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Barnardo's Scotland briefing on the Scottish Parliament debate on 'The Best Start in Life for Scotland's Children'

Barnardo's Scotland welcomes this debate on the best start in life for Scotland's children, and the cross party consensus that we need to make Scotland the best place for children to grow up. Barnardo's Scotland believes that the importance of early childhood development and the impact of early intervention in determining future health, social wellbeing and educational achievement of individuals cannot be understated.

This collective ambition will however only be delivered if we can make the new architecture of public service delivery in Scotland work effectively in the interests of children. This means we must make sure Community Planning, integrated health and social care bodies and the new local joint Children's Services Plans brought in by the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 focus on early intervention and prevention, are integrated from the point of view of the recipient of services and put the voice of children, young people and families at the centre.

Key issues that we would like to see highlighted in the debate include

- Recognition that we need to address **children's mental health and wellbeing issues** at an early stage, through a preventative approach, while also ensuring support is available at times of crisis through Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and other services.
- Acknowledgement that the promotion of children's health and wellbeing from pre-birth, in the early years and primary education needs to learn from developments in neuroscience which shows that **building secure and positive attachments between children and their parent or carers** is the key to effective early intervention and prevention.
- We welcome commitments to **improve financial support for low income families in the early years**, but this should not lead to reduction in existing support package.
- Recognising the important role the **third sector** has in delivering services which complement, support and add value to those provided by health and local authorities.

Children's mental health and wellbeing issues

Barnardo's Scotland welcomes the Scottish Government's commitment to making mental health a priority and in particular the aim to help children and young people who face mental health issues. There is a cross party commitment to addressing children and young people's mental health and wellbeing needs. We recognise the progress which has been made, whilst also highlighting there is more to be done.

We are well aware of the challenges facing many of Scotland's Health Board's in meeting the Scottish Government's 18 week HEAT target for access to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). There is increased pressure on Tier 3 and Tier 4 Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). In a report on 'Commitment One' of the 2012-2015 Mental Health Strategy CAMHS staff in one area reported a 57 per cent increase in referrals since 2009. This is part of an overall national increase in referrals to specialist CAMHS and a 35 per cent increase in the number of those starting treatment over the last 2 years¹.

A picture of increasing need and rising demand is likely to continue the pressure on specialist services. It is our experience that as a result of increasing child poverty and adversity, often linked to changes to welfare support, our own services increasingly have to provide crisis support when their primary aim would have been to work with children and families in a preventative way. It is crucial that the balance between early intervention and prevention and crisis support is addressed going forward.

It is notable that the findings of the 'Commitment One' report identify a reoccurring theme that some of the demand on CAMH services was due to a gap in provision around crisis care and in prevention/early intervention. We believe that the proposed ten year strategy must set out how wellbeing provision under the 'Getting It Right For Every Child' approach will deliver a prevention/early intervention approach which links seamlessly with CAMHS services. More also should be done to support children and young people who have high levels of need but who are waiting to be seen by medical services.

Improving the mental health of children and young people often means supporting their parents. This is particularly the case for families living on low incomes where they have limited access to leisure, live in poorer housing and poorer life chances generally.

Therefore, while we welcome the planned increases in expenditure on CAMHS, without also investing in prevention, early intervention and holistic support for families, waiting times will never be brought down to appropriate levels.

¹ <http://www.thescsc.org.uk/scottish-health-board-figures-on-child-and-adolescent-mental-health-expenditure-highlight-critical-need-for-greater-spending/>

Building secure and positive attachments between children and their parent or carers

All of Barnardo's Scotland's work with children, young people and families is underpinned by the principles of early intervention and prevention. We believe that to support the wellbeing of children and young people it is vital that there are strong positive attachments between parents and children between the ages of 0-3. There is strong evidence that a solid attachment base contributes positively to children's emotional development and will reduce the chances of developing a range of problems in later life.

Barnardo's Scotland uses the 'Five to Thrive' approach. 'Five to Thrive' is a simple, accessible approach aimed at promoting and nurturing positive attachment between parents and children. This type of approach is based on recognition that the factors which lead to many young children failing to reach developmental milestones can be addressed by teaching parents and those working with the children how to take relatively simple measures to improve attachment and thus the child's development.

For many children the results of poor attachment in the early years is that they start school at a significant disadvantage to other children and at increased risk of developing adversities such as mental health problems.

However the value of early intervention and prevention extends throughout childhood and adolescence. For example, around 50 per cent of mental illness in adult life starts before the age of 15² so early intervention can deliver a wide range of preventative spend benefits. There is a continuing need for services to be able to respond quickly and at the earliest opportunity to any problems identified in schools and via GPs.

Improved financial support for low income families in the early years

Our services tell us that many families on low incomes are under increasing pressure as a result of a freeze on working age benefits, reductions in tax credits and the increasing cost of energy and food. More families are presenting in crisis and the demand for our services is increasing. This financial pressure has a significant impact on how parents form attachments with their children. As such any financial support that can be given at crucial times will help.

Barnardo's Scotland, with other stakeholders, has worked with the Scottish Government on the development of the current Sure Start Maternity Grant. We support extension of the grant to low income families who have more than one child. We also support the proposal to make payments at birth, when a child starts nursery and when a child starts school and we would urge the Scottish Government to increase the level of the grant. Careful consideration needs to be given to eligibility for the grant but as a minimum it should cover all children living in poverty.

² Knopf et al, The Mental Health of Adolescents: A National Profile, National Adolescent Health Information Center, 2008, <http://nahic.ucsf.edu/downloads/MentalHealthBrief.pdf>

We welcome the extra support that could be provided through the baby box. We would however not want to see a trade-off between the baby box and any payment to low income families through the grant. In addition if the baby box were convertible to cash (as is the case in Finland) there should be no reduction in grant payments to low income families.

We would encourage the Scottish Government to include consistent information on attachment as part of what goes into the box. The use of Five to Thrive materials would be ideal for this purpose.

Children's services planning and the role of third sector

The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 has created a duty on public bodies to work together in each local authority area to create joint Children's Services Plans. These plans are likely to be required from autumn 2017. Section 9 (2) of the Act sets out the four overarching aims of children's services planning. These are that children's services in the area concerned are provided in the way which:

- (i) best safeguards, supports and promotes the wellbeing of children in the area concerned,
- (ii) ensures that any action to meet needs is taken at the earliest appropriate time and that, where appropriate, action is taken to prevent needs arising,
- (iii) is most integrated from the point of view of recipients, and
- (iv) constitutes the best use of available resources.

The Act also places a new duty on Scottish Ministers and public bodies to identify steps which they could take which would or might secure better or further effect in Scotland the children's rights provisions set out in the UNCRC.

Barnardo's Scotland fully supports these proposals, which we believe are crucial in our collective effort meet the aspirations set out in the motion. We look forward to robust scrutiny from the Parliament of how effectively these new duties around integrated service planning, early intervention and prevention and children's rights are being delivered.

We believe that the third sector is often well placed to deliver children's services in this way, in partnership with public bodies, and again we look forward to robust parliament scrutiny of the way that community and voluntary organised are engaged at every level in helping to realise our shared ambitions for Scotland's children.

Further information

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