

**Barnardo's Scotland response to the Scottish Government
Engagement Paper on the Prevention of Suicide and Self-
harm**

Barnardo's Scotland supports a collaborative approach to preventing suicide and helping those who self-harm.

Barnardo's services offer support to some of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children and young people in society. Some have experienced abuse, bullying, mental health difficulties, school exclusion, homelessness and substance misuse.

Barnardo's accepts self harm as a way of coping with difficult emotions or situations but believes that there should always be an agreement with the child or young person to explore other coping strategies. Barnardo's offers support to children and young people by building relationships and offering emotional support to help them understand why they self harm. We also link closely with local statutory and voluntary organisations with the aim of providing a multidisciplinary response to self harm.

Barnardo's Scotland works primarily to support children and young people who self-harm, so our response will focus on this particular area of the engagement paper.

We agree that action to reduce self-harm is not as well developed as the work on suicide prevention.

Defining Self-harm

Barnardo's Scotland believes that the definition of self-harm used by the Scottish Government is not appropriate or fit for purpose and should be reconsidered as part of this engagement programme.

We believe that the current definition used by the Scottish Government too readily interchanges suicide and self harm. This we believe leads to confusion and can also weaken the evidence base for self-harming as a coping strategy.

The consultation paper makes the assumption that self-harm is something that should be prevented, which is not something that we would agree with. Although it should never be advocated as a positive coping strategy it should be recognised and accepted as a coping strategy that is used by many, and that the focus of the strategy should be on harm reduction measures rather than simply prevention.

In our view far too often the majority of the focus has been on suicide rather than self-harm, largely because the two have been linked too closely.

We believe that self-harm should be treated as separate and distinct from suicide and as such we believe that the Government should develop separate strategies, which cross reference each other as appropriate.

Training and information

Barnardo's Scotland would like to see more training and information made available for staff who are working with, and who come across people who use self-harm as part of their role, for example, guidance teachers, school staff, youth workers. The guidance should cover how to deal with the complexities of young people who self-harm, managing the tensions of safety and protection, confidentiality and information sharing. Our work in communities with these staff has indicated that there is a real need for this information and guidance. Barnardo's Scotland would suggest that a new training tool be developed, which could be rolled out using a 'train the trainers' model.

Government should also consider setting up a central data-base or information centre to allow practitioners and professionals working with children to easily access materials and to know where to go for information.

We also believe that more could be done in schools to teach children about coping and self-harm.

Further research

Government needs to consider new ways to collect research and information on self-harm. Particularly, there needs to be a greater focus on gathering information from a much wider population than is currently targeted. For example, the vast majority of young people we work with at our Barnardo's Hopscotch service (which supports children and young people who self-harm) are in their communities, attending school, living with families, and are not hospital inpatients or being treated for self-harm in hospital, where information and statistics are generally drawn from.

Many young people that carry out self-harm are being managed by workers as part of a safety plan. This information and data is rarely captured or used to explore trends and policy responses.

In addition, it is highly likely that there are significant numbers of self-harming young people who are completely unknown to statutory authorities.

Self-harm and Children's Hearings

Changes to the children's hearing system which will list self-harm as a reason to apply movement restriction condition must be carefully managed or there is a risk that it may have unintended consequences. For instance, it may result in a child hiding their self-harm or make them reluctant to seek help. It is important that hearings panellists have a greater understanding of self-harm and the available services to support young people self-harming, so that they can ensure that appropriate recommendations are made.

Contact:

Richard Meade, Public Affairs Officer, 0131 314 6632,
Richard.meade@barnardos.org.uk