



Scottish Parliament Education and Skills Committee – vulnerable children during the Coronavirus pandemic

Final and extended submission by Barnardo's Scotland, June 2020

Key points

- Barriers to the use of School Hubs need to be overcome and clarity is required as to what support is available to those children for whom Hubs are not appropriate.
- Children and young people remain at risk of 'hidden harm' during this crisis, including domestic abuse as well as sexual abuse and exploitation. It is crucial that statutory and third sector bodies continue to work together to ensure no child or young person slips through the net.
- There is a need for a strong statement around the importance of Health and Wellbeing interventions delivered through the Attainment Scotland Fund.

Use of School/Education Hubs

Eligibility

Feedback from Barnardo's Scotland services is that relatively low numbers of children and young people from the most at risk groups are currently accessing Hubs. The Deputy First Minister's recent letter to the Committee states that while numbers are increasing, only a small percentage of vulnerable children are attending Hubs. Scottish Government guidance defines "vulnerable" children and young people as including: being on the child protection register; looked after; on the edge of care; being eligible for free school meals; having complex additional support needs; being affected by poverty and deprivation.¹ But the guidance suggests not all such children will need support via the Hubs, and leaves decisions about eligibility and levels of provision to be interpreted locally. This means there has been a lack of clarity and inconsistency. In some areas of high disadvantage if all 'vulnerable' children attended there would be too many present to maintain appropriate social distancing. Clearly there must be some form of referral criteria but these must be clearly expressed and interpreted consistently.

¹ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-guide-schools-early-learning-closures/pages/vulnerable-children/>



Stigma

The term 'vulnerable' has also caused difficulties, as some families don't want to be identified as having social work involvement. Barnardo's Scotland services report families consider there is a stigma attached to putting their children in the Hubs as it implies the families are not coping.

Unfamiliarity

In a time of such anxiety and uncertainty many children and young people don't want to go to schools that aren't their own. Some primary aged children are only being given the option of a Hub in a secondary school, potentially not located nearby, and with unfamiliar staff they have never met. We are living through an unprecedented crisis with high levels of personal and community trauma being experienced. Now more than ever our most vulnerable children and young people need safety and stability from the services set up to support them. Practice which has worked better has been where schools send personalised invites, where the setting and staff are familiar and where consideration is given to travel arrangements and distance from the family home.

An example shared by one service was where children in the same family were all invited to the local provision but then after some behaviours which presented a risk, including absconding from the setting, one sibling was sent home. The young person said going to a Hub which wasn't his normal school left him feeling unsafe, so he didn't want to stay there.

All of the barriers outlined above mean many vulnerable children and young people are not in direct contact with education services but are receiving learning support virtually. Alongside our statutory colleagues **we are concerned that a lot of vulnerable children are not being seen by anyone outside their household**. We also know many children and young people could benefit from the routine of getting up and out of the house and engaging with others, therefore we are encouraging families to use Hubs wherever possible. Where that is not happening, wherever we can we are reaching out to children, young people and families, offering practical and emotional help and support over the phone, doorstep visits / drop-offs and socially distanced contact in the community when assessed as safe and appropriate to do so.



Edinburgh Oxfangs – The Wee Hub

As the Covid-19 pandemic emerged and the message to stay at home was adopted, Barnardo's Scotland teams have established new and innovative ways to continue supporting children, young people and families during this unique time. A multi-disciplinary team from across our South East locality provides direct support to children and families to ensure that as many primary to secondary school children and young people with social, emotional and behavioural needs as possible can remain in their own schools, families and communities, whenever that is safe and appropriate. The team quickly developed a model of remote support so they could continue working with families, maintaining important relationships and jointly addressing emerging issues despite not being able to see each other in person.

This support evolved to include community based direct contact in carefully considered circumstances where there was a strong indication that the need for staying at home at all times was outweighed by the benefits of socially distanced time spent with a support worker. This support happens outdoors wherever possible in venues such as families' gardens or public spaces, in parks and other community spaces.

At the same time, the City of Edinburgh Council created a number of school based Hubs providing support with learning tasks and childcare, initially for the children of essential workers and developing to include other children and young people. However, discussions with our partners in the local authority confirmed that for some children or young people who were likely to benefit from this kind of support their individual needs or circumstances meant that the Hubs would not be able to give them the safe, valuable and rewarding experience that was intended.

The Barnardo's Scotland building at Oxfangs is normally a multi-purpose facility offering comfortable and nurturing spaces for contact with children, young people and families as well as being the local and regional administrative base. However, the pandemic meant that the building lay almost unused. After a period of careful planning and consultation with the local authority, the Oxfangs office has been repurposed as 'The Wee Hub' to provide recreational and emotional support to up to eight children and young people who can't find the support they need within the school based Hubs.



Children attend Mondays to Thursdays enjoying a range of activities that support their learning in the broadest sense, and which support emotional and physical wellbeing during this crisis. We will soon offer a Friday service for young people who need support with transitions.

We are lucky to have an amazing woodland area within the office grounds in addition to our other indoor and outdoor facilities. Children are able to explore nature and enjoy carefully managed adventurous activities during their time at The Wee Hub.

The Scottish Government has announced plans to move towards a blended model of education as pupils eventually return to school and it is our intention to continue operating The Wee Hub as long as it is required. We understand that school holidays can be a challenging time for families and the current situation is no different, so our Hub will continue to operate through the summer.

Close collaborative work with the local authority's Additional Support for Learning team around the Hub has meant that provision has continued to evolve further and we are delighted to now have a team from Forest School, offering opportunities to achieve and develop confidence and self-esteem through hands-on learning experiences in a woodland or natural environment with trees, taking place in the grounds at Oxfgangs which we aim to continue long after Covid-19 becomes a memory.

Case study

Our commitment to supporting those children and young people in most need at this unique time means we are also looking beyond our existing allocated caseload. We were contacted by an educational psychologist regarding her concerns over a family and how difficult things were becoming in the house. Issues centred around one of the children in particular who struggled to cope with lockdown and the lack of routine.

We invited the mum and her child to the Wee Hub to have a look around, did an assessment of risk and capacity and by the start of the following week were providing 1:1 support for two hours twice a week at the Wee Hub whilst maintaining all Covid-19 protocols. This has been a huge help to the family as a whole. The young person gets out of the house, gets a little bit of routine back and has a really positive time plus the family get a sense that they are being supported.



Additional support through the Wellbeing Fund

We have been extremely grateful for the support provided by the Scottish Government through the Wellbeing Fund which has enabled us (working in partnership with Action for Children) to increase and broaden the help we provide to families and adapt our services to fit the changing landscape. We have been supplying devices to aid virtual communication and schooling; furniture grants for young care leavers who had moved into tenancy just before lockdown; supporting families with the additional costs of gas and electricity, and data, as well as maintaining ongoing and vital support to young people, particularly around safety and safeguarding.

Barnardo's Scotland absorbs the administrative costs for distribution of our Wellbeing Fund allocation, ensuring every pound we receive from the Scottish Government is used directly to benefit vulnerable children, young people and families.

Access to Education

In one Local Authority area we are currently supporting 230 families with children of school age. We used a questionnaire to guide discussion with individual families to gain an understanding of the barriers to home learning during this present crisis. We reached a total of 161 of these families which equates to 240 children; 165 of these children are in primary school while the other 75 attend secondary school.

Key findings from this questionnaire were that:

- Over a quarter of children were not engaged in any learning at all. Lack of motivation was a commonly cited reason. Other themes were problems with logging into the "Glow" platform, no suitable digital device in the household, lack of structure, and some parents of children with additional support needs were advised education is not a priority in relation to managing behaviour.
- More than 10% of children either do not have a digital device in the household; their digital device is out of date or broken; or their household has insufficient data for online learning.
- Many parents are experiencing a range of difficulties. Less than a quarter of the 161 families surveyed are coping with home learning with no issues identified.
- Some of the challenges identified by parents include – not having the knowledge or understanding themselves to support their children's learning; not having the time due to managing a range of family needs; and issues around supporting siblings who are at different stages of their education.



Child Protection and welfare

Hidden harm

Child protection issues are being frequently raised by Barnardo's Scotland's frontline workers. Children who are staying at home rather than using Hubs are unfortunately at a greater risk of abuse and hidden harm, as the lack of normal daily contact with statutory workers such as teachers and social workers means that there are fewer opportunities to spot and address signs that harm is taking place within the home. We are providing support to many families who are self-isolating, making it even more difficult to keep in contact and check in on their wellbeing. Other organisations such as Scottish Women's Aid have already raised very pressing concerns about levels of Domestic Abuse and we would echo those concerns from the perspective of Barnardo's Scotland services.

"We are aware of two families where an ex-partner who was previously abusive has moved back into the family home to help care for the child. While we do not know that abuse is happening now, the current situation would make abuse easier to cover up and limit ability to escape or seek support. It could also be triggering for a child who has witnessed abuse for this carer to move back in."

As Barnardo's Scotland staff are not readily able to "enter the world" of children and their families at this time, it is difficult at times to know how they *really* are when we would pick up a lot more cues during the normal work we would carry out. As one Barnardo's Scotland worker put it: "Covid-19 can act like a bouncer, restricting access and limiting crucial safeguarding information."

Some of our services have noted a general delay in Child Protection core groups and case conferences taking place which is causing anxiety for families. Supervision orders can now be in place for longer periods due to these delays meaning that there is less opportunity to discuss emergent child protection issues if children are still at home, or to return children home if a risk has been managed. Our services also report that general guidance appears to suggest "essential visits" only are to take place, but this may be understandably open to interpretation.

Ensuring the voice of the child remains central to all decisions made about them and for them is essential.



Our experience is that practice is patchy at the moment in terms of involving children and young people, with an understandably heavy reliance on digital means of communication.

Older children and young people

We are also aware that there is significant pressure on families of teenagers where relationships are already fractured, families are struggling to support teenagers to adhere to lockdown measures and avoid a fine. This is also a very real concern for our services supporting care leavers and care experienced young people. We know of young people who have already been fined for breaching lockdown and this will create further issues in the long term if these can't be paid. These kinds of situations are rarely considered within the child protection arena, usually as a result of the age of the young person, however, we believe these are child protection issues and ones which will have significant impact as this lockdown continues.

Child sexual abuse and exploitation

The following information has been gathered from 16 of Barnardo's Child Sexual Abuse, Criminal Exploitation, Harmful Sexual Behaviour and Missing Services across the United Kingdom. These services currently work with over 1,000 children deemed at significant risk or with lived experience of abuse and exploitation. It is a snapshot of a constantly changing situation.

Identification and referral of children

COVID-19 has impacted on the way statutory safeguarding, multi-agency working and specialist services are able to identify and respond to children who may be impacted by child sexual abuse and wider exploitation. At the same time as children have been removed from physical sight of professionals they are spending more time in families, on-line and potentially meeting in covert locations so as not to be seen as breaking the lockdown.

Although referrals are still being made into all of Barnardo's abuse and exploitation services, sources of referrals have begun to change with schools referrals decreasing significantly. In each of our respective local authorities and police forces safeguarding referrals generally have seen a downward trend. This is a concern as Barnardo's relies on other agencies to identify potential indicators and instances of abuse and exploitation and refer into specialist abuse and exploitation services.



Previously schools have been the primary source of referral for most of our services. We have also seen a reduction in referral rates, however, this has not impacted on levels of service delivery as there is always more demand than availability of support and services are working through existing waiting lists.

Increasing risk of abuse and exploitation for children

Barnardo's services report that they have assessed that many children receiving services are at significantly increased risk of abuse and exploitation because of the following factors:

- Children are still being targeted by sources of harm who have a range of methods of keeping in contact with children including digitally, face-to-face contact and through family members.
- Some children who have regular missing episodes are not being reported missing for a range of reasons. Primarily schools are no longer able to track children's whereabouts. Parents have reported an increased reluctance to report children missing for fear of fines for breaking lockdown. Parents who are key workers may not know their children are not at home and children may be living in families engaged in their exploitation or have limited capacity to protect.
- There are fewer protective adults in communities who have 'eyes on children' that previously may have acted as safeguards or disrupted exploitation.
- Children are being targeted online and this is less likely to be witnessed by protective adults.

Pupil Equity Funding

Like many other Third Sector organisations, Barnardo's Scotland currently receives funding through the Attainment Scotland Fund to deliver health and wellbeing interventions across our education estate. Despite the challenging environment we are negotiating with individual Head Teachers and Local Authorities about their plans for the coming year.

We have adapted our models of service delivery in partnership with our statutory colleagues and are working very hard to ensure we maintain relationships with families who might be struggling at this time.



We have some concerns that the current level of uncertainty across Children's Services may result in a contraction of attainment work commissioned with Third Sector providers. Our Pupil Equity Fund (PEF) work is agreed annually and without a clear commitment from schools that PEF work will be sustained beyond this month we may need to make a number of experienced, skilled, family support workers redundant at the very point when they are most needed.

We welcomed the announcement that Pupil Equity Fund allocations have been confirmed for the next two years to provide more certainty to schools and Head Teachers. We would also welcome a clear statement from the Scottish Government to Local Authorities and school leaders to encourage them to honour existing contractual arrangements with the Third Sector and, wherever possible, commit to continuing these into 2020/21.

Moreover, we would also welcome a clear and unequivocal message that health and wellbeing interventions delivered through the Attainment Challenge Fund are essential in ensuring we are able to meet the inevitable increased demand for support from children and young people on return to education settings as a result of the severe upheaval, distress and potential trauma they will have experienced during the pandemic.

Barnardo's Scotland works with more than 16,300 children and young people in over 140 specialised community-based services across Scotland, and more than 100 shops across the country directly supporting the services. Our work includes: fostering and adoption services and support; helping children break free from sexual exploitation; supporting young carers; helping young people in to employment and helping children living in poverty.

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