

## Duty to commission support and advocacy services

### Victims and Prisoners Bill – House of Lords – Committee stage

The purpose of this amendment is to ensure commissioners are providing specific and sufficient support for children who have experienced or are experiencing a crime, by placing on them a duty to commission this support, rather than to simply have regard for children in their commissioning plans. This would include a **duty to commission specific support services for children, and advocacy services, which include but are not limited to Child Independent Domestic Violence Advisors (CHIDVAs), Child Independent Sexual Violence Advisors (CHISVAs), and Independent Child Trafficking Guardians (ICTGs).**

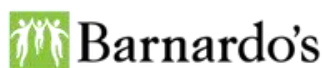
The duty is then further strengthened by a **duty on the Victims Commissioner and the Secretary of State to issue a national statement on the current volume, need, provision and investment into support services for children who are victims of crime** to ensure full transparency in how the appropriate bodies are responding to the needs of children.

#### Duty to commission support for children and young people – [Amendment 108](#)

- (1) It is the duty of relevant local commissioning bodies to commission specialist children and young people's support services for victims in accordance with need, including advocacy services.
- (2) The services provided under subsection (1) must include, but are not limited to –
  - (a) services for victims of child criminal exploitation, and
  - (b) services for victims of child abuse.
- (3) In this section, "advocacy services" must include, but are not limited to –
  - (a) Child independent domestic violence advisors as defined in section 15;
  - (b) Child independent sexual violence advisors as defined in section 15;
  - (c) Independent Child Trafficking Guardians, as defined in Section 48 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015.

#### Duty on the Victims Commissioner and Secretary of State to report - [Amendment 109](#)

- (1) The Victims Commissioner and the Secretary of State must, within 3 months of this Act being passed, conduct a review into the current state of support for children who are victims.
- (2) The review must consider, in particular—
  - (a) the current volume of provision,
  - (b) the current volume of unmet need, and
  - (c) the current level of investment in these services.



- (3) Upon completion of the review, the Victims Commissioner and the Secretary of State must publish and lay before Parliament a report setting out—
- (a) the findings of the review, and
  - (b) the action that the Secretary of State proposes to take in response to the review.

## Purpose of the amendment

### Child abuse and exploitation

Abuse and exploitation can happen to any child, in any family, in any place or online. Abuse and exploitation often happen over a period of time, rather than a one-off encounter, and can have a devastating effect on a child's development, their close networks such as family, friends, and society as a whole.<sup>1</sup> The effects can be complex and wide-ranging and for many, stay with them for the rest of their lives. This can negatively impact a child's physical and mental health, relationships, and education.<sup>2</sup>

Abuse and exploitation can take many forms, and often children experience multiple forms of abuse and exploitation during their lifetime. Children can experience multiple forms of abuse and exploitation during their lifetime – for example, evidence shows the often-inextricable link between criminal and sexual exploitation.<sup>3</sup>

Too many children are at risk of or experience child abuse and exploitation, including sexual abuse and exploitation, child criminal exploitation, domestic abuse, and other serious harms. We do know that most children's abuse goes unidentified and without a response. The Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse estimates that **500,000 children across England and Wales are sexually abused every year**, yet statutory services identify far fewer numbers, with less than 107,000 police recorded offences and 2,700 children put on a child protection plan due to child sexual abuse in 2021/22.<sup>4</sup> In 2018, the then-Children's Commissioner estimated that **30,000 to 50,000 children and young people could be victims of exploitation** through the county lines model,<sup>5</sup> despite just 14,420 local authorities child in need assessments identifying concerns regarding child criminal exploitation.<sup>6</sup>

As well as having a devastating impact on victims of child abuse and exploitation, there is also an economic and societal cost of this harm to individuals and wider society. In 2019, the Home Office estimated the **cost of domestic abuse in England and Wales for the year ending 31<sup>st</sup> March 2017 to be approximately £66 billion.**<sup>7</sup> In 2021, the Home Office

<sup>1</sup> NSPCC, [Effects of Child Abuse](#)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> The Children's Society, 2019. [Counting Lives: Responding to children who are criminally exploited](#).

<sup>4</sup> Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse, 2023. [Child sexual abuse in 2021/22: Trends in official data](#)

<sup>5</sup> Children's Rights Alliance for England, 2019. [State of Children's Rights 2018](#).

<sup>6</sup> Children's Rights Alliance for England, 2019. [State of Children's Rights 2018](#).

<sup>7</sup> Home Office, 2019. [The economic and social costs of domestic abuse](#).



published a study into the costs relating to children whose sexual abuse began or continued in the year ending March 2019. The estimated cost to society exceeded £10 billion, this estimate is restricted to the costs of contact child sexual abuse and doesn't include online sexual abuse so the full costs will be much higher.<sup>8</sup>

### **Child-specific specialist support and advocacy services**

The Victims Funding Strategy commits to a vision where 'the right support should be available to all victims of crime, when they need it'.<sup>9</sup> To uphold this, children must have access to sufficient support that tends to their individual needs and is specific in nature.

Research indicates that specific support services, including mental health services, counselling and therapeutic services, and advocacy services are best placed to meet the needs of victims or survivors, with many children preferring to receive support from third sector organisations and NGOs.<sup>10</sup> One of the particular benefits of the voluntary sector delivering these services is their closeness to the children needing the service, and their understanding of the needs of local service users and communities.<sup>11</sup> Specific support services can often be more flexible, and work with children for as long as necessary and are able to reduce risks associated with abuse and exploitation. Access to specific support services can also reduce the impact of harm and the risk of a child going missing from home, alcohol and drug abuse, accommodation and housing needs and interaction with the criminal justice system.<sup>12</sup>

***"The support gave my child someone she could talk to. A trusted adult who wasn't part of the 'system', someone she was free to confide to. We were lucky that we had a great practitioner that build up a good rapport with my child."*** – parent of a child involved in a Barnardo's child sexual exploitation service.<sup>13</sup>

Investment also makes economic sense – Barnardo's and Pro Bono Economics evidence from 2011 found that, **for every £1 invested in specific support services for child sexual exploitation, it can save the taxpayer up to £12**, with savings being shared by multiple agencies and Government departments.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Home Office, 2021. [A report on the economic and social cost of contact child sexual abuse in England and Wales for victims who experienced abuse in the year to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2019.](#)

<sup>9</sup> Ministry of Justice, 2022. [Victims Funding Strategy.](#)

<sup>10</sup> The Centre for Social Justice, 2021. [Unsafe children: driving up our country's response to child sexual abuse and exploitation.](#)

<sup>11</sup> National Audit Office, [Successful Commissioning Toolkit: Working with Third Sector Organisations.](#)

<sup>12</sup> Barnardo's, 2023. [Invisible Children: Understanding the risk of the cost-of-living-crisis and school holidays on child sexual and criminal exploitation.](#)

<sup>13</sup> Barnardo's, 2022. [TIGER TALKS: Researching children and young people's views on how to improve child sexual abuse services across London.](#)

<sup>14</sup> Barnardo's and Pro Bono Economics, 2021. [An assessment of the potential savings from Barnardo's interventions for young people who have been sexually exploited.](#)



Advocacy services, which include but are not limited to Child Independent Sexual Violence advisers (CHISVAs), Child Independent Domestic Violence Advisers (CHIDVAs) and Independent Child Trafficking Guardians (ICTGs) provide a vital service for child victims of abuse and exploitation. Advocates support children with the practical challenges and emotional trauma of facing abuse and exploitation, and help them to understand and navigate support services, the criminal justice system, and social care services.

The abuse that young people experience can and is likely to look different to the abuse that adults experience, impacting them in different ways. This requires a separate response which can include different risk factors, safeguarding processes and separate safety planning. A report from SafeLives found that existing adult domestic abuse and support are not always equipped to meet children and young people's needs, and do not provide this child-specific need.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the scale of children affected by child sexual abuse and exploitation and domestic abuse, there is not sufficient and child-specific advocacy in place. A recent FOI by the NSPCC found **that less than one quarter of local authorities said that they provide dedicated support for children and young people in the form of an ISVA/IDVA.**<sup>16</sup> Further, research by SafeLives has shown that specialist support for child victims of domestic abuse can lead to improved outcomes. The report *In Plain Sight*, found that following contact with specialist services, children's safety and health outcomes significantly improved across all key indicators.<sup>17</sup> In addition to significant improvements in health, safety, wellbeing and achievement, abusive behaviour in children exposed to domestic abuse dropped from 25% to 7% following support from the service.

***"I couldn't have done any of it without my CHISVA. If it wasn't for her, I wouldn't be here anymore, she is the kindest, most patient and understanding person I have ever met."*** – Child survivor supported by a CHISVA at Safeline.<sup>18</sup>

### Case study: specific support for children through Child House

The Child House model offers a specialised and targeted response to children who have experienced sexual abuse. Child Houses were created in response to systems that are not working as well as they should for children and young people who have experienced abuse.

Evidence shows child sexual abuse victims often face an inconsistent network of agencies and services after experiencing sexual abuse. When a child or young person discloses

<sup>15</sup> Safe Lives. [Safe Young Lives: Young People and domestic abuse](#)

<sup>16</sup> The Independent, 2023. [Gap in support for young people who have suffered abuse – NSPCC.](#)

<sup>17</sup> SafeLives, 2014. [In plain sight: The evidence from children exposed to domestic abuse](#)

<sup>18</sup> Safeline, [Child Independent Sexual Violence Advocates.](#)





sexual abuse, they and their families are often left to navigate the health, police and courts system by themselves. Having to relive traumatic experiences with different professionals.

The NSPCC currently helps deliver the UK's only Child House, the Lighthouse in London, alongside the NHS and the police. The Lighthouse is a multi-agency service supporting children, young people and non-abusing parents, carers and family members following abuse. It provides a child-centred approach in which the agencies involved in supporting the child provide coordinated services in a single, child-friendly environment. Evidence gathering for any court cases is conducted in a way to reduce traumatising and children have rapid access to therapeutic support.

### **Scarcity of support and advocacy services for child victims of abuse and exploitation**

Despite the Government's commitment to ensure support is available to child victims, and the wealth of evidence on the importance and effectiveness of specific support services, children who have been victims of abuse and exploitation can often face a postcode lottery when it comes to accessing them.

In 2023, Barnardo's made an FOI request to local authorities and Police and Crime Commissioners across the UK to ask them how many specific support services they had commissioned in the previous 12 months for child victims of child sexual exploitation, and child victims of child criminal exploitation. Out of the local authorities who provided information, **68% had not commissioned any services in the past 12 months. For Police and Crime Commissioner, this was 39%.**

The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse found nearly three-quarters of victim and survivor respondents reported not having accessed any support services, with only just over a quarter having received some form of support, advice or treatment due to their experience of child sexual abuse<sup>19</sup>. Victims and survivors stress the importance of speaking with a specialist counsellor with particular knowledge of trauma and child sexual abuse to support with their recovery.<sup>20</sup> However, research shows that mental health services available to child sexual abuse victims tend to be generic rather than specialist post-sexual abuse services.<sup>21</sup>

The Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse (CSA Centre) has just published the most comprehensive study to-date of the current landscape of service provision in response to child sexual abuse in England & Wales.<sup>22</sup> They found just 468 services providing support to victims and survivors of child sexual abuse and their families, yet an estimated 500,000

<sup>19</sup> IICSA, 2022. [The Report of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse](#).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid

<sup>21</sup> Allnock, Hynes, 2011. [Therapeutic services for sexually abused children and young people](#).

<sup>22</sup> Parkinson and Steele, 2024 <https://www.csacentre.org.uk/research-resources/research-evidence/supporting-victims-survivors/support-matters/>



children will suffer some form of child sexual abuse every year. The research estimates that **more than 55,000 people in England and Wales are currently held on waiting lists for support following child sexual abuse** with waiting times for services for children who have been sexually abused having more than doubled since 2015. On average, victims/survivors, both children and adults, are waiting six months for much-needed support and one in nine support services hold waiting lists extending over a year.

Further, children who have experienced domestic abuse struggle to access vital support services, even though children were rightly identified as victims of domestic abuse in their own right through the Domestic Abuse Act.<sup>23</sup> Research by the Domestic Abuse Commissioner found that **only 29% of adult victims and survivors who wanted support for their children were able to access it.**<sup>24</sup> Further, research by Action for Children found that there was significant variability in the level of provision for children and young people impacted by domestic abuse between and within local authorities across England and Wales. The research found that, **in more than 10% of local authorities, there were no support services available for children affected by domestic abuse** – provided either through the local authority, specialist domestic abuse or VAWG sector, or other voluntary organisations.<sup>25</sup> In two thirds of the local areas interviewed, children’s access to services was dependent on a parent’s engagement with the service.<sup>26</sup> Barnardo’s own practitioners also reported a lack of specialist support services for child victims of domestic abuse, and more than 42% of Barnardo’s services reported that they had noticed changes in the availability of the provision of specialist support for domestic abuse in their area.<sup>27</sup>

The National Youth Advocacy Service has found foster and kinship carers want more support helping children and young people access mental health services. A nationwide survey across Wales found of the 189 foster and kinship carer respondents, 50% do not know how to access advocacy support and 50% do not know an advocate can be used to access mental health services<sup>28</sup>.

The Ministry of Justice has acknowledged that research to date indicated that the “availability of specialist provision for children and young people is not sufficient to meet the level of need”<sup>29</sup>, and in its final report, the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse recommended that the UK Government should guarantee that all child victims of sexual abuse will be offered specialist and accredited therapeutic support.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>23</sup> [Domestic Abuse Act 2021](#)

<sup>24</sup> Domestic Abuse Commissioner, 2022. [A patchwork of provision: how to meet the needs of victims and survivors across England and Wales.](#)

<sup>25</sup> Action for Children. [Patchy, piecemeal and precarious: support for children affected by domestic abuse.](#)

<sup>26</sup> Ibid

<sup>27</sup> Barnardo’s, 2020. [Not just collateral damage: the hidden impact of domestic abuse on children.](#)

<sup>28</sup> NYAS, 2021. [Survey of Foster and Kinship Carers across Wales.](#)

<sup>29</sup> Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, 2021. [Witness Statement of Melissa Case, Ministry of Justice.](#)

<sup>30</sup> IICSA, 2022. [The Report of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse.](#)



### Case Study: Lisa's Story

Lisa\*, from Scotland, is ten years old and a victim of online grooming where she had been coerced into sending indecent images and videos of herself, over a period of time, to adult men overseas.

The abuse was initiated through an online webcam chat generator site. This platform is a free online chat website that allows users to socialise with others without the need to register. The service randomly pairs users in one-on-one chat sessions where they chat anonymously.

Thereafter, the abuse moved to two social media platforms which lasted for four months before Lisa's mother, Angela\*, discovered the abuse on Lisa's iPad and mobile phone.

Lisa's Barnardo's support worker met with her weekly. During their sessions, they covered different topics to help relieve Lisa's anxiety around being online or becoming a victim of abuse again.

The work was planned so that it was age-appropriate and mindful of Lisa's experience of abuse. Lisa said: "I was embarrassed and felt very guilty about the conversations I had been in. And I felt trapped and was scared I would get in trouble."

During this time, Angela was also supported by Barnardo's as she had struggled with accepting what had happened to her daughter. The Barnardo's project worker explained the grooming process and how Lisa came to be a victim of child sexual abuse.

*\*Names have been changed to protect the identities of children and families we help.*

### What we are calling for

The Victims and Prisoners Bill should place a duty on the relevant authorities to commission sufficient and specific support for children and young people who are victims of crime, including abuse and exploitation. ([Amendment 108](#))

We also are calling for this to be supplemented by placing a further duty on the Victims Commissioner and the Secretary of State to make a national statement on the current volume, need, provision and investment in support services for children who are victims of crimes including abuse and exploitation, so that sufficient specific support services for child victims can be commissioned. ([Amendment 109](#))

Greater investment is also needed in specific support services for child victims of abuse and exploitation, and this should be announced alongside the Bill.



## How we can work together

Please contact Jess Edwards, Senior Policy Adviser for Childhood Harms, Barnardo's at [jessica.edwards@barnardos.org.uk](mailto:jessica.edwards@barnardos.org.uk)

