Together, Safer, Stronger (Community Safety Strategy)  
NIO

Barnardo’s Northern Ireland Response

February 2009
Introduction

Barnardo’s is the largest children’s organisation in Northern Ireland and provides services and support to 8,000 children and their families. We provide broad based family support as well as focused child protection services. We work with young people at risk of offending, in care and leaving care. We provide services for disabled young people, young carers and a broad range of parenting support services. Increasingly Barnardo’s are working with schools in some of the most disadvantaged areas to provide a range of support services to children and their parents.

Barnardo’s welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the debate on this important issue. We welcome those elements of the Strategy that focus on addressing domestic and other violence and which seeks to create safer and stronger communities. We welcome the targets aimed at reducing anti-social behaviour crimes by 15% and the target focused on re-offending. We do not condone or make light of criminal or severe anti social behaviour and the impact this has on people’s lives. However we are concerned that some of the proposals in this Strategy could have very serious impacts on the lives of children and young people, including the possible unintended consequences of bringing greater numbers into the care and custodial systems.

There is a fear that the proposals, as currently drafted, could further marginalise the poorest and most disadvantaged children and young people. Many of the proposals appear to place the emphasis on enforcement rather than prevention, which would seem to be contradictory to other current policy and legislation. While the thrust behind the Strategy may be for communities to re establish self responsibility and be accountable for their own conduct we are concerned that the punitive nature of many of the proposals will have just the opposite effect.

Creation of Dispersal Zones

Barnardo’s NI has serious concerns regarding the creation of Dispersal Zones and some of our experience in England and Wales is that often difficulties or problems are simply moved to a different area. The power
for a police officer to ‘move on’ two or more young people from a locality or to return under 16’s home after 9pm is also of concern. We are concerned about the accountability of the ‘relevant officer’ and the omission of any requirement to consult with local people including the children and young people themselves. We feel that this could contribute to a climate where young people are feared rather than valued as members of their own community and will only serve to increase rather than decrease the fear of crime and misbehaviour which is so pervasive.

Everyone has the right to use public spaces and to socialise with their peers and to exclude young people from this right could have a significant effect on their personal and social development. Again we fear that the use of such powers could be discriminatory, focussing on the poorest neighbourhoods and those lacking accessible and affordable amenities and facilities for young people. It is interesting to note that the grounds for dispersal need only be that the presence of the young people ‘is likely to result in…’ they need not actually be engaged in any anti social behaviour, we believe that such an approach will only serve to alienate young people from the rest of their community and to the enforcing officers to an even greater degree.

Our own work with young people in communities engages them and the community adults in addressing the fears and beliefs that both groups have and finding solutions that are co-operative and mutually supportive rather than punitive. We should also remember that children and young people are frequently the victims of harassment and crime.

The blanket provision in a locality to return all under 16’s home after 9pm will impact on legitimate social and educational activities for young people.

We are also concerned that the failure to follow the ‘relevant officer’ instructions for dispersal will be a criminal offence and that this could draw a significant number of young people into the criminal justice system.

Barnardo’s works directly with young people at risk of offending and believes it is crucial that such work is grounded in both the young person’s family, school and community. Significantly young people who are absent from school or not engaged in training and employment are much more likely to engage in offending or anti-social behaviour. We should seek to
address the underlying causes of such behaviour rather than simply offering a punitive response.

**Parenting Support Orders**

Barnardo’s works extensively in providing support to parents and in a wide variety of settings. Our Parenting Matters service provides support to parents in local communities, in ethnic minority communities and to fathers and mothers in prison.

However, we believe that it is best to work with parents on a voluntary basis and that this has often been crucial in building relationships with some of the most difficult to reach families. While Barnardo’s in England and Wales has some experience of working with parents on compulsory Parenting Orders our overall experience has been that encouraging families to work voluntarily has much better outcomes. We would also emphasize the need for early intervention and support for children and families to prevent as many as possible from requiring any form of compulsory parenting orders.

**Parental Compensation Orders**

Barnardo’s NI does not support the introduction of Parental Compensation Orders. Our current age of criminal responsibility is one of the lowest in Europe and we believe that the introduction of such Orders in-effect lowers it further. We believe that if a child under 10 causes the kind of damage that would require compensation then it is indicative of a family in need of support. It is neither helpful or productive to require parents to pay in this instance and often these will be some of the poorest families and we could only be causing further hardship to families already in need. Children who cause criminal damage under ten years of age should be offered appropriate support and services within their family setting.
Conclusion

Barnardo’s NI supports the broad objectives and vision of the Strategy but we remain concerned that the proposals in-relation to children, young people and their families are more punitive than either preventative or supportive. We also believe that they contradict other policies and initiatives such as the Children’s Strategy and the Anti-poverty Strategy.

We believe the Community Safety Strategy to be effective must reflect the experience of working with some of the most hard to reach families and young people and this requires a preventative and supportive programme of services which can address their underlying needs and the causes of anti-social behaviour.

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