

## Barnardos Opening Statement

I warmly welcome the opportunity to speak to the Committee this morning on such an important issue. I'm appearing today alongside my colleague Laura Keane who is a project leader based in Limerick North.

Barnardos provides frontline services to children and their families who have been affected by traumatic life situations such as poverty, abuse, parental mental health challenges, neglect, separation, bereavement and parental addiction. We offer a range of early intervention and targeted services in our 45 service locations, in family homes, schools, early learning and care settings and communities. We enable children and families to build their resilience and meet their behavioural, emotional, educational, physical and social needs. Last year, Barnardos worked with almost 18,000 children and their families.

Since the onset of the pandemic 18 months ago, we know that children have been among the groups most adversely impacted. It has caused huge disruption to their lives and brought about significant uncertainty and adversity, affecting their overall wellbeing.

Children and young people had to stop doing all the vital things that are part of most everyday childhoods. They were excluded from meeting with friends, going to school and taking part in activities. All of which placed increased challenges on their social and emotional development as well as their mental health.

It is important when thinking about the impact Covid has had on children's mental health we don't look at in isolation but consider it in the context of their wider circumstances. In particular, it's important to understand and appreciate their relationships, such as with their parents, siblings and peers, alongside their home and community environments, which are so often the root cause of poor mental health.

The impact of Covid is not equal across all children. Many of the children we work with experience a huge amount of adversity in their lives. They are living with violence, addiction, mental health and other factors that impact on their wellbeing. Covid has been an additional adversity which becomes layered on top of their current challenges.

Unfortunately, the pandemic has exacerbated most of these issues in particular those facing parents. For example, throughout Covid across our services we saw parents deal with worsening mental health, increased substance use and conflict within the home. This has inevitably led to some parents struggling to cope themselves. We know that parents' own wellbeing can directly affects their children's wellbeing and their mental health.

Our Back to School Survey, with almost 1,500 parents responding, results reinforces this. It found that 52% of parents had faced increased mental health difficulties last year, 82% increased stress, 50% increase stress at home and 15% increase substance use. A substantial proportion, 29%, of parents stated they were concerned about the impact that these issues was having on their children. One parent stated 'Children adapt but they also soak everything in like little sponges. They see and hear everything at home, even when we try our best to shelter them from adult conversations etc. Then they carry this with them on top of their worries & the covid anxiety.'

Last year, a snapshot of almost 1,250 open cases over one week found that nearly two thirds of families (61%) who are being supported by Barnardos, across 32 intensive family support and early years services, are experiencing addiction, a mental health issues, or domestic violence. Of these families, 44% are experiencing difficulties related to mental health, one in four experience domestic violence in the home, and 21% are experiencing issues related to addiction. Overall 30% are experiencing a combination of two or more of

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these issues.

We see on a daily basis that Covid has led to increased mental health issues for children. Across our services, we have sadly seen how covid has exacerbated stress and mental health issues for children who were already experiencing anxiety and who were struggling to manage their emotions.

Additionally, our Back to School Survey found that 63% of parents said they were worried about their children's emotional development how they feel, their coping skills and their ability to talk about their emotions. 58% of parents were worried about their children's stress while 57% of parents were worried about their children's anxiety. One parent stated "My child suffers terribly with anxiety & doesn't like to leave the house for anything! It's like ww3 to go for a walk! On returning to school last April, his anxiety was manifesting in physical."

49% primary school and 56% secondary school parents stated they are concerned about their children's social skills, their peer relationships and their ability to interact with others. 47% of primary school parents and 58% of secondary school parents were concerned about their child's loneliness and not having the level of social connections that the child themselves would like.

The transition out of lockdown has continued to be difficult for children and challenging for their development. For example, a significant proportion of children are struggling to engage with education. They are struggling to adhere to routines, follow rules and even sit still in classroom. For many this is due to anxiety and being concerned that they are too far behind their peers to catch up. As a result, their learning has regressed in some situations, leading to difficulties with self-esteem and anxiety.

A degree of anxiety is normal, children and adults are all anxious at times and most children and adults have the skills and abilities to be able to overcome and cope with this and not let it impact on our daily life's to a great extent. Some children have families and friends who will support us through periods of worry and stress. For many children though, anxiety is immobilising, it prevents them from leaving their room, their homes, stops them from making friends, going to clubs, schools and generally living their lives.

We know, and research demonstrates, that enabling parents to support their children within the family is one of the most successful ways of helping young people to address their mental health issues.

Due to additional vulnerabilities some families and parents require help to successfully support their children and their mental health. As already outlined, the pandemic impacted on their wellbeing and has impacted on their ability to care for their children's mental wellbeing. One of the key things we do in Barnardos is to support parents by working to improve their relationship with their child, introducing and maintain routines in their homes and to understand how to respond to their children and manage their behaviour. All of this is done through our Partnership with Parents programme which by strengthening parenting capacity improves children's mental wellbeing. As well as providing parental support we also recognise the importance of providing direct support to children, helping them to learn new ways to understand and regulate themselves and their emotions. We do this through our 'This is me' programme which works individual with children to support the holistic development and integration of their heart, body and mind.

During Covid, our family support services adapted to respond to the issues families are facing. This means staff responding to parenting challenges, providing them with the flexible

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support required to make sure that they can focus on parenting as effectively as possible.

We believe that children and families can overcome the additional mental health issues and challenges that have resulted from the pandemic. However, in order to do this effectively they will need appropriate support, which will require adequate provision of universal services as well as specific targeted support.