

Barnardo's Northern Ireland

All Party Group on Mental Health Inquiry

Mental Health Education and Early Intervention in Schools

Barnardo's NI is the largest children's charity in Northern Ireland. In the past year we worked with more than 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 opportunity to provide written evidence to the All Party Group on Mental Health's inquiry into Mental Health Education and Early Intervention in Schools. Our comments are informed by our long experience delivering social and emotional learning programmes in schools, as well as school-based counselling services. This work has developed over the years, however due to the lack of a commissioning strategy or co-ordinated strategic approach to funding this work in schools, children in Northern Ireland are not seeing the same benefits as their peers elsewhere in the UK.

It is also important to recognise that children experience their lives as a whole, and therefore partnership working with the local community, parents and other statutory bodies is essential in meeting the needs of children. Our Family Connections work is a great example of partnership working between statutory services, community and voluntary organisations, the community themselves, parents, and children, where children receive consistent support and messaging whether they are in school, in the community or at home.

Our response will firstly look at the current context that this inquiry is taking place in, including the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, cost-of-living crisis and budgetary pressure. We will then examine the different themes within the inquiry's terms of reference and reflect on Barnardo's NI's experience as well as looking at action that can be taken to address some of the challenges.

1. Current environment

- 1.1. In reviewing on the context for this inquiry, it is essential that the All Party Group consider not only the policy environment, but also the real lived environment that children and young people in Northern Ireland are growing up in.
- 1.2. The past three years have seen significant societal shocks make an impact on the daily lives of children and young people, and in turn, their mental health. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children's mental health cannot be underestimated. Overnight, children's lives were turned upside down, with schools closed and children unable to see their friends, relatives or support systems that they relied upon.
- 1.3. This is set out in the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People's report '[A New Normal](#)'¹, released in August 2021. Chapter 3 of the report looks specifically at the impact of the pandemic on children's physical and mental health. The report highlights how the Young Life and Times Survey and the Kids Life and Times Survey both identified a significant proportion of respondents who felt their emotional health had worsened during the pandemic (52% and 41% respectively). The report also highlights how young people struggled to access the support that they needed due to long waiting lists and the closure of face-to-face services.
- 1.4. The report also specifically examines the impact of school closures on the health of young people. It highlights that schools are not only a referral route to support for young people, but are also often a hub for the delivery of services, including mental health support. The report notes that Independent Counselling Service for Schools (ICSS) remained open during school closures with delivery moving online.
- 1.5. A report by Barnardo's NI in August 2020, '[New Term, New Challenges, New Opportunities](#)'², found that education professionals were concerned about the impact of the pandemic on children's mental health and wellbeing, and their ability to support pupils. The majority of professionals who took part in the survey indicated that they would be prioritising mental health and wellbeing on the return to school, but that reliable funding and good guidance were key to supporting children and young people effectively on their return to school.

¹ <https://www.niccy.org/wp-content/uploads/media/3882/niccy-covid-report-main-report-final-aug-21.pdf>

² <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/BarnardosNI-ChildrensMentalHealthAtTheHeartOfEducation.pdf>

- 1.6. While schools and services have largely resumed since lockdown, the impact and repercussions of the pandemic continue to be felt, in long waiting lists and increased need. In the past year we have also seen the cost-of-living crisis taking a toll on children and families. Those families who were just about getting by, are now struggling, and the families who were already struggling, are now finding themselves faced with impossible decisions. It is crucial that we recognise the impact this has on children's mental health and wellbeing.
- 1.7. Children are more likely to be living in poverty than any other age group, with 1 in 4 children in Northern Ireland growing up in poverty. No matter how much parents and carers might try to shield children from the stress and fear of poverty, children can pick up on an adult's distress and anxiety, and with the cost-of-living crisis dominating headlines, children are keenly aware of the environment they are living in.
- 1.8. Teachers tell us that the support needs they witnessed when school returned has continued to rise, with the cost-of-living crisis now adding another layer of complexity. Families who may have previously been on the edge of engagement, are further away and not engaging with any support in the school or community. Additionally, these factors are also having an impact on the mental health and wellbeing of teachers themselves, many of whom are seeing the cost-of-living crisis impacting their own ability to get by and their home and family life.
- 1.9. Children and young people experience their life as a whole, not in neatly separated packages depending on the building they find themselves in. The stresses at home and in the community will have an impact on a child's experiences and engagement at school and it is in recognising those different components that we can understand how to best support our children.
- 1.10. Finally, the current budgetary environment and recent announcements from the Department of Education and Education Authority have been very concerning for many schools. We are aware that schools have been asked to forecast for a significant reduction in their budget, in-year. This will result in extremely challenging decisions for schools, who had already seen their budgets stretched to meet running costs.
- 1.11. Barnardo's NI is concerned that in a restricted budgetary environment, social and emotional programmes, and counselling services are regarded as optional extras, not as core provision. However, we know that good mental health and wellbeing is key to a child's capacity to engage in learning. A 2019 study found that children who had mental

health difficulties were more likely to have lower attainment in education and more likely to be persistently absent from school³.

2. Levels of provision

- 2.1. Barnardo's NI has been working in schools in Northern Ireland for many years, providing support along the full spectrum that children and young people need access to. From universal social and emotional learning programmes such as the *PATHS® Programme for Schools (UK Version)* and *LifeSkills*, to individual school-based counselling, and community-based partnership approaches to supporting children and young people. Barnardo's advocates for a whole school approach, with services spanning the spectrum from universal to specialist to targeted support.
- 2.2. Below we have outlined some of those services and how these are delivered in schools. The biggest challenge we face as a service provider in schools is the patchwork of funding and support available to schools to support children and young people with their emotional health and wellbeing. We will explore this further in the final section, but it is important to recognise that while there are examples of good practice where children are receiving excellent support, this is currently a postcode lottery, and not all children have the opportunity to receive this support depending on where they live and go to school.

School-based Counselling Services

- 2.3. Barnardo's NI School-based Counselling Services has been providing professional counselling to pupils in primary, post-primary and special schools since 2007 through delivery of the Independent Counselling Service for Schools, the Colin Primary School Counselling Service and our independent primary school counselling service, 'Time 4 Me'.
- 2.4. The service is provided by qualified and nationally registered counsellors/therapists who are trained in a range of relevant modalities including Art Therapy, Play Therapy, Drama Therapy and Children and Young Peoples Counselling. The service uses Barnardo's award-winning 'CSSO Model' (Stewart, 2014)⁴, the organisation's preferred counselling delivery framework throughout the UK. The aim of the service is to promote the emotional wellbeing of pupils to improve learning potential.

³ <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/brain-sciences/news/2019/feb/study-links-poor-mental-health-educational-outcomes>

⁴ Stewart, D. (2014) *The CSSO Model*. BACP Children and Young People Journal

- 2.5. Approximately 200 children and young people access a Barnardo's counselling intervention each week in response to adverse life events that are disrupting their wellbeing and learning. The support issues addressed include anxiety, emotional regulation difficulties, family stress (including separation, relationship conflict, serious illness), bereavement, friendship difficulties and bullying. As part of each intervention therapists provide collaborative consultations for parents/carers and school staff to help support the system and maximise counselling outcomes.
- 2.6. As well as individual counselling interventions, the service also provides pupil drop-in services for low-intensity support needs, whole-class resilience workshops and staff training seminars.

[The PATHS® Programme for Schools \(UK Version\)](#)⁵

- 2.7. The *PATHS® Programme* is a universal schools programme for 4-11 year olds which empowers all children to develop the fundamental social and emotional learning skills which will enable them to make positive choices throughout life. The *PATHS® Programme* promotes positive mental health and emotional wellbeing in schools and is delivered through resources, training, and ongoing implementation support from Barnardo's in primary schools across Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK.
- 2.8. Barnardo's offers schools a tailored model of coaching & implementation support providing teachers with one-to-one planning and mentoring support; in-class lesson support; key stage and cluster meetings; thematic support for SEL (Social and Emotional Learning) competencies and whole-school links; curriculum alignment and development and extension activities. In addition to support provided to teachers, Barnardo's NI support schools to embed SEL through a whole-school approach, and provide support to senior leaders, governors, teachers, non-teaching staff and parents and carers to develop their SEL skills and embed SEL into core policies and schoolwide initiatives.
- 2.9. Barnardo's NI works with schools to implement the programme over a 4-year period, and outcomes are measured on an annual basis and shared with schools at the end of each academic year.

⁵ <http://www.pathseducation.co.uk/>

Botvin LifeSkills

- 2.10. Botvin LifeSkills is a highly effective evidence-based prevention programme that improves children's emotional health and wellbeing in both primary and secondary school settings. LifeSkills promotes resilience through the development of emotional literacy, critical thinking, problem solving, self-esteem, healthy relationships and strategies to prevent risk taking behaviours.
- 2.11. LifeSkills is a universal, whole class programme delivered by teachers. Teachers receive training to enhance their understanding of Social and Emotional Learning, trauma, and implementation of the LifeSkills programme. Implementation support is provided to schools in the form of teacher support, parent workshops, senior leadership and non-teaching staff training. On completion of the programme each class receives a LifeSkills Impact report. Clear outcomes can be illustrated at a class, school, and area level. LifeSkills is delivered in schools throughout UK and Ireland.

Jigsaw

- 2.12. Jigsaw is a family support service developed as part of the Neighbourhood Renewal Programme in South Ballymena. It aims to support children and families as they journey through primary school using both individual and group based interventions. The service addresses the barriers to educational achievement and aims to improve health, social, emotional and educational outcomes for children.
- 2.13. Jigsaw has been in existence since 2011 and during this time the project has provided a wide range of interventions to parents, children and school staff teams. The service is constantly evolving in response to emerging need. At the core of all work is the partnership between Barnardo's, the school, local council and Department for Communities.

Family Connections and [THRiVE](#)⁶

- 2.14. Family Connections offers a range of support services for children and families in schools and communities across South and East Belfast and Newtownabbey, including: early years play and learning, parenting programmes, transition support, family support, parent engagement, family learning and community links.
- 2.15. Barnardo's NI also provide backbone support to the THRiVE collaboration in Newtownabbey. THRiVE adopts a whole community approach to

⁶ <https://thrivenewtownabbey.co.uk/>

improving outcomes for children and young people. THRiVE is a collaboration of local parents, schools, community and voluntary organisations and statutory partners, working together to raise aspiration, improve attainment, support well-being.

- 2.16. THRiVE's campaign 'WE CAN' promotes aspirational messages across the community, and local Parent Champions are active in engaging other parents to participate. THRiVE uses a collective impact framework to agree shared goals and impact measurement systems for achieving well-being outcomes such as resilience, self-efficacy, help-seeking behaviours, parenting skills, connectedness.
- 2.17. THRiVE invests resources in school and community professional development for example, Solihull, Lego Therapy, Community Resilience and use of evidence-based interventions and programmes including LifeSkills and the *PATHS*[®] Programme in schools.

3. Current processes

- 3.1. In our experience delivering mental health education and early intervention in schools, we have found that supporting social and emotional learning, and mental health and wellbeing is often confined to the Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (PDMU) portion of the curriculum, rather than being seen as a whole school, and whole child, approach. A child's experience of school must be consistent, no matter what classroom they are in, and this includes the approach to mental health and wellbeing.
- 3.2. One of the biggest challenges in supporting children and young people with their mental health in school, is not necessarily in identifying that a child needs support but knowing the best way to respond. Teachers often recognise the need that their students have but do not feel equipped to be able to respond effectively as they have not been trained in this area. Teacher training has evolved very little in the past few decades, with the majority of teacher training focusing on academic subject areas, rather than the child and their capacity to learn; this is particularly pronounced for post-primary teacher training.
- 3.3. Where schools invest in mental health and wellbeing programmes, we find that the school teams begin to expand their knowledge and understanding of children's mental health and emotional wellbeing needs. For example, in schools where we have been delivering our counselling services, we find that after a period of time, the nature of

referrals to counselling begins to change, with teachers better equipped to identify pupils that might need support.

- 3.4. The most common reason for referral to counselling is childhood anxiety. When we start working in a school, the initial referrals are often children who have been displaying disruptive behaviours and are outspoken, however, as teachers develop a broader understanding of children's behaviour and how this reflects their needs, those children who are quieter or not drawing attention overtly begin to be identified and referred for support.
- 3.5. It is essential that teachers are trained and resourced to identify the needs of their students. This requires investment and commitment from senior leadership in schools to recognise the link between mental health and learning. An investment in children's mental health is an investment in their education and long-term outcomes. The lack of a co-ordinated approach from senior leadership in schools results in a differing approach to mental health and wellbeing in each school dependent on the ethos of the school and the vision of senior leadership.
- 3.6. For example, in our universal programmes like the *PATHS*[®] Programme and LifeSkills, due to the nature of school funding, schools themselves identify the need and reach out to Barnardo's for support. They must fund this out of their own school budget, and often it is justified as meeting their PDMU curriculum requirements. Therefore, in a constrained budgetary environment, often schools cannot continue to fund the programme and the delivery is cut short without implementing the full length of the programme which is needed to benefit fully from the programme.
- 3.7. Even prior to the recent budgetary pressure, schools were often making decisions on programmes they were buying in based on cost-effectiveness, rather than evidence of positive outcomes for children. A [2019 study](#)⁷ by the National Children's Bureau in Northern Ireland examined different mental health and wellbeing programmes delivered in schools in Northern Ireland. While many aimed to achieve positive outcomes, the evidence base for many programmes was light or absent, with little evidence of impact once it had been implemented. When every penny counts, it is even more essential to ensure that the money being spent is achieving good outcomes for children.

⁷<https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/35170/1/Informing%20the%20Development%20of%20an%20Emotional%20Health%20and%20Wellbeing%20Framework...%20%28redacted%29.pdf>

- 3.8. Additionally, schools need support in assessing the effectiveness of programmes and interventions, and what will achieve the best outcomes for their students. We recognise that schools are often tight on time, as well as money, and therefore they must be supported in assessing their needs, rather than placing an expectation on schools to become experts in this area. The recent pilot of primary school counselling 'Healthy Happy Minds' (HHM), launched at the end of 2021⁸, is an example of an investment that, while welcomed, continues to have a number of challenges in delivery.

Healthy Happy Minds

Barnardo's NI has been calling for the commissioning of primary school counselling since 2012. We welcomed the announcement of the pilot in May 2021, however as details became available, we became increasingly concerned about the safety, efficacy, and accountability of the pilot. Unfortunately, despite numerous conversations and attempts to raise these concerns with decision makers, many of these concerns still remain, as the pilot is live in schools. These are summarised below:

Governance, Accountability and Quality Assurance Processes

Barnardo's overriding concern is that there are insufficient processes for governance, accountability and quality assurance in the HHM contract. As a provider of the ICSS contract, we have experience of a robust accountability and quality assurance process which ensures that interventions are safe, ethical and meet national standards. The ICSS process also confirms if providers are meeting contract targets. As a new and developing opportunity within mental provision in Northern Ireland, it is our view that the HHM contract requires a centralised quality assurance system similar to that utilised within ICSS to ensure sufficient awareness and accountability in relation to professional standards for all stakeholders.

Requirement for safeguarding training for all providers

There does not appear to be a requirement for all providers to complete EA safeguarding training. This poses significant risks in relation to safeguarding and child protection concerns. It is our view that all HHM providers should complete safeguarding training as per the requirement in ICSS.

⁸ <https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/news/launch-ps5million-healthy-happy-minds-pilot-primary-schools>

Guidance on parental consent

Barnardo's is concerned that the HHM guidance document to schools indicates that there may be situations where parental consent is not required for an intervention to take place. Given the age of primary school children accessing counselling/therapy interventions under HHM there would always be a requirement for parental consent.

Workforce availability

Given Barnardo's experience over the last 14 months since the HHM pilot began, it is clear that workforce availability is a significant issue and that many schools have not been able to access a HHM counsellor/therapist. It is our view that there needs to be a clear workforce development plan in place alongside the rollout to schools.

Evaluation

Our key concern is the stakeholders engaged in the evaluation process – an effective evaluation must include feedback from schools, children and parents, as well as providers themselves. When an evaluation was finally disseminated in December 2022, it appeared that it focused solely on providers and individual therapists. An evaluation that does not incorporate feedback from all key stakeholders will not be an accurate reflection of the pilot. As we highlighted from the outset, an ineffective evaluation will be detrimental to the ongoing development of the pilot, and we are concerned about how findings from a limited survey of professionals can reliably inform the pilot's future implementation.

- 3.9. For Barnardo's, monitoring implementation and efficacy is a central component of programme delivery. For our *PATHS® Programme*, quality assurance is monitored by assessing a school's fidelity to the programme, evaluating the overall whole-school implementation of the programme, and ensuring that the school leadership are prioritising the programme and leading by example.
- 3.10. In LifeSkills, the school's co-ordinator monitors the fidelity of implementation throughout the programme delivery and each class receives an impact report demonstrating the impact that the programme has achieved.
- 3.11. Both the *PATHS® Programme* and LifeSkills are capacity building programmes, where teachers are trained to support their students in the classroom. The training that we provide in rolling out the programme

can often be a lightbulb moment for teachers where they see the link between brain development and behaviours that they see in children every day.

- 3.12. In Barnardo's NI, we advocate for the importance of a whole school approach, this means that the whole school is speaking the same language of social and emotional learning as well as mental health and wellbeing. This translates into a consistent approach, consistent language and consistent behaviours from staff and students. In this environment, every room should be a safe space for children and young people. However, we also recognise the need for a dedicated space for children and young people if they need time away or individual support.
- 3.13. The involvement of children and young people in the delivery and evaluation of programmes is very important. In particular, outcomes in counselling are notably improved if children and young people are asked for feedback, and this is a measure noted by the Therapeutic Alliance. The onus is then on the practitioner to improve and adapt their practice to meet the needs of the child. Each counselling intervention must be personalised in order to maximise impact for the child.

4. Funding

- 4.1. The lack of a commissioning strategy in Northern Ireland has not only restricted schools' access to programmes and also their ability to implement programmes, but it has made it difficult for schools to strategically plan and invest in long-term approaches to mental health education and early intervention. This puts children in Northern Ireland at a disadvantage compared to their peers in the rest of the UK and Ireland, where a more strategic, long-term approach is taken to the commissioning of mental health programmes and support in schools.
- 4.2. In England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland, local authorities or umbrella agencies, such as the NHS or Public Health Agency, have commissioned organisations like Barnardo's to deliver programmes in up to 100 schools per commission. This is more cost effective and can reap significant returns on investment, for example analysis of Barnardo's delivery of Mental Health Support Teams in England, which work across an average of 10-20 schools, shows that for every £1 spend there is a return of £1.90⁹. Such an approach also ensures schools have full access to the programme throughout the length of the commission. It is crucial that

⁹ [It's hard to talk – Expanding Mental Health Support Teams in Education](#), Barnardo's (December 2022)

Northern Ireland develops a clear commissioning strategy for universal social and emotional learning programmes to ensure we don't continue with a post code lottery of support.

- 4.3. Additionally, funding for schools is not released in targeted, strategic way. For example, the extension of the Engage Programme for schools was announced in July, to be spent in the following September to December period.¹⁰ This lack of advance notice to schools, alongside such a tight timeframe to spend the resource can often become a burden, rather than an opportunity to carefully consider the needs of the students and invest accordingly. The example of Healthy Happy Minds above also demonstrates the risk of rushing to get a funding scheme off the ground, rather than taking the additional time needed to consider safe and effective implementation.
- 4.4. With both the Engage Programme and Healthy Happy Minds, it was not a lack of funding that was the issue, but instead a lack of a strategy and lack of support to schools in identifying and meeting their needs. In this environment, where schools need to spend money quickly, in a tight timeframe, they are not investing in longer term programmes that are well evidenced and can demonstrate impact.
- 4.5. The impact of this scattergun approach to funding results in piecemeal programme implementation. The *PATHS*[®] Programme is a four-year programme and must be implemented for the full four years in order to achieve programme fidelity and to see the outcomes for children. Where schools are commissioning the *PATHS*[®] Programme from different pots of funding, they are often unable to complete the full four years when the funding ends or is discontinued, and therefore will not achieve the full benefits and outcomes of the programme
- 4.6. Finally, resourcing and funding of social and emotional learning, and mental health and wellbeing support should not be siloed within education. While the link with health is immediately obvious, other departments should also be engaged in supporting children with their mental health and wellbeing. The Children's Services Co-operation Act 2015 requires departments to work together, and to pool resources, to deliver children's services. We urge departments to examine how they can utilise this legislation to better support outcomes for children.

¹⁰ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/news/mcilveen-announces-ps10m-engage-programme>

Final comments

As we set out at the beginning of this response, children experience their lives as a whole, and it is up to our government, statutory bodies and partners to work together to support them in this so that our children can develop the skills they need to become confident, resilient adults. Providing the right support, at the right time, in the right place is key to mental health education and early intervention and we believe all our children in Northern Ireland should have access to the best practice we see in schools.

We thank the All Party Group on Mental Health for undertaking this inquiry, and we would be happy to provide oral evidence to expand further on the issues raised and answer any questions that Members might have.

For further information, please contact:

Trása Canavan

Senior Policy & Public Affairs Lead

Barnardo's NI

trasa.canavan@barnardos.org.uk