

13 May 2020 9am-11:30am

Online Harms

- Before the lockdown, children faced serious risks online — ranging from online bullying to sexual grooming and abuse.
- Barnardo's is concerned about a '**perfect storm**' of children and abusers spending more time online, combined with a shortage of content moderators,¹ leading to greater exposure to harmful content.
- Since lockdown, **37%** of Barnardo's frontline staff said children and families are concerned about spending more time online.
- Our abuse and exploitation services have reported an **increase** in children experiencing harm online, including exposure to distressing stories about Covid-19, using online forums to discuss eating disorders and self-harm, cyberbullying and sharing self-generated sexual images.
- Lockdown has meant **it is harder for children to access support** meaning that children and young people may not be able to discuss their concerns with professionals (e.g. teachers, support workers).
- The pandemic has highlighted the urgent requirement for statutory regulation. **The Online Harms Bill should be brought to Parliament without delay. Children should not be expected to look after themselves online.**

Child sexual abuse and exploitation

- Before the pandemic began, **two-thirds** of children supported through our sexual exploitation services were groomed online before meeting their abuser in person.
- The National Crime Agency's latest assessment shows that **300,000 people in the UK present a sexual threat to children** through 'contact' abuse or online.²
- Not every child is safe at home, some children live with their abuser or their family may be involved in their exploitation.
- Since the lockdown began:
 - **45%** of Barnardo's frontline staff have reported a decrease in referrals, including from schools, local authorities and police.
 - **Europol** has raised concerns about an increase in online activity by those seeking child abuse materials during lockdown.³
- Away from the supportive environment of school, vulnerable children and young people exposed to online harms are **more likely to go unrecognised and unsupported.**

¹ BBC, April 2020. [Coronavirus: Internet child abuse images not being deleted.](#)

² National Crime Agency, April 2020. Law enforcement in coronavirus online safety push.

³ Guardian, April 2020. [Lockdown hampering removal of child sexual abuse material online.](#)

Impact on children's and young people's mental health

- Due to the pandemic, children are being exposed to overwhelming amounts of information about Covid-19, including distressing and upsetting stories.
- We are concerned that online disinformation around Covid-19 is adversely affecting children's mental health, especially those with existing mental health conditions.
- Since lockdown, **75%** of Barnardo's frontline staff have reported children and families being more concerned about their mental health, especially anxiety, stress, and depression.
 - **15%** of Barnardo's frontline staff noticed increases in suicide ideation in the children they are supporting.⁴
- It is not always easy for adults to differentiate between information online that is true, misleading or false. **However, children may find it particularly difficult to critically analyse what they see online and to understand whether or not content is accurate.**

The role of tech companies in protecting children

- With legislation to regulate the internet paused, and as the lockdown is increasing the risk of online harms, **the Government must ensure that tech companies are taking extra steps to keep children safe.** This includes:
 - Ensuring the industry monitors the potential surge in online harm and intervenes quickly and robustly - allocating resources to disrupting perpetrators.
 - Encouraging improved information sharing and intelligence sharing about risks. Facilitating partnership working between tech firms, Government and children's charities, such as Barnardo's, to ensure that online spaces are safe-by-design.

Questions for the Ministers:

- When will the Online Harms Bill be introduced?
- In the absence of an Online Harms Bill, what steps are the Government taking to ensure that the tech industry is committed to the safety and wellbeing of children online?
- How is the Government working with technology companies, internet service providers and law enforcement agencies to ensure children and young people are protected during the lockdown?
- Will the Government facilitate improved collaboration between the charity sector and the technology sector to protect vulnerable children and young people?

About Barnardo's

Barnardo's is the UK's largest national children's charity. In 2018/19, we supported around 300,000 children, young people, parents and carers through more than 1,000 services. For more information please contact Claire Stewart, Senior Public Affairs Officer, on claire.stewart@barnardos.org.uk or 07584 347 308.

⁴ Barnardo's, April 2020. Quarterly Practitioner Survey.