



NSPCC



**NATIONAL
CHILDREN'S
BUREAU**

**Believe in
children**
 **Barnardo's**

Briefing for MPs: General debate on the Address

Tuesday 14 January: Education and Local Government

Thursday 16 January: Health and Social Care

Key messages

Children should be a top priority for the new Government's domestic agenda - in legislation, policy reform and funding. Key priorities should include:

- Reintroducing the Domestic Abuse Bill without delay - with statutory support for child victims.
- Bringing forward legislation to protect children from online abuse and harms.
- Beginning the review of the care system to look holistically at how we can improve outcomes for vulnerable children.
- Improving mental health provision for infants, children, young people and their parents.

To keep vulnerable children at the heart of policy making throughout this Parliament we are calling for:

- A Cabinet Minister with named responsibility for vulnerable children.
- An overarching cross-government strategy for children and young people.

Prioritising children and young people

Today the challenges facing vulnerable children are as serious as ever before:

- **One in eight** children in England has a mental health condition¹;
- **One in five** children and young people are exposed to domestic abuse during their childhood²;
- **More than 4 million** children in the UK are growing up in poverty³; and
- Knife crime in England and Wales has hit a record high with **47,513 offences involving a knife or sharp instrument**.⁴

Funding for children and young people's services has fallen by nearly a third from **£10.3bn in 2010/11 to £7.3bn in 2017/18 – a 29 per cent reduction**.⁵ Support that helps children and families early on has faced the biggest reductions, leaving too many children and families reaching crisis point before they can access the help they need. Often, challenges facing children and families are complex and cannot be addressed effectively by any one Government department or local agency alone.

We believe the Government should appoint a **Cabinet Minister for vulnerable children** and develop an ambitious, **cross-government strategy for children and young people** with their voice at its heart.

1. Re-introduce the Domestic Abuse Bill

Domestic abuse experienced during childhood can have a long-lasting, detrimental impact on a child's physical and mental health, wellbeing and ability to learn. However, with the right support, children can recover from this type of abuse and go on to have happy and healthy lives. We welcomed the Government's commitment to reintroduce the Domestic Abuse Bill and hope this will be brought forward without delay.

Together, we are calling for:

- a) The Bill include **a statutory duty on local authorities and their partners to commission support for all adult and child victims of domestic abuse**, regardless of where they live.
- b) The duty should also include **support for young people in abusive intimate relationships**. A study of 13-17 year olds found 25% of girls and 18% of boys reported experiencing physical abuse from a partner.⁶
- c) The Bill's **statutory definition of domestic abuse to be widened** to reflect the impact of domestic abuse on children and their need for protection and support from key agencies.
- d) The Bill to amend the Children Act 1989 to directly reference domestic abuse and to take greater account of forms of domestic abuse like coercive control, recognising that children do not merely 'see or hear' ill-treatment but that this has a direct and real impact on them.
- e) The **family courts** to be a place of safety where decisions are taken in the best interest of the child. In cases of domestic abuse, we would support a prohibition on unsupervised contact for a parent on bail for domestic abuse-related offences, or where there are ongoing criminal proceedings for domestic abuse.
- f) The **statutory guidance** accompanying the Bill should ensure that practitioners and local authority commissioners better support and protect children experiencing domestic abuse, including young people in abusive intimate relationships.

2. Introduce an Online Harms Bill

Technology is central to children's lives and social media is now a ubiquitous part of childhood, but alongside wonderful opportunities, new types of technology, notably livestreaming, have provided new opportunities for abusers to control and coerce children into increasingly extreme forms of abuse.

Data obtained by the NSPCC shows that over the last year, an average of 11 child sexual offences occurred each day over just three commonly-used social network platforms.⁷ Self-regulation has demonstrably failed to keep children using social networks safe from abuse.

The Online Harms Bill promised in the Queen's Speech is a huge opportunity to improve children's safety online by:

- Placing **a legally-enforceable duty of care** on platforms to protect children,

requiring them to identify reasonably foreseeable risks. If harm occurs, platforms must be able to demonstrate safety by design, and that sufficiently rigorous processes had been put in place to identify or address this harm – or they would violate their legal obligations.

- Bringing in **independent statutory regulation**, including technology-facilitated grooming. Regulation should monitor platforms' adoption of measures such as scanning for child sexual abuse imagery, reducing the features available on children's accounts which could allow them to communicate with strangers, and only suggesting age-appropriate content.
- **Requiring platforms to tackle online harms proactively**, and improve transparency and disclosure powers. This would allow the regulator to demand information to build its understanding of the scale and extent of abuse risks that children face.
- **Strengthening enforcement powers** to allow the regulator to robustly incentivise compliance. This should include enforcement notices, and in very serious cases, financial sanctions of a similar magnitude to GDPR violations and potential corporate criminal sanctions.

3. Reform the children's social care system

We were deeply disappointed that the Queen's Speech did not include a commitment to review children's social care alongside the important issue of adult social care, or the review of support for children in local authority care which we welcomed in the Conservative Party manifesto. The children's social care system is responsible for protecting some of the most vulnerable children in society, yet is under more strain than ever, leaving professionals unable to place the best interests and well-being of each child at the centre of every decision.

Our analysis⁸ found:

- Funding for children and young people's services has fallen from £10.3bn in 2010/11 to £7.3bn in 2017/18 – a 29% reduction.
- Meanwhile, local authority spending on children and young people's services fell by £1.7bn, from £10.3bn to £8.6bn – a 16% reduction.
- In the same period, there has also been a one-third (32%) decrease in funding per child, from £813 to £553.

The combination of diminishing funding and rising demand has resulted in a gap between what local authorities need to spend and the resources available to them. As a result, the children's services funding gap has been rising, projected to reach £3.1bn by 2024/25.⁹

Between 2010/11 and 2017/18, the focus of spending on children and young people's services shifted away from early intervention and towards late intervention. Spending by local authorities on early interventions fell from £3.7bn to £1.9bn – a 49% reduction.¹⁰ Over the same period, spending on late interventions has risen by 12% from £5.9bn to £6.7bn.¹¹

Early intervention services now represent just 22% of local authority spending on children and young people's services, down from 36% in 2010/11. This fall has been driven by reductions in numbers of children's centres and services for young people. Meanwhile, the vast majority of local authorities increased late intervention spending, with some more than doubling their respective budgets between 2010/11 and 2017/18.

It is critical that the promised review of the care system for vulnerable children happens urgently. This is a once in a generation opportunity to look holistically at how we can best support vulnerable children and set a new direction, so local authorities are able to prioritise early intervention and plan for the delivery of high-quality care. The Government should use the upcoming Spending Review to prioritise funding children's services, including early intervention.

4. Improving mental health support and provision for all children

Strong mental health begins in infancy and must be supported and protected throughout the life course:

- Early relationships influence a baby's brain, especially their social and emotional development. Emotional self-regulation is strongly associated with mental well-being, good physical health and health behaviours.¹²
- It is estimated that as many as 60-70% of children and adolescents who experience clinically significant difficulties have not had appropriate interventions at a sufficiently early age.¹³
- Exposure to domestic violence has a significant impact on children's mental health.¹⁴ Children of any age can develop symptoms of 'Post-traumatic Stress Disorder'.¹⁵
- Children with experience of online abuse can require mental health support in the same way as children experiencing other forms of abuse.

We welcome the Government's commitment to treat mental health with the same urgency as physical health. To achieve this for children and young people it needs to begin with **sustained investment** in health promotion, early intervention, maternity and specialist services. Alongside this, the **NHS People Plan must also prioritise the training and upskilling of the whole children's health workforce** to enable them to both promote and protect mental health.

It is imperative that every child has access to timely and evidence-based mental health services. This can be achieved by:

- Extending the rollout of Mental Health Support Teams and Designated Senior Leads to all schools.
- Ending the cliff edge of mental health support when vulnerable young people turn 18.
- Strengthening the provision and availability of specialist therapeutic services for infants, children and young people experiencing more severe problems, including trauma resulting from online or domestic abuse.

- Sufficient investment in specialist mental health services as part of the NHS multi-year funding settlement.
- Ensuring children's mental health is addressed in relevant Government policy, including the Online Harms, Serious Violence and Domestic Abuse Bills.

This briefing is supported by Action for Children, Barnardo's, the National Children's Bureau, NSPCC and the Children's Society. For more information or to arrange a meeting contact Claire Stewart, Senior Public Affairs Officer on claire.stewart@barnardos.org.uk or 020 8498 7644.

¹<https://digital.nhs.uk/news-and-events/latest-news/one-in-eight-of-five-to-19-year-olds-had-a-mental-disorder-in-2017-major-new-survey-finds>

²<https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/media/1042/child-abuse-neglect-uk-today-research-report.pdf>

³ Households Below Average Income, Statistics on the number and percentage of people living in low income households for financial years 1994/95 to 2017/18, Tables 4a and 4b. Department for Work and Pensions, 2019.

⁴ ONS, Crime in England Wales: year ending June 2019. Available at:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/crimeinenglandandwales/yearendingjune2019>

⁵ Children and young people's services: Funding and spending 2010/11 to 2017/18:

<https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/childrens-services-funding-report.pdf>

⁶ Safelives, Safe Young Lives: Young people and domestic abuse. Available at:

<http://safelives.org.uk/sites/default/files/resources/Safe%20Young%20Lives%20web.pdf>

⁷ Data obtained by the NSPCC.

⁸ Children and young people's services: Funding and spending 2010/11 to 2017/18:

<https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/childrens-services-funding-report.pdf>

⁹ Local Government Association, Council Can. Available at:

https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Conference%20paper_13.1%20WEB.pdf

¹⁰ Children and young people's services: Funding and spending 2010/11 to 2017/18:

<https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/childrens-services-funding-report.pdf>

¹¹ Children and young people's services: Funding and spending 2010/11 to 2017/18:

<https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/childrens-services-funding-report.pdf>

¹² Parent Infant Foundation <https://parentinfantfoundation.org.uk/why-we-do-it/why-relationships-matter/>

¹³ Children's Society (2008) [https://www.crisiscareconcordat.org.uk/wp-](https://www.crisiscareconcordat.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/investing_in_childrens_mental_health.pdf)

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¹⁴ Mental Health Foundation <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/statistics/mental-health-statistics-domestic-violence>

¹⁵ Royal College of Psychiatrists <https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mental-health/parents-and-young-people/information-for-parents-and-carers/domestic-violence-and-abuse-effects-on-children>