



HOUSE OF LORDS

PUBLIC SERVICES COMMITTEE

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To:

Rt Hon Sajid Javid MP, Secretary of State for Health and Social Care
Lord Kamall, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Technology, Innovation and Life Sciences, Department of Health and Social Care
Maggie Throup MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Vaccines and Public Health, Department of Health and Social Care
Will Quince MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children and Families, Department for Education

13 January 2022

Dear colleagues,

Increased evidence of children who are becoming vulnerable to malnutrition with severe consequences as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic

The House of Lords Public Services Committee recently published a report, ‘Children in crisis: the role of public services in overcoming child vulnerability’¹, in which we considered the challenges that public services face in supporting children who are growing up in England with reduced life chances.

During our inquiry it was brought to our attention that paediatric departments in the Yorkshire and Humber region are seeing an increased incidence of children presenting severe symptoms of malnutrition², in some cases resulting in tragic loss of life. This may be explained by a number of factors arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, including the limitation of contact between families and care professionals and reduced household earnings creating difficulties in purchasing good-quality nutrition for children.

It is possible that what is happening now in Yorkshire and Humber is also happening, or will happen in the near future, in other parts of the country. We are concerned that the COVID-19

¹ Public Services Committee, [Children in crisis: the role of public services in overcoming child vulnerability](#) (First Report, Session 2021-22, HL Paper 95)

² Kate Parmenter, Andrew Brookes, Sarah Burn *et al*, [Increased incidence of severe nutritional anaemia in Yorkshire and Humber during the COVID-19 pandemic with critical clinical decompensation](#), *Archives of Disease in Childhood; British Medical Journal [BMJ]* (19 November 2021) [accessed December 2021]

pandemic will have a lasting impact on vulnerable families' ability to feed their children, with dramatic consequences for children's health.

The Government should urgently consider carrying out a review to understand the scale of child malnutrition nationally. It should encourage public services to intervene early and prevent child malnutrition before hospitalisation becomes necessary. It should work to improve awareness of the issue among the wider community of health professionals.

The case of Maya Zab

On 13 August 2020, an investigation began in the West Yorkshire area into the death of Maya Zab, aged 11 months.³ Maya Zab was born to non-English-speaking parents; the language barrier prevented her from receiving appropriate support from primary carers. This situation had been aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic, when social contact was discouraged. Without the support and information that they needed from professionals, Maya's parents were unable to provide their child with appropriate nutrition. When she reached hospital, Maya was suffering from severe iron deficiency. This caused severe nutritional anaemia, which in turn led to her dying from multi-organ failure.

According to the coroner's inquest, Maya Zab's shocking death is not isolated⁴: another case of severe nutritional anaemia in a child that resulted in the loss of life had occurred in 2020 in the Yorkshire and Humber region. The coroner submitted a 'Prevention of future deaths report' which was sent to the Department of Health and Social Care and NHS England, calling for action to be taken to prevent future deaths in similar circumstances.

Further evidence of the increase of severe nutritional anaemia in children in the Yorkshire and Humber region

Dr Beki James, Consultant Paediatric Haematologist at Leeds General Infirmary in West Yorkshire, drew our attention to a peer-reviewed report that she co-authored, which demonstrates evidence of the increase of severe nutritional anaemia in children in the Yorkshire and Humber region since 2020.⁵

The research analysed data from seven paediatric departments in the region. It found that, although the number of children under 16 years old with severe nutritional anaemia fell between 2019 and 2020, the severity of the anaemia in those cases increased during the same period. Cases with critical anaemia doubled in 2020, as did the proportion of cases requiring transfusion.

³ Courts and Tribunals Judiciary, [Maya Zab: prevention of future deaths report](#) (16 September 2021) [accessed 19 December 2021]

⁴ Courts and Tribunals Judiciary, [Maya Zab: prevention of future deaths report](#) (16 September 2021) [accessed 19 December 2021]

⁵ Kate Parmenter, Andrew Brookes, Sarah Burn *et al*, [Increased incidence of severe nutritional anaemia in Yorkshire and Humber during the COVID-19 pandemic with critical clinical decompensation](#), *Archives of Disease in Childhood, BMJ* (19 November 2021) [accessed 19 December 2021]

The researchers hypothesised that the rise in critical cases may have been caused by consequences arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. The health crisis affected the delivery of children's health visiting services, as some public health nurses were redeployed. Most professionals supporting children and families, such as health visitors and school nurses, returned to their usual posts by the end of July 2020; however, the "stay-at-home" message pushed by the Government reduced direct contact between health professionals and children over the course of the year. This made it more difficult for those professionals to detect early signs of malnutrition. The opportunities for other professionals, such as teachers and nursery workers, to identify a child at risk of nutritional anaemia also reduced during the successive lockdowns.

Dr Beki James told us: "It is very hard to spot chronic changes in a child one sees every day. Each time that lockdown has ended we have had a flurry of children referred in, often with quite dramatic signs, who have been recognised as unwell by the nursery or school to which they have returned."

In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to higher levels of unemployment and reduced household earning capacities. The researchers believe that vulnerable families were therefore likely to have struggled to purchase balanced, good-quality nutrition for their children.

The Yorkshire and Humber region experienced a longer period of lockdown restrictions than other parts of the country and was affected by higher deprivation scores before the start of the pandemic. This might explain why early cases of severe malnutrition had already been identified in children in the region. But the same problems may arise elsewhere, as the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic continue to unfold.

Government response

In their responses to the coroner's 'Prevention of future deaths report' in the case of Maya Zab, NHS Improvement⁶ and Maggie Throup MP, writing on behalf of the Department of Health and Social Care⁷, said that national datasets did not show any national or regional increases in malnutrition, based on the prevalence of diagnosis codes linked to iron deficiency anaemia in the secondary user service data in the NHS England national clinical data repository. However Dr James told us that coding was not able to give a complete picture. Children may be missed if they are not coded correctly or not coded at all; for example, not all children seen in A&E are coded. A more accurate ascertainment of numbers would be derived from reviewing the laboratory data as in the study mentioned above.

Further work is therefore needed to assess whether the situation in Yorkshire and Humber will be repeated elsewhere, or whether the incidence of child malnutrition is more regionalised.

⁶ [Letter from NHS Improvement to Ian Pears, HM Assistant Coroner, about the Regulation 28 Report to prevent future deaths – Maya Zab](#) (26 November 2021)

⁷ [Letter from Maggie Throup MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Vaccines and Public Health, to Ian Pears, HM Assistant Coroner](#) (13 December 2021)

The Government should launch a national-level review of the pattern and demographics of child malnutrition, to help health professionals assess the scale of the challenge and better identify children at risk.

Maggie Throup MP wrote: “the Government does not have any plans to introduce policies to specifically target nutritional anaemia in children.” Yet taking preventative action by intervening early, rather than waiting for crisis point, is key to protecting vulnerable children from tragic, yet avoidable, hospitalisation. This means increasing awareness of this issue among those who are likely to identify symptoms of malnutrition in a child: health visitors, nursery workers and teachers, but also friends and families. It also means improving the accessibility of programmes designed to help families buy healthy food for their children.

The Government is providing support to vulnerable families thanks to the Healthy Child Programme and the Healthy Start Scheme. We welcome these initiatives but argue that more needs to be done to tackle child malnutrition and understand its extent.

In the Yorkshire and Humber region, children have already lost their lives – not as a result of parents’ neglect, but because of avoidable circumstances that led to severe malnutrition. Children elsewhere are also likely to be at risk. The Government should set out which measures it will take to address the challenge of child malnutrition, particularly in relation to the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. In doing so it should focus on preventative measures and early intervention.

We look forward to receiving your response as soon as possible.

Yours sincerely,

Rt Hon Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top,
Chair, House of Lords Public Services Committee

Baroness Pinnock,
Member, House of Lords Public Services Committee