisms levelled towards the Irish Government that its budgetary decisions during the austerity years did not comply with our human rights obligations. The Center for Economic Rights found that austerity measures have severely reduced people's enjoyment of a range of economic, social and cultural rights – and those most affected were vulnerable and marginal groups including children, one parent families, asylum seekers, migrants, Travellers and older people.

Children have only one childhood and it is this experience that shapes their adulthood. We see daily the impact on children of lengthy waiting lists for medical assessments and treatments or languishing in families where there is heightened child welfare or protection concerns or parents being unable to afford basic school materials or living in overcrowded unsuitable accommodation. It is the infringements of these basic rights that mean children don't reach their potential.

Will Budget 2015 change this? Yes and No

### Tusla

Well certainly the best news for children came in the form of the pledge to provide appropriate funding to Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. Tusla has been given the mandate to deliver crucial frontline services for children such as social work and educational welfare supports. It came into being at the start of this year, but was forced to begin on the back foot as it was only given around 90% of its expected operating costs.

Unsurprisingly perhaps then that over the summer we saw lots of commentary in the media over the high number of children on waiting lists trying to access essential appropriate services. Having 9,000 cases of children at risk of abuse, neglect or welfare concerns waiting for referral and assessment should be a cause of national scandal – especially given our history in the matter.

Therefore Tuesday's announcement that Tusla would be given *almost* enough to discharge its duties is a welcome move.

### Accommodation

With regard to ensuring children live in safe and suitable accommodation. The investment of €2.2bn in social housing over the next three years is welcomed. This is desperately needed and when you unpick the figures it is still insufficient given 90,000 households remain on the social housing waiting lists.

The acute housing crisis has been laid bare in the past year and Barnardos has worked with many families at the coal face. One Barnardos project reported at the start of the summer that a quarter of the families with whom they were working were living in emergency

accommodation. Emergency accommodation is not suitable for children as sometimes they are housed in B&Bs and hotels. In some circumstances children are witnessing violence and drug use. They're scared because they're living in cramped conditions surrounded by adults they don't know. There's no place to play or do their homework. The problem is that one part of the State is failing these families, and then another, the Child and Family Agency, Tusla, is having to go in and pick up the pieces with family support. This is costing everyone more, both in terms of the impact it's having on children and parents and the financial cost to the State.

So while the medium to long term plans unveiled in Budget 2015 are important, other more immediate initiatives to address the housing crisis should have been advanced. These include expediting the roll out of the Housing Assistance Payment, changes to rent supplement levels and improving family friendly emergency accommodation.

### Education

For Barnardos fulfilling a child's right to education is vital first step in breaking the cycle of poverty. It must begin with quality pre-school and this is an area that Ireland continues to underfund and again Budget 2015 did not improve this situation, instead opting for a targeted Back to Work Family Dividend scheme. In our view investing in quality accessible early childhood care and education system will not only ensure children perform better in school but will also enable parents return to work. It has also proven to generate significant exchequer savings in the future as these children grow up healthier, more educated, pay more taxes, less likely to engage in criminal activity etc.

Our schools too are under-funded and under-resourced given the large volumes of children in the system and this is only set to increase. So it is concerning that the 1% reduction in capitation and related grants to primary and post-primary schools are still going ahead.

Budget 2015 did announce up to 1,700 new teaching posts, comprising teachers, resource staff and special needs assistants. These are much needed and will still not address Ireland's large class size issue.

For the past nine years Barnardos has conducted a school cost survey, asking parents how much they are paying to send their children to school. This year more than 2,000 parents responded, and while there are indications the overall costs are levelling off, the strain of high costs is crippling parents across the board. It is definitely not a 'free' education system and children's education is being hampered by their parent's inability to pay.

As one of the parents said, 'The great equalizer in any society is education. A poor child has the right to the same education as a child from a wealthy family.'

Overwhelming evidence shows that education is central to allowing real social mobility and this Budget appears to have just maintained the status quo, while not making any headway to make up ground lost after years of cuts. When put in light of a country planning for a recovery it could be very clearly argued that a lack of long-sightedness in relation to education investment does not bode well.

The right to primary education is one of the cornerstone human rights, protected in a great number of instruments. Education is crucial to the enjoyment of other human rights and contributes an important way to the promotion of the essence of human rights – namely living in human dignity.

### Conclusion

To conclude it is too early to tell the full impact of the Budget on the lives of children and families. Certainly while there are some hopeful indications for families worst affected by the

recession, it will not change their fortunes overnight given the depth and aggressiveness of the austerity measures imposed since 2009. In our view, children's rights will be continued to be hampered if the economic recovery is not sustained, shaped and designed to address many of the structural inequalities that exist in Irish society.