

Barnardo's NI

**Response to the Education Authority Consultation on the Proposed
Framework of Future Provision for Children in the Early Years with
Special Educational Needs (SEN)**

May 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 services, from providing family support 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 Education Authority's Proposed Framework of Future Provision for Children in the Early Years with Special Educational Needs (SEN). Our comments are informed by our wide range of services working with children in their early years, children with special educational needs, and parents, as well as our portfolio of work across family support and mental health and wellbeing. These comments support our contribution at the recent Joint Consultative Forum.

In addition, we support the recommendations and points raised in the May 2018 briefing paper on this consultation developed by the Children with Disabilities Strategic Alliance (CDSA).

We welcome the approach to the proposed framework and the general direction of travel within the proposals, particularly the emphasis on early intervention and the principles underpinning the proposals. We do however wish to raise some points, primarily in relation to the need for the framework to be child-centred and based on need, meaningful inclusion and effective partnership working. It is important that the framework is considered in the context of the bigger SEN picture, with committed and continued collaboration between health and education, and across sectors. Our key points are below:

- We welcome that two of the underpinning principles of the framework are that it is child-centred and developmental. We

strongly believe that support should be based on each individual child's needs and not dependent on a Statement or diagnosis. Each child has their own developmental journey; therefore the framework must recognise developmental delay and the changing needs of each child. We know from our work in this area that families can struggle to access services or additional support for their child without a diagnosis. This can lead to families accessing private healthcare to receive a diagnosis, only for this to be queried by health or education services and result in further delays in receiving support. We recommend that the resource required to support children with additional needs must be based on need, and that that support should follow that child whether they are placed in mainstream, voluntary or special education. This should be supported by training and clear guidance for staff in early years settings to identify and meet learning support needs.

- As well as the difficulties and delays in receiving a diagnosis for a child in their early years, the framework should also be cognisant of the need to support parents through this process. We welcome that an underpinning principle of the framework is that it is 'parent focussed' and recommend that this is supported in implementation by relevant training and resource commitment. We also recommend that the proposed parent cluster groups referenced under proposal 4 receive significant support from the EA to ensure enough resource and time is allocated to these so that the groups can provide structured support and advice.
- We echo the point made by CDSA in relation to delays in diagnosis, the need for inclusive education and a commitment to enabling social integration for children with disabilities at the earliest stage to prevent a widening learning gap.
- We welcome the proposal to provide support before the pre-school year through the Early Years SEN Inclusion Service in the first phase of support and the commitment to earliest stage support. However we are concerned that the support outlined is too focussed on the home. Though parent and home support will be crucial to implementation of this first phase, it is not clear what support will be provided by the Service for children attending private or voluntary sector playgroups. We recommend the framework recognises this as an equality of access issue and outlines how children aged 0-3 can avail of this support regardless of their childcare provision.

- In relation to the programme of offer provided by the EA Early Years SEN Inclusion Service, we recommend that more detail is given on how education and health colleagues will work together in planning and delivering support at both a strategic and operational level to avoid duplication of support across providers and confusion for parents.
- We welcome the proposed pilot of Early Years SEN Centres in mainstream early years settings. We are aware from our service delivery work that a number of young children with SEN are excluded from school settings due to behaviour issues and are instead given a few hours of home teaching each week. We recommend a clear commitment is given in the framework to ensuring that children's educational needs are met within educational settings, rather than at home. To support this, staff need to be equipped with the specialist skills and sufficient time to ensure the child's needs are met, and we recommend this is reflected in the funding for implementation of the framework. Whilst we welcome the commitment within the Early Years SEN Centres to a minimum of 15 hours per week with flexibility to meet the needs of the child, we also recommend that this provision is accessible and flexible for parents.
- We welcome the commitment to partnership working between education and health. Joint planning will be critical for implementation and long-term outcomes for children.
- We also welcome the framework's commitment to strengthening partnerships with voluntary sector providers and the establishment of an Early Years SEN Forum. Resource should be allocated to ensure the sustainability of partnership working, both in terms of service delivery and knowledge transfer.

Barnardo's NI welcomes this proposed framework and the opportunity to provide some comments based on our experience. We look forward to engaging further with the Education Authority as the framework develops.

For more information, please contact:

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