Barnardo’s NI  Response to Every School A Good School: The Way Forward for Special Educational Needs and Inclusion

Introduction

Barnardo’s is the largest children’s voluntary organisation in NI. We provide over fifty services across NI every year to thousands of children and their families. Our work ranges from early years, to school age to young people and we provide child protection, family support, educational support and a specific range of services that seek to address disadvantage.

In formulating this response we consulted with our services that work in schools and also those that provide support for disabled children and their families.

Overall Barnardo’s are concerned that if the proposals in the “Every School a Good School – The Way Forward for Special Educational Needs and Inclusion” were to be implemented then disabled children and their families may find themselves facing a further disadvantage. As the situation currently stands many families with disabled children already struggle to get the level and kind of educational support that they believe is most effective for their child, despite a legal framework. In consulting with parents and disabled children who use Barnardo’s services they have expressed serious concern that the limited access and rights they have to additional support within the educational system would be removed. We remain concerned that the proposed new system will create further barriers and longer delays in meeting the needs of children with the most serious Special Educational Needs.

Barnardo’s would want to be clear we recognise the need for additional educational inclusion for children other than those who are disabled but in packaging all groups of children together in this way we would fear that the needs of none will be fully met.

Specific Issues

- There is grave concern around the proposed phasing out of Statements and their replacement with Coordinated Support Plans (CSP). It is well accepted that a child’s Statement is a legally binding document affording the parents reassurance
that their child’s needs will be supported as long as the correct information is contained within the Final Statement.

- There is a lack of clarity around whether the CSP will carry the same weight as the Final Statement.

- Parents and practitioners are not convinced that the removal of Statements will improve provision.

- There is concern regarding the increased pressure that the range of Additional Educational Needs will place on an already limited budget which previously had been allocated for children with Special Educational Needs. How will funding be prioritised? This is pivotal but not clearly addressed in the consultation document.

- The proposal that all schools are to be given a fixed budget for SEN has been questioned by parents. In particular they are concerned about the impact this would have if the funds are required in another school that have children with more complex needs. This contradicts the ‘holistic’ approach to working with the child. We believe that it is more effective for the budget to be allocated to the child and stay with the child if or when they move school.

- If schools are to provide support for the majority of the ‘Additional Needs’ we are concerned that it will place teachers under more pressure and that there is a risk that teachers spend more time away from the classroom.

- Delay was an issue common amongst all consulted. The current system is lengthy; the introduction of a three tiered service appears long winded and if there is more than one child in a ‘school community’ requiring assessment, who decides on priorities. Parents in particular were concerned that this system would increase the delays they face in having their children’s needs met.

- We do acknowledge the need for a more inclusive model of Additional Educational Needs which adopts an approach to assessing the child holistically and addressing issues children bring to school which impacts on their ability to learn. However, this cannot be at the cost of a distinct legal framework for disabled children to ensure they have their needs met. It also would require separate budgets.

- Barnardo’s have concerns regarding how cross departmental working will be effective as this has been difficult to achieve in practice.

- We also remain concerned at the lack of detail on what constitutes the learning community and how this would be decided. Has location been considered, for
example, more rural communities often have less access to local resources than those in Belfast? How will such disparities be addressed?

- We would question the ability to be consistent across the current Education Board areas given that currently each Board/Trust address and fund SEN's in a different way.

- Re: Alternative Education Placements – we would question the model of the school where a child is registered retaining responsibility and accountability for the pupil. Does this mean there will be dual funding of placements? We believe it would be more cost effective for funding to be allocated to the child and follow them to whichever school they attend. It is unrealistic to assume that all children will be returned to their original placement and ignores the individual needs of these children which contradict the ‘inclusive model’.

- Will legislation follow the implementation of the outcome of this consultation?

- The parents and staff we consulted were of the opinion that parent’s views and parental rights seemed limited throughout the proposed process. They were concerned that there appeared to be an ambiguity over whether a parent will be able to make a parental request for a statutory assessment to be carried out.

- Parents were clear that it was in the best interests of a child for this statutory assessment to remain in place. We note that in England and Wales there has been an Inquiry into the involvement of parents when children have special educational needs. We would suggest the Department need to specifically consult with and take account of the views and role of parents. We refer the Department to the recent DCSF publication “Parental Experiences of Services for Disabled Children”.

- Under the proposals there are no plans to hold an Annual Review of the child’s Statement. Parents felt this took away a unique opportunity for them to engage in relation to their child’s current and future educational needs and a clear process for accountability and involvement. Parents remained concerned that there would be no clear route for them to engage with schools or Education Boards in relation to the specific needs of their child.

**Conclusion**

Barnardo’s do have serious concerns regarding the proposals on Special Educational Needs and while we would want other barriers to education and issues of inclusion to be addressed we do not believe this can be at the cost of specific and effective proposals for disabled children with Special Educational Needs.
We believe that the proposals should not be implemented in their current format and there is a need for more detailed proposals and discussions before any changes are implemented.

For further information contact:

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