

Barnardo's NI
Consultation Response to the
Education Authority Equality Action Plan and Disability Action Plan
(2018-2022)
July 2018

Barnardo's NI is the largest children's charity in Northern Ireland. We work with approximately 14,000 children, young people and families across more than 50 different services and programmes and in over 200 schools. We provide a wide range of services¹, from providing family support and early intervention to working directly with children and young people in need of support. 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 draft Equality Action Plan and Disability Action Plan (2018-2022), following our earlier engagement on these plans at the Joint Consultative Forum in May 2018 and discussions with Education Authority colleagues. Our comments are informed by our experience of delivering a wide range of services and working with children, young people and families.

We welcome the publication of these action plans and their direction of travel. In particular, we welcome the commitment to supporting good emotional health and wellbeing, and the specific references to improving educational outcomes for children who are looked after; mental health and wellbeing and improving outcomes for care experienced children are amongst Barnardo's NI's strategic priorities, and we are encouraged to see these critical issues reflected in the action plans. Much of our work in schools relates to mental health, emotional wellbeing, academic engagement and resilience building. We would be happy to further engage with the Education Authority on these areas.

With regards to the **Equality Action Plan**, Barnardo's NI would like to highlight recommendations for three areas:

¹ A full list of Barnardo's NI services and programmes is available [here](#).

- 1) We are disappointed that the action plan makes no reference to **refugee and asylum seeking children**; we believe that this action plan provides an ideal opportunity to reflect and consider the changes in schools resulting from an increased number of refugee and asylum seeking children, including through the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme. This has an impact on the school community and this action plan is an opportunity to formally recognise that; further, there is a need to understand the equality challenges that these changes present and address those within the action plan.

Barnardo's NI works with refugee and asylum seeking children who have experienced significant trauma and disruption to their education, both through our Refugee Support Service as part of the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (VPRS) and through our work with unaccompanied or trafficked children through the Independent Guardian Service. For many of these children, war in their home country has caused real disruption to their education, with younger children who fled Syria to live in camps before coming to the UK often never having received formal education until their resettlement in Northern Ireland. Moreover, the traumatic experience of war, violent bereavement, refugee camps and/or trafficking can significantly impact the child's ability to engage with education later due to the effects of ongoing toxic stress. As one example, in our role supporting children arriving via the Syrian VPRS we have supported teenage boys, some as young as 13, who have witnessed the death of their father and have assumed a paternal role within the family. As well as dealing with that trauma, they have often been forced to find dangerous work to support their mother and siblings. These children arrive with the status of the head of the family and are treated as peers by other men rather than as children. Having had this role in addition to experiencing trauma and arriving in a new country, they are then expected to quickly transition to the school environment after a number of years of interruption to their education. This experience is very different from that of other 'newcomers', who are distinct from their peer group based primarily on their language skills only.

Whilst we welcome the commitment to access improved benchmarking against key outcomes for all Roma, Traveller and Newcomer children and young people in outcome 4.2, we recommend that the Equality Action Plan recognises the unique experience of children who are refugees, asylum seeking

children and/or have been trafficked, and that their needs will not necessarily be covered by the umbrella term 'newcomer'; there is therefore a need for the data to be broken down more thoroughly. Further, we recommend that the Education Authority commits to assessing the educational outcomes of these children and seeks to ensure these children receive holistic, child-centred support to ensure effective school integration and improved educational and emotional outcomes. In addition we recommend that, in line with outcome 4.3, research is also carried out into the needs of young people who are refugees to better understand their needs. We would be happy to work with the Education Authority to develop outcomes and actions in relation to refugee and asylum seeking children based on our service delivery experience.

- 2) We welcome the commitment to improve educational outcomes for **children who are looked after** (1.3). Whilst it is logical that this outcome is grouped under the section for 'Access to Education', it is important that this commitment is fully reflected across the entire action plan, particularly in sections 3 (Bullying) and 5 (Emotional Health and Wellbeing). We welcome the reference to improving emotional health and wellbeing outcomes for looked after children (5.1), but believe there is an opportunity to be more ambitious and seek to enhance and improve the support given to all looked after children, rather than "continue to support" those children "who are experiencing difficulties in school". To ensure looked after children have equality of opportunity in access to education and to achieving better academic and emotional outcomes, the impact of their adverse childhood experiences on their ability to engage with education must be understood and considered in the design of the 'support' referred to in 1.3 and 5.1. This should include thorough training for school staff as well as wraparound educational and emotional support for children who are looked after, many of whom will have experienced trauma, placement moves and educational disruption. In addition, we note that no timescale is given against 1.3 or 5.1, unlike that provided for other outcomes, and we recommend that this timescale is clarified and published. Barnardo's NI would be happy to engage further with the Education Authority on this issue.
- 3) As noted above, **mental health and emotional wellbeing** is a priority area for Barnardo's NI and we are pleased to see its prominence in the draft Equality Action Plan. We have a wide

portfolio of services supporting children, young people and families to protect and improve their emotional health and have significant experience of working with and in schools in this aspect, both in terms of directly delivering support to students and in building capacity amongst school staff. Given our experience of working in this area, we have a number of brief points to make in relation to how the action plan addresses emotional health and wellbeing:

- Emotional Support in School: We welcome the references to emotional support being provided to children, including following critical incidents (5.3). Barnardo's has significant experience of delivering counselling support in schools – including in primary schools, special schools and in instances of traumatic bereavement – and we recognise the clear benefits of such services. We recommend resource is committed to these outcomes to ensure consistent child-centred emotional support and counselling provision is accessible for all children who require it. Further, we recommend that all school staff are trained in trauma awareness and have an understanding of emotional health, and are equipped with the knowledge and confidence to refer children to appropriate services and support engagement.
- 3.1 Bullying: We welcome the commitment for schools to be better prepared and equipped to address all forms of bullying. We urge that the action plan recognises in the actions aligned to this outcome that bullying does not end at the school gate; the proliferation of social and digital media means that bullying is not confined to the school premises, and school staff must therefore be cognisant of the perpetuation of bullying in a child's life today. Recording processes and guidance must reflect this.
- 5.6/5.7 Resilience: We welcome the commitment to improving resilience and personal development outcomes for young people across mainstream schools and EOTAS centres. Much of the work we are engaged in within schools focuses on emotional wellbeing and resilience building, for example the LifeSkills programme which promotes resilience through the development of emotional literacy, critical thinking, problem solving, healthy relationships and strategies to prevent risk taking behaviours. Given the expertise

within the sector in relation to resilience and emotional wellbeing, we recommend that the Education Authority engages with the voluntary sector in the design of these personal development and resilience programmes. Again, Barnardo's NI would be keen to support the development of this work.

We also welcome the publication of the draft **Disability Action Plan**, however we feel it is overly focused on workforce development and employee support, and neglects child-centred outcomes. Whilst we do not disagree with the outcomes listed, we recommend that the action plan is revised to also include clear outcomes and actions to improve the educational outcomes, emotional wellbeing and equal opportunities for children and young people with a disability, including learning disabilities. This should also consider the school day experience of a child with a disability, and seek to engage children and young people with disabilities in the development of relevant outcomes and actions.

Barnardo's NI appreciates the opportunity to comment on the draft Equality and Disability Action Plans. We hope our comments are constructive and useful, and we would be happy to further discuss with the Education Authority any of the points we have made. We look forward to engaging with the Education Authority as these action plans develop.

For more information, please contact:

Julia Buchanan

Assistant Director, Policy

Barnardo's NI

Julia.buchanan@barnardos.org.uk