

## **AsIAM Budget 2024 Analysis**

On Tuesday 10<sup>th</sup> October 2023, the Minister for Finance, Michael McGrath, and the Minister for Public Expenditure, NDP Delivery and Reform, Paschal Donohue, published the Government's Budget for 2024. This was framed as a 'step change in planning for the future' in terms of buttressing public finances against potential economic shocks and in planning for future economic stability, whilst also continuing increases in public spending, with the overall package of supports totalling €14 billion.

In continuing the trend of large Budgets with significant levels of public spending to tackle the impact of inflation in the Irish economy in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the level of public spending reflects the fact that the cost-of-living crisis in Ireland, indeed many other countries, has not abated, and that continuing inflation and higher costs of everyday goods and services is still affecting many people and families across Irish society, who are still experiencing significant financial hardship today. It also continues with longer-term investment into essential public services such as education, housing, and health which has been a re-occurring theme over the last number of Budgets. Funding was also used to develop two investment funds with windfall from corporate tax, a Future Ireland Fund and the Infrastructure, Climate, and Nature Fund, with the intent that future governments can draw from these sources to pay for future increases in infrastructure, added demands to public services, such as healthcare and pensions, and to tackle the climate emergency by investing in green infrastructural projects.

From AsIAM's perspective, whilst there are quite a few welcome measures, including some very welcome and necessary spending in areas of education, health, employment supports, and in tackling child poverty, we believe that there were also missed opportunities to deliver both the types of targeted financial supports which would meaningfully address the level of exclusion, poverty, and the lack of opportunity which many among the 1 in 27 Autistic people in Irish society still face. Even with all the measures in Budget 2024 in place, many in our community will continue to count the cost of not having the same chance to belong, be accepted, and feel included in Irish society. It is a 'step change' budget in the sense that whilst many in our community's circumstances would somewhat improve under the measures announced, it does not substantially address the barriers that many Autistic people and families face in accessing services, in education, in employment, in accessing

social protection and in accessing disability and mental health supports. The Government needs to invest more substantially in these areas to build more trust and confidence among our community.

The Government also missed an opportunity to build more trust and confidence among our community by not bedding in much needed investment in planning for and introducing a National Autism Strategy, which would make a real difference for Autistic people and families. The Government also missed an opportunity by not introducing a Cost of Disability payment, which would address some of these additional costs of living pressures and of being Autistic and Disabled in Irish society. Autistic people and families across Ireland are contacting our Autism Information Line and our Community Support team saying that they are overloaded with the burden of experiencing the barriers to services and supports, of the lack of opportunity across Ireland.

In this sense, Budget 2024 holds a mixed picture for our community as although there are some very welcome, timely and necessary increases in investment and service provision in many areas such as in education, they do not bring the transformational change that our community desperately seeks in addressing the barriers to supports and services that shape their lives as Autistic people or raising Autistic people in Ireland today.

Community member Ciara Jones sums up the mood among many Autistic people and families across Ireland towards Budget 2024 by saying:

*“Some of today’s measures are welcome. However, as Parent and Carer to an autistic teenager, today’s social protection measures do not go far enough for me or my child. Families across the state on Carers Allowance are struggling with basic costs in running a household. The State must recognise the additional costs of a disability. I gave up work in 2018 to care for my son who has high support needs. Today’s announcements along with previous budget announcements do not come anywhere near the financial costs required in supporting my family. The State must start valuing Carers.”*

## **Education**

AsIAM welcomes that there is increased funding for education, which will support more autistic students to exercise their right to an appropriate education in their local community. We welcome the additional investment,

which will form part of the Department of Education's Special Education Budget of €2.6 billion to support children with additional educational support needs, including Autistic children, to access an appropriate education, and an overall budget of €9.6 billion.

This year's Budget allocation for Education will include the following measures:

- **The creation of 1,216 additional posts for Special Needs Assistants and 744 additional posts for Special Education teachers. Of the additional SNA posts announced in Budget 2023, 806 will support students in special classes, 150 will support students in new special school places, and 260 will support students to access mainstream classes in their local school.**
- **An additional €67 million to expand out the free schoolbooks and classroom resources for 212,000 pupils who are in 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year in secondary schools, as well as the 558,000 children who are accessing the scheme in primary and secondary schools.**
- **€92 million will be allocated to provide greater access to school transport.**
- **€5 million will be used to continue counselling and mental health pilot project in primary schools.**
- **€5 million will be used to provide for more Education Welfare Officers, as well as Alternative Education places who students who need different ways of accessing their education.**
- **€40 million will be provided to keep the Enhanced Summer Programme in Budget 2024 with the intention of providing more additional support for children who have additional support needs when schools are closed over the summer months.**
- **Fees for undergraduate part time studies will now be fully funded benefitting eligible one parent families, students with disabilities and carers on low incomes as part of a brand-new pilot programme.**

We welcome to see this further investment in education, which is much needed to support members of our community to access an appropriate inclusive education, but as Inclusion Ireland highlights in their response, Government needs to support the longer-term transition towards an Inclusive Education that ensures that every pupil regardless of need has the same chance to go to their local school, in the community, with the supports or accommodations they need to flourish. We hope to see further and more

sustained investment as inflation and the Cost-of-Living pressures stabilise and AsIAM would like to see the following measures being implemented:

- **Further investment to reduce class sizes by one pupil to 22:1, with the overall goal of bringing our pupil:teacher ratios into line with the European average of 20:1 over the next three years by reducing our class sizes by one pupil per year in subsequent years.**
- **Further investment to update and to fully implement the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004, as highlighted in our submission for [reforming the EPSEN Act](#).**
- **Whilst the reduction of fees for students in full-time undergraduate courses is very welcome, we would call for greater investment into building on measures reducing educational disadvantage by expanding the pilot scheme to also fully fund undergraduate courses for eligible one parent families, students with disabilities and carers on low incomes to full time courses, who experience the sharpest consequences of educational disadvantage in Irish society.**

## **Social Protection**

This Budget announced an extra €2.3 billion in spending on Social Protection for 2024, which included a range of supports for disabled people and families, aimed at supporting people who are under pressure with continuing inflation and with meeting the high costs of living and everyday expenses in Ireland presently. This included the following measures:

- **A €12 increase to core social welfare rates from January 1st, 2024, including the State Pension, Disability Allowance, Incapacity Benefit, Jobseeker payments and the Carer's Allowance, which will come into effect in January 2024.**
- **A €10 increase to Domiciliary Care Allowance to €340 per month from January 2024.**
- **A €400 one-off Cost of Living Payment for Disabled People and Carers to be paid in November.**

- **In addition to the Christmas Bonus, an additional Double Payment on core social welfare payments such as the Jobseekers Allowance, Disability Allowance, Carer's Allowance in January 2024 to deal with the cost of living.**
- **An increase in the Earnings disregard for those on Carers Allowance to €450 for a single person and €900 for a couple.**
- **A once off payment of €400 to people receiving Invalidity Pension, Disability Allowance or Blind Pension in November 2023;**
- **A €400 Lump Sum in November 2023 to families receiving the Working Family Payment;**
- **A reduction in the minimum hours that a disabled person must work to qualify for the Wage Subsidy Scheme from 21 hours per week to 15 hours per week**
- **A €200 increase in the Incapacitated Child Tax Credit.**
- **A €200 payment will be given to those who are on disability payments, such as Disability Allowance, who also receive the Living Alone Allowance.**
- **There will be an increase in the earnings disregard for those in receipt of Disability Allowance and who also work from €140 to €165.**
- **900 more Primary Schools will have access to the Hot School Meals scheme, providing free hot school meals for pupils.**

The social welfare announcements in Budget 2024 includes some welcome measures, especially with reduction of the eligibility requirements to the Wage Subsidy Scheme, and the increase in earnings disregards to the Carers Allowance and Incapacitated Child Tax Credit. However, AsIAM believes that what the Government introduced in Budget 2024 was not enough and falls short of addressing the additional financial costs that Autistic people and disabled people face living in Irish society. We believe Government should take a more redistributive approach aimed at expanding the social safety net for Disabled people, including Autistic people and families. Whilst we recognise the need for the Department to apportion some funds to meet additional expenses over the winter months, and like last year this formed part of their reasoning why they decided to structure the increases in this fashion, we stress that more targeted measures are needed in order to

meaningfully address the levels of economic hardship that our most marginalised members of society experience.

The €12 increase in the weekly rate of Disability Allowance, Jobseeker's payments, Carer's Allowance and Carer's Benefit, the same increase as Budget 2023, does not go far enough to alleviate the financial precarity and insecurity which impacts both members of our community and other marginalised people in Irish society on a day-to-day basis, and in protecting people from poverty or from falling into poverty. In this regard, whilst the measures would address the most pressing financial needs, Autistic people and families still count the cost of not having the same chance in many aspects of Irish society. Through greater increases in social protection payments to meet the adequate income thresholds set out by the Vincentian Centre and Social Justice Ireland, by indexing future increases to inflation and the cost of living, and acting on our calls below, these will go much further in addressing the poverty, isolation and social exclusion that put so many in our community under pressure today.

The second area of concern is the failure to introduce a Cost of Disability Payment and that the one-off Disability payment is down to €400. Neither meaningfully support Autistic people and people with disabilities to meet the additional expenses which come with being disabled in Irish society, which can range between €10,000 and €28,000 for our community.

As we highlighted in our Pre-Budget Submission, many organisations have called for a €27.50 increase to core social welfare rates and for payments to be benchmarked against inflation and rising living expenses. Delivering on these measures will both more directly and more effectively address the impact that poverty and social exclusion has on the Autistic and Disabled communities and will more effectively address the financial and social costs of living with a disability.

We reiterate our calls set out in our Pre-Budget Submission, **“Investing in Creating the Same Chance for Ireland’s Autism Community,”** for the Government to act on the following measures:

- **Provide an additional €25 per week to Disability Allowance, and index any future social protection increases to inflation and the costs of living.**
- **Increase the rate of Carer's Allowance payment by €25 per week, and remove the means test for present and future applicants.**

- **Increase Domiciliary Care Allowance by €25 per week.**
- **Increase the Carer's Support Grant payment by €150.**
- **Extend eligibility for the Home Carer Tax Credit to include single working hours.**
- **Increase in the Incapacitated Child Tax Credit from €3,300 to €3,500.**
- **Introduce a Cost of Disability payment of €20 per week for all people with disabilities regardless of employment status, with no means test requirement for applicants, and act on the findings of the Indecon Cost of Disability Report.**
- **Increase the Housing Adaptation Grant to support individuals and families from €30,000 to €60,000.**

## **Disability Services and Health**

AsIAM cautiously welcomes the additional investment in health, disability, and mental health services in Budget 2024, which included a funding increase of €198 million for the provision of disability services and €75 million for mental health services, including the following measures:

- **An additional €20.5 million for disability residential services for adults and children to deliver approximately 100 new residential places**
- **An additional €10 million in respite services to build on existing provision, to provide more alternative respite such as in homes, after-school and deliver new or enhanced services to families**
- **An additional €8.5 million to improve children's services including the recruitment of additional therapy positions, increasing third level places and supports for specialist children's disability services**
- **An additional €18.2 million for placements in adult day services for 1,250-1400 young people leaving school in 2024 and €23.7m in funding to provide for the full cost of school leavers in 2023**
- **€2 million more funding in Personal Assistant services to promote independent living, delivering around 80,000 additional hours, more Home Support services, and community supports**

- **Additional funding has been allocated to support both the implementation of United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and the Autism Innovation Strategy, funding of Disabled Persons Organisations, supporting more disabled people into employment and supporting disabled people to take part in consultations and events held by the Department.**
- **An additional €75.2 million has been allocated to mental health services including Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), suicide prevention services and Traveller Counselling Services, and developing new services.**

AsIAM welcomes this additional investment in providing disability supports to support autistic people and disabled people and families, particularly around Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, but as with previous years, AsIAM has two key concerns with how the Government's intends to deliver on expanding disability supports.

First, there remains a lack of clarity on how this increased funding will be spent and how this will meaningfully support Autistic people and families over 2024. A more pressing issue is that there is little detail on their plans to introduce an Autism Innovation Strategy and how it intends to put the UNCRPD (United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities) into practice – which is in the Programme for Government – and this falls short on our calls to introduce and legislate for a National Autism Strategy and within many disability organisations to ratify the Optional Protocol of the UNCRPD.

Also, as with Budget 2023, these increases still falls short of the Government's own projections around the scale of additional funding needed for disability services to meet the level of unmet needs among autistic people, disabled people, and their families, which the Department of Health set out in its Disability Capacity Review published in 2021.

Whilst we welcome that 68 new staff for CAMHS will be allocated and the increased overall mental health investment in this Budget, we also share the concerns that many mental health organisations, such as [Mental Health Reform](#), towards the decision to allocate €15 million in developing new mental health measures which will affect the development of public mental health services that many in our community have been calling for in creating a public diagnostic pathway for autistic adults, in delivering an Adult ADHD pathway in the public system, in addressing the needs of those with dual



diagnosis and who have eating disorders, in delivering supports for children and young people, and in addressing waiting lists and staff shortages and expanding services which are vital to meeting our needs.

Whilst we do suspect that cost overruns in the overall health budget impacted the funding needed to invest in addressing these unmet needs, it is myopic to divert funding from mental health services, particularly in services for people most in need of these supports, to make up for pressure points within the health system, and we support Mental Health Reform's calls for significantly increased investment of €85 million to address barriers in mental health service provision and €40 million to address staffing issues faced by people in both the public mental health and the wider community and voluntary sectors.

To better support our community, AsIAM called on the Government to implement the following measures in line with the more sustained investment in disability supports over the coming years under the Disability Capacity Review.

- **Invest €15 million to develop and implement the Autism Innovation Strategy, under the remit of the Minister of State with Special Responsibility for Disability at the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration, and Youth. Develop an Implementation Plan which works to deliver all the recommendations specified in the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Autism Final Report.**
- **Provide €6 million to deliver a 'one stop shop' pilot as highlighted in the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Autism Report, and to financially support local Autistic-led groups.**
- **Provide adequate financial supports to families who access assessments and supports privately due to their unavailability in the public health system until such time as vacant positions within CDNTs (Children's Disability Network Teams) have been filled.**

#### **Actions which support the Implementation of the Autism Innovation Strategy**

- **Enact legislation which requires the State to publish an autism strategy every three years. Establish a committee or monitoring group featuring Autistic people to participate in drafting and monitoring the strategy and require the Minister with responsibility**

**for disability to address both the Dáil and the Seanad every year to provide an update regarding its progress.**

- Ensure that the needs of Autistic people are considered with designing all public services and include the Autistic community when designing autism-specific services.**
- Introduce mandatory autism training for all staff in the public sector who work with Autistic people, particularly in health, education, and social care settings.**
- Recognise the work of autism groups who support Autistic people and families by setting up a funding stream to support these groups in their work and for more autism groups and Autistic led groups to be set up to support Autistic people across communities in Ireland.**
- Ensure that the needs of Autistic people are taken into account when designing all public services and include the Autistic community when designing autism-specific services.**
- Establish a clear pathway to accessing Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC) and assistive technology and ensure that Autistic children and adults can access and retain AAC devices and supports throughout their lives.**
- Increase the funding allocated to Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC) and assistive technology to ensure that there are sufficient devices available to those who need them as well as training for the families of AAC-users.**