

Executive Summary

CHILDHOOD MATTERS

February 2024

The Association of Directors of Children's Services Ltd



4.2 million children are living in poverty

48%

of children from global majority groups live in poverty

70%

of children in poverty live in a household where at least one adult works

43%

of children with two or more siblings live in poverty

Since 2017, the number of children living in destitution has **risen threefold**



1 in 4 older young people had a probable mental health condition in 2022, up from 1 in 10 in 2017



30% of children living in the most deprived areas are obese by the end of primary school



90% of childcare providers say government funding doesn't cover delivery costs



Tooth decay is the most common reason **five to nine year olds** are admitted to hospital

24% of all pupils are receiving benefit related free school meals

1 in 5 pupils are persistently absent, up **60%** on pre-pandemic levels

High inflation has wiped out the planned 15% uplift in funding for schools

£800m

children's social care funding gap in 2022/23



£4bn

local gov funding gap over the next 2 years

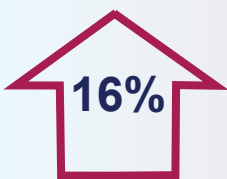
Black children are involved in **20%** of police stop and searches, despite making up **6%** of the population



9 in 10 girls were regularly exposed to unwanted explicit images or videos



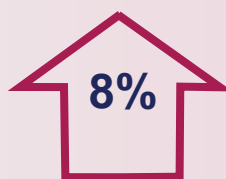
Increases in children's services activity in 2021/22 compared to the previous two years:



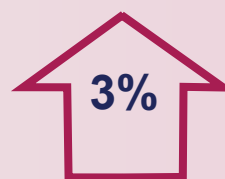
Early help assessments



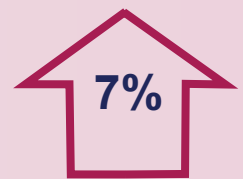
Children in need



Child protection enquiries



Children in care



Education, health & care plans

Executive summary

Seven years ago, the Association published a policy position paper called *A country that works for all children* (ADCS, 2017) in an attempt to articulate the issues and challenges facing children, young people and families and put forward some solutions. Sadly, all seven of the recommendations in the paper still stand and the need for action on child poverty and the crisis in workforce and funding is arguably even starker than ever before.

This paper acts as an update, and an urgent call to arms, capturing the changes that have happened in the intervening years, including the publication of multiple different reviews, inquiries and reports on topics ranging from school exclusions, early childhood and the care system, to special educational needs. The Association has also put forward a series of recommendations for action during this time.

With a general election due within the next 12 months, we are at a pivotal moment in the nation's relationship with children and young people. We need to come together to invest in them, and their families, as well as the public services they rely on to help them to thrive. This investment not only benefits individual children and families but the country as a whole via increased earning potential, less reliance on, and cost to, the state and sustained progress on social injustices. All children and young people should be able to say:

- I have access to the same opportunities regardless of my background or family's resources
- My family and I do not live in poverty, we are not hungry
- We have an affordable, warm and safe home and environment
- I am supported to grow and develop. Education builds my confidence and prepares me not just for exam success, and the world of work, but for independence too
- I am supported early if I have any emotional, health and/ or physical needs
- I am protected from risks of neglect, abuse and exploitation
- I am not unnecessarily criminalised and professionals understand my circumstances, I am listened to and actively involved in any decisions they take about my life
- My contribution to my community and wider society is both valued and recognised.

Sadly, children's needs, their rights and outcomes have not been prioritised in recent years. There has not been any significant new legislation for children and young people since the passing of the *Children and Social Work Act 2017*, although a Schools Bill was both introduced and withdrawn in 2022. During the global pandemic, children's interests were either not differentiated in all age responses or overlooked entirely; pubs, restaurants and even golf courses reopened before most children returned to school in summer 2020. Millions of children live in poverty, with research clearly demonstrating that welfare policies are driving family distress, most notably the 'two child limit' on tax credits, which has affected over 1.5 million children since its introduction in 2017 (CPAG, 2023).

More can be done to support families to overcome the challenges they face and help all children and young people to thrive. In early childhood, the potential benefits of record investment in childcare are not being felt as this funding is spread thinly and not targeted towards the children and families who would benefit most from early education. Changing demographics mean that we have school capacity in the wrong places and years of under investment in school buildings is disrupting the education of tens of thousands of children educated in unsuitable buildings, including those made of defective concrete. The number of children missing education is at record highs as is the number of children with a broad range of mental health conditions. Recent uplifts in funding for schools and colleges have been more than wiped out by inflation and the national system for children with special educational needs is now profoundly broken. In the teenage years,

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and beyond, concerns about the safety of young people in their communities, and online, are growing.

More and more children and families require help and support from children's social care but central funding for these vital services has not kept up, risking them becoming a blue light service. Councils are facing growing challenges in securing the right homes in the right places for children in care, particularly for those with a multiplicity of complex needs. Leaders of children's services are increasingly worried about the growth of private equity backed provision, out of control profiteering and the risk of provider failure, which could be disastrous for the children living in those homes. Councils do not have sufficient resources to develop alternative strategies, in fact several are now effectively bankrupt, with more expected to follow suit. The recent uplift in council funding, including an additional one-off £500 million investment in social care, buys some breathing space but this is a sticking plaster, it is not a long-term solution.

Nine different government departments and agencies lead on various aspects of policy relating to children, young people and families, and children's distinct needs and rights are not well understood by departments with wider portfolios. A number of different reviews commissioned by government, plus recent green and white papers, have correctly diagnosed some of the systemic challenges faced by children, and children's services, and have put forward sensible solutions, but the resulting recommendations are often only partially implemented, if at all.

In recent years, public policy making has become more reactive and driven by short-term decision making, risking a "doom loop" (IfG, 2023). Government does not yet pay enough attention to its role in creating the conditions for success in turning policy into practice in local areas, leading to an "implementation gap." All too often it seems that where investment in children's futures is needed, the bare minimum is on offer, whether that's to repair or rebuild school buildings or support children to recover from the pandemic experience.

So, what would help public services to better support children and families in the future? This paper reiterates previous calls for a comprehensive vision and plan for childhood accompanied by a long term, sustainable funding settlement. For the sake of clarity, the most pressing priorities for key government departments, and agencies, with a stake in child and family policy have been identified by ADCS members:

- **Cabinet Office** should develop and co-ordinate an ambitious, cross government plan for childhood, which pays specific attention to understanding, mitigating, and removing income, health, racial, geographical, and educational inequalities, alongside a resourcing and implementation strategy. This should be led from the centre of government, setting out clear, measurable milestones and objectives, with progress reported in a transparent way.
- **Treasury** should ensure sustainable multi-year funding predicated on a long-term view of the return on investment in children's futures for the whole public sector and the broader positive impact of investment in children on long-term economic growth and the future of the country.
- **Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities** should review the outdated methodology to funding local government, and children's services, to better reflect local contexts, populations and levels of actual need. This review must address both the scale of funding required as well as how it is distributed.
- **Department for Education** should reaffirm its role as a champion and advocate for children and young people across government and broaden the review of Section 17 of the *Children Act 1989* that *Stable homes built on love* committed to and take the opportunity to cement early or family help in statute, as it is for adult social care.
- **Department of Health and Social Care** should embrace integration with children's social care by delegating the resources and responsibilities for commissioning and provision of all children's community and mental health services to place based integrated partnerships.

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This could be achieved using existing legal flexibilities under Section 75 of the *NHS Act 2006*.

- **NHS England** should commit to a root and branch review of children's mental health services to ensure that in the future all levels of need are met at the earliest possible juncture by multidisciplinary teams working in the places and spaces that suit children's lives and preferences.
- **Department of Work and Pensions** should commission a full independent evaluation of the impact of the current welfare system on children, young people and families and use the learning to revise the system to ensure it supports the ambition of eradicating child poverty. DWP should also work with relevant departments on other opportunities to support system wide reform for children and families e.g. kinship care.
- **Department of Culture, Media and Sport** should maximise the universal opportunities for children and young people across their remit whilst transferring leadership on youth services to the Department for Education to align with education and wider children's services policy.
- **Home Office** should thoroughly assess the impact of any new legislation or national policy positions on all children and young people, noting and addressing any differences in application, such as use of stop and search by the police under Section 60 of the *Crime, Justice and Public Order Act 1994*. They should also transfer leadership of the National Transfer Scheme for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children plus policy areas relating to safeguarding and harms outside of the home to the Department for Education.
- **Ministry of Justice** should transfer leadership on youth justice policy, and the Youth Justice Board, to the Department for Education so 'Child First' aims can be realised in practice.

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My contribution to my community and wider society is both valued and recognised

The Association of Directors of Children's Services Ltd (ADCS)

ADCS is the national leadership association in England for statutory directors of children's services and their senior management teams



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