

Written evidence submitted by Bernardos (PHS0368)

Barnardo's is the UK's largest national children's charity. In 2021/22, we reached 357,272 children, young people, parents, and carers through our 791 services and partnerships across the UK, including over 100 mental health and wellbeing services. Our goal is to achieve better outcomes for more children. To achieve this, we work with partners to build stronger families, safer childhoods, and positive futures.

Barnardo's suggests that the Committees' inquiry take a life course approach to prevention, with a specific focus on babies, children, and young people. Ill health in children and young people creates long term social and economic consequences for society¹.

Good health and wellbeing begin at conception. Supporting healthy child development through promotion of protective factors and empowering families to reduce exposure to risk factors, prevents both childhood physical and mental illness and reduces the risk of poor health in later life².

The need for holistic family support is more important than ever particularly in the early years. It can help to improve children's educational outcomes and reduce the need for contact with children's social care, while also improving their health. Stress to the developing fetal brain can have a long-term impact on the child's mental health³. Providing good quality family support that encompass health as key partner should be seen as essential to providing children with the best start in life.

Evidence suggests that preventable illness is increasing in children and young people. Half of all mental health conditions develop by the age of 14⁴ and over a third of children finishing primary school are overweight or obese.⁵ Preventable diseases previously thought to only affect adults including type 2 diabetes are increasing in children and young people⁶.

Children and young people are recovering from the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. Prevalence of mental health conditions in children and young people rose to 1 in 6 during the pandemic, with a sustained effect. In some groups, including 17–19-year-olds, their mental health has continued to worsen, with 1 in 4 experiencing a probable mental health disorder⁷.

Families are facing increasing financial pressures affecting the choices they can make in relation to their health and wellbeing. The cost-of-living crisis is further exacerbating the mental health impacts of the pandemic through family stress and a reduction in disposable income leading to social isolation⁸. The crisis has forced families into decisions about whether to eat or heat their homes,

¹ Ma, K., Anderson, J. and Burn, A., 2022. Review: School-based interventions to improve mental health literacy and reduce mental health stigma – a systematic review. *Child and Adolescent Mental Health*.

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/health-matters-life-course-approach-to-prevention/health-matters-prevention-a-life-course-approach>

³ The Impact of Trauma on the Fetus, the Infant, and the Child | SpringerLink

⁴ World Health Organisation, nd

⁵ House of Commons Library, 2023

⁶ Diabetes UK, <https://www.diabetes.org.uk/professionals/position-statements-reports/specialist-care-for-children-and-adults-and-complications/type-2-children>

⁷ NHS Digital, 2022 <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2022-follow-up-to-the-2017-survey>

⁸ <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/get-involved/campaign-with-us/impact-of-cost-of-living>

increasing the risk of short- and long-term physical health problems for children and young people including malnutrition, obesity, and respiratory diseases⁹.

Child deaths as a result of mould¹⁰ and air pollution¹¹ have now been listed on coroners' certificates, acknowledging the social determinants of health at a time when the Health Disparities White Paper has been dropped. These pressures are not experienced equally. Health outcomes and behaviours follow the socio-economic gradient and intersect with ethnicity, region, special educational needs, and experience of living in care¹².

Though shifting the focus of national and ICS policies towards prevention is a challenge, many of the solutions already exist. Supporting families, children and young people from conception onwards is possible and, in many cases, proven to be cost effective. Barnardo's prevention services include family hubs, social prescribing, and Mental Health Support Teams. Our recent report looking at the impact of Mental Health Support Teams "It's Hard to Talk" found that for every £1 invested in services, there was a return of £1.90 to the state¹³.

Our work in family hubs demonstrates their ability¹⁴ to encompass a range of health-based services including speech and language therapy or addiction support, but we also know that local frameworks are not always recognising the benefits of this partnership approach.

This inquiry is a timely opportunity to acknowledge the role of babies, children and young people in preventative care, building on the "Best Start for Life" Review¹⁵. Prevention can play a role in improving outcomes for children and young people. It can also play a role in avoiding preventable diseases and deaths in adulthood.

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⁹ Royal Society of Public Health, <https://www.rsph.org.uk/our-work/campaigns/our-health-the-price-we-will-pay-for-the-cost-of-living-crisis.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-manchester-63635721>

¹¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-56801794>

¹² Marmot Review, Fair Society Healthy Lives

¹³ <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/get-involved/campaign-with-us/expanding-mental-health-support-teams-education>

¹⁴ <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-09/It-Takes-a-Village-the-case-for-family-support-in-every-community.pdf>

¹⁵ [The_best_start_for_life_a_vision_for_the_1_001_critical_days.pdf](#) (publishing.service.gov.uk))