

## **Children 1st's response to the Scottish Parliament Education Committee's call for evidence on the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on vulnerable children**

Children 1st is Scotland's national children's charity. We have over 130 years of experience of working alongside families to prevent problems from escalating to the point of crisis, to protect children from harm and to help children and families to recover from the trauma associated with childhood adversity by providing relationship-based practical and emotional support.

Our work alongside families has shown us that the coronavirus pandemic is compounding the complex issues that many families are already experiencing, adding on additional stresses and strains. It is making some of the families we work alongside more likely to experience a return to substance use, an increase in poverty or relationship breakdown.

We have significant concerns about the long-term effect of both the virus itself and the measures to contain it on children and families. An entire generation of children will have experienced significant loss, trauma and bereavement. Many children will see a profound impact on their emotional wellbeing, with potential long-term consequences. Children 1st is keen to highlight to the Committee the importance of mitigating these impacts as much as possible while the crisis continues and, crucially, of planning and designing systems and processes for the months and years ahead that will address the traumatic effects. Systems will need to be redesigned to address the adverse impacts through repair and emotional recovery, with children, families' and communities' voices and views at the centre, based on the recommendations of The Promise and underpinned by the UNCRC.

We would ask the Committee to take particular note of the following issues:

- Many of the families we work with tell us they are facing increasing stress and pressure as lockdown continues. They will need, in many cases, sustained and intensive support to help them address the multiple, complex issues they face, often exacerbated by lockdown, in order to prevent relationship or placement breakdown and keep children safe and loved at home.
- Maintaining effective child protection is a major challenge for everyone. We are working with local authority partners to support children for whom home is not a safe place, to ensure that appropriate school provision for vulnerable children is delivered, along with support to help ensure vulnerable children attend.
- We are working with SCRA and other bodies to ensure children and families' voices continue to be heard in the Children's Hearing System, and that processes to protect children's rights, such as safeguarders, continue to operate well despite hearings moving online.
- Our Parentline service has seen high levels of contact from groups such as kinship carers, concerned about maintaining support during ill-health, and separated parents seeking further clarity over safe contact arrangements.

### **Children 1st's response to Covid-19**

Children 1st swiftly adapted and in some cases entirely transformed our operating models to meet the challenges the children and families we work alongside are facing, linked to Covid-19. We are acutely aware that the virus itself and the necessary measures to contain it are likely to affect some of the people that we work alongside the most. The evidence is clear that in times of crisis it is our poorest and most vulnerable communities who are hit the hardest. We have immediately mobilised to mitigate this.

Our national family support service, Parentline, is now being operated remotely by our highly skilled family support workers. It is available online via webchat, text and email or by phone (08000 28 22 33)

to any family who needs support, seven days a week. Families tell us this is a lifeline, when their usual sources of support are not available: *"Parentline has been a lifeline over the past few weeks, I had no idea such support could be available and am extremely grateful."*

Parentline support workers are responding to a wide range of emotional and practical issues, often working alongside parents facing multiple challenges and significant trauma, keeping in touch with them as often as they like, for as long as they need. We respond to significant distress and complex problems by taking a systemic family approach, encouraging parents and carers to explore their own thinking, helping to establish plans for the next hour, day, week and month and always ensuring that the focus is on keeping children at the centre.

Our community-based family support workers are also helping over 2,000 families over the phone, via technologies such as Zoom and, when absolutely essential, through home visits (maintaining social distancing in gardens or on doorsteps). Our Money Advice Service provides both emotional support with money worries and helps families to find lasting solutions to improve family finances.

We have worked quickly to identify those families who are likely to need the most support, including those struggling with addiction or who may turn to alcohol or substances to help them to cope and have supported them to put strong plans in place. In working closely alongside those families we are able to identify when a family is struggling and needs more intense support, in particular acting as an early warning system to prevent or share child protection concerns.

We highlight below what we are seeing at the moment through our services, the impact that this may have on vulnerable families and some of the solutions and mitigations that are, or should be, in place. It is important to be clear that although we have separated out the key issues below our experience is that many children experience multiple complexities that compound their trauma.

### **Family stress and pressure and relationship breakdown**

Our services are reporting that they are seeing the emotional and psychological impact of lockdown through increasing pressure on families even after immediate financial and practical priorities have been resolved. This is also apparent in calls to Parentline, where we are getting a number of calls about teenagers finding it hard being cooped up inside, children with additional support needs and parents struggling to cope with work and childcare. We are seeing the deterioration and, in some cases, total breakdown of already precarious relationships and the impact on emotional health and wellbeing.

Many of the calls to Parentline are from parents and carers worried about children who are exhibiting distressed behaviour and who need some extra help. Many existing supports for families are not currently operating or cannot continue due to schools being closed.

We know that for some children home is not a safe or loving place at the moment—and they are missing the additional support that school can provide. We are working with local authority partners to address concerns about the number of children who have been identified as vulnerable, who are not currently accessing a school place, despite being eligible to take one up. Many of the families in our services have told us that they would like to be able to send their children to school— though others have told us that they don't need this support.

One mother whose child is accessing support through school in the Borders told us:

*“The Hub is great, the children all look forward to it, there’s no problem getting them up in the morning. It’s great for them having the routine (and) allows me time to shop for I am not allowed to take them all into the shop with me. It also gives me space.”*

However, we know that in some places, families are worried about travelling on public transport and their school hub is too far to walk, or they are not aware of how they might access a school space. School spaces, for families who need and want them, are playing a key part in ensuring families do not reach a point of crisis, have space away from each other and allow schools to help put in place additional support for families if they identify them as needing additional help. We are therefore working with Local Authority partners where appropriate to address access issues.

### **Child protection**

We know that for some families the increased stress and pressure that we describe above can lead to unhealthy coping mechanisms such as using drugs or alcohol or not feeling able to stick to Government social distancing rules. For the children living in families where pressure is increasing and they feel unsafe, we are concerned about the impact the pandemic is having on our collective ability to identify child protection concerns when children are less visible.

Children 1st has worked with our partners in Aberlour Childcare Trust to access Scottish Government provide tablets and laptops (together with top up wifi and data allowances) for those families under significant pressure who need them. Families tell us that seeing their support workers’ face every day or hearing their voice is making a big difference, helping them to regulate and talk about their problems and share their current pressures. However, we know that there will be some families who are unseen and some children who will be at home in unsafe environments.

In some areas we are starting to see a significant increase in referrals to our services, much higher than the same time last year. Our understanding is that this is likely to be due to statutory social work capacity and their need to focus on emergency or high- risk cases, leading to an increase in referrals to charities like Children 1st, as we are able to offer systemic family support to families who may otherwise be allocated a social worker.

We are also seeing an increase in referrals to our Family Group Decision- Making service for children under the age of 5 and families with unborn babies. We are helping families, often at short notice, to make Family Plans with their extended families. In some cases, this means that children are staying safe and cared for at home with additional support, rather than being taken into residential or foster care. We are working with our partners to ensure that all families who need support get it as soon as possible, to prevent situations from escalating to a point of crisis.

In recent weeks, Parentline has had a large proportion of calls from Grandparents asking for advice about contact with their grandchildren, especially where they usually play a key role in helping with childcare. Some grandparents have told us that they want to ease the pressure on families and provide ‘respite’ care, others have expressed child protection concerns and have mentioned that they are worried that the children’s parents are not coping. Children 1st have worked with Scottish Government colleagues on advice for extended family members who are usually, or want to be, included in childcare arrangements for our Parentline website. However, we note that the guidance for children of key workers states that “where essential, children can also be cared for at home by a non- vulnerable carer from another household.”<sup>1</sup> We would welcome further discussion about whether it could be clear that similar arrangements could be made where there are concerns about child protection.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-guide-schools-early-learning-closures/pages/key-workers/>

We have also received a high volume of calls from kinship carers who have told us they feel “invisible.” Many are self- isolating due to being older or having underlying health conditions and are facing challenges to look after children with complex needs and a background of trauma. Some are struggling with the technology required to educate the children they are caring for at home. We continue to support this group of carers through Parentline and making resources available on the Parentline website, as well as through our community services delivered in partnership with Local Authorities.

### **Children’s Hearings**

We are working with SCRA and Children’s Hearings Scotland to ensure that, when online Hearings that families can participate in are up and running, family members feel they can fully contribute and understand what is happening, while the potentially life- changing decisions of a hearing are made. Children 1st is therefore working closely with SCRA to put the following new services in place:

1. Support for families prior to and following a Hearing through Parentline, including ongoing emotional support to help families digest and understand decisions made and consider next steps. Our aim is to help ensure people feel fully informed, have someone to talk to and know and are able to claim their rights.
2. Piloting Emergency Family Group Decision Making for families in one area as a small test of change (with the potential to scale- up at a later date) so that our workers can support families to develop Family Plans where children are at risk of being immediately accommodated. Where possible, our aim is to keep families together and help them to develop a Family Plan in advance of their Hearing, and present it at the Hearing, so their voices are kept front and centre.

Our Safeguarders Panel Team have been working together with the Scottish Children’s Reporter Administration and Children’s Hearing Scotland to help find practical solutions to uphold children’s rights and ensure that they are protected. We note that there is a significant decrease in Safeguarder appointments at present and are working closely with our partners to understand why this is the case and to confirm with Reporters and Panel Members that Safeguarders are currently operating.

### **Children experiencing domestic abuse**

Our domestic abuse service in the Borders continues to see an increase in referrals. We are continuing to offer extra support for safety planning and emotional support across our services but remain concerned about the impact of lockdown on safe engagement with non- offending parents.

We would welcome further discussion about ensuring the safety and protection of children where either formal or informal contact arrangements are in place. In particular, Parentline has received a number of calls where a parent has either not returned a child following a contact visit due to them stating that the parent or child developed symptoms of Covid-19 during a visit or because parents are worried that this might happen. We are concerned that perpetrators of domestic abuse may continue to exert coercive and controlling behaviour by using the Lord President’s guidelines in this way. We are keen to ensure there are clear processes and safety plans in place in this eventuality so that no child is at risk.

### **Children living in poverty**

Children 1st is providing supermarket vouchers, board games and other activities for children and other financial assistance through our Activity Fund and our joint work with Aberlour's Emergency Assistance Fund. Our Money Advisers are working alongside families to put in place emergency arrangements relating to gas and electricity supplies, to help families with no recourse to public funds and to access Best Start Grants.

We are in touch with a number of families struggling with technology or data or who need support or reassurance to navigate their finances or to apply for Universal Credit. In some cases we are supporting families by applying on their behalf or entering in their daily logs while they are on loudspeaker over the phone.

Some families have also told us that they don't know how to tap into the support they are entitled to in lieu of free school meals. We are therefore supportive of the suggested approach by CPAG and other organisations to provide cash payments to families and would recommend that Scottish Government consider how this might be more consistently applied.

### **Some unexpected positives**

We are, however, getting reports of the more positive impacts of lockdown- some of which are unexpected. Services are telling us that stronger connections are being developed with families through daily phone calls that may otherwise have taken much longer, and in some cases with families who may have struggled to connect with us before.

### **Planning for what comes next**

In addition to working to provide immediate help and support for families right now, Children 1st believes that significant preparation work must begin to consider what will be required in the months and years to come. We believe that there must be a clear and comprehensive planning process, directly alongside children and families that considers radical system redesign to meet the needs of a generation of children who have been impacted by the trauma of Covid-19. This must be undertaken by and with communities, and must fully consider the needs of children and families who have experienced unprecedented loss, trauma and disconnection.

We will need to consider the needs of children who have not been at school and have been missing their friends, of parents with new babies who have been cooped up inside without any support, of parents with children with additional support needs who have been pushed to the brink, of children who have lost parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, of children who missed the safety of school or who experienced lockdown in a home where they didn't feel safe, of children of key workers worried about whether their parents would be infected with the virus, of children whose parents used drugs and alcohol to cope with their own pressures or who experienced ongoing effects of significant relationship fracture or breakdown. We cannot go back to 'business as usual' but must work to consider what a system looks like that supports families when they need it for as long as they need it, in line with the recommendations of The Promise and underpinned by the UNCRC.

**If you have any questions or comments about our response please contact Mark Ballard, our Director of Strategic Planning and Campaigns at [mark.ballard@children1st.org.uk](mailto:mark.ballard@children1st.org.uk).**