Written evidence submitted by Barnardo's (COR0175)

Introduction

1. Barnardo's is the largest national children's charity in the UK. In 2018/2019 we supported around 300,000 children, young people, parents and carers through more than 1,000 services, including counselling for children who have been abused, fostering and adoption services, vocational training and disability inclusion groups.[1] The majority of our services are now providing support through instant phone messaging and video conferencing, and we have more than 500 staff in more than 70 services providing essential face-to-face support to vulnerable children, young people and families, in line with Government guidance.

2. Barnardo's provides over 100 specialist Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation services which support children, young people and families affected by Child Sexual Abuse. We focus on recovery for victims, prevention and education work, training professionals, safeguarding and community work. For example, our Boys2 project in Wales, funded by the Home Office, found boys who are sexually abused are much less likely to be identified because professionals see them as 'abusers', not victims; in addition, we work with communities to raise awareness and help to start the difficult conversations. We also host the Centre of expertise on Child Sexual Abuse, which commissions research to shed light on difficult questions, including the nature of abuse, perpetrators, effective victim support and prevention. In 2018/19 we supported 7,300 children, young people, parents and carers through our Child Sexual Abuse /Child Sexual Exploitation services across the UK.

Summary

3. Prior to Covid-19, children and young people already faced risks online ranging from cyberbullying to grooming.

4. We know that online harms can impact different groups of children and young people in different ways. Vulnerable groups of children and young people may be more likely to experience harm online. [2] The prevalence of cyberbullying, for example, is higher for some groups such as LGBT+, BME and disabled individuals.[3]

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[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 (2019) Left to their own devices: Children, young people and mental health. https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/B51140%2020886_Social%20media_Report_Final_Lo%20Res.pdf

[3] Ditch the Label (2017). 'The Annual Bullying Survey 2017'. Available at: https://www.ditchthelabel.org/wp-content/ uploads/2017/07/The-Annual-Bullying-Survey-2017-

5. Research conducted by the NSPCC in 2018, found that more than 15 percent of children and young people between the ages of 11-18 have received requests to send images of a sexual nature online.[4]

6. Information obtained from Barnardo's Child Sexual Abuse services, highlighted that two-thirds of the children and young people supported by this service were groomed online before they were sexually abused.[5] Our frontline workers have also reported cases of young siblings being groomed to commit sexual acts upon each other by adults online. Our frontline workers have told us that grooming can take place within 10 minutes of an online interaction and that the implications for children and young people's mental health and wellbeing are significant.

7. Lockdown has highlighted the longstanding shortcomings in the online environment. The internet and digital technologies play an important role in all of our lives and are crucial components in the everyday lives of many children around the world. It allows children to communicate, to access education and resources and to play. In the absence of robust online harms legislation when lockdown measures were imposed, parents and carers have been left to take care of their children's online safety themselves.

8. Throughout lockdown, parents have experienced increased childcare responsibilities, home schooling requirements and caring duties for those who are sick. All parents have reported that parenting is harder throughout lockdown, whether that is due to school closures, reduced availability of support services, and up until more recently, only being allowed out once a day. For some parents, this is further compounded by their own poor mental health, living with domestic abuse or on-going drug and alcohol problems.

9. This is why Barnardo's continues to call for regulation of online safety by the Government and safety-by-design approaches adopted as quickly as possible by the industry,

The nature, prevalence and scale of online harms during the Covid-19 period

Benefits of the online world during the current crisis

10. We welcome the many opportunities that the internet, and technology in general, have provided to support children and young people during lockdown. The internet has allowed children and young people to stay connected with family and friends, and to engage with learning. Their

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2.pdf
[4] NSPCC (2018) How safe are our children? https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/media/1067/how-safe-are-our-children-2018.pdf
[5] Barnardo's (2016) Online Grooming Survey https://www.barnardos.org.uk/barnardos-online-grooming-survey-2016.pdf

parents have been able to comply with social distancing through ordering food and other goods online. A number of our frontline workers have highlighted that during lockdown, the internet has enabled children, young people and families to access online support. In many ways digital technology has been offering hope and helping them to get through the current crisis.

11. Children and young people Barnardo's works with directly have been using technology to access services and all of our specialist Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation services have moved to providing online versions of our services through lockdown. Barnardo's contact with some young people has improved because of this, and young people feel more in control of how and when they can access the support they need. A number of our frontline workers report that being able to engage in activities posted online by Barnardo's has helped children, young people and families to deal with the current Covid-19 crisis. [6]

Online Harms concerns during the current crisis.

12. At Barnardo's we can start to provide support to children who have been groomed online within 10 minutes of starting an initial conversation. Two-thirds of the children we support through our child sexual abuse services were groomed online. **The risk could now be even greater with the current Covid- 19 context.**

13. Since lockdown measures were introduced, there has been a constant series of stories of children being exposed to inappropriate content, for example when hackers on Zoom streamed child sex abuse footage to children in Plymouth.[7]

14. Young people who have been targeted by abusers outside of the home are still being coerced and controlled. For children who are unsafe in their own homes, the closure of schools have hidden these children from the sight of teachers, other relevant professionals or community members who could otherwise act to ensure their protection.

15. Boredom, isolation, unstructured time, stress and anxiety are all evidenced factors which increase recidivism rates for adult sex offenders; lockdown is a time where those with a sexual interest in children are more likely to seek to offend - and this is likely to include in the online space, as well as contact offending which is recorded or livestreamed.

16. Europol has raised concerns about an increase in online activity by that seeking child abuse material during lockdown.[8] The Internet Watch Foundation has also reported that, with the help of industry partners, it has blocked at least 8.8 million attempts by UK internet users to access videos and images of children suffering sexual abuse during lockdown.[9]

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[6] Barnardo's Quarterly Practitioner Survey, April 2020
[7] Guardian, May 2020 Zoom hacker streams child sex abuse footage to Plymouth children
[8] Guardian, April 2020. Lockdown hampering removal of child sexual abuse material online.

17. We know that many factors which can offer children some protection are currently compromised. Parents and carers may have to work through this crisis, and face multiple pressures and increased caring responsibilities. It is not realistic to expect parents to police their child's internet usage and we know this rarely works. Some children may be left unsupervised at home as parents are key workers.

Insights from Barnardo's services since lockdown measures were introduced

18. Barnardo's abuse and exploitation services have reported an **increase** in children experiencing harm online, including exposure to distressing stories about Covid-19, using online fora to discuss eating disorders and self-harm, cyberbullying and sharing self-generated sexual images.

19. Support is currently harder to access. Lockdown measures mean that some children and young people may not be able to discuss their concerns with professionals and that abuse and exploitation are less likely to be witnessed by protective adults.

20. Data from our frontline workers has highlighted that 37% of children, young people and families we work with are concerned about spending more time online during the current Covid-19 crisis.[10]

21. 9% of our frontline workers have reported that they are dealing with an increase in issues around online exploitation with the children and families that they work with, whilst 7% have said that they are dealing with an increase in issues concerning other forms of online harms.[11]

Steps that could be taken to mitigate these concerns

22. The internet is a vital tool for all children and young people, for example, to access education, healthcare, and to keep in touch with family and friends. It should not be a way for children and young people to see dangerous information and violent adult content, nor should it be a place where adults can engage inappropriately with children and young people.

23. Education about online safety does not of itself protect children from the impact of coming across harmful content online. Neither can this education prevent sex offenders, serious organised crime groups or bullies from causing significant harm. It will not remove the power dynamic that enables offenders to exert coercive control and force in their harm of children. Those who seek to harm children online are sophisticated and determined while children are not responsible for predicting and navigating how adults may achieve their aims of abuse and exploitation.

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[9] IWF, May 2020 Millions of attempts to access child sexual abuse online during lockdown
[10] Barnardo's Quarterly Practitioner Survey, April 2020.
[11] Barnardo's Quarterly Practitioner Survey, April 2020.

Therefore an online safety approach that solely relies on children and parents protective responses to online harm is significantly flawed.

24. The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted that the industry has not properly addressed online harms which put children at risk. This emphasises the pressing need for regulation. **There must be no further delay in introducing a legally binding, overarching duty of care** that imposes sanctions on tech providers that fail to prevent abuse and ensure online safety. We need a regulatory and legal framework to match our shared ambition to make the UK the safest and best place in the world for children to enjoy the benefits of digital technologies. For regulation to have a meaningful impact, the regulator should be able to disrupt business activities; undertake ISP blocking as well as have the ability to implement a regime for senior management liability.

25. Online harms legislation is vital, however, urgent steps that could be immediately taken to mitigate some of the concerns raised by our frontline staff include:

- ☐ **Ensuring that the tech industry monitors the potential surge in the full range of online harms** and allocates resources and new technology to disrupt harmful activity and identify and tackle sources of harm in a robust manner.

- ☐ **Encouraging improved information sharing** and intelligence sharing about risks within the tech industry and between the tech industry and law enforcement. There should be more partnership working between tech firms and Government. The tech industry should also be working with organizations, such as Barnardo's, that are experts in the safeguarding and wellbeing of children, to re-design online spaces.

- ☐ The tech industry must mitigate risk at the design level by **ensuring products are 'safe by design'** to ensure that their products are safe for children. A potential solution of a 'safety by design' approach could be, for example, a product that prevents the location of a child from being visible to other adults. This would prevent abusers from contacting potential victims.

26. Additionally, the Home Office and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport must coordinate to ensure that police forces are adequately equipped with resources, information and understanding to deal with online harms. Police must be given access to advanced tools to track down offenders and bring them to justice.

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