

## Barnardo's Briefing Note for MSPs:

23<sup>rd</sup> October 2006



### Early Years – debate on Education Committee report

Barnardo's Scotland manages over 60 services that support 13,000 of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children and families in our communities. Every Barnardo's project is different but each has the same goal: protecting, nurturing and providing opportunities for the most vulnerable children and young people and their families so that, over the long term, they can transform their lives and fulfil their potential.

We welcome the Education Committee's report on their Early Years Inquiry and the core call for the early years to be a priority. A growing consensus accepts the crucial influence that the first few years have on a child's life. Getting support right at this stage will have lifelong benefits both for the child and for society.

#### 1) Investment priorities:

The Executive currently supports children in the early years through a variety of means. In particular we have Sure Start Scotland, which "aims to support families with very young children to ensure they have the best possible start in life, helping them to get the most from subsequent opportunities such as pre-school education." Councils, voluntary agencies, health services and existing child support networks are encouraged to work together to provide a more cohesive service for parent and child and to ensure that services are targeting communities in more deprived areas. In 2006 the total annual spend for Sure Start Scotland will be £52.9m.

Yet although the Committee report praises the work of local family centres it expresses concern over the costs involved and holds back from calling for an increase in provision. Whilst accepting that the best value for money would be gained by locating centres in the most deprived areas, **a greater investment in overall early years support must be taken forward as a priority after the next election.** The Committee have identified some outlets for this increased support and only then can we realise the Committee's ten-year vision of "an early years sector that gives all children the best start in life".

#### 2) Nutrition in the early years:

Barnardo's Scotland welcomes the Schools (health promotion and nutrition) (Scotland) Bill and has supported each of the broad measures contained within. However we are concerned that the proposed duty to ensure that food and drink supplied in schools meets defined nutritional standards will only apply to local authority and grant-aided schools. This means that the new standards will not be binding on independent provision. Although this excludes only a small proportion of school pupils, the proposal also extends to pre-school provision and this is of real concern because the majority of nursery places are outwith the public sector - of all registered childcare and pre-school education centres, 41.8 per cent are in the public sector, 22.3 per cent are in the private sector and 34.0 per cent are in the voluntary sector.<sup>1</sup> Unlike independent schools this is not a matter of parental choice as many areas do not have local authority provision.

Nutritional standards are, if anything, even more important at these younger ages. The SPICe briefing on the Bill quoted research which showed that "food preferences are formed in the early years, generally before a child starts school" so getting nutrition right in nursery provision is just as important as in schools. Independent schools and nurseries are subject to the same style of inspections by HM Inspectorate of Education and the Care Commission as local authority provision. **If nutritional standards will be inspected at local authority nurseries then why have lower standards for the rest?**

We note the response by the Education Minister to a Parliamentary Question in August 2006, where he states “The proposed legislation builds on the Scottish Executive’s existing Hungry for Success programme which does not extend to the independent sector.” And we have received other communication from the Executive stating that “It is not normal practice for the Executive to place a legislative requirement insisting the independent schools sector introduce Executive policy.”

This new legislation provides an opportunity for fresh consideration of which pupils need to be protected by nutritional standards – and Barnardo’s believes that all provision subject to inspection by the Care Commission should be included. Standard 3.4 of the National Care Standards for early education and childcare up to the age of 16 already states that children and young people should have “access to a well-balanced and healthy diet (where food is provided) which takes account of ethnic, cultural and dietary requirements, including food allergies.” We should ensure that this becomes a reality for all children.

### 3) Focus must be on support:

Barnardo’s Scotland is represented on the Youth Justice Improvement Group set up by the Executive, and contributed to the recent report and proposals for action.<sup>ii</sup>

We agree with the recommendation that “All agencies should work together to provide targeted parenting support and intensive family work to address the root causes of offending at an early stage. This should be focussed on helping parents change their own behaviour, gain parenting skills and to take responsibility for their children. To facilitate this we will support agencies in developing effective parent and family practice and interventions.” We also welcome the commitment in the timetabling section that: “By March 2008, agencies will provide early and appropriate services for families who are struggling to manage their children’s behaviour. This will include intensive family support and targeted parenting support.”

However we are concerned at the distorted way in which these proposals have made their way into the public arena, with newspaper coverage suggesting that five-year-olds will be “screened for early signs of offending behaviour” while police “target children under three”. Everyone involved in supporting Scotland’s children believes in early identification and intervention. However this **engagement must be centred on providing support and prioritise the best interests of the child**. Families will be reluctant to engage with the services that can help them if they are fearful of being stigmatised or marked down as a problem.

### Barnardo’s Services:

- Bo’ness Education and Family Support Service works alongside families, children and young people to actively promote opportunities for good childhood experiences, challenge disadvantage and exclusion and help children, young people and their carers to achieve their full potential within the context of their family, education and community.
- Paisley Threads works with young parents to help them take control of their own lives through housing support, building parenting skills and accessing opportunities to increase self-esteem and personal skills.
- Hazel Grove promotes positive family relationships, children’s development and well-being for the most vulnerable young children throughout West Lothian
- Family Matters works to improve the health, development and relationships of young children in Fife their families through a range of individual and family support services

<sup>i</sup> Pre-School and Childcare Statistics 2006. <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/148535/0039477.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> See <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/News/Releases/2006/10/09151212>

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