

**Barnardo's Northern Ireland****The Executive Office**

**'Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most'**  
**Draft Programme for Government, 2024-2027**

At Barnardo's, our purpose is clear - changing childhoods and changing lives, so that children, young people, and families are safe, happy, healthy, and hopeful. Last year in Northern Ireland, we worked with approximately 18,000 children, young people and families across more than 40 different services and 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. For over 150 years, we've been here for the children and young people who need us most – bringing love, care and hope into their lives and giving them a place where they feel they belong.

Barnardo's NI welcomes the opportunity to provide our response to the draft Programme for Government, 2024-2027. Our comments are informed by our work with the diverse communities of children and families that we support through our 45+ services in Northern Ireland. It is essential that the Programme for Government speaks to, and meet the needs of, the wide range of experiences of children and families in Northern Ireland. We have used our breadth and depth of service experience to inform our comments and recommendations

Barnardo's NI has also endorsed submissions by the Reimagine Children's Collective and the Anti-Poverty Strategy Co-Design Group, and that feedback is also reflected throughout this submission.

Our response will provide feedback on the commitments contained within the draft Programme for Government. We set out a key omission in the draft document, which must be addressed, as well as looking at Priorities where Barnardo's NI has experience and expertise to share from our service delivery. We note strengths, weaknesses and gaps in the document and make recommendations throughout as to how the final Programme for Government should reflect this feedback.

## 1. Addressing poverty as a Priority

- 1.1. Barnardo's NI is deeply concerned about the lack of reference to an Anti-Poverty Strategy in the draft Programme for Government. On page 7, the draft Programme for Government states that 'Our Plan' will "take action to address poverty", yet there is no plan to tackle poverty contained within the document. While there is a vague reference to social inclusion strategies, the draft document does not mention the Anti-Poverty Strategy specifically.
- 1.2. The latest statistics from the Department for Communities highlights that poverty is on the rise in Northern Ireland, and it is concerning that the draft Programme for Government fails to recognise the urgent need to address poverty. While poverty has been woven into the fabric of our society, we have the power and the resources to unpick it. We have the ability to reshape our society so that communities and families are supported, and to act so that no child goes to sleep cold and hungry.
- 1.3. Barnardo's NI Co-Chaired the Co-Design Group which was convened in the previous Assembly mandate by the former Minister for Communities to work alongside the department in the development of a draft Anti-Poverty Strategy. While we are disappointed that this work has not continued in the new mandate, the Co-Design Group produced an in-depth, evidence-based, policy paper setting out the recommendations from civil society for an Anti-Poverty Strategy<sup>1</sup>.
- 1.4. Many of the challenges faced by Northern Ireland are either exacerbated by, or have their root causes in, poverty. Furthermore, poverty is inextricably linked with many of the priorities set out in the draft Programme for Government. Unless this government takes meaningful action to address poverty, set out in a robust, comprehensive, resourced Anti-Poverty Strategy, based on objective need, these challenges will persist.
- 1.5. Not only will taking action on poverty assist with achieving the other priorities set out in the draft Programme for Government, but the Northern Ireland Executive is legally required to develop an Anti-Poverty Strategy based on objective need<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.nicva.org/sites/default/files/d7content/attachments-articles/recommendations\\_for\\_an\\_ni\\_anti-poverty\\_strategy\\_-\\_a\\_paper\\_from\\_members\\_of\\_the\\_aps\\_co\\_design\\_group\\_september\\_2022.pdf](https://www.nicva.org/sites/default/files/d7content/attachments-articles/recommendations_for_an_ni_anti-poverty_strategy_-_a_paper_from_members_of_the_aps_co_design_group_september_2022.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> There is a statutory obligation within Section 28E of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, as amended by the Northern Ireland (St Andrews Agreement) Act 2006, for the Northern Ireland Executive to "adopt a strategy setting out how it proposes to tackle poverty, social exclusion and patterns of deprivation based on objective need".

- 1.6. A [recent report](#)<sup>3</sup> (March 2024) by the Northern Ireland Audit Office on child poverty noted this legal obligation on the Executive, and that no anti-poverty strategy was currently in place. Furthermore, the report notes that the previous Child Poverty Strategy 2016-2020 (extended to 2022) was largely ineffective at reducing child poverty levels in Northern Ireland. It is essential that the learning from this report is reflected in an Anti-Poverty Strategy.

#### *Recommendations*

- 1.7. Barnardo's NI recommends that the final Programme for Government should include an additional Priority of 'Eradicating Poverty'. We recommend that this Priority includes a commitment to adopting and implementing an Anti-Poverty Strategy, based on objective need.
- 1.8. The Programme for Government should detail that this Priority is the responsibility of all government departments, and that action on poverty should be a collective effort. Responsibility for co-ordinating the development of the strategy currently rests with the Department for Communities and extensive work has been undertaken within the department, and with the Co-Design Group, to lay the foundations for the strategy.
- 1.9. The 'Eradicating Poverty' Priority should reflect that Northern Ireland departments will work closely alongside civil society in delivering on this Priority. The expertise and relationships held by civil society will enhance the development and delivery of an Anti-Poverty Strategy. The work of the Co-Design Group should be used to inform the development of the draft strategy.
- 1.10. The Programme for Government should specify that the Anti-Poverty Strategy will contain specific, measurable, time-bound targets, identifying the responsible department for delivery. The Programme for Government should also note that the Anti-Poverty Strategy should be accompanied by an action plan, detailing specific actions to be taken, the responsible department and relevant partners.

## **2. Deliver more affordable childcare**

- 2.1. We welcome that the Executive has prioritised an Early Learning and Childcare Strategy. We agree that families urgently need more access to affordable childcare and support than the standardised provision of 22.5 funded pre-school hours a week.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.niauditoffice.gov.uk/files/niauditoffice/documents/2024-03/NI%20Audit%20Office%20Report%20-%20Child%20Poverty%20in%20Northern%20Ireland.pdf>

However, we need to be much more ambitious in providing positive interventions in the early years.

- 2.2. Both the Independent Review of Education in Northern Ireland and the Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services identified Sure Start for the significant and effective contribution it has made to early intervention and prevention at a regional level and recommended that the existing Sure Start framework is expanded to support more families. Barnardo's NI delivers four Sure Starts in Northern Ireland and we recognise and value the multi-agency support families receive from Sure Start. This multi-agency approach is a central way to reorientate our health and social care system away from crisis intervention to early support and help available within local communities.
- 2.3. The ages of 0-3 years are a crucial time for cognitive, emotional and social development and warm, responsive caregivers are central to an infant's sense of safety. Barnardo's NI believes that good quality childcare should be accessible and affordable to all families and the lack of affordable childcare has been identified as a key factor in child poverty as it poses barriers to parents' employment options. Childcare must be accessible and responsive to the needs of parents, both in terms of location and opening hours.
- 2.4. Barnardo's NI notes the emphasis placed in this Priority on 'affordable' childcare. It is essential that a focus is maintained on quality and accessibility. A focus solely on the financial aspect of childcare risks losing sight of the very purpose of childcare settings – to care for and promote the development of babies and children in Northern Ireland.
- 2.5. Childcare professionals also play a key role in ensuring consistent messaging for parents and in delivering a consistent approach for children. Good quality, well-informed and affordable childcare will shape the social, emotional and cognitive development of our children.
- 2.6. We note that on page 23, a commitment is made to 'create a solution focused on child-centred, developmental approaches and early support for children with additional needs'. It is unclear how this sentence should be read. All childcare should be focus on child-centred, developmental approaches, not just childcare for children with additional needs. We would welcome clarity in the Programme for Government on the wording in this sentence.

### *Recommendations*

- 2.7. Barnardo's NI recommends that this Priority is renamed to reflect the focus on quality and accessibility of childcare, alongside affordability.
- 2.8. Barnardo's NI strongly endorses the recommendation from the Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services that access to Sure Start services is extended to all 0 – 3 year olds in Northern Ireland and recommends that this is included as an action in the Programme for Government.
- 2.9. We recommend clearer wording to reflect that all childcare should focus on child-centred, developmental approaches, regardless of the needs of the child.

### **3. Cut health waiting times**

- 3.1. It is welcome that this draft Programme for Government has identified long health waiting lists as a Priority. Some waiting lists are so long that children who join waiting lists for services such as mental health support, age out before they get an appointment, at which point they then have to join an adult waiting list.
- 3.2. The draft Programme for Government recognises that a focus on primary, community and social care will be key to addressing these waiting lists. We are very supportive of this approach to supporting people, including children, in the community before an issue escalates and needs more acute support. The community and voluntary sector will be a key partner in delivering on this commitment, and we urge statutory partners to work more collaboratively and transparently to facilitate delivery.
- 3.3. Barnardo's has experience of delivering this early intervention support in partnership with health services, with the aim of reducing waiting lists. In the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust area, Barnardo's NI ran a pilot where children and young people identified by Multi-Disciplinary Teams in GP surgeries received therapeutic support from Barnardo's NOVA Trauma Service to improve their emotional health and wellbeing, and caregivers were helped to understand how they could further support their children. In delivering this support, Barnardo's were able to meet the needs of children quickly and early, rather than a child moving on to a waiting list where the problem might escalate while they wait.
- 3.4. Barnardo's NI also supports children with complex health and social care needs in a number of different services and settings. It is important that action to address waiting lists does not solely focus on diagnosis, but also treatment and support. From

our experience supporting children and young people with autism, one of the biggest challenges facing families is a post-diagnosis vacuum. Many parents and carers believe that a diagnosis is the key to unlocking access to services, and they feel disappointed and let down when they realise this is not the reality. Once a child or young person receives a diagnosis, they often join a long waiting list in order to access services or additional support.

- 3.5. It is also important to note that poverty is one of the biggest drivers of demand on the health service. If we can tackle poverty and lift more children, families and communities out of poverty, the demand on health services and waiting lists will decrease in the long term and ensure stability and sustainability of health services.
- 3.6. The success of this Priority will rely on the effective implementation of a number of reviews and strategies which have been published, this includes the Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services, the Mental Health Strategy, the Bengoa Report, among others. The work has already been undertaken to review and assess the action that is needed, we now need to move to delivery.

#### *Recommendations*

- 3.7. Barnardo's NI recommends that this Priority recognises the significant impact of long waiting lists on children, particularly where children age out before they receive support and move on to another waiting list. Adult waiting lists are specifically mentioned, and children's waiting lists should be given equal recognition.
- 3.8. We also recommend that this Priority notes that addressing waiting lists is not just about providing access to diagnosis, but crucially addressing waiting lists will provide people with better, more timely access to treatment once a diagnosis has been made.

#### **4. Ending violence against women and girls**

- 4.1. Barnardo's NI welcomes the focus on ending violence against women and girls. It is imperative that the Northern Ireland government takes action on a culture which has resulted in Northern Ireland being identified as one of the most dangerous places in Europe to be a woman<sup>4</sup>.
- 4.2. Barnardo's NI participated in the co-design process to develop the Strategic Framework to end violence against women and girls (EVAWG) and we commend the

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<sup>4</sup> <https://wrda.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/WPG-VAWG-Research-Report.pdf>

approach that was adopted by the EVAWG team throughout the process. It is welcome that a ‘Joined-Up Approach’ has been identified in the draft Programme for Government as a key means of delivering on the Strategic Framework. Furthermore, we welcome the read-across with key strategies such as the Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy. The Gender Equality Strategy, in development as part of the Social Inclusion Strategies (p.67), will be another key strategy informing this work.

- 4.3. A key element in ensuring the success of the Strategic Framework will be the implementation of the action plan and the resource committed to delivering this. We welcome commitment to putting in place the Change and Challenge Funds, and we would welcome more detail on the size of the funds, and how they will be distributed. It is important that contracts for initiatives and services under these Funds are provided on a multi-year basis with full cost recovery for organisations delivering the contract. In order to see meaningful, sustained change, the commitment in government resourcing must also be meaningful and sustained.
- 4.4. We welcome the reference to early intervention and a trauma-informed approach. Violence and abuse experienced by women and girls is a public health issue and prevention and early intervention is fundamentally important to tackling the issue of violence against women and girls in the long term and for future generations. Barnardo’s NI strongly believes that providing standardised, inclusive, well-informed Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in all schools as part of the core curriculum is key to early intervention and would play an important role in educating young people about healthy relationships, consent and boundaries.
- 4.5. Barnardo’s NI believes that whole-school approaches to well-informed RSE are important for children to receive consistent messaging in every classroom throughout the school day. A whole school approach should include involvement with parents and carers on the journey, since they have such a key role in educating children and young people about relationships. This is the approach we take in our *PATHS® Programme for Schools (UK & NI Version)*<sup>1</sup>, where we deliver parent information sessions in which parents are provided with relevant information about the social and emotional language and skills their children are learning in class, and how they can model and support the development of these skills at home and beyond.
- 4.6. When we consider violence against women and girls, we must be cognisant of the range of harmful practices that women and girls can be at risk of, such as child or forced marriage. Barnardo’s NI believes that the minimum age of marriage should be

raised to 18, in line with the age of compulsory education. This will help to prevent coerced and forced marriage amongst children. It will bring the current antiquated law on marriage into line with the broader legal framework on protecting children in Northern Ireland. Further to the public consultation in 2022, this Executive should bring forward legislation to increase the minimum age of marriage to 18.

*Recommendation*

- 4.7. The Programme for Government commit to increasing the minimum age of marriage in Northern Ireland to 18, in line with recent changes in England and Wales and recommendations from UNICEF<sup>5</sup>.
- 5. Better support for children and young people with Special Educational Needs**
  - 5.1. It is welcome that the Executive have prioritised better support for children and young people with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and recognised that the current system needs substantial reform to support learners to fulfil their potential both during and post school.
  - 5.2. Barnardo's NI agrees that children and young people with SEN and disabilities, and their families, need to be placed at the heart of this significant programme of reform and that there is much work to do to rebuild trust and confidence in and within the system. Unfortunately, the current narrow focus on educational outcomes for children with disabilities reflects a silo mentality which is unhelpful in supporting children and families. Children and young people with disabilities also need opportunities to play, socialise and have their additional health needs met.
  - 5.3. Early diagnosis of SEN is key, and support should include educational psychology, speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, social work (if needed), training and support for parents, and support for children and young people throughout the process. It is important that the skills base of the health and social care workforce in Northern Ireland is enhanced to provide this support, and meet the needs of children and families. Currently, even when support is identified, there is a shortage of staff who can provide the support needed.
  - 5.4. This Priority should recognise the inequality experienced by newcomer pupils who do not have access to medical histories and documentation given the circumstances and events which led to them arriving in Northern Ireland. This can often result in

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<sup>5</sup> <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-protection/child-marriage/>

delays and prolonging assessment periods for Statementing. Furthermore, language barriers and a lack of support with translation and interpreting for children and their parents/carers can lead to further delays.

#### *Recommendations*

- 5.5. Barnardo's NI recommends that the Programme for Government takes a more holistic approach to supporting children and young people with special education needs and disabilities. Better support for children and young people with SEN needs a multi-agency response to effectively improve their life outcomes.
- 5.6. More work is needed to support children and young people as they transition from children's services to adults' services and consideration on how to increase capacity for respite care, short breaks and opportunities to be cared for away from their families is urgently required. We recommend that the Programme for Government commits to taking action on this.
- 5.7. Barnardo's NI recommends that this Priority commits to tackling the significant additional challenges experienced by newcomer children who have SEN and commits to addressing these barriers.

#### **6. Provide more social, affordable and sustainable housing**

- 6.1. Barnardo's NI agrees that tackling the housing shortage should be a Priority in the Programme for Government. The housing shortage crisis impacts upon many of the children and families we support, including young people leaving care, refugee and asylum-seeking families, and children and families living in, or at risk of, poverty.
- 6.2. We welcome the recognition in the draft Programme for Government that young people leaving care are at an increased risk of homelessness. In 2022, young people in our Leaving Care service developed a [manifesto](#)<sup>6</sup> highlighting the issues that were important to them, and safe and affordable housing was a key ask. Specifically, they asked the Northern Ireland government to deliver:
  - A Guarantor Scheme to help them to get equal access to private housing that is available to non care-experienced peers.
  - More consideration given to young people leaving care in regard to social housing:

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<sup>6</sup> <https://cms.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-09/FULL%20MANIFESTO%20%281%29.pdf>

- More points assigned to young people leaving care to give a better chance of avoiding being forced into homelessness or unsafe living situations.
- Explore GAP home schemes in Northern Ireland that aim to support young people with care experience to gain independence skills as well as a forever home.

6.3. For our refugee and asylum-seeking families, finding a safe, family home can often be one of the biggest challenges they face when starting a new life in Northern Ireland. We have been supporting families new to Northern Ireland through our Barnardo's NI Refugee Support Service since 2015 and this is a common theme for many of the families that we support.

6.4. In order to support families to settle into their new life in Northern Ireland, to support and foster integration into the local communities, and to ensure they feel safe and secure, the Northern Ireland Housing Supply Strategy should respond to the specific needs of children and families who are refugees or asylum-seeking. This includes ending the mandatory 28-day notice period given by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive when refugee status is granted by the Home Office.

6.5. Finally, it is worth noting that in this Priority, the draft Programme for Government has committed to delivery of a Fuel Poverty Strategy. While a Fuel Poverty Strategy will be helpful in tackling the cost of heating and electricity in a sustainable way, it will not address the systemic challenges of poverty, and even with this strategy, families who struggle to pay for heating or electricity, will still be living in poverty. It is not good enough to commit to a Fuel Poverty Strategy, without also committing to an overarching, comprehensive Anti-Poverty Strategy for Northern Ireland.

#### *Recommendations*

6.6. Barnardo's NI recommends that the pilot programme to address homelessness among young people leaving care is developed alongside young people who have experience of both these systems. They are the experts in their experience and they are determined to make positive changes to the system to ensure that young people in the same position as them do not face the same challenges and barriers.

6.7. The Northern Ireland Housing Supply Strategy should specifically address the housing needs of children and families who are refugees or asylum-seeking. We recommend that the 28-day notice period is extended to allow a more realistic move-on timeline. Alternatively, this challenge could be addressed by allowing the private

rental a family is living in to move from Mears to the Housing Executive once an asylum claim is upheld, thereby removing the 28-day period altogether.

## **7. Safer communities**

- 7.1. We welcome the commitment to the implementation of the Youth Justice Framework. It is crucial that this implementation is trauma-informed. Many children in contact with the young justice system will have experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and therefore, the support that is provided to them must take this trauma and experience into account when addressing their needs. Furthermore, a trauma-informed approach must be integrated throughout the youth justice system, not just for young people in custody.
- 7.2. We strongly recommend that the Department of Justice engages meaningfully with children and young people who have experience of the youth justice system to share their experience and views when developing this system change. It is essential that children and young people are given meaningful opportunities to engage with these plans throughout their development, and that the barriers to engagement are recognised so children and young people feel safe and are in a setting where they feel comfortable.
- 7.3. Barnardo's NI is concerned about the disproportionate number of care experienced children and young people entering the youth justice system. Many care experienced children have experienced significant ACEs, which can contribute to the development of offending behaviour; this is often exacerbated by multiple placement moves, disruption and relationship breakdown. The implementation of the Youth Justice Framework must provide appropriate and necessary support to care experienced children and young people.
- 7.4. The commitment to early intervention is welcome. For children and young people, it is essential that any early intervention work is delivered outside the youth justice system. Youth Justice staff are not the best placed or the most appropriate team to deliver early intervention work with children and young people. By the time the Youth Justice team have come into contact with a child, the most opportune time for early intervention has passed. Barnardo's NI strongly recommends that the Department of Justice works closely with those organisations already providing early intervention and prevention support to children throughout Northern Ireland.
- 7.5. Barnardo's NI notes that there is no reference to the Substance Use Strategic Commissioning and Implementation Plan 2024-28 in this Priority, or elsewhere in the

draft Programme for Government. Given the prevalence of problematic substance and alcohol use in Northern Ireland, and its significant and disruptive impact on children, families and communities, this is a notable oversight. Problematic substance use has links not only with domestic violence and the justice system, but also contributes additional pressure on our health and social care services as it impacts upon the wellbeing of individuals and their families and communities.

- 7.6. This Priority should also reflect the links and overlaps with the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Priority. Implementation and delivery of both these Priorities should work closely together to avoid duplication and to enhance the impact of collaborative working.

*Recommendations*

- 7.7. Barnardo's NI recommends that this Priority explicitly commits to a trauma-informed approach, not only in the implementation of this Priority, but throughout the justice system as a whole.
- 7.8. We recommend that this Priority references the community and voluntary sector as a key delivery partner, particularly for early intervention and prevention support to children where the community and voluntary sector is best placed to deliver.
- 7.9. Barnardo's NI recommends that this Priority references the Substance Use Strategic Commissioning and Implementation Plan 2024-28 and commits to its implementation.
- 7.10. We recommend that this Priority notes the link with the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Priority and commits to collaborative working on delivery.

**8. Reform and transformation of public services**

- 8.1. Reform and transformation of public services in Northern Ireland is urgently needed. The funding and delivery of public services in Northern Ireland is at breaking point. The commissioning environment in Northern Ireland has been operating for years on an annual funding cycle, without multi-year departmental and commissioning budgets. This situation has been exacerbated by the cost-of-living crisis and political instability, leading to eroding budgets and roll-back on investment in early intervention and prevention, resulting in a state where we are no longer funding the minimum to give families in Northern Ireland an adequate standard of living or fulfilling the commitment to give children the best start in life.

- 8.2. The impact of this funding environment goes much wider than services delivered by statutory bodies; the commissioning environment, particularly of services and programmes delivered by the community and voluntary sector, are even more vulnerable. Where statutory agencies are commissioning community and voluntary sector organisations to deliver services, these contracts are not awarded at full-cost recovery, meaning the voluntary sector is left to subsidise the delivery of services commissioned by the statutory sector. Furthermore, where contracts roll on to another year, there is often no uplift in line with inflation, this means that services that were commissioned years previously, are expected to deliver the same support with a real terms reduction in their funding.
- 8.3. It is welcome that this Priority identifies the community and voluntary sector as a key partner. However, the Programme for Government must be clear about what this means in practice. This includes representation in decision making to share expertise and alternative perspectives from statutory colleagues. It also means sustainable investment in the community and voluntary sector including:
  - Multi-year contracts for community and voluntary organisations;
  - Ability to respond to emerging challenges;
  - Investment in early intervention and prevention;
  - Proportionate scrutiny of the community and voluntary sector;
  - Full cost recovery to promote financial sustainability.
- 8.4. Meaningful collaboration will be key to ensuring the success of this Priority. This means better collaboration between government departments, and better partnership working between statutory sector and the community and voluntary sector. Collaborative working will lead to less duplication, more sharing of expertise and best practice, and more efficient and effective use of resources. This is particularly important at a time when budgets are already stretched.
- 8.5. Northern Ireland already has a key tool to facilitate collaborative working, and importantly, pooling of budgets and resources between department to deliver on better outcomes for children. The Children's Services Co-operation Act 2015 requires departments to work together, and to pool resources, to deliver children's services. We urge the Executive and government departments to examine how they can utilise this legislation to better support outcomes for children.
- 8.6. Listening to, and acting upon, the views and lived experiences of service users will be central to the successful reform and transformation of public services. The people who have lived through services are the ones who can shape a better future. They are

the experts in how services both are delivered and received. Those with lived experience can identify the gaps in provision, the failings, the successes and the impact services make in reality. We must put service users' views and voices at the heart of our public services and improve how we communicate with them about the type of services and quality of provision they can expect to receive, how their views will be considered and what the complaints process is when they believe those standards are not met.

#### *Recommendations*

- 8.7. Barnardo's NI recommends that the Programme for Government clearly outlines what it means to recognise the community and voluntary sector as a key partner. We recommend that this includes a commitment to representation in decision-making, and a move to a fairer, more sustainable funding environment, including:
  - Multi-year contracts for community and voluntary organisations;
  - Ability to respond to emerging challenges;
  - Investment in early intervention and prevention;
  - Proportionate scrutiny of the community and voluntary sector;
  - Full cost recovery to promote financial sustainability.
- 8.8. The Programme for Government should identify the Children's Services Co-Operation Act 2015 as a key lever to deliver on reform and transformation of public services, and the delivery of better outcomes for children and young people.
- 8.9. Barnardo's NI recommends that this Priority commits to engaging with children and families to understand their experience of accessing public services in Northern Ireland, and use their experience and expertise to shape the transformation and delivery of services.

#### **9. Missions**

- 9.1. It is unclear how the Missions link in with the priorities set out in the first section of the draft Programme for Government. The final document should clearly outline how the actions contained within the Missions will link to those outlined in the Priorities and how this approach will assist in delivery on the commitments made in the document.

## 10. People

- 10.1. While it is welcome that the draft Programme for Government commits to addressing integration and racism, it is only briefly covered, and key strategies to achieve this have been overlooked. The Programme for Government should commit to the implementation and delivery of the long overdue Refugee Integration Strategy, and the implementation of the Race Equality Strategy.
- 10.2. Barnardo's NI is surprised that the Independent Review for Children's Services has been covered so briefly in the draft Programme for Government and is not explicitly referenced. Instead, there is a vague reference to 'a significant programme of reform'. This is a missed opportunity for the Executive to collectively put forward their vision for children's social care and commit to implementing the recommendations from the Review. A whole system approach can bring multiple benefits in the case of Children's Social Care Services such as prioritising children and families, providing authoritative leadership, improving coordination and delivering more efficient services. This approach would also reduce service disparities around Northern Ireland and improve accountability.
- 10.3. Our response has already outlined above our disappointment about the lack of reference to the Anti-Poverty Strategy, and our recommendation that the Programme for Government includes an additional Priority of 'Eradicating Poverty'. It is unacceptable that the only note of the work undertaken on that strategy to date is in this section as part of the social inclusion strategies.

### *Recommendations*

- 10.4. Barnardo's NI recommends that the Programme for Government should specifically name the Independent Review of Children's Social Care and commit to implementing the recommendations from this review.
- 10.5. Barnardo's NI recommends that the final Programme for Government should include an additional Priority of 'Eradicating Poverty'. We recommend that this Priority includes a commitment to adopting and implementing an Anti-Poverty Strategy, based on objective need. Full details of this recommendation can be found in section 1 of this response – 'Addressing poverty as a Priority'.

## **11. Peace**

- 11.1. Barnardo's NI welcomes the commitment to developing a trauma-informed public sector. We would welcome more information on what this will mean in practice. Much of the expertise in terms of trauma-informed training and service delivery lies within the community and voluntary sector. In order to avoid duplication, and wasting resources, the statutory sector should work closely with the community and voluntary sector to inform and design the delivery of trauma-informed training, and the adoption of trauma-informed approaches throughout the public sector.

### *Recommendation*

- 11.2. The Programme for Government should recognise the community and voluntary as a key delivery partner in achieving a trauma-informed. It will be a more effective and efficient use of resources to adopt and build upon work and expertise that already exists on trauma-informed practice in Northern Ireland within the community and voluntary sector, rather than starting from scratch.

## **12. Funding**

- 12.1. We know that the Programme for Government will set the direction for this Assembly mandate and therefore, how our public monies will be spent. It is essential that the significant gaps in this draft Programme for Government are addressed in order to ensure that they are delivered upon and resources are allocated. This is why it is essential that the Anti-Poverty Strategy is explicitly referenced in the Programme for government, and a new Priority of 'Eradicating Poverty' is added.
- 12.2. It is also important that the Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services is explicitly named in the final document, rather than alluded to. Undertaking this transformational change for children and families will need adequate funding and resourcing. We can no longer apply spot fixes to systemic issues.
- 12.3. As highlighted above, the Children's Services Co-operation Act 2015 was designed to promote and enhance collaborative working and pooled funding to improve the lives of children in Northern Ireland. This Programme for Government should not only note what money will be allocated and spent, but the mechanisms that can ensure that our public monies are being spent most effectively.
- 12.4. We encourage the Executive to ensure that the Northern Ireland government starts budgeting and commissioning services on a multi-year basis. This will allow the

funding and delivery of public services to move onto longer-term commissioning cycles, which is essential to ensuring the stability and sustainability of service delivery.

- 12.5. We recommend that the minimum contract length for services commissioned by government is increased to three years. Barnardo's NI has previously recommended that the Department of Finance ensures successful and consistent implementation of guidelines around commissioning of services and programmes across all departments. In order for services to be sustainable, and an effective use of public funds, commissioning of services must be at full cost recovery. This will mean that the great work being undertaken by community and voluntary sector organisations is not constantly at risk of shutting down.
- 12.6. When budgets are stretched, it is essential that we are investing in what we know works, in evidence-based programmes and services that can demonstrate their efficacy and outcomes. Like many organisations in the community and voluntary sector, Barnardo's NI delivers a range of services that are evidence-based and outcomes focused, ensuring value for money.
- 12.7. Finally, we can no longer continue with an approach of launching pilot programmes, which demonstrate success, only to fail to renew the programme when the pilot funding has ended. We need to deliver long-term, sustained and sustainable change for children, families and communities around Northern Ireland. They need to be able to rely on the services that work to be there for them when they need support.

#### *Recommendations*

- 12.8. Barnardo's NI recommends that the Children's Services Co-operation Act 2015 should be highlighted as a key funding level available to departments in order to work together more efficiently, and use resources more effectively, to deliver on meaningful change for children and families, while being more accountable with public monies.
- 12.9. The Programme for Government should commit to clear guidance to be developed by the Department of Finance on how services should be commissioned, ensuring that contracts are commissioned at full-cost recovery. Furthermore, the Programme for Government should commit to ensuring that commissioning guidance and policies developed by the Department of Finance are implemented consistently across all government departments.

12.10. Barnardo's NI recommends that the funding of the Programme for Government focuses on evidence-based, outcomes-focused programmes and services. We recommend that government departments work alongside the community and voluntary sector to identify what works and how to deliver best value for money, while also achieving sustained and sustainable change.

### **13. Wellbeing Framework**

- 13.1. Strong accountability and effective progress monitoring are crucial to preventing public services from deteriorating to this level again. While significant work was done under the previous Programme for Government to develop an outcomes framework and accountability model, we are disappointed this seems to have been set aside. We urge the Executive to revisit these practices rather than starting from scratch, given limited resources.
- 13.2. To be effective, the Programme for Government needs relevant indicators and better use of data to inform service provision. The draft Programme for Government references the Wellbeing Framework: Doing What Matters Most as a key process for understanding the impact of the actions contained in the document. However, these current indicators are not fit for purpose and do not align with existing strategies. For example, the 'Happier Children' domain cannot be effectively measured by birth weight or care leavers' employment at 19 years old.
- 13.3. The development of the Wellbeing Framework and indicators should be undertaken in consultation with key stakeholders in order to ensure the best, most accurate indicators are identified so that progress can be monitored accurately.

#### *Recommendations*

- 13.4. Barnardo's NI recommends that the indicators in the Wellbeing Framework are overhauled, this work should be undertaken alongside input from key stakeholders, such as the community and voluntary sector.
- 13.5. Specifically, regarding the 'Happier Children' indicator - data should be drawn from the Department of Health's Children's Social Care statistics, which already monitors increases in Children in Need, children in care, and those on the Child Protection Register. Priority should be given to developing a region-wide data system which could address both the lack of disaggregated data on children and track system performance in service provision.

In order to deliver on this Programme for Government, government departments must adopt a new way of working. They must not only work more collaboratively with the community and voluntary sector as a key partner, but they must work more collaboratively with each other. None of the Priorities or Missions set out in this document exist in a vacuum; each Priority and Mission has strong overlap with other areas, and collaboration will be key to avoiding duplication and wasting resources, as well as maximising impact and the number of children, families and communities positively impacted.

Barnardo's NI welcomes the consultation and engagement approach adopted by the Programme for Government consultation team throughout this Call for Views. We appreciate the thoughtful and in-depth conversations that have been facilitated with a wide range of stakeholders. However, we also note our significant disappointment that the consultation period for this important piece of work has been so tightly time-limited. Such a short consultation period does not allow for meaningful consultation with groups that are often excluded from these processes. Furthermore, upon highlighting this issue and requesting an extension to the deadline, it is concerning that the decision was made to stick rigidly to the shortest consultation period available thereby constraining the ability of people in Northern Ireland to engage with this process.

This Call for Views is the start of the road ahead and we would encourage the departments to ensure that the development and implementation of the Programme for Government are underpinned by the key themes that we have highlighted. Barnardo's NI is keen to engage with the Programme for Government team, and relevant teams in other government departments, as this document is finalised and implemented. We are reassured that the intention is for this document to be updated and to respond to emerging need or evidence.

*For further information, please contact:*

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