

## **Barnardo's Northern Ireland Response to 'A Shared Future'**

### **A Consultation Paper on Improving Relations in Northern Ireland**

Barnardo's works with seven thousand children and their families every year in Northern Ireland. We provide over thirty distinct services in localities and communities right across Northern Ireland. We aim to provide excellence in service and maximise influence to affect change for children and young people. Our work is based on the six building blocks that we believe are essential for every child in order to build a positive future. These are:

- A Family that can cope
- Protection from harm
- Emotional, physical and mental health
- Opportunities to learn
- A sense of belonging in the community
- A stake in society

Our vision is that the lives of children and young people should be free from poverty, abuse and discrimination and our purpose is to help the most vulnerable children and young people transform their lives and achieve their full potential.

Our response to this consultation has been informed by Barnardo's staff and the children, young people and parents using Barnardo's services.

Whilst we agree with the broad vision and policy objectives outlined in the consultation document we felt that the paper would have benefited from a more vigorous analysis of the current situation in Northern Ireland and the inclusion of more detailed proposals. It is difficult to disagree with the aspirations within the paper but, as they are currently set out it is hard to transfer this vision into reality without more detailed information.

We welcome this initiative and firmly view it as the initial, tentative step in what will need to be a rigorous and more in-depth process to produce a workable strategy that really reflects the needs and realities facing people living in Northern Ireland. We agree with this overall policy aim and the vision outlined in the paper. We feel that there needs to be a dual approach of managing the consequences of division whilst striving to promote a more integrated society at the same time. This is not an 'either / or' option – there needs to be an acknowledgement that both aims can and will co-exist at least initially.

It is essential to remember that many communities in NI are still not enjoying the benefits of the 'ceasefires' but are still living in high tension / high conflict environments. The broad policy aims of any strategy must include provision for these

particular communities without attaching a level of significance which could be interpreted as 'blame' or 'ownership' of the problem.

### **Key Messages from Barnardo's Northern Ireland**

- We view the paper as an initial step which must be followed up by a more in-depth process of consultation that meaningfully engages with people on a more individual level. For example – using the model provided by the Post Primary Review consultation a pre-paid paper could be distributed to each household in Northern Ireland. This would enable people to respond in confidence and would encourage those reluctant to engage in public discussion or consultation. We are conscious that at this stage the consultation will have elicited the views of a small minority of people.
- A long-term research strategy should be developed to measure and monitor attitudes and experiences relating to relations in NI. This should actively involve children, young people, parents and other groups acutely affected by the situation here. Without ascertaining this base-line information it will be difficult to monitor and develop the strategy.
- It is essential that integrated education becomes a choice for more children and parents whilst respecting the choice of those who attend other schools.
- Initiatives within schools to address and promote good relations should be supported with adequate resources and teacher training to be implemented meaningfully. They should also be afforded a higher status within the school curriculum.
- Measures to help young children respect and understand diversity should be introduced from early years onwards.
- Living in a divided society impacts on parents and parenting ability - parents need support and reassurance to care for their families whilst coming to terms with the impact of the conflict on their and their children's lives.
- A dedicated strategy to tackle paramilitary activity must be a priority and should include active and immediate steps to eliminate the climate of control and intimidation that pervades many communities.
- We need a strategy to focus on how a more positive community image can be created within communities which are marked by sectarian murals, flags and other visual symbols. This will be a sensitive and difficult subject to broach as many feel that it is their right to reflect their identity in this way. Having the opportunity to live in a religiously / culturally mixed area must become a reality for more people. At present housing in 'mixed' areas tends to be expensive and out of the reach of many families.

- Unresolved trauma can have and has had a devastating impact on children and their families. There is a need for wider recognition of this in the form of relevant support strategies at individual, family and community level and a commitment to increase the support services available for children affected by trauma.
- Any strategy to promote relations must dovetail with existing and future strategies and policies to target social need. It is long accepted that those communities who have suffered adversely from the 'conflict' also experience the highest levels of socio-economic disadvantage. The two issues must be addressed simultaneously and jointly.

## APPENDIX I – Consultation Feedback

In November – December 2002 Barnardo’s Northern Ireland consulted with over 200 children, young people and parents using Barnardo’s services throughout Northern Ireland. The purpose of the consultation was to seek feedback to inform the creation of the ‘Children’s Strategy’.

The consultation asked questions such as ‘What is good about living in your area?’ and ‘What is not so good?’. Participants were given space and the opportunity to talk about what was important to them and what they felt needed to change to create a better society for children, young people and families.

It is interesting that although the focus of the consultation was not community relations a clear pattern emerged with concern over sectarianism and community conflict as one of the most consistent messages.

Although many of the key issues raised are similar across geographical and community boundaries, there is a need for recognition of the diversity of experience with the youth population. It is important to ensure that culturally and socially appropriate measures and solutions are introduced when the Shared Future Strategy is developed.

We have attached the relevant feedback from children, young people and parents using Barnardo’s to highlight the genuine concern and fears of living in a divided society.

### **I Feedback from Children**

Children were not as explicit as the young people and adults and certainly did not ‘name’ sectarianism as a problem. This is not to imply that they are unaffected or unaware of it. Indeed research [Connolly et al 2002] would suggest that even very young children are aware of and affected by sectarianism.

However children [aged under 10] did identify a strong and consistent concern over safety in their local areas. Many were unhappy about the physical appearance of their local area and longed for more safe, green and open spaces to play in.

*“Afraid of people hiding in alleyways”*

*“Need more lights around the school and youth club”*

*“Make the bad boys go away [mentioned twice]”*

*“Feel unsafe on the way home and from youth club”*

*“Lights broken so we can’t see at night”*

## **2 Feedback from Young People [aged 10 and over]**

This Includes young people from projects working with young people with learning difficulties, young people with disabilities, young carers and young people leaving care. Localities include Antrim, Ballymena, Randalstown, Belfast, Downpatrick and Armagh.

### **Specific references to Sectarianism**

What’s not so good about where you live?

- Divisions between Catholic and Protestants – conflict and fighting
- Some areas where young people feel they can’t wear their school uniforms – even in their own towns and cities
- Religious fights and school problems
- Riots and trouble in local areas
- Being threatened for not flying a flag
- Feeling that you can’t be yourself or be honest.
- Fighting
- Sectarianism/ Bigotry
- Violence Killing People
- Prejudice
- Religion
- Schools - i.e. Catholic or Protestant
- Areas of Northern Ireland - it's not safe to walk through
- Bitterness
- Language
- Flags
- Football Clubs
- Racial issues
- Drugs and alcohol abuse
- Violence [it can give our country a bad reputation]
- Labelling through uniforms
- Can't be too honest in public
- You have to be careful about what you say and do
- Rangers and Celtic seeming to matter

**What would make it better?**

- If we didn't have to introduce our religious beliefs to people to would cut down on fights
- If there were not as many rows
- More peace
- Less discrimination
- Communication
- Socialisation
- Better education / knowledge

*“ We moved house because of the barricades and the trouble”*

*"You have to be careful about what you say and do"*

### **3 Feedback from Young People at risk of Entering Care or Custody**

Feedback from young people attending Armagh & Dungannon Adolescent Partnership and the Newry Adolescent Partnership.

- Sense of despondency about the political situation in Northern Ireland and a feeling that 'nothing ever changes here for us'.
- Lack of opportunities for young people of different religions and cultures to mix together – leads to sectarianism and racism.

#### **What could make things better?**

- More cross community initiatives.
- Sectarianism - still rife in many areas. Must be a top priority - very negative impact on the quality of life for all young people and their families.
- If everyone wasn't so filled with hatred
- If adults recognised that children are allowed to have a say
- No fighting or violence
- Religions/political fighting to stop
- Children should be mixed with different religions from an earlier age
- More police to counter violence, alcohol abuse and car crime
- More teachers to help educate about other religions

#### **Feedback from an Asylum Seeking Family living in a rural community**

It is important to stress that 'good relations' in Northern Ireland depends on more than relations between the Protestant and Catholic communities. Levels of racist harassment and racist violence are increasing and must also be addressed.

### **Summary of Main Issues**

- 1 **Isolation** - although the family would like to be more involved in local community life are finding this difficult due to the language barrier and lack of transport.
- 2 Barriers to employment - despite having skills and the desire to work are finding gaining employment very difficult - again the language barrier is a problem.
- 3 **Language** - both mother and father are learning to speak English but without opportunities to practice this with English speakers it is difficult.
- 4 **Children's Issues** - they have a young son [under 2] and are concerned because they are unable to raise him as a bi-lingual child. They hope he will adapt well to school and pick the language up there.
- 5 **Benefit trap** - hope to gain employment soon as they don't like relying on benefits and feel it is a negative role model for their son.
- 6 **Exclusion** - concerned for their son's future - will he be bullied or experience racial discrimination, how he feel being different from other children in school?

### **Suggestions for Improvement**

- 1 A bi-lingual worker to act as a link person between them and the local community to facilitate participation.
- 2 Access to a Community Centre where they could meet people, learn English and their son could play with other children.
- 3 Work placements or structured volunteer opportunities to gain work experience.
- 4 Flexible child care for parents working anti-social hours.

### **4 Families in Interface or Conflict Environments**

#### **Feedback from the 'Parenting in a Divided Society' and NOVA Projects**

Parenting in a Divided Society is an action research project working with families in some of the most volatile and sensitive interface areas in Northern Ireland. The aim of the project is to develop ways of enhancing parenting skills to both cope with and address some of the issues facing families living in these difficult circumstances.

NOVA seeks to provide support to individuals, families and communities who have been affected by the 'troubles'. It is based in Portadown and operates mainly in the Greater Craigavon area.

#### **Key issues arising from the work**

- 1 Many communities affected by conflict have been excluded from the benefits of the on-going peace process many also feel isolated and marginalised from wider society.
- 2 For many communities, within which many children live the conflict is ongoing - an environment of continuous trauma.
- 3 Many of these communities are not and do not feel safe for children - there are not enough designated areas for children to play safely.
- 4 There remains a 'vow of silence' in many families, schools and communities about the impact of the ongoing conflict and particularly about its impact on children's lives.
- 5 These circumstances also impact on parents and parenting ability - parents may be unable to protect or keep their children safe in the way they might wish.
- 6 Trauma can affect children's expectations and hopes for their future - a traumatic experience can isolate children [from their family] from the wider community [school and other community resources]. It can make children feel different.

### **Some recommendations**

- 1 These communities need particular attention to combat the combined detrimental impact of economic and social disadvantage, violence and sectarianism.
- 2 Unresolved trauma can have and has had a devastating impact on children and their families. There is a need for wider recognition of this in the form of relevant support strategies at individual, family and community level.
- 3 Support services for children affected by trauma are inadequate.
- 4 Local community members must be involved in the design and implementation of parenting support services, coupled with adequate training and support for those responsible for the delivery.
- 5 Need for further research to enhance our understanding of the affects of ongoing conflict on the lives of children.
- 6 Children must be prioritised in this process - including a commitment to developing more creative ways to listen to, view and respond to children.
- 7 Adopt a systemic approach - sectarianism and conflict is an issue for NI society, not just those who are directly and most affected. All sectors of society have a role to play in resolving the issue

### **5 Feedback from Young Parents**

Includes feedback from young women from the Young Parents Network, Windsor Avenue Family Centre and PACT.

### **What is not so good about Northern Ireland?**

The Troubles and split communities (Catholic and Protestant)

All the trouble that has been happening between Catholics and Protestants and between the Paramilitary organisations.

### **What would make Northern Ireland a better place?**

- No paramilitaries
- Young people's services
- Proper government
- Northern Ireland doesn't have a stable government therefore things take longer to get implemented and put into place here.
- They need to listen to what the people of Northern Ireland want.

### **What would your main concerns be for your child / children as they grow up?**

*Getting in trouble with the Troubles*

*Getting involved or hurt in the Troubles*

*I don't want my son to grow up to be bitter against anyone. I want him to know that everyone is equal. I don't want him to get caught up in the middle of the troubles and end up getting hurt or worse.*

## **6 Feedback from Parents**

Includes feedback from parents of children with disabilities, the parents of young people at risk of entering care or custody, young women who attend our residential support service PACT and Barnardo's Family Centres in Strabane and Bangor. Localities covered include Belfast, Banbridge, Newry, Armagh, Dungannon, Strabane, Bangor and Down District.

### **Specific reference to Sectarianism and Interface Areas**

- 1 Very high levels of tension and stress for those living in interface areas, impact on every member of the family.
- 2 Knock on affect from interface violence - impacts on housing, access to local facilities, reduces investment in area, negative impact on appearance of areas and maintains sectarian attitudes.
- 3 Fears about the future of children - getting involved in paramilitary activity or caught up violence. Concern of parents of even very young children.

*"All the trouble that has been happening between Catholics and Protestants and between the Paramilitary organisations. It's quite frightening"*

*" I don't want my son to grow up bitter against anyone. I want him to know that everyone is equal. I don't want him to get caught up in the middle of the troubles and end up getting hurt or worse"*

### **What is not so good for children and parents?**

Political uncertainty.

Threats

Political situation

The troubles and sectarianism

Presence of army and paramilitary

No trust between two communities

A divided society

One side is as bad as the other and don't want to compromise

There are extremes 'Nazis' who want people to live by their laws

### **What would make NI a better place to grow up in?**

Peace

Employment

More inclusive society – sectarianism – racism

No paramilitary activities, especially for parents of children who truant, offend etc. parents and children should be taken seriously regardless of class

Everyone getting on with one another : no troubles

500 of each community to live together for 6 months : a bigger version of 'Big Brother'

Voluntary commitment to learn about each others culture

Politicians sit down and talk and agree to what is best for young people

Mixed work areas, mixed housing to break down barriers

People and Government to work together. People have to say enough is enough and try and get the gunmen wiped away. Don't allow a role for them. Get rid of hooding, gangsters, racketeering. If no place for them they can't exist.

Elected representatives: they are the ones with access to funding. More activities for young people

More investment in high conflict areas such as interface communities.

More education and youth programmes to encourage good community relations.

### **What are the key issues for children and young people in Northern Ireland today?**

Threats

Drugs

Exploited by employers

Paramilitaries

Young people getting into wrong company

Alcohol and drugs

Paramilitary organisations 'animals' in some instances. Get to hell out and put on some desert island. Forcing us into a life we don't want.

Going through school knowing nothing else only conflict

Important for all young people to feel that they have a future, there is something at the end which will allow them to stay

## **What should the priorities be in relation to children and young people**

Promote young peoples rights

Anti-sectarianism society : promote more integration

Should have our own Government but need to get away from bickering with one another and scoring party points and get on with the real job

Stop the carry on and lead by example. What can young people learn from so called leaders arguing all the time

The Government being on about children being our future but don't do anything about it.

More emphasis on education and providing for what the child is interested in. Need more teachers. In a class of 30-40 what time can a teacher realistically give to one pupil.

They're good at coming around at election time but often don't do anything for children

## **APPENDIX 2 A SHARED FUTURE: NOVA FEEDBACK**

### **I. Policy aims: what should our vision for Northern Ireland be?**

*Do you agree that the overall aim for policy must be for a more shared but pluralist society?*

- we agree with the overall aim towards a more shared but pluralist society
- instead of a simple either/or between the aims outlined in 2.2. and 2.3 there needs to be an acknowledgement that both aims can – and realistically will – co-exist at least initially

*What do you think should be the main policy aims and outcomes which should drive the new approach to promoting good relations in society?*

- Support for integrated initiatives:
  - schools
  - enterprise
  - housing initiatives
- Promote pluralism through:
  - moving away from dichotomy
  - moving from a win-lose mentality towards a celebration of differences
- Reframe traditional alliances/connections

- e.g. making connections because of common socio-economic experiences

## **2. Fundamental Principles**

*What do you think ought to be the principles upon which a new approach to promoting good relations in Northern Ireland should be based?*

- collective responsibility
- leadership
- there is a need to operationalise what good community relations are

## **3. Implications for Action**

*What action needs to be taken at a local Government and community level to underpinning the development of good relations between and within communities?*

- the need for a mindset which fosters acknowledgement without recrimination
- the need to foster a forward/future focus in all action/activities

*What functions do you think should be carried out at a regional level? Should these functions be delivered within Government or by an independent body, such as the Community Relations Council or a new statutory authority?*

- we are unhappy with the concept of an independent body taking the full responsibility for the success or failure of community relations in Northern Ireland
- from our perspective a key factor is that responsibility needs to be defined and acted-on locally as well as regionally
- an independent body may be useful in a monitoring role and also for encouraging the meeting of targets; however the independent body must also have a line of communication to central government which should have an overall responsibility for pushing defined targets

*What action do you think central government should take to improve relations?*

- this is an already comprehensive list; however, it is important to define what success in these various areas will 'look like'

## **4. Monitoring and Evaluation**

*How do you think that a new strategy for improving relations ought to be monitored?*

- by operationalising it
  - define successful outcomes
  - identify necessary activities and outputs
  - develop a timescale
  - identify levels of responsibility and accountability at all levels – both top-down and bottom-up
- recognise limitations and barriers
- be realistic