

Barnardo's Northern Ireland
Belfast Community Planning Partnership
Belfast Agenda Consultation Response

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.

1. General comments

- 1.1.** Barnardo's NI welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on this phase of the Belfast Agenda Refresh. We particularly welcome the introduction of themes such as anti-poverty and children and young people, which permeate all policy levels and should be considered across all actions. All actions within the plan should consider how they can move the dial on poverty in our city, particularly for our children and young people.
- 1.2.** It is important that priorities and actions take into account existing and developing plans and policies at an Executive level, for example, the Anti-Poverty Strategy, to ensure alignment.
- 1.3.** 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.
- 1.4.** Our Family Connections work in East Belfast¹ is a great example of partnership working between statutory services, community and voluntary organisations, the community themselves, parents, and

¹ For more information on East Belfast Family Connections, see <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/get-support/services/east-belfast-family-connections>

children, where children receive consistent support and messaging whether they are in school, in the community or at home.

2. Theme 1: Our people and communities

2.1. Health Inequalities - We welcome the inclusion of mental health within this priority area, but would call for more explicit reference to children's mental health, education on mental health and early intervention in schools, in collaboration with statutory partners.

3. Theme 2: our Economy

3.1. Educational Inequalities – Whilst success is measured within this priority by a number of criteria, what is missing is explicit mention of 0 to 4 year olds. This age group are educated in early years settings such as playgroups, nurseries and schemes such as Sure Start.

3.2. If this priority only focuses on school-age children then this should be explicitly stated within the wording. If the younger age group is included then there should be a reference to supporting babies, young children and their parents. This age group in particular have also been impacted by the pandemic, particularly regarding social, emotional and behavioural development and mental health, physical development and school readiness.

3.3. Negative impacts on children's development as a result of the pandemic are more likely for disadvantaged children and children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities.² It's essential that babies, children, and young people are properly supported to help mitigate the impacts of poverty.

4. Theme 5: Compassionate City

4.1. Inclusive growth and anti-poverty - Nearly 1 in 4 children in Northern Ireland are growing up in poverty, and little has changed in the past two decades. Poverty can impact children in many different ways, from disrupting their development to putting young people leaving care at a higher risk of homelessness.

² <https://post.parliament.uk/impact-of-covid-19-on-early-childhood-education-care/>

- 4.2.** Whilst a priority is welcomed around anti-poverty, there is a need to be more ambitious on child poverty and not just see it as a stretch goal - this is core to tackling poverty and inequality in the city.
- 4.3.** Good relations and shared future - We support the ambition for Belfast to become a more welcoming, safer, fairer and more inclusive city for all.
- 4.4.** However, the draft action plans must more strongly recognise that supporting the specific needs of asylum-seekers and refugees in Northern Ireland is crucial to achieving this. This strategy should examine further what will be done to support integration for refugees and asylum-seekers, including access to education, housing, interpreters and English classes.
- 4.5.** We believe that Barnardo's Northern Ireland Refugee Support Service (NIRSS) demonstrates an example of good practice in this area. A key component of its work involves linking families with local services, including health, education and welfare, as well as supporting them with their integration into local communities.³
- 4.6.** Children and young people - Whilst early years are referenced, it would be beneficial to specifically mention babies when talking about early years, for example:

Ensure every baby and child is seamlessly supported through their early years (children aged 8 and under) to realise their potential to develop and thrive.

If we don't mention babies specifically then they are often lost in policy documents.

- 4.7.** In terms of participation, there is too great a focus on youth forums. These only attract a very small number of children and young people. There is a need to be more ambitious and creative in engaging in voice and influence work with our younger citizens. Participation should also include involving parents/carers/families to maximise engagement.

³ https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/Barnardos_ANewLifeForMe_web.pdf

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