

Barnardo's Northern Ireland Response to the New Admissions Arrangements for Post-Primary Schools

Barnardo's Northern Ireland works with 8,000 children and their families every year in NI and provides over 40 distinct services across local communities. Our services include family centres, fostering, and youth justice work, work with disabled children and ethnic minority children as well as support services for children leaving care and other disadvantaged children and young people. As such we work with some of the most vulnerable children, young people and families in Northern Ireland.

We also have several educational projects working with schools, children, young people and parents. These include a Family Project based in Tullycarnet Primary School, after-schools projects in Belfast and Dr B's Kitchen a vocational training service for young people with a learning disability. Broadly the aim of our educational services is to maximise opportunities for achievement of life and educational skills, leading to greater employability and / or improved life chances for children and young people.

This response has been informed by the experience of our education services. We have also spoken directly with four young people who are previous users of a Barnardo's service and who continue their involvement with us through membership of our Participation Reference Group.

Principles and Objectives

We agree with the proposed principles and the majority of objectives for the new admissions arrangements. However we would welcome inclusion of children within the first objective so that it would read 'ensure parents and children have a clear role in the process and are better informed to make key decisions'. It is important that children are informed about the options and choices available to them and assisted to understand the process.

Choosing a Post-Primary School

The Pupil Profile

Barnardo's is supportive of the decision to remove the Transfer Test and welcomes a process of decision making based on a child's progress throughout their Primary schooling.

We would however welcome more information about how the consistency of content and forms of assessment will be monitored and guaranteed both between and within schools.

The young people we talked with were pleased that the 11+ was being removed but were concerned that the profile may put pressure on children from an earlier age and for a longer duration. They also felt that there was a risk that pupils viewed as disruptive might receive negative content in their profile which could limit their choices later. Young people said it was important that teachers tried to understand the family tensions or situations that may be creating the difficult behaviour, offer pupils support and take their circumstances into consideration when compiling the profile.

Advice and Information from Primary and Post Primary Schools

We agree that Year 6 is an appropriate time to begin discussions about post primary options and welcome the advice and range of information it is proposed Primary and Post Primary Schools will offer.

Our concern is that the decision making process is shaped around parents who are interested in, value and are actively involved in their child's education. Many children are not fortunate to have parents positively engaged with the education system. This can be for a wide variety of reasons, their own personal experience of education, lack of confidence or literacy skills to engage with the materials used or that they are overwhelmed dealing with other issues in their lives. Whatever the reason, there will be children who do not have an interested or supportive parent / carer to assist and guide them through this decision making process and who may be directed towards a school inappropriate for their needs and abilities. For example, parents may not attend open days, may be unable to look up information on the web or fail to attend meetings with the Primary School. The young people we spoke to also highlighted this as a concern and stressed the importance of ensuring that children also receive information in a format they could understand so that they could play a part in the process.

We are also concerned that many parents will want to get involved with the process but will find the new system complicated. We would like to see more consideration of how the new admissions process will engage with and support parents not traditionally engaged with the school system.

Timetable for the Admissions Process

We welcome the proposed timetable and feel that the proposed earlier confirmation of a school place will play a positive role in creating a smooth transition to post-primary education.

Pupils with compelling individual circumstances or a statement of special educational need

We welcome the proposal that there will be flexibility for children with compelling circumstances to be treated individually. From our experience we know the adverse impact that having a disability or medical condition, or being looked after can have on a child's education. It is essential that children in these circumstances are treated as individuals and that ensuring a place at the most appropriate school for their needs and circumstances is prioritised. The success of this depends on the child having an advocate or similar who is familiar with the system and can provide the necessary evidence and we urge the Department to ensure that this will be addressed.

The document states (page 26) that the decision is made by the Education & Library Board based on the child's statement. We feel it is important that any decision made regarding the allocation of a place for a child with special educational needs is done with the participation of the child and their parents. We would also like to highlight the current difficulties experienced by the parents of children with disabilities and special educational needs in accessing transport to and from school. It is essential that these children are provided with transport, if needed, to be able to attend the school which best meets their needs.

Admissions criteria for oversubscribed schools

We strongly agree with the inevitability that certain schools will be significantly over-subscribed. Without a satisfactory process and criteria to allocate places fairly this will be a fraught experience for schools, parents and pupils.

We would ask the Department to consider making the criteria used by schools as clear as possible and to encourage schools if possible to use the same criteria. A menu of options where schools pick and choose criteria may be confusing for parents.

Family-Focused Criteria

We strongly feel that the decision about which Post Primary school a child attends should be based on what it is best suited for that particular child's needs. Where a family has more than one child, using siblings choice of school as a

criteria may skew decision making in favour what suits the sibling group rather than what it is best for an individual child. Families should be free to choose schools for each individual child without concern about how this decision may impact on younger family members.

Community-Based Criteria

Our concern with feeder Primary Schools is the potential risk that certain Primary Schools may be excluded from popular / over-subscribed schools and that listed Primary Schools may find themselves oversubscribed.

We are unclear of the relevance of using a Parish area outside of the Catholic Maintained Sector and would need further information to envisage how other sectors would use this.

Geographical Criteria

School-Centred Catchment - in theory this makes good sense however there is a clear risk of perpetuating the inequality already experienced by disadvantaged communities. We feel that there should be further discussion about how catchment boundaries would be drawn up and who would be responsible for this. Also some children, particularly in rural areas may find their choices so limited within the area they live in that it may be difficult to gain a place at a suitable school.

Child-Centred Catchment – we feel that further clarification is needed about how the 'closest suitable school' would be decided upon and by whom. There may be potential disagreement about what a parent and what the Post Primary School feel is the closest suitable school.

Admissions appeals

We strongly agree with the need for a robust appeals procedure and suggest that appeal boards should consist of more than three people to allow more diversity of opinion.

Other Comments

We are concerned that the concept of 'collegiates' which was outlined in the first review document receives little emphasis within the new admissions document. The young people we spoke to were concerned that in practice this might contribute to tensions between schools and potentially lead to conflict. This concept needs further discussion.

Conclusion

This is a unique opportunity to bring together the strengths of the Northern Ireland school system and make them available for all children. We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the consultation but feel that there is considerable further work to be done before a satisfactory arrangement is developed. The disparity in status and reputation between many Secondary and Grammar Schools is still so great that many children attending a Secondary School will continue to feel that they are attending a 'second best' school. We would like to see a clear strategy developed to address this.

We also feel that age 10 or 11 years is still too young for parents and children to make decisions about their future. We would appreciate further discussion about a more flexible system which would allow movement at the end of Year 10 when both children and parents have a clearer picture of the child's aspirations and aptitudes.

We also feel that support must be offered to parents disaffected from the school system to encourage them to participate fully in the new admissions procedures.

For further information please contact Margaret Kelly or Julie Healy at the Barnardo's Northern Ireland Policy & Research Team on 90672366.