

**Barnardo's NI Response to the  
Programme for Government 2016-21 & Delivery Plans  
December 2016**

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 Programme for Government and its associated delivery plans. Our comments are informed by our extensive experience of working with children and families in Northern Ireland, particularly those who are marginalised. This response is in addition to [our previous submission](#) to the consultation on the draft Programme for Government framework in summer 2016, and to the input we have provided at various Programme for Government policy engagement events throughout the summer and autumn. We urge that this response is read with reference to our previous submissions and comments on this Programme for Government.

Key points Barnardo's NI wishes to highlight are below:

- We welcome the dedicated outcome to children - 'Outcome 14: We give our children and young people the best start in life' – however, we recommend again that the wording is changed to read 'we give *all* children and young people the best start in life' in recognition of the barriers to better outcomes faced by marginalised groups, including newcomer children.
- We are concerned that the issue of childcare is largely absent from the Programme for Government. This is despite good quality childcare being a contributing factor to several of the Outcomes, including Outcomes 1, 3, 5, 6 and 14 by promoting child development (mental, emotional and physical) and by supporting working parents. We therefore recommend that

measurable indicators relating to the provision, accessibility and uptake of quality childcare are developed and used against these outcomes.

- As noted in our last response, we are concerned that the document places too much emphasis on educational achievement at level 2; we recommend that a more graduated measurement is put in place, capturing progress at various ages as well as more holistic emotional and social learning outcomes. To that end, we recommend an indicator is developed to measure self-confidence and resilience throughout the child's development, as a sign of the Executive's commitment to improving the emotional health and wellbeing of all children to improve their outcomes in life. We acknowledge that wellbeing underpins the Children and Young People's Strategy, but 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. We believe an effective and measurable way of supporting emotional health and wellbeing is by embedding mental health support in both the community and the education system, offering a tiered approach of support to children and families to identify issues, engage parents and provide early intervention to those suffering any level of distress and prevent the development of poor mental health, and to equip children with the resilience skills needed to cope with pressures they may face through the provision of programmes in schools. Further, the document rightly highlights how a range of factors, listed on page 164, can impact on a child's life chances; however, we recommend that 'mental health' is added to this list, as poor mental health in childhood can have lasting implications on the child's health and educational attainment; similarly, infant mental health should be considered within Indicator 15 as a key contributing factor to school readiness and development in the immediate pre-school year.
- We welcome the recognition of the particular needs of Looked After Children and care leavers, and recommend that Delivery Plans evolve with reference to the developing Looked After Children Strategy, the Children and Young People's Strategy and the forthcoming Childcare Strategy. Whilst the specific mention of this group of children and young people is to be welcomed, we are disappointed that other significant groups who are marginalised are not referenced; for example, children with a parent in prison, children affected by disability, or young carers.

We recommend that these unique groups are considered within this Outcome and the plan to identify and meet their needs captured within the Delivery Plans.

- We are disappointed to note the absence of any indicator in the Programme for Government to reduce child poverty, particularly given its focus on tackling the educational attainment gap between children from low income families and those from a relatively advantaged background. In our view, reducing child poverty is crucial to delivering on Outcome 14 and ensuring that all children have the best start in life. Whilst we appreciate that child poverty is noted in the background text to the Delivery Plans for Indicator 15, we believe this issue requires the focus and commitment of a dedicated indicator to promote real progress. We therefore recommend the inclusion of child poverty measures, including the collection and reporting of levels of child poverty for different age groups. Indicator 19, provided against Outcome 3 (% of population living in absolute and relative poverty - before housing costs), should also be expanded to include child poverty.
- Similarly, whilst we recognise there are references to neglect amongst the child-related Delivery Plans, we recommend that an additional indicator is introduced to reduce the number of children and young people experiencing neglect or abuse. One of the measurements which could be used for this indicator is a percentage reduction 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). We believe this is an important indicator against Outcomes 14 and 7, amongst other Outcomes, and also complements but does not duplicate other indicators: we therefore recommend it is added to the list of indicators.
- While Barnardo's NI welcomes to some extent the change in terminology from 'good' jobs to 'better' jobs in Outcome 6, it is still unclear what defines a 'better' job and how it would be measured. To avoid further stigmatising those perceived to be in 'bad' / 'low-paid' / 'unskilled' jobs, some further consideration

should be given to the most appropriate use of language here. Drawing on the views of the NEET Youth Forum about the importance of measuring job satisfaction and the quality of jobs (i.e. in terms of growth, pay, training and promotion opportunities), we recommend there is greater focus on having more people working in quality and progressive employment.

- We welcome the commitment to early intervention evident across several areas of the Programme for Government. With reference to Outcome 7, and particularly Indicator 1, we welcome the recognition of the role of poor mental health in offending behaviour and the role of targeted interventions for vulnerable families incorporating health, education and the community. Given their disproportionately high representation in the Criminal Justice System, we recommend that there is a particular recognition for the need to provide early support to both Looked After Children and children affected by parental imprisonment, as an effective method of early intervention and diversion. We welcome the commitment to problem-solving justice which seeks to address the precursors of offending behaviour, and we recognise a role for a tiered model of education and mental health support, as outlined above, in achieving this. We note the related delivery plan reference to early interventions with young people “on the cusp” of the Criminal Justice System: we recommend that this is broadened and provided earlier so all children can benefit from the resilience-building skills the above suggested model would provide, using the school as a hub for a more rounded education. With regards to Indicator 39, in keeping with the above comments we welcome the moves to a welfare-based approach to children engaged in offending behaviour and to a problem-solving approach, including the exploration of addressing offending rooted in mental health issues.
- We note with concern the variety in levels of detail across the different Delivery Plans, and the discrepancies in the lists of stakeholders to be involved. We recommend that the Voluntary and Community Sector is explicitly stated as a key delivery partner in every Plan, in recognition of the Sector’s role in representing communities and service users. For example, whilst we welcome the recognition of the role of the Sector in the Delivery Plan for Indicator 15 (regarding pre-school development), the Delivery Plan for Indicators 11, 12 and 13, which relate to educational attainment, does not reference the

Voluntary Sector, despite the effective programmes already provided by Barnardo's NI and others to improve parental engagement, aspiration, literacy and numeracy. We are keen to work with the Executive to develop and deliver the plans to achieve outcomes, and believe the Voluntary and Community Sector has expertise across all outcomes. In order to demonstrate the Executive's commitment to cross-sectoral working and engagement with the Voluntary and Community Sector, it is important that the Sector is explicitly referenced in every Delivery Plan.

- In addition, whilst we welcome the explicit reference to children and young people in Outcome 14, we recommend that children are considered across every Outcome – particularly given the intention that the Outcomes provided in this Programme represent a long-term vision. To enable all Outcomes to be achieved in future generations, it is critical that the needs and voices of today's children are considered within the Delivery Plans for each indicator.
- Finally, as stated in our previous response, we recommend the importance of safe and sustainable housing in improving wellbeing, tackling disadvantage and driving economic growth is recognised within this Programme for Government. Whilst we recognise Indicators 8 and 48, 'number of households in housing stress' and 'gap between the number of houses we need and the number of houses we have', go some way to acknowledging the role of housing in achieving the Outcomes, we recommend that these Indicators are expanded and considered with reference to Outcome 14 too. In particular, we recommend the impact of poor housing on child development (mental, emotional, physical and educational), and the need for safe and sustainable housing for young people leaving care, are recognised as a key contributing factors to life outcomes for children and young people.

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