

## News release

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### **'VULNERABLE CHILDREN TRAPPED IN UNNECESSARY LIMBO' SAYS BARNARDO'S**

The UK's largest children's charity reveals new data showing that children are being damaged due to unprecedented delay in the courts.

A five year long pattern of deterioration has led to family courts taking up to 65 weeks to rule if it is safe for children to stay with their parents.

Vulnerable children are waiting on average more than a year (57 weeks) in unstable family homes or emergency foster placements before a county court decides if they will be taken into care. In the family proceedings (magistrates) court the average time is 45 weeks – more than 10 months.

Official figures from The Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) show that at the end of 2009 there were 50 per cent more unresolved care proceedings cases than at the end of 2008. New applications account for less than half of this increase, indicating that the courts are taking longer to close a significant number of cases.

Martin Narey, Barnardo's chief executive, says:

“An insecurity has spread through the family courts with additional, sequential expert assessments being routinely ordered. This paired with the evident lack of credence given to social workers, is causing unnecessary delay.

“The courts need urgently to reflect on the damage these delays are having on extremely vulnerable children. A year of a child's life is an inordinate amount of time for them to be trapped in desperate limbo, unclear of their future and very possibly at risk.

“During this time, these children might remain at home with neglectful or abusive birth families or be living in emergency foster care, expected to settle with families they may subsequently have to leave.

“At a time when stable relationships and secure attachments are vital for a child, they are instead engulfed in a period of uncertainty and confusion.”

The data published by Barnardo’s also uncovers a ‘postcode lottery’ governing the fate of children waiting for court decisions throughout England and Wales. In 2008-09 the county courts in Humber and South Yorkshire took an average of 46 weeks to come to a decision whilst those in London took 65 weeks, close to a staggering five month difference.

Barnardo’s is calling for a radical culture shift in court practice. The Government should give urgent consideration to:

- Ensuring all cases are dealt with in less than 30 weeks (seven months) with a tiered, fast track target of 12 weeks for children under 18 months.
- Providing family group conferencing to all children and families prior to care proceedings to ensure the early identification of kinship care.
- Training for all court staff to improve understanding of the impact of delay on child development.
- Establishing liaison forums to improve links between the legal and social work professions to ensure there is greater confidence in social workers’ professional expertise.

Helen, an emergency foster carer for Barnardo’s, says;

“I can’t answer Tom’s questions. He wants me to make him promises about what is going to happen but I can’t, it’s very difficult to know what to tell him. He has such little concept of time it’s hard to explain that we have to wait and see because a week feels like a lifetime to him.”

Research\* shows children experiencing such high levels of placement instability have previously been found to have the poorest levels of adjustment in terms of employment, social relationships, financial management and housing.

Ends

### **Notes to editors**

- \* Nina Biehal (1995)
- See attached PQ data for full breakdown of wait times by court catchment area.

Barnardo's works with more than 100,000 children, young people and their families in 415 specialised projects in communities across the UK.

We believe in the potential in every child and young person, no matter who they are, what they have done or what they have been through. We will support them, stand up for them and bring out the best in each and every child.

Every year we help thousands of children turn their lives around. But we cannot do it without you. Visit [www.barnardos.org.uk](http://www.barnardos.org.uk) to find out how you can get involved and show you believe in children.