

**Barnardo's NI response to the Consultation on the
Safeguarding Board Northern Ireland (SBNI)
Strategic Plan 2013 – 2016**

Introduction

Barnardo's NI is the largest children's charity in Northern Ireland. We work with over 10,000 children, young people and families in more than 40 different services and programmes and in over 150 schools. Our services range from work with looked after children, young people who have been sexually exploited, those affected by parental substance misuse and domestic violence, to early intervention programmes and family support.

Barnardo's NI welcomed the establishment of the SBNI as a positive step forward in helping to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people in Northern Ireland. We are pleased to provide independent, voluntary representation as a member of the Board.

To effectively contribute to policy development Barnardo's NI regularly engages with staff working across our services in Northern Ireland. Our response to the SBNI Strategic Plan 2013–2016 has been informed by consultation with a group of Children's Services Managers and Senior Practitioners who have considerable experience in both prevention and protection activity.

Overview

Barnardo's NI broadly supports and agrees with the four Strategic Priorities identified in the SBNI Strategic Plan 2013-2016.

We welcome the emphasis on looked after children, children who are disabled, child sexual exploitation and risks associated with digital technology. Barnardo's NI particularly welcomes recognition in the Plan of the need to take greater account of children's experiences of multiple adversities.

While they are not identified as core issues to be directly tackled by the Board but by other partner agencies, we are pleased to see highlighted the Board's key role in monitoring the safeguarding arrangements in circumstances where there is domestic violence, parental mental health problems, and parental substance misuse. The inclusion of multiple adversities within the Plan also provides another link to these important areas which must be effectively tackled if children are to live safely and with stability.

Strategic Priority 1: Driving improvements in the current child protection system

Barnardo's NI strongly supports the inclusion of issues around children who experience neglect and multiple adversities being highlighted by the SBNI as a priority area of work. Research shows there is a strong, graded relationship between the number of childhood adversities experienced and a wide range of negative outcomes in adulthood¹. In our view effective interventions with families experiencing multiple adversities has the potential to prevent or decrease the likelihood of harm.

The development of a multi-agency governance model, informed by the views of children, young people, families, frontline staff and reports from inspectorial/regulatory bodies was seen as highly desirable by Barnardo's NI staff.

Barnardo's NI is pleased Case Management Reviews (CMRs) are now a function of the SBNI. Ensuring lessons from them are effectively put into practice is a key aspect of ensuring continual improvement in safeguarding. Our staff welcome the approach outlined in the Plan to CMRs that seeks to positively influence practice and learn lessons rather than seek to attribute blame. This coupled with a child death overview panel which seeks to understand trends and try to take preventative action to reduce future incidents was viewed very positively.

Appropriate, accurate and timely systems for sharing information in relation to individual cases and between organisations working in the safeguarding arena was seen as a crucial piece of good practice. The

¹ Felitti et al (1998) and Dube et al (2003) in Davidson, G; Bunting L; Webb M (2012) Families experiencing multiple adversities: A review of the international literature. Barnardo's NI: Belfast.

dissemination and implementation of recommendations from Case Management Reviews was seen as an essential part of effective safeguarding practice.

Strategic Priority 2: Providing leadership and setting direction

The potential for the SBNI to provide leadership in developing consistent practice across the region was viewed as a very positive development. Staff expressed concerns specifically in relation to the current lack of consistency in terms of thresholds for referrals across the region.

Barnardo's NI welcomes the aim to improve multi-agency working by developing a multi-agency education and training strategy to ensure that child protection training is delivered effectively and consistently. In our view this should be progressed as a priority given our experience that some Health and Social Care Trust areas appear to encourage multi-agency training while others do not. We agree there is a need for additional education and training around new and emerging safeguarding concerns. As reflected in the Strategic Plan, and identified by Barnardo's NI in our practice, these include sexual exploitation, cyber-bullying and the increasing on-line exploitation and criminalisation of children.

The Board's intention to develop an engagement and communication strategy to raise public awareness about child protection issues is vital and again is another area we believe should be quickly progressed. Educating children, young people, families and communities about safeguarding issues and systems that provide help is consistent with Barnardo's NI view that safeguarding should be everyone's business.

The proposal to develop a process within each Independent Safeguarding Panel that enables frontline practitioners to express their views regarding strengths and weaknesses in the current child protection/safeguarding system received a mixed response from our staff. Some viewed this as a positive initiative which could contribute to improving practice. Others were concerned however that there needed to be a filter process within this to prevent Panels from being inundated with the views of individual workers.

Strategic Priority 3: Working in partnership to ensure children and young people are living in safety and with stability

The 'toxic trio' of parental substance misuse, mental ill-health and domestic violence are common indicators of exposure to adversities which can impact on parenting and increase risk to children and young people². Domestic violence and substance misuse in particular are two key areas that Barnardo's NI has been increasingly targeting in our work at both a policy and practice level, for example through delivery of specialised training to a wide range of professionals across the region. We are also progressing research with families experiencing multiple adversities, of which a significant number commonly present with all, or a combination of, the issues of domestic violence, substance misuse and mental health problems³.

Barnardo's NI therefore strongly supports the SBNI plan to work in partnership with the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership to address these core issues. We recommend that future planning in relation to developing effective safeguarding arrangements clearly links in with key strategies such as 'Think Child, Think Parent, Think Family', the DHSSPS Regional Strategy for tackling Domestic Violence, and the DHSSPS Hidden Harm Action Plan.

We also welcome the intention of the SBNI to work with the Health and Social Care Board to ensure that effective partnership arrangements are in place for children and young people with a disability. Barnardo's NI believes that disabled children are currently under-represented on the Child Protection Register due to a number of factors. This includes Gateway teams commonly directing safeguarding referrals in relation to disabled children to Disability teams. In our view this stems from a lack of specific knowledge around disability on the part of experienced professionals in the child protection system, and a lack of knowledge of the child protection system on the part of experienced professionals working with disabled children. Barnardo's NI recommends that joint training with these two groups of professionals would prove beneficial in providing more effective safeguarding procedures for disabled children.

² Devaney, J; Bunting, L; Hayes, D; Lazenbatt, A (2013) Translating learning into action: An overview of learning arising from Case Management Reviews in Northern Ireland 2003-2008. QUB: Belfast. Brandon, M; Bailey, S; Belderson, P (2010) Learning from Serious Case Reviews: A two year analysis of child protection database notifications 2007-2009. London: Department for Education.

³ Publication pending in 2014 – this is the second stage of a partnership project between Barnardo's NI, NSPCC, NCB and QUB about families experiencing multiple adversities. The first stage, an international literature review, was published in 2012 – see Note 1.

Strategic Priority 4: Protect and safeguard children by responding to new and emerging concerns

Barnardo's NI has been providing support services to sexually exploited children in Northern Ireland since 2001, including work with children who go missing from home or care and are at risk of sexual exploitation. We also recently published a two year piece of exploratory research into CSE here. This research 'Not a world away' clearly indicates that sexual exploitation does exist in NI and what we are aware of is only 'the tip of the iceberg' (Beckett, 2011).

We are therefore very pleased that child sexual exploitation is included within the priority areas of work for the SBNI. In our view the sexual exploitation of children is child abuse and as such should be recognised as a mainstream child protection issue for all children under the age of 18 years.

Barnardo's NI welcome the Board's proposal to develop a coordinated strategy and working model to protect and safeguard children who go missing from home or care and are at risk of sexual exploitation. Based on our considerable experience in this area through our Safe Choices NI service, we believe a multi-agency approach is vital to achieve the strategic framework required to ensure a more effective response to sexual exploitation in Northern Ireland. This approach must proactively address the prevention of sexual exploitation, the protection of sexually exploited young people and the prosecution of abusers.

To help achieve this there are a number of key areas Barnardo's NI recommends the Board takes oversight of in order to effectively progress the protection and safeguarding of children who go missing and are at risk of sexual exploitation. These include:

1. Development and implementation of a targeted action plan on sexual exploitation, which includes:
 - data collection and monitoring;
 - professional competency and capacity;
 - best practice models;
 - resourcing of a regional specialist support service.
2. The revision of existing safeguarding and child protection guidance to include the complex nature and impact of sexual

exploitation. This should be supported by the development of detailed inter-agency procedural guidance for practitioners.

3. A preventative approach to sexual exploitation needs to address awareness of the issue among children and young people, professionals and wider society. It also needs to pro actively identify and address known vulnerability factors in order to minimise future risk.
4. Implementation of key commitments outlined in the HSC Strategic Action Plan on Children Missing from Home or Care.

It is also important to note an overlap between Strategic Priorities 1, 3 and 4; many sexually exploited children have had experiences of multiple adversity in the form of domestic violence, parental mental health problems and parental drug and alcohol misuse.

Barnardo's NI also recommends the SBNI Strategic Plan make specific reference to 'internal' trafficking in relation to the sexual exploitation of children indigenous to Northern Ireland. Our Safe Choices NI service has recently seen more cases of 'internal' human trafficking and the issue was highlighted as a concern in the 'Not a world away' research.

On a point of accuracy – page 20, paragraph 2 – the Barnardo's NI research report is entitled "**Not a world away**" – it is currently and incorrectly referenced as "Not a world apart".

Finally, there was wide ranging support amongst Barnardo's NI staff for the Board's proposal to develop a co-ordinated strategy and working model to tackle safeguarding issues in relation to digital technology. We have been increasingly concerned in our practice about children and young people becoming victims of cyber-bullying, 'sexting' and on-line exploitation. Training in this area must address the needs of children and young people, parents, carers and professionals.

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