

**Barnardo's NI response to the
SBNI Multi-Agency Neglect Strategy 2017-19**

May 2017

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 Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland's Multi-Agency Neglect Strategy 2017-19. In our Children's Charter¹, produced with NSPCC in 2016, we highlighted that neglect is one of the most prevalent forms of harm recorded on the Child Protection Register in Northern Ireland and can frequently lead to long-term physical, psychological, behavioural and societal consequences, impacting negatively on the outcomes for a child's life. We know from our own research and service delivery experience that neglect often occurs alongside other forms of abuse and is a feature for families experiencing multiple adversities.

In general, we support the aims, objectives and guiding principles of this strategy. Our comments on specific areas of the Strategy are provided below:

1. Multi-Agency Approach

We welcome the multi-agency approach the SBNI has taken for this strategy. Our Charter contains a recommendation that there should be improved multi-agency co-operation and co-ordination across a range of professionals and agencies to tackle neglect, and we are encouraged by the collaborative and strategic approach outlined both in the development and planned implementation of this strategy, including the point made in section 6 (p11) that "in order to fully address the issue of neglect in Northern Ireland it is recognised that the co-operation of agencies who are not members of the SBNI will also be required". We recommend that the Strategy makes explicit reference to the obligations under the Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 requiring co-operation amongst agencies in order to contribute to the wellbeing of children and young people. We also recommend that the Strategy takes cognisance of the relevant outcomes in the Programme for Government and the Children and Young People's Strategy, when finalised.

¹ <http://www.barnardos.org.uk/childrens-charter-ni.pdf>

2. Emotional Neglect

We welcome the recognition of emotional abuse and neglect in the Strategy, including the reference to “neglect of, or unresponsiveness to, a child’s basic emotional, social and educational needs” (section 3, p4). We particularly welcome the recognition that “an understanding of emotional abuse is also important” for practitioners working with children experiencing neglect, and we recommend robust training is provided to ensure that understanding is developed on an ongoing basis. We recommend that this strategy takes the opportunity to develop a greater understanding of the immediate and lasting impacts of neglect on the emotional health and wellbeing of children and young people of all ages.

We are pleased to see the explicit reference to the impact of emotional abuse of adolescents in section 7.3 (p12) and recommend that this be developed further, with specific training provided for practitioners. We recommend that alongside this, the Strategy explores separately the issue of emotional neglect for Looked After Children and care leavers. We believe there is an opportunity to explore how emotional support for children who are looked after can be improved, particularly at the critical transition stages including when a young person is preparing to leave care and in the following years. Care experienced young people often report feeling isolated after leaving care and entering adulthood alone, often at 18, which is a relatively young age when compared to their peers who may continue to have emotional support from parents for many years as they adjust to being an adult. We believe there could be an emotional neglect element to this transition and that multi-agency support should be provided for young people leaving care up to and including age 25.

In addition to Looked After Children, we recommend that the Strategy lists disabled children and young people as a special group within the Strategy, in recognition of their particular vulnerability to all forms of neglect.

3. Learning from others

We welcome the Strategy’s emphasis on learning from others, and recommend that the focus groups to be held with practitioners referenced in section 8 (p13) are regular and meaningful with practitioners from both the statutory and voluntary sectors engaged.

We are encouraged by the commitment to engage with children, young people and families and recommend that this is ongoing and participants are provided with feedback. We also recommend that this engagement strives to capture the views of families and children from a wide range of backgrounds and situations, particularly marginalised young people including Looked After Children and disabled children and young people. Young people in the Barnardo’s NI disabled young people’s advocacy group, Sixth Sense, recently participated in a conference on neglect in the Southern HSC Trust area, performing a drama entitled ‘Speak Out – I Will Not Be Neglected’; young

people in groups like Sixth Sense should regularly be engaged to gather views throughout the life of this Strategy.

The research referenced demonstrates the importance of affection for children: "a few added that love and hugs were really important but more thought that attention, love, praise, other people's relationships were quite important" (p13). We recommend that this is explored further, and that the ongoing research and consultation engages Looked After Children to understand and address emotional support in the care system.

4. Key Indicators and Outcomes

We welcome the outcomes based approach of the Strategy, though again we urge recognition of the role of a Neglect Strategy in achieving the relevant outcomes listed in the draft Children and Young People's Strategy and the draft Programme for Government, which have a wider scope. For example, the draft Programme for Government provides an outcome that "we give our children and young people the best start in life"; this language is purposefully vague but the accompanying text references protection from violence and harm, ensuring emotional resilience, and addressing the particular adversities experienced by Looked After Children including neglect. It is therefore pertinent that this Multi-Agency Neglect Strategy recognises its role within the wider strategic landscape, in the spirit of both co-operation and outcomes based delivery and in recognition of the cross-cutting impact of neglect.

Whilst the indicators demonstrate the direction of travel and it is welcome that they capture a wide range of factors, we urge that focus on the overall outcome is not lost to a focus on a reduction/increase in numbers: we recommend that there is regular monitoring of the indicators and progress against the outcomes should be published, with the Strategy kept under review to ensure its effectiveness.

Barnardo's NI welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland's Multi-Agency Neglect Strategy 2017-19 and looks forward to working with the Board to further develop and implement the Strategy.