

Written evidence submitted by Barnardo's

Barnardo's response to the Education Select Committee inquiry into the impact of covid-19 on education and children's services

21 July 2020

About Barnardo's

1. Barnardo's is the UK largest national children's charity. In 2018/19 we supported around 300,000 children, young people, parents and carers through over 1,000 services. Our ambition is to achieve better outcomes for more children by building stronger families, safer childhoods and positive futures.
2. As listed in the committee's terms and reference, this submission¹ will focus on:
 - The capacity of children's services to support vulnerable children and young people.
 - Support for pupils and families during closures, including: children's and young people's mental health and safety outside of the structure and oversight of in-person education.
3. For more information contact Claire Stewart, Senior Public Affairs Officer, claire.stewart@barnardos.org.uk.

Executive summary

4. In the aftermath of covid-19 and the lifting of lockdown measures, and in the face of a recession on a scale that 'we have never seen before', Barnardo's is concerned that the future of a whole generation is at risk.
5. Across our 1,000+ services we have seen families face multiple pressures such as increased mental health difficulties, the risk of being plunged into poverty due to reduced hours or job loss, and increased conflict within the home such as domestic abuse.
6. At the same time children and families have been 'hidden', removed from the sight of professionals, meaning services are unable to identify early indicators of harm. As a result services (including Barnardo's) have seen a decrease in new referrals during lockdown. We are concerned that this will create a backlog of demand when schools return and needs become visible.
7. This has come at a time when local authority were already unable to meet the needs of vulnerable children and families, with early intervention services stripped back and local authorities continuing to overspend on statutory services trying to meet the needs of the most vulnerable such as child protection and children in care.²

¹See series of recovery briefings by the children's sector. [Summary and recommendations](#).

² Barnardo's et al, 2020. [Children and young people's services: funding and spending 2010/11 to 2018/19](#).

8. Now not only are there safeguarding concerns, but there are also concerns for young people's futures. The expected recession could lead to one million 18-24 year olds falling unemployed this year alone.³
9. **Key recommendation: We believe the pandemic must be a catalyst for systems change. This is not about recovery or a return to what we had before, vulnerable children deserve resurgence⁴. Achieving better outcomes for vulnerable children should be a key test of the Government's levelling-up and building back better agenda.**

The capacity of children's services to support vulnerable children and young people

Impact of covid-19 on vulnerable children, young people and families

10. Covid-19 and the necessary lockdown are compounding pre-existing challenges facing vulnerable children and families, while simultaneously requiring services to transform their response. A survey of over 1,000 Barnardo's practitioners⁵ found:
 - 71% reported supporting someone with their mental health such as anxiety, stress and sleep dysregulation.
 - 69% reported that families they support are worried about the financial impact.
 - 57% reported that families they support are concerned about increased family conflict and stress.
 - 47% reported supporting someone in or at risk of being in poverty.
 - 37% reported that families they support said children and families are concerned about spending more time online.
11. For some families covid-19 has exacerbated pre-existing problems, for other families covid-19 has created new problems. Under lockdown, safeguarding concerns have increased. Calls to the National Domestic Abuse Helpline increased by 49% and domestic abuse homicides, including children, are thought to have more than doubled.⁶
12. The Local Government Association has reported that referrals to local authority children's services have fallen by more than half in many areas,⁷ despite the general consensus that the risk of harm to children is likely to have increased. 45% of Barnardo's practitioners reported a decrease in new referrals due to families having less contact with other services such as schools, health care visitors, and other services.
13. ***"We have seen a worrying disengagement from some families we were supporting at our children's centres where we are concerned about domestic abuse and associated harm to children. We know there are lots of reasons why it might be difficult for families to engage with us during lockdown but we know they are the children that need us the most. Quite often they say - we'll see about accessing your service again when this is all blown over - but for these families 4, 6 or 8 weeks can see a huge change in the risks of harm they might face."*** Barnardo's practitioner, children's centre

³ Resolution Foundation, May 2020. [Class of 2020: Education leavers in the current crisis.](#)

⁴ We are arguing that vulnerable children instead deserve a 'resurgence', and as part of that the Department, together with sector partners, should design something entirely new - **children's health and social care 2.0** – underpinned by the principle of 'whole system improvement'.

⁵ Fieldwork undertaken between 6th and 21st April 2020.

⁶ Independent, 2020. [Domestic abuse killings appear to double.](#)

⁷ Local Government Association, April 2020. [Coronavirus: LGA responds to the Children's Commissioner report on vulnerable children.](#)

14. We welcomed the Government's move to allow some vulnerable children - those with a social worker or those on an education and health care plan (EHCP) - to continue to attend school.⁸ However, uptake has been varied across the country and has been as low as 5%⁹; and most professionals will have no meaningful or consistent contact with children who are at risk but do not fall within this narrow definition.
15. For many children, home is not always a safe place, but they are not always receiving support from statutory services. Evidence shows these children are often the ones who are identified in Domestic Homicide Reviews or Serious Case Reviews. Agencies are often aware of these children but are not delivering any safeguarding activity to them. As evidenced in the triennial analysis of Serious Case Reviews (SCR) 2014-2017; only 54 of 206 the children who died or were seriously harmed were on a child protection plan.¹⁰ This suggests the majority of children in these SCRs were known to be of concern to agencies, but not at a level requiring a child protection plan.
16. During the pandemic these children are even more vulnerable, as they are not attending school or extracurricular activities, seeing friends or trusted adults, meaning their safety nets have been removed - leaving it likely that indicators of harm that professionals such as teachers, police, health visitors, community hubs, GPs may spot, will be missed.
17. Therefore, we are concerned that the pandemic has (1) created groups of hidden children and young people (see annex 1 for a list) (2) there could be a spike in demand for services, especially as children return to school, which we must ensure that there is capacity to meet.
18. ***"The fact that the vast majority of pupils don't have the face to face contact and daily interaction with staff makes it a lot more challenging to pick up on early signs of need and has removed the channels of natural daily interaction."* - Secondary School Head Teacher/Deputy Head Teacher**
19. Covid-19 has disproportionately affected individuals who are Black, Asian or minority ethnic (BAME). Prior to the covid-19 pandemic, BAME families were more likely to experience other underlying vulnerabilities such as living in poverty and crowded accommodation or be employed in low-paid work. The likelihood of becoming critically ill/dying from covid-19 is much higher for BAME individuals.¹¹ Meaning these communities are also more likely to experience the negative social and economic effects of the pandemic, including losing jobs or a reduction in hours and challenges of home-schooling.
20. As a result, BAME children and young people are more likely to be negatively affected by the pandemic, experiencing bereavement, taking on caring responsibilities for a relative¹², struggling with increased mental health issues due to anxiety and increased racist hostility such as racist hate crime, and living in poverty, including experiencing digital poverty, leaving them at a disadvantage educationally.

21. Supporting BAME communities

⁸ Department for Education, 2020. [Supporting vulnerable children and young people during the coronavirus \(covid-19\) outbreak.](#)

⁹ Department for Education, 'Coronavirus (COVID-19) attendance in educational and early years settings in England – summary of returns to 17 April 2020'

¹⁰ Department for Education, March 2020 [Complexity and challenges: a triennial analysis of SCRs 2014-2017. Final Report.](#)

¹¹ Public Health England, 2020. [Disparities in the risk and outcomes of covid-19.](#)

¹² Barnardo's, 2019. [Caring Alone: Why BAME young carers continue to struggle to access support.](#)

- 21.1 Barnardo's Care Journeys service in the London Borough of Brent has been tailoring food drop boxes for BAME care leavers who were struggling to find items that would normally be part of their diet, due to the pandemic.
- 21.2 Barnardo's is working with a local community organisation, Apnahaq, in Rotherham to help provide accurate information about covid-19 to the South East Asian community where myths about methods of transmission and public health advice have been addressed and factual and accessible information shared.

Children in care

Fostering

- 22. During lockdown, Barnardo's fostering services saw a worrying increase in the number of referrals for children looking for fostering placements, whilst seeing a decrease in interest from potential foster parents.
- 23. From March 2020 to April 2020, we received 2,349 referrals to our fostering services in England, Wales and Northern Ireland - an increase from 1,629 for the same period in 2019. Meanwhile the number of enquiries from people looking to become foster parents fell from 302 to 161 - a 47% drop. The reasons are likely to be complex and as a result of new children entering the care system or existing placement breakdown.
- 24. Many extended families who may have been used in the past to provide kinship care may feel unable to do so, given grandparents and other older relatives will often face a significant health risk due to the nature of the pandemic. Equally a reduction in individual finances due to the economic consequences of the pandemic will likely mean that many adults, who may previously have felt able to come forward as foster parents, will be less likely to do so.
- 25. The lockdown reduced the support many families rely on and the resulting strain could well lead to a large increase in safeguarding referrals. Longer term, we are concerned we will continue to see an increased demand for foster care combined with a reduction in people able and willing to come forward as foster carers.
- 26. **Key recommendations: To ensure there are sufficient foster placements available for children who need it Barnardo's is calling for the Government to:**
 - **Monitor trends in referrals and inquiries to foster across agencies and local authorities. The hypothesis is that this will grow as 'hidden' children return to school and are identified, but it is vital that we measure the data carefully to confirm this, and to prepare for growing demand.**
 - **Introduce national and local campaigns (beyond Fostering Fortnight) to help with recruitment shortages as soon as these are identified.**
 - **Consider whether financial incentives could play a role in boosting the number of people interested in becoming a foster carer.**

Adoption

- 27. During lockdown, fewer children have been identified as needing adoption, the process has been put on hold for many children who are ready to move in with their adoptive families, and there has been an increase in children being placed in foster care. Significant delays in the process of matching and placement can:
 - Cause children feelings of insecurity and uncertainty;
 - Make it harder for new adoptive parents to plan effectively; and

- Negatively affect the financial viability of adoption agencies.
28. Many children who are adopted have often suffered significant trauma, and the impact of lockdown and social distancing measures has meant that support previously available to adoptive families, such as face to face therapy or the respite provided by schools, is not currently available.
29. In response, the Government has transferred £8million of the Adoption Support Fund (ASF) budget into an emergency fund.¹³ However the future of ASF itself remains uncertain as funding is only guaranteed until March 2021. As a result of covid-19, many adoptive families will need continued additional therapeutic support, including for instance to re-engage children with school.
30. During the crisis adoption agencies such as Barnardo's have used new practices including video conferencing facilities to continue to assess prospective parents. However, this means we have continued to incur the cost of supporting and assessing parents while not receiving payments for placement. Whilst the Department for Education has indicated that it will be able to provide some funds to help agencies and has begun a grant application process, it is unclear how much money will be provided at this stage. There is a significant risk of agencies experiencing significant financial difficulties if the current situation continues. Local authorities and courts must be provided with enough resources to enable them to clear any backlog of cases that build up during this time as quickly as possible.
31. **Key recommendation: Barnardo's is calling for the Government to invest in long-term sustainable funding for adoption support, beyond March 2021, and for voluntary adoption agencies to be able to apply directly to the ASF.**

Children's services capacity

32. Prior to the pandemic, local authority children's services were unable to meet demand. In May 2020, Barnardo's, alongside other children's charities, published analysis of the funding and spending on children and young people services between 2010/11 and 2018/19¹⁴ which found:
- Funding for children and young people's services between 2010/11 to 2018/19 fell by 23% - from £9.7 billion to £7.4 billion in real terms.
 - Local authority spending on early intervention services for children and young people fell from £3.5 billion to £1.9 billion - a 46% decrease.
 - Local authority spending on late intervention services for children and young people rose from £5.6 billion to £7.2 billion - a 29% increase.
33. A combination of reduced funding and rising demand has meant that local authorities have shifted investment and resources away from early intervention services, towards late intervention (statutory services). Spending on late intervention now represents 78% of local authorities' children's service budgets. This has meant that vulnerable children and families have to reach a crisis point before being able to access support.
34. Over the last decade there has been an increase in referrals to children's social care services, children subject to a child protection plan and children in care.¹⁵ The

¹³https://www.gov.uk/government/news/covid-19-adoption-support-fund-scheme-to-help-vulnerable-families?utm_source=81763dbe-3a2a-48bf-a02d-6d0c1e5b5284&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=govuk-notifications&utm_content=immediate

¹⁴ Barnardo's et al, 2020. [Under Pressure: children and young people's services 2010/11 to 2018/19 a summary.](#)
Barnardo's et al, 2020. [Children and young people's services: funding and spending 2010/11 to 2018/19.](#)

Barnardo's et al, 2020. [Pressures on children and young people's services: A Deep Dive.](#)

¹⁵ Action for Children, NCB, NSPCC, The Children's Society, Barnardo's, May 2020. [Children and young people's services: funding](#)

Association of Directors of Children's Services have predicted that this will continue to rise.¹⁶

35. The pandemic has created unprecedented challenges for local authorities and other agencies, combined with a backlog of demand for children's services due to a lack of engagement with services. All of which will be compounded by the predicted recession, which could see local authorities budgets squeezed further.
36. In response to the unique challenges of the coronavirus crisis the Government temporarily amended 10 regulations on children's social care. Barnardo's has had significant concerns that this could result in a significant less support for children in the care system at a time when these children may well need more support.
37. We welcome the Government's recent announcement that the majority of the regulations will not be extended beyond September and that local authorities will be discouraged from enacting further easements between now and that date. However, three of the easements will continue beyond September, this includes the ability for supervision visits for children in care to be conducted virtually where necessary. While Barnardo's does not believe virtual visits should become the norm we welcome this regulation which should enable social work visits to continue even when children in care are subject to local lockdown measures or need to self-isolate as a result of being contacted through the NHS's track and trace system. However, for virtual visits to be successful it will be essential that children in care are given the necessary digital equipment.
38. **Key recommendations: Barnardo's is calling for the Government to:**
- **Make public information about which authorities have used easements, for what purpose, how many times and with what impact on children and young people. (This should be updated monthly).**
 - **Conduct an urgent assessment of how many children in care and care leavers have received digital equipment during the pandemic which would enable them e.g. to take part in virtual meetings with social workers, as well as access education.**
 - **Commit to ensuring all children in care and care leavers, as well as children on Education, Health and Care Plans, children who qualify for Free School Meals, and other children deemed vulnerable by professionals, have access to digitally-enabled equipment and data as soon as possible in the next academic year.**
39. Regardless of the pandemic, young people leaving the care system routinely experience far poorer outcomes than their peers, with 40% of care leavers aged 19-21 being not in education, employment or training compared with 13% of their peers.¹⁷ Improving outcomes for the most vulnerable children should be a **key test** of the Government's 'levelling up' agenda and the Opportunity Guarantee in particular.
40. **Key recommendations: Barnardo's is calling for the Government to:**
- **Invest in pre-apprenticeship programmes such as traineeships aimed at bridging the gap for young people who are not yet ready to undertake an apprenticeship but need further support e.g. to develop basic skills before moving on to a full apprenticeship programme.**

[and spending 2010/11 and to 2018/19.](#)

¹⁶ Association of Directors of Children's Services, 2018. [Safeguarding Pressures Phase 6.](#)

¹⁷ <http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8429/CBP-8429.pdf>

- **Develop flexible and part-time apprenticeships which can be of particular benefit to more vulnerable young people such as those with caring responsibilities.**
- **Fund wrap-around support, to be delivered through partner charities and organisations, to ensure the most vulnerable can benefit from work placements and training through the Opportunity Guarantee.**
- **Encourage longer term funding cycles for children’s services as part of the Comprehensive Spending Review.**
- **Ensure that the Care Review (a manifesto commitment) covers early support for families to prevent problems from escalating; considers mental health and wellbeing holistically by breaking down the barriers between health and social care and ending the ‘cliff edge’ in specialist mental health support at age 18; includes digital delivery as part of the continuum of care where it is effective and appropriate; considers the role of all partners agencies working interdependently; and reflects the lived experience of children and young people.**
- **Use the promised £5bn in infrastructure investment to realise the manifesto commitment to champion family hubs to ‘serve vulnerable families with the intensive, integrated support they need to care for children - from the early years and throughout their lives’, to invest in the physical and digital¹⁸ infrastructure necessary to provide a Family Hub in every community.**

How services for children and young people have responded

41. The majority of Barnardo’s 1000+ services innovated to develop new forms of ‘virtual’ or ‘digital’ delivery, with around 500 Barnardo’s practitioners continuing to provide face-to-face services throughout lockdown, supporting disabled children, providing residential services, and running our two schools for children with special education needs and disabilities.

42. An example of how we have adapted innovatively during the pandemic to help reach children not in receipt of statutory services but who are at risk, Barnardo’s has launched **See, Hear, Respond**, a consortium of charities, large and small, national and local, with funding from the Department for Education. Focusing particularly on vulnerable children who are not already receiving statutory services, the partnership, led by Barnardo’s, will provide:

- Access to digital support packages and information that is accessible and interactive;
- Local telephone helplines that will assess callers’ needs to find further help and support from charity workers, or other services ;
- Online counselling or therapy for those going through high levels of anxiety, trauma or other mental health issues that can be safely addressed through digital means;
- Detached youth interventions and face-to-face crisis support, especially for those either at risk of, or experiencing, exploitation;
- Identification of children who would most benefit from extra support to make sure they can reintegrate into school in September.

43. The Government’s package of support for charities¹⁹ is a welcome start. However, as charities struggle to stay afloat, many people who rely on services and are most in need could miss out on vital support, including vulnerable children and families at the same time in which local authorities’ children’s services are struggling to meet demand. Barnardo’s has rapidly adapted to the current environment, however this has come at

¹⁸ Digital enables some children, young people and families to engage with services, does not necessarily deliver on outcomes.

¹⁹ HM Treasury, April 2020. [Chancellor sets out extra £750million coronavirus funding for frontline charities.](#)

an additional cost. It is clear that services have not just changed for the period of the pandemic, but that **digital-first** delivery (as part of a care continuum) is the way of the future - allowing us to reach children where they are and respond to their needs in real time. The Government has made important commitments to help deliver the necessary technology to vulnerable children to enable them to access services, including school work, online however it is unclear how this has been delivered in practice.

44. **Key recommendation: Barnardo's is calling for the Government to:**
- **Consider creating an innovation fund for charities which would enable charities and statutory services to reach children 'where they are' and to capture and share learning which would be available to all (with the IP owned by the Government), which would reduce duplication of effort and resources.**
 - **Commit to ensuring all children in care and care leavers, as well as children on Education, Health and Care Plans, children who qualify for Free School Meals, and other children deemed vulnerable by professionals, have access to digitally-enabled equipment and data as soon as possible in the next academic year.**

Support for pupils and families during closures, including: children's and young people's mental health and safety outside of the structure and oversight of in-person education

45. Mental health and wellbeing runs through everything we do. Our services support children affected by almost all the vulnerabilities identified as risk factors for poor mental health and wellbeing. In 2018/19, we supported over 40,000 children, young people, parents and carers through our mental health services, including 28,700 children supported through our school-based programmes, aimed at improving social and emotional learning.
46. The covid-19 pandemic and the necessary lockdown have exposed the nation to an unprecedented level of trauma, loss and adversity. With many children not returning to school until September, this era-defining event has not only potentially widened the 'attainment gap', but also created a 'trauma gap'.

47. **Wellness Recovery Action Plan (WRAP)** Barnardo's was one of the first to pioneer WRAP for young people in the UK. WRAP is a 10-week peer support programme which aims to build resilience and promote self-care among young people. It is open to all children and young people aged 10-18 years, or up to 25 years for those with additional needs. It supports young people to develop their understanding of what they are like when they are well and what they can do to keep themselves well. Young people produce a wellness toolbox, and their own plan to cope with difficult times and challenging feelings. While normal delivery of the programme has been disrupted, with lockdown in place our WRAP services are working in new ways to continue to support children. During lockdown, our WRAP service in Bradford has been running group sessions and support remotely – via video conference, phone and text – where young people find and talk about belongings that matter to them as a way of articulating anxieties and working on strategies to manage them.

48. In a recent survey for Barnardo's at least a third of 8-24 year olds reported experiencing increased difficulties including stress, loneliness and worry.²⁰ 41% of children and young people said they were lonelier than before lockdown.

49. As schools return in September there must be a renewed focus on mental health and wellbeing within schools. Barnardo's surveyed over 100 school based staff²¹ and found:
- 88% thought covid-19 will have a negative impact on the mental health and wellbeing of their pupils.
 - 82% said that the current measures impacted on their ability to support pupils with their mental health and wellbeing.
 - 26% said they were not confident that their school is equipped with the necessary resources and skills to support pupils with mental health and wellbeing when they return.
50. Children will return to school facing trauma, loss and anxiety. This is a once in a generation opportunity to transform how we address children's mental health and wellbeing. This means:
- Breaking down the existing silos between medical mental health services (CAMHS) and community-based wellbeing support²²; and
 - Rebalancing the education system so that it puts children's mental health and wellbeing on a par with academic achievement. We know that children, who are suffering from anxiety, recovering from bereavement, or living with domestic abuse, will not be able to fulfil their potential.
51. **Key recommendations: Barnardo's is calling for the Government to:**
- 51.1. Short term**
- **Provide timely, transparent and clear information for children, young people and families about Covid-19 and address their concerns directly to help reduce anxiety about the virus.**
 - **Provide specific resources for schools to meet the additional mental health and wellbeing needs of children returning to school - drawing on expertise from charities and other partners. (To note: the £1bn 'catch up fund' whilst welcome has been focused on academic attainment. For children experiencing bereavement, anxiety or abuse, addressing these challenges is a precondition for thriving at school.)**
 - **Allow schools flexibility in the curriculum and a 'readjustment period' of at least a term to meet the emotional needs of staff and pupils when they return.**
 - **Launch a national communication campaign to reassure children, young people and parents that it is safe to go back to school - not just that it is the law.²³**
- 51.2. Long term**
- **Rebalance the education system so that mental health and wellbeing are on par with academic attainment, including ensuring that all children and young people who cannot attend school (for example due to a local lockdown) have access to remote learning and support, so that 'digital poverty' is never a barrier to learning**
 - **Redesign mental health and wellbeing support, in partnership with children and young people - moving away from tiers and thresholds and towards a continuum of care that includes digital services and alternative therapies, and ends the 'cliff edge' at age 18.**

²⁰ See more findings [here](#)- Barnardo's, June 2020. YouGov poll of over 4,000 children and young people aged 8 to 24 years old across the UK.

²¹ Barnardo's, 2020. [Time for a Clean Slate: mental health at the heart of education.](#)

²² Barnardo's [SOLAR service](#)

²³ We understand Public Health England are looking at launching a campaign on mental health.

ANNEX 1: Hidden children

Hidden children could include:

- Children in families experiencing domestic abuse and young people in intimate abusive relationships
- Children who have experienced sexual exploitation/abuse or are at risk
- Children and young people missing from home
- Children experiencing child exploitation or involved in serious youth violence
- Children of prisoners
- Care leavers
- Young carers
- Young people with disabilities and special educational needs (where they fall short of an EHC plan)
- Children and young people impacted by harmful traditional practices
- Children and young people experiencing bereavement and family illness (a growing group due to covid-19)
- Children experiencing mental health difficulties such as those who do not meet child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) threshold
- Trafficked children and young people
- Homeless families and young people

July 2020