

Barnardo's NI

**Response to DUP pre-consultation paper on
'A New Future for Childcare in Northern Ireland'**

August 2019

Key points:

- Barnardo's NI believes childcare should be child-centred, affordable, accessible, flexible, and high quality.
- The early years of a child's life are of critical importance to their development and outcomes. Childcare should be child-centred and of high quality to meet the educational and developmental needs of children, supporting children to achieve their full potential.
- The availability, accessibility and flexibility of childcare is closely linked to preventing and mitigating the impacts of poverty and should be viewed as a key factor in eradicating child poverty. No child should experience poverty as a result of a parent's inability to access or stay in paid work or due to the high cost of childcare.

1. Background and Introduction

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 40 different services and programmes. We are also a leading provider of schools-based child support services in Northern Ireland with a presence in approximately 250 schools, reaching more than 12,000 children. We deliver a wide range of services across Northern Ireland, from providing family support and early intervention, to working directly with children and families who have experienced adversity and need our 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 provide input to the DUP's policy on childcare. We have a range of relevant service delivery experiences focused on promoting better outcomes through family support and early years support. This includes ABC PiP (Attachment, Bonding & Communication, Parent Infant Partnership), a strategic partnership between Barnardo's NI and the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust focusing on promoting good infant mental health, both by working directly with parents and training practitioners. We also have a varied portfolio of mental

and emotional health and wellbeing services, reflecting an ACEs (Adverse Childhood Experiences)-aware approach and trauma-informed practice ethos. Our comments below are informed by our experience of supporting children, young people and families and highlight the key elements we believe should be reflected in this childcare policy.

Barnardo's NI welcomes the consultation on developing a childcare policy for Northern Ireland. As a member of the [Childcare for All](#) coalition, Barnardo's NI advocates for a universal, child-centred childcare infrastructure that meets the needs of children, families, childcare workers and providers and benefits society. The Childcare for All campaign has developed a [Childcare for All Charter](#) setting out a vision of a childcare system that is child-centred, affordable, accessible, flexible, high quality, and which supports children's education and development, and recognises the value of childcare work.

2. Child-centred and high quality

Barnardo's NI believes it is crucial that childcare policy is child-centred. In relation to early years childcare, the ages of 0-3 years are a crucial time for cognitive, emotional and social development and warm, responsive caregivers are central to an infant's sense of safety. This relationship with caregivers helps children develop strong attachment, which in turn supports good infant mental health, child development and better outcomes¹.

In our early years services, we use the Five to Thrive² approach to promote good infant mental health and healthy brain development. We have also produced a booklet – [Promoting Good Infant Mental Health \(Information for Parents\)](#) – which provides practical advice for parents to support emotional wellbeing in 0-3 year olds and promote good infant mental health.

Childcare providers play a crucial role in these formative early years of a child's life and have an important role in supporting healthy child development through child-centred and high quality provision.

3. Accessible, affordable and flexible

Barnardo's NI believes that good quality childcare should be accessible and affordable to all families. The lack of affordable childcare has repeatedly been identified as a key factor in child poverty as it poses barriers to parents' employment options.

¹ For further information and evidence about the importance of early years in child development, see our 2018 report *Connections: Parenting Infants in a Digital World*, available [here](#).

² KCA Training: <https://fivetothrive.org.uk/>

Childcare must be accessible and responsive to the needs of parents, both in terms of location and hours of provision. Parents who live in rural locations often face difficulties accessing good quality childcare in a location accessible to them. Shift workers or those working in the night-time economy (for example: hospitality, emergency services, security staff), face similar challenges and need access to quality childcare outside the standard hours. In addition, our 2014 research, *Believe in Childcare*, explored the childcare needs of ethnic minority communities in Northern Ireland and highlighted the particular challenges and barriers to accessing childcare experienced by these communities³.

Childcare professionals also play a key role in ensuring consistent messages for parents and in delivering a consistent approach for children. Good quality, well-informed and affordable childcare will shape the social, emotional and cognitive development of our children. We have a responsibility to get it right for all children in order to give all children the best start in life.

Barnardo's NI welcomes the opportunity to respond to this pre-consultation. We would be keen to meet with the party to discuss this issue further, perhaps alongside other member organisations of the Childcare for All coalition, to support the further development of this policy and ensure that it reflects the needs of children and families.

For further information, please contact:

Trása Canavan

Policy & Research Officer

Barnardo's NI

trasa.canavan@barnardos.org.uk

Julia Buchanan

Assistant Director, Policy

Barnardo's NI

Julia.buchanan@barnardos.org.uk

³ Barnardo's NI and NICEM (2014) *Believe in Childcare? An investigation into the childcare needs of ethnic minority communities in Northern Ireland*, available [here](#).