

Education, Children and Young People Committee Inquiry into the Scottish Attainment Challenge

Written evidence from Barnardo's Scotland – February 2022

About Barnardo's Scotland work on closing the attainment gap

Barnardo's Scotland has a long history of working in partnership with families, schools and communities, however, the introduction of the Scottish Attainment Challenge in 2015 to tackle the poverty related attainment gap, has enabled us to extend our work to reach over 400 schools, which is 16% of the Scottish education estate.

We recognise that there are a number of complex issues which can affect children and young people's educational outcomes, however, those living in poverty often face the greatest challenge reaching their full potential. The impact of Covid-19 has only heightened this.

Living on a low income is not just about the struggle to pay bills. Families in poverty can find it difficult to be fully emotionally available to their children when their resources are absorbed by the stress of not being able to afford necessities like housing, food and fuel.

Barnardo's Scotland Children's Service Manager: "...first and foremost, it's just about daily living conditions and because so many of our families are on Universal Credit, that does not allow a standard of living that meets the needs of those adults and children within the household, it simply does not."

The psychological burden placed on families under pressure financially cannot be overstated. An inadequate income combined with the complex systems they need to navigate to survive leave many people feeling depleted and hopeless. This in turn affects their mental health and can result in isolation and loss of support networks.

Barnardo's Scotland Children's Service Manager: "I think the impact of the system on people's wellbeing is massive. So a lot of our families see it as these huge hurdles that they'll never be able to overcome."

Children living in poverty are more likely to be delayed in terms of language development and have a higher incidence of behavioural problems than their more affluent peers. We also now understand more fully the impact that the stress caused by adversity and early trauma can have on a child's development, their ability to learn and their mental health and wellbeing.

Schools are increasingly on the frontline of responding to children and young people who come through their gates with a range of unmet material and emotional needs.

What has worked and what could be improved

The development of the attainment challenge since 2015 has allowed Barnardo's Scotland to expand our support and reach more pupils in Scottish schools. Through the Scottish Attainment Challenge Fund and the Pupil Equity Fund, Barnardo's school-based support workers have been able to get alongside children, young people and their families to support them in the challenges they are experiencing.

The poverty-related attainment gap goes beyond the school gates. Being able to strengthen the links between home, school and the community by providing financial, emotional and practical support to children, young people and their families has been one of the key benefits of the Scottish Attainment Challenge.

In Barnardo's Scotland, we believe in a trauma-informed, relationship-based approach to support – we want to see all schools have the opportunity to embed a holistic approach to supporting children and young people to thrive and fulfil their potential. Funding from the Scottish Attainment Challenge has undoubtedly extended the availability of family centred resource in schools which address issues that lie beyond the school gates.

One of our Barnardo's school-based staff in Falkirk described the benefits of being embedded within the school environment:

“The best bit is to see young people enjoying school again and getting something out of their education. They know I am there for them and they pop in, they know there is a person in that school who can take time and look out for them. Just having those relationships with the kids is so good.”

In May 2019 we produced [a report on our early learning from our partnership with schools and communities across Scotland](#). This outlined some of the challenges we have had. Our view of what could be improved is outlined below:

- i. Relationships are central, but developing and sustaining relationships takes time, consistency and resources. The time limited nature of much of the PEF investment (often annually allocated) has woven insecurity into decision making in some settings, impacting the capacity of third sector and other partner organisations to effectively plan longer term and recruit and retain skilled staff.

We welcome the commitment to advise schools of PEF allocations for the full parliamentary term but it is not clear whether this will result in longer term, more sustainable arrangements for partner organisations commissioned by individual schools.

- ii. Health and wellbeing interventions make a vital contribution to reducing the poverty related attainment gap and are of equal importance to literacy and numeracy interventions.

However, these are not always given equal weighting and there is a risk we prioritise measurement of what we can count rather than what makes the greatest difference. Headteachers interviewed in our *Challenges from the Frontline* research underlined the critical importance of approaches which focused on removing barriers to participation in learning and build a strong relational foundation which supports wellbeing.

- iii. In our experience, working and allocating funding strategically, with clear linkage between local children's service planning processes and individual school decisions, delivers the greatest impact. Heavily weighting investment to individual schools allows for flexibility and innovation to meet locally identified need but presents challenges in securing equity in available provision, transferring learning between settings and scaling up successes across the education estate. In Barnardo's Scotland we previously had contracts in some areas which were local authority wide, however, these have now gone and therefore, it is only the children in schools where they have purchased a service who can now access support. This results in a lot of inequity.
- iv. The attainment gap starts long before and exists beyond the school gates, therefore we believe families across Scotland should have access to holistic practical, financial and emotional supports from birth and through the early years as well as when a child reaches school.

Children spend over 80% of their time outside school in families and communities and what happens there has a significant impact on their capacity to engage in education. We need to move from compartmentalising issues (and the funding of these) - e.g. attainment, mental health, domestic abuse, substance use - to planning access to holistic supports for children and families irrespective of their presenting need.

- v. Finally, it appears to be 'mission impossible' to ask schools to reduce the poverty related attainment gap while child poverty levels continue to rise in our communities. We know from the research conducted pre-pandemic for our joint report with the NSPCC, *Challenges from the Frontline*¹ an increasing number of families were experiencing *destitution*. This will only have deteriorated further through the last two years, with even greater challenges ahead as we prepare for the cost of living crisis spreading and deepening. High quality teaching

¹ [Challenges from the Frontline: Revisited](#)

and learning cannot mitigate the significant harm caused by structural inequalities and will continue to erode capacity of children and young people being 'ready to learn'.

How is the impact of funding measured?

Barnardo's Scotland has a robust Outcomes Framework which is used to evaluate and measure impact. This framework is underpinned by the Scottish Government's Getting It Right For Every Child (GIRFEC) framework with specific measurable outcomes that capture progress across the wellbeing indicators; Safe, Healthy, Achieving, Nurtured, Active, Respected, Responsible and Included. This framework ensures that we are outcomes focused and forms the basis of the reports we develop and share with schools so there is a clear record of our activities and impact.

As part of any evaluation process we include reflections from children, young people and families themselves, feedback from professionals, including education staff. Our staff also capture their observations of changes and improvements in family relationships and circumstances. Where appropriate we use tools including Outcomes Star, Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires, Parenting Daily Hassles, Adult Wellbeing Scale to support dialogue with families about their needs and where they are on their journey.

We always work in partnership with local education staff to produce data which they can use to evidence our approach, adding this to their schools-based evidence.

At Barnardo's Scotland, our staff know that the impact we have on the lives of pupils and their families cannot always be translated directly or overnight into measurable education attainment, and there is often not enough recognition of the 'soft' impacts of the type of support that the attainment challenge can provide which have a positive impact over the longer term.

It can be more challenging to capture softer outcomes like a reduced number of children sitting outside the Headteachers office day to day, more children remaining in school for full days, children moving from just attending to engaging meaningfully in learning, developing and sustaining friendships, managing transitions, arriving on time and feeling 'ready to learn' as a result of support around morning routines and management of anxiety. One Headteacher told us: "if someone said to me 'but he's still not meeting his benchmarks, I'd say 'but he's in class.'"

We would therefore like to see better mechanisms to recognise progress on issues like preventing 'informal' exclusions and increasing capacity to manage peer relationships across the school day.

Areas for measurement we would also like to strengthen include trying to capture what has been prevented, e.g. school exclusions, referrals to social work, CAMHS and the Children's Reporter.

What has been the impact of the pandemic on attainment and achievement in schools?

We surveyed our school-based staff in Autumn 2021 to find out the challenges affecting young people to understand their emerging needs as they transitioned back into education. The main findings from Barnardo's staff were that:

- 76% identified poor mental health and wellbeing outcomes as the **greatest concern** facing children and young people who had returned to full-time education in August, following Covid-19 lockdowns.
- 94% agreed that children and young people have more worries now than compared with pre-pandemic.
- 77% agreed that children and young people were anxious about the need to 'catch up' on missed schooling.²

The social isolation due to the Covid-19 pandemic continues to be a source of concern to Barnardo's Scotland schools-based staff working with children and young people as they attempt to adjust to a 'new normal'. This relates to parents also as they have missed opportunities to access school buildings, see where their children are learning and meet the adults who care for their child during the school day and experience bonding community events like Christmas nativity plays and sports events. The absence or reduction of in-person opportunities to build strong, trusting relationships with education staff has made it more difficult in some instances for parents, resulting in increased misunderstandings or conflicts which would be easy to de-escalate if normal arrangements and levels of contact were in place.

We are also aware of an increased level of need since early 2020, with a greater number of referrals from a more diverse range of families to our services. Many families who prior to the pandemic were managing have experienced tumultuous disruption to routines and support networks. An example of this are many families where there is a child with an additional support need, who have reach out and asked for support after services they relied on were reduced or removed through periods of lockdown.

² [Barnardo's Scotland: Snapshot report into issues facing children and young people returning to school after Covid-19 lockdowns](#)