



**CHANGING  
CHILDHOODS.  
CHANGING LIVES.**

**BARNARD'S**

Changing childhoods.  
Changing lives.

# Foreword

by Lynn Perry MBE, CEO Barnardo's



Children and young people in the UK have been living through a permacrisis in recent years and it shows no sign of abating. This is a moment in time to help bring about the real change they need – both urgently today, and in the years to come.

The big changes affecting children include:

- The cost-of-living crisis and ongoing economic uncertainty.
- Covid-19's impact on children's mental health, school attendance and early development.
- The pace of change in use of digital technology, including the growth of artificial intelligence and virtual reality.
- Global insecurity and the impact of climate change.

In the Covid-19 pandemic, today's children lived through the worst crisis since the Second World War and, hot on its heels, the cost of living soared. But the challenges facing children didn't start in 2020, and there are some longer-term trends that we need to reverse.

In November 2023, the UN warned that the UK was in violation of international law due to the number of families living in poverty. 4.2 million children in the UK – more than one in four – are living in relative poverty (in households 60% below the median income after housing costs).<sup>1</sup> Between 2021 and 2022, the number of children in relative poverty rose by 350,000, more than the population of Newcastle.<sup>2</sup>

Since 1985, the average height of five-year-olds in the UK has slipped 30 places – due, in part, to poor diet and living standards. Rising numbers of children are struggling with poor mental health, unable to access the support they need from a health system struggling under the weight of demand. Waiting lists are soaring while children reach crisis point.



Meanwhile, the harms facing children are growing and changing, as young people spend more time online and regulation struggles to keep pace with emerging threats like AI.

The compound impact of the pandemic and cost-of-living crisis have exposed – and increased – the inequalities in our society. Many children face even greater hardships in life, simply due to where they come from, structural inequalities or a cycle of disadvantage which is difficult to break.

Against this backdrop, years of underfunding have left core services increasingly unable to cope with rising levels of need for support, with too many families missing out on help, and more and more children going into care. Review after review point to the systemic challenges we need to address.

At Barnardo's, we recognise that children are on a burning platform. We intend to adapt to respond to this. And the time is now.

Barnardo's has launched a three-year strategy to help us meet the changing needs of children and young people. Developed alongside children, young people, colleagues, volunteers and supporters, our new strategy will also bring some updates to the way the charity looks, sounds and feels to make sure children and young people know who we are, how we can help, and can continue to trust us to be there for them.

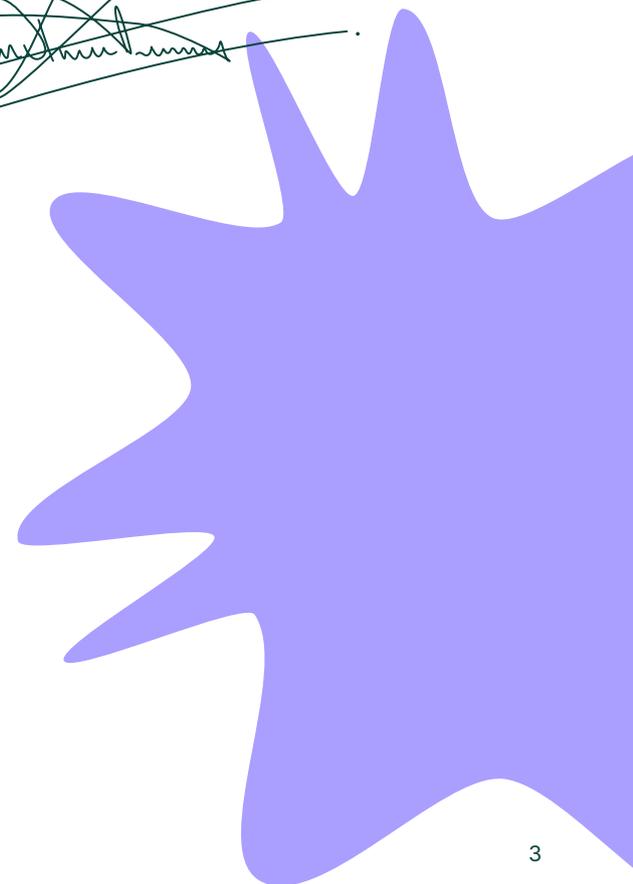
We hope this will help us inspire a new generation of supporters who share our commitment to changing childhoods and changing lives – there is so much need and we know we can go so much further in meeting it if we go together.

Put simply, we will focus our energy where we can make the biggest difference.

As a starting point, we're committing to a three-year investment in direct help for the families we support who are living in poverty – so they can afford food, heating, clothes and the essentials that so many of us take for granted.

And we'll be working with partners to drive change for populations of children who need the most help – so that decisions made at local and national levels are in the best interests of this, and the next generation, supporting change not just for those we work with, but for all children in need of support.

The world has changed beyond recognition since Barnardo's started in Victorian London – and in that time children's needs have changed too. It's imperative that, as a charity, we continue to adapt, to remain relevant and responsive to these new challenges, whilst continuing to provide children with a place where they belong, where change is possible. In 2024, that's exactly what we're going to do.



# What do children think their future holds?

In February 2024, Barnardo's commissioned a YouGov poll of 1001 children aged 14-17 across Great Britain.\* They were asked to imagine themselves aged 30 and answer a set of questions about what their lives would be like at that age.

**55%**

of children responding believe that their generation will not be as well off as their parents.

**34%**

think their own children will be even worse off than they are.

**19%**

(almost one in five) don't think they'll have enough money to live comfortably when they're 30.

Despite all this, an overwhelming

**70%**

were still hopeful about their future.

**61%**

don't think they'll own their own home – 24% think they'll be renting, 14% think they'll still be at home with their parents and 10% in shared accommodation. Only 39% believed they would own their own home.

Children in the lowest socio-economic groups were less likely to believe that they will feel safe at age 30.

**59%** of children in C2DE groups reported believing they would be safe, compared to 71% of ABC1.

Children in the lowest socio-economic groups were less likely to believe that they will have enough money to live comfortably when they are 30. (42% C2DE\*\* compared to 54% ABC1).

In addition, children in the lowest socio-economic groups were less likely to think that they will have a job that they will enjoy. (65% C2DE compared to 71% ABC1).

We asked children responding to the survey why they thought their generation will not be better off in the future when compared to the previous generation. They said:

"Everyone is struggling these days. Nobody has any money and bills are bad. My mum struggles to pay the bills and she's a nurse with a master's degree. I'm not that clever, so imagine my life will be harder than hers. We used to be able to go on holidays, but mum can't afford it anymore."

"It's hard to get enough money for a mortgage now and bills are very high. My parents got their mortgage at 21. I don't think people my age will be able to do that."

"The cost of living is going up and I know that my parents' generation is less well off than my grandparents. It seems to follow that we would be worse off as well."

"Everyone can go to university and get qualifications. However, if you can't get a decent job afterwards, then it's totally meaningless. You can only try your best and pray for some luck to come your way. However, you can't change this, even if you wanted to."

\* we were unable to conduct the poll in Northern Ireland.

\*\* Socioeconomic data categorised according to the Office for National Statistics social grade data.

# Children, young people and families living in poverty

## In the UK in 2024, no child should grow up in poverty

Families across the UK are struggling to make ends meet – with too many children going to school hungry and returning to a cold home. Barnardo's will work to ensure that children and families supported by our services will be warm and fed, through our commitment to a three-year poverty fund. In the meantime we will continue to call on UK Governments to ensure they provide support which covers families' basic needs and increases opportunity for children and young people.

**"It's just so difficult to know where to turn – I have never struggled like we're struggling now. We can only afford a food budget of £50 a month – and as the boys are sleeping on the floor it's really hard for them to get to sleep. I have to keep the heating on in the evening to try and make it more comfortable for them, and then I wake up early to turn it on again before they wake up. We have sleepless nights ourselves, sat there all night worrying about the situation and what will happen. I'm just so thankful for Barnardo's help – I don't know what we'd have done without it these last few weeks."**

Danielle from Bradford, mother to three sons aged six months, six and three<sup>3</sup>

4.2 million children in the UK – more than one in four – are living in relative poverty (in households 60% below the median income after housing costs).<sup>4</sup> Between 2021 and 2022, the number of children in relative poverty rose by 350,000, more than the population of Newcastle.<sup>5</sup>

The percentage of children and young people living in poverty varies across the nations of the UK.<sup>6</sup> Current data shows rises in child poverty in England and Wales, with reductions in Northern Ireland and stable levels in Scotland.

In 2022, one million children experienced destitution, an increase of 186% since 2017. This means that children's basic needs to stay warm, dry, clean and fed are not being met.<sup>7</sup>

In December 2023, UNICEF published a report card on the efforts of 39 high income countries to address child poverty. The UK ranked last on the list, with a 20% increase in child poverty between 2014 and 2021.<sup>8</sup>

**Kate\* works for Barnardo's and highlights the importance of a good night's sleep on one child she worked with: "I worked with one mother to get duvets, pillows and bedding for her daughter as the ones she had were old and sparse. She said to me her daughter went straight to her bedroom to put the new duvet, pillows and bedding on. Her daughter was thrilled with it! It's also going to help her daughter sleep better and stay more alert at school."**

*\*Name has been changed*

## What does the future hold?

**In the next three years, more children, young people and families will be materially and financially worse off.**

The legacy of the cost-of-living crisis coupled with benefit decreases due to inflation will mean more *working* families living in poverty, which will drive poorer health and wellbeing outcomes.<sup>9</sup> As poverty rises, children and young people's **mental and physical health will deteriorate**<sup>10</sup> and they are more likely to be exposed to crime and violence.<sup>11</sup> Poverty is a driver of neglect, a key reason for family referrals to social services.<sup>12</sup>

This will impact family life over the next three years in a multitude of ways such as:

- Families struggling to afford necessities such as food, clothes, heating;<sup>13</sup>
- Impact on the affordability of childcare places;<sup>14</sup>
- For young people entering employment, education and training, particularly those from low-income families, a continued lack of affordable housing. Our research shows young people are turning away from higher education due to the cost-of-living crisis forcing them to prioritise more immediate needs.<sup>15</sup>
- The amount of unsecured debt per household (e.g. credit cards, loans or hire purchase agreements but excluding mortgages) is forecast to rise from £13,000 per household in 2023 to £18,000 in 2027.<sup>16</sup>



**"People my age struggle to get by with how little money they have due to prices going up they're not getting the stuff they need. But another thing too is that because of the cost of living, people struggle to pay for transportation to go to medical appointments and things like that which causes a lot of stress and then they feel like they have no one to go to."**

Respondent to Barnardo's 2023 survey of children and young people

## How can we drive change?

Barnardo's will continue to call on the UK Government to end the 'sibling penalty' or two-child limit, a policy which restricts support provided through Tax Credits and Universal Credit for families which have more than two children. It is currently the single biggest policy driver of child poverty. We will also push for implementation of the Essentials Guarantee to ensure that the amount of Universal Credit families receive is always enough to afford essential items so they can better accommodate unexpected costs such as replacing a broken bed or bedding.

# Families needing support to give their children the best possible life chances

**All parents and carers need access to advice and support, because it takes a whole village to raise a child or young person.**

Without the right support at the right time, any family's challenges can escalate and some children will be at risk of needing to live elsewhere. Some families face particular challenges due to poverty and structural inequalities and may need targeted help to address this.

Barnardo's believes families should be able to access holistic support at the earliest possible time to prevent, cope with and move on from the crises they face. We want to see the number of children who are in need of support from statutory social care services decrease by ensuring their families receive the right support at the right time to prevent escalation.

In recent years, there has been a sharp reduction in spending on early help services. Barnardo's, along with the other leading children's charities, has been tracking local authorities' trends in spending. This analysis<sup>17</sup> **shows that spending on early intervention has reduced from just over £3.7 billion in 2010-11, to just over £2 billion in 2021-22 – a fall of almost half (46%).**

This has resulted in the number of children in care in England reaching 83,840 in March 2023, up from 68,110 in March 2013 – an increase of nearly a quarter in a decade.<sup>18</sup>

While council funding on late intervention to provide services for children in care has increased, this funding has mainly been spent on high-cost children's residential care. Analysis produced by Pro-Bono economics<sup>19</sup> on behalf of the leading children's charities found that the annual spend for children in this type of placement is just over £137,000 per child – more than four times that of a foster placement.



## What does the future hold?

If trends continue as they are, we will see more families reaching crisis point, and more children needing to come into the care system. While there has been a welcome roll-out of Family Hubs and the Start for Life programme, this does not reach every community. Local Government is likely to face continued funding difficulties, forcing them to focus solely on meeting their statutory responsibilities, rather than providing early support for families.

## How can we drive change?

To reverse the trend, and make sure families can access support sooner, we must rebalance the social care system.

That's why Barnardo's will continue to push for universal family support centres in every local community. Our research has shown that Family Hubs can provide a cost-saving. We analysed the outcomes achieved in our family intervention service on the Isle of Wight, and compared to them with the costs state services may otherwise incur. Our research showed that for every £1 invested in the service, the savings to the state are approximately £2.60.



# Children in care and care leavers

## Children growing up in the care of state should have the love, care, support and opportunities we provide for our own children.

The number of children in care is rising in most parts of the UK, and their needs are changing. Too many children are coming into care having experienced significant harm, and are missing out on the right support. There's also a rise in teenagers and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children becoming 'looked after'. Young people growing up in the care of the state are less likely to leave school with good qualifications, less likely to be in employment or training, more likely to have poor health, to become homeless, to be involved with the criminal justice system, and to die prematurely.

Barnardo's wants to support more children to live at home safely with their birth families. We want to see the gap in life milestones between children growing up in care and those growing up with their birth families reduce, and we want children in and leaving care to be given the love and support they need to flourish.

Most children enter care due to abuse or neglect – 54,810 children (65%) up from 63% in 2018.<sup>20</sup>

Characteristics of children in the care system have remained broadly consistent over time. 57% of children are male, 43% are female. Children from mixed ethnic groups are over-represented in the system while those from Asian ethnic groups are under-represented. Overall children of White ethnicity account for 71% of looked after children, 10% are Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups, 7% Black, African, Caribbean or Black British and 5% are Asian or Asian British.\*

There has, however, been a gradual shift in the number of older children in care. In England those who are 16 years or older made up one in five of all children in the care system in 2008, now the number is over one in four (26%).<sup>21</sup> This has largely been driven by an increase in the number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) in the care system. While these children still make up a relatively small number of the overall care population (6.5% in 2023) the total number of these children has increased significantly since 2019. UASC are predominantly over 16 and often need more specialist and bespoke care given their situation.

**"The journey was difficult; I was beaten, and someone stamped on my head and got a perforated ear drum. Sometimes I could eat once or not at all in a day. I was with boys who I trusted, and we stuck together. When I got to the UK, I lived in a hostel but then moved to a foster carer, I was not told I was going to be moving (to the foster carer). I didn't know anybody here and I had no time to prepare."**

Unaccompanied child supported by Barnardo's

\* The terminology used to describe ethnic groups in the report are consistent with official Government data. At Barnardo's we recognise that individuals will self-identify in different ways.



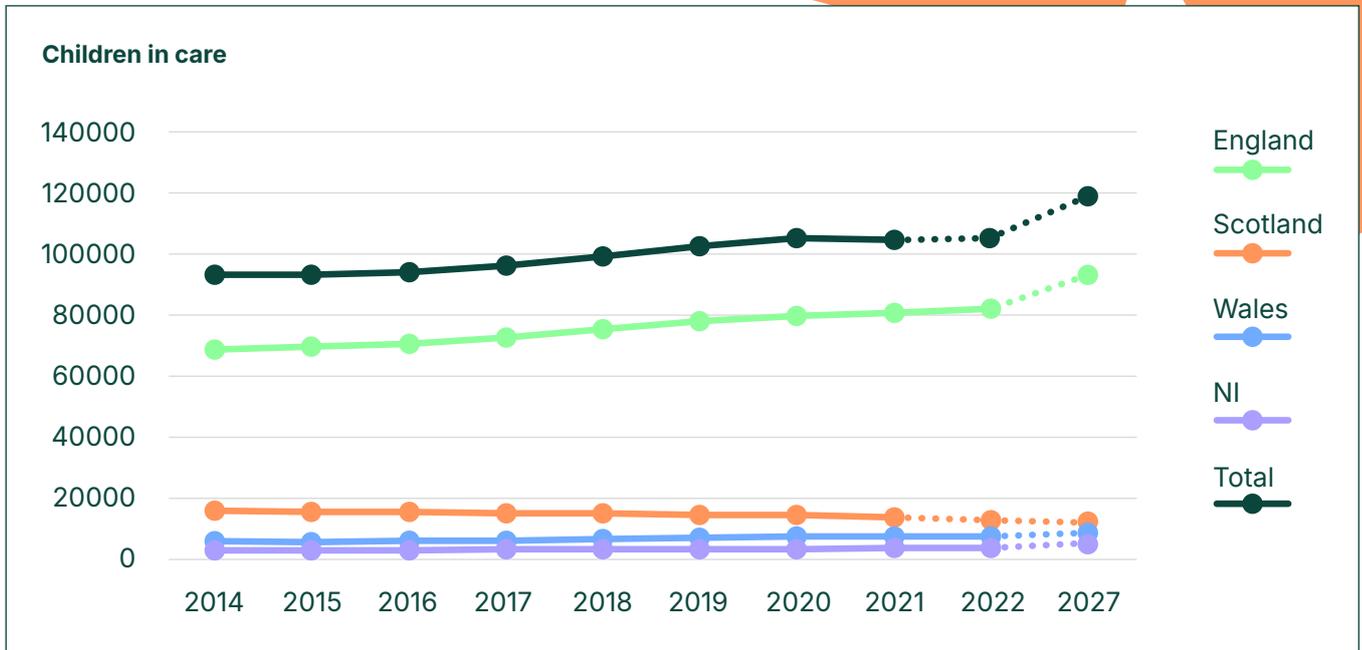
The legacy of the pandemic combined with the cost-of-living crisis is increasing demand on local authority children's services. For example, the number of children needing help from councils for mental health issues has increased by nearly 53% since 2018<sup>22</sup>. An increasing number of families are being referred into children's social care due to the impact of domestic abuse on children – there were a quarter of a million referrals by the police in 2020/21 – an increase of 8% on the previous year.

The number of children in care is also increasing likely due to reductions in early help services for families. This means that those who are facing difficulties such as problems with substance misuse, mental health, or domestic abuse are not able to access the help they need when problems first become apparent. Problems therefore escalate and become entrenched until children can no longer safely stay with their birth families.

At the same time, the support available for placements outside of residential care is likely to decrease – over half (54%) of foster carers have considered resigning because of the financial pressures they are facing according to a recent survey.<sup>23</sup>

### **What does the future hold?**

The combination of decreased early help and a lack of funding for children's social care means that the number of children entering the care system will very likely continue to increase in years to come.



The number of children in care who are placed out of area is also likely to continue to increase. The number and proportion of children in care placed more than 20 miles away has been increasing each year between 2012 and 2021.<sup>24</sup> Evidence shows that children who are moved more than 20 miles away from home are more likely to have lower wellbeing than children placed closer.<sup>25</sup>

Many care experienced young people have poorer outcomes than their peers. They are less likely to gain good qualifications<sup>26</sup>, nearly half of children in care have a mental health disorder<sup>27</sup> and it is estimated that 25% of homeless people have been in care at some point in their lives.<sup>28</sup> Without clear interventions to better support care leavers with a holistic offer, it is unlikely these trends will improve.

## How can we drive change?

We will continue to push for a national offer of support for all care leavers. This includes free bus travel, the introduction of a national rent deposit and rent guarantor scheme, making it easier for care-leavers to access accommodation in the private sector, and access to mental health support, including a lead for mental health in every local authority.

# Children and young people at greater risk of poor health

**Too many children are experiencing preventable health problems - causing pain and discomfort, and meaning they miss out on opportunities during their childhood and later on in their lives.**

Children's health in the UK is falling behind other rich countries, with children and young people growing up in poverty and facing structural inequalities more likely to have poor health in childhood and later in life.

Barnardo's wants to ensure that children at risk of poor health can access the right help at the right time to improve their outcomes later in life. We will continue to press decision makers to take action to address the social causes of poor health, including poverty.

British 5-year-olds are up to 7cm shorter than their peers in other Western countries, indicating diets and living conditions are affecting the development of children in the most deprived socioeconomic groups.<sup>29</sup> Child and infant mortality rates were higher in 2021 than in 2020, though overall have been declining since the 1980s.<sup>30</sup>

## What does the future hold?

On current trends, the Government will miss its targets in England, to halve the 2010 neonatal mortality rate for babies born at a gestational age of 24 weeks or over, and to halve the 2010 stillbirth rate, by 2025.<sup>31</sup>

Children and young people growing up in the least disadvantaged socioeconomic groups can expect to live up to up to 10 years more than those in the most disadvantaged groups. They can also expect to enjoy up to 15 years longer in good health. There are widening inequalities in prevalence of disease, access to healthcare and outcomes.<sup>32</sup>

More children are developing long-term conditions including obesity<sup>33</sup> and Type 2 diabetes<sup>34</sup> in children and young people is rising, impacting their health outcomes into adulthood and increasing costs to society.<sup>35</sup>





This is unlikely to improve into the future, with trends suggesting that **obesity rates, type 2 diabetes and asthma** will continue to rise, impacting other health outcomes such as oral health, sleep, wellbeing, quality of life and increased risk of other health conditions.<sup>36</sup> Waiting times for assessments for Autism Spectrum and Attention Deficit Disorders are also set to continue to grow over the coming years. This means growing delays for support, such as Education Health and Care Plans (EHCP).<sup>37</sup>

Unless significant action is taken on health inequality, we expect that current inequalities will widen, with significant impact on children, young people and families across the life course.

### **Barnardo's collaboration with the UCL Institute of Health Equity**

Barnardo's and the UCL Institute of Health Equity (IHE) are partnering with three Integrated Care Systems (ICS) throughout England to boost children's health by addressing health inequalities, informing best practice and influencing local Government and NHS decision makers on how to provide effective care in their communities.

In 2023 the organisations launched a three-year Collaborative with ICSs in Birmingham and Solihull, Cheshire and Merseyside, and South Yorkshire to tackle the health challenges facing the children and young people in each area.

Barnardo's, the UCL IHE and each ICS have worked in collaboration to produce to develop a new Children and Young People's Equity Framework. The framework uses regional data and insight to support ICSs to develop actions which will help people overcome the societal barriers which can hinder good physical and mental health.

The Framework is informed by key input and insights from young people in each region, gained through face-to-face workshops and digital communication channels so that they can have a say on the issues which matter the most to them. The input of children and young people is crucial to ensure that interventions to tackle health inequality are sustainable in each region.

### **How can we drive change?**

In the next three years, we will continue to call on governments across the UK to prioritise investment and policy change to improve children's overall health and to address inequalities.

# Children and young people struggling with their mental health and wellbeing

## Children should not have to reach crisis point before accessing support for their mental health.

One in five children and young people aged 8-25 in England are thought to have a diagnosable mental health condition, while many more struggle with anxiety and other challenges.<sup>38</sup> However, there are a lack of early intervention services in schools and communities. For those in need of specialist clinical support, waiting lists are far too long.

We want to ensure children and young people have timely access to the right mental health and wellbeing support wherever they live, and we will continue to ask decision makers to prioritise children's wellbeing alongside educational attainment.

**"The education system isn't designed for the modern day; it doesn't teach students how to live. It's not designed for mental health and wellbeing. It is clearly a system designed for achieving A stars."**

Young person supported by Barnardo's services<sup>39</sup>

Many children are struggling with their health and wellbeing as a result of increasing poverty, the cost-of-living crisis and the ongoing impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Children growing up in poverty are more frequently exposed to stress<sup>40</sup>, cold homes<sup>41</sup>, a lack of access to nutritious food<sup>42</sup>, activities and leisure<sup>43</sup> with impacts on their long-term health and wellbeing. While investment in child health and wellbeing has increased, there have significant cuts to children and young people's services, disproportionately affecting areas of socioeconomic deprivation.<sup>44</sup> On average children and young people's mental health receives only around 1% of all health and care funding.<sup>45</sup>

Parents and carers are concerned about the wider effects of worsening mental health and wellbeing issues for their children and how this might impact on their futures. In a YouGov poll commissioned by Barnardo's in August 2022, 61% of parents said mental health issues affected their children's attainment at school. 49% noted a drop in concentration and focus on schoolwork.<sup>46</sup> Schools and colleges are playing an increasing role in identifying children and young people at risk of or experiencing mental health conditions. However, they do not always have access to early intervention services for their students.<sup>47</sup>



**"For us and our teachers, Mental Health Support Teams are accessible, and it feels as though there is no wait time compared to other services. We also hear back so we know when a child's had their assessment and what is happening next. We don't always get that elsewhere."**

Headteacher interviewed for Barnardo's report *'Its Hard to Talk'*<sup>48</sup>

## What does the future hold?

In the future, anxiety will continue to be a cause for concern. Anxiety is reported consistently among both primary and secondary aged pupils, and research suggests this is worse for girls and young women.<sup>49</sup> Key drivers could include climate change, mental health, exam stress, and longer-term impacts of the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis. Longitudinal studies show young people are likely to continue to experience declines in happiness, driven by their experience of school, body image/appearance, and not feeling listened to.<sup>50</sup>

## How can we drive change?

To tackle the growing challenge of children's mental health and wellbeing, Barnardo's will continue to press for universal mental health support in schools and a national strategy for social prescribing for children and young people.

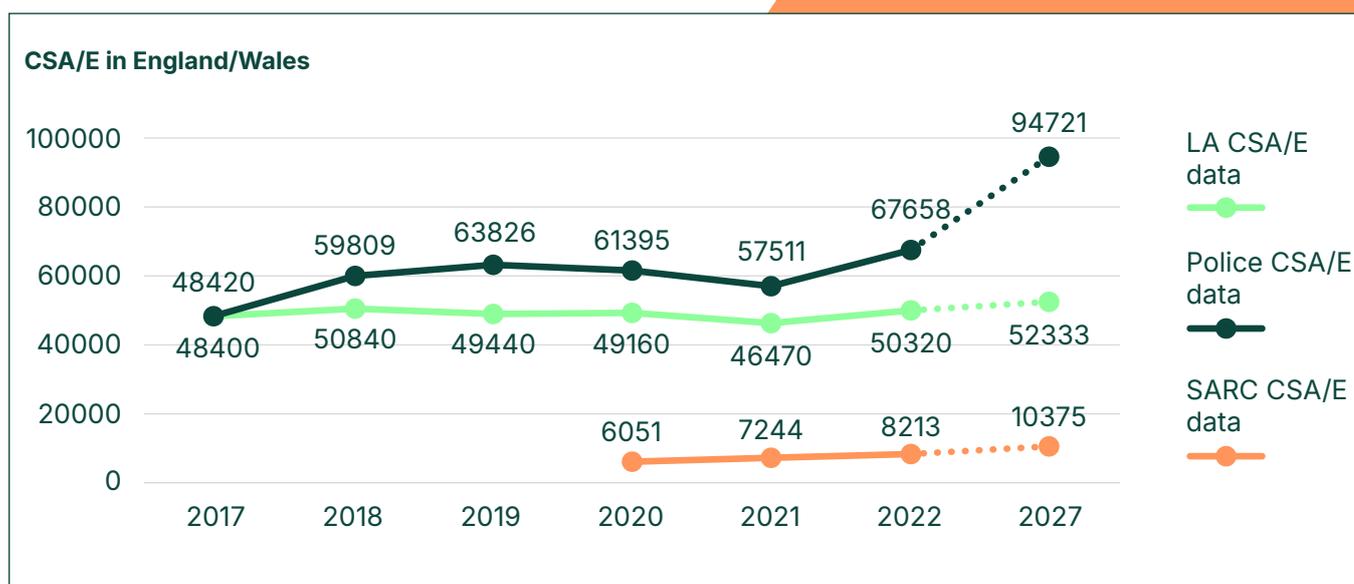
# Children and young people at risk of sexual abuse and exploitation

**A shocking number of children experience sexual harassment, abuse or exploitation before they reach 18 - and the online world means the risks are constantly growing and changing.**

It's become all too common for children to experience harmful sexual behaviour or harassment, partly driven by the rise in online pornography and newer threats arising from artificial intelligence (AI) and virtual reality (VR). Too many children are experiencing harm, and the impact can last a lifetime. The risk of sexual abuse and criminal exploitation has grown, but as a society we don't know enough about the true scale of these crimes or what we can do to prevent them. Some children are at heightened risk of repeated abuse and exploitation, including those who are trafficked to or within the UK.

Barnardo's will work to ensure children are safer on and offline with better regulation and resources for schools to tackle concerning sexual behaviour. We will also campaign to ensure children experiencing sexual harassment, abuse, trafficking and exploitation have access to timely, effective support to help them recover and minimise the risk of further harm.

A shocking number of sexual offences are committed against children – and the true number may be much higher than what's reported. 107,000 Child Sexual Abuse/Exploitation offences were reported in 2022 – a 7.6% increase compared to 2021, and nearly four times what it was 10 years ago. It is likely that this increase is in part due to increased awareness of harms and reporting. However, the numbers of reported offences are likely to remain a significant underestimate. Abuse towards children by other children under 18 accounted for just over half of these offences. Child sexual abuse and exploitation within the family environment remains the most common form.<sup>51</sup>



Police and other agency reported data is only the tip of the iceberg. The Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse, hosted by Barnardo's, estimates that at least one in 10 children in England and Wales are sexually abused before the age of 16.<sup>52</sup> The number of child sexual abuse cases recorded in official agency data is far below these estimates of scale.

Access to vital support services and advocates for children who have experienced abuse, exploitation and other harms is low, with many children facing a postcode lottery. Child victims of abuse and exploitation face a postcode lottery when accessing specific specialist services. A Freedom of Information (Fol) request by Barnardo's in 2023 found that **67% of local authorities had not commissioned any child sexual exploitation, criminal exploitation, or combined services in the past 12 months.** For Police and Crime Commissioners, this was 39%.

Victims/survivors need specific support services that are best placed to meet their needs. Services include mental health services, counselling, therapeutic services, and advocacy services, many delivered by third sector organisations and NGOs.<sup>53</sup> The voluntary sector is well placed to support children, understanding their needs and those of local communities.<sup>54</sup> Specific support services can often be more flexible, work with children for as long as necessary and are able to reduce risks associated with abuse and exploitation.



## What does the future hold?

We are likely to see a continued increase in online exploitation, and this will be shaped by live-streaming, new platforms and technology such as Virtual Reality. Artificial Intelligence-generated child sexual abuse material (CSAM) is also expected to increase.<sup>55</sup> The inclusion of age verification in the Online Safety Act is likely to prevent children being able to view and access harmful content, if properly implemented. However, violent and 'barely legal' content will continue to proliferate and adult viewers will continue to see it. Some will then go on to seek out illegal child abuse content.

**There are also children who view pornography to try to understand their own sexual abuse. Unfortunately, what these children find is content that normalises the most abhorrent and illegal behaviours.**

**This includes 15-year-old Elizabeth\* who has been sexually abused by a much older relative for a number of years. The content she found on pornography sites depicted older relatives having sex with young girls and the girls enjoying it. It was not until she disclosed her abuse that she realised that it was not normal.**

*\*Name has been changed*

The average age which children view pornography online for the first time is 13. Viewing pornography at a young age is damaging, and frequent use increases the risk of engaging in physically aggressive sex acts.<sup>56</sup> Linked to concerns about pornography, professionals are also noticing a worrying rise of misogyny among young boys, associated with the rise of influencers such as Andrew Tate.<sup>57</sup>

More girls and young women report experiencing unwanted sexual contact and harassment in their learning environments including being catcalled, followed, or groped by someone from their school, college or university.<sup>58</sup> Since it became a specific criminal offence in England and Wales in 2019, over 1,000 'uspkirting' crimes have been recorded with 40% involving child victims.<sup>59</sup>

## How can we drive change?

Barnardo's will continue to call for child victims to be given the right to access child-specific support services, as well as the need for a statutory definition of Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE). We will research how to better tackle existing and emerging online harms including through regulating online pornography in the same way as it is offline.

# Children and families seeking sanctuary in the UK



**All children in the UK have the right to care, support and protection, whatever their background or circumstances.**

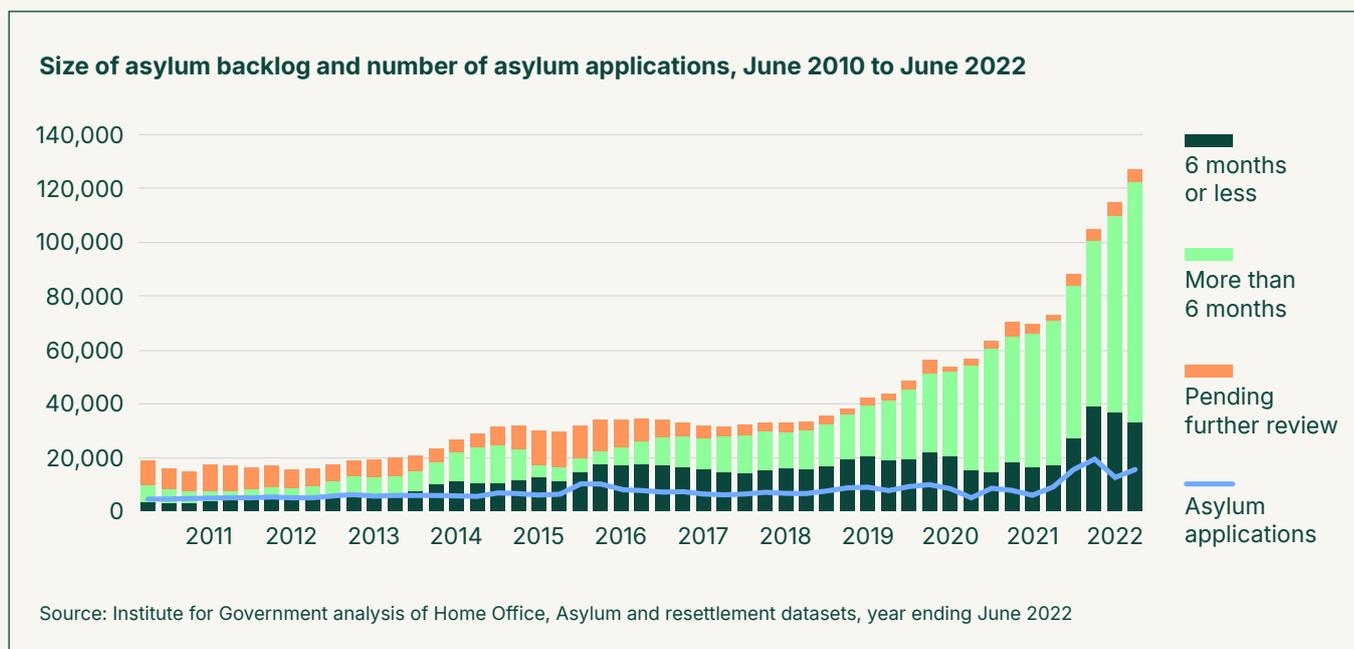
Children arriving in the UK alone or with family have often suffered significant trauma and need specialist support to recover and rebuild their lives in the UK. These children and families too often miss out on the right support and in some cases their rights as well as their wellbeing are at risk.

Barnardo's wants to ensure that displaced children under the age of 18, arriving in the UK alone (Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children) receive the support and protection they need as a child in care and that families arriving in the UK receive the help they need to settle in the country and build a new future. All unaccompanied children must be taken into care when they arrive in the UK so that they can start to get the help they need and deserve. Displaced children and their families must be treated with dignity, compassion and have access to adequate support, including healthcare, education and practical support, regardless of their nationality or mode of arrival to the UK.

Many people seeking asylum are children and young people; of the 75,181 people applying for asylum in the last year, children (under the age of 18) accounted for almost a fifth (18%).<sup>60</sup>

Some are travelling with their families; others have been separated from their loved ones. Nearly one in three people who came to the UK seeking safety from Ukraine in the last year through the community sponsorship scheme were children.

A growing backlog of asylum claims,<sup>61</sup> lack of access to sufficient support and an inconsistent application of immigration policies seriously impacts children's mental health, making integration into our society difficult.<sup>62</sup> The backlog of asylum cases waiting for an initial decision has grown from under 10,000 in 2012 to 125,173 cases or 165,411 people at the end of June 2023. Three quarters had waited for more than six months.<sup>63</sup>



The Children's Commissioner for England's recent report examining homelessness found that of the 6,000 children aged 16 and 17 presenting as homeless in 2022-2023, around 1,000 (18%) were unaccompanied children seeking asylum.<sup>64</sup>

Recent Department for Education statistics show that almost half of unaccompanied children seeking asylum were placed in supported accommodation in the year to 31 March 2023, up from 24% in 2019, whilst those placed in foster placements have been decreasing.<sup>65</sup> Foster carers currently look after 38% of unaccompanied children, down from 50% in 2019. **As with all children in care, children arriving unaccompanied to the UK must have their needs assessed, and a decision made about the placement that will best meet their needs.**



### Zareb's\* story

Zareb was introduced to a Barnardo's service in Scotland via the National Transfer Scheme. He was 16 years old and from Iraq.

Before Zareb arrived at the service, he was placed in a flat in Stirling on his own without assessment. He couldn't work any of the appliances, including the cooker. When a Barnardo's worker arrived at his flat, they reported the heat was at a dangerous level as he had not been shown how to use the thermostat. The one flat had been split into two meaning there was very little space. The worker reported that Zareb was harassed by neighbours, with people banging on the door and speaking to him in a derogatory way.

Barnardo's workers supported Zareb to access the local football team where he went on to thrive; he was given a full kit and was allowed to train with the team, which had a positive impact on his mental wellbeing. Through connections he made in the football team he also attended a local gym. Our workers also supported Zareb to shop for clothing and food and provided social experiences around the local area as well as introducing him to the local Mosque. Zareb has now moved in with a specialist foster family in a neighbouring local authority area where he has settled.

*\*Name has been changed.*

## What does the future hold?

There is likely to be a continued rise in the number of unaccompanied children seeking asylum in the UK. In England, they are projected to make up around 8-10% of the total number of children in care by 2027.<sup>66</sup> Ongoing conflicts in Ukraine, Sudan and elsewhere, as well as climate crises will continue to displace children. Estimates of the number of environmental migrants by 2050 range from 25 million to 1 billion.<sup>67</sup> We expect many children will be housed in contingency accommodation, with continued failures in their safeguarding and care in these placements likely to continue in the coming years.<sup>68</sup>

Following the passage of the Illegal Migration Act on 20 July 2023, it is predicted that within the next three years as many as 45,000 children could be detained in the UK under the plans and between 39,500 and 45,066 children will have their asylum claims deemed inadmissible.<sup>69</sup> More children are expected to go missing from care, especially for those who will soon be turning 18, and who are at risk of deportation following the Illegal Migration Act.

### Abdi's\* story

Barnardo's Independent Child Trafficking Guardianship (ICTG) Service supports child victims who have been trafficked by helping them navigate the criminal justice, immigration and social care systems. Workers provide practical support, such as help with housing, medical needs and education, as well as providing emotional support and assisting with access to specialist mental health services.

The ICTG service received a referral for Abdi after he had been reported as missing. Abdi fled the war in Syria and arrived in the UK in January 2022 a few months before his 18th birthday. Abdi was accommodated by a local authority in England where he was supported to access the opticians, dentist, and medical appointments; he was enrolled in college and was attending regularly.

Abdi went missing in May a few months after arriving in his placement, he took a bag and clothing with him when he left. Abdi was reported missing the same day and enquiries made with friends and college; attempts were also made to contact him by phone. Shortly before going missing, he told placement staff he had seen the news about asylum seekers being sent to other countries and that he was frightened that he would be deported.

*\*Name has been changed.*

It likely that the number of children and young people who are trafficked will continue to rise.<sup>70</sup> There are concerns that traffickers will use the fear of detention and removal caused by the Act as a lever with which to control their victims.<sup>71</sup> It is also likely that the number of children and young people who are incorrectly age assessed as adults will continue to rise.<sup>72</sup> The Illegal Migration Act allows for children to be wrongly assessed as adults by the Home Office and then swiftly removed from the UK to another country without having had the chance to challenge that decision and without ever encountering social workers.<sup>73</sup>

## How can we drive change?

Barnardo's will continue to ensure all unaccompanied children have access to support, services and protection. We want to see Governments across the UK develop strategic plans for welcoming all displaced children and ensure specialist foster care is available to all unaccompanied children seeking sanctuary in the UK.

### Kabir's\* story

Kabir is a child from Sudan that travelled to the UK last year. He was referred to Barnardo's services as a victim of trafficking. Upon arrival, Kabir was age assessed as an adult and was placed in hotel accommodation along with adults.

When Kabir was able to verify that he was under 18 years old by contacting his uncle back home and obtaining his birth certificate, he was moved into local authority care.

A Barnardo's worker that was supporting Kabir asked him about his experience when he arrived to the UK. He said "I was placed in a police station straight away here in the UK, I felt like I did something wrong, I don't want other children to feel that way. I did not know that coming over to the UK in a boat was illegal, I just wanted a safe haven."

*\*Name has been changed.*

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At Barnardo's, our purpose is clear – changing childhoods and changing lives, so that children, young people, and families are safe, happy, healthy, and hopeful.

Last year, we provided essential support to 373,200 children, young people, parents and carers through more than 800 services and partnerships across the UK.

For over 150 years, we've been here for the children and young people who need us most – bringing love, care and hope into their lives and giving them a place where they feel they belong.

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