

## **Barnardo's Northern Ireland**

### **The Executive Office**

#### **Draft Refugee Integration Strategy**

Barnardo's NI is the largest children's charity in Northern Ireland. In the past year we worked with approximately 18,000 children, young people and families across more than 45 different services and programmes. We are a leading provider of schools-based support, reaching more than 32,000 children in schools across the UK and Ireland through our NI-managed social and emotional literacy programmes.

We deliver a wide range of services, from providing family support and early intervention, to working directly with children and families who have experienced adversity and need our support. Our goal is to achieve better outcomes for more children. To achieve this, we work with partners to build stronger families, safer childhoods and positive futures.

Barnardo's NI welcomes the Department's consultation on the draft Refugee Integration Strategy. Barnardo's NI has over 25 years' experience supporting children and families who are new to Northern Ireland, some of whom are refugees or asylum-seekers, and our comments are informed by this service experience. More recently, since December 2015, we have delivered the Northern Ireland Refugee Support Service (NIRSS) in collaboration with other local voluntary organisations, as part of the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme. NIRSS provides intensive support to refugees placed in Northern Ireland, supporting families and children to cope with both past trauma and integration into Northern Ireland.

Since April 2018, Barnardo's NI has delivered the Independent Guardian Service, which provides guardians for separated and unaccompanied children, including those who are victims, or potential victims, of human trafficking. A key element of the Guardian's role is to ensure that the child's voice, wishes, and feelings are heard and represented with all professionals involved in their case and to advocate for the best interests of the child.

Our response will provide some general, overarching comments on the strategy as a whole, as well as providing feedback on the individual outcomes and suggested additional outcomes.

## 1. General comments

- 1.1. Barnardo's NI welcomes the publication of the draft Refugee Integration Strategy and the commitment of the Executive Office to progressing this important strategy. However, while the draft strategy is well intentioned, the content of the strategy is lacking in clarity or detail and therefore it is challenging to understand how it will be implemented and what real-life impact of the strategy will be.
- 1.2. Barnardo's NI believes that the title of the strategy 'Refugee Integration Strategy' does not capture the ambition and vision of this strategy. This strategy is wider than refugees, it also includes asylum-seekers and people who are new to Northern Ireland (often referred to as 'Newcomers'). These three groups have different rights and entitlements to support and services in Northern Ireland, and it is crucial that this strategy explicitly recognises, understands, and accounts for those differences.
- 1.3. Additionally, the title of the strategy seems to place responsibility with refugees for the process of integration, when research has shown that integration is a two-way process, including the 2020 Barnardo's NI report, ['A New Life for Me: Integration Experiences of Syrian Refugee Children and their Families'](#).
- 1.4. Prior to the launch of the 'New Life for Me' report, the integration experiences of Syrian refugee children in the UK had not been well documented. This report outlines how family dynamics and experiences in school influence refugee children's integration processes, and the support provided to families by the Barnardo's Northern Ireland Refugee Support Service. The findings highlight many positive experiences of resettlement, but also the multiple challenges faced by refugee children and their families as they adapt to a life in a new culture and society.
- 1.5. 'A New Life for Me' recommends that "[a] fully understood and resourced strategy aimed at supporting the integration of refugee children and their families by all agencies who have responsibility to meet their needs will have limited success without the acceptance and participation of the local community. The community in Northern Ireland must be encouraged and supported to better understand the nature and trauma of seeking asylum and resettlement in another country, and understand the benefits, responsibility and pride Northern Ireland should have in offering this sanctuary to some of the most vulnerable children and families in the world."

- 1.6. Barnardo's NI recommends that the Executive Office looks at how the strategy can be framed where all communities in Northern Ireland are part of its success. This must be reflected throughout the strategy, from the name of the strategy, to how to outcomes and actions are framed and delivered.
- 1.7. There are a number of key overarching principles which are missing from this strategy. There does not appear to be an analysis and understanding of the issues facing refugees and asylum-seekers in Northern Ireland, and the challenges of integration. How can the strategy propose solutions when it has not yet identified the challenges?
- 1.8. In order to gain a better understanding of the scale of support needed, fully comprehensive, disaggregated data must be collected about the communities and people that come within the scope of this strategy. This will give us a better understanding of where support is needed and the demand for that support, allowing us to design and better target services. Where we have inaccurate or outdated data, services may not be designed to fully meet that demand.
- 1.9. An example of this is the Independent Guardian Service (IGS) which Barnardo's NI has been commissioned to deliver by the Northern Ireland Health and Social Care Board since April 2018. When the service was originally designed and contracted by the Board, it was anticipated that IGS would support approximately 12 children per year. However, in the first three years we supported over 121 children in this service, this is more than triple the number that was expected in that timeframe. This has resulted in the service very quickly having to adapt and expand their delivery so that they can still meet the needs of every child they support.
- 1.10. Improved data collection, and sharing of that data, would allow services to be fully responsive to the need as soon as they are established, thereby allowing our children and families to feel better supported and assisting their integration journey in Northern Ireland.
- 1.11. Throughout the strategy, the outcomes and associated actions are vague and passive. There is no indication as to who is responsible for the outcome, who will be taking the action, and how success will be measured. Additionally, the terms used are vague and do not point to concrete next steps; this key information is not contained anywhere within the draft strategy.
- 1.12. Barnardo's NI recommends that the strategy clearly identifies which departments or bodies are responsible for each outcome, who will be undertaking the action, and what the measurement of success will be

for each action and outcome. It is also important that a review of the strategy is built in to ensure lessons learned are being implemented as soon as possible.

- 1.13. Interpreters are a key link between a recently arrived refugee and asylum-seeker, and their new community and environment in Northern Ireland. However, there are no references to interpreters and the vital link they provide within the strategy. Interpreters assist in making support and systems accessible to children and families, thereby allowing them to engage and start to integrate. The strategy must acknowledge the role of interpreters in integration, and how interpreters will be more accessible and available to refugees and asylum-seekers.
- 1.14. Finally, while the introduction to the strategy recognises the levels and layers of integration, this is not reflected in the outcomes and associated actions. It is important that this understanding is a strand that runs through the body of the strategy in order to inform the implementation and assessment of the strategy's success.

## **2. Children and young people**

- 2.1. The Barnardo's NI report '[A New Life for Me](#)' recommends that children should be a particular focus when considering integration. The role, challenges and needs of children are very different to adults and this should be reflected in the strategy.
- 2.2. Although our report found that some refugee children cope well when they arrive in Northern Ireland, the research highlighted the myriad of challenges that children have presented with during resettlement, including developmental delay, heightened fear and anxiety, aggressive behaviour, acting out trauma during play, teenage bedwetting, nightmares and difficulty trusting others. Barnardo's NI key workers stressed that it is critical that refugee children are supported to feel a sense of safety, in school and in the community.
- 2.3. Identifying the need for therapeutic interventions can be difficult, as children typically do not talk about or express their feelings about past experiences of trauma. Stigma and/or different cultural understandings around mental health were identified as potential barriers to refugee families' willingness to seek help.
- 2.4. Educational placements (particularly for children with special educational needs) often involve considerably longer waiting times, particularly if specific support provisions must first be put in place. This delays children's opportunities for friendship development and contact

with peers. Children with additional learning needs can face greater difficulties learning English, which perpetuates social isolation and presents further integration challenges.

- 2.5. Children should not be left to face additional challenges alone, such as having a caring responsibility or acting as the main contact point for the family with external agencies. There should be trauma support available for all refugee, asylum-seeking, and unaccompanied and separated children to consider the impact of their past experiences on their ability to integrate into life in NI. Schools have a role to play in supporting refugee children who have had traumatic experiences, but should not be left to face this issue alone - specialist support from healthcare professionals is also needed.
- 2.6. Barnardo's NI recommends that the strategy clearly outlines how the needs and experience of children will be reflected in the outcomes and actions. We recommend that a specific outcome is developed for children and young people, and that their needs are also reflected throughout the rest of the outcomes. The approach adopted in the Gillen Review is a good example of how the needs of children and young people can be identified throughout a strategy and specifically addressed in their own dedicated section.

### **3. Communities in Northern Ireland**

- 3.1. Barnardo's NI recommends that this strategy has an additional outcome which examines what communities in Northern Ireland will do to work towards and support integration. We would recommend that the outcome wording reflects this, for example 'Northern Ireland and our communities are a welcoming and inclusive place for refugees and asylum-seekers'.
- 3.2. The associated actions should reflect the actions that communities can take to ensure their areas are welcoming to refugees and asylum-seekers that come to live in Northern Ireland. The actions should also provide detail on the departments and agencies that are responsible for implementing these actions.
- 3.3. The actions should reflect that different communities in Northern Ireland are at different stages in this journey and will need differing levels of support and resources. The strategy should take this into account and ensure that no community is left out.
- 3.4. While this strategy is focused on integration of refugees and asylum-seekers who have arrived in Northern Ireland, it must reflect on the

wider context of integration between communities in Northern Ireland. This strategy does not exist in a vacuum and the reality of integration between different resident communities in Northern Ireland is an important factor to take into consideration, and for refugees and asylum-seekers to learn about.

#### **4. Outcome 1**

##### *Engagement and Inclusion*

- 4.1. This action references a co-production model. Barnardo's NI welcomes the commitment to co-production; however this co-production must be inclusive, fully funded and resourced, and long-term in order to be meaningful and successful.
- 4.2. While the aspiration to undertake co-production is often well-intentioned, it is rarely implemented in the true spirit of the term. In order for a co-production model to be fully realised, the communities and people most impacted by this strategy must be engaged at the earliest possible stage. This group of people with lived experience and representative organisations should input into the design of the co-production process from the beginning and be valued as equal partners and decision makers.
- 4.3. The co-production group should be diverse, bringing in a wide range of different experiences and backgrounds, including people with different nationalities, ages, gender, disabilities and other equality grounds. People must be supported to engage meaningfully with the co-production process, and the process must be adapted to suit their needs.

##### *Education and Training*

- 4.4. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child affirms that every child has the right to education. It is the responsibility of the Northern Ireland state to ensure that all refugee and asylum-seeking children in Northern Ireland are supported to access good quality education that meets their needs. This strategy must reflect that responsibility and outline how refugee and asylum-seeking children's educational needs will be met.
- 4.5. The materials and resources developed to support asylum-seeking children and young people must be available for all teachers and rolled out as part of teacher training, both for new teachers and qualified, experienced teachers. This approach must be embedded as part of the core curriculum rather than solely in schools where there are currently refugee and asylum-seeking children.

- 4.6. Additionally, these resources should be available beyond mainstream schools, and in all education facilities, including Education Other than at School (EOTAS), youth services, Special Schools and informal education facilities.
- 4.7. Barnardo's NI recommends that this strategy should link closely with the Department of Education's Newcomer Strategy. This is key to ensuring that the system is working together, rather than in silos.
- 4.8. From our research and experience, we know that English language classes are a top priority for asylum-seeking and refugee children in education. Children and young people feel that they are not able to excel in education and are losing out because of the language barrier, rather than because of their academic ability.
- 4.9. In 2021, Barnardo's conducted a survey of the young people that Barnardo's supports around the UK. For our refugee children, English language classes emerged as a key theme, one young person said they wanted to *'have more language classes so we can integrate into the community more and learn the culture'*.
- 4.10. Providing refugee and asylum-seeking children with access to English language classes will allow them to better engage in education, with their peers, and their community; ultimately this will assist their integration into life in Northern Ireland.
- 4.11. Additionally, it is very important to recognise that children should not be seen as interpreters for their parents or families. Wherever possible, interpreting services should be used, and in any cases related to sensitive matters, for example medical or legal advice, children should never be asked to interpret.
- 4.12. Finally, this action references extending the Schools of Sanctuary programme. Barnardo's NI would welcome sight of the evidence for, and assessment of, the Schools of Sanctuary programme and the rationale for extending the programme.

## **5. Outcome 2**

- 5.1. While Barnardo's NI welcomes the intention of Outcome 2, it is difficult to understand how this will be measured or achieved in reality. The outcome text states that "Refugees and asylum-seekers feel welcome ... without fear of ... discrimination resulting from their immigration status". Discrimination is the nature of the current immigration system, and under that system refugees and asylum-seekers have different rights

and entitlements. This strategy must recognise the reality under which it operates and reflect that it the outcomes and actions by either accounting for it, or seeking to challenge/mitigate the impact.

### *Housing*

- 5.2. There is no reference to children within this action, even though it will clearly have an impact on children and their needs must be addressed. In particular, the needs of separated, unaccompanied and asylum-seeking children must be clearly acknowledged, with specific actions addressing their needs.
- 5.3. How will the Department ensure that the accommodation is safe and secure? Will minimum standards be applied and measured against? It is essential that the housing provided for refugees and asylum-seekers meets those required standards.
- 5.4. There is no information about what the 'move on process' is and what it involves. Barnardo's NI would welcome further detail on this process, who it applies to, how it impacts children and families, who undertakes implementation, and who is responsible for the process.

### *Destitution*

- 5.5. The structure of the immigration system can result in people, including children and families, becoming destitute. The strategy must address this huge gap in our systems of support and ensure that no-one ends up in destitution as a result of their immigration status. No child should grow up homeless or in poverty.
- 5.6. Additional detail is needed on 'policy staff': who is included in this umbrella term, which bodies do they work for and how will they input into the implementation of the strategy?

### *Protecting the Most Vulnerable*

- 5.7. In the general comments at the start of this response we highlighted the initial anticipated demand for our Independent Guardian Service, versus the reality of the number of unaccompanied or separated children who we have arrived in Northern Ireland. Since the service opened in 2018, the number of children who arrived and were supported by a Guardian far surpassed expectations. It was anticipated that IGS would support approximately 12 children per year; however, in the first three years we supported over 121 children.



- 5.8. A review must be undertaken to ensure that the estimates used to allocate resources and services are in line with the number of separated, unaccompanied and asylum-seeking children arriving in Northern Ireland. If the resources and services are based on inaccurate or outdated numbers, the complex needs of these children will not be met. Ultimately, this will negatively impact on their integration experience.

## **6. Outcome 4**

- 6.1. Barnardo's NI recommends that this outcome is redrafted to reflect the achievements that asylum-seekers and refugees have already accomplished, recognising the challenges and hurdles they have overcome in reaching Northern Ireland. In its current framing, this outcome suggests that refugees and asylum-seekers will only achieve their 'full potential' after arriving in Northern Ireland and integrating.
- 6.2. This outcome should focus on making opportunities for asylum-seekers and refugees more accessible and available to them. It is up to each individual to determine what their 'full potential' is, and it is the task of this strategy to ensure that they have accessible opportunities available to them to achieve their goals.

### *ESOL*

- 6.3. This strategy must recognise the benefits of supporting and promoting bilingualism, particularly in children and young people. It is essential that learning the English language does not come at the cost of neglecting their home language.
- 6.4. 'Language Made Fun' was a joint initiative between Ulster University's Ulster Centre on Multilingualism (UCoM) and Barnardo's NI which was designed to support the language needs of multilingual migrant children in Northern Ireland whilst promoting the maintenance of their home language. Research (eg. Paradis 2008 among many others) has shown that non-English speaking pupils are at risk of underachievement if not sufficiently supported with their second language.<sup>1</sup> The Language Made Fun programme is designed to assist the development of children's English through play.
- 6.5. Early research findings have been published in a report<sup>2</sup> and they show that a relatively small investment in providing individual linguistic

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ulster.ac.uk/research/topic/modern-languages-linguistics/quality/research-projects/language-made-fun>

<sup>2</sup> [https://pureadmin.qub.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/167646736/document\\_2\\_.pdf](https://pureadmin.qub.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/167646736/document_2_.pdf)

assessment and support for these children can have positive outcomes for language, communication and overall confidence of the pupils.

- 6.6. This model of bi-lingual language support is one that we recommend the Department examines and considers when designing and investing in ESOL provision, given the positive outcomes achieved in the Language Made Fun Programme.
- 6.7. It is also important that any support designed for refugee or asylum-seeking children and families takes their specific needs into account. Barnardo's NI's [Family Learning and Integration Project](#) (FLIP) used holistic approaches to build the capacity of families to gain skills and become more confident members of their communities, whilst celebrating their own language and cultural heritage. FLIP worked with two primary schools in South Belfast to support minority ethnic and newcomer families integrate with the community through individual work and group-based programmes. While FLIP had to close due to a lack of continued funding, there are a number of key learnings that could be used to inform service design and delivery in future.
- 6.8. FLIP was made up of a number of different capacity building programmes which aimed to support parents and children to confidently engage with their local communities and to achieve better educational outcomes for children. One of the key learnings from FLIP is that services must be flexible and adapted to meet the specific needs of minority ethnic children and families. A good example of this is the English language classes that FLIP provided.
- 6.9. Throughout the first and second years of FLIP, it became clear that there were a number of parents attending one session of parenting programmes, but were then dropping out as they did not have the level of English needed to participate. One of the schools that FLIP worked with already provided English classes to parents; however, they found that many parents were not attending due to a lack of childcare. As a result, a crèche was funded by The National Lottery Community Fund at the end of the second year, allowing parents to attend the classes. Although this is a resource intensive service, by creating the opportunity for parents to attend English classes, it becomes a pathway to availing of other FLIP interventions.
- 6.10. Supporting parents with English language learning will also support them to be able to engage in their children's education where previously language had been a barrier. This will not only improve their child's educational engagement and attainment, but will allow the family as a whole to better engage with, and integrate into, their community.

Barnardo's NI welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation on the draft strategy. We welcome the intentions of the Department to develop a strategy that is welcoming and inclusive, however it is not clear how this strategy will be practically implemented and realised. Barnardo's NI recommends a redrafting of the strategy to reflect tangible actions with clearly defined roles and responsibilities for the relevant departments, agencies and organisations. Additionally, Barnardo's NI believes that this strategy should be reframed to reflect the nature of integration as a two-way process, in which every community in Northern Ireland has its part to play.

We hope our comments have been useful and we would welcome the opportunity to continue engaging with the Department on the development of this strategy.

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