Barnardo’s NI Consultation Response to the ‘Northern Ireland Children and Young People’s Plan 2011-2014’

Introduction

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 over fifty services and in sixty schools. Our services range from child protection to family support, working with children in care and leaving care, children with disabilities and young people at risk of offending.

We have considerable experience working with children, young people and families across communities where poverty, low educational attainment and aspiration are ingrained. Barnardo’s NI wants to achieve positive outcomes for children in terms of health and well-being so they can realise their full potential.

Barnardo’s NI welcomes the opportunity to respond to the ‘Northern Ireland Children and Young People’s Plan 2011-2014’ consultation document. We are currently represented at various levels of the Children’s Services Planning process, including the Children and Young People’s Strategic Partnership as well as a number of Regional Sub-groups, Outcome Groups and Locality Groups. In developing our response we have consulted with key staff who participate in children’s services planning at these different levels. Our response focuses on four areas:

1. Support for the aims of the Plan, the model/structures proposed and themes identified
2. The effectiveness of the current process
3. Areas for future consideration
4. Barnardo’s NI commitment to children’s services planning arrangements
1. Support for the aims of the Plan, the model/structures proposed and themes identified

Barnardo’s NI has been, and continues to be, fully supportive of the children’s services planning process and welcome the draft Plan. We believe that the aim of joined up planning and commissioning is essential to improving the lives of children and young people in Northern Ireland. The development of this process has enabled this to become more of a reality than previous structures have allowed.

It is apparent from consulting with our staff that different local and HSCT areas are at different stages in developing their structures. Recognising that this is a developmental process with still much work to be done, Barnardo’s NI believe that the model of the Strategic Partnership, Regional Sub-groups, Outcomes and Locality Groups is a sound one which can facilitate delivery of integrated planning and optimisation of resources.

We particularly welcome the development of Family Support Hubs and consider this to be integral to developing early intervention and family support services at both universal and targeted levels. Previously this area has suffered from a lack of co-ordination and fragmentation of services and in our view this development will go a long way to alleviating this. The proposed link of Family Support Hubs with statutory Gateway teams will also ensure appropriate consultation with statutory child protection services is maintained.

Barnardo’s NI agrees with the four strategic themes identified by the Strategic Partnership and is especially supportive of the drive to designate Northern Ireland as an early intervention site. We also feel the proposed combination of both quantitative and qualitative information to inform the development of outcomes and specific indicators is an important development. While there are a range of NI wide, HSCT level and local area data to inform planning and monitor outcomes this will not relate to all themes and issues in the way that may be required. Using qualitative information generated by the practice experience of agencies at a local level and the involvement of communities, parents, children and young people is essential to ensuring that the outcomes process retains a focus on the needs of families in Northern Ireland rather than becoming information led with an emphasis on what is already or easily measurable. As such we are fully supportive of the model of parent and child participation outlined within the Plan.
2. The effectiveness of the current process

Barnardo’s NI staff members consider their involvement in the children’s services planning process to be positive, providing opportunities to develop the building blocks for integrated working and early intervention to better meet the needs of families.

As noted previously, many groups and areas are at different stages of implementation and getting the process up and running across Northern Ireland will be a significant achievement. As such, it is our view that the effectiveness of the current arrangements has yet to be tested in a concrete way, although there is confidence that a good start had been made and some groups can already point to tangible outputs.

Clearly there is still much to be done in terms of the outworking of the Plan and this will require considerable effort and commitment. However, there is a strong feeling that the will to make this work exists across the agencies involved and considerable momentum has already been generated.

3. Areas for future consideration

While recognising that the development of structures and processes is still in its infancy in many areas, Barnardo’s NI believes that a number of issues need to be considered to ensure effective and consistent implementation.

- **Strengthening the influencing role of the Partnership and links with Government Departments**

Seeking support from the Programme for Government and working towards the establishment of a Children’s Minister are important long-term goals. However, Barnardo’s NI feels that efforts also need to be made to establish and maintain links with relevant Government Departments and officials. Currently Departmental representation on the Partnership is limited and while the HSCB is well placed to feed back key issues, the Partnership’s influencing role needs to be broader than just health and social services.

Improved relationships with both policy makers and politicians will be essential in the future if emerging evidence of workable models of integrated practice and interventions are to be effectively communicated. Good working relationships will also facilitate the Partnership to both influence and be influenced by developing policies and strategies which impact on children.
• **Defining early intervention**

Given the emphasis placed in the Plan on early intervention, there needs to be clarity about how this will be defined and what groups of children, young people and families it will comprise.

Barnardo’s NI recommends a broad definition which focuses on preventative work across the developmental age range, for example:

‘intervening early and as soon as possible to tackle problems emerging for children, young people and their families or with a population most at risk of developing problems. Early intervention may occur at any point in a child or young person’s life”.

• **Coordinated/single budget for children**

Barnardo’s NI welcome the long term aim of seeking a co-ordinated children’s budget or single children’s budget as a means of streamlining the various, and often confusing, array of funding streams currently available. However, we would have some concerns that the concept of shared budgets might potentially extend to involve the community and voluntary sector.

The funding currently available is generally statutory in origin and provided by a number of agencies whose responsibilities are primarily those of commissioning services. Barnardo’s NI, like many other charities and voluntary agencies, is primarily a service provider and we would envisage that our financial contribution to the process to be largely through this service provision.

We have no doubt that the process will identify numerous gaps in current provision and this will also point us in the direction of new areas of service development to meet identified areas of need. However, Barnardo’s NI does not anticipate that our contribution will also involve the provision of specific sums of money to a generic pot. Nonetheless, we may, at times, wish to make a contribution to assist a specific development or issue.

• **Bringing existing groups within the structure**

There are many groups and fora across Northern Ireland at both regional and local levels which come together to deal with issues impacting on children and families. Evidently there is an urgent need to avoid duplication and bringing existing groups into the process is a practical way of doing this. Nonetheless, dependant on the original

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focus of the groups, there is a risk that the children’s services planning
element of the work will become a secondary consideration. Barnardo’s
NI suggests that a degree of oversight is needed to ensure this does not
become the case.

- **Representation on Groups**

Ensuring that the range of voluntary and community organisations
which work with children and families are included within the
planning process is a mammoth but essential task. Barnardo’s NI
believes that clear and transparent decision-making processes are
needed in relation to group representation, the inclusion criteria used
and reasons for inclusion/exclusion.

Equally, consideration needs to be given to how Family Support Hubs
will operate in terms of agency representation: will only the services of
those agencies represented on the group be considered as part of any
family support intervention or will there be consideration of relevant
services outside of the Hub? In Barnardo’s NI view, the capacity of
smaller organisations to attend frequent meetings will also need to be a
consideration, as should increasing representation from early years,
community and BME groups.

- **Competing and conflicting interests**

Barnardo’s NI is supportive of the involvement of the community and
voluntary sector in joint commissioning but feels that the potential for
conflicting interests needs to be considered from an early stage. Many
voluntary and community organisations have overlapping and
competing areas of interest and service provision. To make joint
commissioning a workable reality a mechanism for addressing
potential conflicts of interest and allowing for the recusal of agencies
concerned is needed to ensure equitable and transparent
commissioning arrangements.

- **Internal decision making processes**

The development of planning processes is an organic one and much
still needs to be thought through. However, the relationship between
the groups at various levels of the planning structure seems somewhat
confused. It is not always clear who has final ‘approval’ for different
plans and reports and Barnardo’s NI suggests that the roles and
responsibilities of each group needs to be clarified across all the
agencies involved.
• **Monitoring and Review**

Barnardo’s NI believes that future stages in the development of children’s services planning would benefit from the implementation of an independent monitoring and review process. This would provide objective assessment of the benefits of different approaches and an evaluation of progress made to inform the strategic direction of the Partnership and outworking of the draft Plan.

• **Outcomes and associated high level indicators**

Given that the NI wide data currently available is unlikely to provide all the outcomes information that is required, the development of proxy indicators from existing data sources offers a means of evidencing indirect outcomes (for example, one might expect an increased focus on the mental health and health and well being of children and young people to result in fewer school exclusions and increased educational attainment).

However, Barnardo’s NI feels that as the Plan and associated groups and structures bed down it may become necessary to develop alternative methods for measuring specific issues at a Northern Ireland level (e.g. including a module in the Young Life and Times Survey or other continuous surveys; or developing a specific survey to measure key areas on an annual/biennial basis).

4. **Barnardo’s NI commitment to children’s services planning arrangements**

Barnardo’s NI has made a considerable investment in the children’s services planning process and our staff members remain committed to working with other agencies and stakeholders to develop this further in the future. As a major provider of services for children, young people and families in Northern Ireland, we believe that our continued involvement in the process is of great value to us as an organisation and essential to taking forward our commitment to early intervention.
If you require any further information, please contact:

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