

**NSPCC**

**General Election 2024:  
NSPCC priorities  
for manifestos and  
programmes for  
government**

**A six-point plan to protect children**

February 2024

**EVERY CHILDHOOD IS WORTH FIGHTING FOR**

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# A six-point plan to protect children

**We believe that every childhood is worth fighting for. Abuse and neglect can be prevented so that every child can thrive.**

This generation of babies, children and young people are facing a unique set of challenges. No one thing can predict abuse, however we do know that children growing up in homes where there is poverty, domestic abuse, substance misuse or mental health problems are at a higher risk of abuse and neglect. These risk factors have been heightened in families across the country (both during and after the pandemic) and, when combined with the existing strain on services, the implications for children are worrying. The landscape of safeguarding and child protection is changing and while practice is improving in some respects, statutory funding is struggling to keep up with demand. Children and their families are experiencing the fallout from a reduction in universal and early help services. Funding is increasingly being skewed away from early preventative support towards late crisis interventions for children who are already experiencing abuse or neglect.<sup>1</sup>

Over the past few years there have been too many tragic deaths of babies, children and young people who were failed by the adults around them, including those who were supposed to care for them, and the agencies and statutory bodies whose job it is to protect them. It must not take more tragedies to put child protection firmly on the political agenda. We need to create a strong safety net that protects children from harm, and supports stable, loving family life. For children that have experienced abuse or neglect, support needs to be available to help them recover and move towards a brighter future.

There are ways to turn the current situation around with examples of positive practice from across the UK and beyond, found in a growing evidence base of what works to prevent abuse and support children. Most of all, the pandemic served as a reminder of how resourceful, resilient and brave children can be – and how much we can learn from them.

But we cannot achieve the level of change needed without significant action by political leaders and government. The upcoming General Election is an opportunity for all political parties to commit to protecting babies, children and young people, so that they can grow up safe, happy, healthy and have equal access to opportunities.

This six-point plan to protect children spans the different parts of a child's life – at home, in education, and online. At the NSPCC we have a frontline understanding of children's experiences, with insights from Childline, our programme delivery in schools, and our service delivery in local communities. We stand ready to share our insights and make sure that child safeguarding is at the very core of UK policy making.

Our recommendations are grounded in, and complement, our joint work with colleagues in other children's charities. Together, we are calling for the next UK Government to commit to putting children at the heart of decision-making with an ambitious cross-government strategy and outcomes framework, championed by the Prime Minister.<sup>2</sup>

# Putting children and young people at the heart of the next Government

Action for Children, Barnardo's, the National Children's Bureau, NSPCC and The Children's Society have come together as five of the largest children's charities, to call for children to be 'at the table'. We are urging the next UK Government to put babies, children and young people at the heart of policy making, backed by a step-change in investment to transform childhoods across the UK.

We must reverse the unacceptable trends of increasing child poverty, worsening physical and mental health and more children requiring support from children's social care.

Together, we are calling for political parties and the next Government to:

- Commit to an **ambitious cross-government strategy** and outcomes framework to drive improvements for babies, children and young people.
- Pioneer a **new approach to decision-making that places children's needs, wishes and outcomes at its heart**, involving children and young people every step of the way.
- **Invest more of our national wealth in improving the lives of babies, children and young people** and spending strategically on early intervention and prevention.

By working together across departments to make the right policy and investment for children, and by listening to their voices, the next Government can make sure that children are safer, happier, healthier, and that they and have more equal access to opportunities.

More information can be found by visiting: [www.childrenatthetable.org.uk](http://www.childrenatthetable.org.uk)

# NSPCC's six-point plan to protect children

To stop child abuse and neglect, and to support children's recovery, we ask all political parties to commit to a six-point plan to protect children:

## Reform children's social care



## Strengthen the child protection system



## Support the early years of a child's life



## Keep children safe in education



## Protect children online



## Help young victims and witnesses to recover from abuse and neglect



# A summary of the NSPCC's recommendations

Ahead of the next General Election, all political parties should commit to:

## 1 Wholesale reform of children's social care:

- Invest in early help services to support families before they reach crisis point.
- Increase the number of children who can return home from care, if it is safe to do so, by supporting family reunification efforts.

## 2 Strengthen the child protection system:

- Introduce legislation to give children the same protection from physical assault as adults.
- Resource multi-agency child safeguarding arrangements and information sharing so that professionals in health, policing, children's social services, education and others can work together to keep children safe.

## 3 Support the early years of a child's life:

- Ensure that babies, parents and carers in every local area receive a joined-up offer of early years services, including support for parents' mental health and for positive relationships between parents and babies.
- Rebuild the health visiting workforce with 5,000 additional health visitors in England over five years, to help safeguard the youngest children who are most vulnerable to abuse and neglect.

## 4 Keep children safe in education:

- Implement high-quality and inclusive Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) for all children in England, alongside training for education staff to identify and respond to harmful sexual behaviour and child sexual abuse.
- Roll out Mental Health Support Teams to every school and college in England.
- Implement a national register of children not in school to identify their learning, safeguarding and wellbeing needs.

## 5 Protect children online:

- Establish mechanisms to meaningfully consult children and young people about the new online safety regulatory regime.
- Prioritise children's safety in any new regulation covering emerging technologies such as Artificial Intelligence.

## 6 Help young victims and witnesses to recover from abuse and neglect:

- Equip the criminal justice system to safeguard and support young victims and witnesses by providing special measures and reducing court waiting times.
- Guarantee access to therapeutic services for young victims and witnesses of child sexual abuse and domestic abuse, including by ensuring more children and young people can access joined-up, child-centred support through the Child House model.

# Reform children's social care



**All political parties should commit to deliver wholesale reform of children's social care including investment in early help services to support families before they reach crisis point.**

Local authority spending on children's social care is rising, yet there is a concerning shift away from early interventions, which support children and families when they first need help, towards late interventions such as child protection and children in care. This is damaging both for children and the Exchequer. To turn the tide and improve outcomes for vulnerable children, the system requires urgent reform, committed leadership and adequate resourcing of services that provide early help to families before their problems escalate.

## Key figures

- Between 2010–11 and 2021–22, local authority spending on **early intervention services**, to support families when they first need help, declined by 46%.<sup>3</sup>
- While local authorities across England increased their spending on children's services by £800 million for 2021–22, this was driven by **late interventions** such as costly care placements. Out of this additional spending £4 in every £5 went on late intervention services.<sup>4</sup>

In the past 12 years the number of children in residential care has increased by 79% and spending on services for children in care has risen by 61%. However, the outcomes of children in care are poor in comparison to children who have not received a social care intervention. They are less likely to gain good qualifications,<sup>5</sup> nearly half of children in care have a mental health disorder<sup>6</sup> and it is estimated that 25% of homeless people have been in care at some point in their lives.<sup>7</sup> Care leavers are financially vulnerable and a significant number live on, or near to, the poverty line – often struggling to make ends meet.<sup>8</sup>

The number of children in care is on an upward trajectory. Delays in fully implementing the current reform programme – *Stable Homes, Built on Love* – across the country has already added an extra £1 billion to the Exchequer's costs over the next 10 years and will see an additional 10,000 children enter care.<sup>9</sup> However, it is not too late to turn this around. Committing to invest in the full roll out of the reform would prevent spiralling costs and ensure that more families are supported before situations reach crisis point and children go into care.

## Costing the savings

The children's social care bill will be £970 million pounds higher every year if children's social care reform is not rolled out nationally. Over the next twenty years, the Government would have to pay a total of £14 billion more for children's social care (adjusting for inflation) and an additional 30,000 children would be in care.<sup>10</sup>

## Increasing the number of children who return home from care for good

**All political parties should increase the number of children who can return home from care, if it is safe to do so, by supporting family reunification efforts.**

Achieving ‘permanence’ leads to better outcomes for children. Bouncing between home and care is traumatic for a child, and costly for the local authority. A far better alternative is improving reunification practice to prevent breakdowns in the first place. This can be achieved through government-funded practice evaluations and the development of national guidance on reunification to support local authorities in configuring services and delivering quality support to reunifying families.

### Key figures

- A fifth of children who left care in 2022 returned home.<sup>11</sup>
- Between 25% and 65% of children reunified with their families later re-enter care, depending on the time period and cohort of studies.<sup>12</sup> This data should be consistently collected by DfE.

At the moment, children and families often face a lack of support planning ahead of reunification and a cliff edge of support following reunification. This can allow problems to resurface and reunifications to become unstable, risking breakdown. Our research shows that local authorities want to improve this – 78% of local authority respondents to our survey said they would like to offer more support to reunified families than they currently offer. 79% of the local authorities also said that a lack of funding was a barrier for families getting the support they need to reunite.<sup>13</sup>

By improving reunification practice and support, we can make sure children stay with their families and reduce the number re-entering care – immediately lowering the children’s social care bill. Several local authorities are increasing resources and support offers for families where reunification is a viable option; this is paying off by increasing the number of stable reunifications, lowering return-to-care rates and reducing the cost of care placements.

However, good reunification practice is not widespread enough and the majority of children and families experience a ‘cliff edge’ of support following a return home. For an incoming government, reform in this area could both drastically improve the outcomes of children in care and reduce the cost to the Government.

### Costing the savings

A 2014 University of Loughborough study compared the costs of supporting children and families on return home against the costs of children re-entering care. This report found that the average annual cost for each child that returns back into care from home is £61,614, compared with an average annual cost of supporting a child to return home of just over £5,627.<sup>14</sup> The NSPCC is currently in the process of updating these costings for 2023 and we expect the gap in costs will be even higher.

# Strengthen the child protection system



## Protecting children from physical assault

**All political parties should commit to introduce legislation which repeals the ‘reasonable punishment’ defence across the whole of the UK so that children are afforded the same protection from physical assault as adults.**

There is growing evidence that physical punishment is harmful to children. A review of 69 international studies from 2021 showed that physical punishment is not associated with any positive outcomes for children, rather, it is linked to worsening child behaviour problems over time, and an increase in the likelihood of being involved with child protection services.<sup>15</sup>

### Key figures

According to a 2024 YouGov survey of 3,500 adults in England commissioned by the NSPCC:

- Over two thirds of people (71%) think physically disciplining a child is not acceptable.
- 63% believe that a change of law to remove the defence should be passed in England.
- 60% of respondents felt that physical punishment has a negative effect on a child’s mental health.

In England and Northern Ireland, a defence of ‘reasonable punishment’ exists in law which permits the physical punishment of children. This means that children are afforded less protection from physical assault than adults. It is not acceptable that children, who are among the most vulnerable members of our society, are the least protected from physical violence.

Along with over 60 countries worldwide, Scotland and Wales have already changed the law to protect children from all forms of violence, including in the home. Children in England and Northern Ireland deserve the same. Removing the defence would make it clear that physical punishment should not be a part of childhood in the UK. This would give clarity to children, parents, and professionals who are trying to support families. A change in the law has previously been supported by the Royal College of Child Health and Paediatrics and the Royal College of Nursing, amongst others.<sup>16</sup> In 2023, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child reiterated that the UK Government needs to take steps to protect children from all forms of violence, including in the home.<sup>17</sup> We also want to see increased support for parents and families which promotes positive parenting.

## Strengthening multi-agency child protection

**All political parties should commit to resource multi-agency child safeguarding arrangements and information sharing so that professionals in health, policing, children’s social services, education and others can work together to keep children safe.**

Keeping children safe from harm is far too important to be the responsibility and work of just one public agency. Progress continues to be made on encouraging agencies to work effectively together, including the recent refresh of the *Working Together to Safeguard Children* guidance in England. However, without political leadership and resource, the welcome ambitions within the guidance will not come to fruition.

The multiple agencies who are required to work together to protect children currently face challenges including resource and capacity, safeguarding expertise, and difficulty sharing information and data. Many of these obstacles can be tackled, and there is a blueprint for doing so within the current reform programme – but political leadership and will is required at both the national and local levels. Along with our charity partners in the Children’s Charities Coalition, we are calling for a Cabinet Committee attended by Ministers across government to promote a cross-cutting effort on children’s policy. We are also calling for a single, consistent child identifier to enable improved information sharing across agencies and to make it easier to identify what works for children and young people by assessing their outcomes across health, education and social care.<sup>18</sup>

Family Hubs offer a unique opportunity to strengthen multi-agency working within a local area. All political parties should work to ensure that every local area has a Family Hub offering a range of quality early help services, alongside a workforce plan to sustain these services.

Family Hubs should be both trauma informed and poverty aware, working to tackle the stigma a parent can experience when seeking help with their child’s welfare and development. The multi-agency professionals working within universal settings must recognise their role in assessing a families’ needs, then working together with them to either de-escalate problems, or to refer to more specialist services. Multi-agency safeguarding does not happen by default, leadership is needed at all levels to make sure that high-quality safeguarding training, systems and cultures are in place.

### Key figures

- Evidence suggests that Sure Start, an example of a multi-agency programme, prevented over 13,000 hospitalisations of 11- to 15-year-olds each year. The benefits were particularly long-lasting for children from disadvantaged neighbourhoods.<sup>19</sup>
- The Start for Life Programme launched by the Government in 2021 is backed by a £300million investment up to 2025 and includes the rollout of Family Hubs in 87 local authority areas.<sup>20</sup>

# Support the early years of a child's life



**All political parties should commit to ensure that babies, parents and carers in every local area receive a joined-up offer of early years services, including support for parents' mental health and for positive relationships between parents and babies.**

The earliest years of a child's life lay the foundations for their future health and wellbeing.<sup>21</sup> Babies need nurturing relationships and a safe, stable home environment to promote their healthy development. However, some families face more challenges than others when it comes to providing this care. That is why the provision of high-quality support for babies and parents is needed to help tackle inequalities and have a positive, knock-on impact throughout a child's life.

Family Hubs have a vital role to play in delivering early years services within local communities. Every Family Hub should include:

- 1. Preventative perinatal mental health services.** The perinatal period from pregnancy to age two is a crucial time for parent–infant bonding. Babies are completely reliant on their parents being tuned into their needs.<sup>22</sup> Perinatal mental health problems can make this bonding experience more difficult and, if left unrecognised and unsupported, can increase the risk of child maltreatment.<sup>23</sup> That is why timely support is so important for parents who are experiencing common mental health problems like depression and anxiety, but who do not meet the threshold for specialist services. An example of such a preventative service is the NSPCC's [Pregnancy in Mind](#), which helps parents to develop coping skills and builds their capacity to provide sensitive, responsive care to their babies.<sup>24</sup>
- 2. Support for positive relationships between parents and babies.** Babies do not come with an instruction manual, but some new mums and dads will have learnt parenting skills from their own parents. Not everyone is fortunate enough to have had a positive parenting experience, however perinatal education programmes can help prepare and support new parents, whatever their starting point. An example of such a programme is Baby Steps,<sup>25</sup> designed by the NSPCC to a) support the relationships parents have with each other b) support the relationships they have with their babies; and c) support babies' emotional wellbeing and development.

## Costing the savings

- Services for mild to moderate perinatal mental health problems could lead to cost savings for the NHS of £52 million over 10 years and improvements in women's quality of life estimated at £437 million.<sup>26</sup>
- The estimated average lifetime cost of non-fatal child maltreatment by a primary caregiver is £89,390. Two of the largest contributors to this cost are social care costs and short-term health-related costs.<sup>27</sup>

## Rebuild the health visiting workforce

**All political parties should commit to rebuild the health visiting workforce with 5,000 additional health visitors in England over five years to help safeguard the youngest children who are most vulnerable to abuse and neglect.**

As children's public health experts, health visitors lead the delivery of the Healthy Child Programme to children aged 0–5 years, which aims to prevent, identify and treat problems before they reach crisis point. They offer a universal service which includes home visits, putting them in a unique position to reach out to all babies and parents. Health visitors hold important responsibility for safeguarding the youngest children, who are particularly vulnerable to abuse and neglect. Therefore, it is deeply concerning that health visitor workforce numbers in England are at an all-time low.<sup>28</sup>

A recruitment drive to rebuild the health visiting workforce with 5,000 additional health visitors in England should be complemented by increased accountability checks from the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (OHID). This will ensure that the Healthy Child Programme is being fully implemented by local authorities and that every child is receiving at least their five mandated health visitor reviews, with access to additional support services where needed.

### Key figures

- 35% of cases where a child died or was seriously harmed due to abuse or neglect involved babies aged under one.<sup>29</sup>
- Around one in five babies in England did not receive their important 12-month health visitor review, which is the only contact they are entitled to between 6 weeks old and 2 years old.<sup>30</sup>
- Children are less likely to receive their health visitor reviews if they are from deprived areas or Black, Asian, Chinese or mixed ethnic backgrounds.<sup>31</sup>

As well as addressing health visiting workforce challenges, improving the quality of the service nationally must be a priority for all political parties. Health visiting reviews should be conducted face-to-face to help identify health and welfare concerns. Virtual contacts do not allow health visitors to fully assess a child in their home environment, and often the baby is not properly seen. While they may be used to increase the regularity of contact with babies and parents, virtual contacts should not replace crucial face-to-face health reviews.

There should also be continuity of care so that throughout early childhood, families receive support from the same health visitor or health visiting team. This can make it easier for parents to disclose problems and to discuss sensitive issues with professionals they trust. It also improves health visitors' ability to identify any emerging health and welfare concerns.

### Costing the savings

Health visitors take pressure off GPs and A&E departments by identifying and managing common and serious health problems, as well as helping to prevent illness and avoid accidents. There are 450,000 visits to A&E departments and 40,000 emergency hospital admissions in England each year because of accidents at home among under-fives.<sup>32</sup> The cost of treating children's accidents as outpatients and inpatients has been estimated at more than £275 million a year. For example, it can cost as much as £250,000 to treat one severe bath water scald.<sup>33</sup>

# Keep children safe in education



## Inclusive Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE)

**All political parties should commit to implement high-quality and inclusive Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) for all children in England, alongside training for education staff to identify and respond to harmful sexual behaviour and child sexual abuse.**

RSHE is compulsory in schools in England, and it has an important role to play in safeguarding children. Learning about healthy bodies and healthy relationships is a core entitlement all children should receive. Educational programmes are an opportunity to make sure children know that they have a right to be treated with dignity and respect and have the responsibility to treat others the same way. There is strong evidence that RSHE can reduce sexual and domestic abuse,<sup>34</sup> by allowing young people to explore attitudes associated with dating violence and learn how to spot the early signs of healthy and unhealthy relationships.

### Key figures

- On average, dating and relationship violence prevention activities – such as teaching about healthy relationships in RSHE – reduces violence by 17%.<sup>35</sup>
- Half of secondary school teachers surveyed in the UK said they do not feel confident delivering sex and relationships education.<sup>36</sup>

The 2021 Ofsted review into sexual abuse in schools shone a spotlight on the scale of abuse and its normalisation within schools.<sup>37</sup> The review found the implementation of compulsory RSHE to be weak, with poor teacher subject knowledge and significant gaps in curriculum coverage. Recent NSPCC research with children and young people found their experiences of RSHE to be inadequate, inconsistent and not reflective of their lived realities.<sup>38</sup> The research also highlights that children and young people value confident teachers who have the knowledge and understanding required.

Despite the safeguarding implications, there is not sufficient funding to deliver compulsory RSHE. Teachers must feel equipped to deliver high quality RSHE if it is to effectively help safeguard and support children. The NSPCC is committed to supporting teachers to improve their confidence to deliver high quality RSHE. In 2022, we launched a new UK-wide service called [Talk Relationships](#) to help teachers deliver RSHE more confidently. Talk Relationships includes e-learning courses to support secondary school teachers to feel confident when delivering RSHE and when responding to abusive behaviours. It includes a series of lesson plans created by sex and relationships education experts from the PSHE Association and the NSPCC. It also provides a dedicated helpline to give advice and guidance to secondary school teachers who deliver sex education.

## Mental Health Support Teams in schools

**We are calling on all political parties to commit to rolling out Mental Health Support Teams in every school and college in England.**

Mental health is the number one reason children contact Childline.<sup>39</sup> Many of the children and young people who get in touch are struggling to access services and support for their mental health. Long waiting lists and high thresholds to access NHS treatment can leave them struggling with serious issues such as suicidal thoughts and self-harm.

At the first sign of emerging mental health needs, or mild to moderate problems, it is important that children and young people get help at an early stage to ensure that problems do not escalate. Schools are an important place for children to get help with their mental health. With the right training and support, the teachers who see children every day can help to identify mental health concerns and make referrals.

Mental Health Support Teams provide one-to-one support and group interventions for children, as well as support for parents and teachers. They deliver evidence-based interventions for mild to moderate mental health conditions, and provide timely referrals to more specialist support where there are serious mental health concerns.

### Key figures

- In 2023, an estimated 1 in 5 children and young people in England had a mental health problem.<sup>40</sup>
- Children who have experienced child abuse or neglect are 4 times more likely to develop serious mental illness.<sup>41</sup>
- Compared to children from the most affluent areas, children from the most deprived areas are more than twice as likely to not have received support from Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and other specialist services.<sup>42</sup>
- In 2023, children in England were waiting an average of almost 5 months for a first appointment with community CAMHS.<sup>43</sup>

Mental Health Support Teams can offer effective early intervention and crisis prevention for children and young people, but only when sufficiently resourced and fully expanded,<sup>44</sup> alongside ongoing evaluation to assess how well they are meeting children and young people's needs. The Government's latest target of 50% coverage by April 2025 does not have the urgency needed, and many children will still be left unsupported and with escalating mental health problems.

### Costing the savings

For every £1 invested in Mental Health Support Teams (MHSTs), there is a return of £1.90 to the state. The cost to the state of failing to roll-out MHSTs to 6.5 million CYP is an estimated £1.8 billion.<sup>45</sup>

Given the increased likelihood of serious mental illness for children who have experienced abuse or neglect, specialist therapeutic services must also be available for child victims. All political parties should commit to introducing and funding a statutory duty for Local Authorities, Police and Crime Commissioners and Integrated Care Boards to commission community-based recovery services for child abuse victims, including therapeutic and pre-trial support. This is covered in more detail on page 19.

## **A national register of children not in school**

### **All political parties should commit to implement a national register of children not in school to identify their learning, safeguarding and wellbeing needs.**

Receiving an education at home rather than at school is not an inherent risk to children, but it does reduce the chance of agencies identifying possible support needs and in the worst cases, potential safeguarding concerns. Local authorities and education settings must be supported to uphold their duties to safeguard all children in their area.

#### **Key figures**

- 86,200 children were estimated to be in elective home education (otherwise known as 'home schooling') in 2023, a considerable increase compared to an estimated 61,000 children in 2019.<sup>46</sup>
- Only 8% of local authorities can provide an estimate of the number of unregistered home educated children. There is no accurate real time figure of how many children there are in England, nor where they are – let alone the number of children not receiving an education.

Children can be taken out of the school system for a number of reasons, for example: exclusion, off-rolling, or failure on the part of the school to meet their socio-emotional and learning needs. Following a series of incidents of serious harm involving home-educated children, the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel warned that 'often these children were "invisible" as they were not in school and not visited at home – they did not have the additional protection that school provides'.<sup>47</sup>

Some children are not known by authorities at all. These may be children who have never attended an educational setting, those attending unregistered settings full-time, or those, who in a small number of cases, are withheld from school as a way to avoid oversight from safeguarding partners. Making these children 'visible' to agencies is crucial to ensuring safeguarding precautions are there for all children, and families are aware of the support available to them.

A register of children not in school is a necessary precaution to find those children who are hidden from services and safeguarding agencies. A register should also work to identify and support any home-educated child's unmet needs.

## Protect children online

The NSPCC is at the forefront of understanding children's experiences online. Through insights from Childline and cutting-edge research, we listen to and work with children to understand what they need to be safer online and to develop the policy solutions to deliver this. We are ready to support the next Government to ensure that children's safety is not an afterthought but a central pillar of the online world.



The welcome passage of the Online Safety Act will finally require tech companies to robustly consider children's safety in the design of their platforms. **The next Government must ensure the new regulation is implemented effectively** so that platforms take action to prevent abuse in public online spaces and private messaging environments. Where there are gaps, the UK Government can continue to show global leadership by supporting the growth of a rapidly evolving tech sector whilst making children's safety a priority for all.

### Key figures

- In the last six years, UK police have recorded almost 34,000 online grooming crimes, 83% of these affected girls and a quarter of the children were under 12 years old.<sup>48</sup>
- YouGov polling, commissioned by NSPCC, found 86% of UK adults want companies to mandatorily understand how groomers and child abusers use their sites to harm children and take action to prevent it by law.<sup>49</sup>
- 80% of UK adults believe 13–16 year olds are at major or significant risk of sexual abuse in immersive virtual reality spaces.<sup>50</sup>

## Putting children's voices at the heart of online safety regulation

**All political parties should commit to establish mechanisms to meaningfully consult children and young people about the new online safety regulatory regime.**

Regulating the online world to protect children requires an accurate understanding of children's digital lives. Children's experiences online are best understood by speaking directly to them. They have first-hand insight into how technological developments impact them, what is working well to keep them safe, and what is failing.

However, the current online regulatory framework has no built-in mechanisms to hear from children, meaning their voices risk being lost. This undermines the preventative value of the regulatory system, as it will significantly weaken Ofcom's capacity to spot new harms and ensure decision-making is directly informed by the reality of children's experiences. As we are at a critical stage in the implementation of the new online safety regime, the next Government must hold Ofcom accountable for effectively consulting with children to deliver the best possible regulatory outcomes.

To address this, we call on the next Government to ensure children and young people are meaningfully consulted in the development and implementation of online safety regulation. This can be carried out in a number of ways, including through establishing a new body to represent children in online regulation, working with existing organisations to hear from children, or creating participation panels. Establishing mechanisms to consult children can be cost-neutral to the Exchequer through funding it via a levy on regulated companies, a common approach in other regulated sectors.<sup>51</sup>

### Costing the savings

By actively supporting user safety, it could save long-term costs associated with the societal impacts of online harms – the societal cost of online child sexual abuse and exploitation is estimated to be over £2 billion a year.<sup>52</sup>

## Making children's safety a priority

**All political parties should commit to prioritise children's safety in any new regulation covering emerging technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI).**

The rapid advancement of technology provides many benefits to children, however in order to stop a new set of major safeguarding risks developing it must be designed with child safety in mind. The UK police<sup>53</sup> and Internet Watch Foundation<sup>54</sup> have highlighted that generative-AI is already being used to produce hyper-realistic child sexual abuse imagery. On some dark web forums, thousands of AI-generated child sexual abuse images have been found. Recently published NSPCC research has found that virtual reality is putting children at risk of child sexual abuse and exploitation.<sup>55</sup> Immersive technology is being used by offenders to groom children and to simulate child sexual abuse with 3D models of children.

Preventing harm to children in emerging technologies requires the effective implementation of existing regulation, and bold leadership from government in spotting gaps and taking action. As attention increasingly turns to the impact of AI, we urge the next Government to make child protection a core pillar of any future strategy or legislation on AI.

The UK has shown world-leading ambition with the passage of the Online Safety Act. Moving forward, the Government can help foster innovation within the safety tech sector and position the UK as a leader in both online safety regulation and online safety technology. Children and families must know that their safety will not once again be deprioritised for commercial interest, and that the Government will act to ensure this.

For example, the adoption of end-to-end encryption without mitigations significantly undermines the prevention and detection of child sexual abuse on messaging services. Solutions must be developed which ensure that child sexual abuse can still be tackled in these environments whilst upholding the privacy rights of users. By investing in the growth of the safety tech industry and the development of effective tools, the next Government can support the adoption of innovative solutions that deliver for all online users and keep children safe.

# Help young victims and witnesses to recover from abuse and neglect



## A child-centred criminal justice system

**All political parties should equip the criminal justice system so it is resourced and able to safeguard and support young victims and witnesses, by providing special measures and reducing court waiting times.**

Children and young people who are victims of abuse (including sexual or domestic abuse) or neglect have lived through trauma and often struggle in a criminal justice system that is not equipped to deal with their unique needs.

### Key figures

- An estimated 500,000 children will suffer some form of child sexual abuse every year.<sup>56</sup> The vast majority are abused by someone they know.<sup>57</sup>
- Around half of child sexual abuse cases did not proceed further through the criminal justice system, with victims citing that one of the reasons was worry that the process will be too distressing.<sup>58</sup>
- Prosecutions for child sexual abuse more than halved between 2016/17 and 2020/21, while convictions fell 45% over the same period.<sup>59</sup>

The criminal justice system must be well equipped to provide the necessary and specialist support for young victims and witnesses, including access to special measures – the provisions that help vulnerable and intimidated witnesses give their best evidence in court and help to relieve some of the stress associated with giving evidence.<sup>60</sup> Special measures can include: pre-recorded evidence; the option to give evidence from a remote location (rather than in person in court); support from registered intermediaries as communication specialists; and the use of screens in court to block a defendant’s view of victims and witnesses.

Research by the Victims’ Commissioner has previously found that young victims were not informed about or received their rights under the Victims Code, including access to special measures.<sup>61</sup> NSPCC research from 2019 found the criminal justice system was falling short for young victims and witnesses, and was ultimately not able to provide proper resources and support to deliver special measures. A lack of resources for key criminal justice agencies, and poor accountability for the delivery of legal entitlements and policy commitments, contributed to the challenges young witnesses faced.<sup>62</sup>

In recent years there have been positive developments around, for example, the roll-out of pre-recorded evidence and improvements in the numbers of sites available for young witnesses to give evidence remotely (and so avoid going to court in person). However, those supporting children and young people through the criminal justice process still report inadequate court facilities, insufficient access to pre-trial support, too few intermediaries and other challenges. It is crucial that the criminal justice system is equipped and resourced to support all young victims and witnesses seeking justice.

In particular, it is vital that delays in cases coming to court are tackled. According to Ministry of Justice figures, victims of child sexual abuse will wait on average almost 14 months before their case even goes to trial.<sup>63</sup> For a child who is already experiencing depression, suicidal thoughts or PTSD, as a consequence of sexual abuse, the drawn-out process of waiting for a trial to start (let alone come to completion) can be extremely distressing.

The next Government must overhaul the criminal justice system, provide significant investment to address the current backlogs in the court, and fast-track cases involving young witnesses and victims.

## **Therapeutic services for young victims and witnesses**

**All political parties should commit to guarantee access to therapeutic services for young victims and witnesses of child sexual abuse and domestic abuse, including by ensuring more children and young people can access joined-up, child-centred support through the Child House model.**

### **Key figures**

- Police in England and Wales made almost 245,000 child protection referrals to social services for domestic abuse in 2020/21.<sup>64</sup>
- An estimated 55,000 people in England and Wales are currently held on waiting lists for support following child sexual abuse.<sup>65</sup>
- Waiting times for services for children who have been sexually abused look to have more than doubled since 2015.<sup>66</sup>

The Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) found that victims of child sexual abuse can be two to four times more likely to become victims of sexual, physical, or emotional abuse again in their lifetime.<sup>67</sup> One of IICSA's recommendations in their final report was for governments in England and Wales to guarantee specialist therapeutic support for child victims of sexual abuse.

There are services which can successfully help children and young people recover from different types of abuse and support them to rebuild their lives – for example the NSPCC's [Letting the Future In](#) (LTFI) and [Domestic Abuse Recovering Together](#) (DART). However, currently, access to specific support to help young victims and witnesses recover from abuse is patchy and inconsistent.

Sexual Assault Referral Centres (SARCs) are available in the seven health regions across England, but their ability to provide support to under-18s varies widely across these regions. While police forces in England and Wales recorded 103,055 child sexual abuse offences in 2021/22, SARCs in England had initial contact with only 8,213 children during that same period.<sup>68</sup> In addition, freedom of information requests from the NSPCC found only 23% of the 119 local authorities surveyed across England and Wales said they provide dedicated support for young victims (of all forms of abuse) in the form of independent and specially trained advisors.<sup>69</sup>

To address this, we want the relevant authorities who currently commission support for victims (including Offices of Police and Crime Commissioners, Integrated Care Boards, and local authorities) to have a duty to conduct a Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) with a focus on the needs of children and young people when drawing up plans and funding priorities to support victims and witnesses in their local areas. The next Government must also ensure that local partners have the resources to commission sufficient and specific support for young victims of abuse.

The local plans and central government funding should enable the provision of support through Child Houses. Going through a police investigation and prosecution as a victim is often described as inherently traumatic.<sup>70</sup> In addition to the trauma brought about by the experience of abuse and exploitation, through the process of a police investigation and trial, a child or young person must re-tell their experience of abuse, often multiple times, usually in an environment which is unfamiliar, intimidating and confusing to them.<sup>71</sup> That is why an integrated and child-centred model is needed to support victims to give their best evidence and to recover from abuse.

A Child House provides a child-centred space in which the agencies involved in supporting young victims, including healthcare, social care, Child Independent Sexual Violence Advisor (CHISVA) services, third sector and police, provide coordinated services in an integrated, child-friendly environment 'under one roof' to support children to give their best evidence and recover from abuse. The model has been recommended by the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse<sup>72</sup> Home Office,<sup>73</sup> NHS England,<sup>74</sup> the Children's Commissioner for England<sup>75</sup> and in the Government's own *Tackling Child Sexual Abuse Strategy*.<sup>76</sup>

Building on learning from the Lighthouse, in September 2021, the Government published Child House local partnerships guidance to support local areas seeking to establish a Child House.<sup>77</sup> To date, no further Child Houses have been established in England. The NSPCC want children across the country to be able to access local, timely support and want to see the development of further Child Houses across the UK (including more in England and at least one each in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland).

To enable this, we want to see much better government co-ordination of existing, relevant funding streams (on victims and witnesses, criminal justice, health and social care) from national and local stakeholders to enable local agencies to set up in a single, child friendly location and invest in bringing services and systems together.

Additionally, one-off funding is also required to enable local areas to establish Child Houses. Based on our experience as a partner in the Lighthouse (see below), the NSPCC estimates that, as well as bringing funding streams together, roughly an additional £8 million is required to establish a Child House. We urge the next Government to establish a £100 million Child House fund which local areas can bid to for support (if they can demonstrate they could meet the principles and criteria set out in the Government's local partnerships guidance).

### Costing the savings

An evaluation of 'The Lighthouse', the UK's first Child House, found that future savings are three times higher than the cost of delivering the intervention. 'The Lighthouse' (which is delivered by University College London Hospital NHS Foundation Trust in partnership with the NSPCC and the Metropolitan Police), demonstrated a net gain in public expenditure per client of £14,570.<sup>78</sup>

# Notes

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# NSPCC

Everyone who comes into contact with children and young people has a responsibility to keep them safe. At the NSPCC, we help individuals and organisations to do this.

We provide a range of online and face-to-face training courses. We keep you up-to-date with the latest child protection policy, practice and research and help you to understand and respond to your safeguarding challenges. And we share our knowledge of what works to help you deliver services for children and families.

It means together we can help children who've been abused to rebuild their lives. Together we can protect children at risk. And, together, we can find the best ways of preventing child abuse from ever happening.

But it's only with your support, working together, that we can be here to make children safer right across the UK.

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