



## Briefing for DCMS select committee:

Session with Rt Hon Oliver Dowden MP, DCMS Secretary

Wednesday 22 April 2020, 2pm-4:30pm

### Summary

- Charities are the glue that hold society together - and in these times of immense and growing hardship, our services are needed more than ever. Yet in twelve weeks of lockdown the sector is set to lose £4bn.
- The Government's package of support for charities is a welcome start, but falls well short of what is needed. Many charities, large and small, are likely to remain in serious peril without further support.
- More significantly, many vulnerable children and families are at risk of missing out on a vital lifeline of support.
- The Government's recent [announcement](#) that some disadvantaged children will be given access to digital equipment and 4G internet is welcome and we are concerned that children with 'hidden' vulnerabilities who do not have a social worker will miss out and continue to live in 'digital poverty'.
- With vulnerable children isolated in unsafe homes and cut off from school and other services, there is a greater risk of harm:
  - Domestic abuse
  - Physically, sexual and emotional abuse
  - Online abuse and exploitation - providing online safety is of importance to the committee as digital is part of DCMS responsibility.
- In the absence of progressing legislation to regulate tech companies, DCMS should ensure the industry is extra vigilant during this period, implementing safety by design measures such as identifying users are children; proactively identifying child sexual abuse and exploitation activity.
- Barnardo's is working flat out to develop new ways of delivering vital support to children who need us most during the crisis. Although some work continues face to face, in many cases this requires investing in new, innovative approaches so we can reach children on the phone, by video conference or through apps - wherever they are.

## Questions for the Secretary of State:

### Support for charities

- Despite the Government's package of support for the voluntary sector, many charities are still at risk, and many service users may lose their vital lifeline of support. Will the Government commit to reviewing the package of support on a monthly basis?
- How is the Department working with other Government Departments to ensure charities have the resources they need to invest in innovation and adapt their services to reach vulnerable children and adults during the lockdown?
- Will the Secretary of State make representations to the Chancellor to suggest the Government's Job Retention Scheme (furlough) is amended so that charity staff on furlough leave can volunteer for the charity they work for?

### Access to digital devices ([following the Education Secretary's announcement on Sunday 19th April](#))

- What are the precise criteria used to determine eligibility for a device?
- What is the timescale for distribution?
- Which local and national partners will the Department work with to distribute the laptops/tablets and 4G routers?
- Is the Department planning to provide families of children receiving a laptop, tablet and 4G router with guidance as to how to keep their children safe online?
- Is the scheme limited to England?

### Online harms

- How is the Government working with technology companies, internet service providers and law enforcement agencies to ensure children and young people are protected during the lockdown?

### Digital poverty

- 77% of Barnardo's practitioners are supporting families affected by school closures. A key concern for these families is not having access to technology required to access school work.
- With the majority of children at home, access to digital equipment is even more important to ensure children and young people can remotely keep up with school work; socialise with friends and family; and access vital support services - including eg. therapy for adopted children and sessions with project workers for those at risk of sexual abuse and exploitation.
- The Department for Education's pledge to roll out 4G routers and vital digital equipment to disadvantaged and vulnerable children is a welcome move. However, limiting the offer to children with a social worker will mean key groups facing significant vulnerability are likely to miss out.

## **Online harms**

- Children and young people are at greater risk experiencing online harms including sexual and criminal exploitation and cyberbullying.
- With children and perpetrators spending more time online, it is vital that steps are taken to protect children from abuse.
- With children and young people away from the supportive environment of school, many at risk of exploitation — for whom their teacher may be the only professional adult they come into contact with — are in danger of being missed.
- In the absence of progressing legislation, DCMS should ensure the industry is extra vigilant during this period, implementing safety by design measures such as identifying users who are children; proactively identifying child sexual abuse and exploitation activity.

## **Children most at risk (especially where they do not have a social worker or an Education, Health and Care Plan)**

- 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
- 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 in families experiencing domestic abuse and young couples perpetrating domestic abuse
- Children and young people experiencing bereavement and family illness
- Children experiencing mental health difficulties (who do not meet CAMHS threshold)
- Trafficked children and young people
- Homeless families and young people

A significant proportion of these children are likely to be in BAME communities, including because BAME individuals are more likely to become critically ill from the virus, and more likely to face pre-existing challenges (such as being a young carer).

### **About Barnardo's**

Barnardo's is the UK's largest national children's charity. In 2018/19, we supported around 300,000 children, young people, parents and carers through more than 1,000 services. For more information please contact Claire Stewart, Senior Public Affairs Officer, on [claire.stewart@barnardos.org.uk](mailto:claire.stewart@barnardos.org.uk) or 07584 347 308.