

Policy Briefing

Coronavirus – the impact on children & young people

May 2020



We need to ensure safeguards continue to protect vulnerable children and young people, particularly in times of crisis.

About Barnardo's Northern Ireland

We are the largest children's charity in Northern Ireland. We work with approximately 12,000 children, young people and families annually across more than 40 different services and programmes. We deliver a wide range of services across Northern Ireland, from providing family support and early intervention, to working directly with children and families who have experienced adversity and need our support.

The Issue: an overview

The coronavirus pandemic has had a seismic impact on people all around the world, affecting how we lead our everyday lives. However, whilst putting systems in place to address the threat of coronavirus, safeguards that normally protect vulnerable children and young people could inadvertently be breached. We need to ensure that protections for the most vulnerable in our society are preserved, even more so in times of crisis.

Key Messages

- The social restrictions introduced in response to the coronavirus pandemic places **children who are at risk** of abuse or neglect in an even more dangerous situation. Domestic violence and substance misuse have increased in countries where similar lockdown measures have been imposed.
- Many families have been pulled into **poverty** as a result of losing their jobs, or increased financial pressures. Free School Meal funds must be delivered in a way that is accessible to all families who need it, with families supported to use these resources. We need to ensure these funds and resources are extended to all families who have been pulled into poverty as a result of the pandemic.
- Children and young people need continued access to **mental health and wellbeing support**, even more so in times of crisis. Some of our most vulnerable children include young carers, care experienced young people, and children with disabilities or complex needs. Social distancing measures may exacerbate feelings of loneliness and poor emotional wellbeing. There is a risk that we will see a long term impact on the mental health of children and young people, with more needing support for the first time.
- Many charities that deliver **children's services have taken a financial hit**, which could lead to reduced capacity to deliver key services, even when the pandemic ends.



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Barnardo's Registered Charity Nos: 216250 and SC037605

Hidden Harm: Safeguarding Risks

- Families are being pushed into crisis and the children most vulnerable to abuse and neglect are in the greatest danger as vital support systems disappear e.g. closure of schools, ending face-to-face meetings with social workers and other key workers.
- Based on our service data from recent years, we see an increase of safeguarding issues just before or during periods of schools closures such as summer holidays, with particular increases in our early intervention and drug or alcohol misuse services.
- PSNI statistics show that from 1st April 2019 – 31st March 2020, [domestic abuse was at a 15-year high](#) in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, since the start of April 2020, the PSNI have tracked an [increase in domestic abuse calls](#) received, compared with the same time period in 2019. We know children are the hidden victims of domestic abuse, as Barnardo's has shown in recent [research](#). While public services are stretched and redeployed, a commitment to protecting children and families living in potentially abusive households in Northern Ireland must be maintained to prevent and respond to abuse.
- Parental substance misuse may also rise and the Public Health Agency has warned against more frequent consumption of alcohol during this time. Children and young people are the hidden victims in households where parental substance misuse occurs.
- We need to avoid revised safeguarding thresholds, which may leave at risk families who are below the thresholds without the vital support they need, including early intervention or prevention support. Worryingly, the [number of child protection referrals](#) in Northern Ireland has dropped since lockdown began however there is no evidence that levels of child abuse have dropped in this time.
- We are also concerned that [increased online traffic](#) could result in an increased risk to children of grooming, sexual exploitation or abuse. We need to ensure safeguards are in place, and that initiatives are implemented to support parents and carers to navigate digital safety.

Child Poverty

- Children are already at a higher risk of poverty than the general population. In the past month, as a consequence of coronavirus, many families have been pulled into poverty as a result of losing their jobs, businesses or increased financial pressures.
- Experiencing poverty can cause stress and worry for a child, which can have a negative impact on their development in the early years and throughout their life.
- Unemployment in Northern Ireland [rose by 89% in April 2020](#), according to statistics released by NISRA; this is the highest monthly increase since records began.
- Some families live in digital poverty, with no or limited access to the internet, laptops or smartphones, making it difficult for them to access support services or school work.
- We welcome that the Education Authority will make payments directly to families where children were eligible for Free School Meals. However, EA/DE should ensure that these funds are delivered in a way that is accessible to all families who need it (e.g. those who don't have a bank account) and families should be supported to use this resource.
- We need to ensure that funds and resources are extended to families that have been pulled into poverty as a result of the pandemic. We need to ensure all parents are supported and that all children have the best possible start in life.



Mental Health and Wellbeing

- Children and young people need continued access to mental health support, even more so in times of crisis. It is important that we recognise the impact of the crisis and the public discourse on the mental health and anxiety of young people, and the impact that can have on their long term wellbeing.
- In addition, social distancing measures can exacerbate feelings of loneliness and isolation, leading to chronic loneliness which can impact on long term mental and physical health and wellbeing.
- The [research](#) conducted by Ulster University and the University of Sheffield on the impact of coronavirus showed “a spike in depression and anxiety” after the Prime Minister’s announcement of a lockdown, while “rates of depression and anxiety were higher at the end of the week than the beginning”. We are seeing this in our services.
- We need to ensure that mental health support and access to counselling continues throughout this crisis, and that there is particular recognition of vulnerable groups, including young carers, children in or leaving care, children with disabilities or complex needs, and newcomer and refugee families with limited family or social networks.

Sustainability of Services

- Charities are critical to supporting the vulnerable in society and the demand is already increasing: we need to ensure financial sustainability in the sector to respond to both the current need and to the increased post-pandemic future need.
- More families are being pushed into crisis and the most vulnerable children are in the greatest danger as vital support systems disappear.
- The third sector delivers critical frontline services to vulnerable groups, and Voluntary and Community Sector practitioners should be recognised as key workers. There is a need to ensure Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) is provided for all those who require it, and that the contribution of frontline charity workers is recognised.
- The pandemic is a threat to the existence of charities and the third sector, with an [estimated](#) £4.3bn loss in 12 weeks expected in the sector. Funding security is needed to ensure the vital services delivered by the third sector can continue to address the legacy of the pandemic in years to come.

Summary

The response to the coronavirus pandemic needs to consider vulnerable children, young people and families. The current circumstances present increased risks of abuse, neglect, poverty, and poor mental health and wellbeing – the consequences of which will be felt for years to come. We need to ensure that safeguards are in place to protect those who are at risk, and that the vital work done by the third sector in supporting vulnerable groups can continue during and after this crisis.

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