

6 March 2024

## Summary

- Based on Barnardo's latest research, this briefing sets out the changes we believe would ensure children living in the UK today are safe, happy, healthy and hopeful.
- **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 an extension to the Household Support Fund - a lifeline for so many children and their families but we are concerned that many will face a cliff-edge when it ends in September.**
- **Barnardo's also welcomes the £165m investment into the children's homes estate but in the context of the £2.6 billion needed to reform children's social care and address the spiralling crisis facing the sector, compounded by the public services funding settlement freeze, we are concerned that the funding is unlikely to keep up with demand.**
- Whilst these announcements will benefit families, Barnardo's **is deeply disappointed that the Spring Budget failed to include significant investment in children's social care, mental health support and services to support children who are most at risk from abuse and exploitation.**
- A budget for long-term growth requires a long-term strategy for children and plan to lift those most in need out of poverty.
- Many of our calls relate to early intervention and prevention. Such investment prevents families reaching crisis point, not only reducing the financial cost to the state, but would allow more children and families to improve their long-term life chances.

## 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: a closer look at bed poverty and the Household Support Fund crisis](#)'<sup>1</sup> found that:

- Crisis requests for help with children's beds and bedding more than quadrupled between 2018-19 and 2022-23, rising from 4,000 to 18,000.
- On average, local authorities received 180 crisis requests for help with children's beds and bedding in 2018-19. By 2022-23 this had risen to 450 requests, an increase of 150%
- 62% of all local welfare spending comes from the UK Government's Household Support Fund – a scheme set to end in March 2024.<sup>2</sup> We are deeply concerned about this approaching cliff edge and the impact it will have on families in crisis.

**Bed poverty is only one aspect of child poverty** and addressing this issue requires a deeper look at how our social security system supports families that are experiencing financial crisis.

How the Government can help lift children out of poverty:

### **1. A commitment to extend the Household Support Fund for three years from September 2024**

The Household Support Fund (HSF) is a key part of the social security system designed to provide practical emergency support to people experiencing severe financial hardship, via their local authority. Funding for the HSF was set to end in March 2024, however the Chancellor extended the fund in the Budget by six months committing £500m in funding. Barnardo's welcomes this extension having written [to the Chancellor in February](#) alongside the Trussell Trust, Citizen's Advice, Children's Society and 120 other organisations.

However, the short-term approach to funding local crisis support has already meant a number of local authorities have laid off staff and wound down schemes which could have been avoided had the Chancellor made this announcement in the Autumn Statement. We are very concerned that the short extension merely represents another cliff-edge for families. While inflation is falling,<sup>3</sup> the Food Foundation's food insecurity tracker from

<sup>1</sup> Barnardo's (2024) '[No crib for a bed: a closer look at bed poverty and the Household Support Fund crisis](#)'

<sup>2</sup> End Furniture Poverty (2023), '[On the Cliffedge: the state of crisis support 2022/23](#)'.

<sup>3</sup> <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/economic-update-inflation-set-to-fall-over-2024/>

January 2024 has found that nearly 15% of families are experiencing food insecurity, a figure which has doubled since August 2020.<sup>4</sup>

Barnardo's is calling for a long-term strategy and funding settlement for the Household Support Fund to avoid another cliff edge in September:

- Embedding efficiency into the HSF by committing to a three-year funding programme before the scheme ends, increased by 16% (currently £842m).
- Ending the postcode lottery of local welfare support by reforming the HSF to require all local authorities to provide a minimum level of crisis support.
- Establish a Local Crisis Support Commissioner to provide independent oversight of schemes and the publication of basic monitoring information.
- Robust guidance should be issued to local authorities to ensure they do enough to build awareness of the scheme, keep the application process simple and process applications within 48 hours.

## 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. At present, nearly half a million families are affected by at least the two-child limit and/or the benefit cap. Six out of ten families affected by the two-child limit today contain at least one adult that is in work. The latest research from the Resolution Foundation shows that ending the two-child element of Universal Credit is the most cost-effective way of reducing child poverty – **it would lift 490,000 children out of poverty**, at a cost of £2.5 billion in 2024-25.<sup>5</sup>

## 3. Implement an Essentials Guarantee

The Government should implement an Essentials Guarantee as proposed by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and the Trussell Trust. This would ensure that, at a minimum, Universal Credit protects people from going without essential items.<sup>6</sup> 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. Extend free school meals to all primary school pupils in England

In March 2023, Barnardo's report '[A Crisis on Our Doorstep](#)' conducted YouGov polling of a representative group of 1000 parents in Great Britain and found that nearly one in four (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%)<sup>7</sup>. Barnardo's '[At what cost?](#)' report highlights that many of the poorest children whose families are in receipt of Universal Credit are not eligible for free school meals.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup>

## 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 provide earlier support for families in crisis. Alongside the investment needed, the Government should adopt the following key policy changes:

### 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 early support can be key in reducing risks to children and reducing the need for care proceedings

<sup>4</sup> <https://foodfoundation.org.uk/initiatives/food-insecurity-tracking#tabs/Round-14>

<sup>5</sup> Resolution Foundation (2024) [Catastrophic caps: An analysis of the impact of the two-child limit and the benefit cap](#)

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

<sup>7</sup> 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>

<sup>8</sup> 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>

<sup>9</sup> Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Essex '[The impacts of Universal Free School Meal schemes in England](#)'

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. 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.<sup>10</sup>

## 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%.<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>12</sup> 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 £77m<sup>15</sup>. 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**.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> 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, social and economic impact.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> 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

<sup>10</sup> 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>

<sup>11</sup> 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](https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-09/Children%27s%20services%20spending%2022_final%20report.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> 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>

<sup>13</sup> 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>

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

<sup>15</sup> 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/>

<sup>16</sup> 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-conditionsstrategy-case-for-change-and-our-strategicframework/major-conditions-strategy-case-for-change-and-our-strategic-framework--2#chapter6-next-steps-to-the-major-conditions-strategy>

data being gathered during the COVID-19 pandemic, and only being based on one form of support offered by MHSTs.<sup>17</sup>

## 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.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> Action is urgently needed to boost the visibility and understanding of exploitation, and investment is critically needed in specific support services. We want the Government to:

#### **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 services in the past 12 months.<sup>21</sup> We urge the Government to invest in and expand the provision of specific support services for children who are victims of crime, including abuse and exploitation, through the ongoing Victims and Prisoners Bill.

#### **2. Include a statutory definition of Child Criminal Exploitation in the Victims and Prisoners Bill**

Barnardo's 2023 report '[Exploited and Criminalised](#)' looked at how police forces recorded Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE).<sup>22</sup> 30 police forces responded, but only one police force was able to provide any data on CCE. Many police forces asked how CCE is defined, demonstrating how misunderstood Child Criminal Exploitation is. We are calling for the UK government to introduce a statutory definition of Child 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 Spring 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.

<sup>17</sup> 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/hardtotoalk-expandingmentalhealthsupportteamsschools-MHSTs-report-jan2022.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> 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](https://theodi.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/2021-11-01_14-50_PRS_Reportlinks-added.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> 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>

<sup>20</sup> 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>

<sup>21</sup> Ibid

<sup>22</sup> 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>

### **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 beyond September, in line with Barnardo's recommendation of a three-year extension?
- To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care if he will meet with Barnardo's and me 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**

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 370,000 children, young people, parents and carers through more than 800 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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