

**Barnardo's NI response to the OFMDFM Consultation on
'A Sense of Belonging: Delivering Social Change through a Racial
Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland 2014 – 2024'**

Introduction

Barnardo's NI is the largest children's charity in Northern Ireland. We work with almost 11,000 children, young people and families in more than 40 different services and programmes, and in over 200 schools. Our services range from work with looked after children and disabled young people to early intervention programmes and family support. Reflecting the significant demographic changes linked to an increasing migrant population over the last decade in Northern Ireland, we are also working with larger numbers of children and families from ethnic minority communities.

Through our service delivery and associated research we identify key issues impacting on children, young people and families. In turn we progress the evidence-base and learning to usefully influence change at both a policy and practice level. For example, we have recently published research highlighting the particular childcare needs of ethnic minority communities¹, and are currently investigating the views and experiences of newcomer pupils².

In addition to direct consultation and research with service users, we regularly engage with Barnardo's NI staff to discuss key policy issues. Our following response to the OFMDFM consultation on a new Racial Equality Strategy has also been informed by discussion with several senior practitioners working across a range of Barnardo's NI support services.

¹ Kernaghan, D (2014) *Believe in childcare? The childcare needs of ethnic minority communities in Northern Ireland*. Barnardo's NI and NICEM, Belfast.

² Publication pending.

Key points and recommendations

Barnardo's NI welcomes the OFMDFM consultation on a new Racial Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland. In our view its publication is long overdue considering the previous Strategy expired in 2010, and the significant demographic changes that have taken place here in recent years. In parallel there has been a concerning rise in racist incidents experienced by ethnic minorities here, further emphasising the need for a robust policy response and strong leadership.

Indeed some ethnic minority children and families accessing our services have been subject to racist bullying in their local communities and occasionally physical attacks on themselves and/or their property. A vulnerable young person we are currently working with for example has experienced racist abuse and also criminal damage to their home. Barnardo's NI has expressed concern in the past at decisions to house ethnic minority families in areas in which racist attacks are prevalent³. We suggest that actions relating to housing policy/inequality are included within the six shared aims of the Racial Equality Strategy.

While Barnardo's NI broadly agrees with the six shared aims of the Strategy, we believe in its current format the Strategy cannot ensure equality of service provision or effectively tackle racial inequalities, racism and hate crime. ***The Strategy must be urgently reviewed to take account of the following critical, underpinning components that we recommend are necessary to help ensure it succeeds in its aim to deliver racial equality:***

Stronger evidence base and comprehensive assessment of racial inequalities: The Strategy is significantly weakened by the absence of relevant population data, up to date research and evidence on racial inequalities in NI such as housing, education, employment, health and as experienced by particular ethnic groups. Other key areas including poverty, disability, childcare and zero-hours contracts should also be given due consideration.

³ McGovern, J; Meas, W; Webb M A (2011) *Supporting refugee and asylum seeking families living in Northern Ireland*. Barnardo's NI, Belfast.

It is important to note that current systems / census data for monitoring ethnic demography do not disaggregate on key white minority communities (e.g. Polish and Lithuanian) who account for a significant proportion of the ethnic minority population. Addressing this misleading data gap should therefore be prioritised in order to provide an accurate picture of ethnic diversity in Northern Ireland. While Barnardo's NI welcomes the commitment to ethnic monitoring in the Strategy it still needs to be made clear how this will be utilised. In order to ensure meaningful and consistent practice, we further recommend that ethnic monitoring is a mandatory requirement for all Departments.

Commitment to legislative reform: Despite a unanimous motion passed by the NI Assembly in 2009 to reform the outdated Race Relations (NI) Order 1997 (and recommendations to do so in the previous Strategy and by the Equality Commission for NI) this has still not been progressed. Barnardo's NI believes the Racial Equality Strategy needs to be strengthened by an explicit, timetabled commitment to legislative reform. This is essential to ensure ethnic minorities in Northern Ireland have better legal protection equivalent to Great Britain against racial discrimination and harassment.

Accountability and governance mechanisms: The First Minister and Deputy First Minister, assisted by the two Junior Ministers, have responsibility for equality and good relations issues, including the Racial Equality Strategy. There is some differentiation in the accountability arrangements for Together Building a United Community (TBUC) and the Racial Equality Strategy which requires clarification. In our view the Racial Equality Panel which will oversee the detailed work on the Strategy's implementation should also be jointly chaired by the two Junior Ministers to ensure high level accountability and governance.

Production of a time-bound, suitably resourced and cross-departmental action plan with key outcomes: It is disappointing that after such a long time in development the Racial Equality Strategy was published without an associated cross-departmental action plan. In our view this omission is a serious flaw which renders the Strategy unfit for purpose. Without new resources, a timetable and clear targets it is difficult to understand how the six core aims of the Strategy can be fully and effectively implemented.

Taking the key aim of '**equality of service provision**' as one example, it is unclear from the Strategy how equality of opportunity in accessing and benefiting from all public services will be achieved by ethnic minorities. There is also no detail about how any barriers which prevent this access will be removed, for example:

- **Language barriers / limited access to interpreters**

Many of the ethnic minority families coming into contact with Barnardo's NI services are incredibly isolated, and this is further compounded in cases where they have limited or no English and/or where they have no recourse to public funds. We are increasingly working with families for whom language is a significant barrier to accessing a wide range of vital support services, most notably due to difficulties securing an interpreter,

"...the only people that get access to that is children on the child protection register. But if you want to intervene and provide further support, that is very difficult and translators are not available. It is as simple as that." (Barnardo's NI Senior Practitioner)

"...just even to access any support services, anything, they really need a translator with them and social services won't fund that. We also have a lot of families who seem to be falling between the cracks really...It is a trust thing too for those communities but how do you actually get into those families and those communities to help them. When there is maybe a lack of understanding about why you are there, what you are doing and a lack of trust. But then you can't have a common language to do that type of support work and the interpreters aren't funded for it." (Barnardo's NI Senior Practitioner)

Difficulties in accessing suitable translation can also put additional pressures on services,

"...there is quite a few families now, I mean a few years ago we weren't working with interpreters very much at all, and now it is daily. Daily. And we need a lot of help I think in terms of training for that.....it has put a lot of pressure on practitioners the last few years in terms of using translators, even to do work with the family could take double the amount of time when everything you do needs to be translated. We have had lots of issues even with documents, policies, procedures, reports, all that type of stuff, in terms with those being translated...." (Barnardo's NI Senior Practitioner)

Language barriers can also present problems within the education system, both in service delivery and effective participation. The rapid increase in the ethnic

and cultural diversity of the population in Northern Ireland has led to significant numbers of 'newcomer' pupils in schools. Failure to adequately support their language needs will likely lead to social exclusion and underachievement in education. Barnardo's NI recommends there is greater tailored support for their English in an environment that also supports the home language and develops newcomer pupils' communicative confidence. More work needs to be undertaken to gain greater understanding of the types of arrangements schools make for newcomer pupils and to identify barriers that teachers may face in accessing support.

- **Lack of childcare**

Problems accessing childcare services are compounded for ethnic minority parents who work non-traditional hours and lack extended family support and information about systems and services. In Barnardo's NI recent research on the childcare needs of ethnic minority communities, participants highlighted the short notice period given to work as a particularly frustrating aspect of zero-hours contracts⁴. Many felt that their lack of ability to make suitable childcare arrangements at short notice was a barrier to accepting employment or gaining additional hours which in turn impacted on the family's income.

- **Asylum**

Barnardo's NI is concerned that prolonged delays in an individual's refugee status can also create barriers to employment, housing and financial services, leaving those affected vulnerable to poverty and exploitation. For example, a young adult currently engaged with one of our services has been living and volunteering in NI for several years but is unable to take up paid employment, still being without a national insurance number.

While the Strategy correctly acknowledges the need for a smoother transition between being an asylum seeker and a refugee, we are unconvinced that another, separate Refugee Integration Strategy is appropriate and will only serve to further delay any action being taken. We suggest that this is addressed within a Strategy Action Plan, and also that consideration is given to a recommendation made by the NI Council for Ethnic Minorities (NICEM) that a Thematic Working

⁴ Op cit n.1

Group under the Racial Equality Panel is established to produce a programme of action relating to this particularly vulnerable group.

Other

Good practice: Given the range of programmes and initiatives resourced by the Minority Ethnic Development Fund (MEDF) for more than ten years, we were surprised and disappointed that the Strategy was not informed by and did not highlight any good practice. In our view this was a missed opportunity and we would recommend that the revised Strategy incorporate learning from the various projects.

Seventh shared aim: Barnardo's NI is unconvinced that the right to maintain one's cultural identity needs a separate aim and could be usefully addressed within the existing framework, e.g. Aims 4 and 5. On the specific point of female genital mutilation (FGM) however it is our view that the Strategy should specifically advocate against and outline measures to tackle forced marriage, 'honour' based violence and FGM; particularly given these are all unlawful activities and practices often perpetrated against children.

Conclusion

The Racial Equality Strategy should be strengthened by greater emphasis on and evidence about the positive social and economic contributions made by ethnic minority communities in Northern Ireland. Backed up by necessary legal reforms, Barnardo's NI believes there also needs to be stronger leadership from the NI Executive and local councils to tackle racism and hostility towards ethnic minority communities, challenge immigration myths and actively promote social cohesion. It is notable that the wider policy framework remains focused on the traditional two communities in NI and in our view needs to more strongly consider race relations across the range of Strategies.

Barnardo's NI is concerned that the absence of critical components such as an adequate assessment of racial inequalities and a targeted action plan will lead to a lengthy review and edit of the draft Strategy resulting in further delays in its implementation. Following completion of this consultation phase we strongly recommend urgent revision and publication of the final Strategy with an

associated cross-departmental action plan that moves beyond simply listing what Departments are already doing. Action planning should be clearly aligned with the Programme for Government and allocation of Departmental budgets, and the Strategy/Action Plan should be subject to regular monitoring and evaluation.

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