

The pandemic and necessary lockdown are compounding the challenges facing vulnerable children and families — increasing the risk of abuse and exploitation.

### 1. Strengthening the Domestic Abuse Bill.

Even pre-lockdown, domestic abuse was one of the most common adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and the most common factor in local authorities assessment of children 'in need' - featuring in 50% of assessments.<sup>1</sup>

- Since lockdown:
  - **57%** of Barnardo's frontline staff are concerned about an increase in family conflict and stress
  - **16%** of Barnardo's frontline staff report an increase in issues around domestic abuse amongst the children they support.
  - **45%** of Barnardo's frontline staff have seen a decrease in referrals as services have less contact with families.<sup>2</sup>
- Covid-19 exacerbates the risk of domestic abuse - especially to children in households under financial and emotional strain - the vast majority of who are isolated at home, and a maximum of just **5%** of vulnerable children are attending school.<sup>3</sup>

We welcome the Bills return as it is a unique opportunity to tackle the horrific crime of domestic abuse; to identify and protect victims and children. As currently drafted, the Bill would secure support for people in safe accommodation (Clause 53) but not for the majority who remain in the family home. **The Bill must be strengthened through an amendment to ensure ALL victims and children will have access to support.**

### 2. Increased exposure to online harms.

Even before lockdown we know that children were at risk of harm online, ranging from cyberbullying to sexual grooming. Two-thirds of the children we support through our sexual exploitation services were groomed online before meeting their abuser.

Since the lockdown, with children 'hidden' from protective factors like school and services, and with more children and perpetrators spending time online, combined with a shortage of online moderators<sup>4</sup>, children are at increased risk of harm online.

- **37%** of Barnardo's frontline staff said children and families are concerned about spending more time online.
- Our services have reported an increase in children seeing distressing Covid-19 stories, using online forums to discuss eating disorders and self-harm cyberbullying and sharing self-generated sexual images.
- Concerns raised by Europol about an increase in online activity by those seeking child abuse materials.<sup>5</sup>

**The current crisis strengthens the case for bringing forward legislation to regulate the tech industry. With other Bills now coming back to Parliament, the Online Harms Bill should be brought forward urgently.**

<sup>1</sup> Department for Education, [Characteristics of children in need: 2018 to 2019](#), England.

<sup>2</sup> Barnardo's Quarterly Practitioner Survey, April 2020

<sup>3</sup> Department for Education, [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) attendance in education and early years settings](#), April 2020.

<sup>4</sup> BBC, April 2020. [Coronavirus: Internet child abuse images not being deleted](#).

<sup>5</sup> Guardian, April 2020. [Lockdown hampering removal of child sexual abuse material online](#)

### 3. Child sexual abuse and criminal exploitation

Our abuse and exploitation services are reporting that:

- Children isolated at home they may be trapped with their abuser<sup>6</sup> or at risk of being recruited online by criminal gangs.
- Some children are still being exploited/groomed, subject to threats, bribery and coercive control to leave their house.
- Often they seem to be inside houses and places where they are hidden from view.
- Some services report that parents are not reporting their child missing due to fears of being fined by the police.
- With nearly 40 children under 18 being issued fines<sup>7</sup>, the police should be accompanied by outreach workers to engage young people.

#### **Key questions for the Minister**

##### **Domestic abuse**

- How will the Domestic Abuse Bill ensure victims and children remaining in the family home receive support?
- Given the Bill includes a statutory duty to protect victims in refuges but not those who live at home, how will the Minister avoid a two-tier system?
- What steps is the Home Office taking to ensure police have sufficient resources and expertise to protect children exposed to domestic abuse from harm during the lockdown?

##### **Online Harms**

- When will the Online Harms Bill be laid before Parliament?
- How is the Home Office working with technology companies to ensure the risk of harm to children online does not escalate during the lockdown?
- What steps is the Home Office taking to prevent children being sexually groomed online?

##### **Sexual abuse and criminal exploitation**

- How is the Home Office working with the Department for Education to identify vulnerable children and young people at risk of sexual abuse and exploitation and protect them from harm?
- How is the Department working with technology companies, internet service providers and law enforcement agencies to ensure children and young people are protected from criminal exploitation during the lockdown?

#### **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](mailto:claire.stewart@barnardos.org.uk) or 07584 347 308.

<sup>6</sup> ONS, [Child sexual abuse in England and Wales: year ending March 2019](#), January 2020.

<sup>7</sup> ITV, 15 April 2020. [Police issue more than 3,000 fines for breaches of coronavirus lockdown rules.](#)