23rd September 2008

Dear Colleague

Barnardo’s NI welcomes this opportunity to respond to the four Area Children and Young People’s Committees on the consultation of a ‘Draft Northern Ireland Children’s Services Plan 2008-2011’. We will not respond to individual questions in the consultation, but make a number of key comments which we specifically would like to bring to your attention and which we hope will be helpful.

As the largest voluntary children’s organisation in NI, Barnardo’s works with over 10,000 children, young people and their families here every year, providing a range of services including for disabled children, children in care and families in need of support. Barnardo’s has previously highlighted our concerns at the lack of co-ordination in children’s services planning. We therefore warmly welcome the creation of a single regional plan and an integrated approach, including the utilisation of the ‘Whole Child Model’ as central to the development of services relevant to children.

Barnardo’s agrees that an outcome focussed approach and measurement process is essential if the life chances of children and young people are to be successfully improved. We also welcome the efforts being made to ensure the meaningful inclusion of children and young people in the consultation process and the proposed development of a regional Participation Strategy.

It is our view however that representation of the voluntary children’s sector is a key issue in the structures of any single regional planning body, particularly given the sector’s role and considerable experience in delivering
services at a local level. Barnardo’s would like to see a clearly set out terms of reference and criteria which would be issued for consultation before such representation is decided.

We would further suggest that a single planning body should take account of the reality that children’s organisations are effectively competing for contracts and services. It is therefore essential within this competitive system that a robust approach is taken to ensure that it operates on a ‘level playing field’.

Barnardo’s notes that ‘Family Support Services’ is a priority cross-cutting theme within the draft NI Children’s Service Plan. We welcome this focus and its links to the ‘Families Matter’ Strategy. We believe this strategy is crucially important to all families and in particular to vulnerable families who may need extra support or assistance. It will also have a central role to play in the strategic direction of key services.

The draft NI Children’s Services Plan makes clear links to the ‘Families Matter’ Strategy and the Children’s Strategy. However, Barnardo’s also believes that important links to other relevant government strategies should be emphasised, in particular, the Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Strategy and the Extended Schools Strategy.

We would also take this opportunity to state that Barnardo’s has repeatedly stressed a broad range of concerns relating to ongoing funding instability and the potential impact on children and families, especially on those who are most disadvantaged. We believe this issue needs to be urgently resolved in order to enable effective, long-term children’s services planning.

We look forward to reading the final outcomes of this consultation process and for clarity on the issues that we have raised. In the meantime, if you have any queries please do not hesitate to contact me directly.

Yours sincerely

Margaret Kelly
Assistant Director of Policy