

Opposition Day Debate: Investing in Children and Young People

Parliamentary briefing – 9 June 2021



1. Issues facing children and families

Before the pandemic vulnerable children were facing multiple issues – 4million were **growing up in poverty**, 1 in 5 experienced **domestic abuse**, increase in children with **poor mental health**, more **children were entering care** in England, and a serious spike in **youth violence** taking to many young lives. Access to early support for children had been decreasing for several years, including the closures of children centres and youth services, often leaving children and their families reaching crisis point before access support. In 2019/2020, more than 8 in 10 councils in England responsible for children's social care overspent by £832million despite councils increasing their budgets by £535million in 2019/2020.¹

These issues still exist today, exacerbated by the pandemic. As the largest children's charity in the UK, our frontlines workers have told us in January 2021:²

- Mental health, isolation and loneliness is still the primary concern, with more than half reported mental health and wellbeing support as the most important issue to be addressed.
- Two thirds have supported families in the last year with concern around buying food.
- 72% felt demand for services has increased over the last three months, alongside an increase in the level of complexity of need amongst children and family.

Throughout the pandemic, Barnardo's led a coalition of 80+ charities to deliver **See, Hear, Respond**, a 9-month programme funded by the Department for Education, that **reached 100,000 'hidden' children** who had been negatively impacted by the pandemic, but **did not qualify for statutory support** from local authority children's services. Shining a spotlight on the level of unmet need for support. In the first six months of the pandemic 284,375 children were referred to children's services, many of them were previously unknown to local authorities.³

2. What needs to change?

At Barnardo's we believe that the pandemic must be a catalyst for real change for children and families, going beyond the school gates to ensure families can access the right support at the right time – enabling children to thrive at home and in school. To do this, children need to be at the centre of the Government's 'levelling up' agenda, supported by a cabinet minister for children and a cross-government strategy which includes:

Early support

- Many families have struggled to access the support they need, especially new parents. The Government should aim to have a **Family hub – in person and virtual - in every community** to ensure all families can access universal support from pre-birth up to the age of 19 years old.

¹ LGA, 2021. [Eight in 10 councils forced to overspend on children's social care budgets amid soaring demand.](#)

² Barnardo's Quarterly Practitioner Survey, January 2021. Survey took place during 12th-26th January.

³ Children & young people now, February 2021. [More children 'made known to social services in first six months of pandemic'.](#)

Mental health

- A defining impact of the pandemic has been on children's mental health. The Government should commit to **mental health support in every school** as soon as possible and **ending the cliff edge of support at 18** for children accessing CAMHS.

Digital access

- Digital access has been a lifeline to children and families to access education and support. However, the pandemic has demonstrated a clear digital divide, leaving some children without a device or data to connect. The Government should publish **a clear plan to end 'digital poverty', so no child is left behind.**

Support for the most vulnerable

- During the pandemic it has been reported that there has been a rise in children entering care due to increased pressures on families during lockdown and a rise in abuse and neglect.⁴ This reflects the year-on-year rise of children entering care with over 80,000 children in care in England as of March 2020.⁵ Aged 19-21, 4 in 10 care leavers are not in education, training or employment, compared with just 13% of their peers.⁶ The Government should commit to **improving outcomes for the most vulnerable by improving stability**, reducing the number of times a child moves between foster families or children's homes; and **strengthening support for care leavers.**

Transforming the system surrounding children

- Pre-COVID the system was failing too many children. Intervention was too late, agencies were working in siloes, and decisions were driving by short-termism.
- We need to take our learning from the pandemic and transform the system around families, creating a **children's services 2.0** which provides better and more responsive **integrated health and social care services** that work with the voluntary sector, through strategic partnerships, to co-design, co-produce, and co-delivery services that support children and families holistically, harnessing **digital support** and focusing on investment in **long term provision and outcomes.**

About Barnardo's

Barnardo's is the UK's largest national children's charity. In 2019/2020 we supported 358,800 children, young people families and carers through more than 800 services and partnerships. This includes helping new parents to give their child the best start in life, to supporting children in and leaving care, to providing therapeutic interventions to children with mental health problems and those who have been sexually abused. For more information contact Claire, UK Public Affairs Manager, claire.stewart@barnardos.org.uk

⁴ ITV News, June 2020. 50% rise in children referred to care during coronavirus pandemic'; Independent, August 2020. [Rise in mothers having children taken into care during pandemic.](#)

⁵ The Department for Education. Children looked after in England including adoptions, reporting year 2020.

⁶ The Department for Education. Children looked after in England including adoptions, reporting year 2020.