Dawn Purvis MLA
Northern Ireland Assembly
Parliament Buildings
Upper Newtownards Road
Belfast
BT4 3XX

13th December 2010

Dear Dawn

‘Educational Underachievement and the Protestant Working Class: A Summary of Research, for Consultation’

Thank you for the opportunity to consider the issues highlighted in the consultation paper and a response on behalf of Barnardo’s NI is attached. In preparing it we have consulted with our staff working in schools and services with young people experiencing difficulty within the formal education system.

Barnardo’s NI broad range of evidence-based education work includes coordinating extended schools clusters, school-based counselling and support, literacy and numeracy programmes, skills training, work experience, confidence building, social and emotional skills development, restorative practices, advice services and family support.

If it would be helpful to you and members of the Working Group, we would be happy to have further discussions on the issues raised, suggest possible ways forward, assist on further research and facilitate visits to our education-based services.

In the week beginning January 17th 2011, Barnardo’s NI has Professor Tim Shanahan visiting. He is Director of the Center for Literacy at the University of Illinois, Chicago (we have referenced his work at page 3 of our response). Barnardo’s NI would be more than happy to facilitate a meeting with you and Professor Shanahan so he can offer his international expertise on improving literacy and attainment among the most disadvantaged children, and perhaps offer an additional perspective on how the issues raised in the consultation paper might be addressed.

Yours sincerely

Margaret Kelly
Assistant Director, Policy
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 across communities. 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.

**Key Issues and Recommendations**

Barnardo’s NI expresses concern at the evidence highlighting poorer performance amongst protestant working class boys and the attainment gap between children who attend Maintained and Controlled schools in Northern Ireland.

It is very clear from a broad range of evidence that disadvantaged children regardless of their religious background are disproportionately underachieving at school compared to children from more affluent backgrounds, particularly boys. For example, the most recent data based on the School Leavers Survey 2008/09 shows that amongst (urban) boys in receipt of free school meals (FSME), 25.8% protestant and 40.6% catholic gained 5+ A*-C GCSEs compared with 63.9% and 71.8% respectively of non FSME pupils.

We also note from the School Leavers Survey 2008/09 in relation to this group that the gap at the lower attainment levels is relatively narrow (9.5% protestant and 7.8% of catholic boys left school with no GCSEs; and 68.4% protestant and 73.2% catholic boys gained 5+ A*-G GCSEs); however, the gap begins to widen significantly for boys gaining 5+ A*-C GCSEs (25.8% protestant and 40.6% catholic) and for boys gaining 2+ A Levels (11.6% protestant and 22.2% catholic). Although girls perform higher in percentage terms, the pattern is not dissimilar between disadvantaged protestant and catholic girls.

Barnardo’s NI has considerable experience working with children, young people and families across geographical communities, both protestant and catholic, where low educational aspiration and achievement is ingrained. While a performance gap in higher level attainment between protestant and catholic children is clear, the possible underlying cultural, aspirational and economic reasons outlined in the consultation paper are complex and we cannot easily separate and distinguish particular strands to provide a solid explanation. Barnardo’s NI is of the view that it is necessary to undertake a more detailed piece of research involving the community to ascertain the underlying factors and how they can best be addressed. We are willing to offer any assistance required in taking this forward.

It is also our view that tackling poor performance strategically and within each community where there is disproportionate disadvantage is the most appropriate way

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1 OFMDFM (October 2010) Audit of Inequalities – An Overview of the Statistics, the Sources and Current Social Trends: An Introductory Guidance Document
to address educational underachievement. In order to improve educational attainment amongst all disadvantaged children in Northern Ireland, including those from a protestant working class background, Barnardo’s NI believes the following areas should be prioritized:

The **Child Poverty Strategy** should be a key mechanism in breaking the cycle of poverty in Northern Ireland, by addressing the educational underachievement of disadvantaged children across all communities.

**Policy Recommendation:** The NI Executive through the Child Poverty Strategy should identify the most disadvantaged catholic and protestant areas and provide a cohesive, targeted response in the form of evidence-based intervention programmes.

**Intelligent funding and smart investment** is crucial at a time when public sector funding is facing significant reductions. Across all government departments, including education, priority needs to be given to targeted, timely interventions which will prevent more costly interventions being needed at a later stage. This is an opportunity for the Department of Education to strategically review what is effective at achieving the best outcomes for disadvantaged children and invest available resources accordingly.

**Policy Recommendation:** The following series of principles adapted from the Comprehensive Spending Review Framework should provide a useful guide for all government departments when making spending cuts:

- Are poor families or vulnerable children the main beneficiaries of this activity?
- Will cutting back on this activity cause greater pressure on other local services?
- Will cutting back on this activity cause greater problems for the future that will cost more?
- Could this activity be better packaged with others to avoid duplication and deliver a more holistic service?
- Could this activity be provided more effectively and for greater value for money by non-statutory providers?
- Does this service or programme represent the best investment for the best social return?

**School readiness:** Too many children arrive in school not ready or able to learn, providing schools with a considerable challenge. Parents are crucial in promoting the language and cognitive development essential for children to engage in and enjoy learning. Disadvantaged children benefit most from early support that has both an educational and social focus and where parents are supported. However the Draft Department of Education Early Years Strategy seems to focus solely on children aged 3-6 years and on their learning attainment.

**Literacy and numeracy standards:** 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. 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.

**Primary school provision:** The findings within a recent report from the Chief Inspector of the Education and Training Inspectorate need to be urgently addressed. The overall quality of provision in primary schools was not good enough in one third of schools; standards attained were not good enough in one quarter; there was too significant a variation in the standards of literacy and numeracy attained; the quality of teaching was in need of improvement in one lesson in every five; the quality of planning was inadequate in one school in every ten; and the quality of principals’ leadership is an area for improvement in one quarter of schools. Barnardo’s NI also believes it is essential that all teachers are suitably trained and supported to recognise that children can have complex, often multiple issues to deal with at home, including poverty, domestic abuse, parental substance misuse and mental ill-health. In our experience not all teachers are equipped to deal with this or fully understand the needs of vulnerable children.

**Emotional well-being** is an important foundation for learning and educational achievement. We broadly agree with the explanations cited in the consultation paper for male underachievement, particularly behavioural problems. Barnardo’s ‘School Based Counselling and Support’ service is referred a disproportionate number of boys with behavioural concerns, including ADHD. Schools generally do not have the capacity to provide the required supports, however initiatives like primary school-based counselling can have a range of positive impacts on children’s health, well-being, attitude to school and ability to enjoy learning, and in our experience work especially well with boys.

**Policy Recommendations:**

- The Department of Education Early Years Strategy must take a strong cross cutting and cross departmental approach in order to achieve the best outcomes for the most vulnerable children. It should also focus on programmes of intensive

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2 The Education and Training Inspectorate Chief Inspector’s Report 2006-2008
4 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.
5 The Education and Training Inspectorate Chief Inspector’s Report 2006-2008
6 McLaughlin, S (2010) Evaluation of Barnardo’s ‘Time 4 Me: School Based Counselling and Support’ within 14 primary schools in Belfast, Northern Ireland
intervention in those areas where most children are failing to achieve.

- The implementation of pilot programmes of proven practice models to address the literacy and numeracy deficit in schools in Northern Ireland.

- A greater focus on raising standards in primary schools to ensure children are suitably prepared to make the transition into post primary education, including funding levels and the pupil-teacher ratio, strong leadership, teacher training, parental involvement, greater emphasis on literacy and numeracy, and also early intervention and emotional well-being.

- Engaging parents to support their children educationally is critical to success and associated programmes of intensive intervention should be concentrated in areas of disadvantage.

**Post-16 provision:** Good educational and vocational qualifications are the best route to securing future employment and positive life chances. Many of the most disadvantaged young people in Northern Ireland do not stay on at school to take ‘A’ levels or enter post-16 training courses, and where they do participate these often fail or breakdown.

**Early intervention:** It is overwhelmingly vulnerable and disadvantaged young people who choose to abandon their education early and are at risk of becoming NEET (not in education, employment or training), 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.

**Extended schools:** There are major benefits to be gained from engagement in extended schools. The recent evaluation of extended schools in Northern Ireland\(^8\) found that in almost all cases where extended schools are serving disadvantaged communities effectively, significant improvements are evident in the educational outcomes and the personal and social well-being of pupils.

**Policy Recommendations:**

- High quality, effective post-16 provision both in and outside schools should be available and equally accessible to all young people across Northern Ireland in order to foster aspiration and raise expectations of progressing into further and higher education.

- Commit to prioritizing early intervention strategies by allocating 3 per cent of the

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\(^7\) 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.

\(^8\) Education and Training Inspectorate, An Evaluation of Extended Schools, July 2010
budgets from health, education and youth justice to early intervention initiatives.

- A Northern Ireland NEET Strategy should incorporate development of a specific pre-NEET prevention programme that works with primary and post-primary school children, aged 9-11 and 12-14 respectively, who are identified as being particularly at risk of becoming NEET.

- Commit to an expansion of the Extended Schools Programme.