



A 'new normal'

Snapshot report on the needs of children and young people since full-time return to education in August 2021.

November 2021

**Believe in
children**
 **Barnardo's**

We are now 20 months into the Covid 19 pandemic. During this time, children and young people have faced huge disruption to their education as the result of national lockdowns and self-isolation rules.

Barnardo's work in over 400 schools across Scotland, and, as schools returned in August, we wanted to better understand the challenges affecting young people in the aftermath of school closures in order to inform how we best respond to their emerging needs as we transition to a new phase of the pandemic.

We designed a short survey targeted at a cross cutting sample of our schools-based staff and asked them to respond based on direct feedback they have had from the children and young people who participate in Barnardo's services, from their own observations and based on insights from colleagues in education and other organisations we work in partnership with. 49 staff participated. These are staff who have been on the frontline throughout the pandemic, continuing to meet and support families through this challenging period and therefore have a high level of insight and awareness of the reality of life for children and young people, and families in our communities across the country.

The results are outlined below.

1. 94% of staff agreed or strongly agreed children and young people have more worries and anxieties now than pre-pandemic.

“The attainment gap has widened since the pandemic; more parents report mental health concerns that directly affect the child's ability to learn at home and move back into education.”

Team Manager

In addition, 78% of staff disagreed or strongly disagreed that children and young people have access to appropriate supports to address their mental health needs, which reinforces what we already know about the shortage of community and specialist provision for the increasing number of children and young people who are struggling with their mental health. 55% of staff also disagreed fewer children and young people were experiencing feelings of loneliness now lockdown was over.

However, 46% of participating staff agreed or strongly agreed children and young people had had more opportunities to access nature and other supports over this period.

“I have been able to work creatively with young people by supporting them on 'walks and talks' when not allowed in their school or their home. This has also been a great way to connect with nature and encourage young people to see the benefits of getting out in terms of boosting their mental health and wellbeing.”

Family Support Worker

“Therapeutic outdoor learning work being rolled out across various services – with a good degree of consistency – further developing the workforce to be able to offer this type of work.”

Children's Service Manager

1. Mental Health and Wellbeing

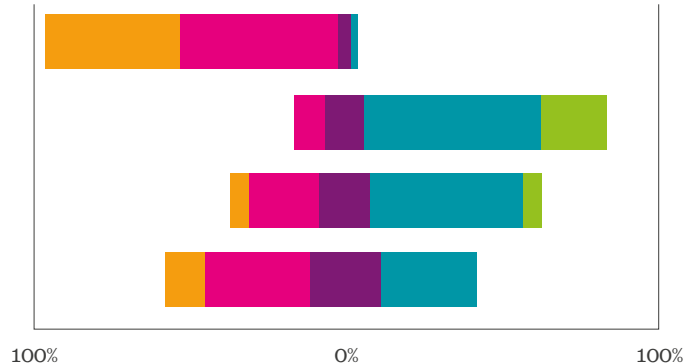
● Strongly agree
 ● Agree
 ● Neutral
 ● Disagree
 ● Strongly disagree

Children and young people have more worries and anxieties now than pre pandemic

Children and young people have access to appropriate supports to address their mental health needs

Fewer children and young people are experiencing feelings of loneliness now we are out of lockdown

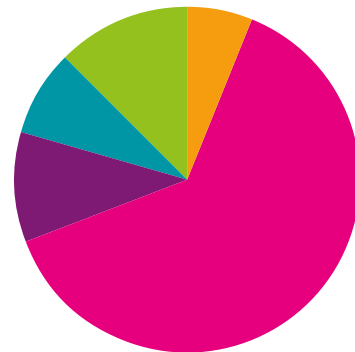
Increased numbers of children and young people are benefitting from opportunities to access nature and other supports



2. We wanted to understand what the main presenting problems were in the population of children and young people who engage with our services. As you can see 63% of participating staff identified anxiety as the ‘most significant’ issue affecting children and young people.

2. What do you feel is the most significant Mental Health and Wellbeing issue affecting children and young people?

● Loneliness/Lack of social connection	6%
● Anxiety	63%
● Worry about self and others	10%
● Low mood/Depression	8%
● Other	12%



3. The lockdowns and other social restrictions have disrupted relationships over the last twenty months with some children and young people feeling isolated from friends and wider networks including family, teachers, and other supportive adults. All of this has an impact on wider community wellbeing. 74% of our staff agreed or strongly agreed many children and young people are struggling to reconnect with peers. More positively 47% reported children and young people are being supported by key adults to reintegrate into school settings.

“ I believe that a joined-up approach with education and our service has provided children and young people with additional support to their emotional health and wellbeing from when they returned to school.”

Team Manager

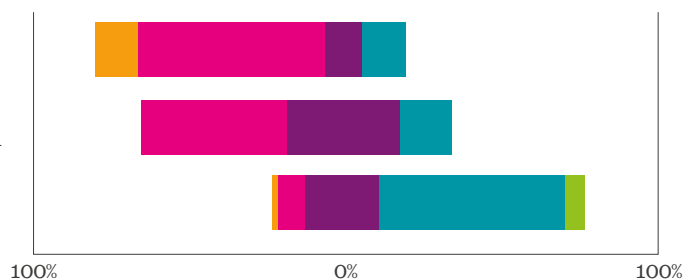
3. Relationships

Strongly agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly disagree

Many children and young people are struggling to reconnect with peers

Children and young people report they feel supported by the key adults in their lives to reintegrate into school

Now we can meet up in person children and young people are spending less time online



4. There has also been a lot of financial hardship over this period. We were interested to learn if the return to school and reduction in restrictions was improving the situation for families. It appears this is not the case with 83% of staff saying more families need financial help now than pre-pandemic, with two thirds identifying ongoing food poverty and hunger as an issue and 90% stating the changes to Universal Credit are causing distress.

“Access to food has been and continues to be invaluable for many families.”
Family Support Worker

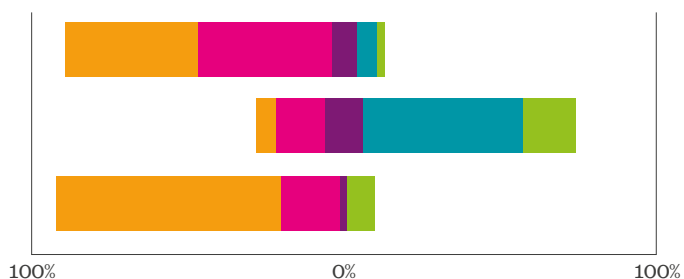
4. Poverty

Strongly agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly disagree

More families now need financial support than pre-pandemic

Food poverty and hunger is reduced now children and young people are back in school

Changes to universal credit will cause greater financial distress to families



5. Returning to school appears to have been positive for most pupils with over two thirds of participating staff reporting this to be the case. 40% also agree there has been a focus on health and wellbeing for returning pupils.

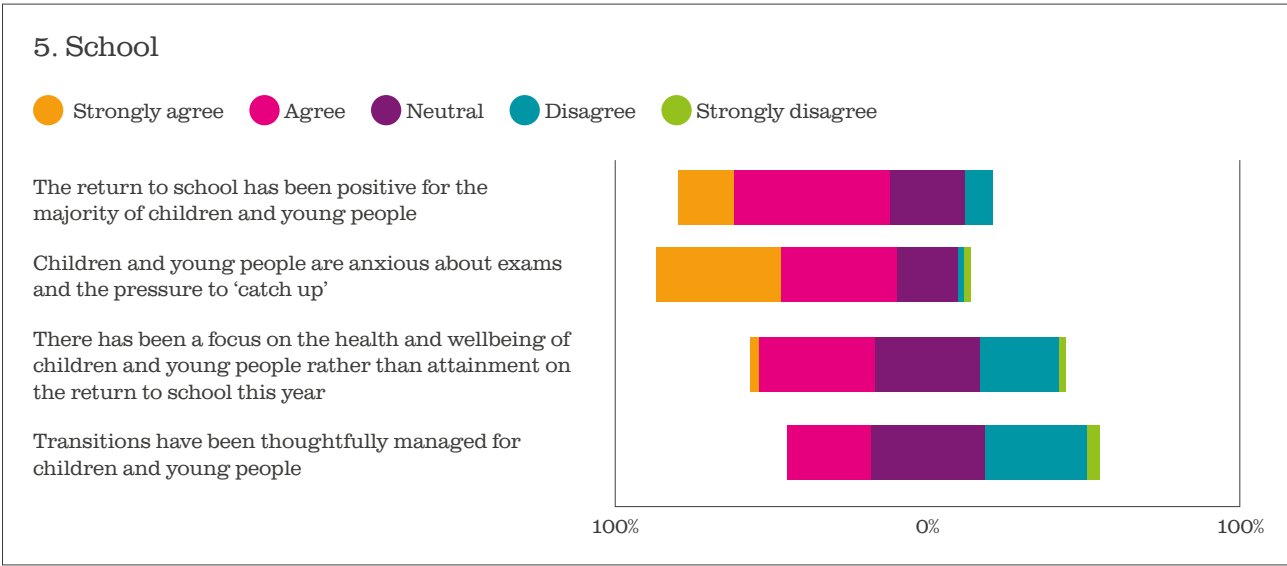
“The Primary Schools have made a huge effort to ensure that mental health and well-being are the priority to improve children’s readiness to learn.”
Family Support Worker

“Some schools have recognised the need for universal recovery and have been very proactive in ensuring the emotional needs of all children are being met, rather than just focussing on a specific group of children.”
Team Manager

However, 77% agreed or strongly agreed children and young people were anxious about exams and the pressure to 'catch up'.

Transitions have been especially important given all the wider disruption, however, participating staff acknowledged it was challenging to achieve successful transitions within such an uncertain environment.

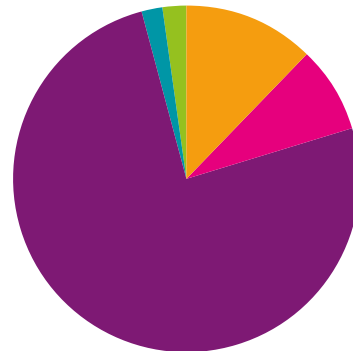
“ There is an increased requirement to support children transition back into the structures of education and all associated areas to meet attainment, including social interactions and emotional wellbeing.”
Team Manager



6. The last 20 months have been incredibly challenging for many children and young people. While we know everyone will have their own story, we were keen to identify if there was any commonality in what our staff were picking up as greatest concern. There was a clear answer with 76% of people identifying mental health and wellbeing above relationships, poverty, school, and other concerns as the key issue in the lives of many children and young people.

6. Which of the themes above do you believe is generating the greatest concern for you about children and young people at this stage of the pandemic?

Relationships	12%
Poverty	8%
Mental Health and Wellbeing	76%
School	2%
Other	2%



We asked our colleagues what supports were a priority for the immediate future and they had a range of suggestions.

Firstly, they expressed the need to **extend provision of support for mental health and wellbeing**.

“Support for mental wellbeing within schools to help with the gaps from pupils being discharged or not being able to access support from CAMHS. Pupils are struggling with transitioning back into school because of anxiety, peer relationships etc.”

Family Support Worker

“More support for young people who are at risk of becoming / or are school refusers. School closures during lockdown have had a huge impact on some children and young people – particularly those who had some anxieties about school pre-pandemic and are now struggling to manage a school routine now.”

Family Support Worker

Secondly, they identified the need for **holistic supports which wrap around a whole family**.

“Mental health and wellbeing for entire families, not just the young people we see in schools. Parental anxiety about losing their jobs / funding cuts / 18 months into a pandemic and no clear view of when it will end / family bereavements due to Covid. All these things (and more) impact negatively upon parental capacity.”

Family Support Worker

“I think continuing with whole family support and not just working with the young person in school is a priority.”

Family Support Worker

Finally, they highlighted the need for **poverty to be addressed**.

“Tackling hunger, poverty and mental health and wellbeing.”

Family Support Worker

“Financial support for families who are tipping into relative poverty.”

Family Support Worker

“Continuing to tackle poverty. Many families are going to be worse off after the pandemic due to Universal Credit cuts and reliance on additional financial supports which were provided during the pandemic.”

Family Support Worker



Conclusion

We know lockdown and wider restrictions have had a significant impact on children, young people and families. We also know our schools-based staff are reporting worsening mental health, with children and young people now having more worries and anxieties than pre-pandemic.

Our staff highlighted the importance of holistic support which reaches children and young people at the earliest point of need to reduce the risk of ongoing poor mental health. However, we know the current infrastructure is unable to meet the level of need with referrals for CAMHS recently reaching the highest on record. It is essential we develop more early help and community-based supports which both compliment and reduce the pressure on CAMHS provision.

It is also hard for children and young people to recover if the adults caring for them are stressed and overwhelmed. We know many children and young people, and the people who care for them, benefit from engagement with an emotionally available, trusted adult to share their feelings and concerns with. This includes practical support with addressing the impact of poverty.

As a matter of urgency, we need to ensure there is sufficient, appropriate, mental health and wellbeing support available in all schools and communities to support this generation of children and young people.

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