Submission by Barnardo’s Northern Ireland to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister’s Inquiry into Child Poverty

November 2007
**Introduction**

Barnardo’s NI is the largest children’s charity in Northern Ireland. In addition to policy influencing, we also provide over 45 distinct services in NI, last year working with a substantial number of children and their families in communities across Northern Ireland. We work with disabled children, young people who are at risk of offending, children in care and families in need of support.

Barnardo’s vision is that the lives of all children and young people should be free from poverty, abuse and discrimination. We therefore welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister’s Inquiry into Child Poverty.

**1.0 The extent, intensity and impact of child poverty in Northern Ireland**

While we recognise the need for further evidence in relation to the persistence of poverty in Northern Ireland, the extent and impact of child poverty throughout the UK have been well documented within a broad range of statistical and research publications\(^1\). Government must improve practices of producing and maintaining up-to-date data, however the considerable research activity in recent years has aimed to address the general lack of statistics and other data on child poverty in Northern Ireland. Therefore, rather than reiterate much of this information of which the Committee is no doubt aware, it is Barnardo’s intention for the purposes of the current inquiry to focus on three key areas in which we believe child poverty should be tackled more effectively and where there is a significant impact on children and young people.

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1.1 Early Years

The disparity in educational attainment throughout primary and secondary schooling between children and young people with more affluent status compared to those from poorer backgrounds has been clearly demonstrated in research carried out by the Department of Education\(^2\). However this educational disadvantage is also apparent from an early age in that pre-school children with a lower economic status have less cognitive and behavioural abilities\(^*\) than pre-school children from higher socio-economic backgrounds\(^3\).

Considering the links between poor education and unemployment with poverty, Barnardos believes that in order to effectively address social inequality it is vital that government supports families and agencies working with pre-school children by demonstrating an increased commitment to early years intervention. This is even more important given that social and emotional skills learned between birth and the age of five years affects subsequent performance in both the school and workplace\(^4\).

Furthermore, the key finding from brain research is that the brain is uniquely constructed to benefit from experience and from positive care giving during the first years of life\(^5\). Significantly, the brain develops earlier than the rest of the body;

- 50% of its’ adult weight in the first six months;
- 75% of its’ adult weight by age two and half years;
- 90% of its’ adult weight by age five years.

By age three the brain has formed 1,000 trillion connections; about twice as many as adults have.


\(^*\) Common definitions of cognitive abilities refer to thinking and problem-solving skills, e.g. ‘the process of being aware, knowing, thinking, learning and judging’ MedicineNet.Com

\(^3\) E. Melhuish et al (2006), ‘Effective Pre-School Provision in Northern Ireland (EPPNI)’, DENI, Report No.41

\(^4\) James J Heckman and Dimitriy V Masterov (2004), ‘The Productivity Argument for Investing in Young Children’, Committee for Economic Development

\(^5\) G. French and P. Murphy (2005), ‘Once in a Lifetime: Early Care and Education for Children from Birth to Three’ Dublin. Barnardos
Early experience determines how the neural circuits in the brain are connected. (Bertenthal and Campos, 1987) and children who are played with, spoken to and allowed to explore stimulating surroundings are more likely to develop improved neural connections which aid later learning (Kurr-Morse and Wiley, 1997). These recent findings from brain research emphasise how crucial the first five years of life are. In this time neural pathways are formed and disposition toward learning is established. French and Murphy (2005) comment:

‘ Sylva (1993) having reviewed the evidence about the impact of early learning on children’s later development, concluded that the impact of early education is found in all social groups but is strongest in children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

It is therefore Barnardo’s view that rather than waiting for children to reach school age, it is essential that, from birth, children receive the best possible start in life. Indeed by investing financial resources in programs for very young children, including interventions such as the Perry Preschool program, research suggests that society benefits in the long term through an increase in skilled workers, and a reduction in crime, violent activity and poverty. The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study, for example, published its research spanning 40 years in November 2004 in which the measured benefits of the programme are highly significant. This long term study shows the effects of a high quality early years care and education programme with children and their parents on low income three and four year old children. At age 40, adults who had participated in the High/Scope programme were shown to have higher earnings, be more likely to stay in employment, have higher academic achievement and to have committed fewer crimes than those in the non-programme group. Although schools and teachers are important, early and ongoing engagement with parents is the key to successful interventions and subsequent changes in society.

Government must also consider the important role of play for children’s social, emotional and physical development, especially in their very early

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6 Cited in French and Murphy, ibid
7 Ibid, p.20
9 L. Schweinhart et al, ibid
10 Sinclair, op cit n.8
years. Through our many services, Barnardos continually provides play opportunities and promotes the value of play in many areas, for example in early years settings, a range of parent education and parent support services including parents from minority ethnic backgrounds, parents in prison and school aged and other young mothers, and for children with disabilities and complex health care needs. Unfortunately, current play and leisure provision for children and young people in Northern Ireland is generally inadequate and often inaccessible, particularly for children experiencing poverty.\footnote{U. Kilkelley et al. (2004), ‘Children’s Rights in Northern Ireland’, NICCY}

**Good Practice**

At Barnardos, we know that young children learn from direct experience. In order to affect change for children we need to support parents in the parenting role. It is important, however, that alongside working with parents, every effort is made to ensure young children do not lose out on positive experiences at this crucial stage in their development. Barnardo’s Northern Ireland has been providing services to the youngest and most disadvantaged members of our society for over thirty years. These services provide a wide range of experiences for young children.

**High/Scope Approach**

Throughout all early years work in Barnardo’s Northern Ireland the High/Scope Approach discussed above in relation to Early Years is implemented. Using this Approach ensures positive outcomes for children both in the short and long term. In addition to parents, High/Scope provides valuable training for early years teachers, pre-school practitioners, Sure Start projects, those working with under-threes, foster carers, and childminders.

Barnardo’s believes that the High/Scope approach is a valuable tool in helping combat poverty and promoting social inclusion in the most disadvantaged communities of Northern Ireland and would recommend its implementation on a broader scale. The following two examples give an indication of the current range of early years work in Barnardo’s Northern Ireland and we would warmly welcome Committee representatives to visit these and any of our other services.
Travellers Pre-school

Barnardo’s NI has long acknowledged the particular difficulties experienced by the Traveller community, including poor living conditions, inadequate housing, long term unemployment, poor health and poor educational attainment. We have provided an early years service to the Traveller community in Belfast since 1990 of which the main aim of the Traveller’s Pre-School is to promote the inclusion and integration of Traveller children into mainstream education. As a formal recognition of the high quality service being delivered to children and their families within the Traveller community, Traveller’s Pre-School has recently achieved High/Scope Accreditation from the High/Scope Ireland Institute, the first early years service in Barnardos NI to receive this award.

Parent & Infant Project (PIP)

The PIP model was built on key evidence about childhood development that linked factors such as the early development of language, development of social and personal skills and infant mental health. The overall aims of the service are to enable young children to achieve their potential according to their abilities and develop socially, emotionally, physically and intellectually; and to establish an environment where parents will be facilitated in recognising and meeting the needs of their children. With a central ethos of early intervention, the main objectives of this outreach based project are to promote and support very early learning in children aged 0-3 years; to offer parent support and education; to help parents to recognise and meet the needs of their children; to increase parents’ confidence in their own knowledge; and to improve the self esteem of the adult and child through enabling and valuing the proficiency of both.

1.2 Disability

In Northern Ireland, 21% of adults have at least one disability and 6% of children are affected by a disability, of which almost 4% are living with two or more disabilities. Current poverty statistics, which underestimate levels of poverty in households affected by disability, indicate that over a million

children living in poverty in the UK are affected by disability while a quarter of all poor children have a disabled parent\textsuperscript{13}.

There is evidence to suggest that families affected by a disability, whether of a parent or child, are at greater than average risk of persistent poverty. Research shows that disabled children and their families in the UK experience particularly high levels of economic and social disadvantage\textsuperscript{14}. It is estimated in the region of 55\% of families with a disabled child are either living at or on the margins of poverty and have more chance of living in poverty than other disadvantaged social groups, including lone parent families\textsuperscript{15}. The risk of poverty is especially high for the half a million children who live in households that contain both disabled adults and disabled children\textsuperscript{16}.

Incomes in households with disabled children are likely to be low because these families experience considerable additional costs, face multiple barriers to employment, and problems accessing disability benefits. For example, although the cost of bringing up a disabled child is three times as much as for a non-disabled child, parents in such families are less likely to work and when they do they are more likely to be in low-paid employment. Inaccessible services and poor service provision for families affected by disability compounds problems on a daily basis, and generates high levels of stress and ill-health\textsuperscript{17}. The situation is often particularly serious in families affected by disability if it is also a lone parent household and/or there are three or more children.

These are all issues which need to be urgently addressed, especially considering the impacts on child poverty in Northern Ireland which has the highest levels of households with disabled people in the UK. Better administrative processes and increased take up of disability living allowance has been identified as just one measure to improve the lives of disabled

\textsuperscript{13} Gabrielle Preston with Mark Robertson (2006), 'Out of Reach: Benefits for Disabled Children’, Child Poverty Action Group
\textsuperscript{15} Gordon et al, ibid
\textsuperscript{16} Preston and Robertson, op cit, n.14
\textsuperscript{17} ibid
children and help reduce child poverty\textsuperscript{18}. If the Government wants to ensure that targets to eradicate child poverty are met then it is essential in Barnardo’s view that in addition to greater access to preventative and support services, more must be done to ensure that disabled children and those caring for them receive the disability benefits to which they are entitled. It is also essential that parents who so often act as full-time carers for their disabled children receive appropriate support that enables them to access well-paid and permanent employment.

Disabled children themselves face significant barriers to education, training and employment without the necessary preventative and support services. Recent research on education and employment amongst disabled young people found that despite similar aspirations, the experience of disabled and non-disabled young people diverged sharply in early adulthood\textsuperscript{19}. Analysis of the data from studies of children born in 1970 and in the early 1980s revealed that three-fifths of non-disabled young people got the education or training place or job they wanted after finishing compulsory education, whereas just over half of disabled youngsters said the same. As they got older the gap between the proportion of disabled and non-disabled young people out of work widened:

- at age 16/17, disabled young people were about twice as likely as non-disabled to be out of work or 'doing something else' (13 per cent compared with 7 per cent);

- by age 18/19, disabled young people were nearly three times as likely to be unemployed or 'doing something else' (25 per cent compared with 9 per cent);

- at age 26, young people who were disabled at both age 16 and age 26 were nearly four times as likely to be unemployed or involuntarily out of work than young people who were disabled at neither age (13.8 per cent compared with 3.7 per cent).

Recommendations arising from this research include a focus on transforming the actual opportunities available to disabled young people, for

\textsuperscript{18} ibid

example, through ensuring continuity of support (including funding, equipment and personnel), especially in the transition from secondary to further education; opportunities to return to education, focusing on acquiring higher qualifications, not just basic skills; and work placements related to each young person’s expressed interests.

1.3 Employment and Learning

Young people making the transition from education to employment now face many more challenges and obstacles than ever before mainly as a result of changes in traditional family structures and a rapidly changing labour market. Those young people who do not stay on at school or in further education or training have fewer opportunities than in previous years.

The term ‘NEET’ is now used to describe young people aged between 16 and 18 (inclusive) who are not in education, employment or training, however Barnardo’s discusses this issue as being relevant to young people aged between 16 and 21 years of age. Many of the characteristics associated with poverty are also associated with young people referred to as NEET. These typically include poor educational attainment, persistent truancy, teenage pregnancy, use of drugs and alcohol, looked after children, disability, mental health issues and crime and anti-social behaviour. The proportion of NEETS has increased from 154,000 in 1997 to 206,000 in 2006. In England, 7% of all 16 year olds are NEET, rising to 11% of 16 year olds from the lowest social groups, 13% amongst those with a disability, 22% amongst those excluded from school, 32% among persistent truants and 74% amongst teenage mothers. In 2005, 6.3% of 16-24 year olds in Northern Ireland were classified as being unemployed, however the percentage of young people classified as NEET is estimated as being twice as high.

Barnardo’s believes that the massive potential amongst young people who are NEETS is in danger of being overlooked if those responsible for the

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21 Department for Children, Schools and Families, and Innovation, Universities and Skills
education and welfare system do not address what is becoming an increasing issue of concern. The Westminster government has recently revealed plans to raise the school leaving age to 18, although there is no immediate intention to introduce this in Northern Ireland. While we can see the obvious benefits in ensuring education, training or apprenticeship for many NEETS, this will only work in practice if it is actually meeting each individual’s need and that other mechanisms are also put in place for those young people that actually want to, or cannot afford not to, go out to work at 16. For various reasons, not all young people within this age group are able to live in a stable and secure family environment and we would have concerns about the poverty implications if they were unable to enter formal employment until the age of eighteen.

Having NEET status not only impacts on young people’s life chances but from a public policy perspective there are also a range of social and financial implications. Young people who are NEET are at risk of poverty and social inclusion but it has also been suggested that being NEET,

‘..may also perpetuate a worklessness culture that can be passed onto future generations of young people and result in NEET status being reinforced in families and communities across generations’.

It is therefore crucial that effective strategies are in place in Northern Ireland to ensure young people are in appropriate employment or learning. This age group should also be given priority in the ‘Lifetime Opportunities’ Anti-poverty Strategy, with a very specific focus on targeting those aged between 16-21 years.

As highlighted in the Strategy, employment for people of working age is the best route out of poverty. However, given the high levels of low pay in Northern Ireland alongside the lack of affordable housing, childcare and fuel for heating, it is also important to consider that an increasing number of people experience ‘in-work’ poverty. This is of particular relevance in relation to younger people aged between 16 and 21 years old who are more likely to earn less and for whom the minimum wage is lower than for adults. While we welcome the minimum wage in principle, Barnardo’s believes that this must be regularly reviewed and increased in order to ensure income protection for young people. In our view, it is discriminatory to pay younger people between 16 and 21 years lower wages for doing the same job as someone older, simply on the basis of age.

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24 Op cit, note 20, p.7
Research has also highlighted the inadequate level of welfare benefits for young people and accessible information in relation to these, and also the need for more effective training of frontline benefits staff\textsuperscript{25}.

\section*{2.0 Consider the approach taken when formulating the current strategy including the extent of the engagement with key stakeholders}

Barnardos does not wish to comment other than to welcome the fact that following a fairly lengthy process, the current strategy has been developed into a much more child focused document. However, we have outlined our main ongoing concerns and recommendations throughout this paper.

\section*{3.0 Assess whether the existing strategy is capable of delivering the key targets for 2010 and 2020}

While Barnardos welcomes the commitment in the Strategy to eliminate poverty, we are concerned that in its current format it will be unable to deliver the key targets within the specified timeframes, and that the targets themselves are limited in their scope. The absence of targets that are generally not Strategic, Measurable, Actionable, Relevant and Timely (SMART) is a notable gap.

We would refer you, for example, to the three areas we outlined at Point 1 in relation to Early Years, Disability and Employment/Learning, which we believe need to be given greater priority within the Strategy if the main target of ending child poverty by 2020 is to be a realistic one.

1) \textbf{EARLY YEARS} – For example, we suggest that targets and indicators are reworked to include emphasis on universal access to high-quality, creative and innovative early years programmes and pre-school provision; and to include early and ongoing engagement with parents; positive parenting etc.

2) \textbf{DISABILITY} - With regards to our previous points on disability, we suggest for example, the development of targets and indicators that address welfare benefits access, service provision and the widening

\textsuperscript{25} U. Kilgelly et al. op cit, n.11
gaps between disabled and non-disabled young people’s participation in employment as they move into early adulthood.

3) EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING – For example, we suggest the development of targets and indicators specific to young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) and aged between 16 and 21 years of age; also to include preventative and support structures - potential young people NEET identified before they leave school; regular review of attendance, behaviour and attainment; monitoring of ‘at-risk’ pupils, for example, looked after children; extended schools activities; counselling and home support services; family learning and parent contact work; use of specialist outreach teams; use of social work and youth and community work staff.

4.0 Examine whether the implementation mechanisms, resources and monitoring arrangements currently in place are adequate to ensure delivery of the key actions/ targets.

Also with reference to our previous points, we have some concerns in relation to the practical and effective implementation of the Strategy. Without appropriately developed targets, action plans or agreed financial resources it is difficult at this stage to assess the adequacy of the implementation mechanisms, resources and monitoring arrangements.

5.0 Identify and analyse relevant experience elsewhere in terms of policy interventions and programmes

Considering that the UK figured seventh from the bottom of a league table comparing child poverty across 26 wealthy nations26, Barnardo’s would strongly recommend that cognisance is paid to the experiences of other nations, including their child poverty national strategies, social policies and other interventions*.

We also suggest continued monitoring and awareness of how child poverty is being tackled by the Welsh and Scottish governments. Finally, it would

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* Also refer to Mark Greenberg (2007), ‘From Poverty to Prosperity: A National Strategy to Cut Poverty in Half’, Centre for American Progress
be useful to keep appraised of ongoing research in the relevant areas, some of which is cited in the footnotes of this paper, with particular attention paid to findings and recommendations on ‘What Works’ and areas of ‘Good Practice’.

6.0 Consider what further actions could be taken to tackle child poverty with particular focus on those that would be deliverable by the devolved administration.

There are clearly many other areas where action to tackle child poverty is required both outside and inter-related to those that we have chosen to discuss here. We enclose for your information our recent child poverty briefing, 'It doesn’t happen here: the reality of child poverty in Northern Ireland', which provides a concise overview of the issues and a number of key recommendations for action by the Northern Ireland Executive.

Concluding Comments

Barnardos welcomes the chance to contribute to the OFMDFM Committee inquiry into child poverty. We would also like to take this opportunity to extend a formal invitation to Committee representatives to visit Barnardo’s services, particularly those relevant to our work in Early Years.

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