

**Barnardo's Northern Ireland**

**Department of Health/Health and Social Care Board  
Task and Finish Group**

**Options for a Regional Service for Separated and Unaccompanied Asylum  
Seeking Children in Northern Ireland**

Barnardo's NI is the largest children's charity in Northern Ireland. We work with approximately 18,000 children, young people and families annually across more than 45 different services and programmes. We are also a leading provider of schools-based support, reaching more than 32,000 children in schools across the UK and Ireland through our NI-managed social and emotional literacy programmes. We deliver a wide range of services, from providing family support and early intervention, to working directly with children and families who have experienced adversity and need our support. Our goal is to achieve better outcomes for more children. To achieve this, we work with partners to build stronger families, safer childhoods and positive futures.

Since April 2018, Barnardo's NI has been commissioned by the Northern Ireland Health and Social Care Board to deliver the Independent Guardian Service. In this time, we have provided Guardians for over 120 young people in Northern Ireland who are unaccompanied or separated from a legal guardian and who are at risk of human trafficking. The role of the Guardians is to ensure that the welfare and asylum rights of children are upheld, and to hold those responsible for meeting children's needs accountable for their responsibilities.

Barnardo's NI also delivers Supported Accommodation for Separated and Unaccompanied Young People (SASUYP). SASUYP provides residential support to young people, aged 16-21 years old, fleeing from states affected by war or human rights abuses who have made dangerous journeys alone. The service aims to prepare young people for independent living by providing a 'place of safety'. The unit accommodates 8 young people in self-contained flats who are supported to reach their full potential and positively transition to independent living. The Service offers an attachment based, trauma informed method of intervention. It aims to inform, educate, support and help build resilience with young people as they make the transition to independence.

Barnardo's NI welcomes this opportunity to comment on the joint Department of Health/Health and Social Care Board Task and Finish Group consultation on Options for a Regional Service for Separated and Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (S/UASC) in Northern Ireland.

## **1. Section 1: Introduction**

- 1.1. Barnardo's NI welcomes the review of the current service provision for S/UASC and recognises the current and foreseeable pressures on the system. We are pleased to see the proposals for an overall strategic direction and a regional service delivery model.
- 1.2. Barnardo's NI welcomes the commitment to co-production in paragraph 1.5 in the future development of the new service delivery model. We are interested to understand more about the plans for involving children and young people in co-production, ensuring their voice and lived experience shapes strategic direction. S/UASC face many barriers in sharing their views and needs with large organisations, safely. We would urge the Department and the Board to carefully consider how best to partner with young people so that co-production is a meaningful experience. We believe that services that are co-produced with children are more likely to achieve positive outcomes and ensure systems are best able to respond to their needs. Co-production is a specialist area of work and Barnardo's NI would be willing to work with the Department and the Board in progressing such a model if required.

## **2. Section 2: Context**

- 2.1. Barnardo's NI recognises the description of the needs of children and young people, identified as S/UASC, within the consultation. To summarise:
  - All require an initial response with many, but not all, requiring long-term care and support (2.3)
  - They have diverse cultural needs (2.4)
  - All have experienced trauma, requiring a trauma-informed response and many have complex therapeutic needs as a result (2.4 and 2.7)
- 2.2. Table 2.9 of projected caseloads is already an under-representation of current service demand in the Independent Guardian Service, delivered by Barnardo's NI. Between April 2021 and early July 2021, 11 new S/UASC have been identified for referral to the Independent Guardian Service. The projected caseload increase for 2021/22 is stated as 10.
- 2.3. Paragraph 2.10 refers to the National Transfer Scheme (NTS); Barnardo's is aware of the exceptional pressures on local authorities in GB due to unprecedented numbers of children crossing the English Channel. We believe there are opportunities to develop a planned, partnership approach to meeting the needs of some of these children and young people in Northern Ireland. Barnardo's NI delivers the Vulnerable Person's Resettlement Scheme in Northern Ireland alongside a consortium of partners; through this scheme over 1,800 Syrian Refugees have been resettled in Northern Ireland since

2015. Our experience delivering this service has us given experience and expertise in delivering a range of supports to new arrivals. We also have experience of delivering support in Family Reunification programs, again in partnership with a range of agencies. Planned transfers of children and young people to Northern Ireland, with accompanying financial resource, may allow for capacity to be developed within systems and structures that could be flexed to respond to unplanned arrivals.

- 2.4. The Strategic Context (para 2.12) recognises that particular focus is required in supporting looked after, care-experienced and “newcomer” children and young people. Barnardo’s NI is concerned at the delays in the publication of a Refugee Integration Strategy for Northern Ireland and the review of the Department of Education’s “Supporting Newcomer Pupils” policy. It would be helpful to be able to place the strategic direction for support for S/UASC in the context of these wider, cross-departmental, policy developments and commitments.

### **3. Section 3: The Rights, Entitlements and Particular Needs of S/UASC**

- 3.1. Barnardo’s NI welcomes that the consultation clearly lays out the rights and entitlements contained within UNCRC in respect of S/UASC. It also references the very helpful Working Arrangements document published by HSC Board. These are important to reference within the consultation as they provide the basis of the provision of all support to S/UASC.
- 3.2. Paragraph 3.2 makes reference to the state’s responsibilities to prevent separation. Barnardo’s NI welcomes the positive aspect of highlighting this responsibility i.e., that efforts should be made to reunify children with their families as soon as possible. However, this paragraph also describes a multifaceted process, with competing rights and responsibilities, that must be considered in the context of risk of trafficking and exploitation for S/UASC. Barnardo’s NI recommends that this section is reviewed to ensure no reader misunderstands the complexity of the work entailed.

#### *Paragraphs 3.8 – 3.38: Particular Needs of S/UASC in NI*

- 3.3. It is helpful to have a summary of the country of origin of children that have arrived in Northern Ireland, their ages and where they present upon arrival. We agree with the description of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) but would note that children continue to experience ACEs post-arrival in Northern Ireland. Barnardo’s NI appreciates that the Regional Model is being designed to reduce ACEs post-arrival, however, they do still occur and should be considered when engaging children and young people in processes that could be retraumatising.
- 3.4. Processes that could be retraumatising for separated, unaccompanied and asylum-seeking children and young people include the asylum process,

negotiating the welfare system, age assessment, repeating their life history on multiple occasions, multiple changes of social workers and social work teams. Challenges that children and young people often face include feeling they are not being believed, racism, ongoing pressure from traffickers, threats to their family still in the country of origin, being placed in accommodation/placement inappropriate to their need, survivor's guilt, family reunification process, providing financial assistance to family members across the world. The children and young people we support are faced with many of these scenarios and this can have a significant impact on their emotional and mental well-being.

3.5. Barnardo's NI agrees with the comprehensive description of the wide range of complex needs that S/UASC have in paragraphs 3.11 onwards. Some comments from our practitioners highlight:

- The importance of managing expectations (para 3.12). It may not be possible to meet all the complex needs of S/UASC children within Northern Ireland, particularly at an early stage, but even in the long term. For example, limited or no links with others from country of origin may be the reality in Northern Ireland and there is a lack of religious resources for certain groups e.g. African Orthodox Christians.
- Paragraph 3.20 should note the potential challenges in identifying appropriate legal representation, given capacity issues and lack of suitably experienced legal professionals within Northern Ireland. Furthermore, private firms are often dependent on legal aid which is a difficult system to negotiate and the provision of support is minimal in comparison to the work required (as such it is not an area of work that encourages solicitor firms to invest time and resource).
- Paragraph 3.25 focuses on ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) There are challenges across Northern Ireland in meeting the need for a variety of ESOL needs. S/UASC needs should be included in scoping of ESOL provision routinely and the Regional Model may better collate and share this information with relevant government departments.

#### **4. Section 4: Current Service Delivery Model in Northern Ireland and Comparators from Other Jurisdictions**

4.1. It is helpful to have a range of examples from other jurisdictions, however we note there were no international comparators. Barnardo's NI is aware of the delivery model in the Netherlands (NIDOS) and would recommend that examination of this model be considered.

## **5. Section 6: Identification of Service Gaps**

- 5.1. Barnardo's NI agrees with this substantial list. We would add the need for specific specialised legal representation for children regarding issues related to trafficking and more commonly associated with European children arriving in Northern Ireland.

## **6. Section 7: Requirements: Immediate, Medium and Longer Term**

- 6.1. Under 'Additional Requirements' we would recommend the inclusion of building links between statutory social work services and minority ethnic communities including leaders within the race equality and refugee/asylum sectors. These links would be beneficial in helping develop safe links into communities for young people. Consideration needs to be given to building safer communities for S/UASC in short, medium and long term.

## **7. Section 8: Core Components of Service Model**

- 7.1. Barnardo's NI welcomes the development of a Comprehensive Service Model. We require some clarification in relation to some components detailed below.

### *Regional Social Work Team*

- 7.2. Barnardo's NI would welcome further information on numbers of social workers envisaged within this team.
- 7.3. The proposals are not clear whether the Regional Social Work Team retains case responsibility for S/UASC when they move to their medium/long term placement. If not, then Barnardo's NI is concerned that this model does not achieve a key aim of the model – to reduce the number of professionals a young person is required to engage with.
- 7.4. The model does not address the disparity in provision across Trusts or the structural issues that require S/UASC to move between Social Work Teams within Trusts depending on their age. In addition, the model does not recognise that asylum/NRM and family reunification processes extend well beyond the initial assessment stage and therefore would benefit greatly from a statutory SW service with the specialised knowledge and understanding of these systems remaining in place.

### *Trust based Social Work and Personal Advisor Provision*

- 7.5. There is no additional resource within the model for this provision. If the Regional Team are going to fulfil many of the current functions that Trust teams carry out, this is a reasonable proposal. However, if capacity is already stretched and Trusts are required to continue to provide medium and long term support this would not seem feasible.

### *Regional Therapeutic Lead*

- 7.6. Barnardo's NI welcomes the creation of this post. However, we would caution that this lead is reliant on the provision of direct intervention from Trusts. We remain concerned that young people will face considerable delays in accessing trauma informed mental health services.

### *Independent Guardian Provision*

- 7.7. We welcome the inclusion of the Independent Guardian Service within the Model. We note that the indicative costs for the IG Service are less than those for the Regional SW Team. We would caution that every S/UASC is entitled to an Independent Guardian, who is a qualified social worker, and this involvement may extend past the involvement of statutory social services in line with legislation. We are not clear how the costs have been calculated nor why there would be a disparity.

### *Regional reception and assessment placements*

- 7.8. We have assumed the costings for the regional unit include staffing and would welcome further clarification of the role of social worker within the unit in relation to the Regional Model.

### *Regional follow-on/stepdown*

- 7.9. We welcome the inclusion of a range of placement options within this part of the model. We think the indicative costs are an under-estimate given the experience of delivering Supported Accommodation on a contingency basis.

### *Health Care Needs*

- 7.10. There are no additional resources identified for mental health and therapeutic needs. Barnardo's NI is concerned by this given current delays and significant waits to access such services. In addition to the long delays experienced by the general looked after children population, S/UASC will require specialist inputs that are harder to resource in Northern Ireland.

### *Peer Support*

- 7.11. We welcome the inclusion of Peer Support as part of the Model although note that no indicative resource has been allocated to this. Barnardo's NI have had considerable success in recruiting Integration Volunteers in our NI Refugee Support Service and would recommend consideration be given to building volunteering capacity within the Model.

## **8. Options for Future Delivery of the Core Components of the comprehensive Service Model**

7.12. Barnardo's NI would agree that the most feasible model presented is that of option 3, however we still have a number reservations and questions about this option. The work with S/UASC is extremely sensitive, time consuming and specialised and requires committed social workers who have a genuine interest and passion to work with this service user group. The questions we have are detailed below:

- Will the regional SW become an additional SW whom each child will be required to meet and then be required to end their involvement with within 3 months?
- Or, does the regional SW team effectively become the Gateway service for S/UASC; if not when does the regional SW team take on responsibility for the child?
- How will the regional SW team sit within the current system (Gateway, transfer directly to regional team)?
- How will the new regional team ensure equity of service and a similar standard of service for all S/UASC with regards to the current disparity of process and application of guidance between different Trusts?
- How much weight will the regional team have with regards to their capacity to direct Trusts in their service provision for S/UASC? Will individual Trusts continue to take individual decisions as they currently do with different aspects of S/UASC care (that are not always culturally or trauma informed)?
- Is there potential for overlap/duplication of role between the Regional SW team and IGS given that both will have an oversight role? The creation of a new Regional SW team adds additional responsibilities to the IGS in their oversight role.

## **9. Barnardo's NI's Preferred Model**

7.13. Barnardo's NI believe that this consultation provides an excellent opportunity to suggest an optimal Regional SW model of practice. From Barnardo's NI's perspective, we believe that an optimal model would take the form of a combination of both option 2 and option 3. Barnardo's NI would recommend a single Trust model to support consistency of practice and prevent potential conflict within a dual Trust approach.

7.14. Barnardo's NI believes that S/UAS children and young people would benefit greatly from having one consistent social worker who would hold case

responsibility for the child from the beginning of their time in NI until they exit the care system. We envisage that this SW would get to know the child well, their story and their needs, which would prevent the child from having to repeat their story with multiple SW's and would provide consistent oversight/support to the child throughout potentially numerous legal processes. This SW would hold the key knowledge and understanding of these processes and the child, rather than the child potentially having to re-educate numerous SW's as is currently the case given the turnover of statutory SW's and case responsibility changing across different teams within Trusts.

- 7.15. Barnardo's NI understands that such a model may appear more expensive on paper but in the long term may become more cost effective. We would envisage the spokes of option 3 remaining in place with regards to ringfencing accommodation resources in each Trust and would suggest the potential of each Trust committing to provide one additional SW or the resources for same in addition to the resources outlined in section 8.2.

For further information, please contact:

**Cecilia Milburn**

Assistant Director, Children's Services  
Barnardo's NI  
[cecilia.milburn@barnardos.org.uk](mailto:cecilia.milburn@barnardos.org.uk)

**James Devine**

Children's Services Manager, Independent Guardian Service  
Barnardo's NI  
[james.devine@barnardos.org.uk](mailto:james.devine@barnardos.org.uk)