
Barnardo’s Northern Ireland Response

December 2008
1) Introduction

Barnardo’s is the largest voluntary children’s organisation in NI we work with over 9,000 children and their families every year and have worked with children and families here for more than 100 years. We provide a wide range of services including family support and child protection, juvenile justice services, services for disabled children and young people in care and leaving care.

This response has been particularly informed by Barnardo’s Forward Steps service which provides support to young children with autism and by our other services which provide family support for disabled children and access to training and employment for disabled young people.

Barnardo’s welcomes and fully supports the production of the Autism Action plan and believes that it is imperative that there is a strategic approach to the development of autism services.

2) Barnardo’s NI supports:

- The overall commitment in the plan to earlier detection and recognition, prompt assessment and diagnosis, and appropriate intervention and support.
- The re-introduction of Health Visitor Assessments at 24 months.
- The removal of IQ as a means of determining access to services.
- The five key themes.
- The creation of a regional approach through a Regional ASD Group, with representation from parents and carers.

3) Specific Comments

3.1 Barnardo’s recognises the importance of early diagnosis and detection of autism as the first step in the process of providing support and ensuring best outcomes for children and young people with ASD. However, we are concerned that the Action Plan has too much of a focus on assessment and diagnosis services and not enough on follow-up support.
While we acknowledge the essential nature of early diagnosis it is only the first step and intensive support is then required to begin to improve outcomes we are concerned that the balance between diagnosis and services is not accurately proportioned in the Plan.

3.2 We are concerned that the Action Plan gives inadequate emphasis to family support services which the Independent Review recognised as crucial to the wellbeing and improved outcomes for children with autism. In the Action Plan this has been referred to as ‘support’ and there is no clear focus on family support and its important role. Family Support is already under recognised and under funded and Barnardo’s would welcome a clear strategy and funding stream to develop this crucial aspect of support for children and young people.

3.3 We are also concerned that the main model in the Action Plan is a medical model of intervention and that there is little focus on social care or on the crucial need for inter-departmental working with Education. This interdepartmental approach needs to be there from early year’s right through to adult education and include transitions. Barnardo’s in particular, because of the services it provides, is very aware of the crucial role of education in developing better outcomes for children with ASD and would want to see the inclusion of education, social care and leisure and play as key elements of the Action Plan.

3.4 We recognise the very difficult budgetary and funding climate. While we welcome the identified funding within the plan we do want to express our concern that it is not adequate to address the need for services among children and indeed adults, with ASD. Neither do we believe that it is adequate to ensure the implementation of the plan as currently outlined let alone if a more service focused plan were to be developed. We would want to see adequate and new funding made available which would allow for the development and delivery of additional services.

3.5 We are concerned regarding the figures quoted in the ASD Action Plan and would recommend the use of the more generally accepted estimate of 1 in 100 children who have autism. It is crucial that there is an accepted and accurate figure as this will determine the level of service provision required.
3.6 As well as a need for a cross departmental approach on ASD there is also a need for a multi-disciplinary approach. In particular it is recognised that children and young people with ASD are more likely to have either mental health difficulties or may have an accompanying learning disability. It is vital that the professionals in each of these disciplines work together in providing services to children and young people with ASD and that both Bamford and the ASD Action Plan are taken forward together.

3.7 We believe that the Action Plan would benefit from a range of good practice examples from both the statutory and voluntary sector.

3.8 The Action Plan would benefit from a greater recognition of the role of the voluntary sector in developing and providing services for children and young people with ASD. In particular it needs to ensure the voluntary sector’s full involvement as an equal partner in the development of services.

4. Conclusion

Barnardo’s welcomes the production of this Action Plan and the focus it could give to assessment and support for children with ASD and their families. However, we do have a number of key concerns that we believe need to be addressed to make it as effective as possible for families and children. Overall the issues of funding, services, co-ordination across departments, multi-disciplinary working and the role and involvement of the voluntary sector remain in need of further development for the Action Plan to have strategic impact for children and their families.

If you require further information on this response please contact:

Margaret Kelly, Assistant Director
Barnardo’s NI
542 Upper Newtownards Road
Belfast
BT4 3HE