



**Vicky Ford MP**

Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families

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Baroness Lane-Fox of Soho CBE  
House of Lords  
London  
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20 July 2021

Dear Lady Lane-Fox

Thank you for your letter dated 23 June 2021, on behalf the House of Lords Covid-19 Committee, on the inquiry into the potential long-term impact of the pandemic on parents and families.

I'd like to respond to the questions raised in the letter, by setting out the actions that the Government is taking in response to each of the seven questions, as follows:

- 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?**

Community health services have continued to provide support during the pandemic with greater use of digital and remote technologies providing support and prioritising families with higher needs. The vast majority of appointments with vulnerable infants and their families are conducted face to face.

With the onset of COVID-19, some public health nurses were redeployed, but this varied across the country. The initiation of the temporary register for nurses and midwives meant those redeployed were able to be repatriated to deliver 0-19 services relatively swiftly and the small number of areas where the return was slow reported repatriation by end of July 2020.

Health visitors have been focussed on catching up on appointments missed as result of the first wave of the pandemic, prioritising the most vulnerable. The Best Start in Life and Beyond guidance, published by Public Health England in February 2021 to support commissioning of the Healthy child Programme, helps strengthen health visitors' approach to catching up and ensuring the right infants

and families are seen first.

Furthermore, during the pandemic, the Department for Education (DfE) have continued working in partnership with Public Health England, the Local Government Association and EIF to support local area health and early years partnerships (which includes schools and nurseries) to work in a more integrated way and improve information flow to identify speech, language and communication needs as early as possible through delivery of bespoke peer support to areas and training for local leaders, commissioners, health visitors and early years professionals to support implementation of a newly launched (December 20) integrated speech language pathway guidance and Early Language Assessment Measure (ELIM) (nearly 1200 health visitors, speech and language therapists and early years practitioners).

ELIM is a government early language assessment tool designed to complement the assessment at 2-2 ½ using the ASQ. The early language interactive pathway guidance (practitioner and parent facing) set out how services can work together to support children with different levels of needs and prevent children falling in the gaps between services. The guidance and training will support Local Authorities to develop evidence-based SLCN pathways and support local areas to consider what they have in place and enhance integrated support.

DfE have also provided £5.6m worth of early years grants for charities to support disadvantaged and vulnerable children's early literacy and language development and well-being during the pandemic (including tailored support on emotional, social and physical development for children aged 0-5). Cumulatively the VCS projects have helped over 450,000 vulnerable and disadvantaged families of pre-school children and supported more than 75,000 practitioners across a range of evidence led early help interventions to support parents during the pandemic including children emotional, social and physical development. For example:

- Early Years Alliance Family Learning Programmes – Lets Learn Together, @home family learning programme focussing on social and emotional development and early language and Me and my baby online programme for new parents to provide advice on baby's learning and development.
- Institute of Wellbeing- Wellbeing Virtual Café community conversations, HLE family learning and wellbeing champions outreach programme provide 'trusted community spaces that align with cultural and faith traditions of BAME communities and enable safe learning environments' to empower BAME parents in creating a high-quality home learning environment to support their children's language development and their wider wellbeing including their social, emotional and physical development.
- National Children's EYSEND programme works across all 9 regions focusing on helped build practitioner skills and develop better local pathways for young children speech, language and communication needs and support parents with HLE including social and emotional child development.

We are exploring opportunities to build on the success of this work to support our recovery agenda.

**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?**

On 2 June we announced an additional £1.4bn for education recovery, which includes a £153m investment in high-quality professional development for early years practitioners. This will include new programmes focusing on key areas such as speech and language development. We will provide further detail on the training programmes in due course.

This investment is in addition to £27m to support children's early language development in light of the pandemic. £17m is to deliver the Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI) in schools that would particularly benefit. 40% of primary schools have already signed up for the programme. £10m will support language development for pre-reception children in the next academic year.

**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?**

Referrals to children's social care have been around 11% lower than previous years over the course of the pandemic, with some local variation.

A spike in referrals following easing of national restrictions has been anticipated but has not materialised. Local authorities have however put in place plans to increase staff capacity and improve relationships with partner agencies to ensure that any subsequent increase in demand post-pandemic could be managed.

Evidence suggests referrals have not increased in the way expected since easing of national restrictions, and over the pandemic, we have not seen a large overall increase in the numbers of children in care. However, we recognise the risk that increased care orders and placements for looked after children could place on the system. DfE work closely with Ministry of Justice (MoJ) to monitor the number of outstanding public law care orders, the numbers of new entrants to care and the numbers in care.

While local authorities are responsible for ensuring there are sufficient places for their children in care, we will do what we can to support them.

For example, we are working hard across government with our partners in the family justice system, including the judiciary and HM Courts & Tribunals Service,

to make sure that the system continues to operate and promotes the best outcomes for children during this unprecedented time.

In December 2020, the Department for Education (DfE), MoJ and our key sector partners published guidance on recovery and reform in public family law proceedings. This guidance aims to assist all those involved in the family justice system, and to ensure that the best interests of children are paramount at all times. We are also working closely with Cafcass to promote the Public Law Snapshot survey and collectively agreeing solutions to ensuring children are safeguarded.

Government has given more than £6 billion in un-ringfenced funding directly to local authorities to support them with the immediate and longer-term impacts of COVID-19 spending pressures, including children's social care. We continue to monitor the financial pressures on children's social care via the MHCLG COVID-19 monitoring survey, and also through conversations with local authorities; they have shared with us how they think the impacts of Covid will persist over time, and this feeds into our analytical modelling to inform policy development.

REACT teams, comprising education and social care staff from both DfE and Ofsted work closely with the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) and the Local Government Association (LGA) locally to deploy support directly into local authorities, drawn from the DfE's, advisers, commissioners, and local authority partners.

Child and family social workers have been going above and beyond to protect vulnerable children at this difficult time. As a result, we are working closely with local authorities to recognise and understand workforce pressures and where we can help. For example, we invested over £53m in the last year alone on workforce development programmes, for recruiting and developing child and family social workers.

The Coronavirus Act 2020 has also enabled the emergency registration of around 14,000 social workers as a contingency measure to support the sector, allowing them to come back into practice if needed.

**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?**

We are committed to doing everything we can to support local authorities, and their partners, to ensure that the most vulnerable children are protected and ensure there are sufficient places for children in their care. Government has given

more than £6 billion in un-ringfenced funding directly to councils to support them with the immediate and longer-term impacts of COVID-19 spending pressures, including children's social care.

In April 2020, the Department introduced a series of temporary flexibilities to existing secondary legislation to ensure children's social care providers and local authorities could continue to support our most vulnerable children in a challenging context. Although the majority of these expired on 25 September 2020 a small number of amendments were extended, following a public consultation over the summer. The extension of these into 2021 helped to ensure critical services were maintained during the pandemic.

For wider respite and short break services, we have also updated our [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): guidance for children's social care services guidance](#). Parents and carers may continue to access respite care to support them in caring for their disabled children while any restrictions are in force. This applies to services which care for children in and away from home.

The Government know the pandemic has caused significant disruption. The temporary pause in other elective activity, to limit the number of patients in hospitals, prevented the NHS from becoming overwhelmed. Since activity was re-started, we've worked hard to prevent the need for this happening again.

With the waiting list growing to over 5 million, our priority is to address the pressures of the pandemic, we're determined to tackle backlogs, restore services and build back better, including in children's services, taking advantage of the opportunities we have to transform care.

That is why, from September 2021, trusts and systems are now expected to deliver 100% of their last years activity for first outpatient attendances and follow-ups (face to face or virtually).

This is to be done by re-establishing and where necessary, redesigning, services to deliver through their own local NHS capacity.

To support this, in the December Spending Review we announced £1 billion to help kickstart recovery, supporting providers to address and tackle long waiting lists.

This £1 billion is accessible as the Elective Recovery Fund (ERF) to trusts to help step activity back up above set threshold levels mentioned in the NHS England priorities and operational planning guidance.

As well as funding, we have been supporting the NHS to innovate and already have significant programmes underway across outpatients, surgery and diagnostics.

Through use of virtual appointments, the outpatients programme avoided 18m face-to-face appointments and reduced the number of unnecessary appointments.

Further to this, the NHS recently announced its £160 million accelerator initiative, it involves a dozen areas and includes five specialist children's hospitals where it will trial new ways of working to accelerate recovery.

The government is completely committed to building back the NHS better, to learning lessons from the pandemic, and to ensuring that patients receive the best possible treatment as quickly as possible.

**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?**

The Government is committed to ensuring that all victims of domestic abuse receive the support they need, when they need it. This is why the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government, (MHCLG) have introduced a new legal duty within the Domestic Abuse Act on local authorities (LAs) to provide support for victims of domestic abuse and their children within safe accommodation including refuges, backed by £125 million of Government funding in 21/22 to ensure that these vital services are available to anyone who need them, wherever they live.

This funding was released to local authorities in April this year to enable them to do that ahead of formal commencement, and the new duty will be funded in future years. The amount of funding from April 2022 will be a matter for the future Spending Review.

Under the new duty Tier One authorities will be required to assess the need and commission support for all victims of domestic abuse, including children, within safe accommodation. MHCLG will be clear in the Statutory Guidance that local authorities must consider the specific needs of victims with protected characteristics and / or multiple complex needs – including those from Black and minoritised communities - when conducting their needs assessments and set out an approach to addressing any barriers to accessing support in their strategies.

The Guidance also makes clear the importance of specialist services that provide vital, tailored support to victims with specific needs, such as 'by and for' provision.

This government provided £750m for frontline charities across the UK supporting the most vulnerable within society during the coronavirus outbreak. This included MHCLG's £10m Emergency Covid Funding to keep refuges open, up and running. This enabled services to re-open 351 bedspaces and provide 1628 additional bedspaces during the pandemic up to 31 March 21.

Additional to this, in this financial year, the Home Office and MoJ will provide just under £151m for victim and witness support services. This includes an extra £51m

to increase support for rape and domestic abuse victims, building on the emergency funding to help domestic abuse and sexual violence services meet Covid-driven demand. This compares to a total budget of £48.5m in 2010-11. Some of this funding is specifically targeted at smaller, specialist charities. For example, £2m for smaller, specialised organisations helping BAME, LGBTQ+ or disabled victims.

## **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?**

As a Government, we are committed to helping parents into work. Childcare is essential in enabling parents to work, although we recognise that this can cause additional financial difficulty. The Government's current childcare offer is comprehensive, broad ranging and reflects different family circumstances, covering children over a range of ages.

Universal Credit (UC) claimants are able to claim back up to 85% of their childcare costs, compared to 70% on the legacy benefits system regardless of the number of hours worked. This can be claimed up to a month before starting a job and for families with two children, this could be worth up to £13,000 a year.

We have issued guidance to Work Coaches in Jobcentres to ensure that eligible claimants who require help with upfront childcare costs, in order to start work, are directed to the Flexible Support Fund. To further support parents with these costs, the Flexible Support Fund daily allowance was increased by 28% in January 2021. We are also now ensuring that the Flexible Support Fund can be used whenever the initial month's childcare costs prevent eligible claimants from starting work.

Budgeting advances are also available to eligible in-work claimants who require help with additional costs, such as when altering working hours or changing childcare providers.

The reimbursement model of Universal Credit childcare costs is more flexible and capable of responding to variation of earnings than the legacy system. It also helps prepare households to budget on a monthly basis, which will ease transition into monthly paid work.

UC is a unitary benefit made up of different elements subject to prescribed maximum amounts (caps). This is paid as one single monthly award, calculated at the end of the assessment period and is subject to the earnings taper, and other appropriate deductions. The consequence of this is that certain elements, such as childcare costs, cannot be ring-fenced or separated from the monthly award. Attempting to extract or ring-fence individual components from the calculation would ignore the interaction between the different stages of the calculation and would not correctly reflect how UC is designed in the legislation and how it operates in practice.

Claimants on UC are encouraged to manage their own finances and budgets to

better mirror the world of work. The majority of claimants can, and do, manage their childcare payments effectively and we cannot be certain that this kind of direct intervention on childcare costs is necessary or appropriate.

As you will be aware, there is an on-going Judicial Review on payment of UC childcare costs and due to this we are unable to comment further on this issue at the present time.

Early Years entitlements are paid directly to the provider by local authorities [before a parent takes up their place], and a parent is entitled to take up a free early education place free of charge. [However, providers are free to charge for additional extras, such as meals and trips]. The early education entitlements can be used on their own or alongside UC support for childcare costs.

Arrangements between parents and Early Years providers for private hours take place within a private market, and as such, we do not generally advise on these arrangements. DfE does, however, ask providers to be transparent, balanced in their dealings with parents. Providers must also avoid any unfair charging practices.

**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?**

The Government is committed to bringing forward an Employment Bill to protect and enhance worker's rights as we build back better from the pandemic – when the time is right. Through this legislation, we are determined to build a high skilled, high productivity, high wage economy that delivers on our ambition to make the UK the best place in the world to work and grow a business.

Flexible working covers a range of working arrangements around the time, place and hours of work, including part-time working, flexi-time, or compressed hours, not just working from home.

In July 2019, we consulted on a range of options for supporting families. Chapter 3 of this consultation was concerned with the transparency of employers' offers on flexible working and family-related leave and pay. As part of this exercise, the Government considered a proposal to require employers to say whether jobs may be open to flexible working in the advert. We received a fantastic level of engagement with the consultation receiving over 3600 responses, including over 300 businesses, demonstrating the importance of the issue to both individuals and business.

Much has happened since the time of this consultation. We have all been



grappling to deal with the global pandemic and the Government has a new manifesto commitment to consult on making flexible working the default unless employers have good reasons not to. We are yet to publish the formal response to the consultation but will do so as part of the consultation that we have committed to in our manifesto. We will consider the proposals that were included in the earlier consultation in light of what we have learned from Covid-19 and our wider approach to flexible working – balancing individual and business needs in what are now quite different circumstances.

Chapter 1 of the 2019 consultation was concerned with high level options for reforming parental leave and pay. We are currently considering responses to the consultation. Separate to this we are evaluating the Shared Parental Leave and Pay scheme, which has included commissioning large scale, representative, surveys of employers and parents. The surveys asked questions about a broad range of parental entitlements, not just Shared Parental Leave and Pay. Information collected through the consultation and the evaluation will inform future policy in this area. We plan to publish the Government Response to the consultation and a Report on the Evaluation of Shared Parental Leave later this year.

Thank you for writing about this important matter. I hope this reply is useful.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Vicky Ford". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

**Vicky Ford MP**  
**Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families**