

Believe in
children



Barnardo's

**Briefing for Education Select Committee:
Session with Vicky Ford MP, Parliamentary Under
Secretary of State for Children and Families**

Wednesday 22 April 2020, 9am-11:30am

The pandemic and necessary lockdown are compounding the challenges facing vulnerable children and families:

- 1. Poverty** - parents in insecure work are being driven into poverty - with some struggling to access food and other essentials. A Barnardo's survey this month found:
 - 76% of Barnardo's practitioners are supporting young people or families who have experienced reduced earnings due to job loss/reduced hours.
 - 48% of Barnardo's practitioners are supporting young people or families who have had difficulties accessing food banks.
- 2. Safeguarding** - 43% of Barnardo's practitioners have seen a decrease in referrals due to schools and other professionals having less contact with families. With vulnerable children isolated in unsafe homes and cut off from school and other services, there is a greater risk of harm:
 - Domestic abuse
 - Physical, sexual and emotional abuse
 - Online abuse and exploitation
- 3. Digital poverty** - compounds these issues - with poorer children unable to access education or vital services due to a lack of internet-enabled devices, phone credit or access to 4G/Wi-Fi.
- 4. BAME children** - BAME individuals are significantly more likely to become critically ill from the virus, meaning BAME children are more likely to be acting as young carers, and to be bereaved.
- 5. Poor mental health** - in children (as well as adults) is skyrocketing; 72% of Barnardo's practitioners are supporting children, young people, parents and carers who are reporting an increase in mental health issues. Some of these children are already facing challenges such as poverty or safeguarding.

With Government interventions such as access to school and access to digital tools focused on children with a social worker, there is a serious risk that '**hidden**' groups who are vulnerable but not receiving this level of support will go unrecognised and unsupported until they reach a crisis point. This includes many young carers, children at risk of sexual exploitation and those living with domestic abuse.

In the longer-term the impact is likely to include:

- More children coming into the care system with vulnerable families reaching breaking point.
- Children's mental health (already affecting one in eight 5-19 year olds) going from crisis to catastrophe.
- An increase in child sexual and criminal exploitation - on and offline.
- Poorer longer-term outcomes and intergenerational inequality.

Key questions for the Minister

Access to school

- What are the Department's plans to increase the number of vulnerable children attending school during lockdown?
- What steps is the Department taking to ensure that vulnerable and disadvantaged children receive support to return to school after lockdown?

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?

Children's social care

- How will the Department ensure vulnerable children are identified and supported whilst school attendance rates are very low?
- How will the Department monitor whether local authorities continue to meet their statutory duties towards vulnerable children?
- How will the Department capture the impact of the new guidance to local authorities on vulnerable groups, including children who are vulnerable but do not have a social worker? ('hidden' groups)
- How will the Department ensure local authorities, schools and charities work together to identify and support vulnerable children?
- How will the Department support local authorities to ensure young people in the care system do not have to leave their care placement during this period?
- What steps is the Minister making to ensure staff working in children's social care and charities have adequate access to PPE and testing, like their counterparts in adult social care?
- How will the Department work with charities to ensure they can continue to provide vital services to the growing number of vulnerable children during this period?

The impact of missing school on vulnerable children

- For vulnerable children, schools are not just about education: they are also a safety net and support network for vulnerable children and those at risk of harm. For some children, their teacher may be the only constant and trusted adult in their lives who they can ask for help.
- At Barnardo's, we know this because many of our services receive referrals from schools and as a result of their necessary closures, we have seen a significant decrease.
- Whilst schools remain open for the most vulnerable children, most recent data suggests a maximum of 5% of vulnerable children are attending school.

- As a result, it is likely that many more children in need of support are remaining 'hidden' - and are likely to miss out on help until they reach crisis point.

Support for charities

- Many charities including Barnardo's are working flat out to develop new ways of delivering vital support so we can reach children who need us most during this crisis.
- However, this requires additional resources at a time when income across the voluntary sector has been slashed by a third (£8m a month) overnight.
- Although our frontline staff are working hard to continue supporting vulnerable children and young people, we are struggling to source supplies of PPE with providers suggesting non-CQC registered services do not qualify despite Government assurance that this is not the case.

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 or 07584 347 308.