

Barnardo's response to the Home Affairs Select Committee's call for evidence: *Home Office preparedness for COVID-19 - the impact on child abuse and domestic abuse*



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About Barnardo's

Barnardo's is the UK's largest national children's charity. Our ambition is to achieve better outcomes for more children by building stronger families, safer childhoods and positive futures. In 2019/20 we supported around 358,800 children, young people, parents and carers through over 800 services.¹

See, Hear, Respond², funded by the Department of Education, is a coalition of 70+ charities and community-based organisations across England led by Barnardo's to provide support to 'hidden' children and young people who are experiencing harm and increased adversity due to the pandemic and who do not have a social worker or other statutory support. There is no minimum threshold for referral and support is available to children from pre-birth up to 18 years old and those with special educational needs under the age of 25. Of the 50,000 children supported by See Hear Respond over 7,000 (7,124) children reported inter parental conflict and domestic abuse and just under 5,000 (4,987) children have been impacted by child sexual abuse. Case studies from this services have been included in our submission.

Key recommendations

- **The Domestic Abuse Bill should be amended to include a statutory duty on public authorities to commission community-based support services for all persons affected by domestic abuse - adult and/or child victims and perpetrators.** The increase in domestic abuse during the pandemic has shown the vital need for community-based support services that all victims can access, no matter where they live or their status. A duty to provide support solely in refuges (as currently proposed in the Bill) will not help the majority of domestic abuse victims, including children.³
- **Online Harms legislation needs to be put in place as a matter of urgency.** Without Online Harms Legislation being in place yet, children have spent more time online seeking support, connection, coping strategies and access to learning, whilst the technology industry remains unregulated with regards to safety-by-design and affording children protection in online spaces.

¹ Barnardo's [Impact Report](#) 2020

² See, Hear, Respond [website](#)

³ [Briefing on the Domestic Abuse Bill](#) - amending the Bill to include community-based services

- **It is essential that we move away from victim blaming language when safeguarding children.** The pandemic saw a resurgence in victim-blaming language and lessons telling children to themselves safe. We must steer away from victim blaming language and teaching such as 'self-generated' or lessons within school that show you how to 'keep yourself safe online'. Being made to feel responsible for their own abuse can stop children from reporting, cause feelings of shame, and exacerbate trauma. Ultimately, victim blaming language fails to recognise the powerful strategies and tactics which groomers and abusers use in order to sexually abuse children in both the online and offline context. We recommend that the language used by schools, within Government guidance and policy is reviewed and alternatives sought to ensure it does not suggest that victims could have been more careful and/or prevented their own abuse.
- **There needs to be a greater focus on protecting groups where child abuse is most likely to be underreported - under 10s, Black Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME)⁴, disabled, boys and LGBTQ+.** Access to support varies in each household and more needs to be done to support the most vulnerable groups more effectively. The pandemic has disproportionately impacted the groups referenced above and professionals need to be better trained to identify and support these groups with online materials and support being made accessible to those with disabilities and those with English as a second language.

Domestic Abuse

We run 26 specialist services which work with adult and child victims and perpetrators of domestic abuse. Programmes include safety planning with victims and therapeutic work. Our report, *Not just collateral Damage - the hidden impact of domestic abuse on children* published in February 2020⁵, provided insight from our services about why early intervention and support is vital for children impacted by domestic abuse to overcome trauma and achieve a positive future.

COVID-19 and domestic abuse

Domestic abuse has significantly increased during the pandemic. The risks to children experiencing domestic abuse have been heightened by the COVID-19 and the ongoing restrictions because victims get little or no respite from their abusers. Since the lockdown was announced on 23 March 2020, calls to the National Domestic Abuse Helpline rose by 49% and domestic abuse killings are thought to have more than doubled. **Three fifths (57%) of Barnardo's frontline staff⁶** said they are concerned about an increase in family conflict and stress.

Barnardo's frontline staff who responded to a survey in Autumn 2020 said:

- 70% have supported someone in the last year who has experienced domestic abuse (June 2019 - July 2020).

⁴ Individuals may choose to identify themselves in different ways, including as Black, Brown, BAME, as 'people of colour' and/or as members of Global South Communities.

⁵ https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/Not%20just%20collateral%20damage'%20Barnardo's%20Report_0.pdf

⁶ Survey of Barnardo's practitioners,

- 57% have supported a child or young person in a household with domestic abuse.
- 56% have supported an adult victim of domestic abuse.
- 29% (118 of 411) have supported a child or young person who is a victim of domestic abuse in an intimate relationship.
- 20% have supported an adult perpetrator of domestic abuse and 19% have supported a young person exhibiting abusive behaviours in an intimate relationship.
- 50% think there has been an increase in the number of children and young people experiencing domestic abuse since lockdown was announced.

During the pandemic, especially where schools have closed, children experiencing domestic abuse are hidden from the view of professionals like teachers and health visitors who would usually be able to report any concerns. We know a maximum of just 5% of children known to be vulnerable were attending school during the first lockdown.

Children are often thought of simply as witnesses when there is abuse at home, but Barnardo's sees first-hand the devastating impact of domestic abuse on children's mental and physical health, from self-harm and depression to being more likely to be in abusive relationships themselves. More needs to be done to break the cycle of domestic abuse. Of the 50,000 children supported in the See Hear Respond programme over 7,000 (7,124) children reported inter parental conflict and domestic abuse.

See, Hear, Respond case study - boy aged 10 from London

This young boy has experienced horrific domestic violence throughout his life which has had an impact on his mental health. He suffers from separation anxiety and worries immensely about his mum. During lockdown he was unable to attend school as mum could not get him to the school in time as they had just fled to a new area due to domestic violence and she also has two other children to take to school. He is not looking forward to going back to school and not wanting to go.

See, Hear, Respond case study - boy aged 12, moved from Northern Ireland to Northern England

This child fled with his mum and younger brother from domestic abuse over a year ago. He has lived in a women's refuge since then and has struggled to build any trusting relationships in school. Due to the pandemic he has not accessed education. The family has resettled into a new home last month and he is due to start a new school in September. He has shown signs of self-harm and anger towards himself and struggles with change.

The Domestic Abuse Bill

The impact of COVID-19 makes it even more important that the Domestic Abuse Bill is strengthened to protect all victims including children, who are often the forgotten victims of domestic abuse.

We see first hand that domestic abuse services across the country focus primarily on working either with adult victims of domestic abuse or perpetrators, and not enough is being done to address the trauma children have suffered or the long term impact abuse has on their lives.

As it currently stands, the Bill will only ensure victims, including children, in safe accommodation can access statutory support. This does not go far enough and risks creating a two tier system, with the majority of victims who remain in the family home not qualifying for this support.

The need for community-based services has been starkly highlighted during the pandemic. We have been calling for the Government to take a holistic approach to tackling domestic abuse by including a statutory duty on public authorities to commission community-based support services to all victims including children of domestic abuse as well as perpetrator rehabilitation programmes in the Domestic Abuse Bill.⁷ This is supported by the Children's Commissioner, the Domestic Abuse Commissioner, the Victims' Commissioner, a group of cross-party Peers⁸, the British Association of Social Workers and many other cross sector organisations. With services seeing a huge spike in demand for support, it is vital that the Bill is amended so all victims, including children, get the same access to support, no matter where they live.

Example of a holistic approach to tackling domestic abuse - Barnardo's Cymru Opening Closed Doors Service

Barnardo's Cymru, Opening Closed Doors Programme offers community-based, early intervention domestic abuse support for the whole family through a therapeutic service model. Barnardo's believe that this model of community based, holistic whole family Domestic Abuse support, offers the highest quality early intervention services for both child and adult victims, as well as perpetrators and should be commissioned nationally by relevant local authorities.

Established in March 2019 the service works across five local authorities in South East Wales and is funded by the Home Office. The programme provides community based support to children and families who have experienced domestic abuse, helping them to recover from the trauma they have experienced and build sustainable change in their lives. The programme takes a holistic approach by offering a whole family intervention that includes:

1. Integrated Women's Support (IWS);
2. Safety, Trust and Respect (STAR) Programme for children and young people; and
3. Domestic Abuse Perpetrator Programme (DAPP).

The evaluation found '**strong indicative evidence that the funded programme has had a positive impact on families involved with it so far**'.⁹ The report revealed the programme's service outcomes has '**relatively strong / the strongest evidence of positive impact** in regard to the creation of 'a safe and stable home environment', 'a reduction in the child's emotional stress' and 'families able to recover from domestic abuse' amongst the families they support¹⁰. Additionally, the report found there is a high demand

⁷ [Briefing on the Domestic Abuse Bill](#) amending the Bill to include community-based services- February 2021

⁸ [Open Letter](#) from peers to the Prime Minister - 1 February 2021

⁹ Oxford Brooke's University, '[Opening Closed Doors Programme Evaluation](#)' Final Report, February 2020, p.3

for community based, early intervention services for the whole family, including child victims and perpetrators. Between the 1st March and 30th November 2019:¹¹

- 256 referrals were received, representing 579 individuals.
- Families experiencing domestic abuse with high levels of need accessed the service, including: 92 children with Care and Support Plans other than for Child Protection, 105 on the Child Protection Register and 33 Looked After Children.

The evaluation endorsed the effectiveness of this model of community based, whole family domestic abuse support and concluded that: *'It has already generated a very high level of demand, **strongly suggesting that it is needed**'* and recommended it is *' a model that is worth investing in and that could be rolled out in other areas.'*¹²

Barnardo's and Child Sexual Abuse

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is one of Barnardo's three priority areas, delivering specialist services in 45 locations across the UK. Last year, we supported 6,400 children and young people through our child abuse and exploitation services and supporting thousands more through our work training professionals, providing resources for schools and raising awareness through policy and research. Our direct work with children includes:

- 2,900 in our child sexual exploitation (CSE) services;
- 2,000 in our missing services;
- 350 in our female genital mutilation (FGM) services;
- 700 in our counter-trafficking services; and
- 400 in our harmful sexual behaviour services (HSB).^[2]

We also host the Home Office funded Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse which reaches 1000's through its training and research, as well as the National FGM Centre, a partnership between Barnardo's and the Local Government Association, which works with professionals and in communities to educate and prevent FGM.

Child Sexual Abuse and COVID-19

- Offline harms

During the COVID-19 pandemic, children may have been trapped in homes where abuse is taking place and hidden from view of trusted adults such as teachers. Stress and isolation of parents and caregivers has increased which in turn could increase the propensity for abuse within the household. The combination of fewer support services being available, the lack of contact with the outside world plus the additional stress has inevitably led to an increase in the risk of serious harm to children.

Throughout the pandemic Barnardo's child sexual abuse services have continued to provide face-to-face support, where necessary and within Government guidelines, and/or through digital means. Whilst some children and young people actually prefer to communicate over the phone, messaging apps or other digital tools, this is less effective when children are

¹⁰ Ibid p.3

¹¹ Ibid p.4

¹² Ibid p.8

younger, have communication difficulties (Disabled children and young people are 3 times more likely to be abused or neglected than non-disabled young people and they may be less visible to professionals and unable to communicate easily online or at all¹³), and or cannot access a digital device/data. In some cases children also lack a safe and private space to speak to support workers. As well as this, there has been a disproportionate impact on BAME families¹⁴, especially where information has not been provided in first languages, where racist responses have seen to grow towards BAME communities and grassroot agencies have struggled to operate.

Throughout the pandemic children have not been given enough education about their rights to be safe and protected from abuse, and adults who could or would 'step in' to act as a protective person are less available. Examples of fines being issued to young people, lack of professional curiosity or trauma informed responses to young people out on the street during lockdown create barriers to victims of extra-familial harm being recognised and safeguarded as a priority. We have even heard of examples of intolerance of children and young people's trauma when they are viewed as naughty, difficult, or deliberately breaking lockdown.

CSA has always been hugely under reported¹⁵ and whilst belief that the pandemic has prevented identification of CSA in the family network is certainly true (referrals have dropped across the board), we need to not look back to pre-lockdown in a false belief that the system was even coming close to early identification and safeguarding of children from CSA.

- **Online harms**

Through COVID-19 more children have been using the internet to stay connected, access support and cope with the pandemic, and at the same time we also see increased ways in which offenders are using this opportunity to abuse. Spending an increased amount of time online meant that potential abusers also had more opportunity to groom children. The need to address online harms is even greater and more urgent in the current COVID-19 context.

As lockdown commenced, the whole sector saw children being rushed on to online platforms to help them, families and the system cope. What quickly followed was a resurgence of victim blaming messages, encouraging children to 'keep themselves safe', reminding them that the internet can be dangerous and that somehow they can be educated or reminded to 'prevent' sexual abuse as well as a wide range of online harms like cyber bullying, radicalisation, hate speech.

During the first lockdown, we surveyed children and young people we support about the impact of the pandemic on them in relation to the content they are being exposed to online and found:¹⁶

¹³ <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/reporting-abuse/coronavirus-abuse-neglect-vulnerable-children/>

¹⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/jun/21/COVID-19-hits-bame-youth-mental-health-worse-than-white-peers-study>

¹⁵ CSA is notoriously underreported, with just 5-20% of cases thought to come to the attention of authorities - CSA during the pandemic, Richard Wortle, University College London, Jill Dando Institute

- Around a quarter (27%) of young men aged 16-24 said they had seen more content online that made them uncomfortable or scared than before lockdown - but this rose to more than two fifths (42%) for young women.
- For children aged 8-15, one in five (21%) boys and girls said they had seen more potentially harmful material than usual.
- Overall, over a quarter (27%) of children and young people aged 8-24 said they had seen more things online that made them uncomfortable or scared than before lockdown.
- More than four in five (83%) children and young people reported spending an increased amount of time online during lockdown, which could have resulted in the increased exposure to harmful material.

The National Crime Agency reported that UK internet traffic to porn sites had significantly increased through lockdown and we need to assume that a proportion of this will be children who can either stumble across porn or actively search for it in curiosity but be met with hard core porn depicting incest, non-consensual rape-fantasies, violent and extreme acts. This aids the normalisation of sexual violence and undermines children's sense of what is normal, healthy, and consensual. This is why the previously proposed age verification legislation was so crucial to keeping children safer online. The abandoning of these changes and delays until the Online Harms Law is passed has put many more children at risk particularly since there has been a substantial increase in the use of the internet due to the lockdowns and homeschooling. We would encourage the Government to look to speed up its online harms legislation as a matter of urgency.

Below is one example of many we have received through the See, Hear, Respond of the impact COVID-19 is having on children.

See, Hear, Respond – boy aged 15

Child C (aged 15) was provided with group work support to help him with emotional wellbeing and mental health challenges. He had previously self-harmed and was feeling increasingly anxious and isolated due to COVID-19 and lockdown and family tensions were high. At the end of the intervention Child C had developed some coping strategies and protective networks, had some joint therapeutic input with wider family members who understood his needs better and support was withdrawn once Child C was linked back into school, family and positive friendships.

However, Child C suddenly self-referred back to See, Hear, Respond in crisis with high suicide ideation. He disclosed that he had been groomed online by an adult who had asked him to send him naked pictures, and was now being blackmailed by the adult. The offender threatened Child C that unless he paid £500 to the offender for the safe return of the images, he would inform the police that Child C had sent naked pictures of himself to the offenders 12 year old daughter's account and that he would be arrested for sexual offences. Child C immediately contacted his previous See, Hear, Respond worker to get help and advice. His worker was able to de-escalate his high anxiety and suicide ideation, work with his family to understand the situation and make sure the child had family support and inform local police and CEOP of the blackmail and exploitation. See, Hear, Respond continues to support Child C in processing what has happened, bolstering his

¹⁶ <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/big-barnardos-conversation> 2020

mental health and helping him use safety mechanisms available online, whilst also helping him understand and navigate the criminal justice process happening around him.