

## Summary

- Based on Barnardo's latest research, this briefing sets out the changes we believe are needed so that children can be safer, happier, healthier and more hopeful.

## The case for action

- **4.3 million children are growing up in poverty, that is more than 1 in 4 children in the UK** and the impact of the cost-of-living crisis has left families across the country struggling to afford the basics.
- **1 in 5 children are living with a mental health condition**, exacerbated by the legacy of the pandemic and cost-of-living crisis.
- **Nearly 84,000 children in England are in care, an increase of 23% over the last decade and nearly 120,000 children of compulsory school age are missing education.**

## Welcome measures in the King's Speech

- **Barnardo's welcomes the Children's Wellbeing Bill which sets out an ambition to change the children's social care system** so that children can thrive in safe and loving homes as well as the introduction of a 'Children Not in School Register' to support children back into education.
- **We also welcome plans to strengthen the law to address violence against women and girls – and an increased focus on child criminal exploitation through the Crime and Policing Bill.** We hope this goes even further – introducing a new criminal offence would send a strong signal that children always need protection.
- In tackling child poverty, we are pleased to see the introduction of breakfast clubs and new legislation to limit the number of branded school uniforms to ease cost-of-living pressures on families.
- We know that children are getting shorter, face worse health outcomes and are experiencing poor mental health which is why we welcome measures to restrict advertising of junk food to children; ban smoking through the Tobacco and Vapes Bill and reduce mental health waiting times.

## What is missing

- **The new Ministerial taskforce on child poverty with a unit in the Cabinet Office is a welcome first step in tackling the child poverty emergency. Alongside this cross-government commitment, we strongly urge the Government to take bold action in the autumn spending review to lift children out of poverty and invest in the future health and wellbeing of the next generation. A comprehensive and fully funded strategy to address child poverty will be essential to the Government's mission to deliver 'Opportunity for all'.**
- There was no mention of family centres – despite their importance and the legacy of the last Labour Government with Sure Start. It is vital that children and families access support earlier, before they reach 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.
- **Investment in children's basic needs and protecting their health and wellbeing is an investment in the country's future.**

## Tackling child poverty and the cost-of-living crisis

Alongside the cross-government Ministerial taskforce on child poverty, Barnardo's is calling for a comprehensive Child Poverty Bill (alongside others, including the Children's Charities Coalition). This must include a series of targets designed to eradicate child poverty over time, with clear milestones starting immediately and with others every two to three years, enshrined in legislation. We were disappointed to see this was not included in the King's Speech.

The latest statistics on child poverty estimate that [4.3 million children are growing up in poverty](#)<sup>1</sup>, our evidence and research shows that an estimated 894,000 children in the UK are [experiencing bed poverty](#)<sup>2</sup>, over 281,000 families can't afford the essentials such as food or heating and [1.6 million children are affected by the two-child limit, pushing families further into poverty](#)<sup>3</sup>. We believe the Government can help lift children out of poverty by:

### **1. Ending 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>4</sup>

### **2. Extending the Household Support Fund which ends in 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 will end in September 2024, at a time when families who are already struggling financially are set to face the colder winter months. We are very concerned that many families will face a cliff-edge when the HSF ends and are calling for an extension until the planned review of Universal Credit is complete. While [inflation is falling](#)<sup>5</sup> the Food Foundation's food insecurity tracker from January 2024 has found that nearly 15% of families are experiencing food insecurity, a figure which has doubled since August 2020.<sup>6</sup>

### **3. Extending free school meals to all primary school pupils in England**

The introduction of breakfast clubs in all primary schools is a welcome step in supporting all children so that they are happier, healthier and can thrive school. 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> To strengthen opportunities for all, the Government should look to extend access to free school meals to all families in receipt of Universal Credit, as part of the upcoming review. Creating universal access to free

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<sup>1</sup> House of Lords (2024): [Child poverty: Statistics, causes and the UK's policy response](#)

<sup>2</sup> Barnardo's (2024): [No crib for a bed: The impact of the cost-of-living crisis on bed poverty](#)

<sup>3</sup> Child Poverty Action Group (2024) [New DWP statistics: 1 in 9 children now hit by two-child limit](#).

<sup>4</sup> Resolution Foundation (2024) [Catastrophic caps: An analysis of the impact of the two-child limit and the benefit cap](#)

<sup>5</sup> House of Commons (2024): [Economic update: Inflation set to fall over 2024](#)

<sup>6</sup> Food Foundation: [Food insecurity tracker](#)

<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](#)

<sup>8</sup> Barnardo's (2022): [At what cost? The impact of the cost-of-living crisis on children and young people](#)

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>

#### 4. Implementing 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>10</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.

#### Support for children in and leaving care

We welcome the Children’s Wellbeing Bill and the opportunity to deliver positive change for children in and leaving care. Urgent action is needed to address the children’s social care crisis and provide earlier support for families in crisis. Within the Children’s Wellbeing Bill, we believe the adoption of recommendations set out in the [Independent Review of Children's Social Care](#)<sup>11</sup> are vital to deliver change, which include reforming children’s social care and investing £2.6bn to keep families together. **A significant funding settlement to prioritise early intervention and prevention is critical to truly transform children’s social care.**

Through the Children’s Wellbeing Bill, we are calling on the Government to adopt the following key policy changes.

##### 1. Children’s Wellbeing Bill:

###### a) Increased funding alongside reform to children’s social care

The ambition to deliver change in the children’s social care system is long overdue and welcome. However, the vital changes children need can only be achieved with investment which is why we strongly urge the Government to take bold action in the autumn spending review. 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>12</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.

###### b) Invest in family centres 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 later. Access to family and early help services can currently be challenging for many families

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

<sup>10</sup> Children’s Society and others (2023), ‘The Future of Local Welfare – Discretionary Support for Individuals and Families Facing Crisis’

<sup>11</sup> Department for Education (2022): [Independent review of children’s social care](#)

<sup>12</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)

with a lack of consistent provision across the country. This must be addressed through the new legislation which should seek to place family help teams on a statutory footing, making it clearer the minimum service families in need of support should receive.

Family help services are most effectively delivered through family hubs and we recommend that these should be established in 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>13</sup>

## **2. Renters Rights' Bill: Prevent housing discrimination for care leavers aged 18-25**

As part of delivering change for children leaving the children's social care system, we know through our research that many struggle to get their foot on the housing ladder. In fact, many face discrimination from landlords. We are calling for new rights to support young people who grow up in residential care and to give young people access to important support such as [rent deposit and guarantor schemes](#)<sup>14</sup>. **Aligned to the Renters Rights' Bill, we are calling for a duty on landlords not to discriminate against an individual on the grounds that they are a care leaver.**

## **3. Better Buses Bill: Provide free bus travel for care leavers 18-25 across England**

Aligned to the Better Buses Bill and ambition to transform bus travel across the country, **we are calling for a national free bus travel scheme for care leavers to support their transition to independence.** 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, West of England Combined Authority and Tyne and Wear, Durham and Northumberland. announced they would introduce free bus travel for care leavers. We are calling for free bus travel for all care leavers right across the country.

## **Support for victims of child criminal exploitation and sexual abuse**

We welcome the Crime and Policing Bill and that it is expected to introduce an offence of child criminal exploitation. 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>16</sup> Action is urgently needed to boost the visibility and understanding of exploitation, and investment is critically needed in specific support services.

Through the following Bills we want to deliver change for victims of child criminal exploitation and sexual abuse.

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<sup>13</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>14</sup> Barnardo's (2023) [The case for a national rent guarantor and deposit scheme for care leavers aged 18-24 in England.](#)

<sup>15</sup> Barnardo's (2022): [Transport for Freedom: Why all care leavers in England aged 18-25 should be given access to free bus travel](#)

<sup>16</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>

## **1. Victims, Courts and Public Protection Bill: Ensure child victims of abuse and exploitation are able to access child-centred specialist support services**

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, including through the Victims, Courts and Public Protection Bill. 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>17</sup>

## **2. Crime and Policing Bill: Include a statutory definition of Child Criminal Exploitation**

**We are calling for the UK government to introduce a statutory definition of Child Criminal Exploitation in England through the Crime and Policing Bill to better help professionals identify victims, and make sure that victims are supported appropriately.** Barnardo's 2021 report 'Exploited and Criminalised' looked at how police forces recorded Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE).<sup>18</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 welcome the Government's focus on violence against women and girls (VAWG) in the Crime and Policing Bill. The Bill should include children who are victims of child sexual abuse, exploitation and domestic abuse too. This will include a focus on experiences of girls and boys in schools, including an increase in problematic and harmful sexual behaviour and sexual harassment.

**In order to achieve the Government's commitment to halving VAWG in ten years, we also need progress to tackle the root causes.** This includes taking action to tackle harmful online content, including regulating online pornographic content the same way it is regulated offline, and also preventing children's access to misogynistic content. To help tackle the root causes of VAWG early, **the Government should take a fresh look at Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) guidance, which enables all children to have access to high-quality, inclusive and age-appropriate lessons that reflect their real-life experiences.** This should include a sharp focus on challenging misogyny in schools, and enabling all children to take a critical approach to the content they see online.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid

<sup>18</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>



### Action you can take:

1. Contribute to the King's Speech 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 take to support families.
2. Ask an oral or written Parliamentary Question about the challenges facing children and young people.
3. Meet with Barnardo's to discuss our latest research and evidence from our services.

### Suggested Parliamentary Questions:

- To ask the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions if ending the two-child element of Universal Credit is part of the Government's plan to tackle child poverty?
- As part of the ambition to "change the children's social care system" will the Secretary of State for Education commit to introducing widescale reform of early intervention and family help services in England (alongside an appropriate increase in funding)?
- Will the Chancellor confirm an extension to the Household Support Fund beyond September to support families struggling financially?
- Will the Government commit to introducing a statutory definition of Child Criminal Exploitation as part of the Crime and Policing Bill to improve protection for children?
- Will the Government incorporate provisions to protect care leavers in the revised Renters' Rights 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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