

Barnardo's Response to Families Matter: Supporting Families in Northern Ireland

Barnardo's NI works with over 11,000 children and their families in groups and communities across Northern Ireland each year. We provide a wide range of services for children, young people and their families. We have particularly drawn on our family centres who work with children and young people in need or at risk, our Parenting Matters service who provide parenting support in numerous communities and to specific groups such as parents from an ethnic minority background and parents in prison and our parenting in a divided society project. Other services which have provided a perspective on the Strategy are the Child Bereavement Service, our Adolescent Partnership Projects and our services working with children with a disability.

Barnardo's welcomes the opportunity to respond to Families Matter: Supporting Families in Northern Ireland. We think this strategy is crucially important to all families and in particular to those families who may need extra support or assistance. Barnardo's works across the broad spectrum of families we provide help and support to parents and children within communities and also to those families where there are child protection issues and where a more in-depth level of family support is required.

1) Do you agree that the aims stated are the right aims?

While we support the overall sentiment expressed in the aim we believe that it makes an assumption that all parents can and do access universal services. Our experience is that they do not. Very many parents who need help and support will not ring a telephone helpline or talk to a health visitor. They need access to specific services that are locality based and can encourage them to engage. If the parenting strategy is to be successful in reaching out across all parents then it must recognise this and build it into its aims.

We think the aim should specifically state that it is aimed at both universal and targeted support services for parents and children.

2) Vision, Principles and Outcomes

Overall Barnardo's are in broad agreement with the vision, principles and outcomes outlined at this point in the document. We can see the relevance of ensuring the Families Matter Strategy links to the broader Children's Strategy. However we think it is crucially important that it links to other government strategies are made clear. For example where and how does it link to the Extended Schools Strategy, or to the Neighbourhood Renewal Programme.

The implementation and funding of the Strategy need to be clarified.

3) Focus of the Strategy

We welcome the preventative and early intervention focus of the Strategy. However, this does not simply mean the provision of universal services. In our experience early intervention services often need to be specialist and robust in nature. It also

means that we need to focus on those hard to reach parents who may not access universal services early, if at all.

Barnardo's felt that the Strategy was not comprehensive in its focus across the range of families and issues that need help and support. In particular hard to reach parents, or more difficult parenting issues eg dealing with drugs or alcohol misuse were not given sufficient focus.

4) Priority Theme One – Parental Support

4.1) Barnardo's believe that parental support is the key element within the Strategy and the main focus of it. If anything we think this priority theme should be further developed within the context of the Strategy to elucidate the different times in a child or young persons life when additional support would be welcomed by parents.

4.2) We recognise the important role of Health Visitors and the contribution that they make to parental support. However, it is also our experience that some parents would be unwilling to engage with health visitors or other staff from the statutory sector. Barnardo's currently works in partnership with health visitors delivering parenting support and provides training in group facilitation to a number of Trusts for their health visitors. It is important that in local communities where there may be a distrust of statutory services that there are appropriate partnerships that will allow parents to engage and access the kind of support they need.

4.3) We feel that this section of the Strategy could have been expanded to focus on the kinds of support that will be offered to specific groups. For example, Barnardo's Parenting Matters, family centres and other services have identified the following key groups of parents who are not clearly identified in the Strategy and for whom specific services and strategies of support would need to be developed. Specific groups:

Parents in prison
Teenage Parents
Specific work with Fathers
Parents in prison
Families of prisoners
Support for families of convicted sex offenders
Parents from ethnic minorities – including parents from the Chinese, Japanese, Portugese and Traveller parents.

4.4) Based on our experience of working with parents we also believe that the Strategy must include a focus on those times and events which lead families to need extra help and support to ensure that services are developed as part of the Strategy. In particular our services have identified the following times or events as needing a specific focus:

Families that have suffered a bereavement
Families providing kinship care or foster care within their extended family setting
Families specifically with children in the following age groups: 0-3 years,8-13 year olds and teenage years.
Families with children who are facing mental health difficulties
Families who have experienced loss or trauma as a result of the conflict
Families with a parent or child with a disability.

4.5) Barnardo's have had a positive experience with Sure Start and welcome both its continuation and expansion. Our understanding is that in England and Wales many Sure Starts have been developed and expanded to become Children's Centres. Since the Strategy identifies the expansion of both of these we think the role of both programmes and how they will link together would need to be clearly identified. There also needs to be a clear indication of the criteria that will result in the development of a Children's Centre within a given area.

4.6) We welcome the focus on positive parenting and believe it is crucial to that this is made available in a way that is accessible to all parents.

4.7) Barnardo's welcomes the proposed increase in the provision of parenting classes but believes this must be available across a broader range of issues.

4.8) The section on parental separation should take account of the impact of separation through imprisonment on parents.

4.9) While we welcome the focus on Child Contact Centres we believe it would be appropriate to undertake a review of the role of the Centres and consider within that if Centres should undertake an assessment and advice giving role.

5) Priority Theme Two – Access to Services and Information

5.1) We welcome the focus on access to services and information and believe it is crucial element of the Strategy. We also agree the need for a helpline and Information Data base.

5.2) We would like to see the actions within this theme expanded. There are many hard to reach parents who will not phone a helpline and this theme must include a clear plan of how these parents are to be reached and services and information made available to them.

6) Priority Theme Three – Assessment

6.1) Barnardo's did not believe that this was an appropriate Priority Theme. Our understanding is that UNOCINI is to be introduced shortly and therefore is a decision already made and due for implementation. However, it also does not sit well with the overall focus of the Strategy and is more suited to

those families requiring more intensive levels of support or where there are child protection concerns.

7) Priority Theme Four- Information Sharing

7.1) Barnardo's agree that information sharing across all the agencies who work with children and young people is particularly important. However the action outlined in this theme was disappointing. Barnardo's has been involved in developing the extended schools provision in NI. Our experience is that many if not all of the schools who have discussed provision with us have focused on parenting support as a key element of this. Indeed we currently provide parenting support in a number of school settings. It is disappointing therefore that this was not addressed within the document and the relationship between schools and parental support was not explored or actioned. We think this is a major omission which needs to be addressed.

8) Priority Theme Five – Integration and Multi-agency Working

8.1) We think that integration and multi-agency working is crucially important. In practice it requires time, effort and a substantial amount of support to bring it about. We think this chapter needs to address how multi-agency working in this context will be supported.

8.2) We believe there needs to be clear actions on how the different departments and in particular the Department of Education will work together to ensure an integrated approach to the Strategy and also how integration will be achieved at the delivery level.

9) Other Comments

9.1) Barnardo's is aware of a large number of parenting support initiatives that have been developed in England and Wales and which we have not seen replicated in the Strategy. We would like to draw your attention to them and ask that they are given consideration as part of the overall Strategy.

9.2) Government has specifically published parenting support guidance for local authorities in England and Wales to enable them to adopt a joined up approach to parenting support. The guidance identified gaps in the provision of parenting support partly caused by weak and poorly co-ordinated commissioning. We would suggest the need to undertake a review of the commissioning and levels and kind of support provided and then issue clear guidance to ensure that parenting support is available in all areas.

The audit also focused on services provided for 'hard to reach' and not yet reached families and again we think that this would be a very helpful focus.

9.3) Government in England and Wales has also sought to put in place a cross authority parenting support strategy group. We think that it would be helpful to have a similar development here and that it may be useful to build on the group that OLR have called together to support the positive parenting initiative.

9.3) Government in England and Wales have developed Early Learning Partnerships which aim to target hard to reach parents through a range of approaches and support and get them involved in their child's early learning. The Early Learning Partnerships have three strands:

Running projects in 19 demonstration areas

Evaluation of the demonstration projects

Workforce development to improve the skills of the workforce and ensure sustainability.

These will be evaluated for impact and then implemented in all local authority areas.

9.4) Transition Information Settings

This identifies that many parents have a greater need for information, advice and support at key transition points in their children's lives. These sessions are usually undertaken in a school setting and are for all parents of new intake pupils joining a school. They cover school based issues but also other issues such as healthy eating, bullying and drugs and alcohol. A range of partners statutory and voluntary are expected to work together to shape the design and delivery of these sessions so that they are effective in responding to local need.

9.5) Respect: Parenting Early Intervention Pathfinders

This is focused on children aged 8 – 13 it is made available to all parents of this population within local authority areas but has a focus of those who may be 'at risk.' This has a £10m budget over two years and takes three particular parenting programmes and will assess their effectiveness over this time. It seeks to ensure that there is one person leading on parenting support in each local authority area, gather information about which programmes work most effectively, make parents aware of the influence they have on their child's behaviour, enable parents to deal with their own issues by signposting them to support and find out whether classes should be voluntary.

9.6) Health Led Parenting Support Demonstration Project

This project has been established in 10 local authority areas and is health led support for parents aged 0 – 2. It will be primarily developed by Children's Centres and involves a structured programme of home visits by nurses, health visitors and community mid-wives during pregnancy and for the first two years. This is based on a similar US model which targeted first time mothers on low incomes and which indicated positive outcomes for mothers and children.

9.10) The range of initiatives outlined above indicates the focus on parenting by the government in England and Wales and would suggest that there is significant additional investment and initiatives required to address the needs of parents and children in Northern Ireland.

Conclusion

Barnardo's has welcomed this opportunity to comment on the proposed Parenting Strategy. While there is much that is positive in the Strategy we do feel there are crucial elements that are missing and that it needs further re-working to ensure that the kind of parenting support services and framework that are required is delivered over the next number of years.

In particular it needs to ensure that other government departments and specifically Education are included. It should also consider the range of initiatives currently underway in England and Wales and ensure these are being addressed in Northern Ireland.