

## Submission on the draft Disability & Learning Support Action Plan

The below feedback was submitted to the Ministry of Education in response to the feedback survey, via the Ministry's online feedback form, on 31 October 2018.

**1. Are the most important actions that need to be taken over the next few years included in the draft Action Plan? If not, what is missing?**

Barnardos sees the draft Action Plan as a good overall starting point for ensuring that all tamariki and rangatahi are able to fully participate in learning and education in ways that work for them, and that support their development. We urge that in continuing to deepen this work, Government focuses on ensuring that all tamariki and rangatahi have the opportunity to realise their full potential through learning and educational opportunities.

Barnardos submits that there are seven key things missing from the draft Action Plan, which we recommend be incorporated in the updated draft:

- a) A greater focus on the importance of listening to and working with the experiences and voices of children, young people and their families and whānau. Aotearoa New Zealand's disability and learning support system needs to be led by children's experiences and needs, and to meaningfully ensure this, children and young people themselves, and their families and whānau, must be at the centre of participating in formulating and making decisions around the child or young person's specific disability and learning support needs. This includes the experiences, voices and participation of our youngest children, as well as of older children and young people.
- b) Linking to our recommendation (a) above, we recommend that the Action Plan is explicitly grounded in the guiding principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child regarding children's participation (Article 12), the best interests of the child (Article 3), non-discrimination (Article 2), and the right to life, survival and development (Article 6). This will help to strengthen the Action Plan by linking it to New Zealand's obligations under the CRC, and ensure that children's rights are advanced and protected through the actions that sit within the Action Plan. We also recommend explicitly incorporating Articles 23 and 28 of the CRC (rights of children with disabilities; right to education) into the Action Plan, along with ensuring explicit reference to the relevant principles and rights in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.
- c) A focus on the critical importance of the early years of life for all children seems to be missing from the draft Action Plan. Based on our experience and expertise in early learning, Barnardos holds the view that the sooner that

neurodiversity is identified, the sooner teachers and other adults around that child – including parents and caregivers – are able to get support and implement effective learning and support strategies around and alongside the child.

To this end, we recommend that the draft Action Plan is revised to reflect that education is a holistic continuum which begins from the very start of life. For example, one specific way this could usefully be reflected is to ensure that the establishment of Learning Support Coordinators also sit across early childhood education (ECE) as well as schools, given that the need sits with children, rather than with specific parts of the education system. We recommend that the draft Action Plan is revised to reflect how early learning/ECE fits into the Action Plan priority areas, so that support for children with disabilities and learning needs is given adequate and appropriate focus, right from the early formative parts of childhood. This will help in part to alleviate pressure on the disability and learning support system in later years of children and young people's lives. More importantly, it should help to ensure that children are able to have their needs identified as early as possible and access the support that they need, when they need it, from this very early part of life. This should help contribute to better learning and educational outcomes later in childhood, and a greater sense of inclusion, which is crucial to a child's sense of identity and overall wellbeing.

- d) The introductory text to the draft Action Plan states that all actions under the Plan will be culturally responsive and designed to meet the specific cultural needs of Māori and Pacific tamariki and whānau. However, Barnardos urges that the draft Action Plan is revised to more explicitly incorporate how the priority actions will be implemented in ways that will meet the needs of tamariki Māori and Pacific children within cultural frameworks. With regard to tamariki Māori, the draft Action Plan would also be strengthened by including Te Tiriti o Waitangi as an underpinning framework, and concepts such as mana tamaiti and whanaungatanga which are particularly important for tamariki. This would be consistent with and connect to wider parts of the New Zealand legislative framework relating to children, such as new principles and requirements coming into effect under the Oranga Tamariki Legislation Bill in July 2019.
- e) The draft Action Plan does not clearly address issues around equity of treatment and access to support and services. Barnardos recommends that the draft Action Plan is revised to make clearer how children, young people and their families and whānau will be able to advocate effectively for children and young people's access to timely and appropriate services and support.
- f) Through our experience working with children and young people with disabilities and learning support needs, Barnardos observes that NGOs and our social workers play an often critical role alongside teachers and educators in helping to ensure that the right support is accessed and wrapped around a child or young person. The draft Action Plan does not make any reference to the role of NGOs in supporting the Action Plan's

implementation and effectiveness. We suggest that this should be incorporated and made clearer.

- g) Given that children and young people with disabilities and learning support needs can often be at a higher risk of experiencing mental health challenges, Barnardos recommends that the Action Plan makes linkages to how the disability and learning support system connects to ensuring adequate and timely access to effective child and youth mental health support. Again, this would help to ensure the Action Plan takes a holistic view of children and young people's lives, which is crucial to support their overall wellbeing and all-encompassing realisation of their rights.

**2. Of the new actions in the draft Action Plan which one/s should we do first to have the biggest impact? (Select up to five priority actions and rank these from one to five, with one as the most important)**

Barnardos sees the following as the five priority actions from the list:

- 1) Establish Learning Support Coordinators in schools, to help parents and children access the right support
- 2) Check all children at age three
- 3) Determine the right level of investments for early intervention services
- 4) Align education supports for disabled children aged 0-8 years and their families and whānau with supports from the Ministry of Health
- 5) Respond to pressures across specific supports such as Residential Special Schools, Early Intervention, Te Kahu Toi/Intensive Wraparound Services

**3. Is there anything in the draft Action Plan that's not a priority? What is it and why?**

No, however, Barnardos recommends that the action "check for health and wellbeing when young people start secondary school" should, in order to have impact, take place when young people start intermediate school. This is particularly important given the increase in numbers of children in early adolescence displaying signs of anxiety and depression, or struggling with early puberty through the latter years of primary school and into intermediate school. Barnardos believes that early identification is key here, in order to ensure that our young people have the right support at the right time, if they need it.

**4. Please tell us if you have any more comments about the draft Action Plan.**

The draft Action Plan focuses in part on the importance of needs assessments to identify needs earlier. While Barnardos broadly supports this, we emphasise that:

- Our education system – from early learning onwards – must be geared towards inclusion and embracing and working with and to support diversity, rather than focusing on children and young people conforming to norms; and
- it is essential that the assessment and identification of needs is backed up with availability of support and response for tamariki and rangatahi. This support and response must be both timely (i.e. short wait times to access), and suited to the specific needs of an individual child or young person and their family and whānau.

Barnardos also notes that the draft Action Plan does not reference funding channels and structures to support its implementation – however, we note that it will be important to ensure adequate funding availability to support the Plan's implementation – especially for NGOs that contribute to and undertake this work. Such funding is necessary so that this support work can be undertaken in an effective and sustainable manner, to best serve the children and young people in need of this support, so that they can participate and develop to reach their full potential.

We note the importance of the transition periods in children and young people's lives – the transition from early learning to school, from primary to intermediate, to secondary school, and out of the schooling system into young adulthood. All transition periods present possible gaps and risks, and it is crucial that appropriate disability and learning support is wrapped around children and young people, including at these transition times.

Finally, Barnardos emphasises that it is crucial to ensure that the actions that fall under the Action Plan are connected to and supported by the wider systems (beyond the education system) that relate to, interact with and support children and young people to have the disability and learning support that works for them and their family and whānau. This includes for example, the health system, social welfare system, and broader system of disability support. It is crucial that these systems are as joined-up as possible, for the benefit of the children, young people and families and whānau who rely on them. Taking a broader systems-view will help to ensure that all children and young people – no matter their disability or particular learning support needs – feel included in society, able to fully participate, and to learn and develop in the best way possible for them. Barnardos submits that the Action Plan is an appropriate place to make these linkages much clearer.

*This submission is made on behalf of Barnardos, one of Aotearoa New Zealand's oldest children's NGOs working every day with tamariki and rangatahi all around the country on a not-for-profit basis. We directly connect to the Action Plan through our early learning services, social workers in schools service, residential services for rangatahi, and in our facilitation of the Intensive Wraparound Service for the Ministry of Education. Our submission is informed by our mahi in these various areas, and our broader Child and Family Social Services work, including with tamariki and rangatahi with diverse learning support needs and disabilities.*

**Contact details for anything relating to this submission**

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