

On the side of children
and young families



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INTRODUCTION

Budget 2018 comes at a time of unprecedented crises in our public services.

Parents in the State are paying some of the highest childcare costs in the world, often the equivalent of a second mortgage. Our schools are underfunded and class sizes are too big. Families are struggling to cover rising costs including rip-off mortgage rates and the prospect of a dramatic increase in Local Property Tax.

In our Alternative Budget 2018, Sinn Féin has very clearly taken the side of ordinary families. We want to create a society that includes quality public services for everyone, a society where the best interests of our children are put first, and young families have stability and security in housing, education, and health services.

We recognise that the benefits of high-quality public services – a health system that is there for you and your children when you need it, an education system with the capacity to ensure every child reaches their fullest potential, and a secure roof over every families' head – far outweigh the couple of euro a week in a person's pocket via the tax cuts proposed by Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil.

By proposing tax cuts that benefit the

wealthiest most, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil are making it clear whose side they are on.

In stark contrast, with our Alternative Budget for 2018, Sinn Féin is taking the side of ordinary young families. A selection of our budget proposals follows.

INVESTING IN CHILDCARE

**Halving the average cost of childcare
– Cost €37 million in 2018
(full year cost €116 million)**

Irish families are paying the second-highest childcare fees in Europe. We want a childcare sector which we can be proud of and which is reliable, high quality, and affordable to all.

Two-parent families in Ireland with two children under the age of five pay, on average, between 25% and 34% of their take-home pay on childcare. For one-parent families, it's even more.

Sinn Féin's proposal would see the Universal Childcare Subsidy increased from the current €0.50 per-hour to €2.50, up to €420 per month.

Coupled with other measures in terms of wages and sustainability funds, this measure would halve the cost of childcare for most families in the State.

In Dublin City, for example, parents are footing on average a bill of almost €790 per month. Under Sinn Féin's proposals, this would be reduced to around €370.

This is only a building block. Sinn Féin aims to continue to increase and expand investment into the early years sector.

**Increase Capitation Grants for the ECCE free pre-school years
– Cost €8 million in 2018 (full year cost €20 million)**

Capitation grants are paid by the State to crèches and pre-schools for each child participating in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme. A higher capitation grant is paid where the education and care is led by a Level 7 graduate, a reflection of the quality provided in the crèche. However, the rates are inadequate and some providers have been forced to request 'voluntary' contributions from parents to make up the deficit.

Sinn Féin proposes increasing both the higher and lower capitation grants by €5 per child, per week.

These increases would help improve the sustainability of services in the sector and increase professionalism and quality of service. Current margins for early childhood operators are extremely tight, which leaves the services vulnerable to changes in regulatory

requirements and does not allow for investment.

The overwhelming evidence showing the large societal benefits of high-quality early childhood education points towards a need for increasing Government investment in this area.

Bigger sustainability fund for childcare providers – Cost €3 million

Sinn Féin proposes to increase the Sustainability Fund for childcare providers by an additional €3 million. The Sustainability Fund will aid providers to recruit and retain qualified staff, ensure all children are cared for by a qualified worker, and allow service providers to move into a position where they can be sustainable in the long term.

Many ECCE schemes have been utilising Community Employment (CE Scheme), Tús, and Rural Social Scheme workers as support staff. The full implementation of the Child Care Act means these staff must hold a minimum FETAC Level 5 qualification when working directly with children. The sustainability fund would help ensure that such important regulatory changes do not negatively impact on the ability of operators to deliver services.

Increased recognition of Non-Contact Time – Cost €4.7 million

Early Years providers' duties involve a large portion of administration and non-contact work in order to successfully deliver childcare schemes. Much of these duties are performed outside of the standard working day. Budget 2017 provided payment for the equivalent of seven days of non-contact time.

Sinn Féin recognises that seven days is still too little to allow for the vital administration work that must be done to be completed. Therefore, Sinn Féin is proposing a 25% increase to non-contact time payments.

The increase in non-contact time payment will apply to all government-subsidised childcare schemes.

INVESTING IN SCHOOLS

Reduce the Pupil-Teacher Ratio at Primary School, increase funding per pupil to schools and provide additional classroom accommodation – Cost €22 million (current) and €45 million (capital)

Students are being taught in overcrowded classrooms, while school

principals struggle to cover the basic costs of running a school.

Figures provided by the Department of Education show that almost two thirds of all mainstream primary school pupils are currently being taught in classrooms of 25 or more pupils, while the average class size in Europe is 21. Sinn Féin is proposing €12 million investment in order to reduce the pupil-teacher ratio by 2 points.

The cuts imposed by successive governments have resulted in an 11% reduction in the overall capitation paid to schools. Parents are increasingly pressured to make up the shortfall through 'voluntary contributions', while principals struggle to pay for essential services such as lighting, heat, and insurance. Increasing school capitation grants, or per pupil funding, by 5% - at a cost of €10 million - will help offset this shortfall and reduce pressure on parents to make 'voluntary' contributions.

Sinn Féin would also provide significant additional investment for the construction of new primary and secondary schools to tackle the critical issue of excessive class sizes, at a cost of €35 million. A programme of prefab replacement would be commenced with an initial investment of €10 million for 2018.

These measures aim to tackle the underinvestment in our education system, to create more equal access to education while establishing a firm foundation for our State to compete on the international stage through a well-resourced public education system.

More supports for pupils with special educational needs
- Cost €14.7 million in 2018
(full year cost €44.2 million)

Over 500 schools have appealed their allocation of resource teachers under the new allocation model. This model is not sufficiently flexible to allow schools to provide resources to children when their needs are identified after the allocation has been made. Sinn Féin would hire 450 additional resource teachers to help ensure children receive sufficient support during the transition to the full implementation of the new resource model and make funding available to hire an additional 500 SNAs in 2018.

Increase Funding to the School Transport Scheme by €7 million

Between 2008 and 2014, there has been a €14 million reduction in funding for school transport and new rules make it harder for children to access this service. In some rural areas, there are simply not enough places on school transport to accommodate all pupils

– resulting in student places on buses being drawn by lottery. That is simply unacceptable.

Sinn Féin is providing an initial funding increase of €7 million in order to provide for a more accessible, flexible school transport system.

TACKLING COSTS AND SUPPORTING INCOMES FOR FAMILIES

Tackle Back to School Expenses
- Cost €28.6

The costs of sending children back to school have become a huge financial burden on low and middle income families. Research by Barnardo's has shown that the average cost of sending a child into first year of secondary school is €800.

Sinn Féin has proposed a number of measures that would help ease this burden:

- » Increase funding for School Books Grant by 30% - €5 million
- » Increase funding to the School Meals Programme by 20% - €9.5 million
- » Increase the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance by €50 - €14.1 million

Increase social welfare rates for families - Cost €55.2 million (in addition to cost of inflation proofing)

The most vulnerable people in our society continue to live with the consequences of decisions made by Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil in previous, regressive Budgets. Lone parents, young families and their children are still struggling to cover basic costs on a daily basis.

Sinn Féin proposes to increase Jobseekers Allowance, Jobseekers Benefit, Supplementary Welfare Allowance, and Farm Assist by €5. We also propose to increase the One Parent Family Payment by €5 and raise the scheme's cut-off age to 14 years.

Increase Family Income Supplement by 5% - Cost €16 million (in addition to cost of inflation proofing)

This increase will assist low income families where a lone parent or parents are employed in low paid work. This is another targeted measure directed at reducing poverty levels among children.

Minimum wage increase of 75 cent

Sinn Féin supports the living wage, which currently stands at €11.70 per hour. In government, we have pledged to introduce the living wage.

Concerted efforts must be made to close the gap between the current minimum wage and the living wage.

The Low Pay Commission's recommendation of a 3% rise for the 2018 minimum wage, amounting to an increase of €0.30 per hour, is unacceptable. In Budget 2018, Sinn Féin believes the government should bring the current minimum wage up to at least €10 per hour, and commit to introducing the living wage.

Introducing a living wage will have a number of beneficial impacts. First and foremost, workers and their families will enjoy greater financial security and a better standard of living. Also, people will have more disposable income, resulting in greater consumer spending which would benefit local businesses.

Increasing the minimum wage will also help address the unacceptable gender pay gap that exists in Ireland; 2 out of every 3 workers who earn the minimum wage are female. A high proportion of these workers are younger people.

**Abolition of Property Tax
- Cost €445 million**

Before the last election, Fine Gael cynically froze the Property Tax. When it is reassessed in 2019, homeowners will face a big increase as the effect of property price increases kick in.

The property tax is a tax on the family home, a tax on people who are already under financial pressure in so many ways. This measure will save homeowners €244 per annum on average. This tax is set to rise dramatically when the temporary freeze on valuation ends in 2019.

Maintain Mortgage Interest Relief for families: cost neutral

With rip-off mortgage rates and many families still struggling to pay their mortgage, we do not believe it is time to withdraw Mortgage Interest Relief for qualifying householders. The mortgage arrears crisis remains acute and removing or phasing out this relief this year would be counter-productive.

INVESTING IN SPORTS

**Sports Capital Programme
- €4 million**

Sport is hugely beneficial to communities across the state and Sinn Féin recognises the importance of sport in our society. Sport benefits our mental and physical health, inspires confidence in our young people and supports community and inclusion. In 2017, an unprecedented number of sports groups and clubs applied for Sports Capital Programme grants, as no grant was available in 2016 and the grant was not annualised until this year. Many of these groups had their applications for Sports Capital Grants turned down due to the demand. Sinn Féin proposes to increase the funding available for the Sports Capital Programme by €4 million in 2018.

PROTECTING OUR CHILDREN

Creation of the Office of a Digital Safety Commissioner
- Cost €2.36 million

Cyber-safety is one of the major child protection issues of our time.

Access to the internet presents various dangers when it comes to child safety, from access to inappropriate material to cyber-bullying and predatory behaviour.

Sinn Féin wants to see the establishment of an Office of the Digital Safety Commissioner and a regulatory policy framework. This Office would roll out a National Strategy on Children's Cyber Safety and include key education measures when it comes to online behaviour.

This proposal builds on a recommendation from the Law Reform Commission in 2016 which envisages such an office to "oversee and monitor an efficient and effective 'take down' system so that harmful communications can be removed as quickly as possible from, for example, social media sites". Its role would also "include the publication of a statutory code of practice on take down procedures and associated national standards".

Hire 150 extra Social Workers
- Cost €7.5 million in 2018
(full year cost €10.06 million)

Recent reports from HIQA into foster services across the State have shown that social workers are under intense pressure when it comes to the sheer volume of reviews and reports which they must conduct. In order to help relieve this pressure, more social workers are needed. This will help see that care plans are regularly reviewed and foster parents are regularly assessed. Sinn Féin proposes to hire an extra 150 social workers in Budget 2018.

IMPROVING HOMELESS SERVICES

Improving homeless services
- Cost €10 million

Homelessness is spiralling out of control. High rents and housing costs coupled with a lack of social and affordable housing is exacerbating the situation and leaving many families at risk of homelessness. Sinn Féin recognises that increased social and affordable housing is the only solution to this crisis.

However, recognising that it will take time to increase housing stock to sufficient levels, as part of the overall Housing proposals, Sinn Féin plans to put aside a fund of €10 million which will be used, in part, to roll out a Quality Standards Framework for all homeless emergency accommodation and an independent inspection regime. Any remainder of the allocation would be held as a contingency fund to meet day to day requirements of providing emergency accommodation.



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