Response from Barnardo’s NI to OFMDFM Draft Child Poverty Strategy: Consultation

Introduction

Barnardo’s NI is the largest children’s charity in Northern Ireland. We work with more than 8,000 children, young people and families in almost fifty services and sixty schools. Our services range from child protection to family support, work with children in care and leaving care, disabled children and with young people at risk of offending.

We have considerable experience working with children, young people and families across communities where poverty, low educational aspiration and achievement are ingrained. Barnardo’s NI wants to achieve positive outcomes for children in terms of health and well-being so they can realize their full potential. We are focused on effectiveness and what works in delivery to achieve these outcomes for the most vulnerable children. We are also focused on the need for intelligent funding and smart investment.

Barnardo’s NI welcomes OFMDFM’s engagement with the voluntary and community sector to inform development of the Draft Child Poverty Strategy. We have discussed the issues directly with OFMDFM and also as members of the Child Poverty Alliance, suggesting areas and policy actions that in our view should be prioritised. We also participated in the one day consultation event with a full range of other voluntary and community sector organisations.

Overview

Given the extensive consultation process and resources invested in this, the Draft Child Poverty Strategy is disappointing, particularly the absence of a strategic and focused action plan. While we broadly agree with most of the underpinning principles and strategic priorities identified, an overall disjointed approach and lack of detail is evident.

For the following key reasons, Barnardo’s NI believes this Strategy in its current format cannot effectively address child poverty and tackle the underlying issues that affect children’s lives:

- We agree with the need for ‘a targeted approach and the identification of a smaller number of priority issues on which to focus first’ and the development of ‘signature projects’ to support them (p.14). However, as these will essentially form the main
thrust of the Strategy, we would have expected the issues and projects to have already been identified and included. Barnardo’s NI believes that without these priority issues for immediate action then the Strategy cannot begin to take effect.

- The Child Poverty Act 2010 places a legal requirement on the NI Executive to report annually on its progress. It is therefore concerning that the Draft Child Poverty Strategy does not set out any strategic targets or measurable indicators for individual Departments to reduce child poverty. Without specific targets and indicators there is no accountability. These are fundamental elements to ensure the Strategy is meaningful and has any chance of success.

- The required framework for delivery clearly linked to the range of existing and planned policies and strategies across all NI Executive Departments is absent.

- The priority action area addressing ‘educational attainment regardless of background’ needs to be more focused. In 2008/09, 57.1% of school leavers entitled to free school meals obtained less than five GCSE passes at grades A*-C compared to 29.9% for all children¹. The Strategy should target disadvantaged children who are disproportionately underachieving at school compared to children from more affluent backgrounds, and also analyse and disaggregate the specific groups within this. A range of measures should be targeted at these groups, for example, boys entitled to free school meals that are doing least well².

- We are concerned that childcare is not a main priority given that employment is a key route out of poverty. Accessing good quality and affordable childcare is crucial to a parent being able to work, and should feature more centrally in the Strategy. It also needs to consider the specific childcare needs of families with disabled children who are particularly vulnerable to living in poverty.

**Key Initiatives and Signature Projects**

Barnardo’s NI is fully aware of the scale and intensity of the impending cuts to public spending. However, we believe the Government must support programmes of prevention and early intervention which are proven to be effective, rather than reverting only to supporting children at crisis point.

In our view the Child Poverty Strategy should provide opportunities to develop and implement a series of smaller key interventions and pilot programmes which can then be evaluated for effectiveness.

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¹ NI School Leavers Survey 2008/09, DE
² Qualifications and Destinations of NI School Leavers 2008/09, DE
As previously stated, Barnardo’s NI welcomes the commitment in the Strategy to develop a series of key initiatives and signature projects aimed at addressing a smaller number of priority issues.

In order to help inform development of the Strategy’s delivery plan and signature projects, Barnardo’s NI suggests the following interventions and priority issues for inclusion:

Increasing employment is a key route out of poverty: In Northern Ireland there are 50,000 children in households that are living within fifty pounds of the poverty line. That figure represents nearly half the overall number of children living in poverty so fifty pounds additional money per week would make a significant difference.

Barnardo’s NI recommends an Earnings Disregard Pilot to maximize income and increase parental employment in households with no-one working as one potential measure in helping lift families out of poverty.

We are unclear why the new proposed Earnings Disregard pilot specified within the OFMDFM budget allocation is not included in a Child Poverty Strategy Action Plan.

The improvement of literacy and numeracy standards within education is a crucial and key element in improving overall educational attainment and consequently long term poverty and disadvantage. One-fifth of children in Northern Ireland currently leave primary school unable to read and write to the required standard while two-fifths leave with poor numeracy skills. Furthermore, twenty per cent of school leavers lack basic literacy and numeracy skills.

It is important to learn from international evidence-based programmes which have been successfully implemented in previously failing schools. For example, the Chicago Reading Framework developed by Professor Tim Shanahan across 600 schools improved literacy in 75% of schools after one year, with the lowest performing schools equaling the highest in achievement gains. This was achieved without additional resources but by replacing ineffective teaching methods.

Barnardo’s NI recommends the Child Poverty Strategy identifies those children with poor attainment levels and includes pilot programmes of proven practice models to address the literacy and numeracy deficit in schools in Northern Ireland.

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3 The Education and Training Inspectorate Chief Inspector’s Report 2006-2008
5 Tim Shanahan is currently Professor of Urban Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago where he is Director of the Center for Literacy. He is an internationally recognised reading researcher whose work emphasises reading-writing relationships, reading assessment, and improving reading achievement.
Young people not in education, employment and training (NEET) are overwhelmingly those most vulnerable and disadvantaged who abandon their education early, and of whom 50% are likely to move into long term economic inactivity. Even the most intensive model of intervention saves money in the long term, as well as helping young people to resolve the issues that distract them from learning. A recent Audit Commission Report estimated that the total financial cost to the economy and the Exchequer of each NEET young person is £160,000. If we intervene and re-engage NEET young people then we can save £81,000 over the lifetime of an average young person who is NEET.

Barnardo’s NI recommends that the Child Poverty Strategy incorporates the development of a pilot programme to identify and support the current cohort of 16 year olds who will leave formal education in June 2011.

This programme would assess those most at risk of dropping out before they leave school and support them to access suitable further education, training and employment.

Intensive family support programmes are highly targeted interventions which work with those most disadvantaged families who are using very high levels of available resources. There are a small but significant number of families with chaotic backgrounds who often face multiple adversities including disability, mental ill-health and substance misuse. They are disproportionately using health and social services, police, GPs and health visitors, as well as a range of voluntary services. Addressing and changing the outcomes for these families is crucial in targeting long term and inter-generational poverty.

This has not been an area that has benefited from focused funding and a coordinated programme response. However, research\(^6\) suggests that the cost of each intensive intervention is as little as £8,000 per family while the costs of failing to address the underlying issues can easily be £250,000, over thirty times the cost of an intensive intervention. Intervening early and intensively in families who have not reached crisis point but are challenging is vital.

Barnardo’s NI recommends the Child Poverty Strategy identifies the small but significant number of families using high levels of resources and includes the development and implementation of an intensive Family Intervention pilot programme.

The relationship between disability and poverty is well documented in research, particularly that families with disabled children are more at risk of living in poverty. The Strategy needs to address the crucial support needs of parents of disabled children who currently receive very limited support and recognize that any withdrawal of this support may result in some families falling into crisis.

\(^6\) Ward et al., Costs and Consequences of Different Types of Child Care Provision, Loughborough University, 2004
Barnardo’s NI recommends the Child Poverty Strategy specifically identifies employment as a route out of poverty for families with disabled children; and incorporates a pilot programme of family support and respite to enable parents of disabled children to access and retain paid employment.

Resources

Barnardo’s NI would appreciate some clarification around the funding attached to the Child Poverty Strategy. We are particularly interested in the links between funding for the Strategy and criteria for the Social Investment Fund. It is our view that tackling poverty strategically and within each community where there is disproportionate disadvantage is the most appropriate way to address it.

Barnardo’s NI suggests that one key criterion should be areas where child poverty is especially concentrated. Alongside this other key indicators of disadvantage should be considered, such as areas with the highest levels of unemployment, economic inactivity and benefit claimants, as well as poor educational attainment. These indicators would provide a clear link between the policy outcomes sought from the Child Poverty Strategy as well as ensure the Social Investment Fund is being used in the most disadvantaged communities.

Statistics

Barnardo’s NI would also like to draw your attention to Page 19 of the Draft Strategy which states “Child relative income poverty rates have fallen from 29% in the baseline year (1998/99) to 25% in 2008/09. Progress, has, as with the UK as a whole, not maintained the earlier momentum seen between 1998/99 and 2004/5.”

This sentence is misleading as poverty statistics have only been collected in Northern Ireland from 2002/3 and the figures referred to prior to this are estimates based on UK trends from 1998/99 to 2001/02. It is also contradictory to OFMDFM’s own report in that the Lifetime Opportunities Monitoring Framework (Page 4) indicates that “overall relative income poverty levels have remained stable between 2002/3 and 2008/9. Whilst child relative income poverty levels in NI are currently below those estimated for the baseline year of 1998/99, over the period 2002/3 to 2008/9 the child poverty relative income poverty level has remained relatively stable.”

Conclusion

It is normal practice for us to consult more widely with our service users when compiling consultation responses. Until a revised Strategy with ‘robust plan’ (p.14) is made available it would not be appropriate for us to do so. Barnardo’s NI would appreciate some clarification as to when this delivery plan will be published.
The Child Poverty Strategy should be a key mechanism in breaking the cycle of poverty in Northern Ireland. As it stands, the Strategy in our view would be unable to achieve this or to even begin to effectively address child poverty and inter-generational disadvantage.

In order to meet the requirements of the Child Poverty Act 2010, we would urge OFMDFM to publish as a matter of priority a Child Poverty Strategy with the key areas for immediate action clearly identified and a delivery plan attached. If it would be helpful, Barnardo’s NI is happy to meet and discuss our proposed recommendations for priority action in the Strategy in more detail.

_Barnardo’s Northern Ireland, Feb 2011_

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