

## **AsIAM Analysis on Budget 2023**

On 27<sup>th</sup> September 2022, the Minister for Finance, Paschal Donohue TD and the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, Michael McGrath TD, published Budget for 2023. This was framed as a Cost-of-Living Budget and contains a significant package of measures totalling €11.3 billion. The main aim of the Budget was to protect citizens against the sharpest consequences of the rise in inflation that Ireland and many other countries around the world are currently experiencing.

As one of the larger Budgets in recent years, the scale of this year's measures reflects the reality that many people in Irish society are experiencing significant levels of financial hardship, particularly in recent months. It also aimed to continue with longer-term investment into essential public services such as education and health which has been a re-occurring theme over the last number of Budgets.

From AsIAM's perspective, Budget 2023 was not as expansive or as redistributive as we had hoped in the sense that the levels of targeted financial support aimed at the autism community, particularly for Autistic people and families on low and middle incomes did not go far enough to fully meet their needs. This was particularly the case for people and families who rely on social protection payments for part or all of their income, and who are particularly exposed to the sharp price increases to everyday living expenses such as food, energy and clothing. The €12 per week increase in core social protection rates offered in the Budget do not keep pace with the rising cost of living and the rate of inflation - whilst we do acknowledge that this is one of the bigger social protection increases in recent years, this still leaves people under significant financial pressure. These issues highlight the need for a bigger social safety net, a greater focus on tackling disadvantage in future social protection increases and for more sustained increases in social protection payments to more meaningfully address the levels of economic hardship and insecurity that Autistic people and families experience.

The range of one-off social protection supports, whilst welcome in recognising that disabled people and family carers experience additional costs in the first instance, also do not go far enough to compensate for the shortfall between core social welfare rates and rising levels of inflation. It also does not address the wider structural socio-economic barriers many in our community and other marginalised groups who are vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion, given the potential for these payments to be swallowed up if further price increases occur over the winter months.

Although we would have liked to have seen a more effective targeting of finite resources with more measures offering greater protection for families who are being financially squeezed by the Cost of Living crisis, on a more positive note, the Budget also contained a broad range of measures which will support many Autistic people and families, and we will set these out below:

## Education

AsIAm welcomes that despite the scale of the Cost-of-Living Crisis, there is increased funding for building a more inclusive education system which supports autistic students to exercise their right to an appropriate education. 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 1,194 additional posts for Special Needs Assistants and 686 additional posts for Special Education teachers. Of the additional SNA posts announced in Budget 2023, 735 will support students in special classes, 124 will support students in new special school places, and 335 will support students to access mainstream classes in their local school.**
- **An additional €47 million to roll out a free school books and classroom resources for all 540,000 children who are attending primary school from September 2023, bringing the total cost of the Scheme to €50 million.**
- **A reduction in the pupil: teacher ratio from 24:1 over 2022 to 23:1 over 2023 through the funding of 370 additional teaching posts.**
- **An additional €20 million will be provided to the Enhanced Summer Programme, bringing the total budget for 2023 to €40 million with the intention of providing more additional support for children who have additional support needs when schools are closed over the summer months.**

Additional funding was also announced in a number of areas:

- **An additional €13 million will be allocated to the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) to recruit 161 frontline and administrative staff to support students with educational support needs and families in navigating the Special Education System.**
- **The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) will receive additional funding to recruit 54 more psychologists to provide services in special schools and special classes.**
- **Additional funding will be provided to support proposed reforms to the Senior Cycle, including the Leaving Certificate exams, for additional staff for DEIS Schools and to support pupils in DEIS Schools to remain and to participate at school.**

Given the context of the Budget was primarily focused on tackling the Cost-of-Living crisis, it is welcome to see further investment in education, which is much needed to support members of our community to access an appropriate inclusive education. We hope to see further and more sustained investment as

the Cost-of-Living crisis abates 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 a matter of urgency, as outlined in the Priorities for Action as set out by the Minister of State for Special Education and Inclusion.**

## **Social Protection**

This Budget announced an extra €2 billion in spending on Social Welfare for 2023, which included a range of supports for disabled people and families, aimed at supporting people through the sharpest consequences of the spiralling inflation Ireland is currently experiencing. This included the following measures:

- **A €12 increase to all core social welfare rates from January 1st 2023, including the State Pension, Disability Allowance, Incapacity Benefit, Jobseeker payments and the Carer's Allowance, which will come into effect in January 2023.**
- **A €500 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.**
- **An improved means test for family carers in receipt of Fuel Allowance – Families on Half-Rate Carer's Allowance will be disregarded from the means test from January 2023.**
- **The rate of Domiciliary Care Allowance will increase to €330 from January 2023.**
- **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.**

The Social Welfare package for 2023 contains some positive measures, particularly in recognising the additional costs that carers and Disabled People experience in the first instance, but AsIAM believes that Government should take a more redistributive approach aimed at expanding the social safety net for Disabled people, including Autistic people and families. Increases 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, whilst one of the bigger increases in recent years, still falls short of addressing the consequences of medium-term inflation, and of addressing socio-economic inequality that impacted both members of our community and other marginalised people in Irish society. The second area of concern is the failure to introduce a more long-term Cost of Disability Payment, which would 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.

Over the medium term, AsIAM believes that the incremental increases to the Social Protection budget needs to have a greater focus on addressing the impact that poverty and social exclusion has on the Autistic and Disabled communities. This should include a greater level of financial support to address the financial and social costs of living with a disability. As set out in our Pre-Budget Submission, "Living Under Pressure", AsIAM would like to see the following measures implemented:

- **Provide an additional €20 per week to Disability Allowance with a view to index any future social protection increases to inflation and the costs of living.**
- **Increase the rate of Carer's Allowance payment by €20 per week, and remove the means test for present and future applicants.**
- **Increase Domiciliary Care Allowance by €20 per week.**
- **Increase the Carer's Support Grant payment by €100.**
- **Increase the weekly Carers payment by €20 with a view to index any future increases to inflation and the cost of living.**
- **Extend eligibility for the Home Carer Tax Credit to include single working carers.**
- **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, with a view to incrementally increasing this payment over the coming years.**

## **Disability Services**

There were also some welcome measures in the field of disability and equality in Budget 2023, which included a significant funding increase of €177 million for the provision of disability services, including an additional €29 million for building long-term capacity in Disability Services. This includes the following measures:

- **funding to continue the core services including residential and emergency residential, Respite, PA services and facilitating the move of younger people away from nursing homes to more suitable residential locations**

- **additional funding for specialist disability services for children or young people in, or transitioning out, of Túsla care services**
- **An additional 1,200 placements in adult day services for young people who are leaving school**
- **Additional funding for the Disability Awareness and Participation Fund, including additional funding for the provision of Assistive Technology**
- **An additional €39 million to assist in reducing the Assessment of Need waiting list**
- **Additional financial supports for Section 39 organisations who provide disability services.**

Whilst we have not received details as to how this Budget will materialise on the ground, AsIAM welcomes this additional investment in providing disability supports for families - keeping with the Government's commitment to expand the capacity of our Health Service over its lifetime.

However, AsIAM has two key concerns with the Government's plan on expanding disability services. First, there remains a lack of clarity on how this increased funding will be spent and how this will tangibly support Autistic people and families over 2023. A more pressing issue is that as with Budget 2022, this also 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 disabled people and their families experience, which the Department of Health set out in its Disability Capacity Review published in 2021.

AsIAM believes there needs to be more sustained investment in disability supports over the coming years in line with the Disability Capacity Review.