



STRONGER FROM THE START



Working together to
promote and **improve**
infant mental health
in **Northern Ireland**

Who are we?

An Alliance of more than 60 organisations from across the community and voluntary sector in Northern Ireland, working together to promote and improve infant mental health



What is infant mental health?



- Infants need trusting, secure and reliable relationships with their parents or main caregiver. The infant can recognise these qualities through the way they are held, talked to, touched, and cared for. These early interactions during the first weeks, months and years of life prepare the way for strong, healthy social and emotional health and wellbeing across the lifespan

IMH: What & Why It Matters



- IMH describes **social & emotional wellbeing and development** of children in the earliest years of life.
- IMH reflects whether children have the **secure, responsive relationships** they need to thrive.

- Wellbeing in early years strongly linked to **later outcomes**
- **Poverty** impacts & exacerbates
- Early intervention = most **cost effective** way of transforming child & family trajectories

The NI Policy landscape



Asks



Leadership & Collaboration

Improving Evidence & Policy

Workforce Development

Service Development

OUTCOME

Clear commitment to improve infant mental health

ACTIONS:

- Invest in infant mental health
- Joined-up planning, commissioning and review processes

OUTCOME

Insight, data and evidence collected & shared

ACTIONS:

- Invest in research to understand IMH needs
- Identify measure and implement data collection and sharing

OUTCOME

Skilled and supported multi-disciplinary workforce

ACTIONS:

- Infant & early childhood workforce strategy
- Effective collaboration with & resourcing of community & vol. sector

OUTCOME

Infrastructure of resourced, evidenced and high-quality services

ACTIONS:

- Range of universal, targeted and specialist support available
- Support services to be accessible & effective

Embedding IMH into Early Learning & Childcare Strategy



Investing in Early Childhood would generate **£45.5billion** in value added to UK economy

£12.2bn of that is from equipping people with improved social/emotional skills, starting EARLY is optimal for ROI.

£16.1bn would be saved by reducing public spends needed for remedial work for ACEs.

£17.26bn is added value from supporting parents and caregivers of under 5s who work.

Centre for Early Childhood
[Report Here](#)

Research by the [RCPsych](#) indicates that of the 5% of children aged between two and four years old with anxiety, behavioural disorders or neurodevelopmental conditions, the majority do not receive the level of support needed to reach their full potential. Childcare and EY Settings are vital to improving this.

Embedding IMH into Early Learning & Childcare Strategy



- IMH & preventative policymaking requires a whole-system approach for 0-5s & that must include EL & Childcare Strategy.
- Opportunity to invest in high-quality child development and infant mental health practice as well as facilitating parental employment/parenting support.

How?

- Joined-up planning, commissioning, delivery and review processes (establish links with MHS/PHA/Children's services and introduce collective impact assessments/data processes)

- **A workforce strategy** that mandates skills development & knowledge around infant mental health, ensures pre-qualification training and ongoing professional development. E.g. national competency framework [Royal College Psychiatrists 2023](#)
- A plan that ensures Early Learning & Childcare settings considered key part of **integrated family support services** & integral to basic infrastructure of local public services (links to C.Services Reform)

What next?



- Look for opportunities to amplify the voice of infants for example using infant-inclusive language
- How do we incorporate infant mental health into the early years and childcare strategy
- Consider how the ‘asks’ can inform your work
- Identify and facilitate opportunities to connect the dots
- Back to basics: share the messages!
- Prioritise funding for early intervention. Remember – emotionally healthy babies lay the foundations for emotionally healthy adults.
- Talk to us if you want to know more! Email roberta.marshall@barnardos.org.uk

