

Written evidence submitted by Barnardo's (COR0104)

Introduction

1. Barnardo's is the largest national children's charity in the UK. In 2018/2019 we supported around 300,000 children,¹ young people, parents and carers through over 1,000 services, including counselling for children who have been abused, fostering and adoption services, vocational training and disability inclusion groups. The majority of our services are now providing support over phone instant messaging and video conferencing, and we have more than 500 staff across over 70 services providing essential face to face support to very vulnerable children, young people and families, in line with Government guidance.
2. Barnardo's provides 14 specialist domestic abuse services which support families affected by domestic abuse including safety planning with victims, therapeutic work with children and perpetrator group work. We also see the impact of domestic abuse every day across the majority of our 1000+ services. Over 76% of Barnardo's practitioners have supported children, young people and/or parents who experienced domestic abuse in the last year.² Since lockdown restrictions have been introduced, 15.9% of our frontline workers report an increase in issues around domestic abuse.³
3. This submission will provide insight from Barnardo's services⁴ on how Covid-19 and social distancing measures are impacting children affected by domestic abuse and child abuse.

Summary

4. Covid-19 and social distancing measures are having a serious impact on children, young people, parents and carers across the country. Families are under increased pressures economically and emotionally. Barnardo's practitioners have reported supporting families who are in poverty, have seen a reduction in earnings, are affected by school closures, and require additional support for their mental health and wellbeing.
5. With children spending more time at home and online we are concerned that children are at greater risk of harm. 35% of Barnardo's practitioners who are working with families who they have safeguarding concerns about are most concerned about domestic abuse and child abuse.⁵ 57% of Barnardo's practitioners are concerned about an increase in family conflict and stress.
6. With fewer protective structures in place (such as school)⁶ and a reduction in contact with families - 45% of Barnardo's practitioners have reported a decrease in referrals due to services having less contact with families⁷ - there is a serious risk that 'hidden'

¹ We use the United Nations' definition of children and young people. The United Nations defines any individual under the age of 18 as a child. The UN also refers to those aged 15-24 as young people.

² Barnardo's Quarterly Practitioners Survey, October 2018-2019. Children can both experience domestic abuse by living in a domestic abuse household and/or experience it in their intimate relationships.

³ Barnardo's Quarterly Practitioner Survey, April 2020

⁴ This includes insight from our specialist domestic abuse services as well as other services that work with children, young people and families affected by domestic abuse.

⁵ Barnardo's Quarterly Practitioner Survey, April 2020.

⁶ 24,000 of the children in attendance on Friday 17 April were classed by schools as vulnerable, down from 29,000 on Friday 3 April. DfE [estimates](#) this represents around 5% of all children and young people classified as 'Children in Need' or who have an Education, Health and Care Plan.

groups of vulnerable children, such as children affected by domestic abuse, are going unrecognised and unsupported.

7. 40% of Barnardo's practitioners have reported children and families they support are concerned about being unable to access the support available.⁸ Due to the social distancing measures, some children and families are now struggling to access support. Reasons include; a lack of access to devices/wifi, families self-isolating, or not having a safe space to speak.
8. Without access to services for children to recover from domestic abuse it can have a significant impact, putting at risk their future wellbeing, their education, and their chance of forming happy, healthy relationships.⁹
9. The Domestic Abuse Bill which has returned to Parliament is a vital opportunity to improve support for **all** victims including children. As currently drafted it will only ensure victims and children in refuges and safe accommodation can access support. The impact of the lockdown further strengthens the case to extend the proposed statutory duty to cover **all** victims and children, to include the majority of victims and children who will remain in the family home or elsewhere in the community. This is particularly important as demand for domestic abuse services is expected to continue to increase as we exit lockdown.
10. In April 2020, the Home Secretary, Priti Patel, announced support¹⁰ for domestic abuse victims. This includes the launch of a new national campaign to reach out to those who are at risk of abuse and funding for online support services.¹¹ Barnardo's welcomes this announcement; however, there are still concerns around how Covid-19 impacts children, young people and families. These concerns are outlined in this submission.

The prevalence of domestic abuse and risk of harm within the home since the Government issued 'stay at home' guidance on 23 March

11. Prior to Covid -19, analysis of Government's children in need data from Action for Children shows that up to 692 children a day are assessed as being at risk of domestic violence in England. ¹² Furthermore, Young people are the group most likely to be in an abusive relationship. A 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.
12. Furthermore, prior to the Covid -19 outbreak it was estimated that 1 in 5 children under 18 in the UK were impacted by domestic abuse during their childhood.¹³ In the Department for Education figures domestic abuse was the most common factor amongst children considered to be 'in need' of support from local authority children's social care - featuring in 50% of all assessments.¹⁴

⁷ Barnardo's Quarterly Practitioner Survey, April 2020.

⁸ Barnardo's Quarterly Practitioner Survey, April 2020.

⁹ Barnardo's, 2020. [Not Just Collateral Damage](#).

¹⁰ In addition, Government recently announced that they will set out an extra £750 million coronavirus funding for frontline charities, which includes those supporting domestic abuse victims. Barnardo's welcomes this government announcement. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/chancellor-sets-out-extra-750-million-coronavirus-funding-for-frontline-charities>

¹¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/home-secretary-outlines-support-for-domestic-abuse-victims>

¹² <https://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/what-we-do/policy-and-research/keeping-children-in-safe-and-loving-homes/domestic-abuse-policy-report/>

¹³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/children-affected-by-domestic-abuse-to-benefit-from-8-million-fund>

13. Children were already hidden victims of domestic abuse as they struggled to access support services due to a postcode lottery of provision. In the context of coronavirus and the 'stay at home' guidance, whilst necessary, it has further restricted children's access to safe places to disclose concerns and find support. As well as the ability of services to provide support.¹⁵
14. For those families who need to access help and support, it is more difficult for a variety of reasons (for example – as the perpetrator may be within the household the victims are unable to speak by phone, as the children are not at school they are unable to talk in front of them, or victims lack devices or phone or data credit to access support remotely.) Barnardo's practitioners are very aware that calling phone lines for help may be one approach or solution.¹⁶ However we know that victims may not be able to access these numbers to make a call or be able to call safely if living with a perpetrator of abuse. Generally, children have less of an opportunity to disclose the harm that is happening at home or to receive support from agencies either to help them cope or to recover.
15. 45% of our frontline service workers reported a decrease in referrals in April 2020 due to services having less contact with families since Covid -19 restrictions were introduced. Combined with significantly less children attending school and Department for Education guidance on children's social care states: '*we accept that local authorities will struggle to meet some of their statutory duties at the moment*', this raises significant concerns that children at immediate risk of harm will be missed, and that with early intervention is sacrificed further, there will be a backlog in demand for assessment and support.
16. 15.9% of our practitioners reported an increase in issues around domestic abuse since the restrictions were introduced.¹⁷ Families are facing increased pressure and for households where domestic abuse existed before the coronavirus outbreak our domestic abuse services are reporting an increase in circumstances which can trigger perpetrators of domestic abuse - isolation, lack of meaningful daily structure, increase in alcohol use and financial stresses.

“Coronavirus impacts family relationships as families who already struggle to communicate and interact in a positive manner are then confined to small homes together. This has potential to result in more instances of negative interactions between family members. This can then result in an increase in violence and family breakdown.” –

Barnardo's Practitioner

17. Additionally, our domestic abuse services have suggested that in households where abuse did not exist before the outbreak, it may now be present as a result of additional pressures from lockdown, including job losses. The vulnerability of children

¹⁴ Department for Education, 2018

¹⁵ In April 2020, The Victims Commissioner, Dame Vera Baird QC, gave evidence to the Home Affairs Committee about the effect of the Covid-19 lockdown. During the session Dame Vera stressed the importance of innovation while people's movements are restricted, suggested replicating a scheme operating in France and Spain where workers in Pharmacies and Supermarkets are trained to offer help or support options for those suffering from abuse can seek help by using a recognised code word or phrase – similar in concept to the “Ask For Angela” campaign. <https://victimscommissioner.org.uk/news/victims-commissioner-gives-evidence-to-home-affairs-committee-about-effect-of-covid-19-lockdown/>

¹⁶ Barnardo's welcomes the Government's announcement of £1.6 M in funding for the NSPCC helpline. <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/what-we-do/news-opinion/one-million-funding-government-nspcc-helpline/>

¹⁷ This is an issue that has a global impact with lockdowns around the world bringing a rise in domestic abuse. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/mar/28/lockdowns-world-rise-domestic-violence>

in these households will be hidden as they may not have been on the radar of statutory agencies and therefore will not be encouraged to attend school. One of our services in London, for example, tells us that the risks of harm have increased for those families that were in the process of separating, as children are unable to seek support from school and other services.

18. Whilst services have seen a general decrease in referrals from some agencies such as schools and police, here has also been a shift in the source of referrals some of our services receive. One of our domestic abuse services in London, for example, highlighted that they are seeing more referrals being made from family support workers and statutory social care.
19. Multi-agency working is still in place for incidents of domestic abuse that are reported to the police, however, with a reduction in children attending school and less specialist support services operating, there has been a reduction in identifying and responding to children who may need support.
20. Our child abuse and exploitation services have also reported that whilst multi-agency forums still exist virtual there is:
 - An issue with information sharing due to concerns about security whilst using technology to communicate.
 - Reduced contact with families, and therefore reduction in the depth of information that professions have to share through multi-agency forums.
21. Our services highlight that, as a result of the current crisis, some of the children and young people that they work with have been exposed to increased amounts of emotional abuse and pressure via digital communication. For example, parents who do not live with their children and want to see more of their children during this time are more likely to ask for more contact and are unhappy when they are unable to get this.

Measures or proposals to reduce or avert domestic abuse and child abuse at this time

22. The Domestic Abuse Bill which has returned to Parliament is a vital opportunity to improve support for **all** victims including children. As currently drafted it will only ensure victims and children in refuges and safe accommodation can access support. The impact of the lockdown further strengthens the case to extend the proposed statutory duty to cover **all** victims and children, to include the majority of victims and children who will remain in the family home or elsewhere in the community. This is particularly important as demand for domestic abuse services is expected to continue to increase as we exit lockdown.
23. A neighbourhood response should be key at this stage of the lockdown. As a result of lockdown measures the only reporter of domestic abuse may now only be a neighbour who overhears an incident. It is crucial that communities and victims are informed that core services such as the police, A&E, refuges and support services are open and operational and can intervene to ensure that children, young people and families are kept safe and can access support.

Preparedness of responders and service providers to address the needs of victims during the pandemic

24. Barnardo's services have been able to respond to the needs of victims and they have adapted their service delivery using digital resources such as video and telephone call sessions to enable weekly/bi-weekly check ins with families and to continue to provide support to them. Our services are using Facetime and Whatsapp on work specific mobiles and laptops, trying to use safe and encrypted services where possible. This is part of the charity's national programme of development and innovation which has worked at pace to adapt to the new and changing circumstances created by the lockdown.
25. In our domestic abuse services, there have been some positive aspects to 'virtual' or 'distanced' support:
- This has led to staff having more contact with young people than previously and being able to provide support in a more timely manner. One service in particular told us that the contact has adapted to enable consistent communication, with options of texting, emailing, calling and videos being offered more to suit children, young people and families.
 - Some young people are contacting practitioners more spontaneously and naturally than previous physical appointments, often this contact is for less time in duration but more frequently.
26. However, providing services only in virtual form also creates new challenges:
- With the perpetrator in the household, the victims and children are often unable to speak over the phone or in a safe place.
 - 'Digital poverty': lack of access to digital devices, phone credit, Wi-Fi.
 - Younger children find it difficult to engage over the phone, as normally the practitioner would be speaking to them whilst doing an activity.
 - Difficult to build a trusted relationship with new referrals.
 - Many children and young people prefer instant messaging, however it is difficult to have a discussion.
 - The services are now mainly reliant on self-reporting, whereas face to face contact practitioners can pick up on non-verbal cues. Frontline workers cannot visually assess risk and, as a result, some risks and concerns can be missed.¹⁸

April 2020

¹⁸ This does not only affect Barnardo's services. For example, other vital services would usually see children in person, such as GPs and health visitors.