



## **Health and Sport Committee Inquiry into Perinatal Mental Health**

### **Response from Barnardo's Scotland – November 2021**

#### **Information about your organisation**

Barnardo's is the UK's largest national children's charity operating in Scotland since 1892. Barnardo's Scotland works with thousands of children, young people and their families in our specialised community-based services across Scotland. We believe in children and we believe every child and young person has a right to thrive. Our work includes family support, supporting children, young people and families through fostering and adoption services, child sexual abuse and exploitation services, support for young carers, supporting young people entering employment, education and training, and families living in poverty. We use information and experience from our services across Scotland, and from the children and young people we work with, to seek positive change in policy and practice based on what matters to the people who use our services and what we see working in communities. We work collaboratively across all sectors and political parties to achieve the best outcomes for children and young people.

#### **Barnardo's Scotland and Perinatal Mental Health**

Our Perinatal Mental Health Service 'Growing Together' operates across Renfrewshire and Inverclyde, providing a range of group work and one to one support for expectant parents, new parents and carers and infants up to three years old. We use the Five to Thrive method to provide parents with knowledge and skills about attachment and development, so they have lots of information about how their baby will grow and develop and how they can support them. Many of the parents supported by 'Growing Together' are also care experienced.

For further information please contact Senior Policy and Public Affairs Lead Kirsty-Louise Hunt at [kirstylouise.hunt@barnardos.org.uk](mailto:kirstylouise.hunt@barnardos.org.uk)

#### **How can the Scottish Government improve perinatal mental health services in Scotland, both in the short term and over the next five years?**

A huge problem adversely affecting perinatal mental health is the level of pressure that many families are under - particularly financial pressure. Barnardo's Scotland works with families who have struggled hugely during the pandemic and are

continuing to face a cost of living crisis – at times having to choose between eating and heating their homes. That’s why we want to see the Scottish Government take immediate steps to help alleviate poverty, such as doubling the Scottish Child Payment.

Lack of quick access to a GP and long waiting times for mental health referrals and access to therapeutic support is also a significant barrier for new mums seeking support. Further investment is needed to improve the level of support available at the first time of asking. Perinatal mental health is inextricably linked to infant mental health, and early intervention to support social development in the early days and years is crucial – particularly in the wake of the isolation induced by Covid-19 and the need for additional support for infants who have not had access to the same opportunities to support social development.

In the longer term we want to see increased investment in creating opportunities for families to connect with one another, so that every family with a new baby in Scotland has access to a consistent level of support regardless of where they live. We want to see urgent action to ensure the Whole Family Wellbeing Fund gets to frontline services and that the Scottish Government provides an action plan to deliver the recommendations and blueprint of the Family Support Delivery Group. That should include support for every family from pre-birth to the later stages of childhood.

Barnardo’s Scotland family support worker Julie, who works in the Growing Together service, recently provided an interview about her experience. Asked if there was one thing she could change for families across Scotland, she replied:

“I wish that it wasn’t such a struggle to get support when they need it. For families not to feel they are going to be judged because they need support. To make support more available and take away any stigma. I know some young people I work with feel like they don’t want to ask for support initially because they think they are going to be judged and are worried people think they’re a bad parent or not able to look after their baby because they need extra help. Take away stigma, have more support available, have places parents can go to with their children and learn together, especially about play and all the little things that make such a big difference in a wee one’s life.”

Julie’s full interview can be read [here](#) on the Barnardo’s Scotland website.

### **How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on the mental health of new mothers and the support available to them during the perinatal period?**

The Covid-19 pandemic has proved very challenging for the mental health of new mothers. Our work with parents in the perinatal period has always focused on supporting wellbeing, but there has been an even greater focus and need for this during the pandemic. Parents who were previously doing well expressed increased levels of social isolation, anxiety and stress.

There has also been a significant rise in reported levels of domestic abuse in the referrals to Barnardo's services. The lack of regular face to face contact and social isolation acting as a barrier to intervention or detection, is a continuing cause for concern.

Barnardo's Scotland 'Growing Together' perinatal mental health service has had to continually adapt to meet the changing needs and requests of new parents since March 2020. Many of the support services that parents had routinely relied on were not available in the usual way, mostly restricted to telephone support. Barnardo's Scotland was able to offer ongoing, consistent in person support throughout the pandemic where face-to-face contact was assessed as necessary. This crucial in person support meant that parents could be supported and advised.

The Scottish Government Wellbeing Fund also meant that our staff teams could help support parents who were struggling financially because of pandemic restrictions. Many families were under severe financial pressure, so being able to help with the cost of nappies, food and providing devices to keep people connected helped to relieve some of this stress. Financial pressure as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic has had a huge impact on perinatal mental health.

Although some parents found the flexibility of online support helpful, our biggest lesson from the pandemic, through feedback from our staff, parents and partner agencies, is that there is no replacement for face-to-face delivery and that in person support and connection is vital for the wellbeing of parents and babies.

### **How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted on the mental health of those who have experienced the death of a baby, and the support available to them?**

Barnardo's Scotland does not have specialist expertise in bereavement services and we do not have detailed comments on the availability of bereavement support in the wake of the pandemic.

Our experience during the pandemic in general is that online/telephone support and the removal of face-to-face support is detrimental to mental health and that consistent, relational, in person support is crucial.