

Barnardo's Scotland: Information Provided to the Scottish Covid-19 Inquiry – Prison and Justice

INTRODUCTION

1. My name is Fiona Bennett. My date of birth is Personal Data and I am 58 years of age. My details are known to The Inquiry.
2. I have provided my own statement. I have signed the consent form provided. I am happy for my information to be contained within reports, and I am happy for the statement to be published.
3. I am willing to provide evidence at the hearings should it be required.
4. I am an Honours Graduate in Psychology from Edinburgh University and a qualified Social Worker and Family Therapist with post-graduate qualifications in Child Protection and Social Services Management. Professional experience includes over 30 years in Services for vulnerable children and their families including Local Authority, Child and Adolescent Mental Health, Early Years, Youth Justice and Fostering. Contributions to the development of related policy areas, research and professional practice including early year's workforce development; GIRFEC; social work; Justice and child mental health.

Overview of role at Barnardo's

5. I have been an Assistant Director of Children's Services with Barnardo's for over 10 years, a member of the senior leadership team and have responsibilities for 2 geographic patches (South West Scotland and Forth Valley) and Barnardo's Scotland Welcome (Ukraine) Service and a lead role for Justice. I have line management responsibility for Service Managers who operationally manage services and have overseen Shine Women's Mentoring Service almost since it's outset (10 years) and have been responsible for the Services within Polmont HMP Young Offenders Institute for over 5 years.
6. I remain passionate and committed to improving the lives of others through the provision of quality, effective, locally-based Services and the work of Barnardo's.

A brief overview of the history, legal status and aims of the organisation or body, where relevant.

7. Barnardo's is a UK-wide charity, registered in Scotland as charity number SC037605. The aim of Barnardo's Scotland is to support children, young people, and families across a range of issues to help them to thrive and overcome challenges. We have previously provided an overall organisational written statement to the Covid-19 inquiry and below we have provided a further written response focusing specifically on prisons and justice based on the experience of services we provide within those areas.

A brief description of the group(s)/individuals which the person, organisation or body supports or represents.

8. Barnardo's Scotland is one of the leading children's charities and works with thousands of children, young people, and families each year, across over 100 community-based services.
9. We support all the children and young people who may be vulnerable to offending in the future (based on their life histories, vulnerabilities, contributory factors) and those impacted by crime – so potential victims, witnesses, children of parents in prison or those on community disposals, siblings of people who offend or within families who are in regular or close contact with Justice Services.
10. We work with children and young people of all ages and many will be considered to be at risk of offending, demonstrating what can be considered to be problematic behaviours and subject to early intervention via community based services. Some may have been referred to the Reporter to the Children's Panel, on offence or other grounds but not be considered to require compulsory measures of supervision so receive voluntary services or interventions. Others may be on statutory orders (via the Children's Hearing) either at home or elsewhere and receive (voluntary) Barnardo's support or interventions as part of their care plan. For older young people or adults, they may have come to the attention of the police and be referred to us or may have incidents being considered by the Procurator Fiscal and be subject to divergence from prosecution.
11. We deliver a wide range of services which includes providing family support and early intervention, supporting care-experienced young people in the transition to adulthood, supporting children, young people and families through fostering and adoption services, helping children affected by sexual abuse and exploitation, supporting young people who come into conflict with the law, helping young people entering employment, education and training, and supporting young people and families affected by drug and alcohol use.
12. *Barnardo's has over 100 Services in Scotland and many will work with those impacted by imprisonment. The services directory can be found here.¹ You may find this briefing helpful.²*

A brief overview of any work of the person, organisation, or body in supporting or representing the relevant group(s)/individuals between 1 January 2020 and 31 December 2022 as it relates to the response to the COVID-19 pandemic by the Scottish Government, where relevant – prison and justice services

¹ [Services | Barnardo's \(barnardos.org.uk\)](https://www.barnardos.org.uk/services)

² <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-06/Barnardo%27s%20Scotland%20Briefing%20-%20Children%27s%20Care%20and%20Justice%20Bill%20Stage%201%20-%202022%20June%202023.pdf>

13. Barnardo's offers a range of services which support children, young people, and women in conflict with the law. These include our Shine Women's Mentoring Service,³ which supports women at risk or leaving custody, normally up to 6 months and this can include group work and practical support. (read more about the supports offered in Chapter 2 of the 10 year impact report⁴), and the Stirling and Clackmannanshire Adult Justice Service, which supports young people aged 18-26, who are known to the Adult Justice Service in Stirling and require additional support as part of their risk assessment plan.

14. This additionally includes a broad offering within Polmont YOI:

a) *Outside In Youth Work Service*

Delivered within HMPYOI Polmont since 2010, Barnardo's Scotland's Outside In Youth Work Service offers a varied and innovative curriculum of activities for young people in custody. This curriculum ensures that young people play an active role within the learning process, with autonomy to choose which activities they wish to pursue based on personal circumstances and experiences. The youth work service is fully embedded within HMPYOI Polmont's vision for young people in custody and works hard to support young people to develop their confidence, manage personal relationships and develop capacity to consider risk and make reasonable decisions to take control.

During the pandemic there was online and telephone contact and adjusted delivery to ensure safe contact. Further information here⁵.

b) *Inside Out⁶*

Operating as a partnership between Barnardo's Scotland, The Children and Young People's Centre for Justice (CYCJ), and HMPYOI Polmont, this service uses creative ways to enable young people to be heard within the justice system; and provides opportunities for exploring and sharing their experiences with policymakers, managers, corporate parents, and the Scottish Government. Barnardo's and CYCJ support this weekly group to explore their experiences and encapsulate what care and justice means to them. The young people create a monthly newsletter to distribute within the establishment and are currently working to create positive change within HMYPOI Polmont.

c) *Parenting Matters*

Running as a partnership between Barnardo's Scotland and the Scottish Prison Service (SPS), the Parenting Matters service has been delivered in HMPYOI Polmont since 2014.

³<https://www.shinementoring.org/>

⁴ SHINE REPORT_FINAL (WEB ONLY) May23.pdf (shinementoring.org)

⁵ <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/InThisTogether-Justice.pdf>

⁶ Inside Out (Youth Justice Voices) shortlisted for national charity award - Children and Young People's Centre for Justice (cycj.org.uk)

The team delivering our Parenting Interventions programmes in Polmont are trauma-informed and have undertaken training to deepen their understanding of trauma, attachment, and the stress response system – enhancing practice and reinforcing the power of positive relationships in supporting healing from trauma and adversity.

15. Finally, Barnardo's runs the HMP Edinburgh Prison Visitor Centre in collaboration with SPS and the Onward Trust. Open seven days a week, this service provides support for families affected by imprisonment who are visiting a friend or relative. The centre offers a welcoming and supportive environment, especially for first time visitors who are unsure of prison procedures.

A brief overview of the key issues and impacts experienced by the group(s)/individuals which the person, organisation or body supports or represents, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic in Scotland

16. The Covid-19 pandemic had a severe impact on people entering and leaving prison, throughout their sentences and on their families, relatives, carers and those close to them. They experienced effects in line with the general population – financial, emotional, psychological and pressures associated with being unwell, bereaved or in lock downs and so on.
17. In addition, people entering prison also did so at a time when the Justice system was under stress, including changes to service provision and delays. Subsequently people entering prison were often coming in ill-prepared, with little understanding of the processes or what prison life was likely to be like during the pandemic. Young people told us they had no idea what charges they were at Court for (whether they were recent or historical) and how long they would be on remand or in custody.
18. They entered the prison with few personal belongings or resources (such as money or savings) and had no idea how or when they would see children, families or loved ones. They may have entered prison at a time of restrictions so were in cells for long periods of time (often 23 hours per day), with no activities or supports that would have been otherwise available to them.
19. Agents and support service visits were limited to phone or video. People in prison were isolated – at best they had contact with “bubbles” of 4-6 other inmates; at worst they had no contact with anyone other than prison staff for long periods of time. They were anxious about being ill or testing positive and being subject to periods of isolation.
20. We were aware of significant illness and death including people in prison, or prison/support staff. The general living conditions within the prison (isolation, long periods in cells and limited access to supports and activities) impacted on mental health and wellbeing as reported by people in prison themselves and as observed by staff who came into contact with them. Records of drug use, self-harm, suicide attempts and suicides are kept by Scottish Prison Service (SPS).

21. On exit they had little preparedness for the outside world, transport was difficult and access to services was different to what they may have experienced in the past – limited and largely online. Third sector provided phones and care packages but not to everyone so some were further disadvantaged due to digital exclusion, including low levels of online abilities and service access that was, largely remote.
22. Like everyone else, prisons were not adequately prepared for the pandemic and the response was slow and reactive. Significant efforts were made to have a quick interagency response, but the challenges were many and complex. These included (but were not limited to):
- Impact on staff and staffing levels
 - Impact on court and judicial processes
 - Impact on prisoners themselves
 - Impact on family and others
23. In terms of staff impact, Barnardo's had increased sickness absence or people in isolation which reduced staffing levels for temporary periods. Generally, this was kept to a minimum and services were not overly impacted. We had contingency plans for services with higher rates of Covid related illness, daily Covid (senior manager) meetings, risk registers and action plans.
24. More people found themselves on remand for longer periods. The nature of the prison experience changed including lengthy periods in cells (23 hours per day), lack of activity, visits or contact with families, agents, or support services. The problems articulated in relation to health inequalities in prison and lack of access to health services there were magnified by Covid. There were impacts on mental health and wellbeing, behavioural aspects, and increased drug use.
25. It was immediately clear to staff at Barnardo's services in prison and justice that a new response was required. All staff were given access to phones and online kit and training in necessary remote responses. Barnardo's worked proactively with prisons to ensure as quick access as was possible to email, phone, or video contact - and this facilitated practical support and interventions (Polmont HMP YOI has parenting; bereavement, trauma, and loss; and youth work services) as well as therapeutic support and vital messages to/contact with family, agents, and others.
26. Almost all people in prison were in shock. Even those who had experienced custody before described this as different and disorienting with negative impacts on their mental health and wellbeing, family relationships and so on. One woman told us it was by far the worst sentence she had ever experienced; she had served multiple short sentences. Many entered (or left) prisons economically disadvantaged – more so than pre-Covid times. They had few personal belongings, missed opportunities to work whilst inside prison and could not rely on families who were equally impacted by poverty.

27. In immediate response to the pandemic, we increased the direct support to families from our own charitable resources, supporting families impacted by imprisonment. We also ensured people in prison had access to toiletries and essential goods and clothing and, on leaving, leaver's care packs, clothing and mobile phones with credit and essential phone and web-links.

28. Together with our partners, Action for Children Scotland, we made a direct approach to the Scottish Government and received a substantial allocation of money through the Scottish Wellbeing Fund. Our focus was always on how we could provide the most immediate support to those most in need with the minimum of bureaucracy.

- *The following are comments by young people in Polmont who received a Barnardo's Service and indicates that practical and emotional support was welcome:*
- "This is a good idea to speak to people especially when we have no one to talk to just now, it's hard but getting the phone calls from you I look forward to them and it makes it a wee bit easier."
- "Thank you for everything you have lifted my mood by sending the emails and speaking to me on the phone."
- "All jokes aside when I'm feeling down, I read one of your emails and it makes me so happy to know I have not lost you all."
- "Thank you so much for making lockdown that little bit easier for us, tensions can be high at times."
- "I'll get the DofE stuff done keep sending the stuff in, it keeps my mind occupied thanks."

29. Barnardo's Scotland reflected and recorded events during Covid and these are published 'In This Together' reports which identified a range of work delivered by Barnardo's Scotland Services. These were published between 27th April and 6th July 2020. The justice version can be found here⁷.

30. As soon as it was possible for Barnardo's staff to re-enter prison we did so and resumed as normal a service as possible. Notable statutory and health services remained, rightly so, preoccupied by Covid responsibilities and the third sector were pivotal in ensuring supports to those who needed them.

31. On discharge from prison, services were equally fragmented, and community-based Barnardo's justice staff worked hard to ensure regular contact by phone or video and to ensure an essential link between the person and essential services. During the time that services were only offering remote interactions this was critical – Barnardo's workers were arranging health calls or interventions; support with benefits and access to money, food, and fuel; support accessing homelessness and housing services for those that needed them; and support in ensuring safe contact between people discharged from prison and their families. Barnardo's also

⁷ <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/InThisTogether-Justice.pdf>

provided family support services for impacted families – particularly essential when schools remained closed, or families had to self-isolate etc

Our experiences of service provision within HMP Edinburgh

32. At the end of March when lockdown was first introduced, SPS made the difficult decision to terminate all visits due to the Covid-19 Pandemic; this was a very difficult time for both the families and residents. Staff at the Visitor Centre continued to offer emotional and practical support to the families via telephone & home visits as some of them were finding it very difficult to manage not seeing their loved one.
33. We discussed with SPS the best way forward to ensure that we were keeping in contact with the most vulnerable families as some were socially isolated in the community with no support network. We advertised on Prison TV, offering all residents food parcels for their families and activity packs for their children. We wanted to alleviate some of the stress and pressure the families were feeling especially as they were unable to see their loved ones and we hoped that if the residents knew their families were being looked after this would also alleviate some of the stress and worry they were feeling.
34. Working in partnership with SPS & Early Years Scotland we delivered activity packs for children under 5 and this gave us an opportunity to complete welfare checks to ensure that the children and families were managing during this difficult time. SPS gave us literature and leaflets and supported us with delivering food parcels to give to the families to enable them to receive information and guidance on the new processes that they were putting in place. There were question and answer sheets to help the visitors understand the changes that were taking place and hopefully this would alleviate any stress the families were feeling at this difficult time.
35. We facilitated welfare visits and delivered food parcels for families at the family home and offered emotional and practical support. Some of the children & families we visited were finding it very difficult to manage not seeing their loved one and this gave us an opportunity to ensure that we could answer any concerns they may have and offer emotional support - as a lot of the families were isolated and had no support network. During these visits we found that some families were not able to meet their basic needs, with some children not having beds to sleep in.
36. Through Barnardo's cost of living fund, we were able to help families purchase, beds & furniture and we helped families with paint, wallpaper & carpets to ensure that their living area was at a respectable standard. This also gave us an opportunity to highlight any safeguarding concerns that we may have, and we relayed this information to Prison Based Social Work.
37. When SPS introduced the virtual visits some of the families found it difficult to access them as they were unable to manage the connectivity and did not have the appropriate equipment. Barnardo's accessed some funding from Connect Scotland where we were able to support 68 families

with tablets, iPads and connectively to ensure that they could contact their loved one in prison.

- 38. Case Study: K regularly attends the visitor centre with her family. She has no support network due to her partner's offence and is unable to leave the family home. K was receiving abuse and threats from the neighbours whenever she left the house which was causing her a lot of distress and upset. We went to the family home with shopping on a weekly basis and activity packs for the children to try and ease the stress for her and to minimise her going to the shops. This resulted in K not having to leave the family home as much and made her feel a bit better and safer not having to queue at the shop.**

The view of the person, organisation, or body as to whether the group(s)/individuals they support or represent were adequately considered when decisions about the response to the COVID-19 pandemic were made by the Scottish Government.

39. From Barnardo's Scotland perspective, the impact of lockdown and Covid restrictions had a detrimental impact on people in prison. Services were stretched in responding to the pandemic, there were staff shortages, illnesses, and deaths. It was an anxious time within prisons and the impact on mental health, wellbeing, drug use, behavioural issues, and violence, alongside long times in cells and lack of support services, has been noted.
40. Connections with family and community supports were difficult and less frequent. The justice system faced backlogs and other challenges, periods on remand were extended. Despite efforts, it is not clear that there was sufficient and meaningful engagement with people in prison to adequately engage them in decisions and decision-making. Certainly, attempts were made around early release and other judicial measures, but these were not used frequently enough to have much impact - and people in prison often articulated that there was a lack of care and response to their situation.
41. For example, the immediate economic impact on people in prison, their families meant that many were struggling to afford the essentials. The long-term impact of accruing debt is apparent for those now living in the community. Many describe the long-term negative effects of their (Covid) prison sentence on their mental health, addiction, relationships, and vulnerabilities that may lead them to commit further offences.
42. We made successful bids to the Scottish Government Immediate Priorities Fund in April 2020, Winter Support Fund in 2020-21 and 2021-22 in addition to the Summer Wellbeing Recovery Fund in 2021. These funds allowed us to provide essential resources directly to children and families who were most in need or impacted by the pandemic.

A brief summary of the views of the person, organisation or body, or the group(s)/individuals they represent, as to the lessons, if any, that can be learned from the Scottish Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

43. It is the view of Barnardo's Scotland that the pandemic and its response showed the possibilities for the Scottish Government, local authorities and the third sector to work together to mobilise support to children and families most in need. The common purpose and determination to minimise red tape were defining features of the early pandemic period.

44. The third sector also worked together collaboratively and our joint approach to government with Action for Children Scotland was a clear example of this. Government funds were distributed effectively to those most in need with monitoring and reporting requirements kept to a minimum. The trust placed in Barnardo's and other charities was a real positive during such a difficult period.

Signed: **Personal Data**

Dated: 23/02/24