

## **Barnardo's NI Department of Finance Draft Budget 2026-29/30 Consultation Response**

**March 2026**

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. We are the longest serving independent fostering provider in Northern Ireland and are a registered adoption agency. 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 our views on the draft Budget 2026-2026/7. Our response is shaped by our 2024-2027 strategy<sup>1</sup>, which prioritizes children being safer, happier, healthier, and more hopeful. Agreeing a multi-year budget is an important opportunity to take a strategic look at all aspects of public spending, including service delivery, workforce and reform. Barnardo's NI calls for an ambitious budget that provides wrap-around care and support for children, young people and families. At present the draft budget lacks the vision and detail to truly change the effectiveness of public services and the experiences of children and young people access to services.

Our response is focused on the following key areas; Early Intervention; Child poverty; Commissioning of Services; Mental Health services; Children's Social Care; Care Leavers and SEN and Disability support.

Barnardo's NI calls on the Executive to use the Children's Services Cooperation Act (NI) 2015 to mandate that departments (Health, Education, Justice) report collectively on outcomes for children, preventing the ability for one department to save money by pushing the problem onto another. Siloed departments limit the potential for transformative service delivery.

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<sup>1</sup> [Barnardo's Strategy 2024 - 2027 \(FINAL\).pdf](#)

## **1. Ending the "Postcode Lottery" for Early-Intervention**

1.1 The budget outlines a shift toward funding Family Support Hubs and early-intervention social work teams. Barnardo's NI is encouraged and strongly welcomes the £195m Childcare Strategy, this allocation however must be integrated with the Department for Economy's strategies to ensure that service access aligns with the needs of the most marginalized families.

1.2 The current geographical model of Sure Start excludes thousands of children in poverty who happen to live outside designated wards. Sure Start funding should be transitioned to a model that follows the needs of the child. Instead of funding based on postcodes, resources should be allocated based on the actual number of children living in low-income households, ensuring Barnardo's Northern Ireland services can reach vulnerable families in rural or complex areas.

1.3 The First 1001 Days Movement – a coalition of over 200 charities and professionals who believe that babies' emotional wellbeing and development matters recommends a national strategy to support babies in the first 1001 days should include targeted approaches to reduce inequalities. Barnardo's NI backs this recommendation.

## **2. Child Poverty**

2.1 Barnardo's NI welcomes the allocation of funds to address the removal of the two-child cap, providing a direct financial cushion for larger low-income families. However, the budget lacks a cohesive link to a long-term Anti-Poverty Strategy with specific targets to eradicate child poverty. A more ambitious and expansive approach is required.

2.2 Research conducted by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation<sup>2</sup>poverty.<sup>3</sup> The report highlights the stark number of children experiencing poverty with at least one parent in work.

2.3 A fully funded dedicated Child Poverty Strategy with an objective definition of poverty and clear, time-bound targets for eradication should be brought forward. In addition, ring-fenced funding should be allocated to expand access to free school

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.jrf.org.uk/poverty-in-northern-ireland-2025#\\_-trends-in-poverty](https://www.jrf.org.uk/poverty-in-northern-ireland-2025#_-trends-in-poverty)

meals and to mitigate against the increase in school meal prices. No child should be going to school hungry. Poor nutrition and hunger directly impact a child's ability to learn, focus, and engage effectively with the school day.

### **3. Commissioning of Services and Sustainable Funding**

3.1 Barnardo's NI welcomes the longer-term nature of this draft Budget. It is essential that budget forecasting plans and commits to expenditure beyond an annual cycle, ending crisis management and embedding a sustainable and reliable baseline for the delivery of public services. This must now be reflected in the way that government departments commission services.

3.2 Currently, many services commissioned by statutory agencies are funded on a short-term basis. For Barnardo's NI, the result of this is uncertainty, not just for the children and families we support, but also the staff that work in those services. We currently invest significant time and resource into retendering for services that we currently deliver due to the short-term funding cycles. This is time and resource that would be better spent delivering and improving our services.

3.3 Barnardo's NI encourages the Department of Finance to ensure successful and consistent implementation of guidelines around commissioning of services and programme across all departments. For services to be sustainable, and an effective use of public funds, commissioning of services must be at full cost recovery. Fair Funding principles agreed in the Partnership Agreement between the Department of Communities and the Northern Ireland Community and Voluntary Sector through the Joint Forum outlines practical ways of working that can support more effective, transparent and impactful use of resources. The Department of Finance is encouraged to embed Fair Funding Principles to ensure effective commissioning of services.

3.4 The Executive should commit to 3-year funding cycles for voluntary partners - matching the budget cycle - that include inflation-linked uplifts for staff wages. This ensures Barnardo's Northern Ireland and sector partners can attract and keep the specialized staff (therapists, social workers) that families rely on.

### **4. Children's Mental Health Services**

4.1 Barnardo's Northern Ireland provides specialised Bereavement and Trauma services, while our PATHS Programme<sup>4</sup> focuses on Social and Emotional Learning. Northern Ireland spends significantly less per capita on mental health than England while the Mental Health Strategy remains critically underfunded. The budget should

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<sup>4</sup> [PATHS® Childhood Development Programme for Schools | PATHS® UK | PATHS](#)

mandate parity, ensuring mental health receives a fixed, growing percentage of the total Health budget.

4.2 Focusing solely on CAMHS crisis teams ignores the children who are struggling but not yet in clinical crisis. Mental health support should be a right, not a referral. While the current draft budget seeks to fund acute crisis services, children and young people who don't meet the threshold for CAMHS but are too distressed for general school support will continue to fall through the cracks. To better protect children and young people's mental health and ensure access to critical services the Executive should fully fund the Mental Health Strategy with a focus on early-stage services.

## **5. "Prevention First" in Social Care**

5.1 The budget proposes £26 billion over the next three years for the Department of Health. Children's social care is a core component of this, particularly in addressing the high cost of emergency placements and the legal requirements for children in care.

5.2 On 31 March 2025, 4,188 children and young people were in care in Northern Ireland. This was the highest number recorded since the introduction of the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995.<sup>5</sup>

5.2 The budget correctly identifies the high cost of residential care but focuses capital on building new units. Barnardo's NI would like to see a more comprehensive response that recognises and takes action to increase recruitment and to provide supports for foster and kinship carers so that children can be supported in the community where possible.

5.3 To shift from a reactive to a proactive model the Executive should reallocate a percentage of the Department of Health's £26bn "crisis budget" into a Dedicated Early Intervention Fund. This fund should specifically support voluntary sector partners to deliver intensive, trauma-informed family support, reducing the long-term dependency on the care system. Every child has the right to be raised safely within their family whenever possible. The fund should be used to commission voluntary sector partners to provide intensive, 24/7 family support that prevents entry into the care system.

5.4 Urgent action is required to address the current challenges facing children, young people, parents and carers engaging with Children's Services. In February 2022, the Health Minister, announced a fundamental review of Children's Social Care Services in Northern Ireland.

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<sup>5</sup> [Publication of 'Children's Social Care Statistics for Northern Ireland 2024/25' | Department of Health](#)

5.5 Led by Professor Ray Jones, the Independent Review Team was given the remit to set out a clear vision of what high quality, equitable, sustainable, and resilient Children's Services in Northern Ireland should look like in the future. Barnardo's NI submitted a Summary Paper<sup>6</sup> as evidence to the Review team in April 2023.

5.6 The Review Team published the final report in June 2023, with 53 recommendations about the restructure the system to address the current challenges. The Minister of Health and the DoH accepted 34 of the 53 Recommendations. Barnardo's NI and our sector partners remain disappointed by slow pace of implementation and the absence of a reflection on the recommendations within the draft budget.

## **6. Support for Care Leavers**

6.1 The draft budget is largely silent on the cliff-edge faced by young people leaving care at 18, who are disproportionately represented in homelessness and unemployment statistics. Barnardo's Northern Ireland provides essential services to help young people from foster or residential care into independent adulthood.

6.2 To provide a transitional support system for care leavers Barnardo's NI recommends a Multi-year Care Leaver's Grant. This would be a ring-fenced fund within the Department for Communities budget to guarantee stable housing, a starter pack for independent living, and a dedicated personal advisor for every care leaver until age 25.

## **7. SEN and Disability Supports**

7.1 The budget faces an urgent warning<sup>7</sup> from education leaders who face an £826 million shortfall. Barnardo's Northern Ireland shares these concerns. For children with disabilities, this creates a high risk of service erosion in an already underserved and underfunded area.

7.2 To ensure every child has the right to an education system that meets their needs the budget should fund a New Education Therapy Service that embeds speech, language, and occupational therapists directly within special schools and mainstream SEN units.

7.3 Needs-Led Capital Investment: While £24m is for buildings, it doesn't solve the lack of places. The budget should include a Satellite Class fund, allowing mainstream

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<sup>6</sup> <https://cms.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-06/Barnardo%27s%20NI%20-%20Reimagining%20Children%27s%20Social%20Care%20Summary%20Paper.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> [Education Leaders Issue Urgent Warning on Funding Crisis – NI Council for Integrated Education](#)



schools to quickly open SEN-specific classrooms with dedicated staffing, reducing the need for long-distance transport.

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