Northern Ireland Executive – Draft Budget 2008-2011

Barnardo’s Northern Ireland Response

January 2008
1. Introduction

1.1) Barnardo’s is the largest voluntary children’s organisation in NI. We work with over 10,000 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.

1.2) We have used our experience of working on the ground with children, young people and their families and across a range of statutory and voluntary agencies, including HSS Trusts and Education and Library Boards to inform our response to the draft budget and programme for government.

2. Context

2.1) Barnardo’s recognises that this is a difficult fiscal time and that there are significant savings and efficiencies to be made over the course of the Budget. However we are also very aware that our spending on services for families and children lags considerably behind England, Scotland and Wales.

2.2) 130,000 children, according to government statistics, live in poverty in NI and 44,000 of those in severe poverty. We have a higher rate of children on the child protection register 38 per 10,000 children than Scotland (22), England (24) or Wales (33). There are substantial levels of mental health difficulties among our young people with over 1,000 young people waiting last year to see a psychiatrist, some for over 2 years. Last year over 150 young people had to go into adult mental health wards because of the lack of beds.

2.3) Despite our level of need and having one of the youngest populations in Europe our level of spend on children’s services is significantly lower. In Northern Ireland we spend £287 per child on personal social services this compares to £513 in Scotland, £429 in Wales and £402 in England. Overall our children’s services are under-funded by some 30% and that means that the most vulnerable children and young people suffer in-terms of the range
of services and help they receive and subsequently that they may do less well.

2.4) Barnardo’s concern is that without a reasonable increase in funding we will see our children slip further behind children in Britain. Ed Balls, Children’s Secretary, has announced a government drive to intervene in the lives of disadvantaged children at the very earliest stages of their development and to increase the number of free nursery places for children from 2 years of age. As well as an announcement of extra funding and support for disabled children because it is recognised that the extra expenses incurred can often tip a household into poverty. The extra funding for disabled children will amount to £340m.

2.5) We believe it is crucial that the Executive recognises to achieve a vibrant future economy and society we must invest further in our current group of children and young people; including those who are most marginalised and vulnerable. We believe the draft Budget needs to address how services for these children and young people will be taken forward.

3. Public Service Agreement Aims

3.1) There are particular PSA Aims in the draft Budget that Barnardo’s specifically welcomes.

- Children and family – we welcome the focus on ensuring that children are cared for and live in safety, that they are protected from abuse, receive the support they need to achieve their full potential and become more independent.
- Making people’s lives better – we welcome the focus on a drive across government to reduce poverty and address inequality and disadvantage. However, we think it is vital that there is a clear strategy coming from this that addresses child poverty in the most disadvantaged communities.
- Helping children and young people to achieve through education – encourage all children to realise their potential and in particular address the educational disadvantage of those children living in poverty.
• Raising standards in schools – we welcome the focus on reducing the gap between the highest and lowest attainers in educational terms.

4. Departmental Allocations

4.1) Barnardo’s experience is that when there is a need for efficiencies within Health and Social Services or Education these are most likely to be sought in the process of contracting with the voluntary sector. We are very concerned that the efficiencies required will result in a net deficit investment in children’s services and that this will most directly effect those children who are most vulnerable and disadvantaged. We would ask the Executive to consider both the levels of funding and the need for ring fencing funding for specific programmes of work for children’s services.

5. Issues in Programme for Government Children and Young People

5.1) The focus of the current Programme for Government has been on growing the economy and the need to build a peaceful, fair and prosperous society where everyone can enjoy a better quality of life. For this to be achieved there is a commitment to pursue an innovative and productive economy and a fair society that promotes social inclusion, sustainable communities and personal health and well being.

5.2) The PFG recognises that inequalities exist and we must strive to eliminate all forms of inequality. This must include the inequalities faced by many children and young people particularly those living in the most deprived areas.

5.3) The cross cutting theme with particular resonance for children and young people is A Better Future; which places an overarching responsibility on the Executive to proactively change the existing patterns of social disadvantage by using increased prosperity and economic growth to tackle ongoing poverty. Barnardo’s would like to see a clear and detailed strategy for ensuring that this is achieved.
6. Priority: Growing a Dynamic, Innovative Economy

6.1) This focuses on the need for economic growth to enhance the quality of life, reduce poverty and disadvantage, increase wealth and build stronger communities.

There are some important considerations within this priority for children and young people, particularly those living in poverty. Nearly 50% of the children who live in poverty live in a household with an adult working. One of the key mechanisms to lift those children out of poverty, depending of course on their age and childcare, is to enable a second earner in a household to return to work. Many children who live in poverty live in one parent households and often these are the children living in households entirely dependent on benefit.

6.2) Therefore when addressing the key goal of increasing employment rate from 70% - 75% by 2020 if particular attention was paid to enabling lone parents to return to work and to getting second earners back to work in households with dependent children it could make a significant difference to reducing the child poverty rate. Both these actions would require specific strategies to ensure they were appropriately addressed.

6.3) Another key goal within this priority is increasing by 2011 that 70% of school leavers achieve 5 or more GCSE passes at A to C. In 2005/06, 64.2% of all school leavers achieved this so this would not represent a huge increase over 3 years. However, children and young people living in poverty are much less likely than children overall to achieve this so it would be important that this particular goal focused on increasing the level of qualifications among those children living in poverty and in the most deprived areas.

6.4) An issue not included as a key goal but which does have relevance and is currently being focused on by the Westminster government in England and Wales is young people Not In Education Training or Employment (NEET). It is estimated that around 10% of young people here are NEET and research suggests that these are also the young people who are most likely to be at risk of offending. It is important to address the needs of these young people and provide them with skills or training that will enable them to contribute to the economy and provide them with clear purpose.
7. Priority: Promote Tolerance, Inclusion and Health and Well-being

7.1) This priority recognises that too many of our people, particularly the most vulnerable continue to live within communities which experience high levels of poverty, disadvantage and exclusion. They are more likely to suffer from poor health and low educational attainment and experience unemployment and limited lifetime opportunities.

7.2) In terms of key goals this priority commits to reducing child poverty by 50% by 2010 and eradicating it by 2020. It also commits to a £10m package to combat rural social exclusion and poverty. It is important that this package has some focus on the needs of children and young people in poverty and how in particular we can make real difference in-terms of better outcomes for children. There is significant research which indicates that investing in very young children, those aged 0 – 5 and in improving their family support and parenting experience makes the most significant difference to later education and health outcomes. The Executive should consider the range of evidence and develop a detailed strategy on how this will be taken forward.

7.3) We welcome within the key goals under this Priority a commitment to achieving a position by 2011 where 30% of school leavers entitled to free school meals obtain 5 or more GCSE passes at grades A – C.

7.4) Key goal 9 under this priority is reducing the number of abused or neglected children on the child protection register or in care by 20% by 2013. This is a welcome goal and recognises that children in care have much worse outcomes than children in general. It is reflected in the Care Matters consultation document produced by DHSSPS and which outlines the way forward for achieving this goal. However, we have a very real concern that the investment required to make this a reality is not currently available. When the Care Matters paper was first consulted upon it was estimated that it would require £30m over 5 years to put it into effect. Unfortunately as we currently stand not even £3m is available for taking this forward and the success of this strategy is in significant doubt because of a lack of funding.
7.5) We welcome the key goal within this of increasing the number of children and young people participating in sport and physical recreation by 2011 and would emphasize the need for that to include the most disadvantaged children.

8. Children’s Fund

8.1) The Executive Programme Fund for Children (Children’s Fund) was established under the last devolved administration and sought to provide a ring fenced programme of funding for services aimed at those children most in need within their local communities. Currently the Children’s Fund spends approximately £6m per annum on over £105 services for children, young people and their families. If the Fund continues, it is likely to be reduced to approximately one third of that over the next three years and because it is no longer an Executive led Fund but rather will come from the Health and Social Services Budget focus on those services specifically aimed at health.

8.2) Barnardo’s runs a total of 11 services under this Fund. These are crucial and vital services for children and young people who are often in very difficult circumstances. Children who have experienced domestic violence, services for young people with a disability, children and young people who are at risk of entering care or the young justice system and a crucial range of support services to parents. Such a reduction will have an inevitable impact on the number and range of services.

8.3) We would ask the Executive to re-consider the continuation of the Children’s Fund as it currently stands. We would also suggest that services funded under it should be continued on the basis of those which have been evaluated as being most effective.

9. Conclusion

Barnardo’s wants to express its concern that the current Budget as it is configured may not adequately address the needs of children and young people, particularly those who are most disadvantaged and we would ask
the Executive to reconsider the level of budgetary allocations made for children and young people to ensure that we do not fall further behind the level of comparable spend in Britain.

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