

Written evidence from Barnardo's [EOV0044]

About Barnardo's

Barnardo's is the UK's largest national children's charity. In 2021/22, we reached 357,276 children, young people, parents and carers through our nearly 800 services and partnerships across the UK. 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 has a long history of supporting all children through different forms of childhood harms, including child sexual abuse and exploitation, and domestic abuse. Barnardo's has supported children and young people affected by sexual abuse for over 25 years and now delivers specialist services in 45 locations across the UK. Our practitioners support children and young people's recovery by rebuilding their confidence and self-esteem, and by helping their families, schools and social networks make sense of what has happened. It is often long-term and complex work. We also work in partnership with other statutory and voluntary organisations to promote joined-up responses for children and their families, and strong support networks.

Barnardo's also host the Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse which reaches thousands of professions through its training and research and the National FGM Centre which works with professionals and in communities to educate and prevent FGM.

To what extent is there evidence that men who exhibit certain non-criminal behaviours, including online, go on to commit criminal offences against women and girls?

Barnardo's is concerned about the impact that pornography has on violence against women and girls, including the impact of content that depicts overt sexual violence against women and sexualises children. We have held long-standing concerns about the impacts on children who view harmful pornographic content particularly on their mental health and their understanding of healthy sex and relationships.

Content that would be prohibited offline by the BBFC, making it illegal to own on DVD or Blu-Ray, is readily available on mainstream pornography sites. The BBFC will not classify any content as R18 if it is illegal, or material that is potentially harmful – for example because it depicts and/ or promotes child sexual abuse, incest, trafficking, torture, and harmful sexual acts.¹ It includes material which promotes violent sexual activity, including breath restriction (strangulation), gagging and forced penetration, and depicts sexual activity with adult actors made to look like children: petite, young-looking performers made to look underage through props such as stuffed toys, lollipops and school uniforms. It

¹ [BBFC Classification Guidelines](#), 2019, page 28

also includes content which depicts sexual activity between family members, such as between fathers and daughters and brothers and sisters.

This content is extremely harmful, promoting violence against women and girls, and sexualising children. Yet online, it is easy to view free of charge and currently lacks age-gating. Research shows that 88% of scenes in online pornography show physical aggression, with 94% of this directed at women.² In 2019, 39 billion searches were made on Pornhub, with one of the most frequent search terms being 'teen'.³ Although commercial pornography sites such as Pornhub have banned certain search tags and descriptors that overtly suggest underage sexual activity, such as 'children', 'underage' and 'child young', research by the organisation CEASE has found that content which suggests underage sexual activity remains prevalent, including search tags like 'classroom teacher', 'exxxtrasmall' and 'barely legal'.⁴ Examples of titles of hosted videos on the site include 'Cute schoolgirl gets f***ed by her English teacher' and 'Daddy F**** Me Hard Before School'.⁵

The research also finds that tags which suggest overt sexual violence and non-consensual activity remain prevalent. Whilst tags like 'rape', 'assault', 'hurt' and 'kill' are banned by Pornhub, permitted tags include 'used like meat', 'violation', 'stop', 'fake taxi', 'extreme choking', 'destruction' and 'sexuallybroken' remain in use.⁶ Examples of titles hosted include 'Young chubby toilet slave gets p***ed on and f***ed with her head in the toilet', 'dazed 18 year old f***-meat choked and degraded by 42 year old c**k' and 'stepdaughter got stuck – daddy uses her helplessness to f*** her like a doll. Lucky guy can use redhead as a wh*r because she has debts'.⁷

Research into the titles of videos available on the landing page of the UK's three most popular pornography websites revealed that one in eight titles described activity constituting sexual violence.⁸ These titles used descriptions such as: pain, destroy, brutal, torture, violate, and hurt.⁹ The study also found that the three most common words in videos which contained coercion and exploitation were 'schoolgirl', 'girl' and 'teen'. Although 'teen' could legitimately refer to those over 18, much of the content found in the study did suggest sexual activity with underage girls, with titles including terms such as 'pigtails', 'homework', and 'braces'.¹⁰ Other research has found that, when compared with adult performers,

² Bridges et. al., 2010. Aggression and sexual behaviour in best-selling pornography videos: a content analysis update <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/20980228/>

³ The Police Foundation, 2022. Turning the tide against online child sexual abuse. https://www.police-foundation.org.uk/2017/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/turning_the_tide_FINAL-.pdf

⁴ CEASE, 2021. Expose Big Porn. https://cease.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/210607_CEASE_Expose_Big_Porn_Report.pdf

⁵ CEASE, 2021. Expose Big Porn. https://cease.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/210607_CEASE_Expose_Big_Porn_Report.pdf

⁶ CEASE, 2021. Expose Big Porn. https://cease.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/210607_CEASE_Expose_Big_Porn_Report.pdf

⁷ CEASE, 2021. Expose Big Porn. https://cease.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/210607_CEASE_Expose_Big_Porn_Report.pdf

⁸ Vera-Gray et. al., 2021. Sexual violence as a sexual script in mainstream online pornography. <https://academic.oup.com/bjc/article/61/5/1243/6208896>

⁹ Vera-Gray et. al., 2021. Sexual violence as a sexual script in mainstream online pornography. <https://academic.oup.com/bjc/article/61/5/1243/6208896>

¹⁰ Vera-Gray et. al., 2021. Sexual violence as a sexual script in mainstream online pornography. <https://academic.oup.com/bjc/article/61/5/1243/6208896>

'teens' were five times more likely to be in videos featuring forceful anal penetration, and more likely to be in videos where the male performer ejaculated in their mouth, or on their face.¹¹

Further, a study that analysed heterosexual scenes published on Pornhub and XVideos found that 45% of scenes from Pornhub and 35% of scenes from XVideos contained at least one act of physical aggression.¹² Concerningly, the study found that women's responses to the aggression were either positive or neutral, and rarely negative.¹³

Barnardo's is concerned that this type of harmful content that would be prohibited offline – yet is so prevalent online – can lead to violence against women and girls.

Pornography platforms design their sites to keep users on the site for as long as possible, in order to increase their exposure to adverts – increasing their revenue. Pornography affects the brain in a way that can make the user 'spiral' and seek more and more extreme content in order to fulfil themselves and pornography companies monetize this by presenting ever more extreme content to its users.¹⁴ Dr Max Waltman, Assistant Professor at Stockholm University, told the APPG on Commercial Sexual Exploitation's Inquiry on Pornography that, "research shows that consumers quickly become de-sensitised to the materials that show less violence and require more and more extreme and aggressive materials to be aroused."¹⁵

The Government Equalities Office found that there was substantial evidence of association between the use of pornography and harmful attitudes and behaviour towards women and girls.¹⁶ The review concluded that it "found evidence of an influential relationship between use of pornography and harmful sexual attitudes and behaviours towards women... findings suggest that pornography, alongside a number of other factors, contributes to a conducive context for sexual harm towards women".¹⁷

Further, evidence collected for the Government's 2021 Tackling Violence against Women and Girls Strategy found that there was "a widespread consensus about the harmful role of violent pornography can play in violence against women and

¹¹ Shor et. al., 2018. "Harder and Harder"? Is mainstream pornography becoming increasingly violence and do viewers prefer violent content?

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00224499.2018.1451476?journalCode=hjsr20>

¹² Fritz et. al., 2020. A descriptive analysis of the type, targets, and relative frequency of aggression in mainstream pornography <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32661813/>

¹³ Fritz et. al., 2020. A descriptive analysis of the type, targets, and relative frequency of aggression in mainstream pornography <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32661813/>

¹⁴ CEASE, 2021. Expose Big Porn https://cease.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/210607_CEASE_Expose_Big_Porn_Report.pdf

¹⁵ All Party Parliamentary Group on Commercial Sexual Exploitation, 2023. Pornography regulation: the case for parliamentary reform. <https://www.appg-cse.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Inquiry-on-pornography.pdf>

¹⁶ Government Equalities Office, 2020. The relationship between pornography use and harmful sexual attitudes and behaviours.

<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20221215002524/https://www.iicsa.org.uk/key-documents/28604/view/INQ006736.pdf>

¹⁷ Government Equalities Office, 2020. The relationship between pornography use and harmful sexual attitudes and behaviours.

<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20221215002524/https://www.iicsa.org.uk/key-documents/28604/view/INQ006736.pdf>

girls, with most respondents to the open public surveys and many respondents to the nationally representative survey agreeing that an increase in violent pornography has led to more people being asked to agree to violent sex acts...and to more people being sexually assaulted."¹⁸ This was also supported by a meta-analysis of 22 studies from across seven countries, which revealed that pornography consumption was associated with sexual aggression. The researchers noted that the study "does not support the position that pornography-sexual aggression associations are simply due to sexually aggressive individuals watching content that conforms to their already established aggressive sexual scripts... sexual aggression is caused by a confluence of factor and many pornography consumers are not sexually aggressive. However, the accumulated data leave little doubt that, on the average, individuals who consume pornography more frequently are more likely to hold attitudes conducive to sexual aggression and engage in actual acts of sexual aggression than individuals who do not consume pornography or who consume pornography less frequently."¹⁹

A very real example of the association between pornography and serious violence against women and girls is Wayne Couzens – the murderer of Sarah Everard. In Court, a former colleague set out how Wayne Couzens was attracted to "brutal sexual pornography".²⁰

Evidence suggests that the excessive consumption of content that sexualises children can result in offenders viewing illegal child sexual abuse material, and harming children, women and girls online and offline.²¹ As increasingly extreme pornography becomes available on mainstream sites – including pornography which depicts sexual activity with 'child-like' performers, and which depicts overt sexual violence towards 'teen' girls – the threshold of what is considered 'acceptable' can be lowered, which can legitimise those who access extreme and abusive content.

Former Chief Constable Simon Bailey told the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse that the ready availability of free online pornography was 'creating a group of men who will look at pornography and the pornography gets harder and harder and harder, to the point where they are simply getting no sexual stimulation from it at all, so the next click is child abuse imagery. This is a real problem'.²² The Lucy Faithfull Foundation – a UK-wide charity dedicated to the prevention of child sexual abuse, have warned that what they are seeing "on a daily basis is the conflation of easy access to hardcore and deviant pornography and an interest in child molestation." They went on to say that "the link is

¹⁸ HM Government, 2021. Tackling Violence against Women and Girls: The safety of women and girls across the country is our priority

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1033934/Tackling_Violence_Against_Women_and_Girls_Strategy_-_July_2021.pdf

¹⁹ Wright et. al., 2015. A meta-analysis of pornography consumption and actual acts of sexual aggression in general population studies. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/jcom.12201>

²⁰ Care, 2021. Everard killer viewed 'brutal' pornography. <https://care.org.uk/news/2021/09/everard-killer-viewed-brutal-pornography>

²¹ The Guardian, 2020. How extreme porn has become a gateway drug into child abuse.

https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/dec/15/how-extreme-porn-has-become-a-gateway-drug-into-child-abuse?fbclid=IwAR0JjqKlZxs6xyyV8ZzYyPmoYKZTpiIF8d_cdDGdHww1IaVqxWTLmZTu5wU%3e

²² Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, 2022. The report of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse. <https://www.iicsa.org.uk/reports-recommendations/publications/inquiry/final-report>

unambiguous".²³ Further, interviews with offenders who viewed child sexual abuse material in the UK suggest that most had not intentionally sought out child sexual abuse material, but it was the result of 'entrenched pornography use' and spiralling online behaviour. Nine out of ten offenders said that they initially found child sexual abuse material through online pop-ups and linked material, while looking at pornographic material.²⁴

Barnardo's welcomes the recently announced Government Review into pornography, which will investigate the disparity between the regulation of content online and offline. Resolving this disparity and ensuring that online pornography is regulated in the same way as offline pornographic content will ensure that this harmful content is prohibited.

As well as impacting adults who view pornographic content, Barnardo's is also concerned about children who view pornographic content, including this harmful content. We are pleased that, following the work by Barnardo's and other charities, the Online Safety Bill now includes a duty for highly effective age verification for pornographic content on both dedicated pornography sites and social media sites that allow pornography, meaning that children are protected from this harmful content. However, we do know that many children have already accessed pornographic content, which has harmed their mental health and impacted how they view healthy relationships, sex and consent.

Research by the Children's Commissioner for England found that the average age at which children first see pornographic content is 13-years-old, and 10% of nine-year-olds have seen pornographic content.²⁵ Further, the research found that, by the age of 18, 79% of children had seen violent pornographic content.²⁶

While it is difficult to correlate violence against women and girls with a growth in access to violent pornography, there is some evidence to suggest a link. For example, research by the Children's Commissioner for England found that, in 50% of cases of child sexual abuse that had been conducted by another child, the associated interview transcripts included words referring to at least one specific act of sexual violence that is commonly seen in pornography.²⁷ Further, a study published in 2019 involving 568 adolescents revealed that exposure to sexually explicit material online – including pornography – was related to individuals' resistance towards the #metoo movement, and increased

²³ The Guardian, 2020. How extreme porn has become a gateway drug into child abuse. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/dec/15/how-extreme-porn-has-become-a-gateway-drug-into-child-abuse>

²⁴ IWF, 2013. New research shows action needed to stop people seeing indecent images of children for the first time. <https://www.iwf.org.uk/news-media/news/new-research-shows-action-needed-to-stop-people-seeing-indecent-images-of-children-for-the-first-time/>

²⁵ The Children's Commissioner for England, 2023. 'A lot of it is actually just abuse': young people and pornography. <https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2023/02/cc-a-lot-of-it-is-actually-just-abuse-young-people-and-pornography-updated.pdf>

²⁶ The Children's Commissioner for England, 2023. 'A lot of it is actually just abuse': young people and pornography. <https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2023/02/cc-a-lot-of-it-is-actually-just-abuse-young-people-and-pornography-updated.pdf>

²⁷ The Children's Commissioner for England, 2023. Evidence on pornography's influence on harmful sexual behaviour among children <https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2023/05/Evidence-on-pornography-s-influence-on-harmful-sexual-behaviour-among-children.pdf>

acceptance of rape myths.²⁸ A study of young people across Europe found that boys who regularly watched online pornography were significantly more likely to hold negative gender attitudes; and regularly watching pornography and sending/ receiving sexual images or messages were both associated with increased probability of being sexually coercive.²⁹

Barnardo's practitioners have said that children are participating in acts that they have seen in pornographic videos, despite feeling uncomfortable and scared. In a survey of Barnardo's practitioners in 2021, more than a quarter (26%) had supported vulnerable children who had accessed pornography, and almost a third (32%) said that it led to the children that they supported developing unrealistic expectations of sex and relationships.³⁰

Viewing pornographic content is also normalising how girls view sexual violence, with girls often seeing it as a 'normal' and 'expected' part of relationships. In research by the Children's Commissioner for England, 76% of girls agreed with the statement that "viewing online pornography affects young people's expectations around sex and relationships" – compared to 67% of boys.³¹

Case study – Elizabeth*

There are also children who view pornography to try to understand their own sexual abuse. Unfortunately, what these children find is content that normalises the most abhorrent and illegal behaviours.

This includes 15-year-old Elizabeth* who has been sexually abused by a much older relative for a number of years. The content she found on pornography sites depicted older relatives having sex with young girls and the girls enjoying it. It wasn't until she disclosed her abuse that she realised that it was not normal.

*Please note all names have been changed.

How effective is (a) the police service and (b) the criminal justice system at responding to these behaviours and offences and how might those responses be improved?

Barnardo's has concerns regarding the support that child victims of sexual abuse and exploitation, child criminal exploitation, and domestic abuse receive when going through the criminal justice system. We welcome the Victims and

²⁸ Maes et. al., 2019. # (Me)too much? The role of sexualising online media in adolescents' resistance towards the metoo-movement and acceptance of rape myths.

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1016/j.adolescence.2019.10.005>

²⁹ Stanley et. al., Pornography, sexual coercion and abuse and sexting in young people's intimate relationships: a European study. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0886260516633204>

³⁰ Barnardo's, 2022. The Online Safety Bill: Impact of Pornography on Children.

<https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-02/The%20Online%20Safety%20Bill%20-%20Impact%20of%20Pornography%20on%20Children.pdf>

³¹ The Children's Commissioner for England, 2023. 'A lot of it is actually just abuse': young people and pornography <https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2023/02/cc-a-lot-of-it-is-actually-just-abuse-young-people-and-pornography-updated.pdf>

Prisoners Bill, however, along with a coalition of other children's charities, we are concerned that it does not go far enough to protect child victims.

Scale of childhood harms

Girls can be at particular risk of experiencing childhood harms. 15% of girls are estimated to experience some form of sexual abuse before the age of 16, with abuse by family members being more common for girls.³² Within child sexual abuse, girls at risk of being victims of child sexual exploitation. Victim-blaming attitudes towards child victims of sexual exploitation can persist, leading to cases being incorrectly identified as 'consensual sexual acts between young people', or as 'inappropriate relationships', rather than child sexual exploitation.³³ This happened in Telford, with the Report of the Independent Inquiry for Telford Child Sexual Exploitation reporting that victim-blaming language was used, and that there was an early perception towards the victims of them having made 'poor choices'.³⁴ A Barnardo's service has recently shared how, when supporting a 17-year-old girl, the police had referred to her as a 'sex worker', rather than appropriately providing her with safeguarding and support as a victim of child sexual exploitation.

Further, girls can be victims of child criminal exploitation. Barnardo's services have reported that girls can be specifically targeted by organised criminal gangs for criminal activity to evade police. This can include targeting and using girls as a group, or to accompany a boy on county lines as a 'young couple', which is thought to be seen as less conspicuous than a single child, or a group of boys travelling alone. Girls and young women can also be exploited by boyfriends through coercive and controlling behaviour, including both sexual and criminal exploitation and domestic abuse.³⁵

Girls can be vulnerable due to how they exploited, and methods used to keep them trapped in the cycle of exploitation. For example, girls can be made to hide and conceal items, including drugs and weapons, through plugging, spooning, and hiding in bras. The increase in online methods of exploitation has also put additional vulnerabilities on girls, including the use of 'online collateral'. Online collateral is the use of incriminating and/ or intimate images, videos, voice notes and screen shots of messages to ensure compliance. This can include the threat of 'revenge porn', which is especially used to keep girls trapped in cycles of exploitation. Overall data on the scale and prevalence of child criminal exploitation is not widely available and there are data gaps, and of the children

³² Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse. Infographics of child sexual abuse.

<https://www.csacentre.org.uk/our-research/the-scale-and-nature-of-csa/infographics/?page=7>

³³ Barnardo's, 2023. Invisible Children: Understanding the risk of the cost-of-living crisis and school holidays on child sexual and criminal exploitation. <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-06/summer23-report-invisible-children-cost-living-criminal-sexual-exploitation.pdf>

³⁴ Independent Inquiry Telford Child Sexual Exploitation, 2022. Report of the Independent Inquiry Telford Child Sexual Exploitation Volume One of Four <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5cc814eee8ba44aa938d883c/t/62cd9f93d1afb577e0f4d785/1657642904848/IITCSE+REPORT+-+VOLUME+ONE.pdf>

³⁵ Jury-Dada, 2018. #GirlsAndGangs: Girls, gangs, and their abusive relationships.

<https://girlsandgangshome.files.wordpress.com/2019/03/girls-gangs-and-their-abusive-relationships-final.pdf> and National Crime Agency, 2016. County Lines Gang Violence, Exploitation & Drug Supply 2016.

<https://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/who-we-are/publications/15-county-lines-gang-violence-exploitation-and-drug-supply-2016/file>

referred to the National Referral Mechanism for child criminal exploitation in 2022, just 6.2% were girls.³⁶ We know, though, that this is just the tip of the iceberg.

Children, including girls, are also at risk of experiencing domestic abuse. In the year to 31 March 2022, there were 160,690 risk assessments made which identified concerns about the child's parent/ carer being the victim of domestic abuse – just under one third of all episodes with assessment factors recorded.³⁷

Children who are exposed to domestic abuse in the home continue to experience mental and physical health problems throughout their childhood and into adulthood. For example, 42% of female young offenders had experienced domestic violence in the family home³⁸, and one study found that over half of children (52%) who had experienced domestic abuse in the home had developed behavioural problems.³⁹ Further, more than 90% of Barnardo's service practitioners who responded to a survey about domestic abuse reported that living with domestic abuse impacted children's mental health.⁴⁰ Experiencing domestic abuse in the home can also result in further harm – for example the Parliamentary Inquiry into Harmful Sexual Behaviour found that experiencing domestic abuse has particularly strong correlation with children displaying harmful sexual behaviours.⁴¹ Further, children who live in households where there is domestic abuse are more likely to be in abusive relationships when they are older – either as abusers or victims, or both – stuck in a cycle of abuse.⁴²

Young people also experience the highest rates of domestic abuse in their own intimate relationships of any age group. In 2015, the Crime Survey for England and Wales identified that 12.6% of girls and women aged 16 to 19 had experienced abuse in the past year.⁴³ Evidence suggests that this can start even earlier in adolescence; an NSPCC survey of 13 to 17-year-olds found that a quarter (25%) of girls and 18% of boys reported having experienced some form of physical violence from an intimate partner.⁴⁴

³⁶ Home Office, 2023. Modern Slavery: National Referral Mechanism and Duty to Notify Statistics UK, end of year summary 2022. <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/modern-slavery-national-referral-mechanism-and-duty-to-notify-statistics-uk-end-of-year-summary-2022/modern-slavery-national-referral-mechanism-and-duty-to-notify-statistics-uk-end-of-year-summary-2022>

³⁷ Office of National Statistics, 2022. Characteristics of children in need. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/characteristics-of-children-in-need>

³⁸ Safe Lives. Safe Young Lives: Young People and Domestic Abuse <https://safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Safe%20Young%20Lives%20web.pdf>

³⁹ Safe Lives, 2014. In plain sight: the evidence from children exposed to domestic abuse https://safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/In_plain_sight_the_evidence_from_children_exposed_to_domestic_abuse.pdf

⁴⁰ Barnardo's, 2020. Not just collateral damage: the hidden impact of domestic abuse on children. https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/%27Not%20just%20collateral%20damage%27%20Barnardo%27s%20Report_0.pdf

⁴¹ Report of the parliamentary inquiry into support and sanctions for children who display harmful sexual behaviour (Chaired by Nusrat Ghani MP), 2016

⁴² UNICEF (2006) Behind Closed Doors: The impact of Domestic Violence on children

⁴³ Safe Lives. Safe Young Lives: Young People and Domestic Abuse <https://safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Safe%20Young%20Lives%20web.pdf>

⁴⁴ NSPCC, 2009. Partner exploitation and violence in teenage intimate relationships. <https://library.nspcc.org.uk/HeritageScripts/Hapi.dll/search2?searchTerm0=C1739>

Specialist support services for all child victims of abuse and exploitation

Children who have faced abuse and exploitation can often miss out on accessing vital child-specific support services, which can play a significant role in supporting and safeguarding children. These services include therapeutic and counselling services, mental health services and advocacy services. Research indicates that specific support services are best placed to meet the needs of victims or survivors, with many children preferring to receive support from third sector organisations and NGOs.⁴⁵ Investment also makes economic sense – Barnardo’s and Pro Bono Economics evidence from 2011 found that, for every £1 invested in specific support services for child sexual exploitation, it can save the taxpayer up to £12, with savings being shared by multiple agencies and Government departments.⁴⁶

Despite the benefits of such services, children can often face a postcode lottery when it comes to accessing them. In 2023, Barnardo’s made an FOI request to local authorities and Police and Crime Commissioners across the UK to ask them how many specific support services they had commissioned in the previous 12 months for child victims of child sexual exploitation, and child victims of child criminal exploitation.⁴⁷ Out of the local authorities who provided information, 68% had not commissioned any services in the past 12 months. For Police and Crime Commissioner, this was 39%.⁴⁸

Despite children being rightly identified as victims of domestic abuse in their own right through the Domestic Abuse Act,⁴⁹ this has not had any real impact on the provision of specialist services for child victims. Research by the Domestic Abuse Commissioner found that only 29% of adult victims and survivors who wanted support for their children were able to access it.⁵⁰ Further, research by Action for Children found that there was significant variability in the level of provision for children and young people impacted by domestic abuse between and within local authorities across England and Wales. The research found that, in more than 10 percent of local authorities, there were no support services available for children affected by domestic abuse – provided either through the local authority, specialist domestic abuse or VAWG sector, or other voluntary organisations.⁵¹ In

⁴⁵ The Centre for Criminal Justice, 2021. Unsafe children: driving up our country’s response to child sexual abuse and exploitation. <https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/library/unsafe-children-driving-up-our-countrys-response-to-child-sexual-abuse-and-exploitation>

⁴⁶ Barnardo’s and Pro Bono Economics, 2011. An assessment of the potential savings from Barnardo’s interventions for young people who have been sexually exploited. [https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-11/an assessment of the potential savings from barnardo s interventions for young people who have been sexually exploited - full research report final .pdf](https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-11/an%20assessment%20of%20the%20potential%20savings%20from%20barnardo%20s%20interventions%20for%20young%20people%20who%20have%20been%20sexually%20exploited%20-%20full%20research%20report%20final%20.pdf)

⁴⁷ Barnardo’s, 2023. Invisible Children: Understanding the risk of the cost-of-living crisis and school holidays on child sexual and criminal exploitation. <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-06/summer23-report-invisible-children-cost-living-criminal-sexual-exploitation.pdf>

⁴⁸ Barnardo’s, 2023. Invisible Children: Understanding the risk of the cost-of-living crisis and school holidays on child sexual and criminal exploitation. <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-06/summer23-report-invisible-children-cost-living-criminal-sexual-exploitation.pdf>

⁴⁹ Domestic Abuse Act 2021. <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2021/17/contents/enacted>

⁵⁰ Domestic Abuse Commissioner, 2022. A patchwork of provision: how to meet the needs of victims and survivors across England and Wales. https://domesticabusecommissioner.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/DAC_Mapping-Abuse-Suvivors_Long-Policy-Report_Nov2022_FA.pdf

⁵¹ Action for Children. Patchy, piecemeal and precarious: support for children affected by domestic abuse. <https://media.actionforchildren.org.uk/documents/patchy-piecemeal-and-precarious-support-for-children-affected-by-domestic-abuse.pdf>

two thirds of the local areas interviewed, children's access to services was dependent on a parent's engagement with the service.⁵² Barnardo's own practitioners also reported a lack of specialist support services for child victims of domestic abuse, and more than 42% of Barnardo's services reported that they had noticed changes in the availability of the provision of specialist support for domestic abuse in their area.⁵³

The Ministry of Justice has acknowledged that research to date indicated that the "availability of specialist provision for children and young people is not sufficient to meet the level of need"⁵⁴, and in its final report, the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse recommended that the UK Government should guarantee that all child victims of sexual abuse will be offered specialist and accredited therapeutic support.⁵⁵

The Victims and Prisoners Bill that is currently going through Parliament offers an opportunity to ensure that all child victims of crime, including abuse and exploitation, can access specialist support. Alongside a coalition of children's charities led by the NSPCC, Barnardo's is calling on the Government to place a duty on the relevant authorities to commission sufficient and specific support for children and young people who are victims of crime, including sexual abuse and exploitation, domestic abuse and criminal exploitation. We also are calling for this to be supplemented by placing a further duty on the Secretary of State to make a national statement on the current volume, need, provision and investment in support services for children who are victims of crimes including abuse and exploitation, so that sufficient specific support services for child victims can be commissioned. Greater investment is also needed in specific support services for child victims of abuse and exploitation, and this should be announced alongside the Bill.

Provision of Child Independent Sexual Violence Advisors and Child Independent Domestic Violence Advisors

Further, Barnardo's would like to see investment in the provision of specialist Child Independent Sexual Violence Advisors (CHISVAs) and Child Independent Domestic Violence Advisors (CHIDVAs), as well as statutory guidance developed for these roles. Whilst child sexual abuse and domestic abuse is prevalent, access to statutory services remains low.

However, access to CHISVAs and CHIDVAs remains low. A recent FOI by the NSPCC found that less than one quarter of local authorities said that they provide dedicated support for children and young people in the form of an ISVA/

⁵² Action for Children. Patchy, piecemeal and precarious: support for children affected by domestic abuse. <https://media.actionforchildren.org.uk/documents/patchy-piecemeal-and-precarious-support-for-children-affected-by-domestic-abuse.pdf>

⁵³ Barnardo's, 2020. Not just collateral damage: the hidden impact of domestic abuse on children. https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/%27Not%20just%20collateral%20damage%27%20Barnardo%27s%20Report_0.pdf

⁵⁴ Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, 2021. Witness Statement of Melissa Case, Ministry of Justice. <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20221214212511/https://www.iicsa.org.uk/key-documents/28849/view/MOJ000929.pdf>

⁵⁵ Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, 2022. The report of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse. https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20221215051709/https://www.iicsa.org.uk/key-documents/31216/view/report-independent-inquiry-into-child-sexual-abuse-october-2022_0.pdf

IDVA.⁵⁶ Research by domestic abuse charity SafeLives has shown that specialist support for child victims of domestic abuse can lead to improved outcomes. The report *In Plain Sight*, found that following contact with specialist services, children's safety and health outcomes significantly improved across all key indicators.⁵⁷ In addition to significant improvements in health, safety, wellbeing and achievement, abusive behaviour in children exposed to domestic abuse dropped from 25% to 7% following support from the service.

We would also want to see this investment in Young People's Violence Advisors (YPVAs), which is a role specifically developed to support young people who have experienced abuse in their own intimate partner relationships. Young people experience the highest rates of domestic abuse in their own intimate relationships of any age group. In 2015, the Crime Survey for England and Wales identified that 12.6% of girls and women aged 16 to 19 had experienced abuse in the past year.⁵⁸ Evidence suggests that this can start even earlier in adolescence; an NSPCC survey of 13 to 17-year-olds found that a quarter (25%) of girls and 18% of boys reported having experienced some form of physical violence from an intimate partner.⁵⁹

Police response

Barnardo's is concerned about how child victims of crime, including child criminal exploitation and sexual exploitation, can be blamed and criminalised for their actions, rather than appropriately safeguarded and supported. As previously noted, victim-blaming attitudes and language can persist in instances of child exploitation, and this can be because of a lack of understanding of exploitation.

In England, there is no statutory definition of child criminal exploitation. In 2021, Barnardo's made a Freedom of Information request to police forces across the UK about child criminal exploitation. Of the 30 police forces that responded, just one police force was able to provide any data, with the majority of police forces asking us how child criminal exploitation is defined.⁶⁰ This demonstrates how misunderstood child criminal exploitation is.

Barnardo's, along with a coalition of children's charities, is calling for the Victims and Prisoners Bill to include a statutory definition of child criminal exploitation, to ensure that all child victims are able to be appropriately identified and supported. This is also supported by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, who, in their most recent concluding observations on child rights in the

⁵⁶ The Independent, 2023. Gap in support for young people who have suffered abuse – NSPCC.

https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/nspcc-children-gap-england-government-b2338779.html?utm_term=Autofeed&utm_medium=Social&utm_source=Twitter#Echobox=1684110902

⁵⁷ Office of National Statistics, 2022. Characteristics of children in need. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/characteristics-of-children-in-need>

⁵⁸ Safe Lives. Safe Young Lives: Young People and Domestic Abuse <https://safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Safe%20Young%20Lives%20web.pdf>

⁵⁹ NSPCC, 2009. Partner exploitation and violence in teenage intimate relationships. <https://library.nspcc.org.uk/HeritageScripts/Hapi.dll/search2?searchTerm0=C1739>

⁶⁰ Barnardo's, 2021. Exploited and criminalised: what can the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill do to ensure that children who are criminally exploited receive the care and support they need? <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-10/Exploited%20and%20Criminalised%20report.pdf>

UK, urged the UK Government to ensure that the Victims and Prisoners Bill clearly defines the criminal exploitation of children.⁶¹

Barnardo's and The Children's Society defines child criminal exploitation as "when a child under the age of 18 is encouraged, expected, or required to take part in any activity that constitutes a criminal offence under British law". We hope that this will be included by the Government in the Victims and Prisoners Bill.

Criminal Justice Response

Barnardo's is concerned about a lack of clarity regarding access to pre-trial therapy for child victims who are engaged in the criminal justice system. The revised CPS pre-trial therapy guidance now affirms that there is no requirement to delay therapy on account of an ongoing police investigation or prosecution, which is welcome. However, this is not being universally applied for child victims. Research commissioned by the Home Office shows that children and young people are being wrongly advised that they should not access therapy until the criminal justice process had ended.⁶² Given increasingly long delays and waiting times for victims of abuse and exploitation – an FOI by the NSPCC found that waiting times for child sexual abuse cases have increased by 43% in the past four years⁶³ – this is compounding the trauma that young victims and witnesses are facing.

Further, the CPS guidance increases the likelihood of victims' therapy notes being accessed, deterring many victims from seeking therapeutic support out of fear that the notes will be accessed to discredit them during the criminal justice process. In Barnardo's report, *Journey to Justice*, children and young people shared their grievances about the lack of mental health support they received during the process, including the constraints on what can be discussed during pre-trial therapy.⁶⁴ The CPS guidance must be revised to afford a greater level of confidentiality to all victims so that they can access this vital therapeutic support freely.

What interventions are currently in place for perpetrators with different offending histories and how effective are they for different offender pathways?

Interventions are currently in place to reduce reoffending. This includes sex offender treatment programmes, management in the community, and circles of support.⁶⁵ However, for those at risk of committing child sexual abuse, prevention efforts are often hampered because of beliefs about perpetrators of

⁶¹ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2023. Concluding observations on the combined sixth and seventh periodic reports of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CRC%2FC%2FGBR%2FCO%2F6-7&Lang=en

⁶² Bluestar Project and the Green House, 2022. Keeping Secrets: childhood sexual abuse and pre-trial therapy. https://www.bluestarproject.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Keeping-Secrets-Policy-Report_FINAL.pdf

⁶³ NSPCC, 2022. Child sexual abuse victims face longer delays to get to court as waiting times surge.

<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/about-us/news-opinion/2022/child-sexual-abuse-victims-court-waiting-times/>

⁶⁴ Barnardo's, 2017. *Journey to Justice: Prioritising the wellbeing of children involved in criminal justice processes relating to sexual exploitation and abuse.*

<https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/journey-to-justice-full.pdf>

⁶⁵ Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse, 2020. Key messages from research on child sexual abuse perpetrated by adults. <https://www.csacentre.org.uk/resources/key-messages/csa-perpetrated-by-adults/>

child sexual abuse.⁶⁶ Some organisations in the UK, including the Lucy Faithfull Foundation, have developed activities and interventions for a range of individuals who may be at risk of committing a sexual offence.⁶⁷

Barnardo's is concerned that there is little understand of who the perpetrators of serious violence against women and girls are, including of child sexual abuse and exploitation.

According to the Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse, perpetrators of child sexual abuse are generally identified as male, white, and aged between 18 and 85 years, with the average age ranging from 30-46 years old. Of these, a high proportion were employed, and a large number were in professional jobs.⁶⁸ However, because of a lack of research into this space, and the fact that high numbers of child sexual abuse and exploitation go unreported, it is difficult to accurately identify perpetrators of child sexual abuse and exploitation, including the extent of female-perpetrated abuse.

We would welcome a greater focus in research on the characteristics of perpetrators of child sexual exploitation and abuse, to enable the understanding of different offender pathways.

September 2023

⁶⁶ Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse, 2020. Key messages from research on child sexual abuse perpetrated by adults. <https://www.csacentre.org.uk/resources/key-messages/csa-perpetrated-by-adults/>

⁶⁷ Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse, 2020. Key messages from research on child sexual abuse perpetrated by adults. <https://www.csacentre.org.uk/resources/key-messages/csa-perpetrated-by-adults/>

⁶⁸ Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse, 2018. Characteristics and motivations of perpetrators of child sexual exploitation: a rapid evidence assessment of research. <https://www.csacentre.org.uk/documents/characteristics-motivations-cse/>