

Summary

- **More than 1 in 4 children in the UK live in poverty** and the impact of the cost-of-living crisis has left families across the country struggling to afford the basics.
- Barnardo's **welcomes the Government's Budget announcement of an increase to Universal credit by 6.7%, equivalent to inflation in September 2023 and the end to the local housing rates freeze.**
- Whilst these announcements will benefit families, Barnardo's **is deeply disappointed that the Autumn statement failed to include any significant investment in children's social care, mental health and services to support children who are most at risk from exploitation.**
- In fact, analysis suggests that **'unprotected' departments will face a 2% cut per year in real terms.**¹ At the same time, given rising demand for public services which are already struggling, the Government's budget will place **further strain on services children and young people need the most.**
- Based on evidence Barnardo's has published this year, this briefing sets out the changes we believe would ensure children living in the UK today are safe, happy, healthy and hopeful.

Tackling child poverty and the cost-of-living crisis

The latest statistics from the Department of Work and Pensions show that more than 1 in 4 children are living in poverty (29%). Barnardo's latest report 'No Crib for a Bed' found 1 in 12 parents have a child who has had to share a bed with them or a sibling because they cannot afford another bed.² The findings on bed poverty are part of a far deeper problem of entrenched poverty in the UK.

As part of the Children's Charities Coalition, we have recently published the report, ['Children at the Table – A roadmap for putting children at the heart of the next Government'](#)³ which calls for a step-change in national investment to transform childhoods across the UK.

How the Government can help lift children out of poverty:

1. A commitment to extend the Household Support Fund for three years from March 2024

Funding for the Household Support Fund will run out in March 2024. Without renewal of the funding, local crisis support will need to be significantly curtailed. Unless a new package of support is announced imminently local authorities could also struggle to retain staff and design systems to deliver the schemes, risking a delay in provision. We are concerned that inconsistent support and underfunding will mean that many families will struggle to get help when they need it most and in some cases may not be able to seek support at all. In

¹ Institute for Government (2023) 'Six things we learnt from the 2023 autumn statement' available online at <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/comment/six-things-look-out-2023-autumn-statement#:~:text=the%20longer%2Dterm,-The%20chancellor%20announced%20a%20package%20of%20new%20tax%20cuts%20for,extended%20for%20a%20further%20year.>

² Barnardo's (2023), 'No Crib for a Bed: The impact of the cost-of-living crisis on bed poverty' available online at <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/research/no-crib-impact-cost-living-crisis-bed-poverty>

³ Children's Charities Coalition (November 2023) ['Children at the Table – A roadmap for putting children at the heart of the next Government'](#)

October we [wrote to the Chancellor](#), alongside the Trussell Trust, the Save the Children and StepChange Debt Charity asking him to extend the fund in the Autumn Statement.

2. End the two-child element of Universal Credit

The two-child limit is now the single biggest policy driver of child poverty in the UK and denies children the support they need to thrive because they have siblings.⁴ Ending the two-child element of Universal Credit is the most cost-effective way of reducing child poverty – **it would lift 250,000 children out of poverty**, and a further 850,000 children would be in less deep poverty at a cost of £1.3 billion.⁵

3. Implement an Essentials Guarantee

The Government should implement an Essentials Guarantee as proposed by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Trussell Trust that would ensure that, at a minimum, Universal Credit protects people from going without essential items.⁶ It should also ensure support is never pulled below this threshold, such as with deductions or because of the benefit cap. This would enable families that are struggling to better accommodate unexpected costs, like replacing broken beds or bedding.

4. Extending free school meals to all primary school pupils in England

In March this year, Barnardo's report '[A Crisis on Our Doorstep](#)' conducted polling with YouGov of a representative group of 1000 parents in Great Britain and found that nearly 1 in 4 (23%) have struggled to provide sufficient food for their child in recent months due to the cost of living, up 3% from October 2022 (20%)⁷. Barnardo's '[At what cost?](#)' report highlights the very poorest children, whose families are in receipt of Universal Credit are not eligible for free school meals.⁸ As a first step, the Government should look to extend access to free school meals to all families in receipt of Universal Credit. Creating universal access to free school meals will help the poorest families overcome administrative barriers and reduce stigma, will boost educational attainment and attendance and can increase health outcomes for children.

Support for children in and leaving care

The [Independent Review of Children's Social Care](#) set out a clear case for reforming children's social care and urged the Government to invest £2.6bn to build a new system and ensure the country has enough skilled social workers. Research over many decades has shown care-leavers are financially vulnerable, and research by the Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum revealed 65% of care leavers said that the cost-of-living crisis was having a "*significant effect*" on them, 45% were struggling to afford food and 31% were at risk of homelessness.⁹ To address these long-standing societal issues facing children in and leaving care, the Government should adopt the following key policy changes:

⁴ Benefit Change & Larger Families (April 2022), '[Does cutting child benefits reduce fertility in larger families? Evidence from the UK's two-child limit](#)'

⁵ End Child Poverty Coalition (2023), '[Six years in: the two child limit](#)'

⁶ Children's Society and others (2023), 'The Future of Local Welfare – Discretionary Support for Individuals and Families Facing Crisis'

⁷ Barnardo's (2023), 'A Crisis on Our Doorstep: The deepening impact of the cost-of-living crisis on children and young people in the UK' available online at <https://cms.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-03/crisis-on-our-doorstep-barnardos-report-march2023.pdf>

⁸ Barnardo's (2022), 'At what cost? The impact of the cost-of-living on children and young people' available online at <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/research/what-cost-impact-cost-living-children-and-young-people>

⁹ National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum (2022) 'Survival is not easy' available online at <https://members.leavingcare.org/landing/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Survival-Is-Not-Easy-Full-Report-NLCBF-December-2022-2.pdf>

1. Invest in family hubs so they can be established in every local community.

Most children enter the care system because of problems within the family environment. Providing families with effective support for these early can be key in reducing risks to children and reducing the need for care proceedings later. We recommend the extension of family hubs to all communities. This has the potential not only to improve the lives of families but also reduce the costs incurred by other services in the long term. In Barnardo's 2021 report '[It Takes a Village](#)' calculated that for every £1 invested in its Isle of Wight family hub service, £2.60 of savings were generated.¹⁰

2. Increased funding alongside reform to children's social care

Research from the Children's Services Funding Alliance published in their report '[The Well Worn Path: Children's Services Spending 2010-11 to 2021-22](#)' September 2023 found combined spending on early intervention services has fallen by 46%, whereas total expenditure has risen by almost half 47%.¹¹ Without significant investment, local authorities will be unable to sustainably meet current needs for children's services and simultaneously deliver the necessary rebalancing towards the kind of early intervention services that are at the heart of the recent reform agenda.

3. Provide an enhanced package of financial support for care leavers aged 18-25

As outlined in our latest report '[No Bank of Mum and Dad](#)' Barnardo's is calling for an enhanced package of financial support for care leavers.¹² This includes but is not limited to ensuring care-experienced young people claiming Universal Credit receive the over 25 rate and uprating existing care leaver support in line with inflation.

4. Provide free bus travel for all care leavers 18-25 across England

The average cost of a bus pass is £18 a week which is not affordable for many care leavers, especially in the context of rising costs. Access to free bus travel would enable care leavers to get more easily to work, college, visit relatives or access hobbies. It is estimated that the cost of setting up a national scheme for all care leavers aged 18-25 would be approximately £77m¹⁵. Following the publication of our report, '[Transport for Freedom](#)', Cornwall Council and West of England Combined Authority announced it will be introducing free bus travel for care leavers. We are calling for free bus travel for all care leavers right across the country.

Happier and Healthier Children

The latest statistics from NHS Digital show that approximately **1 in 5 children and young people in England between the ages of 8-25 have a diagnosable mental health condition.**¹³ Children and young people in the UK are falling behind other OECD countries in terms of wellbeing, reporting lower life satisfaction and less belief that their lives have meaning and purpose.¹⁴ Despite increased investment in services, child and young people's mental health only receives around 1% of all health and care funding. The increasing prevalence of mental ill health poses a public health issue, resulting in long term health,

¹⁰ Barnardo's (2021), 'It Takes a Village: The case for family support in every community' available online at <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-09/It-Takes-a-Village-the-case-for-family-support-in-every-community.pdf>

¹¹ Children's Services Funding Alliance (2023), 'The Well Worn Path: Children's Services Spending 2010-11 to 2021-22' available online at https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-09/Children%27s%20services%20spending%2022_final%20report.pdf

¹² Barnardo's (2023), 'No Bank of Mum and Dad: The impact of the cost-of-living crisis on care-experienced young people' available online at <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-10/report-cost-living-crisis-care-experienced-young-people-bank-mum-dad-.pdf>

¹³ NHS Digital (2023) 'Mental Health of Children and Young People in England 2023 - wave 4 follow up to the 2017 survey' available online at <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2023-wave-4-follow-up/introduction>

¹⁴ OECD (2023) 'OECD Child Well-Being Dashboard' available online at <https://www.oecd.org/els/family/child-well-being/data/dashboard/>

social and economic impact.¹⁵ Our latest research shows the following changes to policy would make a real difference to the health and wellbeing of children:

1. Commit to funding and delivering a rapid roll out of Mental Health Support Teams (MHSTs) in schools and colleges

MHSTs are a cost-effective investment in children and young people's mental health, but only 35% of children and young people have access to MHST support, and current plans to reach around 50% still leaves gaps in vital support.¹⁶ Barnardo's recent analysis in its report '[It's Hard to Talk](#)' demonstrates that for every £1 invested in Barnardo's MHSTs, there is a return of £1.90 to the state, and this is likely an understatement due to much of the data being gathered during the COVID-19 pandemic, and only being based on one form of support offered by MHSTs.¹⁷

2. Commit to investing in social prescribing for all children and young people

Social prescribing is a way of connecting people to activities, groups, and services that help improve their health and wellbeing e.g. crafting clubs, walking groups, outdoor activities to reduce anxiety. Research from The Open Data Institute for and Frontier Economics found if social prescribing was applied across England, it could reduce the need for GP appointments by 2.5-3% annually.¹⁸ This would save 2.8-3 million appointments, reducing pressure on GP services considerably. Barnardo's report '[The Missing Link](#)' highlights that social prescribing improves children and young people's mental health and wellbeing and is cost effective.¹⁹ We are calling for a national strategy for social prescribing in children and young people to be developed.

Support for Victims of Child Criminal Exploitation and Sexual Abuse

The true scale and prevalence of child sexual exploitation and child criminal exploitation is difficult to assess for a number of reasons. However, we do know that child sexual exploitation was identified in 16,330 child in need assessment made by local authority children's services in 2021-22, and across the UK 3,013 children were referred to the National Referral Mechanism for Child Criminal Exploitation.²⁰ Action is urgently needed to boost the visibility and understanding of exploitation, and investment is critically needed in specific support services. Our latest research informs our key policy change calls:

1. Ensure child victims of abuse and exploitation are able to access child-centred specialist support services.

Barnardo's report '[Invisible Children](#)' found children at risk of sexual and criminal exploitation are not being identified and supported effectively during school holiday periods. Two thirds (68%) of local authorities, and four in ten (39%) Police and Crime Commissioners have not commissioned any child sexual, criminal or combined exploitation

¹⁵ Children's Commissioner (2020) 'The State of Children's Mental Health Services 2019/20' available online at <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/mental-health-services-2019-20/>

¹⁶ Department of Health and Social Care (2023), 'Major Conditions Strategy; Case for Change and Our Strategic Framework.' Available online at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/major-conditions-strategy-case-for-change-and-our-strategic-framework/major-conditions-strategy-case-for-change-and-our-strategic-framework--2#chapter6-next-steps-to-the-major-conditions-strategy>

¹⁷ Barnardo's (2022), 'It's Hard to Talk: Expanding mental health support teams in education' available online at <https://cms.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-01/hardtoltalk-expandingmentalhealthsupportteamsschools-MHSTs-report-jan2022.pdf>

¹⁸ The Open Data Institute and Frontier Economics (2021), 'The Role of Data in Unlocking the Potential of Social Prescribing' available online at https://theodi.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/2021-11-01_14-50_PRS_Reportlinks-added.pdf

¹⁹ Barnardo's (2023), 'The Missing Link: Social Prescribing for Children and Young People' available online at <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-10/report-missing-link-social-prescribing-children-young-people.pdf>

²⁰ Barnardo's (2023), 'Invisible Children: Understanding the risk of the cost-of-living crisis and school holidays on child sexual and criminal exploitation' available online at <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-06/summer23-report-invisible-children-cost-living-criminal-sexual-exploitation.pdf>

services in the past 12 months.²¹ We urge all governments across the UK to invest in and expand the provision of specific support services for children who are victims of crime, including abuse and exploitation.

2. Include a statutory definition of Childhood Criminal Exploitation in the Victims and Prisoners Bill

In Barnardo's 2023 report '[Exploited and Criminalised](#)' they made FOI request to police forces across the UK about childhood criminal exploitation (CCE).²² 30 police forces responded, but only one police force was able to provide any data on CCE. Many police forces asked about how CCE is defined, demonstrating how misunderstood Childhood Criminal Exploitation is. We are calling for the UK government to introduce a statutory definition of childhood criminal exploitation in England to better help professionals identify victims, and make sure that victims are supported appropriately.

Action you can take:

1. Contribute to the Autumn Budget debates to highlight the severe impact of the cost-of-living crisis on children, young people and families across the UK and the steps the Government should have taken through its Budget to support families.
2. Ask a Parliamentary Question that raises Barnardo's policy recommendations (suggestions below).
3. Write to or ask a written or oral question to the Secretary of State for Education and / or the Chancellor of the Exchequer to ask whether they will consider the findings of Barnardo's latest research.
4. Meet with Barnardo's to discuss our findings and recommendations from our latest research reports.

Suggested Parliamentary Questions:

- Will the Chancellor increase funding alongside reform to children's social care as recommended in the independent review of children's social care?
- Will the Chancellor provide an enhanced package of financial support for care leavers aged 18-25 when they leave the care system?
- Will the Chancellor confirm an extension to the Household Support Fund, which will end in March, in line with Barnardo's recommendations?
- To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care if he will meet with myself and Barnardo's to discuss a national strategy for children and young people's social prescribing?
- Will the Government commit to placing a funded duty on the relevant authorities to provide specialist services for all child victims of abuse and exploitation through the Victims and Prisoners Bill?

About Barnardo's

Barnardo's is the UK's largest national children's charity. In 2022/23, we reached over 370,000 children, young people, parents and carers through over 800 services and partnerships. 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 Sundeep Kaur Bhogal, Policy and Public Affairs Lead (England), sundeep.bhogal@barnardos.org.uk

²¹ Ibid

²² Barnardo's (2021), 'Exploited and Criminalised: What can the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill do to ensure that children who are criminally exploited receive the care and support they need?' available online at <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-10/Exploited%20and%20Criminalised%20report.pdf>