

Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill

Second Reading

1 May 2025

Summary

The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill offers an opportunity to significantly improve opportunities for children in England, with measures to protect children at risk of abuse, to improve care for those who cannot live with their birth families, and to help children grow up healthier.

Barnardo's welcomes this legislation. Families in England face mounting pressures and provisions including free breakfast clubs, more support for kinship carers and a greater focus on identifying and supporting children who may be at risk of harm, will all help to make sure more children can grow up safer, happier, healthier and more hopeful. However, given the scale of the challenges facing children and families, the legislation needs to be more ambitious to make a transformative difference. Barnardo's believes that there are six key areas where the Bill should be amended:

- **Enhance obligations on local agencies to provide early support for families, before they reach crisis.** We believe all parents and carers should have access to universal, non-stigmatising, community-based support – along with more targeted help for those who need it. This should include advice and support for parents from pregnancy to the start of school, help with issues like SEND, accessing mental health support, and advice and guidance on raising teenagers (including online safety). The Bill should therefore be amended so that family hubs or centres are put on a statutory footing, and to require local agencies to provide sufficient levels of these services to meet the needs of their local population.
- **Introduce a 'national offer' for young people leaving care** all young people who grew up with foster carers or in a residential care home must be able to access the support they need to thrive in early adulthood. While the Bill improves the support available, the changes proposed do not go far enough. To help address the inconsistency of support available to care leavers across the country the Bill should introduce a new 'national offer' setting minimum standards of help that should be available to a young person irrespective of where they live.
- **Ensure that children's wishes and feelings are considered in all decisions made about them.** The Bill should be amended strengthens requirements on local authorities to give children's views due weight, in decisions that affect them and to better reflect the UK's government's obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- **Improve information sharing between agencies working with children.** The introduction of a single unique identifier is welcome. The provision will enhance safeguarding and improve services offered to children by ensuring professionals can more easily gain a complete picture of a child and their needs. However the Bill should be amended to clarify these provisions and ensure they have the maximum benefit for children.
- **Extend the provision of free school meals.** Many children who grow up in homes experiencing food insecurity do not have access to nutritious food via Free School Meals, with huge impacts on their health and wellbeing both now and in the future. The Bill's welcome provision of breakfast clubs in England does not go far enough to ensure all children get the nutrition they need. The Bill should be amended to introduce an auto-enrolment system for free school meals, and to expand the eligibility criteria, starting with all children from families in receipt of Universal Credit.
- **Remove the 'reasonable punishment' defence for physically assaulting a child.** Parents in England may legally hit their child on the defence of reasonable punishment. This is different from the law in Scotland and Wales where all physical punishment of children is outlawed. The Bill should end the defence of reasonable punishment in England and provide children with equal access to protection from assault. This would end the current ambiguity faced by professionals in distinguishing between physical punishment and physical abuse and help improve responses to child abuse.

1. Enhancing obligations on local agencies to support families before they reach crisis point

Children's social care is locked in a vicious cycle. Chronic under-funding has led to too many children reaching crisis point meaning the number of children who need to enter the care system has risen.

- The number of children needing help from councils for mental health issues has increased by nearly 53% since 2018¹.
- The police made almost a quarter of a million referrals to social services for domestic abuse in 2020/21, an increase of 8% on the previous year².
- These challenges, combined with a lack of support being available to help families reaching crisis point, has resulted in the number of children in care in England increasingly substantially – there has been a 28% increase in the number of children in care since 2010-11³.

To shift the dial, we need to provide more universal support for families so they can access help before problems escalate. Family support is most effective when embedded within communities through family centres or 'hubs'. These offer both universal services (like parenting groups) and targeted support (such as benefits advice or employment help). At their best, family centres act as 'local nerve centres', providing everything from stay-and-play groups to employment support to youth services, all under one roof.

Investment in earlier support for families also saves money over the long term. For example, Barnardo's runs a 'Welcome to Parenthood' programme as part of our service offer through the Sandwell Family Hub. It is an eight-week programme which supports with setting boundaries and routines which helps improve parental mental health and reduce the risk of social service involvement. This has been shown to deliver cost savings in the long term – with the programme calculated to deliver £2.44 in benefits for every £1 spent⁴.

The current legal framework for supporting families provides a patchwork of obligations on local authorities. While there are various provisions that refer to support services for specific 'groups' of children or families, and also a need for local partners to 'co-operate' to improve children's wellbeing, there is a lack of clarity on local authorities' obligations to provide universal family support to meet the needs of all families in their area, creating a significant gap. This has left the provision of family centres or hubs vulnerable, as local authorities have been forced to focus their limited funds on meeting their statutory obligations. This amendment would for the first time introduce such an obligation.

Recommendation: The Bill should be amended to include a specific duty on local agencies to provide sufficient family centre support for children and families in every community (from pre-birth to 25). This should be accompanied by specific, targeted funding from central government in the Spending Review of around £2.8bn to enable the development of a network of around 3,500 family centres to be established (this would be comparable to the 2009 network of family centres).

2. Improve support for young people when they first leave care

Young people who have spent time in foster care or residential care have, on average, significantly poorer outcomes than their peers:

- 39% of care leavers aged 19- 21 are not in education, employment, or training (NEET), compared to around 13% of all young people⁵.

¹ LGA (2022) [Social workers seeing record numbers of children with mental health problems](#)

² NSPCC (2022) [Record numbers of children affected by domestic abuse leads to call for better recovery support](#)

³ Department for Education (2024) [Children looked after in England including adoptions, Reporting year 2024 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

⁴ Barnardo's (2025) [Our representation to the 2025 Spending Review | Barnardo's](#)

⁵ Department for Education (Nov 2024) [Children looked after in England including adoptions, Reporting year 2024 - Explore education statistics - GOV.UK](#)

- Some one in three care leavers become homeless in the first two years after they leave care⁶.
- 50% of young people who grew up in care are estimated to have a mental health disorder⁷.

The Bill as drafted contains some provisions which should improve the support available for care leavers' including an important new provision which will extend 'corporate parenting obligations' to several other bodies beyond children's services departments in local authorities. This means that public bodies covered by the new provisions will be under a duty to assess what services or support they provide for care-experienced children and young people, to take action to help children in care and care leavers access them and to collaborate with local authorities in the support provided. Barnardo's strongly welcomes this development. **However, this provision excludes "any function of the Secretary of State in relation to immigration, asylum or nationality" despite there being more than 10,000 care leavers in England with unresolved immigration or citizenship issues⁸. Given the challenges young people face when leaving care with unsettled immigration status including difficulties access employment, benefits and housing and we urge the government to rethink this decision.**

In addition, we believe to truly address the challenges young people face when leaving care there needs to be a clearer set of tangible support that all care leavers can access – irrespective of where they live. This should aim to replicate the support that other young people often receive from their families. Currently some local authorities do step-in and provide support in these areas, but many do not.

A report by the Education Select Committee⁹ published on 28 February 2025 highlighted that care leavers face a confusing patchwork of entitlements when they leave care. It recommended that, to tackle this, a **national offer of support** should be introduced at part of the Children Wellbeing and Schools Bill – such an offer could include:

- Free prescriptions
- Free bus travel
- Help with rent deposits and guarantors
- Access to leisure facilities
- For those in need of welfare support - eligibility for the over 25 rate of Universal Credit (recognising that unlike many other young people, they will not have access to a 'bank of mum and dad')
- Greater support for care leavers who go to university

Barnardo's believes that the Education Select Committee recommendation for a "national offer" for care leavers should be incorporated into the Bill.

Recommendation: The Bill should be amended to provide more support for care leavers,, including introducing an obligation on the Secretary of State to produce a 'national offer' of support for care leavers. This would place minimum standards on local authorities, outlining what support care-experienced young people should be offered. This would help to end the current post-code lottery in the support available and make sure different parts of the state are working together to level the playing field and improve opportunities for young people who systematic experience worse outcomes than their peers.

3. Ensure that children's wishes and feelings are considered in all decisions made about them.

As part of the Children's Charities Coalition Barnardo's believe that real, positive changes to the lives of babies, children and young people cannot be achieved without listening to their wishes and feelings when making

⁶ All- Party Parliamentary Group for Ending Homelessness (2017) [appg_for_ending_homelessness_report_2017_pdf.pdf](https://www.crisis.org.uk/appg_for_ending_homelessness_report_2017_pdf.pdf) ([crisis.org.uk](https://www.crisis.org.uk))

⁷ Barnardo's (20217) [neglected-minds.pdf](https://www.barnardos.org.uk/what-we-do/our-approach/neglected-minds.pdf)

⁸ SLR (2021) [Immigration support pledge - SLRA](#)

⁹ Education Select Committee (2025) [Scrutiny of the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill](#)

decisions that affect them. Yet, at present, the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill fails to prioritise such measures, meaning that critical decisions will be made at local and regional level without consideration of the views and experiences of the children they affect. **We urge Parliamentarians to ensure the Bill strengthens requirements on local authorities to ascertain the wishes and feelings of children, and give their views due weight, in decisions that affect them.**

This should include placing a duty on Ministers to give due regard to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), ratified by the UK in 1991, sets out children's fundamental rights, including the right to adequate living standards, education, the best possible health, and protection from harm. These rights ensure every child can have a good childhood and develop to their full potential. They are essential to children's wellbeing. This matters because failing to explicitly and systematically consider children's rights means laws and policies are not always developed with children's unique needs and best interests in mind, often leading to unintended consequences for the most vulnerable in our society.

We urge Parliamentarians to support:

- **the introduction of a duty to require UK Ministers to give due regard to the UNCRC when delivering their functions.**
- **including a mandatory requirement for Government to undertake a Child Rights Impact Assessment** when developing any legislation, policy, or strategy, directly or indirectly affecting children.

4. Improve information sharing between agencies working with children.

Barnardo's, as part of The Children's Charities Coalition welcomes the government's intention to improve information sharing for children and the introduction of a Single Unique Identifier in clause 4 of the Bill. The lack of a consistent identifier across services impedes joined-up and responsive support, and makes it harder to match records and share information confidently and safeguard children who are in touch with multiple services.

However we believe that these important provisions could be improved in the following areas:

- Providing clear timescales for implementation
- Using the NHS number as the SUI
- Allowing the use the SUI for anonymised research and commissioning purposes
- Protections to guard against unintended consequences, particularly for migrant and asylum seeking children

5. Extend the provision of free school meals

Many groups of children in the UK – including children living in poverty, asylum-seeking children, children from Black and Minoritised Ethnic communities, and care-experienced children – experience health inequalities: unfair and avoidable disparities in health and access to health services. A lack of equitable access to nutritious foods is one of the key drivers of these inequalities.

Across the UK, 2.4 million children (17% of all children) are living in food-insecure homes, with an additional 10% in marginal food security¹⁰. This is having a huge impact on children's health, development, and wellbeing, both within childhood and throughout their lives. Children living in food insecurity are at least twice more likely to report not being in good health¹¹. Malnutrition in children has risen steeply in the UK in the 21st century,

10 Empty Plates and Cold Homes, Barnardo's, 2024

11 Gundersen and Ziliak (2015) [Food Insecurity And Health Outcomes | Health Affairs](#)

increasing by 76% between 2007 and 2022, accompanied by the return of so-called ‘Victorian diseases’ such as rickets and scurvy¹².

Food at school provides an opportunity for children to reliably access nutritious food. Food eaten at school makes up 30% of what a child in primary school eats in a day, and since eating habits and patterns are formed in early years, expanding the availability of nutritious, free school meals represents a real opportunity to reduce health inequalities now and into the future¹³.

However, not all children who would benefit from free school meals currently access them. Families in England claiming Universal Credit can only claim means-tested free school meals if they earn below £7,400 a year (after tax). Because of this, **900,000 children who are growing up in poverty are ineligible for free lunches at school**¹⁴. Additionally, despite the low eligibility threshold, the Department for Education estimates that 11% of eligible children do not claim free school¹⁵. This equates to around 200,000-250,000 children¹⁶. Some children feel excluded or stigmatised by the current system, with some pupils reporting that they are offered different food or are sat separately from children not receiving free lunches¹⁷.

The Mayor of London announced the delivery of universal free school meals in London in 2023. An independent evaluation found that it had been successful in improving children’s access to healthy food: over the 2023/2024 academic year, 60% of parents were able to spend more money on food because of the policy, and 55% of children were eating a more varied diet due to the increased access to food¹⁸.

It is essential that barriers to accessing healthy food are reduced. By extending breakfast clubs to all schools in England, the Bill already acknowledges the potential benefits of school food in reducing barriers to opportunity in society and promoting good health and wellbeing in children. However, as long as the barriers to accessing school food remain, the Bill will not be doing all it could to promote access to essential nutrition for children of all backgrounds.

Recommendation: The Bill should be amended to introduce auto-enrolment for Free School Meals, alongside an immediate extension of the entitlement to all primary school-aged children living in families in receipt of Universal Credit.

6. Remove the ‘reasonable punishment’ defence for physically assaulting a child (please also see separate coalition briefing)

The physical punishment of children remains lawful by virtue of the ‘reasonable punishment’ defence – an exception to the law on assault. This leaves children with less protection from assault than adults. Scotland, Wales, Jersey and the Republic of Ireland have already repealed their equivalents of the ‘reasonable punishment’ defence and physical punishment is also no longer permissible in many other countries worldwide including Tajikistan, Zambia, South Korea and Brazil. Such a change is long overdue in England.

There is a wealth of evidence showing that physical punishment does not work in managing children’s behaviour and can have a significant negative impact on children’s health and wellbeing. A report published by RCPCH earlier this year showed that children who experience physical punishment are up to 2.6 times more likely to experience mental health problems and up to 2.3 times likely to go on to experience significant harm through more serious forms of physical abuse¹⁹.

¹² NHS (2023) [Admissions for scurvy, rickets and malnutrition - NHS England Digital](#)

¹³ Parnham et al. (2022) Cambridge University Press, [School meals in the UK: ultra-processed, unequal and inadequate | Public Health Nutrition | Cambridge Core](#)

¹⁴ [New official data shows 900,000 children in poverty don't qualify for free school meals under national policy | CPAG](#)

¹⁵ Department for Education (2013), ‘[Pupils not claiming Free School Meals](#)’

¹⁶ Sustain (2024), ‘[Driving uptake of Free School Meals through opt-out automatic enrolment](#)’

¹⁷ Child Poverty Action Group (2021) [Discretion, Dignity and Choice: Free School Meals](#)

¹⁸ Impact on Urban Health (2024) [More than a meal: An independent evaluation of universal primary free school meals for children in London](#)

¹⁹ RCPCH (2024) [rcpch-equal-protection-from-assault-england-ni_policy-report-2024-v1-2.pdf](#)

The risks inherent in physical punishment can also result in significant safeguarding challenges for professionals in distinguishing between physical punishment and physical abuse creating a barrier to child protection particularly as there is no legal definition as to what is 'reasonable' which is dependent on circumstance and open to interpretation.

Recommendation: The Bill should be amended to include a new clause which would abolish the defence of reasonable punishment for physical punishment of a child in England.



Action you can take

- Please attend the Second Reading debate to speak out on behalf of children and care leavers, and in support of the objectives of the Bill.
- Suggested questions:
 - Does the Minister agree that the Bill could go further to ensure that children and families are able to access support when they need it and before problems escalate, and would they agree to look at further amendments to put services that provide support for children and families – such as family hubs - on a clearer statutory footing?
 - In light of evidence showing that care leavers have poorer outcomes than their peers, does the Minister agree there is a case for introducing a 'national offer' that would ensure greater consistency in the support available across the country?
 - Does the Minister recognise the importance of school food in improving children's nutrition and health – especially for those facing poverty and disadvantage - and will they commit to ensuring more children can access Free School Meals?
 - Does the Ministers agree that given both Scotland and Wales have legislated to remove any defence which allows for children to be legally assaulted, it is time for us to change the law in England?

Please contact us to arrange an oral briefing at public.affairs@barnardos.org.uk

About Barnardo's

At Barnardo's, our purpose is clear - changing childhoods and changing lives, so that children, young people, and families are safe, happy, healthy, and hopeful. Last year, we provided essential support to over 356,200 children, young people, parents and carers through 760 services and partnerships across the UK. For over 150 years, we've been here for the children and young people who need us most – bringing love, care and hope into their lives and giving them a place where they feel they belong.

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