

Barnardo's NI Consultation Response

Delivering Social Change for Children and Young People

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 BME children and families to early intervention programmes and family support.

Through our service delivery we identify key issues impacting on children, young people and families. In turn we progress the evidence-base and learning from our direct work to usefully influence change at both a policy and practice level.

Background

Barnardo's NI provided detailed feedback on 'Delivering Social Change for Children and Young People' at a recent consultation event hosted by the All Party Group on Children and Young People at Parliament Buildings, Stormont. Our views were incorporated through contributions made by several staff across Barnardo's NI Senior Management, Children's Services and Policy teams on all the core

components of the document. Having already participated in the consultation process, for the purpose of this response we will therefore provide a short overview of Barnardo's NI key, over-arching comments.

Delivering Social Change (DSC) Consultation

We regularly consult children, young people and parents using Barnardo's NI services to inform the range of policy responses we make on key issues affecting their lives. Unfortunately, the DSC consultation process did not allow appropriate time in which to organise and facilitate any meaningful discussions with service users, either within the initial timeframe or the six week period remaining after the extension was announced.

While we appreciate that the consultation period was eventually extended from five to ten weeks, the overall timeframe still falls short of the twelve weeks good practice recommended in guidance issued by the Equality Commission for implementing Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Furthermore, standards in the Ask First principles to help ensure children's participation in public decision making, and endorsed by OFMDFM, are underpinned and informed by Section 75 and the UNCRC. Taking these factors into account Barnardo's NI is concerned therefore about the unduly short consultation period and also the generally haphazard approach taken to consulting children and young people.

The latter is particularly illustrated by failure to simultaneously publish a child friendly version of the document; the late notice / process for

consultation work with children and young people; and the very poor standard of questions in the children's version. While Barnardo's NI welcomes attempts by OFMDFM to produce age appropriate consultation materials, it is disappointing these were let down by questions which are unlikely to generate any meaningful data to usefully inform policy development.

Barnardo's NI believes the manner in which the consultation has been undertaken significantly impacts on children's ability to participate in policy making effectively. We recommend OFMDFM urgently reviews its processes for all future public consultations, particularly with children and young people, and would welcome further discussion on this.

Policy Framework

Barnardo's NI commends the NI Executive's goal of creating a comprehensive delivery framework to co-ordinate work on priority social policy areas across government departments. However in our view the proposed integrated policy framework drawing together the Child Poverty Strategy, the Ten Year Children's Strategy and UNCRC obligations has diluted those policy areas and is flawed for a number of key reasons:

- **Child Poverty**

Barnardo's NI is concerned this policy document which incorporates the Child Poverty Strategy does not specifically address how child poverty will be eradicated at a local level. It is very clear that the 2020 statutory targets to end child poverty will be missed by a long way and

that a serious response is required. Evidence suggests that austerity measures and a low-wage economy will continue to impact on child poverty in Northern Ireland, which is predicted to increase significantly. According to the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) by 2020-21¹ it is estimated that Relative Child Poverty and Absolute Child Poverty will rise to 30.9% and 38.5% respectively.

The rise in working households within child poverty figures is of particular concern, especially as employment is commonly cited by government as the most effective route out of poverty. Unfortunately there are no actions in the document to deal with in-work poverty and the high levels of economic inactivity in Northern Ireland. As families face increasing financial pressures and their children are at greater risk of social disadvantage, a targeted and joined up policy response has never been more essential.

Furthermore, to effectively address child poverty there needs to be much greater emphasis on tackling the underlying issues behind it. While Barnardo's warmly welcomes the Signature Projects, funding for these is time-limited and short-term in nature. Most of the families we work with have complex, multiple needs for which longer term investment is required.

▪ **Outcomes and Indicators**

The DSC document does not effectively address the needs of **all** children and young people. Considerable time and investment has gone into developing the Ten Year Strategy for Children and Young

¹Institute for Fiscal Studies (2014) Child and working-age poverty in Northern Ireland over the next decade: an update. IFS Briefing Note BN144. OFDMFM / ESRC.

People and its six High Level Outcomes; it is unclear therefore why its inclusive and targeted approach is being undermined by the DSC document which, while intending to direct resources where they are most needed, is much more narrow in focus and also excludes the specific needs of some vulnerable and marginalised groups, for example, disabled children.

The use of evidence and indicators to inform programming and spending is limited, inconsistent and unlikely to offer an adequate measurement of progress against outcomes. As well as within the Ten Year Children's Strategy there has been real commitment in recent years to building an outcomes based approach across the voluntary and community sector; this is particularly evident in the Outcomes Based Accountability (OBA) approach of the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership (CYPSP). However the DSC document disregards the effective and experienced system already in place within the CYPSP to deliver joined-up planning and commissioning of supports and services for children and young people. Barnardo's NI is currently represented at various levels of the Children's Services Planning process, including the CYPSP, as well as a number of Regional Sub-groups, Outcome Groups and Locality Groups. Given the extensive work being undertaken and the knowledge base behind it, we are very surprised that this has not been built upon by the DSC policy and concerned at the evident lack of connectedness.

While we broadly welcome the key first actions outlined in this document, overall they are limited and do not go far enough in order to improve outcomes for **all** children. The following two examples illustrate this point:

Outcome 1 Families have adequate income and work that pays

We agree with the need to provide additional places for school-age childcare; however this does not go far enough in addressing Northern Ireland's inadequate childcare infrastructure. The urgent need for good quality, affordable childcare at a local level in Northern Ireland has been well documented. Problems accessing childcare are compounded for black and minority ethnic (BME) parents who are often socially isolated, work non-traditional hours and lack extended family support and information about systems and services. Barnardo's NI recently published research on the childcare needs of BME families in Northern Ireland which showed that many had difficulty accessing childcare outside traditional working hours.²

Participants highlighted the short notice period given to work as a particularly frustrating aspect of zero-hours contracts. 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. These issues are likely to be relevant to parents across the wider population given the increasing numbers of people employed on zero-hours contracts³. Barnardo's NI recommends that more work is undertaken on the development of additional, flexible and affordable childcare provision at a local level to meet the needs of parents working zero-hours contracts and/or atypical hours.

² Kernaghan, D (2014) *Believe in childcare? The childcare needs of ethnic minority communities in Northern Ireland*. Barnardo's NI and NICEM, Belfast.

³ For example, see House of Commons Library Standard Note SN/BT/6553 Zero-hours contracts, December 2013.

Barnardo's also recommends that in line with other UK regions the provision of childcare services in Northern Ireland should be on a statutory basis to ensure there is enough childcare to meet the needs of working parents in their local area. The success of Universal Credit here in meeting the Government's aim to make work pay will also depend on the level of childcare available. It is estimated that 30,000 extra childcare places would have to be provided in NI to have 70% of lone parents in employment (as targeted in the Welfare Reform Act).⁴

Under new government proposals working parents on low incomes who earn enough to pay income tax will receive 85% of their childcare costs. However, the lowest earning families for whom childcare costs present the biggest barrier to work are excluded from this support and will continue to receive the lower 70% subsidy. This will affect those more likely to work part time in low paid jobs or on zero-hours contracts, and falls far short of covering childcare costs for many of the poorest families.⁵

Outcome 2 Children in poverty achieve good educational outcomes

The sole focus of the education outcome appears to be on achieving good educational outcomes for children in poverty. While there are well documented inequalities in our education system, we believe this outcome should be related to **all** children and young people with targeted outcomes and positive actions for specific groups.

In recent years for example the rapid increase in the ethnic and cultural diversity of the population in Northern Ireland has led to a

⁴ Welfare Reform Group, Briefing for Social Development Committee, December 2011.

⁵ Barnardo's press release, 17 October 2013, accessed 6 February 2014.

steep rise in the number of languages spoken here; as a result some schools have experienced significant numbers of 'newcomer' pupils. 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. 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.

We also believe a broader range of indicators are needed within the education outcome rather than the simplistic primary indicator of 5 A*-C GCSE's, particularly to include a vocational equivalent. Barnardo's NI is actively involved in raising awareness about the needs of young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), many who work towards obtaining vocational qualifications rather than go down the traditional GSCE route.

Joined up working

Barnardo's NI believes that a collaborative, cross-departmental approach to issues affecting the lives of children and young people is critical in order to improve outcomes and minimise the need for crisis interventions. The DSC strategy has not delivered a truly joined up policy in relation to how departments work but also joint commissioning in a way which achieves the best outcomes. Without any statutory or legal obligation to cooperate early intervention and prevention work will not be effectively prioritised across government

departments and significantly limits the possibility of collaborative working.

Conclusion

Policy aimed at improving the lives of children in Northern Ireland should effectively address the needs of all children and young people, while also specifically targeting those experiencing poverty. Barnardo's NI is an active member of the Child Poverty Alliance (CPA) and as such supports the CPA's key recommendation that the NI Executive retains the Ten Year Children's Strategy and maximises the Six High Level Outcomes as the overarching framework into which the Child Poverty Strategy can be accommodated.

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