
EARLY YEARS COMMISSION

A CROSS-PARTY
MANIFESTO

JULY 2021

FABIAN
SOCIETY

CSJ The Centre for
Social Justice



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OUR DECLARATION

Our country must give every child the best start in life, and right now we are falling short.

Despite improvements among some children, too many continue to fall behind in their first few years, particularly those living in poverty. Many are not ready to learn by the age of five and struggle with their health and wellbeing, leading to damaging long-term consequences.

This reality obstructs our country's path to a more prosperous future. We will never truly level up if we don't recognise this. There are steps we can take now to help those children, even though they and we may not realise the benefits for decades.

Between now and 2030, we must all work together to make our country the best to be born into.

We call on central and local government, community organisations, the private sector, parents, and society as a whole to come together to achieve this goal.

* Commissioners serve in an individual capacity, and this manifesto does not represent the views of the organisations with which they are involved.



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HOW THE COMMISSION GOT HERE

In 2020 the Centre for Social Justice and the Fabian Society were commissioned by Kindred² to become the secretariat for an Early Years Commission, in recognition that giving all children the best start in life should be front and centre of every government's policy agenda. An independent, cross-party approach is the most effective way of ensuring that the early years become a priority, and stays a priority, for longer than one election cycle.

Over nine months, the Early Years Commission heard from organisations and individuals committed to giving every child the best start in life and pushing for a change in early years policy. The Commission's remit was broad, but our central focus was on children from conception to the age of five.

Our work started with a review of the available evidence on early years and the recommendations made over the past 10 years. This allowed us to identify common themes and ideas to focus on. We also received written evidence from 64 organisations and oral evidence from 15 witnesses (see Annexes 1 and 2). We held three roundtables and numerous focused discussions with stakeholders across the early years sector.

The evidence these experts presented informed our cross-party, cross-sector recommendations and manifesto for change. Our manifesto is a declaration of consensus on short-term and longer term changes which, together, would provide comprehensive support for our young children at home and in the community.

We also commissioned YouGov to survey 3,023 adults across England. The survey was carried out online and sent to members of YouGov's panel. Fieldwork was undertaken between 16 and 18 December 2020. We asked five questions on the coronavirus pandemic, investment in public services for children under five, and the facilities that are important for families.

The remit of this manifesto is England only. Early years, health, and local government policy are devolved matters.



CO-CHAIRS' FOREWORD


Many of us have gained a new perspective on parenthood in the many months we've now endured this pandemic. But when it comes to supporting children in the earliest years of their lives, we all need to look forward to the next 10 years, and beyond.

This crisis means different things for different parents. For some it has meant enjoying more time with their children. But for others the consequences have been severe, as families have fallen through the cracks of a system in a state of shock: reduced access to childcare; no access to family networks for support; unstable or sharply reduced income; and the pressure of balancing home education and work – with severe consequences for their wellbeing.

School closures have made the most headlines, but we must also focus on the first years of a child's life, and what the pandemic's effect on families with young children says about the long-term future of the support available at this crucial period. Our polling found just 1 per cent of adults in England believe that children under five have been prioritised the most by the Government during the coronavirus pandemic.

For example, whilst we acknowledge the Government's 'catch-up' fund for children in primary and secondary schools, its scope could have been widened to include maintained nurseries and early years providers, safeguarding the burgeoning development of young children, and improving childcare and working opportunities for their parents.

Anne Longfield CBE, the former Children's Commissioner for England, was right to shine a light on the early education sector, which has been unduly affected by the crisis, and we welcome the Government's review into early years and healthy development in the first 1,001 days, led by Andrea Leadsom MP. The Duchess of Cambridge's powerful call for all of us to do more to understand the special importance of the early years, and the role of everyone to support parents, needs to be heeded and acted upon.



Our polling found just 1 per cent of adults in England believe that children under five have been prioritised the most by the Government during the coronavirus pandemic

The experience of adversity in our earliest years relates closely to poverty, unemployment, homelessness, and poor mental, emotional and physical health later in life.

And while the current circumstances are exceptional, this crisis is shining a light on the system of support for our youngest children which, despite the dedication and hard work of many, is too often dysfunctional and fragmented.

That's why we set up our cross-party Early Years Commission – to address long-term challenges, and to set out a long-term plan. We came together across the party-political divide to chair this Commission jointly – as a Conservative MP and a Labour MP who differ in many ways, but who have both dedicated much of our parliamentary careers to the early years. Having acted as Minister and Shadow Minister for Children and Families, it was clear that, even when facing off across the dispatch box, we both agreed on the fundamental importance of this issue.

Many charities, academics and campaigners have provided us with a wealth of carefully considered policy ideas. Taken together they provide a great deal of common ground, fertile for discussion, and our Commission is united in its determination to secure a better future for our youngest children. The Centre for Social Justice and the Fabian Society formed our secretariat and, working together, we have set out a number of proposals that draw support from across the sector.

First, we must make young children society's top priority, by working to end child poverty and making sure our public services, and those they work alongside, deliver what the whole family needs. We must all help to make homes a nurturing and safe environment, giving parents time away from work, the financial stability to focus on their child, and the support they need to have strong and healthy relationships.

But our children must also be at the heart of their community. So, we need to invest effectively in early education, and in children's centres and family hubs where they provide integrated support to all children, especially to those in greatest need.

We know, instinctively, how important the first years of a child's life are. The evidence only confirms it. We also have a good idea about what we need to do to help – together, we aim to ensure that the Government does too.

They say it takes a village to raise a child. It will take a nation working together to bring up our next generation.



Sharon Hodgson MP

Early Years Commission Co-Chair
MP for Washington and Sunderland West



Edward Timpson MP

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SUMMARY

We could and should be serving our youngest children better. The pandemic has exposed problems which date back decades. A wealth of evidence shows emphatically that we need to get the first years right, and we are simply not doing so for too many children, especially those living in poverty.

Both parents and professionals are being overstretched. We will all pay the price if we turn a blind eye to this.

The education, health and development of young children must be society's top priority when it comes to the levelling-up agenda. We need a relentless and inclusive focus on the early years.

Our three core priorities are to:

- Make young children society's top priority, by working to end child poverty and deliver public service innovation focused on their needs regardless of circumstance.
- Support parents to make their homes a nurturing, safe environment where a baby takes their first steps into a healthy, long, and happy life. We can do so by giving parents time away from work, the financial stability to focus on their child, and the community and professional support they need to have strong and healthy relationships.
- Put our children at the heart of their community and public services, which we can do by investing in early education – as well as children's centres and family hubs that provide integrated support to all children, but especially those in greatest need.

Our cross-party Commission believes that its recommendations would transform the lives of our youngest children. Commissioners' views are informed both by their own expertise and by the experiences and insights of the many policymakers, campaigners, and practitioners they consulted during this inquiry.

Now, we must act.

Problem	Short term solution (2024)	Long term solution (2030)
Our public services work in silos and are unable to give young children top priority.	Draw together early years public service spending in each local authority to deliver a place-based, coordinated offer with children at its heart.	
Parents cannot afford to take time away from work to nurture their children.	Expand parents' statutory day-one employment right to paid leave to attend antenatal appointments, and for care or medical appointments during the early years period.	Extend rights to maternity, paternity, and shared parental leave for employees.
Children are not receiving the health visits they need to ensure they are healthy and ready for school.	Guarantee every child receives all the health visits they are entitled to; bring local and national government together to improve the available data; and increase the public health grant.	Integrate health and education support provided to children, and introduce two mandatory new age-based health visitor checks.
Low quality parent-child and parent-parent relationships during the early years period can have lasting negative effects on children's development.	Work with local authorities to develop a dedicated, locally relevant parent support service in every community.	
The early education workforce and budget need to be set up for success before outcomes for children will be improved.	Raise the skills of early education practitioners by investing in continuing professional development.	Fundamentally overhaul the early years funding model, and replace it with a new settlement that prioritises the child more effectively.
Not enough families have access to essential services located in children's centres and family hubs.	Adopt a 'Tell Us Once' approach to birth registration and move this service to children's centres and family hubs.	Roll out high-quality children's centres and family hubs across the country – prioritising areas that need them most.

Together, our proposals realise the promise of prudent, effective early years support. The steps we take over the next decade will be rewarded: we will see happier and healthier children, a society that allows every person to flourish, a stronger economy, and levelling-up across England.



IN THE HOME

PREGNANCY TO AGE 5

Develop a dedicated, locally relevant parent support service. Guarantee every child receives all the health visits they are entitled to



IN THE COMMUNITY

PREGNANCY TO AGE 5

Roll out high-quality children's centres and family hubs across the country – prioritising areas that need them most

PREGNANCY

Expand parents' statutory day-one employment right to paid leave to attend antenatal appointments, and for care or medical appointments



AGE 0

Adopt a 'Tell Us Once' approach to birth registration and move this service to children's centres and family hubs



AGE 0-1

Extend rights to maternity, paternity, and shared parental leave for employees



AGE 1-2

Introduce a new health visit when child is 18 months old



AGE 3

Introduce a new health visit when a child is between 3 and 3.5 years old



AGE 2+

Radically overhaul the early years funding model, and replace it with a new settlement that prioritises the child more effectively.

Raise the skills of early education practitioners by investing in continuing professional development.



INTRODUCTION

THE CASE FOR ACTION

Many more babies, young children and their families could and should be getting a better start in life. However, we know that inequalities open up early, poverty can scar deeply, and life chances are cut short.



More than **TWO MILLION FAMILIES** with children under five are living in poverty, and poverty is rising fastest for the youngest children¹



At just three years old, a child growing up in poverty is nearly **ONE AND A HALF YEARS BEHIND** their more affluent peers when it comes to early language development²



Each year **185,000 CHILDREN START SCHOOL NOT READY TO LEARN**, and children eligible for free school meals are one and a half times more likely to be behind their peers in early learning and development³



Since 2013, there **HASN'T BEEN ENOUGH PROGRESS** in tackling the early years educational attainment gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged children⁴

1 Households below average income. Department for Work and Pensions, March 2019; Best beginnings in the early years. Children's Commissioner, 2020.

2 Read on. Get on: How reading can help children escape poverty. Literacy Trust, 2014.

3 Best beginnings in the early years. Children's Commissioner, 2020.

4 Education in England: annual report 2020, Jo Hutchinson et al. Education Policy Institute, 2020.

We know that some families are hit particularly hard. By age five, boys, Black, and Asian children, children with special educational needs and disabilities, and those eligible for free school meals (FSM) of all ethnicities are more likely to be not ready for school.⁵ There is also significant regional variation: a child qualifying for FSM in London is 30 per cent more likely to be at the expected standard at the end of reception than a child in the Leeds City Region, Greater Manchester or on Merseyside.⁶ We consistently let our most disadvantaged children and families down when making policy choices, despite everything we know about the costs of doing so.

We find our country in this situation because our youngest children are not treated as our top priority for public spending.

- Public spending on under-fives is 10 times less than it is for secondary education, resulting in underfunded and badly coordinated early years services.⁷
- Over the past decade we have seen local authority spending on early intervention services, such as children's centres and family support, decrease by 46 per cent in real terms, while spending on late intervention services, such as safeguarding and children in care, has increased by 29 per cent in real terms.⁸ In England and Wales, nearly £17bn a year is spent on the cost of late intervention.⁹

Taken together, these facts demonstrate that it is critical that we invest in the early years to avoid costs later in a child's life. These are longstanding problems that highlight the need for a long-term transformation in the way we prioritise the early years period.

But 2020 exposed these failures like never before.¹⁰ The measures needed to tackle the Covid-19 pandemic have narrowed life chances and entrenched existing disadvantage. Inequalities have opened up across society.

By age five, children with special educational needs and disabilities, and those eligible for free school meals (FSM) of all ethnicities are more likely to be not ready for school

5 Achievement in early years foundation stage profile (EYFSP) teacher assessments by pupil. Department for Education, 2020.

6 Best beginnings in the early years. Children's Commissioner, 2020.

7 Public spending statistics. HM Treasury and Office of National Statistics, 2019.

8 Children and young people's services: Funding and spending 2010/11 to 2018/19. Action for Children, Barnardo's, NSPCC, National Children's Bureau and The Children's Society, 2020.

9 The cost of late intervention: EIF analysis 2016, Haroon Chowdry & Peter Fitzsimons. Early Intervention Foundation, 2016.

10 Working for babies: Lockdown lessons from local systems, Jodie Reed & Natalie Parish. Parent-Infant Foundation, 2021; A critical juncture for public services: lessons from Covid-19, Public Services Committee. House of Lords, 13th November 2020.



According to a YouGov survey in December 2020, which we commissioned, just 1 per cent of adults in England believe that children under-5 have been prioritised by the Government during the coronavirus pandemic.¹¹

The Babies in Lockdown study found that: “Many families with lower incomes, from Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities and young parents have been hit harder by the COVID-19 pandemic.”¹² Mothers have given birth without the presence and support of their partners or babies’ fathers, and some children may have been nine months or older before they met another baby.¹³ Ofsted has warned the pandemic will leave a legacy of child abuse, neglect and harm, as vulnerable children have slipped out of sight of public services.¹⁴

11 All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 3,023 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 16th–18th December 2020. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all English adults (aged 18+).

12 Babies in lockdown: listening to parents to build back better. Best Beginnings, Home-Start UK, and the Parent-Infant Foundation, 2020.

13 Only 23% of NHS trusts letting birth partners stay for whole of labour. Alexandra Topping and Pamela Duncan. The Guardian, Friday 25th September 2020.

14 ‘Toxic lockdown’ sees huge rise in babies harmed or killed, Hannah Richardson. BBC, 6th November. Vulnerable children in lockdown ‘national concern’, Sean Coughlan. BBC, 1st December 2020.

To mitigate this, the Government must immediately focus on ensuring families recover properly by providing catch-up funding for the early years services that have struggled during Covid-19 restrictions, as they have with schools. Poverty is likely to have got worse during Covid-19.¹⁵ Many families have struggled financially and are finding it difficult to afford essentials, although the Universal Credit £20 uplift has kept many families afloat and out of poverty. We welcome the Government's commitment to maintain the uplift for another six months beyond April 2021. The Government should maintain a system of financial security for families to reduce poverty and protect the life chances of thousands of young children.

But as we look beyond the pandemic, we must improve the way we support our children before they start school. To give every child the best start in life, we must combine the care and resources of both the home and the community. And to do this, we need leadership – both from the very top of national government and within our communities.

Resources are limited, but responsible investment now avoids costs later, and the pandemic increases both the necessity and efficacy of this requirement. Amidst the cacophony of demands on the Treasury, as we bring the Covid-19 virus under control with the national vaccination programme, this request cannot be placed at the bottom of the Chancellor's red box.

Some young children need more support than others, but to reach them we need high-quality services for all, that empower every family, and that are held together by strong relationships at home and in the community. There can be no more piecemeal reform or tinkering: it is only through deep strategic transformation and long-term commitment that we can deliver the change our youngest children need and deserve.

This is the spirit which originally brought the Early Years Commission together, before Covid-19 struck: to establish a cross-party, long-term agenda for fundamental change in early years. The pandemic makes our work all the more urgent.

¹⁵ Poverty and COVID-19. Social Metrics Commission, 2020.

The Public and Early Years Services

As we look to rebuild post-Covid-19, there is widespread support for increasing investment in services for young children and families. According to our YouGov survey, only 19 per cent would oppose an increase if it was paid for by increasing taxes or by cuts to other services, compared to 43 per cent who would support it. In the so-called 'Red Wall' seats, just 16 per cent would oppose such a choice.

The public also believes that investing in better services for children under five would have a positive effect on their local area, with 56 per cent agreeing. Respondents in 'town and fringe' areas, as defined by the Office for National Statistics, were more likely to agree with 60 per cent saying it would have a positive impact, while 56 per cent in urban areas said it would have a positive effect.

There is a strong consensus across England on the types of facilities for families with young children that the Government should focus on:

- When asked to choose the three facilities that they felt were most important for families with young children, 46 per cent chose nurseries, while 43 per cent chose children's centre and family hubs. Half (50 per cent) selected parks.¹⁶
- Similarly, 55 per cent of Labour voters in 2017 who switched to the Conservatives in 2019 choose children's centres and family hubs as one of the most important facilities, while 48 per cent chose nurseries.
- Over-65s were also most likely age group to choose nurseries (50 per cent) and children's centres and family hubs (51 per cent) as most important.

¹⁶ The YouGov survey presented respondents with 10 different options. They were able to select up to three.

A photograph of a woman with dark hair hugging a young child with curly hair from behind. The child is smiling and has their hand near their mouth. The entire image is overlaid with a semi-transparent red filter. A large, semi-transparent white number '1' is positioned on the left side of the image.

1

**MAKING YOUNG
CHILDREN THE
PRIORITY**

Young children are affected by a range of government policies and yet they are rarely, if ever, the priority when it comes to matters of public policy.

As a result, families must often attempt to navigate their way through a disjointed array of public services. This is challenging for all families, but especially for those with children who have special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

Despite the dedication of public sector workers, many services appear detached from their purpose: providers of services often do not know who they are supposed to help, what help is needed, and how help can be provided in ways that work for children. Too often, the most vulnerable fall down the gaps between public service silos and become invisible. This can even happen if a child is at serious risk.¹⁷

This stems, in part, from significant underfunding, but also flows from our failure to use existing monies as effectively as possible.¹⁸ Children and families need services that offer coherent, relevant and familiar support based on local strengths and relationships. Our complex and disjointed system of services – both national and local – often overwhelms the most disadvantaged families, particularly if they have complex needs or a disabled child.

There is limited and inconsistent communication and collaboration between different agencies, which means that many families waste time providing them all with the same information.¹⁹

We need an overarching framework for the early years at national level. Government departments work in their own siloes, while the way we fund early years services can undermine cooperation, because the departments that spend are not always the ones which benefit the most from it. All of this encourages ‘firefighting’ and tackling emergencies, leaving gaps in provision and missed opportunities to prevent problems arising in the first place.²⁰

Children and families need services that offer coherent, relevant and familiar support based on local strengths and relationships

17 A critical juncture for public services: lessons from Covid-19, Public Services Committee. House of Lords, 13th November 2020.

18 A critical juncture for public services: lessons from Covid-19, Public Services Committee. House of Lords, 13th November 2020.

19 A critical juncture for public services: lessons from Covid-19, Public Services Committee. House of Lords, 13th November 2020.

20 First 1000 days of life, Health and Social Care Committee. House of Commons, February 2019.



This is even more problematic in the context of a severe health pandemic. If our country is to recover from the devastating impact of Covid-19, we need to make young children and early years the centrepiece of our plans at both national and local levels. And we need clear responsibilities and effective coordination of the many public services that affect families and young children. Achieving these ambitions requires strong leadership at all levels of government, and a commitment to pursuing excellence in practice.

- 1. Local government should be supported by national government to draw together early years public service spending in local authorities to deliver a place-based, coordinated offer with children at its heart**

Councils should first find gaps in provision by identifying the services families can currently access; the services they need in the community; and the barriers certain groups face in accessing support. They should then consider how pooling different budgets can support a range of new universal and targeted services to

improve outcomes for young children – for example those relating to early help, health visiting, early education, children’s services, and relationship support.

Reform should pay strong attention to ease of access, and should improve the interoperability of services by improving data sharing. Local authorities should work with the NHS to establish partnerships and joint commissioning of services around a set of shared outcomes for the local community. By partnering with community organisations, they should aim to close gaps between services, improve outreach to identify children who are ‘invisible’, and build trust in support services.

Meanwhile, national government should draw from the logic of the Supporting Families Programme (formerly the Troubled Families Programme) to incentivise local authorities to invest and pool spending on successful, evidence-led preventative approaches in the early years more generally, just as the programme did for family support.²¹ An increased multi-year funding settlement for councils would support this, by improving local government capacity, service integration, data sharing, and innovation. It would also enable local government to take a full leadership role in coordinating early years provision.

The Government should also build on the Leadsom Review with a cross-departmental strategy on early years from conception to age 5, led by a cabinet minister, which would draw together the work of different departments including:

- A framework setting out how all public bodies and various early years services should work together that encourages joint commissioning.
- A shared purpose across institutions and early years professions to encourage joint working.
- A commitment to improving family financial security, while lessening the extent and impact of child poverty in the earliest years.
- Goals, among others, to eliminate infant mortality, improve child health, boost school readiness and the home learning environment, and increase data collection on early intervention.

By partnering with community organisations, (local authorities) should aim to close gaps between services, improve outreach to identify children who are ‘invisible’, and build trust in support services

21 Working with troubled families: a guide to evidence and good practice. GOV.UK; Children’s services funding & early intervention. County Councils Network, May 2020.

This strategy should be supplemented by a strengthened ‘family test’, which should be placed on a statutory footing.²² A strengthened family test would help Parliament, charities and other entities to hold departments to account during the policy-making process. The Government should also work with local authorities and NHS bodies to pilot an equivalent local family test.

The cabinet minister would be responsible for overseeing a ministerial committee or taskforce dedicated to implementing this strategy. They would also improve coordination across departments more generally so that the early years and children are at the heart of the work of the Government and all public services.



22 Family test: assessing the impact of policies on families. GOV.UK; Implementing the family test: A review of progress one year on. The Family and Childcare Trust, Relate, Relationship Foundation et al, 2016.

EARLY YEARS IN THE HOME



Children need a supportive home environment: it is associated with better outcomes for the child, which makes a substantial difference over the long term.²³

Parents who have enough money to meet their family's needs, who engage in meaningful activities with their child, or who focus on having warm, responsive relationships can enhance the child's wellbeing and development significantly.²⁴

At the moment, many children are not receiving this and we are letting families down. Too many parents do not have the financial support they need to spend time at home, while health visits during crucial years of development are too sparse and too inconsistently delivered, resulting in inadequate support. The result is that too many children do not develop in a healthy way, with inequalities opening up between disadvantaged children and their peers.

We must support parents to take the time to care for and educate their children and use health visits and relationship-based support to ensure that children are healthy, well developed, and ready to start school at the age of five.

PARENTAL EMPLOYMENT RIGHTS

To support the development of their children at the start of their lives, parents must be able to spend meaningful time with their child and with each other free from financial pressures, as far as possible. The evidence is clear: this can positively shape the physical and mental health of both the mother and the baby, while the length of maternity leave has been directly linked to the quality of mother-child interactions.²⁵ Ensuring that fathers and partners of mothers are involved in those first few weeks is also a good predictor of later involvement, especially if they are involved at the same time as the mother.²⁶

23 Parenting style influences child development and social mobility: evidence briefing. Economic and Social Research Council, 2012.

24 Home matters: Making the most of the home learning environment. National Literacy Trust, National Children's Bureau (NCB), People and the Foundation Years Trust, 2018.

25 The role of length of maternity leave in supporting mother-child interactions and attachment security among American mothers and their infants, Raquel Ploka et al. International Journal of Child Care and Education Policy, 2018.

26 Fathers' role in the care and development of their children: the role of paediatricians, Michael Yogman et al. American Academy of Paediatrics, 2016; Who stays and who leaves? Father accessibility across children's first 5 years, Jacqueline D. Shannon et al. Parent Sci Pract, 2009.

Indeed, fathers who are engaged with a child's development in the early years are a third less likely to separate from the child's mother.²⁷ Two-thirds of mothers say their partners are their primary source of support during the pregnancy period.²⁸ A father's involvement during pregnancy is also linked to the baby's health during the first year, which influences a child's later wellbeing.²⁹

SHORT TERM

1. The Government should expand parents' statutory day-one employment right to paid leave to attend antenatal appointments, and for care or medical appointments during the early years period

In many cases, parents are not entitled to paid leave at important points during the antenatal and early years period. Fathers and partners of mothers are only entitled to unpaid time off employment to attend up to two antenatal appointments. As a result, they are likely to miss antenatal appointments, either because they have no right to take time off work, or because they cannot afford to do so.³⁰ Conversely, healthy pregnant women can have paid time off to attend between nine and 12 such appointments.

Once the child is born, parents are not entitled to paid time off for medical appointments or, in the case of parents with disabled children, time off to put in new complex and often unexpected care arrangements.³¹ Many are forced to take unpaid leave, which means they are financially worse off, and some are deterred from working at all.

The Government should expand parents' statutory day-one employment right to paid leave to attend antenatal appointments, and for care or medical appointments during the early years period. Fathers and partners of mothers should be entitled to take paid leave for four antenatal appointments. The leave would be used according to the needs of parents, but it would enable fathers and partners of mothers to attend the initial appointment, the scan at 12 or

27 Supporting families in the foundation years, Department of Education and Department of Health, 2011.

28 Testing times: Supporting fathers during the perinatal period and early parenthood. Centre for Social Justice, 2018.

29 All babies count, the dad project. NSPCC, 2014.

30 Pregnant women currently have a legal entitlement to paid time off to attend antenatal appointments on the advice of a doctor, midwife or health visitor. Employers must agree to any reasonable request for time off for this purpose.

31 2018 off balance – Parents of disabled children and paid work. Working Families, 2018.



20 weeks, plus two further appointments.³² All parents should be entitled to take paid leave for their child's medical appointments during the early years period. Parents of disabled children should be entitled to an additional period of paid 'adjustment leave' for up to 10 days, upon a new diagnosis or change in their child's condition. This would help them to absorb the news and allow them to put new care arrangements in place. Employers must make it clear that their employees have these rights.

While these new rights to paid leave would be for employed parents, the Government should consider ways to ensure self-employed parents can access support to enable them to attend appointments and take adjustment leave.

Together, these measures would allow more parents to be fully engaged in caring for their child, and they would be able to focus on their family without the anxiety of taking unpaid leave or the possibility of losing their job.

These measures would allow more parents to be fully engaged in caring for their child, and they would be able to focus on their family without the anxiety of taking unpaid leave

32 The condition of Britain: Strategies for social renewal, Kaye Lawton et al. IPPR, 2014.

LONG TERM

2. The Government should extend rights to maternity, paternity, and shared parental leave for employees

Parents are not always able to spend meaningful time with their children during the early years. Due to the financial strain associated with staying at home, some parents, especially from low-income families, return to work earlier than they would have preferred.

New mothers, and fathers or partners of mothers, are entitled to a modest amount of leave, and many are not entitled to any at all. Indeed, more than a quarter of employed women are not eligible for paid maternity leave, while nearly a quarter of employed men are not eligible for paid paternity leave.³³ The UK is ranked 34th out of 41 OECD countries in terms of the length and generosity of paid leave available to mothers, and ranked 28th out of 34 OECD countries regarding paid leave available to fathers and partners of mothers.³⁴

In addition, the uptake of shared parental leave – which provides the opportunity for the mother to transfer some of her leave to the father or partner of the mother – is relatively low, with just 3.6 per cent of eligible couples using it in 2019/20.³⁵

The Government should extend rights to maternity, paternity and shared parental leave for employees:

- Maternity and paternity leave should be available from day one of employment. Employers would still be reimbursed for most of the costs of statutory maternity, paternity and parental leave.
- Compulsory maternity leave should be increased from two weeks to six weeks, paid at 90 per cent of average weekly earnings, or 100 per cent of National Living Wage, whichever is higher. An additional eight weeks should be provided on a use-it-or-lose-it basis, providing mothers with a core entitlement of 14 weeks overall – the recommended international standard for the minimum period of this leave.³⁶

33 Inequalities in access to paid maternity and paternity leave and flexible work, Margaret O'Brien et al. *Modern Fatherhood*, 2017.

34 Are the world's richest countries family friendly? Policy in the OECD and EU, 2019.

35 Honey, I shrunk the Shared Parental Leave take-up figures, Richard Dunstan. *Maternity Action*, 15th February 2021.

36 Maternity and paternity at work: Law and practice across the world. International Labour Organisation, 2014.

- Two weeks of compulsory paternity leave for fathers and partners of mothers should be introduced, paid at 90 per cent of average weekly earnings, or 100 per cent of National Living Wage, whichever is higher. An additional 10 weeks should be provided on a use-it-or-lose-it basis, which could be taken at any time over the first year of a child's life, providing fathers and partners of mothers with a core entitlement of 12 weeks.
- Replace the option of the mother transferring maternity leave to the father or partner with an entitlement to shared parental leave that provides an entitlement of 60 weeks of well-paid parental leave that can be shared as a couple wishes (or for a single parent).
- To ensure that parents are not worse off by taking all non-compulsory leave, whether 'use it or lose it' leave or shared parental leave, the Government should increase statutory pay for all new parents to at least the National Living Wage.

The Government should also consider addressing the challenges self-employed people face when seeking leave to spend adequate time with their child during the early years. This would give working parents clearer and stronger rights, and would likely boost the amount of time both parents spend caring for their baby, particularly fathers and partners of mothers.



Table 1: A comparison between parental leave and pay in Sweden and England

	Sweden	England (currently)	England (if this recommendation was implemented)
Shared Parental Leave	60 weeks	50 weeks (maternity leave that is transferable to the father or partner of the mother)	60 weeks
Maternity Leave	12 weeks (two weeks compulsory, 10 weeks non-compulsory)	52 weeks (2 weeks compulsory, 50 weeks non-compulsory and shareable with the father or partner)	14 weeks (6 weeks compulsory, 8 weeks non-compulsory)
Paternity Leave	12 weeks (12 weeks non-compulsory)	2 weeks (0 weeks compulsory, 2 weeks non-compulsory)	12 weeks (2 weeks compulsory, 10 weeks non-compulsory)
Pay	The first 390 days paid at 80 per cent of a parent's salary up to a maximum of £595 a week; the final 90 days paid at £105 a week ³⁷	<p>Maternity leave: first 6 weeks paid at 90 per cent of a mother's average weekly earnings; the next 33 weeks paid at £151.97 a week or 90 per cent of a mother's average weekly earnings whichever is lower; remaining 13 weeks unpaid</p> <p>Paternity leave: £151.97 a week, or 90 per cent of the parent's average weekly earnings, whichever is lower</p> <p>Shared parental leave: £151.97 a week or 90 per cent of the parent's average weekly earnings, whichever is lower</p>	Compulsory leave paid at 90 per cent of average weekly earnings or 100 per cent of National Living Wage, whichever is higher. Non-compulsory leave paid at £344 a week (based on 37.5 hours a week)

37 Based on the exchange rate of Swedish krona to British pounds in January 2021.



HEALTH VISITING

Health visitors, registered nurses and midwives who have additional training in community public health nursing play an invaluable role in ensuring that every child has the best start in life. They carry out health checks, providing support and advice to parents as part of a universal preventative service. They work through the Healthy Child Programme, which is an evidence-based framework that delivers public health services to children and families from conception to the age of five.³⁸

As part of this programme, all children should receive five mandated health visits and checks, which are a crucial opportunity to identify health risks or the need for extra support. They can also be an opportunity to assess the broader development of a young child, as well as providing advice on wellbeing and parenting. In March 2021, Public Health England proposed an additional two suggested checks in the first six months of a child's life.³⁹

Looking to the future, we don't just need existing entitlements delivered as they should be; we also need integrated education and health support, facilitated through additional checks

38 What works to enhance the effectiveness of the Healthy Child Programme: An evidence update, Kirsten Asmussen and Lucy Brims. Early Intervention Foundation, 2018.

39 Best start in life and beyond: Improving public health outcomes for children, young people and families. Public Health England, March 2021.

However, the numbers of health visitors and funding for public health have both fallen since 2015, following the transfer of responsibility for delivering the Healthy Child Programme from NHS England to local authorities.⁴⁰ With perinatal mental illness affecting up to 20 per cent of new and expectant mothers, and around 10 per cent of new fathers, health visits do not make a sufficient impact on psychological wellbeing in those earliest years for either the parents or the child.⁴¹

Many vulnerable families have already missed vital health visits due to Covid-19, and the abolition of Public Health England is likely to lead to a period of adaption, which could disrupt some services. Looking to the future, we don't just need existing entitlements delivered as they should be; we also need integrated education and health support, facilitated through additional checks.

SHORT TERM

3. The Government should guarantee that every child receives all the health visits they are entitled to; bring local and national government together to improve the available data; and increase the public health grant

Since 2015 the local government public health funding grant has been reduced by £700m, contributing to the gradual decrease in the number of practising health visitors and their significantly increased caseloads. In 2018/19, 84 per cent of local authorities had an average health visitor caseload above the recommended safe ratio of 250.⁴²

As a consequence, not all children are receiving their health checks, with around 80 per cent of children receiving the health checks they are eligible for. There are also concerning disparities in the proportion of children who receive their check at two to two and a half years.

For example, it is estimated that 91 per cent of eligible children in the North East receive it, but only 68 per cent in London.⁴³

Data also suggest that children from Black, Asian and mixed heritage families are less likely to receive checks.⁴⁴

40 Health and local public health cuts briefing. Local Government Association, 2019.

41 Getting it right for under-fives: An eight-point plan for an early years strategy. The British Psychological Society, 2020.

42 Best beginnings in the early years: Technical report two. Children's Commissioner, 2020.

43 Health visitor service delivery metrics: 2018 to 2019. Public Health England, 2019.

44 Health visiting experimental statistics from the community services data set, England 2018/19. NHS England, 2019.

While there are data on how many children are receiving home visits, there is little available to identify who specifically is not receiving them.⁴⁵ According to one recent study, only 13 per cent of local authorities could identify whether a child who missed their review at two to two and a half was also from a disadvantaged family, and only 13 per cent could identify whether a child who missed a review had special educational needs.⁴⁶ Incomplete data makes it hard for local authorities to identify children who would benefit from more targeted support, and for national government to support councils to improve the quality of their health visiting services.

The Government should guarantee every child receives all the health visits they are entitled to; bring local and national government together to improve the available data; and increase the public health grant. Deprived and otherwise disadvantaged communities should be targeted for improving the performance of health visits, including Black, Asian and minority ethnic families and families from outside the UK. Additional funding could help grow the health visiting workforce, reduce workloads, improve collaboration between midwives and health visitors, and provide crucial continuing professional development opportunities including on early mental health and the parent-infant relationship. It could also ensure that councils were better placed to help families who need health checks but are not currently accessing them.

The Government should also urgently support local authorities to gather complete data on the number of health visits families are receiving; which families are not receiving checks; and the number of health visitors operating in each area. This will enable local government to deliver locally relevant interventions and improve their services.

45 Evidence-based early years intervention, Science and Technology Committee. House of Commons, 2018.

46 Best beginnings in the early years. Children's Commissioner, 2020.



Many children are vulnerable to undetected issues that may affect their development, both in health and education, and a lack of support in the home

LONG TERM

4. The Government should integrate health and education support provided to children, and introduce two mandatory new age-based health visitor checks

Many children are vulnerable to undetected issues that may affect their development, both in health and education, and a lack of support in the home. The help that does exist often fails to blend approaches that support both education and health at the same time, especially for children from low-income families. As a result, the support provided is limited in effectiveness, despite the strong interplay between these elements in the early years of a child's life. Under the Healthy Child Programme, there is no visit or check for a child between the ages of one and two and a half years old, and the latter at two and a half years is the final one a child must



currently receive.⁴⁷ This means there is no health visit or check during a critical period of a child's development between 1 and two and a half years, and none between two and a half years and starting school, which would help to assess if a child is school-ready.⁴⁸ The recent introduction of two new suggested, non-mandatory health checks during the first six months, while welcome, was a missed opportunity to close the gaps in visits or checks later on in a child's life.

The Government should integrate health and education support provided to children, and introduce two new mandatory age-based visits or checks. As part of the Healthy Child Programme, the Government should introduce health visitor checks when a child is 18 months old, and when the child is aged between three and three and a half.

These additional visitor checks should be underpinned by adequate data sharing mechanisms that enable integration of the health and education support that children and families receive, by building on the progress around a shared identifier (for example, the NHS Digital Red Book) for every child.

Both additional checks should focus on improving the home learning environment and school readiness, especially for children living in disadvantaged families, with support provided where children are not meeting expected child development. There should

47 Continuing the mandation of the universal five health visiting checks, Viv Bennett. Public Health Matters, 2017.

48 First 1000 days of life, Health and Social Care Committee. House of Commons, 2019.

be recognition that psychological resilience, emotional health, and social development are an important part of school readiness.

The Government should consider a wide range of professionals, not just health visitors, to undertake these checks as part of the Healthy Child Programme (alongside adequate training), and should pilot a relevant programme to test their efficacy.

The aim should be to identify the best way to deliver integrated education and health support, without undermining the quality of help provided to children and families. Local authorities should be adequately supported financially to deliver the above.

RELATIONSHIP SUPPORT

The quality of the parent-child relationship during the early years period can have lasting effects on children's development, affecting their child's emotional regulation, communication, and problem-solving skills, and can also impact on the child's ability to form strong relationships.⁴⁹

Healthy attachment formation makes it easier for children to regulate their emotions, and to develop secure bonds during childhood and beyond. Conversely, children who do not form secure, nurturing relationships with primary carers are more likely to develop challenging behavioural traits (for instance, physical and verbal aggression); suffer from poor executive brain function (for example, diminished concentration and working memory); and be less resilient to substantial external shocks (such as family instability or poverty).⁵⁰

We also know that the quality of the relationship between parents, whether they are together or separated, is critically important, and has a lasting impact on a child's health and educational attainment.⁵¹ Frequent, intense and poorly resolved conflict between parents can cause stress and depression for children and the wider family.⁵²

Healthy attachment formation makes it easier for children to regulate their emotions, and to develop secure bonds during childhood and beyond

49 Foundations for life: What works to support parent-child interaction in the early years? Early Intervention Foundation, 2016.

50 Baby bonds, Sophie Moullin, Jane Waldfogel and Elizabeth Washbrook. Sutton Trust, 2014.

51 What works to enhance inter-parental relationships and improve outcomes for children, Gordon Harold et al. Department for Work and Pensions, 2016.

52 The impact of couple conflict on children. Tavistock Relationships, n.d.

SHORT AND LONG TERM

5. The Government should work with local authorities to develop a dedicated, locally relevant parent support service in every community

Despite the critical importance of the parent-child relationship and the relationship between parents to a child's development, many parents still lack access to relationship-based parenting support programmes. Better access to such programmes would help parents develop strong, healthy and resilient relationships with their child, and with one another.

The Government should work with local authorities to develop a dedicated, locally relevant parent support service in every community. National government should create a new fund which would support local authorities to develop such a service. This could be modelled on the Government's Early Outcomes Fund, which allowed local authorities to bid for grants to improve the collective operation of local services (on that occasion, in relation to early language outcomes).⁵³

New parent support services would offer families relationship-based support (both for parent-child relationships and parental relationships) from the conception of their child. Stakeholders across the local authority, local early years sector, the NHS and other community organisations would work together to design a new offer, taking as their benchmark the existing suite of relationship-based support services in their areas.

Booking antenatal appointments, the antenatal visits themselves, and birth registration would serve as crucial opportunities to signpost parents to support services that best suited their needs. The dedicated support service in each local authority area would leverage the enormous potential that already exists in the voluntary sector, as well as other crucial sources of support such as early help, children's centres and family hubs. Parents should have access to a range of services including, for example, parenting groups, one-to-one parent-child relationship support, and couple relationship support services.

Better access to programmes would help parents develop strong, healthy and resilient relationships with their child, and with one another

⁵³ Early outcomes fund: grants for local authorities. Department for Education, 2018.



**EARLY YEARS
IN THE
COMMUNITY**

Every family depends on services in their community to give their child the best start in life. Public services in the community are vital to improving health outcomes, psychological wellbeing, school readiness, and narrowing the educational attainment gap.

But we do not invest enough, and we do not invest effectively, in these services. The low amount of support available to families has a negative impact on some of the most vulnerable communities, particularly where the number of children in need is high.⁵⁴ Having little recourse to consistent support contributes to children in need having poor educational outcomes and poor mental health experiences.⁵⁵

We need to transform the services we deliver and use all the resources that exist in communities across our country to give every child the best start in life.

EARLY EDUCATION

High-quality early education plays a critical role in supporting a child's development, which in turn improves their school readiness and prospects in life. Disadvantaged children receive particular benefit from attending high-quality provision, especially when they are learning alongside children from different social backgrounds.⁵⁶ It is crucial for narrowing the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers, which is large when they start school.

Yet overall, children from the poorest backgrounds spend significantly less time in early education than children from more affluent backgrounds.⁵⁷ This is despite, or perhaps because of, a complex and regressive system of financial support.⁵⁸ In addition, we know from the evidence we have received that the early years workforce is not always given the support it needs – nor do we reward them in a way that reflects the important role they have in giving our children the best start in life.

54 Family hubs: A discussion paper. Children's Commissioner, 2016.

55 Family hubs: A discussion paper. Children's Commissioner, 2016.

56 Tackling disadvantage in the early years, Education Committee. House of Commons, 2019.

57 Closing the gap? Trends in educational attainment and disadvantage, Jon Andrews, David Robinson and Jo Hutchinson. Education Policy Institute, 2017.

58 Childcare, Treasury Committee. House of Commons, March 2018.

Covid-19 has highlighted the importance of early education, particularly to support children's early learning environment. But it has also made an already fragile sector even less stable, and the future looks concerning for many providers: 34 per cent in the most deprived areas told the Early Years Alliance that they do not expect to be operating in a year's time.⁵⁹ Many childminders have taken a pay cut, even if they received a grant through the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme, making it difficult for them to stay in the market.⁶⁰

SHORT TERM

6. The Government should raise the skills of early education practitioners by investing in continuing professional development

There is a clear need for early education practitioners to engage in training and continuing professional development (CPD) if there is to be any progress in tackling inequalities in the short-term. However, the withdrawal of the Graduate Leader Fund in 2011 dramatically reduced progress in developing a highly qualified and skilled workforce.⁶¹ Once employed, early education practitioners have limited opportunities for CPD, because early years providers have limited funding to support this. This creates barriers to career progression, contributing to a high turnover in staff as practitioners find jobs elsewhere.⁶² There is also evidence that training courses (including for level 3 qualifications) have become more expensive, although the National Skills Fund may mitigate this for those who want to achieve their first full level 3 qualification in childcare or related qualifications.⁶³

While the Government has created a £20m Early Years Professional Development Fund, which is targeted towards the most disadvantaged areas, this fund will only provide funding to train 3,000 early years practitioners in 1,500 private, voluntary, and independent settings.

59 COVID-19 and social mobility impact brief #4: Early years, Chris Pascal et al. The Sutton Trust, July 2020.

60 Challenges for the childcare market: The implications of COVID-19 for childcare providers in England, Jo Blanden et al. Institute of Fiscal Studies, September 2020.

61 Early years workforce review: Revisiting the Nutbrown Review – policy and impact, Chris Pascal et al, August 2020.

62 Understanding the early years workforce, Jonah Bury et al. NatCen, 2020.

63 The early years workforce: A fragmented picture, Sara Bonetti. Education Policy Institute, 2018; National Skills Fund Guidance. Department for Education, 9th December 2020.



The Government should raise the skills of early education practitioners by investing in CPD. More funding should be available to public, private, voluntary, and independent early year settings – as well as childminders – to allow greater access to high-quality training. This programme should seek to upskill workers in child development, relationship support, mental and emotional health in the early years, and in relation to special educational needs and disabilities. It should also enable more staff to become degree-qualified early years workers, and to undertake apprenticeships where appropriate. Early education practitioners should also be trained to work with other early years practitioners (for example, health visitors).

More funding should be available to public, private, voluntary, and independent early year settings – as well as childminders

LONG TERM

7. The Government should fundamentally overhaul the early years funding model, and should replace it with a new settlement that prioritises children more effectively

There are several challenges that flow from our current early education model:

- it is complex for parents to understand;⁶⁴
- it underpays and undervalues those who care for our children;⁶⁵
- it is costly for providers;⁶⁶
- there are questions over whether we have struck the right balance between quantity and quality of provision;⁶⁷ and
- there is a lack of high-quality places across the country, particularly in the most disadvantaged areas.⁶⁸

Total public spending on early education is around £5.4bn, yet costs for families are among the highest in the OECD.⁶⁹

Serious concerns have been raised about how we prioritise that spending: according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies “support for low-income workers fell from 45 per cent of total childcare spending in 2007 to just 17 per cent 10 years later, and the share of childcare spending targeted at low-income families working or not – stood at 27 per cent.”⁷⁰

The Government should fundamentally overhaul the early years funding model, and should replace it with a new settlement that prioritises the child more effectively. It should start with a zero-based review, focusing on how we can most efficiently

64 A plan for jobs needs a plan for childcare. National Day Nurseries Association, 2020.

65 The stability of the early years workforce in England. Social Mobility Commission, 2020.

66 A plan for jobs needs a plan for childcare. National Day Nurseries Association, 2020.

67 Closing Gaps Early, Kitty Stewart and Jane Waldfogel. Sutton Trust, 2017; The Conservative governments’ record on early childhood from May 2015 to pre-COVID 2020: Policies, spending and outcomes, Kitty Stewart and Mary Reader, 2020.

68 Supporting disadvantaged families through free early education and childcare entitlements in England. National Audit Office, 2020; Unknown children – destined for disadvantaged? Ofsted, 2016.

69 Early education and childcare spending, Christine Farquharson. Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2019.

70 Early education and childcare spending, Christine Farquharson. Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2019.

use current government expenditure on early education (including any underspend on current entitlements) and on whether certain interventions – such as the Early Years Pupil Premium – should be expanded.

The new funding settlement should prioritise quality of care and access for the most disadvantaged children, and should aim to tackle educational inequalities, to ensure that children are school-ready. Reforms should give early years providers the stability and certainty they need to plan provision, improve quality, and equip the workforce with the pay and skills required to address the challenges of recruitment, retention and career progression. It should also set out when, and how, funding rates will increase to take into account increasing costs of provision. Childminders must not be forgotten in this new funding settlement and should be enabled to become a core part of the early education system, providing wraparound high-quality care. For parents, reform should mean that the system for childcare is simple, easily accessible, affordable, and supports their goals in the labour market.



The new funding settlement should prioritise quality of care and access for the most disadvantaged children, and should aim to tackle educational inequalities

CHILDREN'S CENTRES AND FAMILY HUBS

Children's centres and family hubs are an essential part of the community infrastructure that exists to support children and families in the early years, and they are there to ensure that children and families are better able to access local services and family support, forging new relationships in their community which are crucial for wellbeing.⁷¹ Past studies of Sure Start and children's centres have found that they have a positive effect on the parent-child relationship, parental stress, the home learning environment, and the number of hospital admissions up to the age of 11.⁷²

Family hubs, too, perform a crucial role. They provide a joined-up local approach to supporting families with children aged 0 to 19, and therefore the ability to provide families with the full suite of early help support services they and their children need to overcome a range of difficulties and build stronger relationships.⁷³ After being introduced in the Isle of Wight, for example, family hubs led to a reduction in the number of children who entered care, while

71 Getting it right for under-fives: An eight-point plan for an early years strategy. The British Psychological Society, 2020.

72 Effects of fully-established Sure Start Local Programmes on 3-year-old children and their families living in England: a quasi-experimental observational study, Professor Edward Melhuish et al. The Lancet, vol. 372, no. 9650, November 2008; The health effects of Sure Start, Sarah Cattan et al. Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2019.

73 Introducing family hubs. Family Hubs Network: <https://familyhubnetwork.org.uk/hubs/introducing-family-hubs>



more children in need were supported through bespoke support plans.⁷⁴

The current government has made a specific manifesto commitment to champion family hubs, and has pledged £2.5m for the sole purpose of research and development. In December 2020 the Government announced plans to create a National Centre for Family Hubs to support councils to set up new family hubs.⁷⁵ As a Commission, we do not take a firm view on the naming of these centres. What matters most is ensuring that there is adequate infrastructure and funding that allows services to be open several hours per week and offer a blend of both open access and targeted services at neighbourhood level.

Covid-19, and in particular its associated lockdowns, have forced providers to move essential children's services onto digital platforms. This raises questions about the potential to capitalise on the experience of engaging families through digital platforms as users and providers gain confidence.

⁷⁴ Family hubs: A discussion paper. Children's Commissioner, 2016.

⁷⁵ Vulnerable families to benefit from additional package of support. Department for Education, 2020.

SHORT TERM

8. Local authorities should adopt a ‘Tell Us Once’ approach to birth registration and should move this service to children’s centres and family hubs

Many centres and hubs cannot access the data they require to understand and meet local needs, and do not know how many children or families live in the areas they serve. This makes outreach more challenging, and some children and parents miss out on support at a crucial time in their lives. The methods currently used to collect data are often patchy, unreliable and financially inefficient.⁷⁶ Some centres have formal arrangements with other local agencies to access this data, but others do not.

Local authorities should adopt a ‘Tell Us Once’ approach to birth registration, and should move this service to children’s centres and family hubs. By listing centres and hubs as partners for the scheme, they will be able to access the data directly, and will not be reliant on other agencies to provide basic information about births in their area. This will improve the ability of centres and hubs to identify and reach out to ‘invisible’ children and families who need support, but who have not been in touch with services. Conducting birth registrations in centres and hubs would make it easier for parents to learn about and access suitable support services, especially from Black and minority ethnic families and other hard-to-reach disadvantaged groups.⁷⁷

LONG TERM

9. Councils should roll out high-quality children’s centres and family hubs across the country – prioritising disadvantaged areas that need them most

Funding cuts to local government, and the rising cost of social care, have reduced local authorities’ abilities to fund early years support services. A lack of ring-fenced funding may have contributed to the closure of some children’s centres, while others have been ‘hollowed

⁷⁶ Beyond the building: Data sharing. Action for Children, 2015.

⁷⁷ Ensuring Equality in childcare for black and minority ethnic families: a summary paper. Esmée Fairbairn, 2008.


out' and no longer operate on the open access basis as they were originally intended.⁷⁸ Those that remain find it difficult to meet local demand for services and are unable to expand in a way that meets need.⁷⁹ The number of children using centres in the most deprived local authorities has fallen faster than in the least deprived areas, despite the greater need for services in the former.⁸⁰

Councils should roll out high-quality children's centres and family hubs across the country – prioritising disadvantaged areas that need them most. There should be a clear and basic offer for all centres and family hubs, that doesn't stifle innovation, and that utilises existing resources, groups, and physical space in their local areas, making them a core part of the offer.

There should be a mixture of universal help, targeted interventions and integrated support for families, starting from conception and continuing throughout the early years. Peer-to-peer support should be emphasised, where parents or grandparents provide mutual help and advice to new parents where appropriate. Councils should also be encouraged to innovate and provide locally-relevant services, and should enable 'user' commissioning, co-production and accountability.

A digital offer could supplement, but not replace, face-to-face services and guidance. This would enable centres and family hubs to expand their reach and link to other local provision.

To help achieve the above, the Government should increase and prioritise the funding for such early intervention services in local areas, particularly those with the highest level of disadvantage and need.



There should be a mixture of universal help, targeted interventions and integrated support for families, starting from conception and continuing throughout the early years

78 Sure Start (England), Alex Bate and David Foster. House of Commons Library, 2017; Stop start: Survival, decline or closure? Children's centres in England, George Smith et al. The Sutton Trust 2018.

79 Family hubs: A discussion paper. Children's Commissioner, 2016.

80 Closed doors: Children's centres usage between 2014/15 and 2017/18. Action for Children, 2019.



CONCLUSION

Our cross-party manifesto sets out an ambitious and long-term agenda to give every child the best start in life. It is rooted in the evidence on the importance of the early years and the difference prudent, effective investment can make.

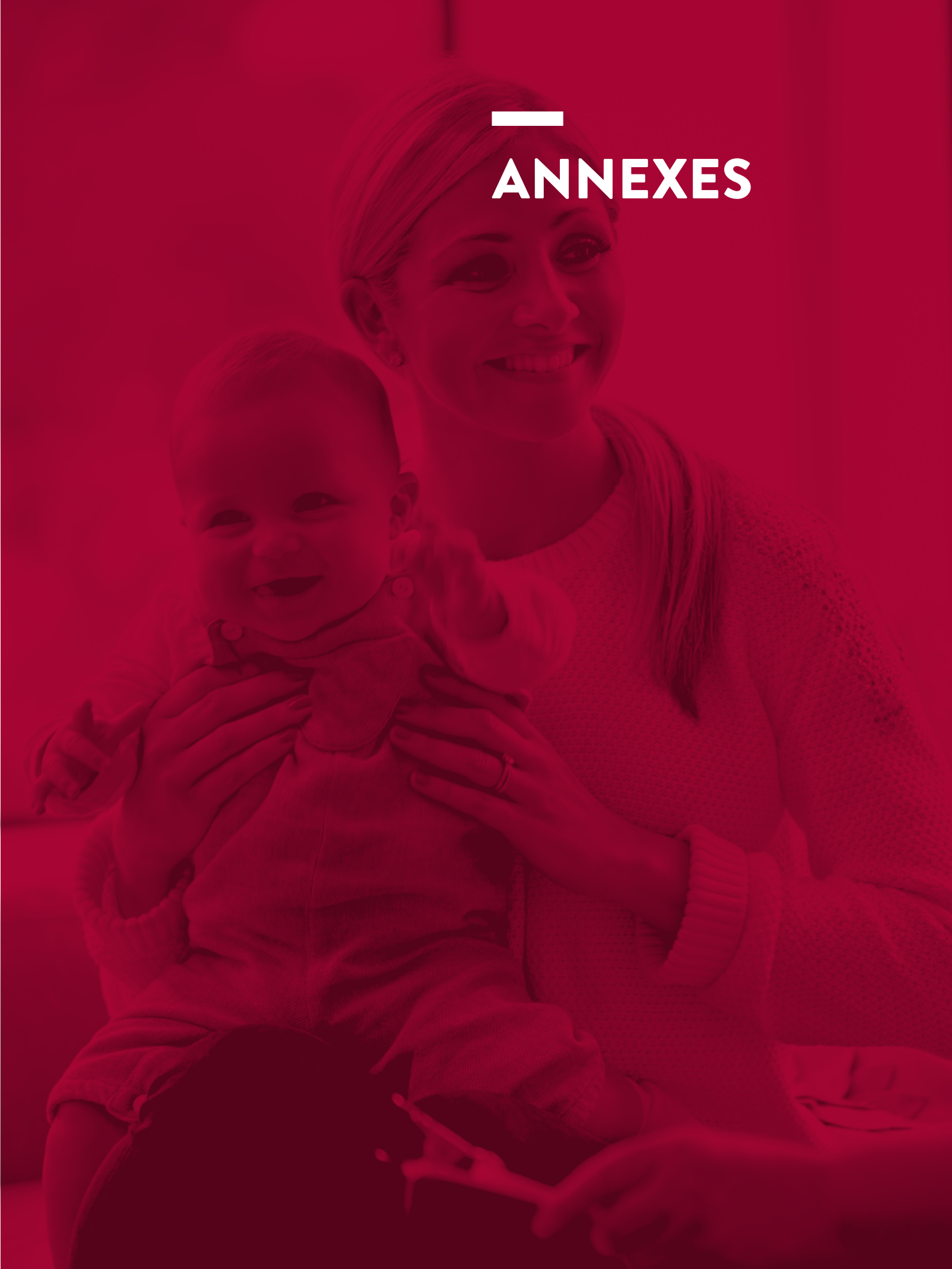
But it recognises that currently we do not focus enough on supporting the youngest children, especially those living in poverty, and that too many fall behind in their first few years.

Our three core priorities to transform lives are:

- Make young children society's top priority by delivering public service innovation locally and nationally with a commitment to lessen child poverty;
- Support parents to make their homes a nurturing environment with time away from work, financial stability to focus on their child, and the community and professional assistance they need;
- Put our young children at the heart of their community and public services with investment in early education, children's centres and family hubs.

This is an agenda ready to be implemented and to deliver fundamental change in the early years. It asks for all of us to work together to make our country the best to be born into. Now, we must act.

ANNEXES





ANNEX 1

COMMISSIONERS

SHARON HODGSON MP

Co-chair

Sharon Hodgson has been the Labour MP for Washington and Sunderland West (previously Gateshead East and Washington West) since 2005, and is currently Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Leader of the Opposition, following stints as Shadow Minister for Veterans, and four years as Labour's Shadow Minister for Public Health. Sharon has had a keen interest in the early years since being elected, having formerly sat on the Children, Schools and Families Select Committee, and was appointed as Shadow Minister for Children and Families between 2010 and 2015, shadowing Commission co-chair Edward Timpson in his role as Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State. Outside of her ministerial roles, Sharon has also been vice-chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Conception to Age 2 – The First 1,001 Days, and has taken a keen interest in the early years in her roles as Chair of the APPG on School Food, and the APPG on Art, Craft and Design in Education.

EDWARD TIMPSON CBE MP

Co-chair

Edward was first elected as the Member of Parliament for Eddisbury in 2019, but previously served as MP for Crewe and Nantwich between 2008 and 2017. Edward has previously served as Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families, Minister of State for Children and Families, and Minister of State for Vulnerable Children and Families. Outside of Parliament, Edward undertook the Timpson review into school exclusions. Prior to becoming a Member of Parliament, Edward was a barrister who focused on family law and worked with vulnerable children.

SARA BONETTI

Sara is Director of Early Years at the Education Policy Institute. Sara spent a decade working in the field of early years in the United States, as a teacher and a researcher. Her recent publications have focused on what high quality early years education looks like, and the early years workforce in England.

SARAH DARTON

Sarah has been the CEO of Family Links the Centre for Emotional Health since 2018. The charity's mission is to deliver training programmes, based on the Nurturing Programme, that build and sustain emotional health and relationships in families, schools and workplaces. Prior to joining Family Links as Director of Programmes, Sarah worked in the NHS for 30 years as a health visitor, a named nurse for child protection, and a manager of a Sure Start Children's Centre.

NAOMI EISENSTADT CB

Naomi is the former Director of the Sure Start programme and former Director of the Social Exclusion Task Force. She is also the former deputy chair of the Poverty and Inequality Commission for Scotland. Naomi has authored *Parents, Poverty and the State: 20 Years of Evolving Family Policy*, jointly with Carey Oppenheim, and *Providing a Sure Start: How Government Discovered Early Childhood*. Prior to working in the Civil Service, Naomi worked in organisations concerned with poverty and early years.

ELI GARDNER

Dr Eli Gardner is a Clinical Child Psychologist with more than 25 years of experience of working with children and their families in the NHS. She is the co-founder and Executive Director of the charity Kids Matter who engage local churches to deliver their accessible and evidence informed parenting programmes to parents and carers of all faiths and none, who are facing disadvantages; so that their children can thrive. She is married, lives in London and has 3 quasi grown-up children.

IMRAN HUSSAIN

Imran is the Director of Policy and Campaigns at Action for Children. He previously spent eight years at Child Poverty Action Group as their Director for Policy, Rights and Advocacy.

JEN LEXMOND

Jen Lexmond is Founder & CEO of EasyPeasy, the digital platform for parents that has narrowed the developmental gap for over 60,000 disadvantaged children across the UK.

PATRICK MYERS

Patrick is a Senior Ambassador for the Department for Work and Pensions' Reducing Inter-Parental Conflict Programme, which seeks to intervene early in the parental relationship where conflict has been identified. Patrick's work involves raising the profile of evidence and the programme nationally and supporting others to play their role in this very important work. He was seconded and then transferred into the Department for Work and Pensions from Dorset Council.

ED VAINKER OBE

Ed is the CEO of the Reach Foundation, and a co-founder of Reach Academy Feltham. He oversees the Reach Cradle to Career model, which includes substantial work in the Early Years. He has sat on a number of policy groups, including the Royal Foundation Steering Group on Early Life.

ANNEX 2

CALL FOR EVIDENCE

In the summer of 2020, the Early Years Commission issued a call for evidence on early years policy. We are grateful to those who provided written evidence in response:

- Action on Postpartum Psychosis
- Association of Directors of Children Services
- Before Becoming a Parent
- British Association for Child and Adolescent Public Health
- British Association for Early Childhood Education
- British Psychological Society
- Child Poverty Action Group
- Children and Young People’s Mental Health Coalition
- Children’s Commissioner for England
- Contact
- Daphne Cotton
- Department of Psychiatry, University of Oxford
- Dr Kitty Stewart, CASE/LSE
- Early Intervention Foundation
- Early Years Alliance
- Early Years Funding Collaborative
- East Riding Council
- Education Endowment Foundation
- Family Action
- Fawcett Society
- Fegans
- First 1001 Days Movement
- First Steps Nutrition Trust
- Flying Start in Wales
- Foundation Years Trust
- I Can
- Institute for Health Visiting
- Isle of White Council
- La Leche League GB
- London Early Years Foundation (LEYF)
- Local Government Association
- Maternal Health Alliance
- Mothers at Home Matter
- NASUWT Union
- National Children’s Bureau
- Nesta
- New Economics Foundation
- Northern Powerhouse Partnership
- NSPCC
- Nuffield Foundation
- Oxford Parent Infant Group
- PACEY
- Palix Foundation
- Parent-Infant Foundation
- Penelope Leach, Robin Balbernie and Sebastian Kraemer
- Professor Edward Melhuish
- Professor Eva Lloyd
- Professor Kathy Nutbrown
- Public Health England
- Relationship Foundation
- Save the Children
- School-Home Support
- SHINE Trust
- Stefanou Foundation
- Sutton Trust
- Southwest Neonatal Network Donor Milk Bank
- South Yorkshire Early Education Branch
- Thrive@Five
- Triple P
- TUC
- Unison Union
- WAVE Trust
- What about the Children
- Women’s Budget Group
- Working Families
- World Breastfeeding Trends Initiative

The participation of these organisations and individuals in the call for evidence does not indicate support for the Commission's recommendations.

Our call for evidence questions

1. How can we ensure that parents and children receive the best possible physical and mental health support, particularly during the perinatal period?
2. How can we ensure that parents are supported to balance work and caring for their child during the early years?
3. How can we support parents to develop the skills and maintain the relationships that support healthy child development during the early years period?
4. How do we provide the most effective and integrated early years services in local community spaces to give children the best start in life?
5. How do we ensure every family can access high-quality childcare that works for both parents and children?
6. How can central government work better together to develop effective policies on early years?
7. How can local government and agencies work together to deliver innovative high-quality early years provision?
8. If you could introduce one early years policy designed to bring about the greatest impact on a child's life chances, what policy would it be and why?

ANNEX 3

CONSULTATION

The Early Years Commission consulted widely on its recommendations through oral evidence sessions, a stakeholder roundtable, and a number of interviews. We are grateful to those who have provided evidence, support and feedback on these recommendations:

- Andrea Leadsom MP
- Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families
- CACHE
- Anne Longfield CBE, the former Children's Commissioner for England and the Commissioner's office
- Contact
- Coram Family and Childcare
- County Council Network
- Dr Jackie Musgrave
- Dr Kitty Stewart, CASE/LSE
- Early Childhood Forum
- Early Education
- Early Intervention Foundation
- Early Years Alliance
- Early Years Funding Collaborative
- Fatherhood Institute
- Institute for Health Visiting
- Local Government Association
- National Children's Bureau
- National Day Nurseries Association
- Nesta
- Nuffield Foundation
- NSPCC
- OnePlusOne
- Palix Foundation
- Parent-Infant Foundation
- PACEY
- Professor Jane Payler
- Professor Sir Michael Marmot
- Race Equality Foundation
- Relationships Foundation
- Royal College of Midwives
- Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health
- Royal Foundation
- Save the Children
- Scope
- Small Steps Big Changes
- Sutton Trust
- Working Families
- Voice, the Union

The participation of these organisations and individuals in the call for evidence does not indicate support for the Commission's recommendations.



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