Response by Barnardo’s NI to the CYPSP Black and Minority Ethnic Children and Young People Draft Action Plan

Introduction and background

Barnardo’s NI is the largest children’s charity in Northern Ireland. We work with almost 11,000 children, young people and families in more than 40 different services and programmes, and in over 150 schools. Our services range from family support to work with looked after children, BME children and families, and children and young people who are in need of support across a wide range of services.

Barnardo’s NI is represented at various stages of the children’s services planning process, including the Children and Young People’s Strategic Partnership. We believe that the aim of joined up planning and commissioning is essential to improving the lives of children and young people in Northern Ireland.

Our work on the ground, at both policy and practice level, provides us with a clear overview of many of the issues currently impacting upon BME children and their parents. In particular our Tuar Ceatha BMER service works with children and families from a diverse range of ethnic backgrounds to enable parents to better understand the developmental needs of their children; reduce social isolation and increase family support; and improve access to key universal and specialist services. Our G-Old Community Partnership Sure Start also provides a range of family support services for under 4 year olds and their families living in the Cookstown area, including BME families.

Barnardo’s NI therefore welcomes this opportunity to comment on the draft action plan of the CYPSP Sub Group for BME children and young people.
Key comments

Overview

Barnardo’s NI welcomes and generally supports the overall actions outlined in the draft plan of the CYPSP Sub Group for BME children and young people. We agree with how 'Black and Minority Ethnic' (BME) is defined in the document as referring to settled BME communities, Travellers, Roma, refugees, asylum seekers, migrant worker communities, unaccompanied children and children of mixed parentage.

However, we suggest the plan could be strengthened if the diverse range of children covered by the term BME was better reflected within each stage of the plan and across all the key outcome areas to ensure that the specific needs of different groups are fully met. Children from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds for example will often have additional levels of needs in respect of health and education, particularly those with a disability, as will Traveller children and unaccompanied minors. Poverty is also a key factor in the lives of many of these children which is exacerbated by language and cultural differences. It is therefore essential their particular needs are not lost within the broad umbrella of BME.

‘Enjoying, learning and achieving’

English language acquisition at an early stage is vital for BME children’s successful attainment in education. In Barnardo’s NI experience it is evident that many BME children start from a disadvantaged position and fall behind as they do not get sufficient supports within the school system.

This is particularly relevant for those children who have had no experience of schooling in their home country or are arriving here having had traumatic experiences. As a result it can be very challenging for teachers, especially in large class sizes, to effectively cater for their specific needs. Barnardo’s NI therefore recommends there is greater emphasis made in the BME Action Plan on developing and implementing focused strategies for English language acquisition, especially for those children who find it more difficult to adjust to life/school in Northern Ireland.
We would also suggest the issue of English language acquisition is clearly addressed in respect of parents, who need to be engaged in this process as their children’s primary educators. Many BME parents also need assistance in accessing English language classes and support and links with the school should be strengthened to identify problems at an early stage.

In our experience, and also evidenced in a recent NICEM education report, racial bullying and harassment in schools is an issue for many BME children. Barnardo’s NI therefore suggests the Action Plan clearly factors in anti-racism work in schools to assist in effectively tackling this problem.

Another issue of concern is the cultural competence levels of many professional staff who interact with BME families in the course of their work, including educators. This is also especially relevant in relation to Travellers accessing mainstream education where there still needs to be a shift in attitudes amongst some educationalists towards Traveller families. They have an important part to play in making schools a welcome place for Travellers, and while some have achieved this others still have some way to go. Barnardo’s NI recommends more in depth training on equality and diversity is provided for educators and other frontline staff across a range of key agencies coming into contact with BME families.

**Conclusion**

Barnardo’s NI has made a considerable investment in the children’s services planning process and remains committed to working with other agencies and stakeholders to develop this further in the future. We believe that our continued involvement in the process is of great value to us as an organisation and essential to taking forward our commitment to early intervention. We welcome and support this BME Draft Action Plan and would be happy to provide any additional input as it is finalised and implemented.
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