Barnardo’s NI Consultation Response to “Pathways to Success” – A proposed cross-departmental strategy to reduce the number of young people most at risk of remaining outside education, employment or training (NEET)

Introduction

Barnardo’s NI is the largest children’s charity in Northern Ireland with services ranging from child protection to family support, work with children in care and leaving care, disabled children and with young people at risk of offending. We work with more than 8,000 children, young people and families in almost fifty services and sixty schools across communities in Northern Ireland.

Many of the children and young people we work with are at risk of or have already become disengaged from the education system. Most are from disadvantaged communities and have left school with few or no qualifications. We provide support services for vulnerable young people facing barriers to participation, as well as vocational training and work-based learning services¹.

Through our broad service base Barnardo’s NI also engages with children, young people and families to help inform policy development. In preparing our consultation response for the NI NEET Strategy we have drawn on the experience of young people using our services that are, or are at risk of, becoming NEET.

Development of NI NEET Strategy

All other UK regions have had a specific NEET Strategy and targets in place to reduce the overall number of young people who are NEET for considerable time now. With rising youth unemployment at an all time

¹ See Appendix One for examples.
high (one in five young people), the introduction of a NEET Strategy for Northern Ireland is very timely.

Barnardo’s NI warmly welcomes the DEL Consultation on the “Pathways to Success” NI NEET Strategy. We have contributed extensively to the initial DEL Scoping Study, the subsequent Committee for Employment and Learning NEET Inquiry and to the development of the NI NEET Strategy. Indeed, Barnardo’s NI set up and Chair the NEET Strategy Forum to enable those working in the voluntary and community sector to engage with and influence the development and implementation of the Strategy. The Forum has also worked in partnership with DEL to design and deliver a series of public consultations on the Strategy, including one with young people.

In our experience the process for developing the Strategy has demonstrated a more collaborative, co-operative approach and should be commended. It has recognised the key role of the voluntary and community sector and worked to develop a shared understanding and approach that Barnardo’s NI believe provides a model for how new policy development should be taken forward.

Consultation Questions

Barnardo’s NI has addressed those areas where we believe our additional input would be most helpful. Any recommendations made are highlighted at the end of each section.

Overview of Strategy

Barnardo’s NI broadly agrees with the key elements of “Pathways to Success,” the proposed NEET Strategy for Northern Ireland. It is focused on demonstrating effectiveness and how proven models can work on a larger scale, while recognizing the need to pilot work programmes. It also details current spending and the need for that to be effective in delivering better outcomes. Critically, the Strategy does give a commitment to consider the need for additional funding.

In our experience too many high level government strategies do not link or coordinate priority action areas with other existing or planned Departmental strategies. Barnardo’s NI therefore welcomes that the NEET Strategy is cross-departmental in nature and is not simply a list of current initiatives; it does provide a clear list of current and planned strategic actions across the three key areas of Information, Intervention and Prevention.
**Recommendation:**

It is essential that other key government strategies are coordinated with the NI NEET Strategy as its Action Plans are being developed and implemented, notably the Child Poverty Strategy (OFMDFM); Families Matter (DHSSPS); Care Matters (DHSSPS); and the Early Years Strategy (DE).

**Strategic Focus**

Barnardo’s NI agrees with the strategic focus outlined in “Pathways to Success” and supports the initial emphasis on re-engaging those 16-19 year olds who are seen as ‘core’ NEET because they have identifiable barriers. The numbers of young people who are ‘core’ NEET has remained a considerable issue both in times of prosperity and recession. Given the social and economic benefits it will bring to them as individuals and society generally, it is important these young people receive targeted interventions as a priority.

The Strategy identifies the risk categories for the young people it aims to support (p.21). It correctly notes that many of the young people who are NEET do not have one of these characteristics but will likely have multiple barriers. However, it is essential that these characteristics are not perceived as forming separate ‘groups’ to be targeted; many ‘core’ NEET young people are simply located in disadvantaged communities and in households where no-one has ever worked.

While the Strategy does recognise the balance between prevention and intervention, in our view targeted preventative work based on proven models should begin at the earliest possible stage. More specific emphasis should be made in the Strategy on tackling NEET within early years and the education system. Education is one of the most important factors in a child’s development, promoting well-being, providing life skills, fostering citizenship and preparing for future employment. The improvement of literacy and numeracy standards within education is just one example of
what needs to be urgently addressed in stemming the flow into the NEET category\(^2\).

**Recommendations:**
It is important for the Northern Ireland NEET Strategy to recognise and reflect that many of the young people who are ‘core’ NEET have one significant identifiable barrier which is that they are from families with a history of poverty and unemployment located within deprived communities.

Reducing the numbers of young people not in education, employment or training should be a priority area within education. The 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 to 11 and 12-14 respectively, who are identified as being particularly at risk of becoming NEET.

- **Current and Planned Strategic Actions**

**Information**

Barnardo’s NI believes that developing a rigorous information base is one of the most important issues to be addressed by the NEET Strategy if it is to deliver an effective response and be successful in the long term. All the available evidence suggests that the earlier we identify a young person who has become NEET then the greater our chances of re-engaging them. To have the best chance young people need to be re-engaged within three to six months of dropping out of the system.

At present in Northern Ireland it is far too easy for young people to fall out of the system and be forgotten. We need the right systems in place to prevent this and therefore agree with the proposal to consider a tracking mechanism in NI for NEET young people. However this should be underpinned by a legislative requirement on post-16 learning providers to notify the system if a young person drops out, similar to that provided by

\(^2\) One-fifth of children in Northern Ireland 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.
the Education and Skills Act (2008) in England and Wales. To be fully effective any tracking system must also be backed up by a clear range of support services. It is vital that tracking is only used as a support mechanism for young people and not punitively linked to the receipt of social benefits.

The Department of Education is not currently included in the actions within the Information section and this should be revisited. Barnardo’s NI believes it is equally important that children at risk of becoming young people NEET in the future are monitored before they leave school.

**Recommendations:**

A tracking system to monitor young people when they leave school should be developed with a legislative basis requiring post-16 learning providers to report any young person who drops out.

A monitoring framework must be developed to identify young people at greatest risk of becoming NEET while they are still in the education system.

**Intervention**

Barnardo’s NI believes it is critical we have the right provision in place to successfully engage those who are ‘core’ NEET. The NEET Strategy should provide an opportunity to strategically review what is effective at achieving the best outcomes for young people and invest available resources accordingly. An effective response will also require continued and more detailed collaboration across all sectors.

It is important to note the rate of young people NEET increased from 13% to 19% between 2000 and 2009. This would suggest a number of possible difficulties:

- The current range of programmes and interventions are not effectively reaching the numbers of young people who are NEET.
- The programmes are reaching NEET young people but failing to make a significant impact.
- The flow into NEET continues to be more significant than the range of interventions addressing it and so the numbers remain stubborn.
The current and planned interventions outlined in the Strategy must therefore be assessed for effectiveness, especially for young people with identifiable barriers. Intervention must be targeted and proven to work to prevent more costly interventions being needed at a later stage.

In Barnardo’s NI experience the key elements necessary in re-engaging young people include mentoring, work-based learning, personal development and the development of soft skills, alternative education, and engagement with parents/carers through a family support worker. Young people with poor experience of school and further education colleges particularly stress the need for an identified ‘mentor’ to provide ongoing career advice and personal support.

**Recommendations:**

There needs to be a more comprehensive and significant analysis of why the numbers of NEET young people have increased since 2000 and why the range of interventions have failed to make any significant impact.

An action research project should be developed to run alongside the interventions provided to the initial cohort of young people supported by the Northern Ireland NEET Strategy. This would help assess effectiveness and enable learning from practice to be continuously fed back to the NEET Strategy Steering and Implementation Group (SIG).

**Prevention**

Please refer to points made about prevention in relation to the Strategic Focus (page 3).

- **Funding**

In our view it is not possible to address the current numbers of NEET young people in Northern Ireland without a clear strategy on funding. The need for intelligent funding and smart investment is crucial at a time when public sector funding is facing significant reductions. Barnardo’s NI welcomes the commitment in the Strategy to consider the need for
additional funding but believe it is equally important to determine how effectively existing funding is being used.

Recommendation:

The full range of funding currently being invested in NEET young people should be identified; and the range of programmes assessed for their effectiveness in re-engaging young people and in achieving outcomes linked to education, employment and training.

• Implementation

We agree with the proposed steering and implementation mechanism, including the suggested establishment of four thematic sub-committees (Intervention; Prevention; Information; and Employment Preparation). The main focus of these sub-committees should be to produce related action plans.

Recommendation:

Each of the four thematic sub-committees in the NI NEET Strategy Steering and Implementation Group (SIG) should also be tasked with identifying cost effective, evidence-based models of best practice.

Conclusion

With the right help at the right time young people can turn their lives around. The development of the “Pathways to Success” NI NEET Strategy is a significant and critical step forward in ensuring we do not lose another generation of young people to long term unemployment and poverty. It should not simply be seen as a policy to support disadvantaged young people but also as an opportunity to help grow Northern Ireland's economy. Barnardo’s NI looks forward to continued work with DEL as the lead Department and across other Departments and sectors to turn the Strategy into effective action.
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Appendix One

- **Armagh and Dungannon Adolescent Partnership** works with young people and their families who are in need of family support, in conflict with the law and vulnerable. These children may be at risk of engaging in offending behaviour or going into care or custody. Often they are disengaged from the education system, and therefore are, or are at risk of becoming, not in education, employment or training (NEET).

- **Dr B’s Kitchen** provides a supportive training environment within the hospitality sector to enable the transition to employment for young people with learning disabilities or other support needs. Structured training on a full-time basis lasts for two to three years depending on individual learning and progress. All training and qualifications are delivered in house, in the public restaurant and conference facilities.

- The **School Age Mothers (SAM) Programme** (part of the Barnardo’s NI Young Parent’s Network) offers holistic support to young women who are pregnant or a parent to help them complete their education up to compulsory school age and beyond. Emphasis is on maintaining young women in their original school as far as possible, and encouraging them to engage in other community services.