

**Barnardo's NI**  
**Consultation Response to the**  
**Establishment of a Regional Care and Justice Campus**  
**February 2021**

Barnardo's NI is the largest children's charity in Northern Ireland. We work with approximately 12,000 children, young people and families annually across more than 40 different services and programmes. We deliver a wide range of services across Northern Ireland, from providing family support and early intervention, to working directly with children and families who have experienced adversity and need our support.

Barnardo's NI welcomes the opportunity to comment on the proposal to establish a regional care and justice campus. Our comments are informed by our experience of supporting children, young people and families. As members of the Stakeholder Reference Group for this project, we are pleased to see this initial public consultation, though regret that the context of Covid-19 reduced opportunities for the group to engage more fully with the proposals or for further engagement with children and young people. This brief response highlights a number of overarching points we wish to raise, however we urge that more details are published before plans are finalised and that there is further engagement with voluntary sector organisations currently operating in Lakewood and/or Woodlands. It is also important that children and young people are given meaningful opportunities to engage with these plans throughout their development, and that the barriers to engagement in the current context are recognised so that engagement methods can be adapted or postponed until it is safe to meet young people in a setting where they feel comfortable.

In general, we welcome the therapeutic, relationship and needs-based approach presented in this proposal. We urge that as this develops, there is an emphasis on making sure the proposal is child-centred, and not led by the current estate profile. We agree with the premise of the campus, but would like to see more detail on how the community satellite model will work. In particular, there needs to be an assessment of current provision, its sustainability, and its effectiveness in areas of mental health and drug/alcohol misuse. Whilst we understand the need for a regional approach, we need to avoid focusing resource on one area in Bangor; this proposal should be accompanied by a focus on early intervention and prevention, and local community support across Northern Ireland. As such, the meaningful involvement of the voluntary and community sector as an equal partner will be critical to this proposal. We will also make the point in this response that this initiative should be led by Health, reflecting a trauma-informed and child-centred approach based on child welfare.

As the provider of the Independent Guardian Service, as stipulated under the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (NI) Act 2015, we are concerned that the proposals do not make reference to unaccompanied children arriving in Northern Ireland. Often these children are placed in the Juvenile Justice Centre soon after arrival, despite the statutory defence of claiming asylum. This is something that should be considered by the multi-agency panel; it may be appropriate for someone with immigration law expertise to sit on the panel, to ensure that there is a rights-based, child-centred and trauma-informed response to these children and they are not placed in a secure care setting unnecessarily.

Communications about the establishment of the campus will play an important role in supporting better outcomes for children and young people. Young people must be involved and be active participants in its design and development. Our vulnerable young people already face stigma and challenges. There needs to be a concerted effort to educate and communicate that young people placed in the campus are not 'criminals' or 'bad'; similarly, young people need to be supported to understand the changes so they do not wrongly perceive that they are being sent to the Juvenile Justice Centre. Perceptions and stigma could be a barrier to both engagement whilst in the campus and to reintegration, and this needs to be considered within the planning process and implementation plan.

The following points respond to relevant chapters within the proposal.

#### 1. Secure Care Campus

- We understand the rationale for merging the current Lakewood and Woodlands sites, but urge that all decisions are based on the needs of children and not led by the current estate profile.
- We agree that smaller groups of four-to-six children in each house is appropriate. In our purpose built home, Children's House, we support a maximum of four primary school-aged children. Our experience is that this smaller number enables workers to build relationships with children, understand and respond to their needs, and address their trauma. It will be important that the Head of Operations and their team understand each child and their needs, so that they are allocated to the most appropriate house where their needs can be met and they can feel safe.

#### 2. Admissions

- We understand the proposal to maintain the role of courts in determining whether a child should be admitted to the secure care campus. We urge this is accompanied by training for the judiciary on the impact of trauma and child-centred approaches.
- If the use of the campus as a place of safety is necessary, then it is important that the campus is led by Health. A child should never enter the justice system due to their vulnerability. We agree that alternative options should be developed in collaboration with Health, taking a trauma-informed, child-centred and child protection approach. More details are

needed about the proposed use of satellite provision as a place of safety under the PACE Order.

- Through our role as Independent Guardians, we are aware of children and young people entering the Juvenile Justice Centre (JJC) soon after arrival in Northern Ireland, particularly regarding entering the jurisdiction on fake documents. However, these young people should never have been admitted to the JJC due to the statutory defence that exists for those claiming asylum. Often they are put through the court system before having the opportunity to seek advice from a solicitor experienced in asylum/immigration law. This particular group of vulnerable young people need to be considered more fully in this proposal and alternatives identified in collaboration with Health and Justice.

### 3. Multi-Agency Panel

- We welcome the proposal to establish a multi-agency panel and a needs-based approach to decision making in respect of admission or continued placements. However, the proposed membership needs to be expanded to ensure substantial representation from the voluntary and community sector, to reflect the direct experience of supporting the most vulnerable children and young people in the community. This will be critical in informing how the child's needs can be met in their community. Collaboration between the statutory and voluntary sector will be crucial to the implementation of this proposal to ensure joined-up working and effective child-centred responses.
- It is important that the child is supported and facilitated to meaningfully engage with the panel and be part of the decision-making process. Whilst the proposal notes that the panel will "encourage" the child to attend, alongside a "competent advocate", their participation needs to go beyond attendance at a meeting with a range of professionals they may not have met before. Significant efforts should be made to ensure the child understands and is an informed, active participant in the decision making process and that their advocate is someone who also understands the process, can accurately advise the child and with whom the child has built a meaningful relationship. For children already in the campus, their participation in planning for their exit should begin at day one.

### 4. Services in the Campus

- We welcome the development of a Framework for Integrated Therapeutic Care, and the emphasis on relationship-focused work. Services within the new campus should be child-centred, holistic and needs-led.
- The multi-disciplinary health and wellbeing team should include representation from the voluntary and community sector. This will allow a collaborative approach both during and after the placement, putting the child's needs first and enabling cross-sectoral wraparound support to

ensure the best outcomes for each child, particularly given the stated intention to link closely with community-based services to ensure support continues after a child leaves the campus.

#### 5. Needs-based Approach

- We agree that children should not be separated due to their route of admission to the centre. Each decision should be made based on the child's needs and the most effective way to respond to those needs. As in any children's social care setting, continuous risk assessment should be carried out. It will also be important to address the risk of bullying and stigma.

#### 6. Leaving the Secure Care Centre - Discharge / Exit Planning

- We wholly agree that no child should remain in secure care longer than is necessary. Every effort should be made to ensure children are not deprived of their liberty in the first place and, when a secure care placement is absolutely necessary, that there is a concentrated effort to facilitate reintegration to their community, with appropriate supports in place, as soon as possible. As highlighted above, children should be supported to participate in planning for their exit from day one.

#### 7. Satellite Provision and Step Down Unit

- We welcome the establishment of a step down unit, but again highlight concerns about focusing resource in one geographical area. Support from family and engagement with the child's local community provision is an important aspect of effective reintegration and should be considered within exit planning and the step down provision.
- We are keen to learn more about the local satellite provision, including residential provision and peripatetic teams. This provision should be integrated with local voluntary and community sector provision, and in developing this proposal further there should be meaningful engagement with existing providers to ensure collaborative child-centred working that reflects local contexts.
- The proposal references satellite provision as an option for designated supported accommodation for 16 and 17 year olds, either as an alternative to entry to the Secure Care Centre or to provide supported living arrangements following their discharge from the Secure Care Centre. Barnardo's NI provides supported accommodation for young people leaving care and we would be keen to share our experience to inform the development of this proposal.

- The prevention aspect of satellite provision should draw on effective models in the community, including those provided by the voluntary and community sector, with an emphasis on family support, mental health provision and addressing risk taking behaviour.

## 8. Governance

- We believe this initiative should be led by Health, with a Head of Operations accountable to the Department of Health or one of its agencies e.g. the Health and Social Care Board. To ensure a regional approach, we suggest it should not sit within one particular Health and Social Care Trust. It is important that this is aligned with a Health agenda rather than Justice to reflect a 'child first' mentality and a welfare, child protection and trauma-informed approach.

## 9. Equality, Rights and Rural Impact

- As noted above, unaccompanied children are not currently referenced in the proposal. Their unique needs and challenges, including language barriers to engagement, need to be addressed – though we again highlight our concerns about the placement of unaccompanied children in the JJC / campus.
- As above, whilst we understand the need for a regional approach, there is a concern that with resource directed to the Bangor site children from other, more rural areas may be more isolated from their local and family supports, potentially leading to loneliness and poorer outcomes. There is also a risk that children geographically closer to the campus will be more likely to be placed there. A needs-based approach is critical and the best way to respond to each child's diverse needs must be considered.

**For more information, please contact:**

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