Barnardo’s NI Response to the Draft Budget 2011 - 15

1. Introduction

Barnardos is Northern Ireland’s largest children’s organisation and we work with over 9,000 children and their families every year across many local communities. We work with those children most at risk and who are most vulnerable and disadvantaged. We provide a range of services that span family support, work in prisons, early years, programmes to address educational disadvantage, support for disabled children and young people and support to children in care and leaving care.

Our work on the ground provides us with a clear overview of many of the issues currently impacting upon children and families and informs our policy perspective.

We welcome this opportunity to comment on the draft Budget and we welcome that the NI Executive have put forward a budget for consultation and consideration.

In our response we will focus on those broader issues that we believe have not been addressed or not sufficiently addressed within the draft Budget. These are outlined below.

2. Strategic Focus on Children and Families

Barnardos NI are disappointed that overall the draft NI Budget does not give a specific focus and priority to the needs of children and families. We are concerned, that particularly in a time of public sector retrenchment, this lack of a coherent focus on the needs of children and families will result in a ‘salami slicing’ approach to public sector expenditure. In effect this could mean we see key support services for children and families reduced on a piecemeal basis and so we lack any clear coherence.

Barnardos had requested that the NI Executive consider undertaking a cross cutting review of services for the most vulnerable children and families in order to properly inform budget decisions across Departments. This is standard practice in setting the budget in Westminster and we would urge the NI Executive to consider the need for such a cross cutting review and to implement it when the next Executive is formed after the next Assembly Elections.
3. Priority for Families and Children

Barnardo’s are disappointed that there is no clear priority for the needs of families and children within the main Budget document. The fact that the Budget has been brought forward without a Programme for Government makes this even more difficult. We believe it is vitally important that the NI Executive have a clear set of priorities for families and children and fund to those. We would want to see this addressed in any new Programme for Government.

4. Youth Unemployment

We are disappointed that the section of the main Budget document that deals with the issues of the economic downturn and its impact has singularly failed to address the disproportionate impact in terms of youth unemployment. The reality is that much of the current recession in both NI and Britain has been borne by young people and by enormous increases in terms of their unemployment rates.

In NI the numbers of young people under 25 claiming benefits had risen by more than 90% during 2009. Over the last three years Youth Unemployment has doubled and currently costs the Northern Ireland economy £250 million per year. We are facing the potential of another lost generation of young people unless there is a clear programme of intervention and support.

Given that this focus is missing and yet is a critical aspect of the current recession it is not clear what focus the NI Executive intend to take on such a vital issue that has consequences not just for the individual young people but the economy as a whole.

5. Social Investment Fund and Social Protection Fund

Barnardo’s welcomes the creation of both these Funds and the proposed focus on those who are more disadvantaged. However, we would seek further information on the process to develop the criteria for these Funds and current Executive thinking on what this criteria is likely to be.

6. Level of Detail

The lack of a clear level of detail in the overall Budget and even in Departmental Budgets makes it very difficult to know where the Executive priorities are and what areas are likely to be more severely affected by public sector spending reductions.
7. Health and Social Services Spending

Many of the services provided for children at risk and within the child protection system are located within the Personal Social Services element of DHSSPS. Spending on those family and children services in NI is already almost 30% behind the comparable spend levels in Britain. We are very concerned that a decision to ring-fence Health spending will impact more severely on the spend on personal social services and consequently on those children most at risk.

8. NEET Young People

The Department of Employment and Learning Minister has been tasked with taking forward a joint Departmental Strategy to address the issue of NEET young people in NI. There are currently 46,000 young people who are NEET here and this figure has continued to rise over the last decade.

Nowhere in the draft Budget either at Departmental level or in the broader Budget is there a reference to the needs of NEET young people, the Strategy or how this will be addressed. This is an issue of serious concern as many NEET young people move into long-term economic inactivity. If the Executive is to be serious about addressing Northern Ireland’s 28% economic inactivity rate then it must address NEET young people.

It also places us out of step with developments in England, Scotland and Wales all of whom have recognised the needs of NEET young people and put in place extra funding and programmes of support.

We are very disappointed that this crucial issue is not in the draft Budget and has not been addressed in terms of cross cutting funding.

Conclusion

In times of public sector retrenchment the need for strategic investment and smart funding is critical. Barnardo’s are concerned that the current Budget does not set the Executive’s vision and priorities for children and families. Indeed the needs of children and families do not appear to have any priority in this Budget. We are very concerned that this will lead to the withdrawal of funding on a programme by programme basis within separate departments and the most vulnerable families lose out.

We would urge the NI Executive to develop a more cohesive and comprehensive approach to the needs of children and families and for this to be firmly located within the central Budget and within each Department.

Barnardo’s NI, February 2011
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