

## Advocating With and On Behalf of Children - The Barnardos Experience

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### Introduction

Corsaro (1997: 65) states

*"Adults most often view children in a forward-looking way, that is, with an eye to what they will become - future adults with a place in the social order and contributions to make to it. Rarely are they viewed in a way that appreciates what they are - children with ongoing lives, needs and desires."*

Barnardos is an independent charity working with vulnerable children and their families in Ireland. It has operated in the Republic of Ireland since 1962 and is now a major contributor to the development of policy and the provision of vital services for children and families. Barnardos employs over 300 people and its work is further supported by more than 200 volunteers, from every age and background.

Barnardos works directly and indirectly with over 12,000 vulnerable children and their families each year, many of whom have fallen outside traditional support mechanisms through poverty, educational disadvantage or social exclusion. Barnardos provides thirty-two projects in Ireland, which are mainly based in areas that suffer from serious neglect and disadvantage. In addition, Barnardos runs a national information and resource centre for parents and professionals working in the field of child care. Barnardos' vision is an Ireland where childhood is valued and all children and young people are cherished equally. Barnardos' mission is to challenge and support families, communities, society and government to make Ireland the best place in the world to be a child, focusing specifically on children and young people whose well-being is under threat (Barnardos, 2005a).

### Barnardos Advocacy Department

In 2005 Barnardos launched its twelve year strategy and investment programme which seeks to contribute towards building a society whose cornerstone is the needs and rights of children and young people. One new departure for Barnardos was the establishment of an Advocacy Department in order to ensure that the issues affecting the children and families that Barnardos works with were being raised at a national political level. Four priority areas were identified to focus the work of the Advocacy Department. These are:

- Child Poverty
- Child Protection
- Educational Disadvantage
- Alcohol Abuse

Three cross-cutting concerns inform all Barnardos advocacy work: children's rights; implementation of the National Children's Strategy (Department of Health and Children [DHC], 2000) and the inclusion of all children in Ireland.

Cohen *et al.* (2001: 7) define social justice advocacy as:

*"the pursuit of influencing outcomes - including public policy and resource allocation decisions within political, economic and social systems and institutions - that directly affect people's lives."*

Cohen *et al.* further describe advocacy as a tool for challenging social injustice that seeks to shape the framework through which issues are seen and it aims to propel citizens, policy makers and Government towards taking significant remedial action in relation to an identified problem. It is not a one-off event and is part of a process of change.

The definition developed by Cohen *et al.* encapsulates the two types of advocacy that Barnardos as an organisation is involved in. Case advocacy operates at an individual level and can involve Barnardos staff working with a child and/or family to influence the outcome of an issue specific to them for example, working with a family and a school to ensure a child does not get excluded from education or helping a family secure assessment and treatment for their child who has a language delay. Barnardos Advocacy Department on the other hand is involved in systemic advocacy which aims for structural change in policies, legislation and practice. The guiding principles that underpin advocacy activities are being solution-focused, coming from a position of expertise and experience, and being research-based and independent.

Barnardos recognises that on its own it cannot achieve its ultimate goal to make Ireland the best place in the world to be a child. It works therefore to build and participate in coalitions and partnerships that have at their core a focus on improving the lives of children. Barnardos uses a range of targeted strategies, points of intervention and actions to pursue its advocacy goals, for example, researching and developing policy positions based on the experiences of the communities, families and children Barnardos works with. Real and meaningful participation of children and families is as important as analysing the external policy environment in arriving at a particular policy position that will bring real change for children and families. The approach is pro-active, co-operative, innovative and solutions-focused.

### **Children's Participation and Consultation**

Central to the work of the Advocacy Department is ensuring that the voices, opinions and experiences of children are heard. The involvement of children in policy making and the development of participation fora is enshrined in the National Children's Strategy (DHC,

2000) where the first goal of the strategy is to give children a voice in matters which affect them and to give their views due weight in accordance with their age and maturity. This goal mirrors Article 12 of the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (United Nations [UN], 1989). Some current national structures for participation include:

- Comhairle na nÓg
- Dáil na nÓg
- National Children's Advisory Forum
- Student Council Working Group
- Recent consultation with young people regarding the age of sexual consent (Barnardos, 2007)

Among others, Hill *et al.* (2004) have argued that despite the rhetoric on participation, achieving a goal of meaningful participation of children in policy making remains as elusive as ever. Hill *et al.* (2004) usefully distinguish participation from consultation and suggest that participation denotes direct involvement in decision making while consultation is defined as seeking children's views through various means. Based on that definition, Barnardos uses both models. In its advocacy work, Barnardos consults children using a variety of methods including focus groups, interviews and workshop consultations and using different media such as discussion, written materials, art and drama work.

Consultation with children and families brings a rich seam of understanding when researching an issue. For example, with regard to the issue of poverty, Barnardos have learnt that children, while rightly objecting to any attempt to hang a label of poverty on them, are well able to understand and describe the effects on daily life for children who live with very little disposable income.

Hearing and representing those experiences helps Barnardos to influence and shift policy makers beyond a focus on traditional 'children's issues' such as child income support and provision of services directly to children to an understanding of how the public policies that affect the lives of children and young people cut across government departments. For example, policies developed and implemented by the Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government directly impact on the planning of areas, and on the housing in which children live.

The key to effective consultation and participation is well planned preparation and trained staff. In keeping the best interests of children and young people to the fore, the following principles should guide all forms of consultation and participation:

- Consent - gaining formal consent from guardians / parents is essential. In addition, participation should be voluntary.
- Confidentiality - that anonymity will be guaranteed or if engaged in public consultation that the views of children will be used for the purpose intended only. Also

that any engagement with the media by children and young people will be done in a respectful manner.

- Transparency - that the participants are aware from the outset what exactly is being undertaken and where their contribution fits in.
- Equality and Inclusion - that participation in the consultation would be available to all children who are interested in it.
- Respect and Integrity - that their views would be taken seriously rather than being a tokenistic exercise.
- Feedback - that the participants would be informed of the outcome of the consultation.

Below are two small examples of Barnardos experience of engaging in participation and/or consultation with children. The first example, the Children's User Satisfaction Survey, can be described as participation in that children will be among the decision makers influencing the shape of service provision by the agency over the next ten years. The second model of consultation described captured the experiences and views of children which were used in an advocacy campaign to influence the public and national political spheres.

#### **Children's User Satisfaction Survey 2005 - Services**

The purpose of the Children's User Satisfaction Survey was to find out what children in Barnardos services thought of the services available to them and what, if any, changes they would like to see in the way that services are delivered. A self-completion survey was considered the most appropriate method for collecting information on children's satisfaction with services. This decision was made bearing in mind the strengths and weaknesses of the method. The strengths are that it is confidential; it is also child friendly; it requires voluntary participation and has limited staff involvement. However, it can also yield results that are not necessarily representative; there is limited quality control and participants must be literate in order to complete the survey.

The survey was designed to capture the views and opinions of the children and young people accessing Barnardos' services. The questionnaire was made up of nine questions, all of which were open-ended. Children were asked to tell us what activities they participated in at the project, what they liked best about the project, what they liked least and what, if anything, they might change about the project.

The questionnaire was distributed in bulk to each Family Support Project to invite all children to participate rather than choosing a sample of children. A total of 698 questionnaires were sent out and 172 were completed and returned; of this number 169 were usable. This final figure represents a response rate of twenty-four per cent.

The survey found that children are in general satisfied or very satisfied with the types of services provided, the level of contact and support that they receive, and the way in which their needs are responded to. The findings of the survey, combined with ongoing service redesign and evaluation, is now being used to recalibrate services to ensure that they reflect the needs of the children and families that Barnardos works with and that they achieve the outcomes established. The ongoing full participation of children has been selected as one outcome that is to be measured over time.

### **Seven Steps to Ending Child Poverty - Advocacy**

Barnardos launched a national child poverty campaign in October 2005 with the main objectives being to raise public awareness of the extent of child poverty in Ireland and to influence political decision-makers to take the necessary steps in the 2006 National Budget and beyond to end child poverty.

To achieve this, a variety of campaigning tools was used including policy formation, multi-media advertising, PR and political lobbying. The public aspect of the campaign hinged on a call to action namely *"One in seven children in Ireland lives silently in poverty. Give them a voice. Yours."* We told the public they could help make these children heard by signing the Barnardos End Child Poverty Petition on-line. The petition was then sent to a list of Government ministers with relevant portfolios as well as the Opposition spokespersons with relevant responsibilities for the areas in which we were seeking change.

The Advocacy Department worked directly with some families and children through focus groups and interviews to hear their experiences and gain their opinions on the key public messages of the campaign, as well as the main policy recommendations. It provided an opportunity to ensure that the policy recommendations being proposed were grounded in the real lived experiences of the children and families Barnardos works with and to identify the real issues affecting their lives. In addition, interviews were held with some of the Barnardos' projects staff members to gain understanding and insight into the main issues affecting children growing up in poverty.

### **Priorities and Realities Identified by Children and Families**

The following quotes illustrate some of the priorities that were identified and further developed through the focus groups and interviews. They clearly illustrate the day-to-day realities of living in poverty.

*"I would love if there was more stuff for children to do like a playground but our area is not safe to play in."* (Girl aged ten, Dublin).

*"Everything that you would like to do with your children you can't because everything costs so much. I would love to include my children but it is not possible on my budget."* (Mother of three, Cork).

*"I get a loan of €1,000 from a loan shark for uniforms, books and other stuff." (Mother of five, Dublin).*

*"The child was living in temporary accommodation with both parents in a one bedroom basement flat which was dark, in a poor state of repair, sparsely furnished with no garden or outdoor facilities." (Barnardos' employee describes the living conditions of one three-year-old boy).*

*"My thirteen year old son has a hole in his eardrum that was discovered when he was seven. We were told they couldn't operate on him until he turned eleven, but he is now thirteen and we still haven't heard back. The hole is growing as he grows and is affecting his hearing and needs urgent attention." (Mother of five, Dublin).*

### **Campaign Outcomes**

Phase One of this ongoing campaign began with a national launch and the publication of the policy report *Seven Steps to Ending Child Poverty* (Barnardos, 2005). Some of the families who participated also engaged in media work highlighting the issues that directly affected them.

Determining the effectiveness and outcomes of the campaign is a challenge for all advocacy campaigns because of the presence of so many other variables in the political, economic and social spheres. However, we can say that the campaign was influential in a number of areas which are detailed below. In addition, having the inclusion of the voices of the children, and the experiences of the families we work with added invaluable credibility to our recommendations and was commented on from a number of sources including political leaders. The key outcomes of the campaign are as follows:

- A number of the policy recommendations proposed in *Seven Steps to Ending Child Poverty* (Barnardos, 2005) were implemented as evidenced by Budget 2006.
- Each Opposition spokesperson and almost every Minister targeted by the on-line advocacy petition produced a detailed response outlining their position on child poverty where previously there had been none.
- Some 800 people used the Barnardos website to email Ministers and relevant opposition spokespersons calling for Ministers to implement the Barnardos recommendations.
- In terms of overall public awareness of the issue of child poverty, Catalyst MC Ltd. (a market research and performance improvement service) who undertook pre- and post-campaign public awareness research, showed that the campaign message of 'Child Poverty' as an issue appeared to have hit home with a post-campaign result of seventy-nine percent, compared to thirty-eight percent before the campaign.
- Barnardos also received significant news coverage in the national and local print and broadcast media.

The ongoing developments of the campaign and the subsequent outcomes were fed back to the children and families through the Advocacy Department working directly with the project leaders.

### **Conclusion**

Advocacy in all its forms, at individual level or systemic level, is essential to improving the lives of children and young people. The involvement of children and young people through effective participation and consultation is crucial to ensure that the outcomes at an individual, national policy and societal level are reflective of their needs and rights. We as a society owe it to our children to listen to them and to enable them to make their voices heard. For Barnardos, advocacy is grounded in the services provided and in the lived experiences of children and families.

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