

Barnardo's Northern Ireland**Infant Mental Health Framework
Proposed content for action plan 2023-2026
(Public Health Agency)**

Barnardo's NI is the largest children's charity in Northern Ireland. Every year we work with more than 18,000 children, young people and families across more than 45 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. 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 response to the Proposed Content and Action Plan for the Infant Mental Health Framework. 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, including providing services to support infant mental health and parent-infant relationship during the first 1,001 days of a babies life.

ABC PiP stands for Attachment, Bonding and Communication Parent Infant Partnership, it is one of only two specialised Parent-Infant Relationship Teams in NI. ABC PiP's aim is to enhance the life opportunities and outcomes of infants and their families by improving parent-infant relationships and creating stronger bonds and attachment. ABC PiP are supporting parents and professionals to understand and improve infant mental health including babies' social and emotional development in the first 1001 days of life. The team deliver 1:1 family home interventions across the SEHSCT area¹.

Our response will provide on a number of cross-cutting themes and where possible will link it bac k to relevant sections of the framework.

¹ ABC PiP (2023) Four Years Learning Report: It's All About Relationships

1. General comments

- 1.1. Barnardo's NI welcomes this proposed Infant Mental Health Framework in both its ambition and commitment to early intervention, prevention and addressing new and increasing risks such as Covid-19.
- 1.2. Barnardo's NI would argue that whilst the effect of the pandemic are still being felt by families, a more emerging threat is the Cost of Living Crisis, both in families already facing poverty and those classed as 'working families,' who previously wouldn't have struggled financially. This must be reflected within the strategy going forward.

1.3. Policy and Legislative Context

- 1.4. It is been of great concern that there has been significant reductions in both Department of Education and Department of Health budgets, and the risk is that non statutory services such as early intervention and prevention are at risk of being cut.
- 1.5. Barnardo's NI believe that infant mental health spans far beyond a single remit and therefore recommends the utilisation of the Children's Service Co Operation Act (NI) 2015 to improve co-operation amongst Departments and Agencies as they deliver services aimed at improving the well-being of infants, children and young people. This includes sharing the provision of staff, goods, services...or other resources as stated in the Act². Barnardo's NI welcomes the strategies emphasis on joined up commissioning.
- 1.6. With the recent publication and conclusion of the Independent review of social care, chaired by Professor Ray Jones, examinations to the quality, equity, resilience and sustainability of children's services have been to ensure they can respond to and meet the current and future needs of children. Whilst we are supportive of the review and its recommendations, it is worth highlighting the review doesn't explicitly discuss infant mental health, instead it emphasises early intervention and trauma informed practice.
- 1.7. Within this framework it is important the discussions of infant mental health are not seen in isolation and 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. Northern Ireland spends a total of £536 million per year on late intervention. This equates to £288 per head, or £1,166 per child. Late

² [Children's Services Co-operation Act \(Northern Ireland\) 2015 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](#) Section 4: Sharing of resources and pooling of funds.

intervention issues are often related and cumulative. Successful early intervention should tackle the root causes of these issues and consider the connections between the different issues which children and young people face³.

1.8. Data, Statistics and Impact

- 1.9. Barnardo's NI welcomes the frameworks commitment to an 'outcomes-based approach where services regularly gather, analyse and share data on impact, and use this to better inform services, locally and regionally'. It is vital that the data collected is not simply statistical outputs that it records a way to measure impact to the families supported.

1.10. Service Delivery and Workforce

- 1.11. Barnardo's NI agrees that there is 'regional consistency in availability of and access to services. Equity of access should mean that every baby and their family in need of support should receive access to the right services when and where they need it.
- 1.12. Multi-disciplinary teams are vital with expertise in supporting & strengthening relationships between babies and their parents or carers. This strategy must see the value of a specialised workforce rather than running the risk of trying to homogenous teams to deliver blended rather than specialised services.

2. ABC PiP Service Development and Three Strands of Work

- 2.1. Barnardo's NI believes that ABC PiP encompasses the aims of the action plan and it's three overarching themes of the Structure, and should be highlighted as a model of best practice in how to build an regional Mental Health Framework that is equitable in both access and service delivery.
- 2.2. There must be consistency across reporting, and that there is parity in the data that is required from community voluntary services who would often comment they are over-burdened with information requests, compared with statutory service reporting requirements.
- 2.3. The service has been developed through a strategic partnership between Barnardo's NI, South Eastern HSC Trust and Tiny Life with support from Parent-Infant Foundation. Our strategic partners work

³ Early Intervention Foundation (2018) cited in [Final SFTS Manifesto \(aimhni.co.uk\)](https://aimhni.co.uk) Page 3

holistically, as one multi-disciplinary and cross-sectoral team, to deliver three strands of work: a direct parent-infant service for families; training and support for other professionals; and engagement with the wider systems in which babies and their families receive services.

- 2.4. **Service Delivery:** We offer a specialist infant mental health service for families experiencing difficulties and requiring direct support and intervention. There are two levels of support available, and families referred to the service can receive a range of interventions during the course of their period of involvement with us.
- 2.5. **Building Capacity in the Work Force:** Our aim is to contribute to the continuous development of a Northern Ireland workforce which is sensitive to the specific and unique social and emotional developmental needs of infants and considers infant mental health to be 'everybody's business'. Our education, training has covered: Bonding and attachment Baby brain development, Trauma & resilience Speech, Language and communication, and to date ABC PiP have created 1,023 Training Deliveries to Professionals: 535 on Five to Thrive Model; 45 in Solihull Approach; 73 in Baby Massage and 177 in a Community Resilience Model.
- 2.6. **Systems Change:** We are driving system change by influencing a system change in the best interests of the most vulnerable families by ensuring their relationships, opportunities and outcomes are improved through early intervention and adequate resourcing. We deliver on this core aim through collaboration and influencing at local, regional and national levels, encouraging and supporting commissioners, referral and delivery partners to understand and align with our agenda for change.
- 2.7. **Co-Production, Voice and Influence:** We wanted to say a massive thank you to all our ABC PiP Parents who have been integral to our service development and indeed the launch of our report. We are committed to supporting and enabling parents to have a say in decisions that affect them and their young children. Our aim is to embed their experience in the design, delivery and management of services and to lead by example in our own work.

"I feel that I have become a better parent and I'm able to bond a lot better with my daughter. I have also learned to recognise the areas I am strongest with and improve on areas I would struggle with." (Parent ABC PiP)

CONCLUSION

Barnardo's NI welcomes the opportunity to engage with the Infant Mental Health Framework Proposed content for action plan 2023-2026 and the PHA's consistent collaborative approach to infant mental health. As always we are keen to continue that positive engagement to assist the developing this framework further.

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