



**NATIONAL
CHILDREN'S
BUREAU**

Manifesto for a Better Childhood

October 2019





Introduction

In 1969, the National Children's Bureau published the ground breaking study *Born to Fail?*¹ It showed how poverty damaged children's lives, resulting in poor health and underachievement at school.

Distressingly, the inequality that we found 50 years ago still persists today. In many cases it is getting worse:

- Almost one in three of our children and young people now grow up in poverty², unable to live at the standard that most people would accept for their own family;
- The services that support our most vulnerable children and families have faced devastating cuts of up to 40% over the past decade³, with the poorest areas facing the biggest reductions⁴;
- Among the poorest third of our children, obesity and mental health difficulties are reaching epidemic levels⁵.

Is this the sort of society we want for our children?

A new opportunity

It is a travesty that so many of our children and young people are being left behind because this is also a time of great opportunity. Technology is connecting people across the planet and we are seeing the emergence of new global youth movements. Children and young people are freer to express themselves than ever before.

In order to make the most of this opportunity, we need a new and positive vision for childhood, starting in pregnancy and continuing until a young person's 25th birthday.

Our *Manifesto for a Better Childhood*, developed with children and young people, sets out this vision. We hope you will join us in making it a reality.

Anna Feuchtwang, Chief Executive

Children's voices at the heart of the political process

Children and young people will be those most affected by decisions made today, yet they are often denied a voice in both local and national politics.

Children and young people are passionate about the issues facing the country, including climate change, serious violence, and mental health. They have a right to have their say and to be listened to.

The next government must renew our democratic offer and provide meaningful opportunities for all children and young people to get involved:

- ✧ **Lower the voting age to 16**, and support children and young people to campaign and participate in the democratic process.
- ✧ **Give children and young people a say in all local decisions that affect them**, including everything from how recreational spaces are designed to what services are offered by the NHS.
- ✧ **Re-invest in youth centres and services**, putting this vital resource back at the heart of local communities.

Priorities for the new Childhood Strategy

At the core of our manifesto is the need for a Childhood Strategy built on the principle that children and young people themselves must have a say in the political process.

This cross-government strategy must establish a new vision for childhood and establish a set of binding outcomes that all government departments are accountable for delivering.

Accountability for delivery of the strategy must be held by a Cabinet Committee, a group of ministers that can take collective decisions that are binding across government.

The strategy must be backed by £10 billion⁶ of new money at the next Spending Review, to reverse the impact of a decade of cuts and reinvest in services for children and young people.

Developed in partnership with children, young people and families, the strategy should include a set of national priorities for children and young people.

All government departments must be accountable for work to:

- ✳ Stop children and young people growing up in poverty.
- ✳ Improve outcomes in early childhood.
- ✳ Create an inclusive education system.
- ✳ Promote and protect our children's wellbeing and mental health.



PRIORITIES FOR THE CHILDHOOD STRATEGY

Stop children and young people growing up in poverty

We all share a moral obligation to end child poverty. It destroys childhoods and causes irreparable damage to our society's future health and productivity. So many of society's problems flow from this.

There are over 4 million children who are living in poverty right now⁷ and, unless we change things there will be more than 5 million by 2022⁸. We cannot accept this.

Growing up in poverty means not being able to afford the basics like food, clothes and rent. It means children are more likely to have a range of health problems⁹, to be excluded from school¹⁰, or taken into care¹¹. And most tragically, poorer children are more likely to die before their 18th birthday¹².

Our call to government:

- **Make work pay for families** with better support for childcare costs.
- **End the unjust two-child limit on benefits and reform Universal Credit.**
- **Reverse the cuts and re-invest in children's services** that provide help to the most vulnerable children and young people.
- **Financially support young people trapped in poverty to access further and higher education.**



PRIORITIES FOR THE CHILDHOOD STRATEGY

Improve outcomes in early childhood

Every child deserves the best start in life. What happens during pregnancy and in the early years shapes children's physical health, their language and communication, and their emotional wellbeing¹³. Failing children at this stage of their lives has devastating consequences.

Improving outcomes during pregnancy and in the early years is the smartest investment we can make as a society. Yet time and time again we have failed to deliver what evidence tells us is needed: high-quality early years services, equally accessible to all families.

Our call to government:

- **Commit to a children's centre in every neighbourhood**, with high quality services for all families from conception to age five.
- **Offer parenting support to all parents who want it**, focused on the importance of strong relationships and attachment.
- **Develop a graduate-led workforce** to raise the quality of early education and childcare.
- **Invest in a world-class health visiting service for new parents**, so all families can build a trusting relationship with their health visitor.



PRIORITIES FOR THE CHILDHOOD STRATEGY

Deliver an inclusive education system

Our country will only succeed if all our children succeed. Yet our education system is becoming less and less inclusive of children who have more difficult lives.

Permanent exclusions are rising¹⁴, more children with SEND than ever are in special schools¹⁵ and pupil referral units¹⁶, and an increasing number of parents are feeling forced into home education¹⁷.

It is time for us to re-affirm the values of our education system. We need a clear, inclusive vision of education that values the progress of all children, that celebrates their talents, and that champions individuality and difference.

Our call to government:

- Set a timeframe for stabilising and then **reducing the number of permanent exclusions**; remove the incentives in the system to exclude children and young people.
- Give the **wellbeing** of children and young people equal weight to academic progress; ensure every setting puts the wellbeing and mental health of its children and young people at the heart of everything they do.
- Ensure age appropriate, inclusive **relationship, sex and health education** is available to all children and young people.



PRIORITIES FOR THE CHILDHOOD STRATEGY

Promote and protect our children's wellbeing and mental health

Growing up in the 21st century provides fantastic opportunities for children and young people, but it also creates huge pressure. From social media to climate change, from serious youth violence to Brexit, children and young people have never been more exposed to change and uncertainty. Protecting their wellbeing and mental health must be a top priority.

Parents must be supported to help them understand, promote and protect their child's mental health, right from the start. All children must be supported and provided with an education that enables them to look after their own mental health and navigate potential challenges such as bullying and other adversities.

Our call to government:

- **Place a duty on all social media and digital platforms to follow child safety rules and protect children from online harm**
- **Develop a workforce plan** that ensures all professionals working with children and young people are trained in the importance of secure attachment, strong relationships and emotional intelligence.
- **Ensure every child and young person that needs it has access to specialist mental health support**, e.g. parent-infant relationship services, CAMHS etc.

Notes

- 1** Wedge, P and Prosser, H (1973) *Born to Fail? The National Children's Bureau reports on striking differences in the lives of British children*, London: Arrow Books. The book reported on the findings of the National Child Development Study, the first ever multidisciplinary, longitudinal study of 16,000 children born in 1958.
- 2** *Households Below Average Income, Statistics on the number and percentage of people living in low income households for financial years 1994/95 to 2017/18, Tables 4a and 4b.* Department for Work and Pensions, 2019
- 3** <https://www.ncb.org.uk/news-opinion/news-highlights/childrens-funding-slashed-third-child-leaving-thousands-risk-falling>
- 4** Calculations from Professor Paul Bywaters. The calculations are based on the methodology used in the published paper Webb, C. J. R., & Bywaters, P. (2018) 'Austerity, rationing and inequity: trends in children's and young peoples' services expenditure in England between 2010 and 2015' with figures updated for 2016/17
- 5** *Time to Solve Childhood Obesity. An Independent Report by the Chief Medical Officer*, 2019
- 6** As calculated by the Children's Commissioner for England in <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/cco-a-manifesto-for-children.pdf>
- 7** *Households Below Average Income, Statistics on the number and percentage of people living in low income households for financial years 1994/95 to 2017/18, Tables 4a and 4b.* Department for Work and Pensions, 2019.
- 8** *Living standards, poverty and inequality in the UK: 2017-18 to 2021-22*, The Institute for Fiscal Studies
- 9** *Annual Report of the Chief Medical Officer 2012, Our Children Deserve Better: Prevention Pays*, 2013
- 10** Department for Education, *Permanent and fixed period exclusions in England 2017 to 2018* <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/permanent-and-fixed-period-exclusions-in-england-2017-to-2018>
- 11** Department for Education, 2018, *Children looked after in England (including adoption)*
- 12** Wolfe, I et al, *Why Children Die: Death in Infants, Children and Young People in the UK*, Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, National Children's Bureau, British Association for Child and Adolescent Public Health, 2015

Notes continued

13 Annual Report of the Chief Medical Officer 2012, Our Children Deserve Better: Prevention Pays, 2013

14 Department for Education, Permanent and fixed period exclusions in England 2017 to 2018

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/permanent-and-fixed-period-exclusions-in-england-2017-to-2018>

15 Department for Education, 2019, Schools, pupils and their characteristics:

January 2019 [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/812539/Schools Pupils and their Characteristics 2019 Main Text.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/812539/Schools_Pupils_and_their_Characteristics_2019_Main_Text.pdf)

16 Department for Education, 2019, Schools, pupils and their characteristics: January 2019 – Accompanying Tables

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/826255/Schools Pupils and their Characteristics 2019 Accompanying Tables.ods](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/826255/Schools_Pupils_and_their_Characteristics_2019_Accompanying_Tables.ods)

17 Association of Directors of Children's Services, 2018, Summary Analysis of the ADCS Elective Home Education Survey 2018

https://adcs.org.uk/assets/documentation/ADCS_EHE_survey_analysis_2018_FINAL_web.pdf

United for a better childhood

The National Children's Bureau brings people and organisations together to drive change in society and deliver a better childhood for the UK. We interrogate policy, uncover evidence and develop better ways of supporting children and families.

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Part of the family
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