

**Barnardo's NI Response to the
Children and Young People's Strategy (2017-2027)
March 2017**

Barnardo's NI is the largest children's charity in Northern Ireland. We work with almost 11,000 children, young people and families across more than 40 different services and programmes and in over 200 schools. We provide a wide range of services, from working with disabled children, minority ethnic families, looked after children and care leavers, to offering family support and early intervention. We believe that every child deserves the best possible start in life, and our service provision reflects that philosophy.

Barnardo's NI welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Children and Young People's Strategy (2017-2027). Our comments are informed by our extensive experience of working with children and families in Northern Ireland, particularly those who are marginalised and by a series of consultation sessions we carried out with children and young people on the request of the Department of Education. We recognise and commend the enormous work that has taken place to produce this strategy. Adopting an outcomes focused, evidence informed and child rights based approach will inform and influence all forthcoming strategies relating to children and young people. We acknowledge however considerable work remains in identifying suitable indicators to measure where the greatest effort is needed to fulfil the unrelenting challenge to ensure that all children have the opportunities to achieve their true potential. We contend that to give all children and young people the best start in life will require the effective implementation of the Children's Services Co-operation Act (CSCA).

Key points Barnardo's NI wishes to highlight are below

Proposed key principles

We welcome the strategy's proposed key principles and in particular the commitment to co-design and partnership both of which will require working alongside the community and voluntary sector. In addition the guiding principles focused on prevention and early intervention, participation, rights-based and evidence informed are all very welcome approaches.

Within the principle of age appropriate actions we welcome the recognition that children and young people are not a homogenous group, but rather individuals with diverse views, voices and needs however whilst age is important there are other factors to be considered.

We welcome the principle that the strategy will be subject to regular review particularly in light of our changing society. For example the term social media was not coined when the first strategy was written. Again we believe the

community and voluntary sector along with children and young people can make an invaluable contribution in their stakeholder roles by providing meaningful feedback which can achieve impact for children and young people.

We welcome the eight outcomes and the children and young people we consulted with, concur on this. However within the outcome areas there is a discrepancy between what is identified as 'where the greatest effort is needed' and the corresponding indicators to measure any resulting change. We would urge that the indicators are more reflective of the scope of the outcomes.

Proposed new structures

We are concerned that the proposed structure will fail to reflect the energy needed to implement this innovative strategy. We recommend that the department explore international best practice to devise a new structure that is fit for purpose and capable of implementing and scrutinising this strategy.

- We believe community and voluntary sector organisations like Barnardo's should be represented on the Strategy Group and the Stakeholder Forum
- To allow for true engagement and partnership we recommend the Stakeholder Forum meets more regularly than the proposed once a year
- We welcome the continued commitment to engage with children and young people, particularly those who are marginalised, 'harder to reach' and 'seldom heard'. It is critical the mechanisms are put in place to ensure they can meaningfully inform the ongoing co-design process.
- We welcome the inclusion of parents in the model and we urge the department to consider the use of digital technology to promote engagement with parents and children and young people.

Proposed outcomes to improve well-being

Children and young people are physically and mentally healthy

We welcome the extension of the 'health' outcome to specifically recognise physical and mental health and wellbeing.

Children and young people with disabilities We welcome the recognition that children and young people with disabilities require extra effort to ensure they are given the same opportunities to achieve in education, have time and space to play, are listened to, and have their rights respected. Other positive developments include recognising the supporting role of families and committing to ensuring the same quality of care opportunities are provided to children and young people with disabilities.

Children and young people with mental health problems We welcome the strategy's sentiment '*to ensure all children and young people who are suffering from mental health problems ...have access to appropriate and timely health care services and feel reassured to seek help and support without fear of being stigmatised, ignored or mistreated*'. Adolescents receive specific mention but we urge that it is recognised that the onset of mental ill-health often happens in

primary school. In our consultation, children and young people were unequivocal that bullying, the pressure of school and home life necessitated additional support, the Barnardo's Time4Me schools counselling service was highly regarded by the consultees. We see a role for educators to normalise discussions about mental health, by embedding mental and emotional health and wellbeing in the school curriculum. We believe the most effective way to prevent the onset of mental ill-health and wellbeing is through early intervention, as Barnardo's NI schools counselling research has shown (See In Focus, Time4Me, 2016). We urge that primary school children are given access to non-stigmatising mental health support.

CAMHS Despite the explicit inclusion of mental health in the first outcome the strategy does not refer to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). A huge concern for young people, their parents and practitioners attending CAMHS is that it is significantly different to Adult Mental Health (AMH) services and the transition can be extremely challenging. CAMHS offers a diverse range of services while AMH services focus on addressing patients who are experiencing severe and enduring mental illness. Not all young people experiencing emotional health and wellbeing issues have a diagnosable mental health illness that meets the thresholds for AMH services, but many require a continuing service. We recommend extending CAMHS (or a suitable alternative) to age 25 to respond to the needs of young people who do not meet adult mental health thresholds but require ongoing mental health services post 18 years.

Infants We welcome also the emphasis on infants generally and more specifically their mental health, which is a contributing factor to school readiness and their development in the immediate pre-school year. We suggest consideration be given to the Five to Thrive framework which seeks to enhance awareness of the building blocks for healthy brain development in babies – Respond, Cuddle, Relax, Play, Talk.

Role of parents The strategy recognises the important role of parents and guardians in children and young people's lives, a sentiment that was reiterated in our consultation with children and young people. Each of the sections titled 'what needs to be done?' sets out expectations of parents. It is important that parents and guardians are a key lynchpin within this strategy because they have considerable ability to influence and guide children and young people. Oftentimes they too need support.

Integrated mental health approach From at least the age of five a considerable proportion of children and young people's days, weeks and years are spent in school. Our consultation spelt out the influence of school on their lives. Many of their school-related issues were less concerned about learning and achieving and more about feeling safe, feeling confident within themselves, being valued and treated fairly by teachers and peers. We believe an effective and measurable way to support emotional health and wellbeing is to embed mental health support in both the community and the education system, offering a tiered approach of support to children and families. In practice an integrated emotional support system located in the school or community would identify

issues, engage parents and provide early intervention to those suffering any level of distress and prevent the development of poor mental health by equipping children with the resilience skills to cope with pressures that they may face in their school day.

We are disappointed that no mental health indicator(s) for children under 16 has been included. We recommend an indicator is identified to measure self-confidence and resilience throughout the child's development to examine improving or otherwise emotional health and wellbeing of all children for the purpose of improving their outcomes in life.

Children and young people enjoy play and leisure

We welcome the addition of the enjoyment of play and leisure as an outcome and the recognition that *it makes a positive contribution to the mental, emotional, social and physical well-being of children and young people*. CSCA has given play and leisure a statutory footing. Although play and leisure is fundamental for all children and young people, it is often taken for granted or is not a priority for children themselves, for example children and young people who may spend long periods of time in hospital or juvenile justice centres.

Children and young people living with multiple and complex needs for example those who are care experience face particular challenges preventing them from playing, which are compounded if they have a disability and/or are newcomers or are experiencing other disadvantages. They need opportunities, the space and resources to engage in social activities and age appropriate leisure or rest activities to build their confidence and social skills and to be better prepared and equipped with the skills required to be independent adults. We are concerned too for the play needs of children and young people living in rural areas who are more inclined to experience isolation and not have the same opportunities as those living in urban areas. The uncertain future of the youth service is problematic given the invaluable avenue for play and leisure provided by youth centres, particularly for older children.

To help ensure children can enjoy and play and leisure we recommend planners look to the Scandinavian countries and learn from their very best practice. Consideration should be given to exploring the viability of the steps taken in Wales (see "Wales - a Play Friendly Country"), which is the updated statutory guidance for local authorities on assessing for and securing sufficient play opportunities for children in their areas as set out by Welsh Play Sufficiency Assessment (2012).

Children and young people learn and achieve

We welcome the recognition that *'the care and education environment is not solely about academic achievement'*. This was borne out in our consultation with children and young people who felt pressured by the often excessive focus on grades. We concur with the sentiment that children and young people who enjoy care and education will perform better. Over the past number of years Barnardo's NI has developed evidence of effective programmes contributing to the achievement of better outcomes for children and young people (see All

Stars, LifeSkills, Incredible Years Policy and Practice Briefing Papers). We are however concerned there is no indicator contained within the strategy to measure primary aged children's learning and achievement. In addition to tracking academic attainment we urge exploration of the viability of using emotional health and well-being measures for example Kidscreen, Locus of Control or other widely used instruments to help gauge pupils emotional well-being. Children and young people told us that they would welcome online surveys.

Not in education, training and employment (NEET) is a major issue for a percentage of young people and reflects how our systems are failing young people. A large percentage of NEET are care experienced. We recommend corporate parents and (in the case NEET but not care experienced) departments should collaborate to reduce the financial barriers and obstacles young people face in engaging in and sustaining pathways into employment.

Children and young people live in safety and security

In our consultation with children and young people safety and security was an important issue. Homelessness was a devastating reality that many found difficult to come to terms with. Consultees found the suggestion to measure 16/17 year olds presenting as homeless as not good enough given that this age range constitutes a very small number of children and young people.

We recommend steps are taken to improve data collection and data sharing between relevant government departments, statutory bodies and community and voluntary sector organisations to better understand the challenges faced by marginalised young people including those who are care experienced, children affected by parental imprisonment and in contact with the juvenile justice system.

Care experienced young people We are particularly concerned about care experienced young people transitioning into independent accommodation. We recommend care leavers are encouraged, enabled and empowered to remain in positive care settings until they are ready to leave up to the age of 25. When they leave they have access to a range and choice of appropriate accommodation, housing and support based on their unique needs and circumstances. We urge corporate parents to support care leavers to maintain long term housing stability.

Internet safety We welcome the recognition of internet safety being included as an issue needing greatest effort however we urge that the steps are taken to measure the impact of social media and technology on children and young people's lives. Technology is a cross-cutting theme that impacts on many of the other outcomes including learning, play and leisure and mental health.

Child Sexual Exploitation As recognised within the strategy, CSE remains a priority for the Executive. Alongside the full implementation of the accepted recommendations of the Marshall Report (2014) within the agreed timeframes our Children's Charter (2016) also recommended a preventative approach to CSE which specifically includes awareness raising in education, youth, community and health settings. For the purposes of measuring the extent of CSE

we recommend a regular review of current risk monitoring and other arrangements in Northern Ireland for collecting and sharing data on runaway children and those who go missing from care.

Children experiencing neglect or domestic violence We draw attention to the area of Hidden Harm that is children and young people who are living in families affected by parental alcohol and substance misuse. This group's experience of harm is often hidden, or if seen, is not recognised as harm. It has been estimated that 40,000 children in Northern Ireland are affected by parental substance misuse whilst 40 per cent of children on the child protection register and 70 per cent of children who are 'looked after' are there as a direct result of parental substance misuse (See PHA/HSCB Hidden Harm Action Plan, 2009). Children living in these families have their physical and emotional health, development, education, safety, stability, general life opportunities and their potential, severely compromised. Hidden Harm like so many other vulnerable groups cuts across the outcomes areas of physical and mental health, safety and stability, enjoyment of play and leisure, learning and achievement etc. The New Strategic Direction (NSD) for Alcohol and Drugs Phase 2 (2011-2016), which included Hidden Harm was a welcome development. The subsequent disbandment of the Regional Hidden Harm Implementation Group and the associated Local Hidden Harm Implementation Forums has not helped the plight of this vulnerable group. We recommend Hidden Harm is prioritised as a vulnerable group alongside other named groups within the new strategy and urge its prioritisation in future policy development and implementation.

In addition, we recommend that an indicator is introduced to measure the number of children and young people experiencing neglect or abuse. One of the measures which could be used is a percentage reduction or increase in the incidences of neglect on the Child Protection Register. As our Children's Charter outlines, "neglect is one of the most prevalent forms of harm recorded on the Child Protection Register in Northern Ireland. Frequently leading to long-term physical, psychological, behavioural and societal consequences, neglect often occurs alongside other forms of abuse and is a predominant feature in families experiencing multiple adversities" (Barnardo's NI and NSPCC NI Children's Charter, May 2016, page 7).

Children and young people experience economic and environmental wellbeing

We welcome the commitment to '*protect children and young people from the worst effects of poverty and to provide them with the life skills they need to ensure they are economically active in adulthood*'. In our consultation with children and young people the impact of societal inequalities and the need to have financial well-being were high on the agenda. The unseen cost of education and subsequent missed opportunities were difficult realities that the consultees grappled with.

We welcome the recognition of the important role of childcare both from an economic and child development perspective. We urge that the final childcare strategy is published and implemented as a matter of urgency. Again childcare is

a cross-cutting theme, which has to accommodate diverse needs for example Barnardo's NI Family Learning Integration Project in South Belfast is finding that newcomers often lack information and are unaware of services and how systems work. Children and young people with disabilities and their families are another example of a group requiring additional support.

Living in rural areas We know from our services that children living in rural areas are experiencing isolation and poverty including poverty of experience. Little or no access to transport is contributing to their inability to access health services and leisure opportunities, all of which was borne out in our consultation. Sub-standard internet and broadband access is another contributing factor to their sense of isolation and disadvantage with possible repercussions for learning and achievement.

Children and young people make a positive contribution to society

We welcome the commitment to listen and resource engagement and participation with a wide range of children and young people. The department through this process has shown that it is relatively easy to hear the views of "seldom heard voices" including care experienced children and young people, young carers, children who are bereaved etc. However the likely reality is that very few children and young people will have responded to this consultation. We know too from our consultation that they have very articulate viewpoints, supported by practical suggestions that could make a real difference to many lives. Children and young people told us they welcomed surveys and government representatives meeting with them on a regular basis to hear their views. The Kids Life and Times was also viewed as a useful mechanism.

Beyond parents and guardians who are willing to listen to children and young people, their voices are seldom heard. We recommend that the department commit to continuing its engagement with children and young people on all matters affecting them, particularly those who are "hard to reach" and "seldom heard". This includes those who are care experienced, disabled, newcomers, NEET, children affected by parental imprisonment and those in the youth justice system. More critically we recommend that children and young people's views are respected and given due consideration in decision-making processes. We anticipate the CSCA will be an avenue for all government departments to evidence how they are listening and responding to children and young people.

Children and young people live in a society which respects their rights

We welcome the underpinning themes of the UNCRC throughout the strategy and this particular outcome's emphasis on groups recognised as requiring greatest effort. In our consultation all of the identified groups were discussed implicitly as rights holders but also as those most in need of equality and equal opportunity.

However in our consultation it was concerning how few had heard of the UNCRC. With a greater understanding of the convention it is conceivable that children and young people will better understand the unique challenges faced by for example young carers, those with disabilities, hidden harm, newcomer children

and many others. More probably it is adults who need to understand these challenges and recognise their role as duty bearers. Research and policy briefings published by Barnardo's NI over a number of years highlight many issues faced by various groups including newcomer families, sexual exploitation, autism as well as programmes impacting on child behaviour, school readiness and life skills amongst others.

Going forward we recommend introducing necessary and protected budgetary measures for the most vulnerable children and young people including but not limited to looked after children, care leavers, children affected by parental imprisonment, child sexual exploitation, refugees, children in the youth justice system and those living in poverty and experiencing multiple adversities. Extending age discrimination beyond 16 years will help to cement young people's stake in society.

Children and young people live in a society in which equality of opportunity and good relations are promoted

In our consultation equality of opportunity and good relations was discussed at length, particularly the various forms of discrimination. Consultees were unequivocal that being treated equally was a fundamental aspect of their lives.

Northern Ireland is approaching 25 years of existing as a post-conflict society and although the legacy of the troubles and the aftermath of segregation will continue there is an onus on all government departments to extend their outlook to encompassing others for example newcomers, traveller children, LGBT sexual orientation and all who are treated differently because of their circumstances. Shared space and promoting greater integration are critical leavers to eliminating the implicit and sometimes explicit prejudices that exist amongst children. No young person today in Northern Ireland has experienced the troubles, any prejudice they express is learned. In our consultation the benefits of a common education system was highlighted but so too was the need to teach about other religions and to stop associating some sports with a religious background.

Our consultation demonstrated how children ranging from eight to eighteen years have very articulate viewpoints. We welcome the recognition that children and young people '*should not feel they are treated unfairly due to their age...*' however to ensure they are given an equal stake in society reflective of their evolving capacities we recommend enacting age discrimination legislation (Goods, Facilities and Services) within the lifetime of this strategy.

Long lasting outcomes and moving forward

We believe a key component in determining the performance and impact of this strategy will be its ability to work with the community and voluntary sector and to gather feedback and collect data from children and young people on a regular basis. Without knowing their views and perspectives, as well as gauging the knowledge of practitioners it is not possible to know the direction of travel of the outcomes and the strategy. We look forward to the publication of the strategy's implementation plan and welcome the opportunity to comment on the content.

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