Believe in children
Barnardo's
Northern Ireland

Reimagining Children's Social Care Services in Northern Ireland

Summary Paper

April 2023

Prepared by Dr Donna Kernaghan

STATS & STORIES

Introduction

Barnardo's NI is the largest children's charity in Northern Ireland and has been working for more than 100 years to improve the lives and opportunities of children, young people and families in communities across Northern Ireland. With more than 45 different services and programmes, including work in over 200 schools, Barnardo's NI provides prevention and early intervention services, family support work and specialist services to support children and families with a range of needs.

Central to our approach to improving the lives of children and families, is listening to their experiences and using this evidence to develop our policy positions. As part of this commitment and to inform the response to the Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services, Barnardo's NI commissioned Stats & Stories to consult with Barnardo's NI staff, children, young people, parents and carers on their experiences of children's social care services and their thoughts on what changes are needed in the future. Specific attention was given to consulting participants on the proposals by the Independent Review around the creation of one regional organisation for Children's Services and the increased use of multi-disciplinary teams.

The findings of this summary paper explore the multiple perspectives of Barnardo's NI staff, children, young people, parents and carers and are presented in three sections:

- Section 1: Current Challenges Facing Children's Services
- Section 2: The Role of the Community and Voluntary Sector
- Section 3: The Future of Children's Services

Drawing on this evidence base, a number of recommendations have been made to assist the future development of Children's Social Care Services in Northern Ireland which we trust the Independent Review will find useful.

Methodology

The purpose of this consultation process was to capture the expertise of staff and the experiences of children, young people, parents and carers who have experience with children's social care in order to inform Barnardo's NI's response to the ongoing Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services.

A Research Advisory Group (RAG) was set up to support the work of the project and consisted of seven Barnardo's NI staff members who work in a range of different services, based in different Trusts throughout Northern Ireland. The RAG members played a key role on advising on the development of the staff survey, interpreting the results and facilitating focus groups.

The research included both quantitative and qualitative methods and was conducted in two phases:

Phase 1: All Barnardo's NI staff were invited to participate in an online staff survey during October – November 2022. A total of 110 participants completed the survey drawn from over seventy percent of Barnardo's NI services across all five Health and Social Care Trust areas, as well as regional services. The survey was anonymous and covered the following themes:

- the current challenges facing children's services and the families that use them;
- the role of the community and voluntary sector in delivering children's services, including views on the workforce and funding sources;
- future risks and opportunities.

Analysis of the quantitative data was conducted using SPSS with qualitative comments thematically coded. Presentations of the staff survey results were provided to both the RAG and members of the Senior Leadership Team to discuss the findings and identify any additional areas to be covered during the focus groups.

Phase 2: A total of six focus groups were carried out during December 2022 – January 2023 with 29 participants. In addition, ten Barnardo's NI staff also contributed while supporting the focus groups in their services. The focus groups explored participants' experiences of Children's Services, including what had worked well and what could be improved. Each group also discussed their ideas on the proposals from the Review on how to reorganise children's services. Focus groups comprised of:

> **Children and Young People Focus Groups:** A total of three focus groups were conducted with 12 children and young people during December 2022. In addition, one young person contributed through a written response while another young person gave a short interview. A co-facilitator supported each focus group through providing a range of activities that were fun and engaging for children and young people.
>
> **Staff Focus Group:** One staff focus group was conducted with eight members of Barnardo's NI staff during December 2022. This focus group was used to explore the themes raised in the staff survey in greater depth.
>
> **Parents and Carers Focus Groups:** Two focus groups with nine parents and carers were conducted during December 2022 – January 2023. In addition, one parent provided a written response.

Focus groups were recorded, with participants' consent, for the purposes of conducting thematic analysis. Please note that all extracts from the focus groups used in this paper have been quoted verbatim to capture the authentic expressions of the participants. However, all names, ages and specific references to places used by children or young people to access a service have been removed to protect confidentiality.

Results

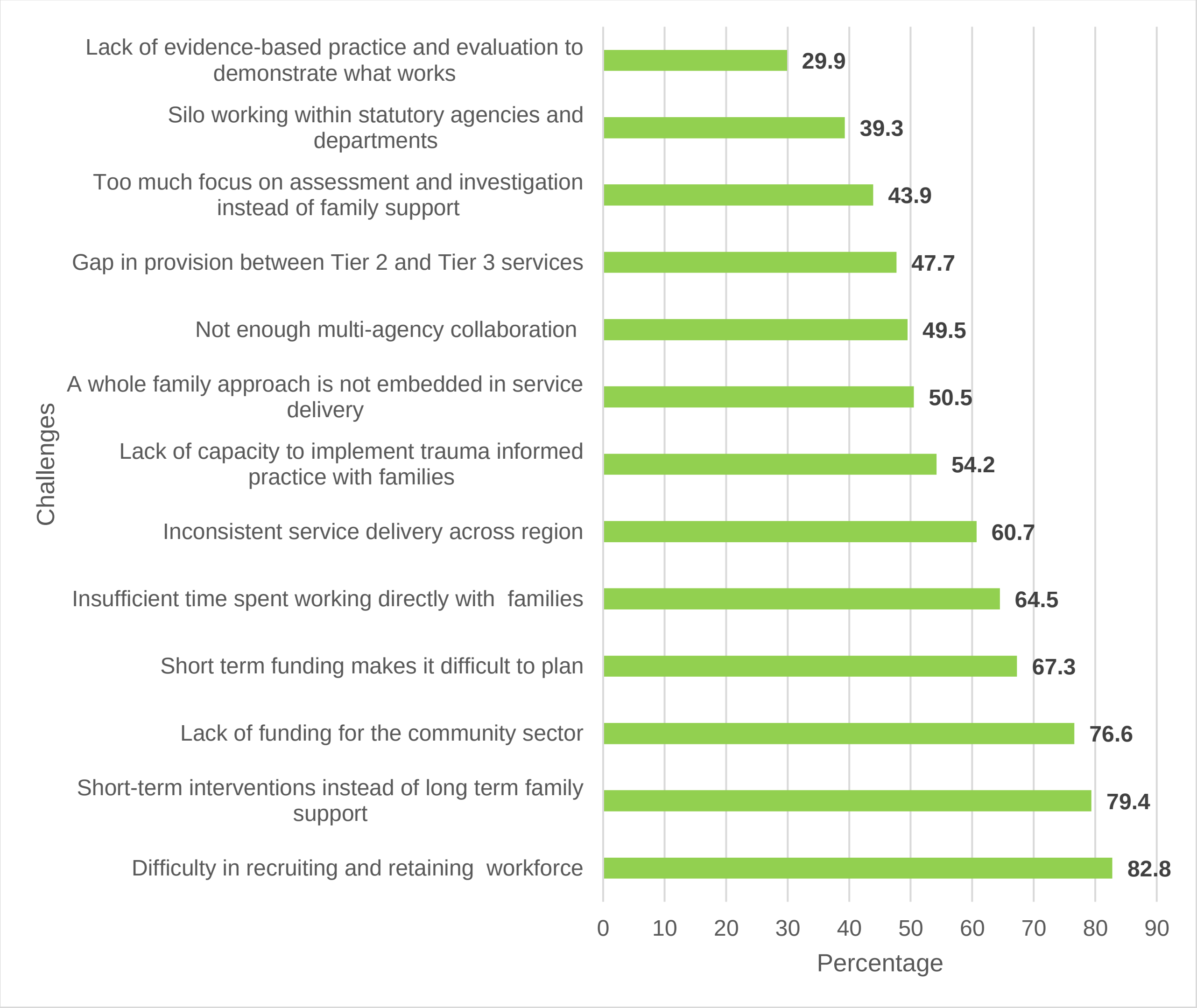
SECTION 1: Current Challenges Facing Children's Services

Drawing on data from both the staff survey and focus groups, this section explores the current challenges facing Children's Services from the multiple perspectives of staff, children, young people, parents and carers. While many participants recognised that chronic workforce shortages had impacted statutory staff's ability to respond, the general consensus within the focus groups was that the current system cannot meet the demands of children, young people and families and that transformational change is required. Key to improvement is better communication with children and families through listening to the needs of families, providing regular updates and sharing information. In many cases, participants felt that engagement with Children's Services caused more stress and frustration for families with support rarely provided in a timely way.

Staff Perspectives on Current Challenges

In the survey, Barnardo's NI staff were asked to consider the current difficulties facing the Children's Services system in responding to the needs of children, young people and families. The largest number of participants indicated that difficulty in recruiting and retaining the workforce created a challenge in meeting the needs of children and families (82.8%). Comments from Barnardo's NI staff acknowledged that workforce shortages were a systemic issue. As a result, many statutory staff were struggling with high caseloads and little capacity to address long waiting lists. Staff also indicated that the type of support available to families often did not meet their needs. As shown in Figure 1, participants indicated that short-term interventions instead of long-term family support was problematic (79.4%), with insufficient time given to work directly with families (64.5%). Funding was also identified as a barrier to providing services to meet the needs of families with staff reporting a lack of funding for the community and voluntary sector (76.6%) and short-term funding cycles making it difficult to plan service delivery (67.3%).

Figure 1: Staff Perceptions of Current Challenges Facing Children's Services Responding to Needs of Families



N = 110

Children, Young People and Families' Experiences of Current Challenges

Participants of the focus groups were asked about both their positive and negative experiences of statutory Children's Social Care Services. Positive experiences recounted by children, young people, parents and carers mainly relied on personal relationships they had built up over time with statutory staff such as social workers, physiotherapists, health visitors or consultants. These relationships supported families to navigate the system and access the services they needed in a timely manner. Participants also highlighted that they had positive experiences using charities or when statutory services worked in collaboration with the voluntary sector such as the model used for Barnardo's Fostering and Adoption Northern Ireland. While some positive experiences were identified through the focus groups, participants were more likely to report having poor experiences with statutory Children's Services. Thematic analysis of the qualitative data found a number of key challenges identified by participants who had experience of engaging with Children's Services as outlined below:

Accessing Children's Services: While parents, carers and young people recognised that the combination of staff shortages and long waiting lists made it challenging for the social care workforce, many participants reported that it was difficult to obtain any type of support from Children's Services within a reasonable timeframe. This included support for children or young people with an assessed need or diagnosis. It was noted that this difficulty was ongoing over a period of many years:

> ***"I was supposed to have a social worker since first year but I have never had one. That's at least over four years and there has been nothing."*** Young Person

> ***"From I turned 18, 4 years ago, social care have been unable to offer anything to meet my needs as assessed by them."*** Young Person

Children and young people with complex or additional needs may encounter additional barriers in accessing services as they were often informed that they required specialist services. The example that was repeatedly given was the failure of children and young people with autism to be able to access CAMHS. Due to long waiting lists for specialist services, the unintended consequence was that children and young people often went without any statutory service provision for long periods of time:

> ***"If you have a big list of problems, they will be a lot less willing to listen to you because they will just be like I don't think we are qualified to help you there. You are too complicated to help."*** Young Person

> ***"If your child has any type of special need, people are less likely to bother. They do not want to touch it with a bargepole."*** Parent

Parents and carers expressed high levels of frustration at being unable to access support for their child from Children's Services. Parents were unclear how to navigate the system without being assigned to a social worker and uncertain about the process or what supports were available. This was particularly acute for parents when their child began transitioning to Adult Social Care Services. Parents' confusion was often compounded through the lack of information and communication from statutory staff.

Inconsistency: Parents, carers and young people reported that they had experienced high levels of staff turnover. Consistency of staff was important to families but this was often not possible due to poor staff retention:

> ***"He was pushed from pillar to post there so somebody left then he got another person then another person and it takes a lot for him to get to know people and trust people."*** Parent

> ***"The kids are seeing them, then are seeing someone different and it upsets the children. The children are all over the place and they are going 'Who is this person now?'"*** Carer

In some cases, high staff turnover meant that children and young people no longer had access to the service they needed or that there were long delays to service delivery. Participants were also aware that there was often a disparity between the service they received and the service received by others living in different Health and Social Care Trust areas.

Communication with Families: Parents reported a lack of communication from statutory staff about information relevant to them such as updates on waiting lists to access services or progress with their child's case. One recurring example given was parents discovering that their child's case had been closed without the family being consulted. Specifically, parents and staff participants highlighted the difficulty in finding an appropriate member of staff within Children's Services to contact and how they could be reached.

> ***"You are emailing and you don't have a name and you ring them and it's music."*** Parent

> ***"It is nearly like it is a secret society and you are not meant to know about it."*** Parent

The lack of face-to-face contact with families has also been highlighted as an issue. It remains the case that some Health and Social Care Trust areas have continued to deliver some services 'online only' since the COVID-19 pandemic began in March 2020. One example provided by a participant was the use of large online sessions being provided as a substitute for personal one to one support for young people with Autism. Another example provided by carers was of Looked After Children Reviews which continue to be held in some Trust areas by either phone or video conferencing with a 'black screen':

> ***"It is a black screen. You can't see any faces. It is only voices. They introduce themselves but in the middle of speaking you don't know who is who because you can't see them when they are talking."*** Carer

While understanding the convenience of online meetings, carers and staff viewed this as extremely poor practice, particularly when having difficult conversations. Staff also raised concerns about the lack of personalised care, health and safety and risks to confidentiality using this method.

Listening to Children and Young People: The most common theme raised by young people taking part in the focus groups was not being listened to. Young people described this in three main ways:

- **Valuing Young People's Views:** Young people reported that the things that were important to them such as socialising and gaining more independence were not valued or facilitated by the social care system. Transport which was once provided by the Trust to be able to access education, work opportunities and socialising was repeatedly cited as an issue for young people when it was removed at the age of 19. This particularly impacted on young people living in rural areas, families without a car and young people with physical disabilities, chronic illness or a learning disability.

- **Repeating Their Story:** Young people also reported that they often had to repeat their story many times to different professionals in each service or setting they were involved with. This was particularly exasperating as often time has lapsed between retelling their story without any change in the support they received:

> ***"At the time it is very hard to sit there and think to yourself, I have repeated this story over twenty times to twenty different***

> ***people, nothing has changed. Why should I say it again?"*** Young Person

- **Believing Young People:** Being listened to was often closely linked by participants to the idea of being 'believed' by statutory staff. Multiple examples of this were given including problems they were experiencing that they needed help with, preferences during transition periods in both health and educational settings and their views about contact with social workers or family members:

> ***"They would never listen to me. They did not believe half of my problems whenever I told them and they didn't believe the majority of my health conditions were a thing, even though there was proof."*** Young Person

> ***"They are not always listened to, the children. I think it is a big issue. The Trust social workers have such big caseloads and they are hearing the same things over and over again that maybe they become hardened to it and they just shrug it off."*** Carer

Advocating for Children and Young People: Similarly, parents and carers reported that they were often not listened to or given their place to advocate on behalf of their child. Parents described ongoing attempts to advocate for their child with staff in Children's Services in terms of a 'battle' or 'fight' which often had a detrimental impact on their own mental health and the rest of their family.

> ***"I know I personally have got to the stage where you give up because I have cried, I have fought, I made phone calls. I was at the end of my tether and it was affecting us as a family."*** Parent

> ***"You are constantly having to fight and advocate on behalf of the children. You shouldn't have to, it should be getting done and getting sorted by other people but you have to do it constantly."*** Carer

> ***"It feels like a battle the whole time. I have phoned every department that she goes to say 'Right what is your plan for her? Are you going to review her before you see her?'"*** Parent

Furthermore, participants reported experiencing indifferent attitudes from social care staff at times. This was described in terms of feeling their child was viewed as a number, a negative attitude towards parents and the perceived implication that they should be grateful for receiving any support:

> ***"I think there is now a mentality within the statutory services that you are lucky to be here. The message is stop complaining – there is a big waiting list and you are here now."*** Senior Leader

> ***"The way the lead in the LAC speaks to the birth parent is ridiculous. So rude and so condescending."*** Carer

> ***"They are just like another number. They don't see what the effect of this has on the young ones, what is happening and what they are doing to themselves, the stress and worry."*** Parent

It was also suggested that parents and carers felt that they were unable to complain about poor service without a 'black mark' against them by the social care system. The fear that complaining could potentially jeopardise the service they were trying to access or future services meant parents often tolerated negative attitudes and poor service delivery. Staff highlighted that some parents had limited capacity to be able to advocate within this type of system alone.

Information Sharing: Closely related to the lack of communication with families was issues around information. This was described by participants of the focus groups in three main ways:

1. **System Information:** Many participants found it difficult to access information about services or supports that would benefit them in the local area. They reported that there was not enough information on how to navigate the Children’s Services system and that this was not held in one centralised place.

2. **Recording Information:** The accurate recording of information was highlighted as an important issue due to the high staff turnover and the current use of temporary agency staff. Participants reported that in their experience, note taking of meetings and record keeping by staff working in the statutory sector could be poor and was mainly paper based in nature. This made it difficult for information to be recorded in one place and risked information being lost.

3. **Sharing Information:** Both young people, parents and carers highlighted the importance of accessing information held about themselves or their child. It was suggested that a better use of existing technology such as CHARMS, PaRIS or the Northern Ireland Electronic Care Record (NIECR) could be used to support this. Staff had a different perspective as they focused on the need for better information sharing between statutory teams and the need to improve how information is shared with external partners such as Education and those working in the community and voluntary sector.

SECTION 2: The Role of the Community and Voluntary Sector

Participants of the staff survey viewed the community and voluntary sector as providing a distinct role in social care services for children. Most staff identified that community and voluntary sector services tended to be flexible, responsive and person centred with good understanding of the local community. Staff also reported that the community and voluntary sector had a role of 'bridging the gap' between families and statutory social care services for:

- those that would not engage with statutory services due to fear or stigma; and
- those who were waiting to access a statutory service.

Staff also emphasised that the community and voluntary sector was distinctive due to its independence from statutory services and the voluntary nature of engagement. This section focuses on two central issues of: (i) workforce recruitment and retention; and (ii) funding of the community and voluntary sector.

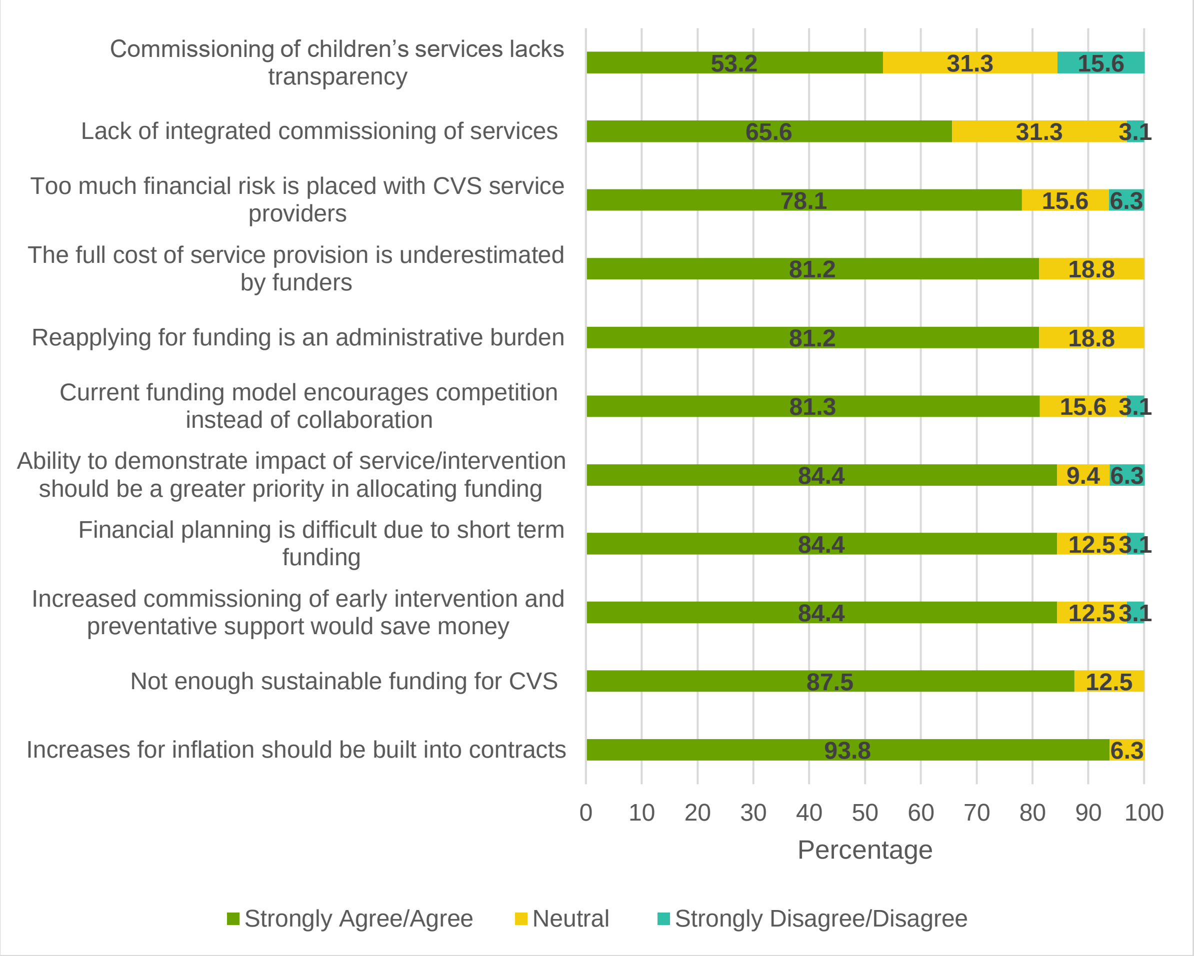
Workforce Recruitment and Retention in the Community and Voluntary Sector

Staff recommended more investment is needed in the children's social care workforce. This was described in terms of both recruitment of new staff and retention of current staff. Staff suggested that investment in this area would increase capacity and reduce pressure on staff across the system. This would be beneficial for children and families as waiting lists would be reduced and staff would have more time to build relationships with families. The two main barriers to both recruitment and retention were the perception of pay in the community and voluntary sector being lower than statutory counterparts and the uncertainty caused by short-term funding.

Staff Views of Current Funding Model

In terms of the current model of funding for the community and voluntary sector, findings show that a high proportion of participants agreed that change is needed. As displayed in Figure 2, most staff agreed or strongly agreed that increases for inflation should be built into contracts (93.8%) and that there is not enough sustainable funding for the community and voluntary sector (87.5%). Results indicate clear consensus from respondents related to a change in how money is spent, for example, increased commissioning of early intervention and preventative support (84.4%) and how greater importance should be placed on demonstrable outcomes when funding is being allocated (84.4%).

Figure 2: Changes to Current Model of Funding



N= 32[1]

---

[1] Not all staff had knowledge of funding

Findings also show that the current model is not conducive to collaboration (81.3%) and that the real cost of interventions made by community and voluntary organisations is often not fully recovered from statutory organisations (81.2%).

SECTION 3: The Future of Children's Services

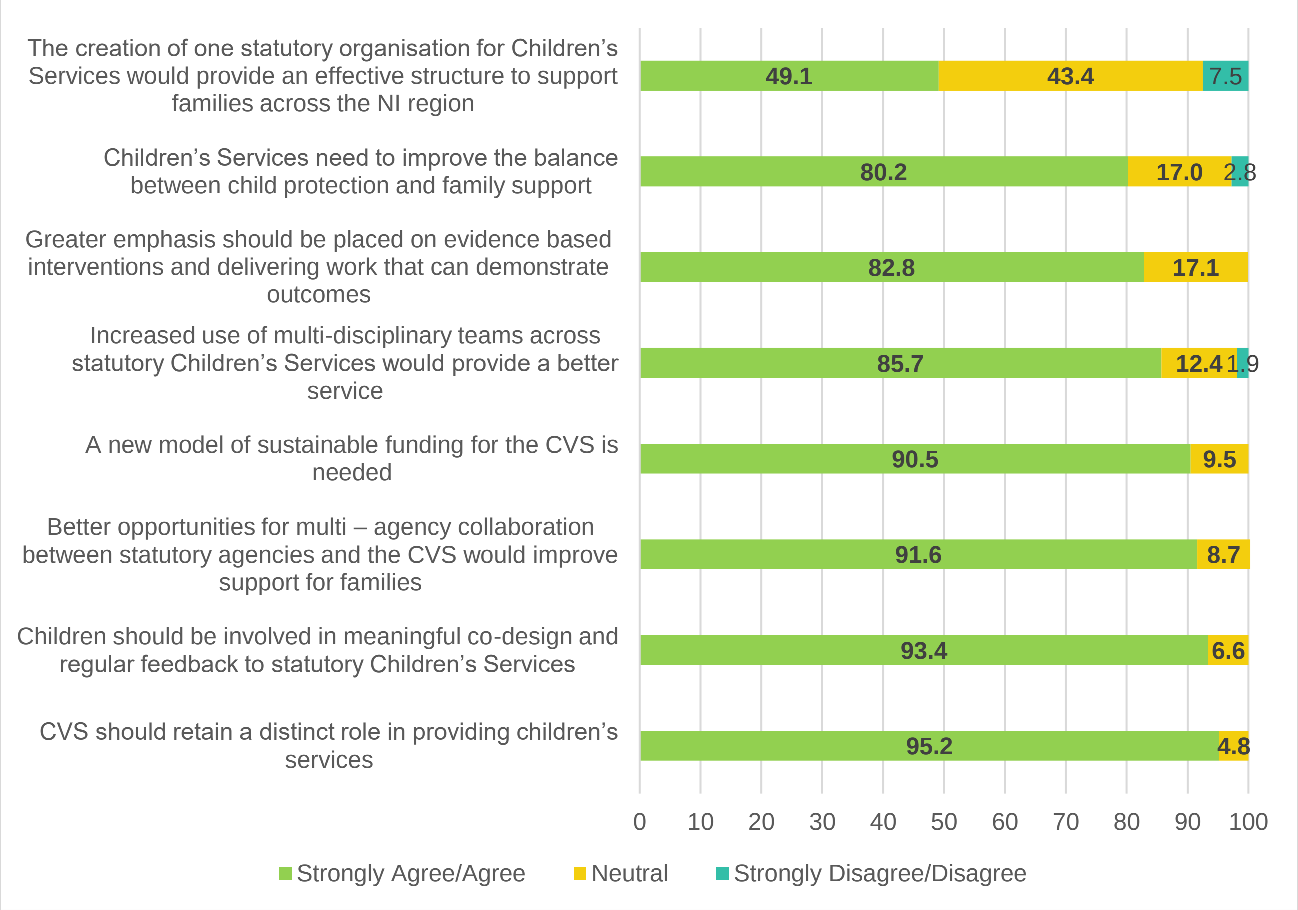
This section provides an insight into participants' views on the future direction of Children's Services in Northern Ireland. Discussions were held in every focus group on the two main proposals of: (i) the creation of one regional organisation for Children's Services; and (ii) the increased use of multi-disciplinary teams. Other areas of interest related to the Review were also discussed including participants' views on the potential shift in focus from 'children' to' family' services, better use of IT and their ideas about how children, young people and parents/carers could hold the system to account.

Staff Views of the Future of Children's Services

In the survey, staff were asked to consider to what extent they would agree or disagree with a range of statements about the future of the children's services system in Northern Ireland as shown in Figure 3. Results show that over ninety percent of staff agreed or strongly agreed on four core areas for the future of Children's Services in Northern Ireland:

- over ninety five percent of staff agreed that the community and voluntary sector should retain its independence within a new system (95.2%);
- children's services in the future should include meaningful co-design and feedback with children and young people (93.4%);
- better multi – agency collaboration (91.6%); and
- a new sustainable funding model for the community and voluntary sector (90.5%).

Figure 3: Staff Perceptions of the Future of Children's Services



N= 110

The majority of staff also agreed that future delivery of Children's Services should increase the use of multi-disciplinary teams (85.7%), have greater emphasis on demonstrating good outcomes for families (82.8%) and restore the balance between family support work and child protection (80.2%).

Staff Views on One Regional Organisation for Children's Services

Results displayed in Figure 3 above show Barnardo's NI staff expressed differing views towards the proposal to create one statutory organisation to replace the current Children's Services model operating across five Trusts. While half of staff (49.1%) agreed or strongly agreed that the creation of one statutory organisation for Children's Services would provide an effective structure to support families across the NI region, 43.4% were unsure with 7.5% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with this.

Reflecting the survey results, staff participating in the focus groups conveyed mixed views about the proposal to create one regional organisation for Children's Services. Staff in the focus groups suggested that they did not have enough information about the proposed changes to form a firm view. Staff felt there was a range of key areas around implementation, the role of the community and voluntary sector and collaboration which needed clarification. Questions raised by staff have been recorded in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Areas Identified by Staff as Requiring Further Clarity

- Is there a risk that a new organisation would centralise services and reduce access to some families?
- What age limits will the new organisation have?
- How would a new organisation reduce waiting lists?
- How long would changes to create a new organisation take to implement?
- What type of leadership structure will the new organisation have?
- Is the necessary budget available?
- How would new organisation allocate funding on a regional basis?
- How can the community and voluntary sector be better utilised to reduce pressure on the new organisation?
- How will the new organisation collaborate with other key departments, particularly with clinical services, Adult Social Care Services and Education?
- Where do other significant services for children such as SureStart and CAMHS fit into this model?

While details related to these areas in Figure 4 remain unknown at this time, staff were clear that changes on this scale must produce better outcomes for children, young people and families than the current status quo. In this way, staff were supportive of a change in focus from 'children' to 'family' services particularly as it was a better reflection of how Barnardo's NI services tend to operate. Staff also identified that a new organisation provided the opportunity to do things differently at a regional level. Benefits of this included streamlining administration at the top, decreasing duplication, increasing consistency and reducing the postcode lottery through greater standardisation of practices and processes.

> ***"I would just love it if it wasn't about Trusts anymore. It is just about what the process is. This is what we are going to go through and it would not matter if it was Antrim, Ballymena, Lisburn or Enniskillen."*** Social Worker

> ***"There is only so much money to go around and if we can streamline at the top, there is a better chance that those on the ground get what they deserve."*** Senior Leader

Staff also felt there was an opportunity to change structural barriers such as short-term funding, age limits for transition from children's services and address issues around transport.

Children and Young People's Views on the Creation of One Regional Organisation

Within the context of the challenges outlined in Section 1, children and young people were broadly positive about the proposed changes to create one children's social care organisation for Northern Ireland. Benefits identified by children and young people included convenience, opportunity for more support and easier for their parent/carer to manage:

> ***"I think the idea itself is good. There are too many things split off now so trying to get anything done requires you to go to***

> ***every single thing for a young person to do that, they usually need to get their parent to do it and it is hard to find a lot of time to go to every single individual branch for everything."*** Young Person

> ***"I feel like the idea could work really well it just needs a proper solution and a proper team working behind it who genuinely do care for the idea of it working and will fight for it."*** Young Person

Participants were asked what the priorities would be for children and young people within a new system. Thematic analysis across the three focus groups with children and young people, identified three key themes as outlined below.

Listening to the Views of Children and Young People: This was the most common theme identified in the focus groups. Children and young people reported that their views were important and should be respected. They also highlighted that they needed the appropriate information, including in different languages and formats, to help them make good choices:

> ***"It is a good idea to get young people's opinions because our opinions matter in life. It is our life."*** Young Person

> ***"Listen to good ideas from children and good ideas from others."*** Child

> **"Giving young people information to understand and help them make educated choices on what they want would be a good idea."** Young Person

There were some differences in the types of examples given by children and young people. It was important for younger children that adults listened to their preferences on how they engaged with services. This included choices about accessing services in their home environment and different ways to communicate such as drawing or writing:

> ***"Them coming to my house would be better so I can have an animal up on my knee and rub their ears."*** Child

> ***"Staying at home you can tell your views in private so that no one else can hear."*** Child

Young people were more focussed on the importance of their views being heard around their independence. It was important for young people that a future organisation helps them become more independent and that support is tailored to meet individual needs and circumstances. They wanted their views on the extent of their parents' involvement and staying within Children's Services past the arbitrary age limits listened to within the new organisation.

> ***"We want our independence. We don't want to be depending on our parents."*** Young Person

> ***"It is good to take in parents' opinions but you need to ask the young person's opinions and maybe value them a little bit more than the parents' opinions."*** Young Person

Children and young people did not express any strong views about the shift in focus from 'children' to 'family' services.

Relationships: Children and young people identified that friendly and trusting relationships with adults are important. In order to improve how these relationships are built and maintained in a new organisation, children and young people suggested that it would be helpful to have information about social care workers before they met such as a brief profile including a picture. As outlined above, listening to the views of children and young people was a central issue for participants. However, they also recognised that sometimes they needed support from adults to express their views. Children and young people felt advocacy should be a key priority in the design of the new organisation where parents, carers or a trusted adult with knowledge of the system could play a recognised role as an advocate:

> ***"Some people do not like talking to absolute strangers about the problems they have with the system so if they had someone that they did know and could tell a little bit about they could maybe say it to them or just have someone that they gradually get to know in the system."*** Young Person

The increased use of supportive peer relationships within a new organisation was also discussed. Children and young people saw this as an important way in which they could meet with others in a similar position and access help potentially in a more informal way.

Greater Collaboration with Education: Throughout the focus groups, most children and young people stressed the importance of school as a place they considered safe and where they were able to access information and support. It was suggested that there could be greater collaboration between schools and other educational settings and the new organisation to provide appropriate services to children and young people in surroundings they are comfortable in. However, it was not the case that all children and young people felt safe in school as two participants of the focus groups had experienced long periods of being home schooled. Nevertheless, they also identified the problem of health and education services not working together which resulted in a poor service:

> ***"If you are home schooled as far as this country is concerned you are on your own. You don't even get money for it, maybe***

> ***some pocket change to buy a book or something."***
>
> Young Person

Parents and Carers' Views Creation of the Creation of One Regional Organisation

The first priority of parents and carers for any reorganisation of children's services was to ensure that the current challenges of long waiting lists, high staff turnover and poor communication were addressed. In this way, parents and carers were cautious about the idea of one regional social care organisation for children. The greatest concern parents and carers had was that a new model of delivery may result in reduced services in some areas or may increase the challenges parents and carers had in gaining access by moving services out of the local area. Similar to staff, parents and carers also questioned what budget was available for this and how long this type of reorganisation would take to achieve. Despite the cynicism that a new organisation would improve services on the ground, parents and carers suggested improvements that should be included in the design:

Recognition of Parents and Carers within the System: Participants were positive about the shift in emphasis from 'Children' to 'Family' services as they felt this better reflected reality and included them. Parents and carers felt there should be greater understanding of the difficulties they faced with their child, often without any support. Foster carers felt their role should be better recognised in the future, including invitations to attend professional meetings concerning their foster child. Both parents and carers felt that their role in a child's care was often overlooked.

Focus on Individualised Support: Parents and carers viewed the creation of a new organisation as an opportunity to increase personalised support for children and young people by reducing the 'tick box' mentality which they often experienced from social care workers. Parents and carers would like to see more options provided for families to engage with social care which suits their circumstances. One example given was the ability to reduce social work visits for children in long-term settled foster placements. Parents and carers also emphasised that a new organisation, potentially operating through multi-disciplinary teams, should be able to lift the burden of administration for appointments and visits from a family:

> ***"Do I need physio, an OT, a health visitor, a speech and language therapist, my social worker, her social worker out in the space of a month? No I don't. That is about ticking their own boxes and has nothing to do with us."*** Carer

In this way, parents and carers felt that their family would be better supported as a whole, and it would help ensure that children and young people receive the necessary and appropriate support rather than a cycle of meetings that the system requires to be carried out.

Staff Views on Multi-Disciplinary Teams

From the two main proposals outlined by the Review Team, there was greater consensus around increasing the use of multi-disciplinary teams across the statutory Children's Services. As shown in Figure 3, 85.7% of staff surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that the use of multi-disciplinary teams would provide a better service. Staff reported that multi-disciplinary teams could improve collaboration between different services, reduce waiting lists and benefit families by providing all the services they needed through one team. SureStart was provided as a successful example of a range of professionals working in one place to support families in the local community. The setting of GP surgeries was also viewed as an accessible way that families could access a multi- disciplinary team which could support their needs.

> ***"I think there is real value in having a multi -disciplinary one stop shop approach, having your sensory OT, social worker, your autism specialist."*** Senior Leader

> ***"Easier access to multi-disciplinary teams would reduce long waiting lists for specialist services, e.g., substance misuse, CAMHs, DAMHs mental health, disability etc., they lose interest by the time they are offered an appointment."***
> Team Leader

While staff were broadly in favour of increased used of multi-disciplinary teams, a number of concerns were raised in the staff focus group about how multi-disciplinary teams would operate in practice. Staff were concerned that multi-disciplinary teams would be too general in nature and would reduce access to specialist services for families with particular focus on families having to travel long distances:

> ***"I think with multi-disciplinary sometimes it can get a wee bit wishy washy as opposed to that real bank of knowledge."***
> Project Worker

> ***"If we are looking at multi – disciplinary teams we need to know what exactly is the provision, what can Joe Bloggs expect from you and when we can't deliver do we know how to escalate."*** Senior Leader

Staff were also of the firm view that roles and responsibilities within the team needed to be clear and communicated to young people and parents with an established point of contact. Staff also felt it was important that members of the team had authority to act as necessary.

Young People, Parents and Carers' Views on Multi-Disciplinary Teams

Drawing from their own experiences of finding it difficult to access support from Children's Services, young people, parents and carers were largely supportive of the idea of multi-disciplinary teams. Overall, participants felt this removed the reliance on one person, could provide access to more personalised care and increase collaboration between professionals.

> ***"With Children's Services, you are very much reliant on the competence of an individual and that is wrong."*** Carer

> ***"I don't mind if there is a group of people as long as I am getting the support I need. That is all I ask."*** Young Person

> ***"I think that a group of people would be better because if someone else misses something in a group, if a social worker does miss something that someone already knows like there is a club I could go to or something else to help, it is a lot better because then you have more people knowing and looking out for what you need."*** Young Person

Parents and carers also saw the use of multi- disciplinary teams as an opportunity for services to better coordinate and make scheduling of visits and appointments easier, particularly for children and young people with complex needs. However, similar to the staff group, parents, carers and young people were apprehensive about some aspects of this change. The most common concern for young people was knowing who their contact person would be. Parents wanted clarity around what multi-disciplinary teams looked like particularly for children with complex needs, medical conditions and mental health concerns. Parents also questioned who their contact within a team would be and how CAMHS would operate within this new system. Foster carers wanted more information about how the role of the social worker may change within this proposed reorganisation. Concerns about accessibility for rural areas and the lack of transport to visit teams based long distances from their home were also raised by many participants.

Checks and Balances

Participants in every focus group were asked for their ideas about holding the new organisation to account. Children and young people tended to approach this in terms of ensuring social care workers do what they said they would do on a personal level. This was compared by one child to an 'unbreakable oath' from Harry Potter in which "If you break it, you get fired!". Children and young people talked about agreeing rules of how services should work inspired by the types of contracts some youth groups use to establish how children and young people behave. Young participants also wanted the opportunity to be able to ask questions or raise concerns with decision makers in person.

Staff, parents and carers recognised the need for much greater accountability within the social care system. Parents and carers wanted a clear understanding of who was responsible for their child's care, what services were meant to be provided and how to make a complaint about poor quality service if necessary. Staff highlighted the need to access evidence of how the system was working. Staff felt that statutory services should be required to monitor and evaluate their work in the same way that is often required of the community and voluntary sector by funders. Staff supported moving towards implementing a shared measurement framework across the statutory and community and voluntary sector in order to draw comparisons and identify which practices are most beneficial for children and families. Staff also cited the need to access this evidence regularly, such as quarterly or annually published reports including comparisons across the region within similar services.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this research was to gather evidence from multiple perspectives to inform Barnardo's NI response to issues arising from the Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services. Results from this process confirm that the current state of children's social care services in Northern Ireland is intolerable. A combination of staff shortages and long waiting lists exacerbated by the COVID pandemic, has resulted in a system in disarray. Too many children, young people and families are receiving a poor quality of care and many more are unable to access any support from Children's Services in a way that meets their needs. Results indicate that this problem is endemic affecting services across all Health and Social Care Trust areas.

The central theme that emerged from the qualitative data of participants' experiences, was the failure of Children's Services to respond to the individual needs of children, young people, parents and carers. This was demonstrated across the themes identified in Section 1 in which the lack of information and communication from statutory staff meant parents, carers and young people were often uncertain about how to access help or get in touch with staff members. Both parents, carers and young people highlighted that they felt there was no role or way for them to effectively convey their needs or preferences and there was a need for advocates who were familiar with the social care system to support them in being heard by statutory staff. Overall, many participants reported that engaging with the social care system impacted negatively on their mental health.

Within this context, there was broad recognition from participants that the structural reorganisation of Children's Services both in terms of the creation of a new regional organisation and the increased use of multi – disciplinary teams could positively impact the services provided to families. The increased use of multi-disciplinary teams had most support from participants and was viewed as an opportunity to increase access to support for children, young people and parents and improve information sharing and communication across sectors. Staff reported that this could be an effective way to support early intervention and prevention and could be beneficial in terms of strengthening partnership work between the statutory and voluntary sectors. More clarity is needed around how and where multi-disciplinary teams will operate and the impact this will have on the quality of the service received by families.

Responses to the proposal to create a new regional organisation for children from the existing five Health and Social Care Trusts were varied. Benefits of the creation of a regional organisation included the opportunity to take a fresh approach to the design and delivery of children's services at a regional level which could increase consistency, reduce duplication and make better use of available resources. Staff recognised that the creation of a new organisation could provide the opportunity to adopt a systemic approach to service delivery with greater investment in early intervention and prevention work with families. To support this, staff suggested that SureStart provision should be expanded and included within the remit of a new regional organisation. Participants also highlighted the potential to improve multi- agency collaboration between statutory agencies and the community and voluntary sector through developing better processes to share information and expertise.

Parents and young people felt that a new organisational structure could be more effective in responding and listening to the needs of children and young people. However, most participants felt that they did not have enough information about the benefits and risks associated with the creation of a new regional structure to develop a firm view. Participants raised concerns about how the creation of a new regional organisation would address the current pressures such as long waiting lists facing families using Children's Services with many expressing a lack of confidence in the system to implement the necessary changes to improve Children's Services.

Recommendations

Drawing from the evidence gathered during this consultation process and the information from the Independent Review to date, the following recommendations have been made:

RECOMMENDATION 1: Addressing Current Challenges

Urgent action is required to address the current challenges facing children, young people, parents and carers engaging with Children's Services. This should include:

- **Reduction of Waiting Lists:** An Action Plan to reduce waiting lists for children's social care services should be developed by the Department of Health and implemented with other statutory partners.
- **Better Communication with Families:** Better communication from statutory services is critical to improving the experiences of children, young people, parents and carers. This includes clear and regular communication about their case with a named contact person, face to face contact, ease of access to information and increased use of advocacy.
- **Responding to Need:** Greater commitment and flexibility is needed from statutory staff in order to meet the needs of children and young people and to address the concerns raised by parents and carers.
- **Increased Collaboration with the Community and Voluntary Sector:** Partnership working between the statutory sector and the voluntary sector should be increased and improved, with particular focus on early intervention and prevention, to reduce immediate pressures on statutory Children's Services.
- **Standardisation of Data:** Work should be underway by the Department of Health to develop a standardised dataset on the performance of children's social care at a regional level to increase the data that is publicly available around waiting lists.

RECOMMENDATION 2: A Framework for Multi-Agency Collaboration

To improve multi-agency collaboration a framework between statutory agencies and the community and voluntary sector should be developed. The framework should include the following areas:

- **Multi – Agency Cooperation:** This framework would seek to guide how multiple agencies can share information in an effective and safe way and improve communication between staff working in different organisations. The framework would establish the role for the community and voluntary sector to work as equal partners in the planning, design and delivery of children's services.

- **Funding and Commissioning:** A new funding model is needed to support the community and voluntary sector deliver children's social care services. Priorities for a new funding model should include:
  - → **Sustainability:** Multi-year contracts would provide certainty to support workforce retention and allow greater forward planning. Recognition of the cost of inflation rises during the length of contracts is also required;
  - → **Responsive:** Funders should have increased ability to quickly meet the needs of families as new challenges emerge;
  - → **Investment in Early Intervention and Prevention**: Greater investment is needed to support early intervention and prevention work for children, young people and families, specifically at a local community level;
  - → **Proportionate Scrutiny:** Spending of public money by the community and voluntary sector should be held to the same level of scrutiny as the statutory sector with the level of reporting proportionate to the amount of funding involved;
  - → **Full Cost Recovery:** Commissioning should be based on full cost recovery for community and voluntary organisations including

indirect costs such as administration, energy and maintaining their digital infrastructure.

- **Supporting the Children's Services Workforce:** Opportunities to share good practice between sectors including shared training courses and resources should be increased to support the development of the whole workforce providing social care services to children and families.

RECOMMENDATION 3: The Role of the Community and Voluntary Sector

Greater effort is needed to build consensus within the community and voluntary sector in order to develop a strategic response to potential changes in how Children's Services are delivered. Consideration should be given to how to effectively facilitate engagement within the sector around the following key areas:

- development of a framework for partnership working with the statutory sector;
- a new model of funding for the community and voluntary sector;
- response to the proposals made by the Independent Review;
- increasing opportunities to share good practice within the sector;
- identifying areas of mutual interest.

RECOMMENDATION 4: Checks and Balances

A new approach to accountability is needed in order to build public confidence and increase transparency. Checks and balances need to be embedded into the children's social care system and could include:

- **Family Charter:** This charter would establish a social contract between the statutory children's social care organisation and families.

This would include outlining the service and treatment families can expect and what process to follow if services are not delivered to the necessary standard. The Family Charter should be co-produced with children, young people and families, widely publicised and be available in a range of age-appropriate formats including different languages, easy read and accessible communication versions.

- **Public Forums:** Regular opportunities for parents, carers, children and young people to raise concerns about children's social care with senior statutory representatives should be created within local communities to promote transparency, build trust and provide a visible way to hold senior leaders to account.
- **System Performance Monitoring:** The lack of disaggregated data held at a regional level needs to be addressed. This should include indicators to monitor the performance of children's social care, such as waiting lists, and feedback from children, young people and parents. A standardised dataset agreed in collaboration with all stakeholders should be published on a quarterly basis with annual reports to establish what works, areas requiring improvement and the impact of services on families.

Barnardo's NI will continue to engage with children, young people, parents and carers on these issues as they develop. We hope this paper has provided further insights for the Review and we look forward to working together to improve Children's Social Care Services in Northern Ireland.