

### Summary

- Barnardo's is concerned that the mental health of children and young people has been negatively affected by the pandemic's disruption to education and over the last two years. The Schools Bill provides an opportunity to address the **long-lasting impact Covid-19 has had on children and young people's mental health**.
- Barnardo's believes the **Schools Bill** must go further and address the mental health and wellbeing issues that have dramatically increased during the pandemic, by **speeding up the rollout of Mental Health Support Teams (MHSTs) to all schools**.
- Since the end of lockdown, children and young people have been 'lost in the system' - the Children's Commissioner has estimated that in the autumn 2021 term, **more than 1.7 million children were 'persistently absent'**.<sup>1</sup>
- The Bill will introduce a requirement on every school to publish a clear attendance policy, which Barnardo's supports. However, it is important that this is **accompanied by increased support for children and parents to overcome the barriers they may have in attending school**.

## 1. The impact of Covid-19 on children and young people's mental health

The Schools Bill is an opportunity to do more to address the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people in education settings.

The pandemic has exposed children and young people to trauma, adversity and loss, with implications for their long-term mental health and wellbeing. Emerging evidence suggests that the impact could be profound, with links being made to increased symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression and anxiety.<sup>i</sup>

During May 2020, Barnardo's commissioned a number of surveys with children and young people (age 8-25) to understand how Coronavirus and the lockdown was affecting them personally<sup>ii</sup>.

- At least **1 in 3** children and young people polled by YouGov said they had experienced an increase of mental health and wellbeing issues including stress, loneliness and worry.
- While more than **2 in 5** (41%) in the YouGov poll said they were more lonely than before lockdown, more than **1 in 3** said they were more worried (38%), more sad (37%) or more stressed (34%). **1 in 3** also said they had more trouble sleeping, which could have a knock on effect on school work, behavioural issues and family life.

Barnardo's quarterly surveys of frontline workers since March 2020 have showed a steady increase in concerns about the deteriorating mental health of the children and families, they work with:

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<sup>1</sup> [Where are England's Children? Interim findings from the Children's Commissioner's Attendance Audit](#), March 2022

- In April 2020 seven out of 10 practitioners reported an increase in mental health issues among the children, young people and parents they worked with. By April 2021 this had increased to **nine out of ten practitioners**.<sup>2</sup>

Barnardo's recent quarterly survey of frontline workers (January 2022) has shown that:

- 31% of respondents are still seeing an increase in mental health issues among CYP and families
- 44% of respondents felt that the main long-term impact of the pandemic on children, young people and families was on mental health and wellbeing.
- 76% of respondents supporting children who have not re-engaged with school identified unmet mental health and wellbeing needs as a primary reason.

*'Not being able to do things that normally make me happy and help me cope has made my mental health decline massively.'* **Young person talking about the impact of Covid-19 on their mental health in our report *In Our Own Words***.<sup>3</sup>

The number of children with diagnosable mental health conditions has also significantly increased since 2017:

- **For 6 to 16-year-olds:** from **one in nine** to **one in six** in 2021<sup>4</sup>
- **For 17 to 19-year-olds:** from **one in ten** to **one in six** in 2021<sup>5</sup>

Over **420,000** children and young people were treated through NHS-commissioned community services in **2020/21**.<sup>6</sup> According to the NHS's own data this is approximately **only 39.6% of children and young people with a diagnosable mental health condition**.<sup>7</sup>

Recent research showed that **prescribing of antidepressants to children aged 5–12 years** has increased by more than **40% between 2015 and 2021**.<sup>8</sup>

**At age 11, those from the lowest income families are more than 4.5 times more likely to experience severe mental health problems than those from the highest income families**.<sup>9</sup>

Supporting mental health in our schools is essential to achieving educational attainment. Research from UCL demonstrates that those who have mental health difficulties are more likely to have lower attainment when it comes to educational outcomes and are more likely to be persistently absent from school.<sup>10</sup>

We welcome the Government's commitment to improve mental health support through the roll-out of Mental Health Support Teams (MHSTs)<sup>11</sup>. However, under current plans only 35% of

<sup>2</sup> Barnardo's Practitioner Survey April 2020 and April 2021

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/mental-health-covid19-in-our-own-words-report.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2021-follow-up-to-the-2017-survey#summary>

<sup>5</sup> <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2021-follow-up-to-the-2017-survey#summary>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.england.nhs.uk/mental-health/cyp/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.england.nhs.uk/mental-health/cyp/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://pharmaceutical-journal.com/article/news/number-of-young-children-prescribed-antidepressants-has-risen-by-41-since-2015>

<sup>9</sup> Association of Young People's Health (2019) Key data on children and young people in 2019. Chapter 9: Inequalities in health outcomes. [https://www.youngpeopleshealth.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/AYPH\\_KDYP2019\\_FullVersion.pdf](https://www.youngpeopleshealth.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/AYPH_KDYP2019_FullVersion.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> [https://www.ucl.ac.uk/evidence-based-practice-unit/sites/evidence-based-practice-unit/files/headstart\\_evidence\\_briefing\\_3.pdf](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/evidence-based-practice-unit/sites/evidence-based-practice-unit/files/headstart_evidence_briefing_3.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.england.nhs.uk/mental-health/cyp/trailblazers/>

learners in England will be able to access a Mental Health Support Team in their school by 2023.<sup>12</sup> This means **over 5 million children will miss out on the support an MHST can provide.**<sup>13</sup> Given the increase in mental health issues in children and young people, and long waiting lists to access CAMHS, we want to see the Schools Bill **include a commitment to introduce Mental Health Support Teams in every school.**

Research carried out by the Department for Education in 2017 found that **71% of schools said a major barrier to setting up mental health provision was funding,**<sup>14</sup> which is why we are concerned that **the Government has not confirmed funding for MHSTs for 2023/24** onwards and urge the Government to do so urgently.

## **2. School absence**

The Centre for Social Justice found in autumn 2020, 758 schools reported that at least an entire class worth of children had become severely absent in the first term back. That is close to one in 28 schools where the equivalent of a whole class had gone missing.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, in March 2022 the Children's Commissioner<sup>16</sup> estimated that in the autumn 2021 term, more than **1.7 million children** who comprise 22% of state school pupils were **'persistently absent'** (missing over 10% of sessions or 10 school days) and **124,000 (1.5%)** were **'severely absent'** (missing over 50% of sessions).

Barnardo's conducts quarterly surveys of its frontline service providers. Around two in five practitioners (38%)<sup>17</sup> are currently supporting children who have not re-engaged with school since previous lockdowns or COVID-19 related absences. **44% of Barnardo's practitioners supporting families with school-aged children are concerned about children missing school.**<sup>18</sup> While several issues were identified as important factors for school absence, **76%** of Barnardo's practitioners felt **that unmet mental health and wellbeing** needs was a key reason for children and young people not re-engaging with school.<sup>19</sup>

While we support the Bill's intention to ensure schools publish a clear attendance policy, our frontline practitioners who work with children and young people with poor attendance find that schools which are supportive and keen to help families struggling with attendance are more successful at engaging them compared to those who take a more disciplinarian approach which can further alienate children already struggling through sanctions, detentions, isolation or exclusion. This is why we encourage a trauma-focused and child-centred approach to issues surrounding behaviour and attendance and we hope the Schools Bill acknowledges the need for parents to be given help and support, alongside the need to reinforce attendance.

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.england.nhs.uk/2022/05/nhs-fast-tracks-mental-health-support-for-millions-of-pupils/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics>

<sup>14</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/634726/Supporting\\_Mental-Health\\_survey\\_report.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/634726/Supporting_Mental-Health_survey_report.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> The Centre for Social Justice, Lost But Not Forgotten: The Reality Of Severe Absence In Schools Post-lockdown.

<https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/library/lost-but-not-forgotten>

<sup>16</sup> [Where are England's Children? Interim findings from the Children's Commissioner's Attendance Audit](#), March 2022

<sup>17</sup> Barnardo's Quarterly Practitioner Survey February 2022

<sup>18</sup> Barnardo's Quarterly Practitioner Survey, February 2022

<sup>19</sup> Barnardo's Quarterly Practitioner Survey February 2022

**Suggested questions:**

1. How will the Minister champion children's mental health and wellbeing in the Schools Bill?
2. Will the Government commit to extending Mental Health Support Teams to every school?
3. What additional support will be made available to schools through the Bill to provide mental health and wellbeing support?
4. When will the Government be able to confirm funding for Mental Health Support Teams in schools beyond 2023/24?

**About Barnardo's**

Barnardo's is the UK's largest national children's charity. In 2020/21, we reached 382,872 children, young people, parents and carers through our 791 services and partnerships across the UK. Our goal is to achieve better outcomes for more children. To achieve this, we work with partners to build stronger families, safer childhoods and positive futures. For more information contact Ceri Finnegan, Policy and Public Affairs lead on

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/mental-health-covid19-in-our-own-words-report.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/big-barnardos-conversation>