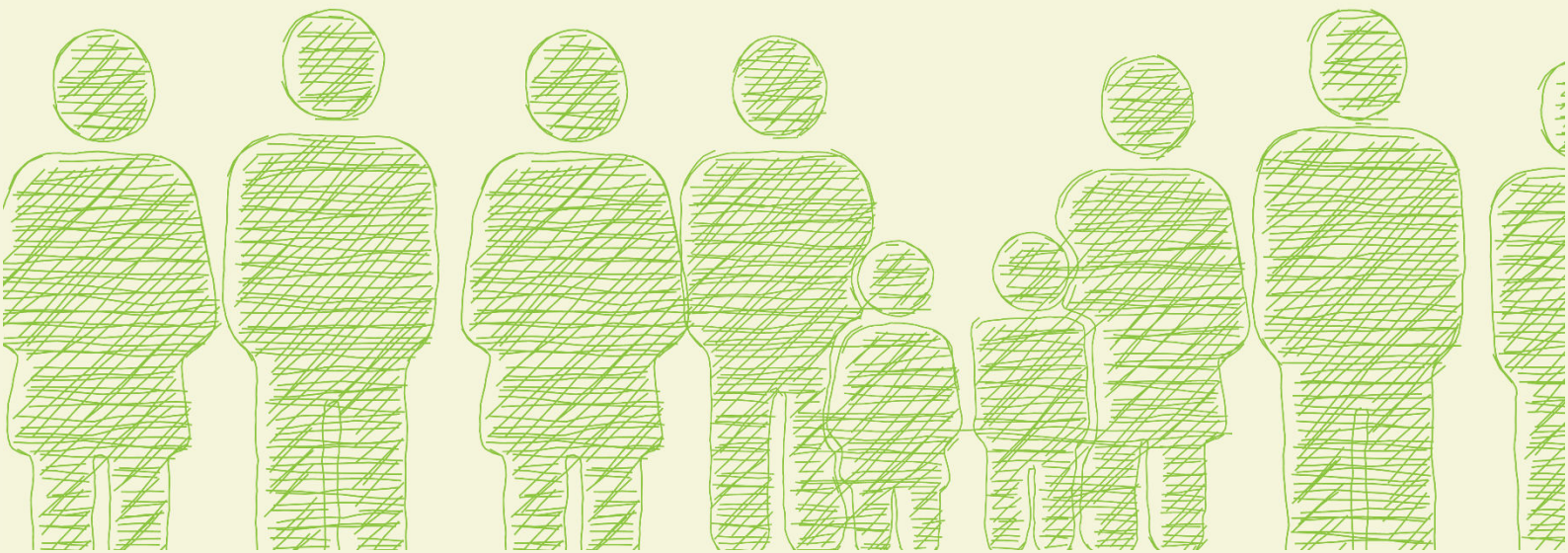




# PRE-BUDGET SUBMISSION 2023

Living Under Pressure

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## Pushing Forward

Budget 2023 takes place in a landscape where everyone in Ireland is facing significant financial challenges. Whilst some degree of normality has returned since the COVID-19 pandemic first visited our shores in February 2020, our economic and social outlook remains uncertain following a very turbulent two years. The instability brought about from Russia's invasion of Ukraine, in conjunction with the spike in inflation induced by high levels of borrowing from Governments around the world, including Ireland, to pay for emergency supports, have delivered sharp increases in the cost of living which have squeezed many families and people. This is particularly the case for Autistic people and their families. All around us, individuals and families are really struggling to make ends meet.

Whilst there have been many positive changes that have come about as a result of the pandemic, it was also a particularly challenging time for Autistic people, as we all attempted to embrace a "new normal". The COVID-19 pandemic shone a light on the practices, policies and in some cases barriers which exist in this State. These gaps often have a disproportionate impact on more vulnerable communities in our society.

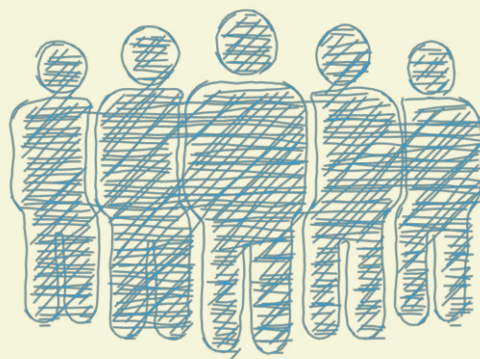
In our engagement with Autistic people and families over the course of the pandemic, we found that Community members' access to services, supports, resources and financial entitlements were significantly impacted, but on a broader level, that COVID-19 restrictions particularly impacted those in our community on low and middle incomes. Isolation, social exclusion, poverty, precarity and lack of access to supports dominate many aspects of life as an Autistic person living in Irish society in 2022 but have been features in many Autistic people and families' lives since well before the pandemic.

The persistent increases in the cost of living also means that the ability of social welfare to protect against poverty is reduced. For families on low and middle incomes, who are more vulnerable to the impact of inflation as they spend a greater portion of their

income on everyday necessities such as food or energy and are more exposed to price increases.

Among the many decisions the Government will make in Budget 2023, there is a pressing need to strategically invest in these vital supports to fix gaps in service provision and deliver for families and individuals. AsIAM believes that the Government should both shield the most vulnerable cohorts of the community against the worst impacts of the cost-of-living crisis and deliver a fair recovery for everyone, particularly for those who rely on the State for financial support and families on low and middle incomes. AsIAM also believes that poverty, isolation and social exclusion should not be inevitable outcomes of being Autistic or raising Autistic people, and that the Government needs to provide greater financial investment to marginalised groups in society, including Autistic people to both support their participation in society and ensure happier and healthier lives for members of these communities. Budget 2023 presents an opportunity to invest in reducing the social and economic barriers and hardship that Autistic people and families experience currently.

Our budget theme for 2023 focuses on reducing the financial hardship to create a fair and more sustainable and inclusive society - one in which every citizen can flourish, irrespective of difference, background or where they come from, and have the same chance to be included in society and live a happy, healthy life.



## Addressing Poverty Gaps within the Autistic Community

Families and individuals across Ireland are experiencing unprecedented levels of financial hardship. Every day we are reading and hearing news stories about the pressures many families are experiencing, and the sacrifices and difficult decisions families must make in order to make ends meet. The cost-of-living crisis has touched every cornerstone within the States fabric with inflation rates at their highest level in over thirty years. This spiralling trajectory of increased costs is pushing families and individuals further towards poverty or into poverty, and this will further intensify as we approach the winter months when increasing food and energy prices will bite further into family budgets and people's living standards.

Ireland also faces significant challenges in tackling poverty, child poverty and deprivation more generally, which was highlighted by Social Justice Ireland in its Pre-Budget Submission. Despite a period of economic growth in recent years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, measures aimed at cushioning the most disadvantaged in society were limited in scope and did not keep pace with both this rate of growth and with increases in living costs, this had the consequence of leaving the most marginalised in society to fall further behind. Although there are proposed reforms to the social protection system which seek to index welfare payments to keep pace with the cost of living and the rate of inflation, the Government also needs to introduce a significantly bigger welfare package than previous years to ensure that disadvantaged members of society are cushioned from the worst impacts of this cost-of-living crisis.

Whilst the cost-of-living crisis impacts everyone in society in all parts of Ireland and across all socio-economic backgrounds in different ways, members of the Autistic and wider disability community are all too familiar with this experience of economic hardship. This has been the reality for many families who have been feeling the financial squeeze since long before the pandemic, and some of whom are still dealing with the long-term consequences of cutbacks to disability services and supports which happened during

the economic crisis and subsequent recession. The situation today only further worsens the cost-of-living struggles experienced by members of the Autistic community and families. As far back as 2010, the European Disability Forum, the pan-European organisation representing people with disabilities, published data that indicated the European average of 29% of disabled people were at risk of poverty, but in Ireland it was estimated that 38.1% of disabled people were at risk of poverty – the worst in Western Europe (European Disability Forum, 2020, p14).

Budget 2023 must acknowledge the degree of the financial pressures currently being experienced by many families due the cost-of-living crisis and take measures which should both protect families from the sharpest consequences of this inflation spiral and relieve as much of the hardship experienced by families as possible.

In this pre-budget submission, AsIAM have identified proposals which we believe will help address some of the most pressing cost of living issues experienced by our community, which we will set out below.

## **Cost of Disability**

Facing the additional costs of living with a disability is a very common experience that many in the disability community of Ireland experience. For many years, advocacy groups, such as Disabled People Organisations (DPOs), Self-Advocates, organisations representing people with disabilities and families, and wider civil society, including service providers, have highlighted the challenges of having to meet the additional financial costs of having a disability, and the interconnected relationship between poverty and disability. For example, many families have to give up work or reduce their working hours to support their disabled loved one. Many disabled people also share stories of having to use a significant portion of their income to pay for additional expenses, such as access to private therapies and supports, additional clothing, light or

heat during the winter, for assistive technology, or for accessible taxis or other forms of transport in suburban or more rural parts of the country.

This hardship was particularly brought to the fore during the pandemic; autistic people have been significantly impacted due to social exclusion and barriers in accessing education and employment. Research has suggested that overall disabled people have a considerably lower income compared to nondisabled people, with many disabled people having €8,000 lower annual income every year (indecon.ie, 2021, p vi). When contrasts with the additional cost of disability.

Research commissioned by the Department of Social Protection and Indecon estimated that the additional cost of living with a disability is at between €9,500 - €11,700, with unmet needs equal to €2,522 - € 3,821 per year due to higher cost of everyday living expenses such as fuel and electricity, transport, medical and therapeutic expenses, transport, domestic services, equipment aids and appliances, clothing, food (indecon.ie, 2021 p viii). Additionally, research from the ESRI (Economic and Social Research Institute) on poverty in Ireland shows that households with one or more adults with a disability and those supported by lone parents, experience some of the highest poverty levels in the State (Watson et al., 2016; Russell et al., 2010).

These costs can be particularly high for Autistic people and families in Ireland, and are estimated to be as high as €28,464.89 due to costs such as loss of earnings, interventions, and assessments within the private sector (Roddy and O'Neill, 2018, p1106).

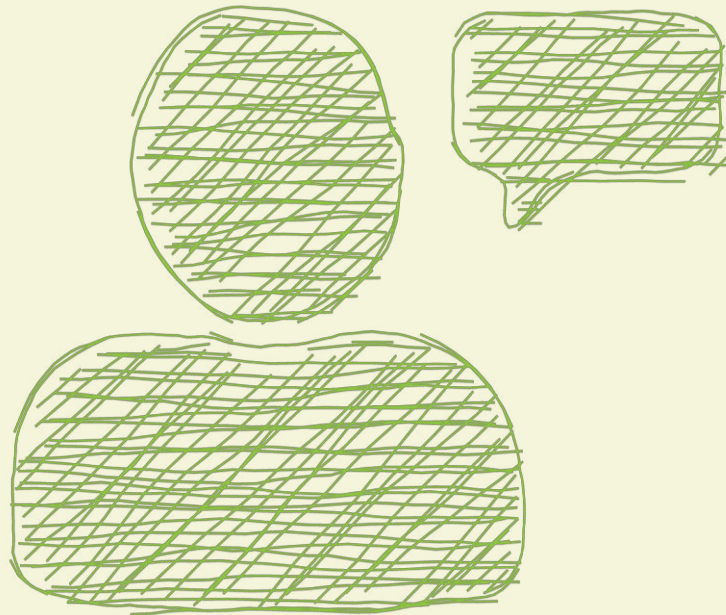
Budget 2023 must recognise the daily work carried out by carers across the country and increase financial supports for carers accordingly. The below key asks in our pre-budget submission if implemented would mitigate some of the financial burdens that families and individuals are currently enduring.

## Key Asks for Budget 2023

1. Provide an additional €20 per week to Disability Allowance by investing an additional €174.5 million with a view to index any future social protection increases to inflation and the costs of living.
2. Increase the rate of Carer's Allowance payment by €20 per week. Do this by investing an additional €77 million and remove the means test for present and future applicants.
3. Increase Domiciliary Care Allowance by €20 per week by investing an additional €11.2 million.
4. Increase the Carer's Support Grant payment by €100.
5. Increase the weekly Carers payment by €20 with a view to index any future increases to inflation and the cost of living.
6. Extend eligibility for the Home Carer Tax Credit to include single working carers.
7. Increase in the Incapacitated Child Tax Credit from €3,300 to €3,500. The cost to the State of this measure is estimated at €4m.
8. 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. This will require investing an initial €276 million to introduce this payment, with a view to incrementally increasing this payment over the coming years.
9. Invest €30 million to reduce class sizes by two pupils 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.



10. Invest €25 million 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.
11. Invest €15 million to develop and implement the Autism Innovation Strategy, under the responsibility of the Minister of State with Special Responsibility for Disability and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, with a view to expediting its development and rollout over the next twelve months. AsIAM produced 56 key considerations, all of which are available [here](#).



## Supporting Participation

One of the key themes in our Autism Innovation Strategy, which we would like to see addressed in Budget 2023, is for the Government to increase investment on measures that support and encourage marginalised groups to participate in the community, thereby recognising the contribution these groups make to Irish society. This is an intrinsic component in addressing the sense of isolation and insecurity that many in the autism community experience. In our engagement with the community, we note that there are significant barriers to access and participation which restrict the level of inclusion that Autistic people and families feel as part of the community.

In our Same Chance Report, we highlight that:

- 54% of Cardholders have experienced some form of discrimination because of they or their loved one were Autistic;
- 32% of Cardholders reported that judgment and lack of understanding were the biggest barriers to inclusion and participation,
- 90% of respondents felt that Irish society did not understand enough about autism to support their inclusion and participation.
- 27% of Cardholders did not feel safe to take part in the community

Additionally, in our submission to the Department of Social Protection on the Reasonable Accommodation Fund, we highlight the inconsistencies on who might be entitled to supports within the Autistic community. We also questioned the reliance on medicalised assessments in Ireland that is out of step with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The current assessment process disadvantages some people who may fall below a threshold of functional capacity needed to access support, no matter how necessary the support is. Many Autistic people often have to go through an intrusive, undignified and often humiliating process of having to prove how their disability or difference impacts their quality of life, which can add to any distress or anxiety.

When also factoring in the prevailing public attitudes towards autism (which we highlight in our CORE Attitudes to Autism Survey included in the Same Chance Report), the barriers to securing a diagnosis and the challenges to receiving timely services and supports, influence whether an Autistic person might feel comfortable to be open about their autistic selves in the community.

For these reasons, AsIAM believes that Budget 2023 should include measures which centre on promoting diversity and building more inclusive communities. We also recommend that the Government implements the following measures to address isolation, poverty and social exclusion in marginalised communities, including Autistic people and families.

