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Changing lives.

# Practitioner Insights

**Understanding the Needs  
of Children, Young People  
and Families**

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## Foreword

At Barnardo's we have a long history of supporting children, young people and families. In 2022/23, we reached 373,200 children, young people, parents and carers through our 811 services and partnerships across the UK. Our purpose is clear - changing childhoods and changing lives, so that children, young people and families are safe, happy, healthy and more hopeful.

This research report delves into the perspective of Barnardo's practitioners, offering an insight into the complex challenges they navigate in their day-to-day work supporting children, young people and families. It shows there is a need for change in the system.

It is clear from practitioners that they are often stretched to their limit, grappling with a lack of funding and resources, across the social care sector. Having the right support available at the right time is crucial for children, young people and families, to prevent their needs worsening and reaching crisis point.

As we move into 2024, understanding the intersectionality of mental health and the rising costs of living, alongside gaps in key areas of support, becomes paramount. The pervasive influence of social media and technology is shaping the experiences of children and parents in a multitude of ways, the implications of which are not yet fully known.

Amidst these challenges, the report confronts the reality of unmet needs amongst children, young people and families, particularly those with special educational needs and disabilities who are struggling without the right support in place.

This report makes a number of recommendations that we hope will be taken forward. It serves as a call to action, urging decision makers to address these deficiencies to help ensure a more resilient and supportive environment for children, young people and families in the future.

Steve Oversby, Corporate Director of Children's Services

## Executive Summary

This research comprised six focus groups with Barnardo's practitioners who work directly with children, young people and families. The research explored their views on the emerging, current and long-term needs of those they support and how needs might be changing.

The most pressing issue that practitioners identified was that cuts to services are leaving children, young people and families without the right support at the right time. There is not enough early intervention or preventative support, and support is often too short-term, inconsistent, and not at the right level to fully address needs. This is affecting all types of service areas.

It is putting pressure on Barnardo's services, causing burnout amongst practitioners and creating problems with workforce recruitment and retention, which has a knock-on impact for all children, young people and families.

Mental health needs across all groups are rising, in part due to the long-term impact of the pandemic, cuts to mental health services, and a lack of investment in preventative support. Thresholds for mental health services are too high and waiting lists are too long, meaning many are reaching crisis point before receiving support. Young people transitioning from child to adult services are at particular risk of falling through the gaps in mental health provision.

The impact of the cost-of-living crisis is vast and wide reaching, but working families who are not in receipt of financial support from the Government are particularly affected. Being unable to afford basic essentials, such as food or housing, is creating instability in families' lives, making it more difficult for practitioners to provide them with support. Living in poverty is exacerbating mental health problems and compounding other issues such as family conflict or domestic abuse, whilst also putting children at increased risk of exploitation.

There is a lack of (affordable) activities for children and young people to take part in, limiting their opportunities to socialise face-to-face, to participate in hobbies, and to build new skills.

While high thresholds and a lack of sufficient or consistent support means that many children, young people and families' needs are not being met, this is a particular issue for children and young people with additional needs who are waiting a long time to be assessed or diagnosed with a special educational need or disability (SEND). Many receive patchy or little to no support, making it difficult for children and young people to attend school.

The internet and social media are central components of life, leaving practitioners concerned about a loss of face-to-face socialisation, pressures from social media, and the risk of exploitation. Children and young people are viewing harmful content online which is contributing to a rise in, and the normalisation of, violent and misogynistic behaviours, and are engaging in behaviours beyond their age, such as vaping.

The analysis of practitioners' perspectives has raised some urgent issues, highlighting areas that should be prioritised by Barnardo's and addressed by decision makers.

- **Provide long-term funding for services and interventions** so practitioners can provide longer, more consistent support and build effective relationships with children, young people and families.
- **Prioritise preventative support and early intervention** and lower thresholds to ensure fewer children, young people, parents and carers reach crisis point.
- **Support staff wellbeing** to prevent burnt out and compassion fatigue, and ensure the retention and recruitment of Barnardo's staff, so services can be effectively delivered.
- **Invest in mental health support** by directing resources into preventative services and increase the availability and reach of mental health support in schools.
- **Address poverty and the rising costs of living** by tackling structural inequalities and providing working families with financial support.
- **Expand the provision of supported accommodation** to support children and young people with additional needs, care leavers, and those at risk of homelessness.
- **Increase the availability and accessibility of activities** to provide children and young people with more opportunities to spend time outdoors, socialise with peers and learn new skills.
- **Invest in support for children with SEND** to reduce waiting times for assessments and increase the provision of support available following a diagnosis.
- **Prevent online harms** by implementing greater regulation of the internet and protective measures to reduce the risk of children and young people being exploited or harmed online.
- **Invest in preventative programmes to tackle violent and harmful behaviours**, such as substance use and understanding anger programmes.

## Introduction

Barnardo's Practitioner Survey has been running since 2019 to capture insights from colleagues working directly with the children, young people and families that Barnardo's supports. It explores practitioners' views on current and emerging needs amongst children, young people and families, but also longer-term needs to track how they may be changing over time.

Through the survey, practitioners have told us lots about long-term sector wide issues, such as a lack of services and support for families, the impacts of poverty and the rising cost of living, and the worsening of mental health problems. They have also told us about more emerging issues, such as children and young people taking up vaping, or a rise in misogynistic views amongst young boys.

This research aims to build upon these findings and explore them in depth, to unpack more about practitioners' thoughts on emerging, current and long-term needs, how they are changing, and what may continue to change in the future. To achieve this, six focus groups were undertaken with respondents to Barnardo's Practitioner Survey.

## Research Questions

- What are practitioners' views on key issues that children, young people and families face?
- Do practitioners think these issues are changing?
- What is likely to continue changing over the next three to five years?

## Method

This research was conducted by Lily Owens-Crossman and Laura Parkes, Barnardo's Research and Evaluation Team. Respondents of Barnardo's Practitioner Survey Wave 15 (July 2023) were invited to take part in follow-up focus groups, to explore key findings from the survey in more depth.

The fieldwork ran from 4-10<sup>th</sup> October 2023 and six focus groups were held online over Microsoft Teams to enable the participation of practitioners across the UK. In total, 22 practitioners took part.

Participants worked across a range of service areas, including:

- Children in Care
- Care Leavers
- Child Abuse and Exploitation
- Child Protection
- Disability
- Health
- Early Support
- Education
- Family Support Services
- Mental Health and Wellbeing
- Refugee and Asylum Seekers
- Youth Work

The focus group data was analysed using a thematic framework based around the key research questions. Quotes from practitioners have been used to illustrate the themes below.

## Limitations and Considerations

The following limitations should be considered when reading the report.

- Findings may not be representative of the whole organisation or sector at large.
- Respondents' concerns may not match the priorities of children, young people and families.
- Contextual factors may have influenced responses, such as the geographical or service areas that practitioners work in.

## Key Findings

### A Crisis in the Sector

*“I think because that crisis is across all of social care, then that directly impacts on us as well.”*

Practitioners unanimously described a crisis in the social care sector. Cuts to funding have led to fewer services and charities to signpost children, young people and families to, while services that are still running are over-stretched. This is making it difficult for families to get support when they need it, causing knock-on impacts in numerous areas of their lives.

A lack of long-term funding and investment was felt to be exacerbating this. Practitioners identified a decline in youth services and Children’s Centres, due to short-term funding cycles where support is stopped and restarted, reducing the number of activities and opportunities available to families. Support was often felt to be too short-term and inconsistent to fully address needs, creating a sense of instability in the lives of children, young people and families, as well as in services. Some practitioners described having to ‘firefight’ instead of being able to provide targeted, longer-term support. There was agreement that wide and systemic change is needed within the sector.

It was especially felt that early intervention and preventative support has declined, particularly within recent years. A thread of support, which once ran from early years to adulthood, is now missing, meaning more children, young people and families are reaching crisis point before they can access help. This creates a grey area for Barnardo’s services, where practitioners are receiving referrals for a higher, more complex level of need than their service should support, causing them to work outside of their role and remit.

This context is also impacting on the wellbeing of the workforce. Many practitioners described increasing pressure within their service and its impact on staff, particularly in terms of burnout and compassion fatigue. A knock-on impact on the recruitment and retention of staff was noted, as was the impact on children, young people and families who are unable to build consistent relationships with practitioners because of this.

“I think we have a tendency to pick up, as I say in my service, things that we probably shouldn't be picking up, but the reality is there's nowhere else to go.”

“But yeah, it's a lot of strain and a lot of pressure in the service at the moment and I can definitely see it with my workers.”

“...there's more poor practice in terms of consistent relationships. So actually people are struggling more so social workers are off sick more, for example. And so you're getting that flux and change in consistent people across the young person's life.”

“But unfortunately, the way they are, we tend to have fixed contracts and limited services, six-week interventions. And if you are working with a child with trauma, then actually it's going to take six weeks before they are even going to walk through your door, you don't stand a chance of making a difference.”

“...things do seem to be out of control and everybody's firefighting, whatever services you're in.”

“Early intervention is really lacking and it seems like even early intervention services are now having to become more crisis focused...”

## A Mental Health Crisis

*“I don't think we've seen the worst of the mental health crisis.”*

Practitioners told us they are seeing a rise in the number of children and young people struggling with their mental health, such as a rise in referrals for children with anxiety or suicidal thoughts. Mental health issues among parents and carers have also risen, with practitioners providing increased support around parental anxiety, depression and complex mental health issues. The negative knock-on impact this has on children and young people's own mental health was noted.

This increase in mental health problems was often attributed to the prolonged impact of the pandemic, in part due to a loss of social contact during school closures and lockdowns. Practitioners felt this had contributed to a rise in social anxiety, which is fuelling an increase in emotionally based school avoidance.

A rise in mental health problems was also attributed to the cost-of-living crisis, due to the additional pressure and strain this is putting on families, and subsequent lack of affordable and accessible activities and opportunities for children and young people to participate in.

There was a strong sense that mental health problems are going to continue to worsen. Some practitioners felt that the Government is not doing enough to prioritise investment or adequately fund support in this area and drew attention to waiting lists of 3-4 years for mental health services in some areas of the UK. Schools were highlighted as a place where children and young people can receive good mental health support, but many practitioners felt that there is not enough of it, and earlier and more preventative support is needed.

*“[For] parents with bipolar and quite complicated mental health disorders or illnesses...[it's] having a knock-on effect on their family and we know that that does affect children. And that's something that we are seeing rising quite rapidly....”*

*“...the rise in emotionally based school avoidance. That's certainly something that we're seeing as quite a big increase, in the past year or two.”*

*“I'm finding with our service that we are trying to act as a buffer zone to CAMHS and mental health because of the long waiting lists for both parents and children.”*

*“Before we were noticing it predominantly just with CAMHS, and there was, of course, and always has been waiting lists for adults too. But actually what we're noticing is that the adult ones are just through the roof.”*

*“I'd like to say in our area there's good mental health support in schools, but there's not enough of us...But often the referral we're getting is for quite high level of need because there's not the earlier intervention in place in the primary [schools].”*



## The Cost of Living

*“The cost of living is affecting everybody.”*

Practitioners described a rising number of families struggling to afford essentials such as food, bills, rent and/or mortgage payments. There was a sense that this is likely to continue getting worse as costs continue to remain high. Practitioners are providing increased support to parents and whole families to access financial aid, foodbanks and other essential items, and identified Barnardo’s Cost of Living Grant as a valuable resource. Although financial strains were felt to be affecting families across the UK, the impact on working families and those not in receipt of financial support from the Government was very often noted. Practitioners identified working families as those at most in need of support.

A crisis in the housing sector was highlighted by practitioners. There is a lack of affordable housing, while families are facing increases in their rent and are at risk of eviction as landlords look to continue to raise prices. Finding suitable homes for families facing eviction was a challenge, with houses often described as substandard or unsuitable for families to live in.

Homelessness and precarious or temporary housing were also cited as issues, with an increasing number of families sofa-surfing or living in hotels.

This creates instability and insecurity in their lives, which needs to be addressed before more sophisticated repair work or other forms of support can be provided by practitioners.

The cost-of-living crisis is having a knock-on impact in other areas of family life by creating increased pressure and strain, compounding pre-existing issues. Practitioners discussed how mental health needs are exacerbated and reported a rise in domestic abuse and referrals for conflict resolution. The cost-of-living crisis was also felt to increase the risk of exploitation for children and young people due to parents working longer hours, leaving them with less time to monitor their children.

For many families, rising costs have resulted in less disposable income to spend on activities and opportunities, such as school trips or after school clubs. This is limiting children and young people’s opportunities to socialise face-to-face, to make new friends, to participate in hobbies, and to gain new skills. For some, this is leading to loneliness and isolation, for others it is resulting in more time spent indoors and online, which was felt to be impacting children’s communication skills and their abilities to build face-to-face connections and relationships.

“Working parents seem to be the ones that we’ve noticed are being really heavily hit by needing the food banks, needing extra support.”

A lot of people are being made homeless because landlords are thinking ‘if I kick them out, I can get more rent.’”

“In order to be able to look at trauma, you need that stabilisation. And I think all the cost-of-living stuff is crashing that stabilisation, stopping you from doing the more sophisticated pieces of repair work because there’s too much flux in what’s going on in their lives day to day.”

“We know that that [financial stress] will likely cause anxiety...I think that’s going to be quite a major problem in the next 10-15 years.”

“How many parents do we see who have multiple jobs...that means they’re not at home when the kids get home from school. So they’re not keeping an eye on what the kids are doing.”

“These children are missing out on wonderful opportunities because there’s no money or they may not qualify for the after-school club.”

## Unmet Needs

*“You can't meet everybody's needs and they've got to kind of put their priorities somewhere and unfortunately, people do slip through the net.”*

High thresholds and a lack of sufficient or consistent support means that children, young people and families' needs are not being met. Practitioners supporting children and young people with their mental health often gave examples of this, where there is not enough support to bridge the gap between early intervention and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), who are only able to take referrals for those in crisis. Children and young people are therefore falling through gaps in provision. Those aged 17-19, who are caught between children's and adult's services, were identified as particularly at risk of this.

A number of service areas have seen an increase in referrals for children and young people with additional needs. There are long waiting times for assessments and diagnoses of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), with parents often having to battle to get their children seen or assessed. This results in significant delays for receiving the correct support, with needs increasing and wellbeing deteriorating in the meantime.

Following a diagnosis, there is often sparse or non-existent support for children and young people with SEND and their families, meaning their needs continue to go unmet.

Schools were cited as an area where children and young people's needs are frequently getting missed. Practitioners told us that children who are isolated or struggling often go under the radar as their needs are not great enough to be picked up on in school. It was felt that schools are underfunded and under resourced and therefore do not provide adequate support for speech and language, mental health or SEND.

Mainstream schools are struggling to meet the needs of children and young people with additional needs. Practitioners highlighted how support is patchy and, in some instances, non-existent for children with SEND. For example, parents in England can face difficulties obtaining Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP). This is resulting in children and young people not going to school, or only attending for a few hours a week, causing them to miss out on their education, impacting their wellbeing, and putting strain on their family.

*“With CAMHS pretty much having to operate in a crisis model, like what's down from that, you know, what's above us but below crisis.”*

*“So, I guess families with children with those additional needs are probably going to find things more difficult than maybe a family that doesn't have children with neurodivergent needs just in terms of the constant battle to try and get their child seen and assessed by appropriate agencies...”*

*“It's years, it could be four or five years in some areas. And then again there's no post diagnostic support for young people or families. You're just given a diagnosis and off you go and what do you do with it? Then how do you manage that?”*

*“Schools are just desperate for help because they've got no funding.”*

*“...I think it's a national crisis with EHCPs and finding special school placements as well as finding the actual support within the schools. A lot of mainstream schools are really struggling to try and manage [children with] really high complex needs.”*

## Online Harms

*“It's these normalised behaviours of what's happening online.”*

Practitioners were concerned about the amount of time that parents and carers are spending online. They felt it was causing them to spend less time engaging with their children, which in some instances is contributing to a rise in speech and development delays amongst those under two years old. Parents feel pressure from the unrealistic expectations they see on social media. For example, practitioners told us that some parents can feel like failures when they do not have a perfectly clean house or perfectly prepared activities for their children to do, like they have seen online.

It was noted that children and young people are comparing themselves to others on social media which is setting unrealistic expectations for them to achieve. The amount of time that children and young people are spending online was a concern for practitioners. Parents are struggling to put boundaries in place to limit screen time, with children and young people spending more time socialising online than face-to-face. This was felt to be harmful, with practitioners stating that the impacts of this are currently unknown but are likely to be felt in the future.

The risk of exploitation online was described by some practitioners. Children and young people with SEND are particularly susceptible to ‘mate crime’ where they are befriended for financial, criminal or sexual exploitation.

The impact of children and young people seeing harmful content online was highlighted. The case of Molly Russell was given as one example of the impact that viewing graphic content related to self-harm and suicide can have. The increasing online presence of misogyny was cited as a rising problem, with the influence of Andrew Tate, and other online creators, and the normalisation of misogynistic content shaping the viewpoints and behaviour of boys and young men. Practitioners also felt that pornographic material was shaping young people’s behaviour and expectations in relationships.

“[For] a lot of the parents that I work with that is one of the key sticking points that they've got with their children is they're desperately trying to put some boundaries in around screen time. But it's so embedded as part of our society now, you can't do it very easily; homework is set on computers, everything is really dependent on screens.”

“In line with Andrew Tate and all of the awful online stuff that we've been seeing, I think that's kind of, hitting the older age range at the moment. But I can see that filtering down to the younger children as well in terms of what they're watching and what they're seeing online becoming more normalised and affecting behaviour, particularly amongst boys and young men.”

“That whole gender misogyny thing is a rising problem and it's affecting young people a lot.”

“This kind of constant bombardment does [have] a big impact that also addresses what people think is acceptable in relationships, how you behave, how you dress, how you act, what you should look like.”

“These teenagers that will be parents in the upcoming future will need some kind of upskilling to deal with this experience they've had around very new technology and learning how to set expectations and boundaries for their children.”

## Managing Behaviour and Emotions

*“That's the breakdown of [...] a society in some ways is that behaviours aren't being challenged enough.”*

Practitioners expressed concern that children and young people's behaviour is worsening and felt that this will become a greater issue in the coming years. Children and young people are being negatively influenced by external factors such as social media, pornography and sometimes family and peers. This normalises certain behaviours that children and young people learn to exhibit and expect, and practitioners noted that they are seeing violent, misogynistic and exploitative behaviours regularly because of this.

Children and young people increasingly engaging in behaviours that are beyond their age was a concern for practitioners. Vaping, for example, was seen to be a fast-growing issue in both primary and secondary schools, with younger children taking it up, and little known about the potential long-term health effects. Other types of substance use, such as stimulant drugs, were mentioned as contributing to non-attendance at school, challenging behaviour, and arrests. Substance use programmes were identified as an area facing cuts to funding and services.

Practitioners felt that more children and young people are struggling to understand and manage their emotions, and instead react to situations with trauma responses.

It was acknowledged that children and young people need to be better supported to understand and challenge violent behaviour, and more support for parents is needed, to help break cycles of intergenerational trauma and learnt behaviours. A lack of reparative support for young people who perpetrate violence was also discussed.

The long-term effects of the pandemic were cited as something that continues to significantly impact children and young people's social behaviours. Practitioners noted that the pandemic has changed the way that people interact within society as a whole, and this is particularly being seen in children and young people who require greater support with social skills development. Increased online interaction and less face-to-face connection has continued beyond the pandemic, which was felt to have contributed to a rise in loneliness and isolation among children and young people. Practitioners felt that this issue is likely to grow and were concerned about the unknown future consequences for children and young people.

“And that's something really, really common that I find is a lot of children engaging in behaviours that are outside of [what's] appropriate for their age.”

“I imagine that's something that might come out in the next couple of years as an issue [...] A lot of underage drinking, vaping, and kind of engaging in antisocial behaviours very young.”

“You know, there's so many boys that have been through so much violence, but haven't got the strategies to help understand or acknowledge that and their response to that is just to be violent themselves.”

“How do we tackle intergenerational trauma and how do we tackle what has gone before? I'm thinking like some of the young men that I'm working with at the moment they've been seeing so much violence within the household and within their community that it's just so normalised...”

“And I am doing a lot of social skill building activities with children that [...] should have those social skills at that age, but they aren't at the minute.”

## Recommendations

Through the analysis of practitioners' perspectives, this research has raised some urgent issues that should be addressed by decision makers and prioritised by Barnardo's.

### 1. Provide long-term funding for services and interventions

Systemic change is needed in the sector and resources should be directed to provide sufficient funding for services, to enable longer-term and consistent support to be provided. Priority should be placed on whole family support and keeping families together.

### 2. Prioritise preventative support and early intervention

Thresholds for support should be lowered, and an emphasis on early intervention should be placed, to ensure that fewer children, young people, parents and carers reach crisis point.

### 3. Support staff wellbeing

Practitioners discussed burnout and compassion fatigue within the sector. More emphasis should be placed on staff wellbeing and services should be sufficiently resourced, so Barnardo's is able to effectively retain and recruit staff.

### 4. Invest in mental health support

Mental health services should be a priority area for investment and resources should be directed to preventative and treatment services. Increasing the availability and reach of whole-school wellbeing support would be an effective way to ensure this is tackled early and holistically.

### 5. Address poverty and the rising costs of living

While structural changes are needed to address rising costs and reduce poverty, working families are most in need of immediate financial support.

### 6. Expand the provision of supported accommodation

Investment should be made to provide greater accommodation support for children and young people with SEND, care leavers, and children, young people and families at risk of homelessness.

### 7. Increase the availability and accessibility of activities for children and young people

Investment should be made to provide free and affordable activities for children and young people, offering opportunities to spend time outdoors, socialise with peers and learn new skills. This has the potential to contribute to positive mental and physical health and to reduce isolation and time spent online.

### 8. Invest in support for children with SEND

Greater support for children and young people with SEND, as well as their families, should be a priority area for investment. This should focus on reducing waiting times and difficulties accessing assessments for SEND and increasing the provision of support following a diagnosis.

### 9. Prevent online harms

Greater regulation of the internet is required, and protective measures are needed, to reduce the risk of children and young people being exploited or harmed online.

### 10. Invest in preventative programmes to tackle violent and other harmful behaviours

The provision of preventative programmes, such as substance misuse and understanding anger programmes, should be expanded to help reduce harmful use of substances, violent behaviour, and break cycles of intergenerational trauma.

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