

Key questions for the Secretary of State

Access to digital devices

- DfE provided digital devices to local authorities and academy trusts between May 2020 and July 2020. Does the Secretary of State know how many children and young people have received a digital device, and how many more children may be left without a device?
- How will DfE ensure all vulnerable and disadvantaged children and young people can access digital devices and data as the pandemic continues, given the ongoing need for remote access to education and support services?

Mental health and wellbeing

- Are you satisfied that schools are able to respond effectively to children's mental health - including specific challenges faced by some groups (such as bereavement in the case of BAME¹ children whose communities are most affected by the virus)?
- Can you provide an update on the implementation of the Transforming Children and Young People's Mental Health Green Paper, including how many schools have benefited, and how many will benefit by 2023? Do you agree that the proposals should be fast-tracked?

COVID-19 has compounded existing inequalities facing children and families. Those who were already vulnerable and disadvantaged are most likely to have fallen further behind in education, to have suffered trauma and to need additional support with their mental health and wellbeing. **Over 80% of Barnardo's frontline workers were supporting someone with an increase in mental health issues due to COVID-19 crisis in June, in comparison to 69% in April.**²

There is evidence that **missing out on school is likely to reverse almost a decade's worth of progress in closing the attainment gap.**³ Disadvantaged, vulnerable and BAME children and young people have suffered more than their peers.⁴ The Government's promised £1bn 'catch up' fund seeks to address this, though there are reports that the **national tutoring programme for disadvantaged pupils will not be ready until Spring 2021.**⁵

To ensure children and young people are able to realise their potential, and to have any hope of 'levelling up' society whilst we continue to live with COVID-19, we must

¹ Individuals may choose to identify themselves in different ways, including as Black, Brown, BAME, as 'people of colour' and/or as members of Global South Communities.

² Of Barnardo's frontline workers who responded to Barnardo's Quarterly Practitioner Survey.

³ Education Endowment Foundation, June 2020. [Best evidence on impact of school closures on the attainment gap.](#)

⁴ Guardian, September 2020. [Gap between rich and poor pupils in England 'grows by 46% in a year'](#)

⁵ Guardian, September 2020. [Boris Johnson's catch up tutoring 'will arrive to late' for pupils who need it most.](#)

make sure that they are able to learn and to access support. In particular this requires:

- **Tackling digital exclusion** to provide equal access to education and support;
- **Rebalancing the education system** so that mental health is on par with academic attainment.

1. **Tackling digital exclusion** - The internet has been a lifeline for children and young people - providing access to education, to specialist support and to friends and family. We welcomed the Department's commitment to provide digital devices to disadvantaged young people.⁶ However, it is not clear how many children and young people have benefited, and in light of the continued pandemic, we now need a holistic commitment - that no child should be digitally excluded and left behind. Barnardo's has launched the 'Great British Tech Appeal' with Vodafone with the aim of distributing up to 10,000 digital devices to disadvantaged children and their families - but while charities and companies can play a role, this urgently requires Government leadership.
2. **Supporting pupils' mental health and wellbeing** - COVID-19 has exposed the nation's children to trauma, adversity and loss - during the lockdown many experienced poor mental health, bereavement or domestic abuse, while many parents saw a reduction in income and are facing unemployment.⁷ In addition to widening the 'attainment gap', COVID-19 has created a '**trauma gap**'.
 - Before COVID-19, **one in eight** five-to-19-year-olds had a diagnosable mental health condition.⁸ **One in three** 8-24-year-olds have suffered additional mental health challenges during lockdown.⁹
 - Barnardo's report *Time for a Clean Slate* found **88%** of school staff believed COVID-19 will impact on the mental health and wellbeing of their pupils.¹⁰
 - Good mental health and wellbeing is a precondition to educational attainment. But **71%** of teachers believe they will be unable to close the gap without extra support for pupils who have experienced bereavement, mental ill-health or abuse during lockdown.¹¹

To address this, **COVID-19 must be a catalyst for systemic change**. The Government's Transforming Children and Young People's Mental Health Green Paper has started the process of implementing mental health support teams and appointing a senior lead for mental health in schools. However, its ambition is only to reach a fifth to a quarter of England by 2022/23. **In light of COVID-19 and the increased need for mental health support, this Green Paper must be fast-tracked.**

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 on claire.stewart@barnardos.org.uk or 07584 347 308.

⁶ Department for Education, 2020. [Guidance](#): Get laptops and tablets for children who cannot attend school.

⁷ [Refuge, 2020](#).

⁸ [NHS Digital, 2018](#).

⁹ [Barnardo's, 2020](#) (based on a sample of 4,000 children and young people)

¹⁰ Barnardo's, 2020. [Time for a clean slate](#).

¹¹ [Polling](#) by Teacher Tapp for Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR)