

# **Barnardos Australia response to the NSW Budget**

**19<sup>th</sup> September 2023**

[barnardos.org.au](https://barnardos.org.au)



# Barnardos Response to NSW Budget

## September 2023

### Overview

Barnardos believes that every child has the right to a safe home, and we are heartened to see the focus on housing in the Minns Government's first budget for NSW. We also know that keeping NSW children safe and at home with their families also needs more than putting a roof over their heads. The absence of a longer term, more transformative approach to intervening early with vulnerable families leaves children at risk of continuing to enter out-of-home care (foster care).

The work Barnardos does with families can support children and their communities for the rest of their lives. We want to work with the NSW government to support families sooner rather than later.

The housing-first focus will make a difference for families, but the economics of early intervention add up. We want to see more for families experiencing violence, and for young people facing mental health issues from future Minns budgets. Children entering foster care in NSW desperately need Non-Government Organisation (NGO) Specialist Care and Assessment Teams to assist the Children's Court to decide future plans to ensure more children have a safe home.

### Domestic and Family Violence

The NSW government has recognised that we are facing a domestic and family violence (DFV) crisis. One woman in Australia is killed by her partner each week, 1 in 4 children are exposed to DFV and almost 40% of women in NSW have experienced DFV or sexual violence by the age of 15. A shocking 90% of children in Barnardos out-of-home care (foster care) have experienced DFV.

These statistics are incomprehensible and yet continue to be bandied around as though there is nothing we can do about them. We can. We can reduce these statistics by investing in prevention and early intervention. The first budget delivered by the Minns government addresses some of the crisis needs but doesn't go far enough in planning for the future and addressing how we can create long-term change which will help reduce the prevalence of DFV and reduce the 'too late' spending on this issue in future budgets.

Children are the hidden victim-survivors of domestic and family violence. In policy and practice, they are not recognised and rather, are considered an extension of the non-offending parent (usually their mother). Children need their own trauma informed counselling and support which is also age appropriate. We are pleased that the current 20 child specialist DV workers' contracts have been extended by 12 months in this budget. However, we need longer term contracts if we are to retain quality, specialist DV workers for children. We also need more than 20 child specialist workers. Most families in our services experience DFV and we would welcome funding for a child DFV specialist in each of our Children's Family Centres.

# Barnardos Response to NSW Budget

## September 2023

The majority of DFV victims are children and yet children themselves tell us directly that there is nowhere to seek help, or if they do seek help, there is often no improvement in their situation.\*

Investing in prevention and early intervention must be prioritised to prevent further harm to children. This budget has promised \$4.4m to extend some projects which fit under the 'prevention/early intervention umbrella', but Barnardos is disappointed that no new investment in these crucial areas has been announced in this budget for the next twelve months or beyond. There was also no new investment in these areas by the previous coalition government in the previous budget.

Barnardos welcomes investment to build a new specialist multicultural domestic and family violence centre in south-western Sydney. We see many families who hold temporary support visas in our Children's Family Centres, and they are ineligible for many DFV support programs and housing due to their status. We want to see these families receive equal access and support, and this centre is an excellent first step.

## Out-of-Home Care

Barnardos is a supporter of early intervention to keep families together. While the numbers in out-of-home care remain steady, we are missing the opportunity to support families before children are removed and we are also not investing enough in the specialist assessment work needed when a child has a Care Application before the NSW Children's Court. The Government's commitment to ensure that out-of-home services continues to the end of the financial year with the \$280M commitment announced on 13th September 2023 does little to improve children's outcomes. A long-term, sustainable approach to providing a safe home for the whole of childhood, for every child, is needed to guarantee a better future for the most vulnerable NSW Children.

Foster care is a stop-gap measure, and not a 'lifestyle choice' for children. Permanency for children is the solution and where the Minns Government needs to focus.

The NSW Care Act legislation clearly sets out a 'permanency hierarchy' which prioritises restoring children to the care of their families within 2 years if it is safe to do so. But current government contracts for foster care are not focused on funding specific programs for children when they are first removed into care, to help Child Magistrates have the best information to make their decisions.

Current OOHC funding is for 'a bed' – 'any bed' – but what is needed is Specialist Assessment and Care teams that can provide child safety and child development assessments to determine the best future child plan. Specialist Assessment & Care teams are what is needed throughout NSW to address this issue, provided by non-government agencies such as Barnardos, to assist NSW government in delivering permanency planning decisions and better outcomes for vulnerable children.

# Barnardos Response to NSW Budget

## September 2023

### Youth Mental Health

The generation that faced significant social isolation throughout the pandemic is missing from the Minns government's first budget. Many young people in Barnardos' services and across NSW are unable to access vital mental health support because they fall into a gap between early intervention and crisis support services. Our health system is failing these young people at a time when they are supposed to be participating in education and making the transition to independence.

The announcement of 250 new school counsellors is very welcome. They play a critical role for early identification and intervention of young people struggling with issues including mental health and family violence. The absence of school counsellors at many rural schools means that Barnardos often does not receive referrals until young people are in crisis. Our youth workers continue to support them in the absence of accessible mental health care.

### Housing

The Minns government is implementing some good practical changes to support renters - such as a portable bonds, placing limitations on evictions and a new Rental Commissioner. These small changes are welcome but will not address the fundamental problems in the housing market.

The housing crisis has put pressure on the state's pathways out of homelessness. Increasing the stay length in transitional housing (with a \$11m funding commitment) without providing vulnerable families with access to secure long-term housing will only exacerbate the bottle neck in the housing pipeline. 55,880 families and individuals are continuing to wait for secure housing. The size of the crisis will require a much stronger commitment in the 2024-2025 budget.

The \$35m for social housing maintenance is a positive step given the long-term neglect of public housing. Bringing these properties up to a liveable standard will help provide a modest increase to public housing stock, but again, this modest amount is unlikely to alleviate pressure in the system. As a result, we will see more children experiencing homelessness or remaining in unsafe homes.

As advocates for children, Barnardos is very excited to see how budget measures will contribute to the future for NSW children in a time of crisis for many families. After only six months in government there are many promising measures from the Minns government, and we look forward to working together closely over the current and forthcoming period to keep NSW children increasingly safe.

### References

[The Truth is the abuse never stopped](#), Barnardos Australia, 2022