

Wednesday 29 April 2020, 9am-11:30am

The pandemic and necessary lockdown are compounding the challenges facing vulnerable children and families — with children isolated in unsafe homes and cut off from school and other services.

- 1. Poverty** - parents in insecure work are being driven into poverty - with some struggling to access food and other essentials. A Barnardo's survey this month found:
 - **76%** of Barnardo's practitioners are supporting young people or families who have experienced reduced earnings due to job loss/reduced hours.
 - **48%** of Barnardo's practitioners are supporting young people or families who have had difficulties accessing food banks.
- 2. Safeguarding vulnerable & 'hidden' children —**
 - However, just max. **5%** of vulnerable children are attending school.¹
 - **45%** of Barnardo's frontline staff have seen a decrease in referrals due to families having less contact with services.²
 - Meaning children, especially with 'hidden' vulnerabilities, are going unrecognised and unsupported.
 - Combined with local authorities' duties being relaxed, we are concerned that children will miss out on support until they reach a crisis point.
- 3. Children leaving care. 33%** of Barnardo's frontline staff are supporting a child who will transition out of care within the next 12 months. Their main concerns are delays and uncertainty, access to benefits and less access.
 - Leaving care can often be a cliff-edge. We welcome the Department's announcement encouraging local authorities to ensure children should not have to leave care during this period, as well as the provision of digital devices to children in care and care leavers.
 - Local authorities should use a proportion of the £3.2bn³ announced by the MHCLG Secretary to support vulnerable groups of children and young people including children in and leaving care; and more 'hidden' groups such as children at risk of domestic abuse.
- 4. Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) children and young people** are more likely to be disproportionately affected by Covid-19 due to:
 - Family members are more likely to be critically ill, meaning they may have caring responsibilities;⁴
 - Living in households where parents or principal carers are key-workers;
 - Living in households at risk of poverty - including 'digital poverty', so are less likely to have access to digital devices or the internet.

¹ Department for Education, [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) attendance in education and early years settings](#), April 2020.

² Barnardo's Quarterly Practitioner Survey, April 2020

³ MHCLG, 18 April. [Government pledges extra £1.6billion for councils](#).

⁴ Barnardo's, [Caring Alone](#), April 2019.

5. Longer-term the impact is likely to include:

- More children coming into the care system with vulnerable families reaching breaking point.
- Children's mental health (already affecting one in eight 5-19 year olds) going from crisis to catastrophe.
- An increase in child sexual and criminal exploitation - on and offline.
- Poorer longer-term outcomes and intergenerational inequality.

Key questions for the Secretary of State

Vulnerable children

- Can the Education Secretary provide further details on how the Government is prioritising vulnerable children and families in responding to Covid-19?
- How is his Department ensuring that local authorities, schools and charities work together to identify and support vulnerable children, including children with hidden vulnerabilities, especially whilst school attendance is low?
- How will the Department monitor whether local authorities spend part of the £3.2bn announced by the MHCLG Secretary to support local authorities to respond to Covid-19 on children's services?
- How will the Department monitor whether local authorities are ensuring that children in care do not have to leave their placement during this period (in line with the Government's commitment)?
- How will the Department monitor to what extent local authorities continue to meet their statutory duties towards vulnerable children, in light of the relaxation of regulations?

Access to digital devices

- What are the precise criteria the Department is using to determine eligibility for children and young people to receive a laptop/tablet/4G router?
- What is the timescale for distributing laptops/tablets/4G routers?
- Who is the Department working with to distribute laptops/tablets/4G routers?

Support for charities

- Can the Education Secretary provide an update on whether the DCMS has notified the Department about:
 - a) Which proposals for funding through the Government's charities sector support package (£360m of £750m) have been successful, and
 - b) When charities can expect to receive these vital funds so that they can continue providing frontline services for those who need it most.
- Can the Education Secretary confirm that key workers in children's social care and charities have adequate access to PPE and testing, like their counterparts in adult social care?

About Barnardo's

Barnardo's is the UK's largest national children's charity. In 2018/19, we supported around 300,000 children, young people, parents and carers through more than 1,000 services. For more information please contact Claire Stewart, Senior Public Affairs Officer, on claire.stewart@barnardos.org.uk or 07584 347 308.