

Barnardo's Northern Ireland

Consultation response to NICCY's draft Corporate Plan

'Children's Rights: From Rhetoric to Reality'

Barnardo's NI is the largest children's charity in Northern Ireland. In the past year we worked with approximately 18,000 babies, 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 babies, children and young people. To achieve this, we work with partners to build stronger families, safer childhoods and positive futures.

Barnardo's NI welcomes the opportunity to respond to this consultation on NICCY's draft Corporate Plan – 'Children's Rights: From Rhetoric to Reality'. Our comments and recommendations are informed by our work with the diverse communities of children and families that we support throughout our 45+ services in Northern Ireland.

Our response provides some general comments, and considers several of the priority themes and objectives, and identifies other areas we think would be important to include in the Corporate Plan.

1. General comments

- 1.1. Barnardo's NI welcomes the inclusion of key issues within NICCY's draft Corporate Plan, particularly, tackling child poverty, improving health and wellbeing, addressing issues in youth justice, and promoting the voices and issues facing asylum seeking, refugee and newcomer children and their families.
- 1.2. However, an important element that we think is missing from the draft Corporate Plan is the specific mention and consideration of the rights

and needs of babies and very young children. This is expanded further at **2**.

- 1.3. Like NICCY, Barnardo's NI believes that investment is needed to effectively meet the needs of our most vulnerable babies, children, and young people. We welcomed the introduction of the first three-year Budget Bill in the last Assembly mandate and would encourage the Assembly to ensure that any forthcoming Budget Bill is multi-year. 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.
- 1.4. Barnardo's NI recognises the important role NICCY plays in representing the needs and interests of children and young people in Northern Ireland. In the continued absence of an NI Executive and Assembly, it is vital that NICCY continues to represent these needs to the UK Government and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, to act to ensure that children, families and communities are not left without the support they need from public services. There are actions that the Secretary of State can take to ensure that our babies, children and young people do not pay the price for political stasis.
- 1.5. Barnardo's NI looks forward to continued engagement with NICCY as we work to ensure a better future for our babies, children and young people.

2. Including babies in the Corporate Plan

- 2.1. The specific mention and consideration of the rights and needs of babies is something important which we think is missing but should be reflected in the Corporate Plan.
- 2.2. Barnardo's NI would like to see the inclusion of the term 'babies' as part of NICCY's language. We believe that if we do not mention babies specifically in policy documents and strategies they and their specific needs risk being overlooked in implementation and delivery.
- 2.3. Barnardo's NI is part of the Stronger from the Start Alliance – an alliance of more than 40 organisations from across the community and voluntary sector in Northern Ireland, working together to promote and improve infant mental health, including supporting good parent-baby relationships and strong attachments.

2.4. The [Stronger from the Start manifesto](#) notes that investment in the earliest years of life is supported by a wealth of research and evidence, and is a cost-effective way of transforming child and family outcomes. COVID-19 and its impact on babies and their families has strengthened the case for urgent action. By working to #IncludeInfants in policy, strategy and service delivery we can deliver change to the life chances of our children, and to generations to come.

3. Incorporation of the UNCRC into law (Objective 1 - Inclusion)

3.1. Barnardo's NI supports this objective which places a duty on statutory partners and service providers to consider the impact of all legislation and policy on children.

3.2. Bringing the UNCRC into NI law should ensure that cross-cutting issues that affect babies, children and young people, such as poverty, are considered across all Departments and across all policy levels. It should also ensure that children have access to adequately funded services that meet their needs.

3.3. We recommend that appropriate learnings are taken from the process in Scotland to incorporate the UNCRC into Scottish law.

4. Tackling child poverty (Objective 2 – Rights)

4.1. Barnardo's NI strongly supports the inclusion of action on child poverty as a key priority in NICCY's draft Corporate Plan. We welcome the commitment to advising government on actions to address poverty, including through the delivery of an Anti-Poverty Strategy.

4.2. Addressing poverty must be a priority for any future NI Assembly and Executive. It is not acceptable that nearly 1 in 4 children in Northern Ireland are growing up in poverty, with little change in the past two decades.

4.3. Poverty can impact children in many different ways, from disrupting their development to putting young people leaving care at a higher risk of homelessness. The impact of poverty in Northern Ireland has been identified by the recent Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services as a main driver of demand for social care services and is highly correlated with poor mental and physical health.

- 4.4. We continue to advocate for the adoption and implementation of an ambitious cross-departmental and cross-sectoral Anti-Poverty Strategy, with the vision to eradicate poverty and ensure no child grows up in poverty. This should build on the [recommendations of the Anti-Poverty Strategy Co-Design Group](#).
- 4.5. We also continue to call for the introduction of a Child Payment for Northern Ireland, adapting a model that has already proved successful in Scotland. This would help to support the children and families that need it most and lift 27,000 children out of poverty¹.
- 4.6. We recommend NICCY's Corporate Plan uses the word 'reduce' rather than 'tackling' child poverty, as this would allow for the measurement of change in poverty figures.
- 4.7. Barnardo's NI would like to see reference to the two-child limit in Universal Credit in NICCY's Corporate Plan and for the Commissioner to join in our calls for it to be removed.

5. Improving health and wellbeing (Objective 2 – Rights)

- 5.1. Similarly, improving health and wellbeing is an important aspect of our work and we welcome its inclusion as a priority within NICCY's Corporate Plan. There is a need and opportunity for statutory and community and voluntary organisations to work together to ensure better outcomes for our babies, children and young people.
- 5.2. Barnardo's NI provides backbone support to the THRiVE collaboration in Newtownabbey – which is a good example of adopting a whole community approach to 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 and support well-being.
- 5.3. Improving health and wellbeing is an important aspect of Barnardo's NI work. Among our priorities are:
 - A greater emphasis placed on children's mental health and wellbeing, so our children receive the right support at the right time.

¹ <https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/content/dam/gb/reports/children-cant-wait.pdf>

- Full implementation and funding of commitments made in the Mental Health Strategy for Northern Ireland 2021 - 2031.
- Expansion of primary school counselling to full commissioning of primary school counselling services.

5.4. We recently launched a report along with the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy and other organisations called "[The case for investing in therapeutic interventions in Northern Ireland's schools](#)". The testimonials from young people and experts in this report outlines the benefits of therapy in schools.

5.5. Additionally, as part of the Stronger from the Start Alliance, we continue to campaign on the importance of infant mental health and work for meaningful change in policy, practice, and life experiences. We urge NICCY to join our calls for the urgent prioritisation of infant mental health and the enhancement of parent-infant service provision. The Alliance's key asks are summarised in our [manifesto](#) and include:

- Investment in infant mental health, including an increase to the Mental Health Strategy 2021 -31 funding allocation to ensure full delivery of the commitments made to infants and their families.
- A multidisciplinary, cross-departmental approach to prioritise and improve infant mental health.
- Investment in research programmes to understand infant mental health needs, experiences and risk/protective factors.
- Identification of appropriate measures and improved data collection/sharing processes to inform services planning and delivery.

5.6. Furthermore, to better support our children and young people, our social care services need urgent transformational change. As part of the Reimagine Children's Collective, we recently launched a joint position in response to the Independent Review conducted by Professor Ray Jones. This paper, '[Reimagining Children's Social Care Services](#)', makes a number of recommendations to address the issues in our children's social care system to help ensure babies, children, young people and families have access to the right support.

5.7. NICCY's proactive work and advice to government in the area of improving health and wellbeing should include advising government to prioritise implementation of the recommendations of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services.

6. Childcare (Objective 2 – Rights)

- 6.1. Barnardo's NI joins NICCY in supporting the progress of a Childcare Strategy, with Northern Ireland being the only part of the UK without such a strategy.
- 6.2. Unaffordable childcare disproportionately impacts lower income families, affects a family's mental health and wellbeing, contributes to the gender pay gap in the UK², and is a key barrier to many parents entering the workforce.
- 6.3. Additionally, we believe that parents should be at the centre of designing a new childcare system.

7. Addressing issues in youth justice (Objective 2 – Rights)

- 7.1. We strongly support the commitment to taking action to raise the criminal age of responsibility in Northern Ireland.
- 7.2. Barnardo's NI remains concerned by the low age of criminal responsibility in Northern Ireland. We believe that the minimum age of criminal responsibility should be set at 16 years old, not 14 as has been proposed, and that children in contact with the youth justice system should be treated as children, first and foremost.
- 7.3. We are also concerned about issues of racial profiling in the justice system, including where this leads to excessive encounters of Stop and Search, as indicated by anecdotal evidence from our services. We encourage NICCY to consider this issue further in their Corporate Plan and work with partners on addressing discrimination.
- 7.4. Barnardo's NI agrees with NICCY's identification of spit and bite guards as 'harmful devices'. We support a review of the use of spit and bite guards, particularly on children and young people.
- 7.5. Crucially, children should be supported outside of the justice system and detention should be a last resort. We recommend that NICCY continues to engage with the community and voluntary sector to increase focus and investment on early intervention and family support in communities,

² <https://www.pwc.co.uk/services/economics/insights/women-in-work-index.html>

that helps prevent the need for children and young people to come into contact the youth justice system.

8. Asylum seeking and refugee children/newcomer children (Objective 2 – Rights)

- 8.1. We welcome the inclusion of asylum seeking, refugee and newcomer children in the draft Corporate Plan and the Commissioner's commitment to promoting their voices and the issues facing them over the next three years.
- 8.2. Barnardo's NI has over 25 years' experience supporting children and families who are new to Northern Ireland, some of whom are refugees or asylum-seekers.
- 8.3. Since 2015, we have delivered the Northern Ireland Refugee Support Service (NIRSS), working with displaced children and families through several different services and programmes. We believe NIRSS is an example of good practice in how best to support refugee children and families. The team works in partnership with local statutory departments and voluntary organisations, providing intensive support to refugees placed in Northern Ireland through the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (now closed) and the Afghan resettlement schemes. Key aspects of this work involve linking families with local services, including health, education and welfare, as well as supporting them with integration into local communities. NIRSS also completes screening visits as part of the Homes for Ukraine scheme.
- 8.4. NIRSS also works in contingency, hotel accommodation, with asylum seeking children and families. The team assist with school readiness and education for children of primary school age living in temporary accommodation with their families, and has started delivering parent-infant programmes to families with children under the age of 5.
- 8.5. Since April 2018, Barnardo's NI has delivered the Independent Guardian Service. This service provides guardians for separated and unaccompanied children, including those who are victims, or potential victims, of human trafficking. A key element of the Guardian's role is to ensure that the child's voice, wishes, and feelings are heard and represented with all professionals involved in their case and to advocate for the best interests of the child.

- 8.6. We encourage the Commissioner to advocate for the rights and needs of asylum seeking, refugee and newcomer children and their families. It is vital that services to support these children are properly resourced.
- 8.7. Having warned of its serious implications for the safety and protection of children, Barnardo's is deeply concerned of the implications that the Illegal Migration Act will have on children. Not only will this Act make it legal to detain children for more than 24 hours, it will deny children the chance to put forward their case for asylum in the UK. It will also prevent some children who have been identified as victims of trafficking from receiving protection and support, including those who have suffered trauma and exploitation.
- 8.8. We urge the Commissioner to consider the findings of our report, '[A Warm Welcome: A blueprint for supporting displaced children](#)', when advising our NI Executive on these matters.

9. Covid-19 impact legacy (Objective 2 – Rights)

- 9.1. We welcome NICCY's commitment to seek and collate further information on how lockdowns have affected children's early years development.
- 9.2. In Barnardo's NI we fully understand the importance of Speech, Language and Communication (SLCN) skills in improving outcomes for babies, children and young people throughout life. We have noted a negative impact on this area of development in many of our services since the Covid-19 Pandemic.
- 9.3. In Barnardo's NI we are using the core elements from the 'Five to Thrive Approach' and the key messages from the 'Help Kids Talk' Initiative to support good Parent-Infant relationships and strong attachments which are essential to developing early SLCN skills. Help Kids Talk is an initiative which has been developed by Early Intervention Lisburn, South Eastern Health and Social Care, and Barnardo's NI, and currently funded through Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council.
- 9.4. We are fully committed to working collaboratively with others to build on good practice which already exists and to develop innovative solutions to this issue.

10. Promote the participation of children and young people (Objective 5 – Participation)

- 10.1. Barnardo's NI welcomes that the participation of children and young people is a key objective of the Corporate Plan. We believe that services are best when those that they are set up to serve have a voice in shaping them.
- 10.2. Forums have traditionally been used to engage with children and young people. In our experience they often attract only a very small number of children.
- 10.3. We would encourage NICCY to work in conjunction with partners to look at more ambitious and creative ways in engaging with our younger citizens.
- 10.4. We also encourage NICCY to ensure a diverse representation of voices, including reaching out to under-represented groups such as traveller children and asylum-seeking, refugee and newcomer children.
- 10.5. It is also crucial that participation includes involving parents, carers and families to maximise engagement. We encourage NICCY to work with partners who have developed best practice around participation work with babies and very young children, as well as involving parents/carers.

Barnardo's NI appreciates this opportunity to provide comment on NICCY's draft Corporate Plan – 'Children's Rights: From Rhetoric to Reality'. We are keen to continue working alongside NICCY to improve outcomes for babies, children, and young people in Northern Ireland. We would be happy to meet to discuss further any of the issues raised in this response.

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