

# NSPCC

## **A Six Point Plan to Protect Children**

NSPCC policy priorities

March 2025

EVERY CHILDHOOD IS WORTH FIGHTING FOR

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# Introduction

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

No one thing can predict abuse or neglect. 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. When these risks are combined with the existing strain on local 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. These children were failed by the adults around them, including those who were supposed to take care of them, and the agencies and statutory bodies whose job it is to protect them. It must not take yet more tragedies to keep child protection firmly on the political agenda. We need to create a strong social 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. But we cannot achieve the level of change needed without significant action by political leaders and government. Cross-party commitment is needed to strengthen protections for babies, children and young people.

Children's voices must be heard within the corridors of power and their views must be considered in all decisions affecting them. They cannot be an afterthought as the Government delivers its Plan for Change. Children have different needs from adults, they face different risks, and they access different services. If the Government is to renew the social contract, it must start by protecting the rights of babies, children and young people, who are the future of our society.

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 the Children's Charities Coalition.

## Making child-centred government a reality

Action for Children, Barnardo's, the National Children's Bureau, NSPCC and The Children's Society make up the Children's Charities Coalition. We are urging the 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, increasing demand for children's social care, and worsening physical and mental health outcomes for children.

Together, we are calling on the Government to:

- Deliver 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 Government can make sure that children are safer, happier, healthier, and that they and have more equal access to opportunities.

## 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



# NSPCC's six-point plan to protect children

To stop child abuse and neglect, and to support children's recovery, we ask the UK Government and parliamentarians from across parties to commit to a Six-Point Plan to Protect Children:

A summary of the NSPCC's recommendations

## 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:

- Change the law to make it clear that children should not experience physical punishment.
- 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.
- Tackle neglect with a national strategy that sits alongside the child poverty strategy.

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

- Ensure that families in every local area receive a joined-up offer of early years services that supports healthy childhood development.
- Invest in rebuilding and reforming maternity and health visiting services, with 2,500 additional midwives, 5,000 additional health visitors, and a plan for improving the quality and safety of these services across England.

## 4 Keep children safe in education:

- Deliver high-quality and inclusive Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) for all children in England, alongside training for teachers 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 and ensure local authorities have the resources to support and safeguard all children in their area.

## 5 Protect children online:

- Support young people to safely access the benefits of the online world.
- Keep children's safety online a priority by ensuring Ofcom is robust and ambitious in their work to implement the Online Safety Act and that legislation is kept updated to tackle emerging risks and technologies such as Generative AI.
- Establish mechanisms to meaningfully engage with children and young people about the new online safety regulatory regime.

## 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 "under one roof".

# Reform children's social care



**The Department for Education should work with the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government 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 intervention, which supports children and families when they first need help, towards late interventions such as residential care placements.<sup>2</sup> This is unfair for children and unsustainable for the public purse. 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.

## Key figures

- Local authority spending is increasingly skewed towards fire fighting for children.<sup>3</sup> Between 2010 and 2022, spending on early intervention services declined by 44%, while spending on late interventions increased by 57%.
- There has been a 28% increase in the number of children in care between 2010 and 2022. Spending on residential care placements has risen by more than £1bn (89%) since 2010 with more than double the number of children placed in residential care.
- Child poverty rose by 19% between 2010 and 2022.<sup>4</sup> Not all children who experience poverty will be at increased risk of abuse and neglect. However, poverty is an indicator of support needs, which can also make it harder to access support.

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 be in education, employment or training, they have worse outcomes in housing, and they are more likely to be involved in the criminal justice system.<sup>5</sup> They are less likely to gain good qualifications,<sup>6</sup> nearly half of children in care have a mental health disorder,<sup>7</sup> and it is estimated that 25% of homeless people have been in care at some point in their lives.<sup>8</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>9</sup>

Delays in fully implementing the previous Government's reform programme – Stable Homes, Built on Love – across the country 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>10</sup> However, it is not too late to turn this around. Government commitment to invest in the full roll out of children's social care 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

- Over a quarter (26%) of local authority spending power was consumed by expenditure on children's services in 2022–23. This totalled just over £12.2 billion, an increase of around £600 million (5.2%) from the previous financial year. Reform of children's social care can stop these spiralling costs and allow for greater investment in other local services.
- 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>11</sup>

## **The Department for Education should increase the number of children who can return home from care, if it is safe to do so, by supporting family reunification efforts and developing national guidance for local authorities.**

Achieving ‘permanence’ leads to better outcomes for children. Bouncing between home and care is both traumatic for a child and costly for the local authority. A far better alternative is improving reunification practice to prevent family breakdowns following a child’s return home from care. 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**

- Almost a fifth (17%) of children who left care in 2023 returned home.<sup>12</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>13</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 said they would like to offer more support to reunified families than they currently offer.

Despite the appetite for change amongst local authorities, good reunification practice is not widespread enough and families experience a ‘cliff edge’ of support following a return home. Over half (56%) of local authorities surveyed said that they did not have a reunification policy or strategy, and the majority (79%) said that funding constraints were a barrier to providing more help.<sup>14</sup> Government leadership in this area could both drastically improve the outcomes of children in care and reduce the costs for local government.

### **Costing the savings**

- It costs an estimated £105,000 on average for each child who returns to care compared to an average of £7,857 to provide support to a family when a child returns home
- Over £300m is spent each year on children going back into care when a return home fails. In contrast, it would cost £67m to provide support and services to meet the needs of all children returning home from care.<sup>15</sup>

## Strengthen the child protection system



**The Department for Education should repeal the ‘reasonable punishment’ defence in section 58 of the Children Act 2004, to make it clear that **physical punishment should never be part of any childhood.****

There is growing evidence that physical punishment is harmful to children. A review of almost 70 studies 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>16</sup> Experience of physical punishment also increases the likelihood of mental health problems.<sup>17</sup>

### Key figures

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

- The majority of people surveyed (71%) think physically disciplining a child is not acceptable<sup>18</sup> and almost two thirds (63%) of those who expressed an opinion believe that a change of law should be passed in England.<sup>19</sup>
- Contacts to the NSPCC adults’ helpline about physical punishment of children tripled in 2023/24.
- Children who experience physical punishment are more than twice as likely to experience significant harm through more serious forms of physical abuse.<sup>20</sup>

In England and Northern Ireland, a defence of ‘reasonable punishment’ exists in law which permits the physical punishment of children. Yet there is no legal definition of reasonable punishment and this ambiguity in the law leaves children exposed to potential harm, as they are less protected from physical assault than adults. This can also create a barrier to child protection, as professionals can face challenges distinguishing between physical punishment and physical abuse.<sup>21</sup>

Along with over 60 countries worldwide, Scotland and Wales have already changed the law to protect children from all forms of violence. 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. 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>22</sup> We also want to see increased support for parents and families which promotes positive parenting.

## **The Department for Education should 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 refresh of the Working Together to Safeguard Children guidance in England. However, if the welcome ambitions within the guidance are to come to fruition political leadership and adequate resources will be needed.

The multiple agencies who are required to work together to protect children currently face challenges including capacity, safeguarding expertise, and difficulty sharing information and data. Many of these obstacles can be tackled, including by continued central government funding to support local multi-agency safeguarding arrangements in light of the revised guidance.

Effective information sharing is crucial for child safeguarding purposes. We support the implementation of a consistent identifier for children and want to ensure that all relevant professionals working across health, education, social care and policing are enabled to use it, rather than a select few. The Government should also extend the purpose of the consistent identifier to support service evaluation and commissioning, making it easier to identify local levels of need and to assess the impact of services on children's outcomes.<sup>23</sup>

Family Hubs offer a unique opportunity to strengthen multi-agency working within local areas. An Ofsted and CQC review of Family Hubs shows that those who accessed them had positive experiences, and there was improved joint working between health, social care and early years education.<sup>24</sup> However, inconsistency in Family Hubs provision across England leaves many families without the support they need. The Government should work together with local authorities to ensure that every local community has a Family Hub offering a range of quality universal and early help services. To be effective, this should include an outreach programme to engage underrepresented families and a workforce plan to sustain these services.

### **Key figures**

- Over half (56.5%) of all rapid reviews completed by safeguarding partners in England in 2021 mentioned a lack of coordination or handover between services.<sup>25</sup>
- Over a third (38%) of council-run children's centres in England have closed since 2010.<sup>26</sup>

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 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.

## Costing the savings

- 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. It is estimated that the financial benefits from reducing hospitalisations offset approximately 31% of the cost of Sure Start provision.
- Sure Start was also shown to improve the educational achievement of children. Children that lived within a short distance of a Sure Start centre performed 0.8 grades better in their GCSEs and those from the poorest backgrounds improved by three grades.<sup>27</sup> Each grade improved can lead to an increase in lifetime earnings by an average of £23,000.<sup>28</sup>

## The Department for Education should **introduce a national neglect strategy** which establishes the impacts of this harm and the best practice for dealing with neglect, especially within the context of poverty.

Neglect is most commonly listed as the initial category of abuse on child protection plans in England. It was also the top main concern for child welfare contacts to the NSPCC Helpline in 2023/24, accounting for 27% of all child welfare contacts.<sup>29</sup> Neglect can be defined as not meeting a child's basic physical and psychological needs which can have a negative impact on their physical health, mental health and safety. Even as other forms of harm have fallen in recent years in relation to child protection plans, the figure for neglect has risen.

Concerningly, the multi-agency response to neglect has been inadequate and slow. Local neglect strategies do not always translate into service response. Referrals and assessments are made but, in the view of the professionals, they do not necessarily lead to adequate follow up. Opportunities to intervene early are too often missed, allowing neglect to become chronic. Disagreements about how to define neglect likely contributes to the slow response. The inclusion of 'persistence' in the definition of neglect requires professional judgement about when neglect will 'seriously impair' development. Improved guidance should include an updated definition that removes the word 'persistent' as it prolongs maltreatment.

Neglect has become increasingly normalised as poverty has risen and poverty is a major risk factor for neglect.<sup>30</sup> Whilst not all children living in poverty are experiencing neglect and not all neglected children are living in poverty, poverty is a source of pressure and stress for families.<sup>31</sup> Efforts to tackle child neglect must also be underpinned by ambitious work and a robust strategy to eradicate child poverty.

## Key figures

- Over half of professionals surveyed have seen an increase in neglect cases during their professional lives. Nine in ten believe this was driven by poverty rates and the rising cost of living.<sup>32</sup>
- Three quarters (76%) of professionals said that a reduction in community support to parents was a key factor in driving neglect.<sup>33</sup>
- One in three social workers said they had been encouraged by a colleague or manager to delay action on a neglect concern, in the context of services under strain and an increasing normalisation of neglect as poverty levels rise.<sup>34</sup>

# Support the early years of a child's life



**The Department for Education and the Department for Health and Social Care should set out a plan to ensure that families in every local area receive a joined-up offer of early years services that supports healthy childhood development.**

The first 1,001 days from conception to age two lay the foundations for future health and wellbeing.<sup>35</sup> Babies need safe, stable and loving home environments with nurturing relationships to promote their healthy development. However, some families face challenges such as poverty, perinatal mental health problems, and domestic abuse. Without the right outreach and support, these problems can create barriers to meeting a young child's emotional and developmental needs. That is why the provision of high-quality early years services is needed to help tackle inequalities and have a positive, knock-on impact throughout a child's life.

## Key figures

- The Government's goal is for 75% of children to reach a 'good' level of development by the time they start reception class in school, up from the current level of 68% of children; this is considered a target for school readiness.<sup>36</sup>
- Disparities in levels of childhood development emerge in the early years, by age two only 80% of children are reaching the expected level of development.<sup>37</sup>
- Children deemed not school ready are 2.5 more likely to be persistently absent from school, and three times more likely to be NEET.<sup>38</sup>

Family hubs have a vital role to play in delivering early years services within local communities. However, there is a lack of consistency in evidence-based service provision nationwide. Every Family Hub should, as a minimum, 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>39</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>40</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>41</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>42</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.

Growing up in poverty increases the likelihood of a young child experiencing health and developmental problems. Yet, research from NSPCC and UNICEF UK shows that families on low incomes face barriers to accessing the preventative early childhood services which can help to mitigate the impact of poverty.<sup>43</sup> Family Hubs should work to address these barriers by co-designing services with families, delivering outreach strategies, and providing flexible, drop-in sessions as opposed to appointment-only support.

### 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>44</sup>
- Investment in early childhood could generate £45.5 billion in value added for the national economy each year.<sup>45</sup>

**The Department for Health and Social Care should work with NHS England, integrated care boards and local authorities to invest in rebuilding and reforming maternity and health visiting services, with 2,500 additional midwives and 5,000 additional health visitors in England over five years.**

Maternity services are the first support that parents encounter during pregnancy. They can play an important role in preparing parents for what to expect, identifying needs and mitigating risks before the baby is born. However, in 2023, almost half of all maternity services inspected by the CQC were rated as either 'in need of improvement' or 'inadequate'.<sup>46</sup> To provide families with one-to-one care, the Royal College of Midwives estimates an additional 2,500 midwives are needed in England.<sup>47</sup>

As children's public health experts, health visitors lead the delivery of the Healthy Child Programme to children aged 0–5 years, which includes health and development reviews with home visits. This puts health visitors in a prime position for safeguarding the youngest children, who are particularly vulnerable to abuse and neglect. It is deeply concerning that health visitor workforce numbers in England are at an all-time low.<sup>48</sup> To allow for safe caseloads, the Institute for Health Visiting estimates an additional 5,000 health visitors are needed in England. The Government should support this with greater investment in the public health grant, which is used by local authorities to commission health visiting.

### Key figures

- In 2024, one in three cases where a child died or was seriously harmed due to abuse or neglect involved babies aged under-one.<sup>49</sup>
- In 2023–24, one in five children did not receive their health visiting review at age two, which for many children is the last assessment of their development before they start school.<sup>50</sup>

Additional investment in the workforce should be complemented by increased local accountability for improving standards in maternity provision and delivering at least the five mandated health visitor reviews to every child, with access to additional support services where needed. The quality of the service delivered is important for child safeguarding. For example, virtual health visiting reviews could lead to safeguarding concerns being missed. Once safe staffing levels have been achieved, continuity of care should be prioritised in both maternity and health visiting, as this can make it easier for parents to disclose problems and for professionals 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>51</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>52</sup>

# Keep children safe in education

The Department for Education should commit to delivering **high quality and inclusive Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE)** for all children in England, alongside training for teachers 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. Children have a right to receive high quality, age appropriate, and inclusive RSHE tailored to the realities of their lives. This can play a key role in preventing child sexual abuse including peer-to-peer harmful sexual behaviours.

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. This should start early and build in complexity throughout their education, in line with children's evolving capacity. There is strong evidence that RSHE can reduce sexual and domestic abuse,<sup>53</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>54</sup>
- Half of secondary school teachers surveyed in the UK said they do not feel confident delivering sex and relationships education.<sup>55</sup>
- In a survey of 13–17-year-old students, only 55% said they had received lessons on sexual consent and 43% on sexual harassment. Children who admit to having harmed were even less likely to have received this at 39% and 31% respectively.

The 2021 Ofsted review into sexual abuse in schools shone a spotlight on the scale issues such as sexual harassment, image sharing and its normalisation within schools.<sup>56</sup> The review found the implementation of compulsory RSHE to be weak, with poor teacher subject knowledge and significant gaps in curriculum coverage. NSPCC research with children and young people found their experiences of RSHE to be inadequate, inconsistent, and not reflective of their lived realities.<sup>57</sup> The research also highlights that children and young people value confident teachers who have the knowledge and understanding required. Any topic young people are curious about, exposed to, talking about and/or researching online needs to be considered age appropriate for RSHE, and curriculum guidance should outline to teachers how they should engage their students meaningfully in the development of their RSHE curriculum.

Despite the safeguarding implications, there is not sufficient funding to deliver compulsory RSHE. Teachers must feel equipped to deliver high quality RSHE, including on newer or emerging issues such as image sharing and generative AI, 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 peer-to-peer behaviours. It includes a series of lesson plans created by sex and relationships education experts from the PSHE Association and the NSPCC, and a guide for teachers on how to implement a whole-school approach to RSHE in their school. It also provides a dedicated helpline to give advice and guidance to secondary school teachers who deliver sex education.

## **The Department for Education and NHS England should roll out Mental Health Support Teams in every school and college in England.**

Mental health is the number one reason children contact Childline.<sup>58</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>59</sup> and the average wait for a first appointment with CAMHS was five months.<sup>60</sup>
- Children who have experienced child abuse or neglect are four times more likely to develop serious mental illness.<sup>61</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>62</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>63</sup> However, some groups of young people are currently being underserved by the model, including those with special educational needs or neurodiversity, those from racialised communities, and children with challenging family or social circumstances.<sup>64</sup> Ongoing evaluation is needed to assess how well they are meeting all children and young people's needs and a commitment from the Government to adapt the model to meet a broader range of needs.

### **Costing the savings**

- Mental Health Support Teams pay for themselves within two years<sup>65</sup> and average benefit per intervention was previously estimated at £5,600.<sup>66</sup>
- The long-term impact of mental health problems in childhood costs the UK over an estimated £1 trillion in lifetime lost earnings.<sup>67</sup>

**The Department for Education’s commitment to creating a national register of children not in school is welcome. To create lasting change, local authorities will need to be resourced to discharge their new safeguarding duties, to identify all children not in school, and to offer the right support where necessary.**

We support parents’ rights to provide an education to their children in a way they deem fit. Receiving an education at home rather than at school is not an inherent risk to children, but it can reduce the chance of agencies identifying possible support needs and, in a minority of cases, potential safeguarding concerns.

### **Key figures**

- A reported 153,300 children were home educated at any point during the 2023/24 academic year, increasing from an estimated 126,100 in the previous academic year.<sup>68</sup>
- The number of home educated children in England has almost tripled (186% increase) between 2018–2019 and 2023–2024.<sup>69</sup>

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>70</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 but significant 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 in place, and families are aware of the support available to them.

Currently, families do not have to inform their local authority that their child is receiving an education at home. The new register of children not in school must introduce proportionate mechanisms to support and safeguard all children. To do this effectively, sufficient funding and resources must also be introduced to enable local authorities to discharge their safeguarding duties.

# 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 policymakers to ensure that children's safety is not an afterthought but a central pillar of the online world.



The Online Safety Act requires that tech companies robustly consider children's safety in the design of their platforms. Political leaders should support young people to enjoy the benefits of the online world by ensuring the new regulation is implemented effectively and platforms take action to prevent abuse in public online spaces and private messaging environments. 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 across online spaces, including emerging areas such as Generative AI.

**All parties should advocate for laws and policies on online safety which support children to safely access the benefits of the online world – as well as address the risks.**

**The online world is an integral part of children's lives.** Children and young people learn, play, and socialise online – they are clear that they enjoy many benefits from social media, messaging apps, gaming services and access to the wider online world. Many children do not distinguish between their 'online' and 'offline' worlds, with both parts informing who they are and their life experiences.

Access to the online world is particularly important for some groups of children and young people. For example, for LGBTQ+ children, online spaces and online allies are an important part of their support network and help them to feel part of a community. Neurodiverse children and young people benefit from using the internet to support learning and interacting with their peers.

The online world can offer vital access to confidential advice and support. Almost three quarters of Childline's counselling sessions take place through online messaging and emails – many children will be using smartphones for this. This approach allows children to feel more comfortable discussing their problems and disclosing harms.

## Key figures

- Almost all children go online and around seven in ten children who use social media or messaging sites say that these apps make them feel happy and closer to their friends.<sup>71</sup>
- 86% of UK adults surveyed want companies to mandatorily understand how groomers and child abusers use their sites to harm children and to take action to prevent it by law.<sup>72</sup>

**As well as benefits, the online world also carries risks to children's safety which must be addressed.** The scale of risk that children continue to face online is unacceptable. Many tech companies have rolled out apps and features without children's safety in mind, meaning children continue to be at risk of sexual abuse and exploitation, and have dangerous and inappropriate material pushed to them through algorithms on a daily basis. There are benefits for young people from technology and connectivity, but the evidence shows that healthy child development is not enabled by unfettered access to harmful content.<sup>73</sup>

Young children should not be accessing products that are fundamentally unsafe for them. Most social media services are designed for children aged 13 and over, yet tech platforms have consistently failed to invest in effective age assurance to identify and stop younger users from accessing their platforms, putting them at unnecessary risk. Rather than considering imposing blanket bans on smartphone use or on social media access for all under-16s, the Government must ensure tech companies are forced to step up to change the design and operation of their platforms which are allowing these preventable harms to children.

### **Costing the savings**

- The estimated annual cost of child sexual abuse with an online element is £993 million, according to the The Impact Assessment for the Online Safety Act.<sup>74</sup>

**Ofcom must be held to account by the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology for robust and ambitious work to implement the Online Safety Act and legislation must be kept updated to tackle emerging risks and technologies such as Generative Artificial Intelligence (Gen AI).**

The unacceptable level of risk that children experience online was recognised by all political parties through the passage of the Online Safety Act. The Act requires companies to embed safety by design for young users by understanding and addressing the risks to children on their sites. Rather than placing the burden on children to protect themselves, the legislation mandates tech companies to take responsibility for understanding and tackling the risks on their services. The NSPCC pushed for strong enforcement powers in the Act to incentivise a culture at the very top of tech companies which prioritises child safety. These include powerful tools to stimulate change such as fines of up to 10% of global revenue and criminal liability for senior executives.

Ofcom are taking their first steps in implementing the Act. They must be held accountable for delivering and enforcing ambitious regulation, which drives forward new standards of best practice in industry, delivers comprehensive protections for children, and ensures there are no safe havens for the perpetrators of abuse online.

Moving forward, the Government should continue to position the UK as a leader in both online safety regulation and online safety technology by keeping the legislation in line with emerging risks. 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.

## Key figures

- In the last six years, online grooming crimes recorded by UK police have increased by 89%, with over 7,000 offences recorded in 2023/24.<sup>75</sup>
- 79% of online 13–17-year-olds surveyed have used Gen AI technology, such as ChatGPT or Snapchat My AI.<sup>76</sup>

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 Government can support the adoption of innovative solutions that deliver for all online users and keep children safe.

While the rapid advancement of technologies such as Generative Artificial Intelligence (Gen AI) could provide benefits to children and young people, it must be designed with child safety in mind to stop a new set of safeguarding risks developing. Children are already experiencing a range of harms connected to Gen AI, including through the generation of child sexual abuse material, the generation of outputs which are used to bully children, and receiving harmful content on topics such as eating disorders and mental health.

On some dark web forums, thousands of AI-generated child sexual abuse images have been found. NSPCC research has found that virtual reality is putting children at risk of child sexual abuse and exploitation<sup>77</sup> with immersive technology 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 political leaders in spotting gaps and taking action. As attention increasingly turns to the impact of artificial intelligence, we urge the Government to make child protection a core pillar of any future strategy or legislation.

## Costing the savings

- It is estimated that the safety tech sector had a total revenue of £623m in 2023, a 37% increase on the previous year, with a growing workforce across the UK.<sup>78</sup>

**The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology and Ofcom should 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 significantly weakens 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 Government must hold Ofcom accountable for effectively consulting with children to deliver the best possible regulatory outcomes. We want the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology to ensure that children and young people are meaningfully consulted in the development and implementation of online safety regulation.

This could be done 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>79</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>80</sup>

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



**The Ministry of Justice should resource the criminal justice system 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) 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>81</sup> The vast majority are abused by someone they know.<sup>82</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>83</sup>
- Prosecutions for child sexual abuse more than halved between 2016/17 and 2020/21, while convictions fell 45% over the same period.<sup>84</sup>

The Government must overhaul the criminal justice system, provide significant investment to address the current backlogs in the court, and fast-track cases involving young victims and witnesses. 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>85</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 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>86</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. NSPCC research 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.<sup>87</sup> 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>88</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.

**The Department for Health and Social Care, Ministry of Justice and Home Office should 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 “under one roof”.**

### Key figures

- Police in England and Wales made almost 245,000 child protection referrals to social services for domestic abuse in 2020/21.<sup>89</sup>
- An estimated 55,000 people in England and Wales are currently held on waiting lists for support following child sexual abuse.<sup>90</sup>
- Waiting times for services for children who have been sexually abused look to have more than doubled since 2015.<sup>91</sup>

Where previously there were no measures to monitor the effectiveness of the justice system, the Victim and Prisoner’s Act will introduce new accountability mechanisms. This includes a strengthened role for the Victims’ Commissioner and new thresholds of compliance with the Victims Code of Practice. This should help create a system where young victims’ entitlements are clearly set out and – where there are failures to deliver these – gaps are identified, reported on and recommendations are made to improve compliance and the quality of service from support agencies. The Government must ensure that the guidance and Codes to support implementation of the new Act are strong and effective.

While the new legal provisions are welcome, they will not change the reality that support services for children remain few and far between and there is a lack of system-wide, sustainable funding for services specifically for children and young people.

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>92</sup> One of IICSA’s key recommendations in their final report was for governments in England and Wales to guarantee specialist therapeutic support for child victims of sexual abuse. The Government has recently announced several measures to drive forward IICSA’s recommendations, but this has not, to date, included a guarantee of therapeutic support which is crucial for supporting all survivors.

There are services available 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 and Domestic Abuse Recovering Together. 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>93</sup> In addition, freedom of information requests from the NSPCC found that 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>94</sup>

To address this, the NSPCC successfully campaigned for the Victim and Prisoner’s Act to ensure that the relevant authorities who currently commission support for victims (including Offices of Police and Crime Commissioners, Integrated Care Boards, and local authorities) have a duty to conduct a Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA). When drawing up plans and funding priorities to support victims and witnesses in their area, these partners will need to include a specific focus on the needs of children and young people.

However, JSNAs alone will not address the current postcode lottery of support for child victims. The Government should look to fill this gap in upcoming legislation by introducing a centralised statutory duty on local governing bodies to commission specialist services for young victims.

These local plans and central government funding should also be designed to enable children and young people to access joined-up, child-centred support “under one roof”.<sup>95</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 and intimidating.<sup>96</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.

Child Houses are designed to provide 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 “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>97</sup> the Home Office,<sup>98</sup> NHS England,<sup>99</sup> the Children’s Commissioner for England<sup>100</sup> and in the Government’s Tackling Child Sexual Abuse Strategy.<sup>101</sup>

Building on learning from the Lighthouse (the first adaptation of the Child House model in the UK), the Government published Child House local partnerships guidance to support local areas seeking to establish joined-up, child-centred support “under one roof”.<sup>102</sup> The NSPCC want children across the country to be able to access local, timely support and want to see the development of Child Houses across the UK.

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 Government to establish a £100 million innovation fund from which local areas can bid for support to set up a Child House (if they can demonstrate they could meet the principles and criteria set out in the Government's local partnerships guidance).

### **Costing the savings**

- Public sector costs of child sexual abuse and exploitation are estimated at £122,000 per child or young person.<sup>103</sup>
- An evaluation of 'The Lighthouse', the first adaptation of the Child House model in the UK, found that future savings are three times higher than the cost of delivering the intervention. 'The Lighthouse' , demonstrated a net gain in public expenditure per client of £14,570.<sup>104</sup>

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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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