



23 June 2021

Vicky Ford MP
Minister for Children and Families

Dear Vicky

The long-term impact of the pandemic on parents and families

The COVID-19 Committee recently undertook a short inquiry into the potential long-term impact of the pandemic on parents and families. A number of concerns were raised with us by witnesses, which we set out below, and we would be grateful for a response that outlines the actions that you and the Government are taking on these matters.

1) Babies and new mothers

Social distancing requirements resulted in over a year of expectant parents missing out on ante-natal classes, some mothers having to give birth alone, and new parents being unable to access both the formal and informal support they would have expected in the days, weeks and months following the birth of their child. Unsurprisingly, parents (and organisations who work with parents) are reporting concerns about the impact this has had on their mental health and their ability to care for their baby. We do not know what long-term impact this may have on the babies born during the last 15 months, especially when combined with the effect of many babies having little or no interaction with other adults or children during this time. **Given the critical importance of the first two years of a child's life to their long-term health and wellbeing, we agree with witnesses that we cannot wait until the effects of the last 15 months are established before taking action. The Government should take steps to mitigate the potential long-term impact of the pandemic on babies and their parents, including through the provision of 'catch up' Health Visitor appointments and additional funding for services that support new parents, and establish a robust mechanism to monitor the impact of the pandemic on the emotional, social and physical development of babies born since the start of the pandemic.**

- One survey found that two thirds of respondents believed “their ability to cope with their pregnancy or baby has been impacted by COVID-19.”¹
- “I had to do the entirety of my pregnancy alone and then had to do labour until I got into my own room and then I was allowed another person to come and then we had to stay in hospital for a week ... I was on my own the entire time. I was in a room, put in the room, on my own and no one...I wasn't allowed any visitors and so yeah, that really affected me at the time quite badly.” [outreach session participant]

2) Child development

We heard concerning evidence about the impact of over a year of lockdowns and social distancing on pre-school children. This ranged from children’s opportunities to learn to crawl and walk being hampered by lack of space in inappropriate housing, to their social and emotional skills being underdeveloped as a result of lack of contact with other children and adults. Despite this, we heard that there has been no equivalent of the additional funding that has been made available to enable school-aged children to ‘catch up’ on lost learning. **Young children’s physical, emotional and social development will almost inevitably have suffered from the lack of contact they have had with the outside world for a significant proportion of their lives; without action to address this, this could have a whole range of consequences for them and for society as a whole in the years ahead.** The Government should make the same commitment to helping the youngest children recover from the pandemic as they have for school-aged children. This should include providing the significant additional resource that early years providers will require to respond to the additional and more complex needs of those in their care.

- A recent survey by the Early Years Alliance found that 59 per cent of providers reported a decrease in the number of children “meeting the expected level of early attainment in physical development, communication and language development, and personal, social and emotional development.”²
- “In a two year-old’s life they have been locked down more than half their life. In a four-year-old’s it is 25%. It is enormous; it is massive. I do not think we can underestimate it.”³

3) Safeguarding concerns

Parents have been left without access to the formal and informal support that they normally rely on, at a time when family pressures became much more intense: children and parents largely confined to the home; many parents losing work and under increasing financial pressure; the nature of the pandemic having a negative impact on many people’s mental health and wellbeing. At the same time, pandemic restrictions mean that children have not been seen by the teachers, youth workers, Health Visitors and others who might normally be able to identify safeguarding concerns. We heard that child deaths and incidents of serious harm have

¹ Best Beginnings, *Babies in lockdown* (August 2020): https://babiesinlockdown.files.wordpress.com/2020/08/babies_in_lockdown_executive_summary_final_version-1.pdf

² Written evidence from Early Years Alliance (CFP0005)

³ Q 14 (Jane Williams)

risen, and that many expect a significant increase in referrals to social services, and potentially children taken into care, over the coming months and years as a result of the pandemic. **The pandemic has tragically resulted in more children coming to harm; as services and society reopens, it seems likely that there will be a significant increase in the number of children identified as at risk and the number of families in need of support. We are not convinced, however, that Local Authority Children's Services, or third sector organisations, have the resources required to respond to this increase in need.** The Government should work with Local Authorities to identify (and provide) the additional funding for Children's Services that will be required as a result of the pandemic, both in the next 12 months and in the next 2-5 years.

- There were 285 reports of child deaths and incidents of serious harm between April and September 2020, a rise of more than a quarter on the same period a year before.⁴
- The charity School-Home Support reported a 750 per cent increase in the number of children who needed to be referred to social services between March and May last year, compared to the same period the year before.⁵
- Before the pandemic, the Local Government Association estimated that children's social care was facing a £3.1 billion funding gap by 2024/25.⁶

4) Disabled children

We heard that for the parents of disabled children, the pandemic has had a particular and often devastating impact. Some who had previously received support from a range of professionals 24hours a day were left to look after their children almost entirely alone. Others feared that cancelled health and social care appointments had resulted in deteriorations in their children's conditions that may be irreversible. **The parents of disabled children that we heard from felt that they had been abandoned during this pandemic, with damaging consequences for their own wellbeing and for their children.** In addition to providing any additional resources that may be needed to enable health and social care services to catch up on the backlog of missed appointments as a result of the pandemic, the Government should review its approach to service provision to consider whether it would be possible to prevent the levels of disruption that have occurred over the last 15 months by classing services for disabled children as 'essential', should further periods of social distancing be required in future.

⁴ 'Covid: The devastating toll of the pandemic on children', BBC News (30 January 2021): <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-55863841>

⁵ 'Vulnerable children 'suffer alone' in UK lockdown with schools shut *The Guardian* (23 May 2020): <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/may/23/vulnerable-children-suffer-alone-in-uk-lockdown-with-schools-shut>

⁶ ADCS, *Building a country that works for all children post COVID-19* (July 2020): https://adcs.org.uk/assets/documentation/ADCS_Building_a_country_that_works_for_all_children_post_Covid-19.pdf

- “I have a 6-year-old boy with very complex needs. He has a 24-hour care plan, and I mean literally 24 hours. We went from having support obviously at school, his carers, to having to go into shielding...we were left with a situation where we couldn't work because we couldn't have anyone in [to provide care] ... I've gone from having care support to doing it all on my own ... I've become the teacher, his physio, his nurse... I'm desperate to just be a mum.” [outreach session participant]
- A survey of over 500 parents and carers of children with special educational needs found the lack of health and social services support had led to children's development stalling or regressing, while lack of support and respite has resulted in “deteriorating mental health, increased anxiety, [and] exhaustion” for parents, with a number of couples separating as a result.⁷

5) Domestic abuse

We heard how lockdown restrictions had prevented people from escaping abusive relationships and resulted in children witnessing more abuse, as well as an increase in the violence that people were experiencing. Given that it often takes people a number of years before they reach out for help, witnesses told us they expected services to see an increasing number, and increasing complexity, of cases for at least a decade. At the same time, we heard there was a significant shortfall in the availability of refuge spaces and other support for survivors, and that this was particularly acute for Black and minoritised communities. **It is unacceptable that so many of those who sought to escape domestic violence during the pandemic were turned away due to lack of space. Without significant additional resource, this seems set to continue in the months and years ahead, trapping survivors and their children in dangerous, potentially fatal, living situations.** *The Government should provide the additional funding required to ensure no-one is prevented from leaving an abusive relationship because of lack of refuge space. Given the likely long-term impact of the last 15 months on demand for services, this should be a long-term funding settlement and include the resources to provide specific services to meet the different needs of different communities, including Black and other ethnic minority communities.*

- The charity Refuge reported a 61 per cent increase in calls to their domestic abuse helpline in the last year.⁸
- Research by Women's Aid found one in five women had tried to leave during the pandemic but had been unable to access housing or refuge space.⁹
- Women's Aid “estimate that investment of £393m a year is needed to secure a sustainable specialist refuge sector and vital community-based support that is available and accessible to all women in England.”¹⁰

⁷ Written evidence from ASK Research (CFP0007)

⁸ ‘Calls to domestic abuse helpline in England up by 60% over past year’, *The Guardian* (23 March 2021): <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/mar/23/domestic-abuse-covid-lockdown-women-refuge>

⁹ Women's Aid, ‘A perfect storm’: <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/a-perfect-storm-the-impact-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-on-domestic-abuse-survivors-and-the-services-supporting-them/>

¹⁰ Women's Aid, *A perfect storm: The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on domestic abuse survivors and the services supporting them* (2020): <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/A-Perfect-Storm-August-2020-1.pdf>

6) Unemployment

The closure of school and childcare settings has had a significant impact on parent's employment. Some have lost jobs, some have had to reduce hours, and some who have remained in work fear their need to balance work and childcare during the pandemic may harm their future career advancement. Economic necessity, and personal fulfilment, will mean many parents currently unemployed will now be looking for work but we heard that the Government's current system for providing financial support for childcare was a major barrier for many people, with parents expected to meet costs (often running to thousands of pounds) up-front and only able to claim once in work, with a significant lag in payments. We also heard about the shortage of flexible working opportunities, particularly part-time work, and the lack of support for fathers wanting or needing to play a greater role in childcare. **Given the long-term impact of poverty on children's life chances, and the impact on parental wellbeing that arises from economic security and job satisfaction, it is important that unnecessary barriers to parents' ability to work are removed.** *The Government should modify Universal Credit and free childcare scheme requirements so that childcare costs (including deposits for places) are met up-front. Given the Employment Bill did not appear in the recent Queen's Speech, they should also find an alternative mechanism to meet their commitment to requiring all jobs to be advertised as flexible by default, and consider how to build on the momentum generated by the increasing role of fathers in childcare over the pandemic by reforming parental leave entitlements.*

- A survey by the TUC in September 2020 found that one in six working mothers had had no choice but to reduce their working hours.¹¹
- Research by Gingerbread found that single parents were more likely to have lost their jobs, to have been furloughed and to have seen a decline in working hours.¹²
- 57 per cent of mothers surveyed by campaigning organisation Pregnant Then Screwed believed that "their increased childcare responsibilities during the pandemic has impacted their career prospects or will harm them in the future."¹³
- "If you are offered a job today, you become eligible for 30 hours at the beginning of September, when the next term starts. There is no plan for what you are supposed to do from now until then. That means that parents will face huge costs when they first move into work, which creates a huge barrier to moving into work."¹⁴
- A survey by the Fatherhood Institute found 76 per cent of fathers wanted more flexible working options post-pandemic.¹⁵

¹¹ TUC, '2 in 5 working mums face childcare crisis when new term starts – TUC poll':

<https://www.tuc.org.uk/news/2-5-working-mums-face-childcare-crisis-when-new-term-starts-tuc-poll>

¹² Gingerbread, 'Tackling single parent poverty after the Coronavirus': <https://www.gingerbread.org.uk/policy-campaigns/publications-index/tackling-single-parent-poverty-after-coronavirus/>

¹³ Pregnant Then Screwed, 'Childcare during the pandemic has damaged my career prospects say 57% of employed mothers': <https://www.docdroid.net/joYdZsN/the-impact-of-covid-19docx-pdf>

¹⁴ Q 40 (Megan Jarvie)

¹⁵ Fatherhood Institute, 'Fathers seek more home and flexible working to maintain COVID transformation in childcare': <http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/2021/fathers-seek-more-home-flexible-working-to-maintain-covid-transformation-in-childcare/>

In summary, the specific questions on which we would like a response are:

1. What steps are the Government taking to mitigate the potential long-term impact of the pandemic on babies and their parents, including through the provision of 'catch up' Health Visitor appointments, additional funding for services that support new parents, and establishing a robust mechanism to monitor the impact of the pandemic on the emotional, social and physical development of babies born since the start of the pandemic?
2. Will the Government give the same commitment to helping the youngest children recover from the pandemic as it has for school-aged children, including providing the significant additional resource that early years providers will require to respond to the additional and more complex needs of those in their care?
3. What assessment has the Government made of the potential increase in (1) referrals to Local Authority Children's Services, and (2) care orders, in both the next 12 months and the next 2-5 years, and any additional resources that Local Authorities will need as a result?
4. In addition to providing any additional resources that may be needed to enable health and social care services to catch up on the backlog of missed appointments for disabled children as a result of the pandemic, what plans does the Government have to review its approach to service provision to prevent the levels of disruption that have occurred over the last 15 months for disabled children and their families, should further periods of social distancing be required in future?
5. What plans does the Government have to provide additional support to ensure that no-one is prevented from leaving an abusive relationship because of lack of refuge space, including a long-term funding settlement and resources to provide specific services to meet the different needs of different communities, including Black and other ethnic minority communities?
6. What plans does the Government have to modify Universal Credit and childcare funding scheme requirements so that childcare costs (including deposits for places) are met up-front?
7. Given the Employment Bill did not appear in the recent Queen's Speech, does the Government have plans to find an alternative mechanism to require all jobs that do not always require employees to be physically present be advertised as flexible by default, and to reform parental leave requirements to build on the momentum generated by the increasing role of fathers in childcare over the pandemic?

We look forward to receiving your reply.

Baroness Martha Lane-Fox of Soho CBE
Chair of the COVID-19 Select Committee