



Children at the Table: A roadmap for putting children at the heart of the next Government

November 2023


Children
at the Table



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Foreword



“There are many young people filled with knowledge, fresh ideas and experiences which should be included in decisions which affect us all. If we are not, the decisions are made for us not with us.”

Young person

Babies, children and young people have been overlooked by policy makers for too long and the impact is clear: more children are living in poverty, they face a growing mental health crisis, and are waiting too long to receive urgently needed support. There are rising numbers of children persistently absent from school, more children being impacted by abuse, exploitation and online harm, and a greater number of children being taken into care due to reaching a crisis point in their lives.

We know that children facing disadvantage are falling further behind their peers in education, health and wellbeing outcomes; those who are already vulnerable are being put at even greater risk of harm. The pandemic and cost-of-living crisis have exposed and cruelly intensified these inequalities. A lack of political vision and ambition to improve childhoods is holding this nation back.

That’s why we’ve come together as five of the largest charities working to support children and young people in the UK.

We’re calling for the next UK Government to put babies, children and young people at the heart of Government policy making, backed by a step-change in investment to transform childhoods across the UK.

We believe that every child, regardless of their background, their parents’ or carers’ income or their postcode, deserves the best possible start, and early access to supportive interventions throughout their childhood and adolescence. Every child should be surrounded by people who love them, have enough food on their table, and a warm home to sleep in at night. Every child should grow up free from abuse, harm, neglect or exploitation and be able to achieve their full potential.

We want all children to be safer, happier, healthier and have more equal access to opportunities.

This means commitment from the very top of Government to deliver an ambitious strategy that will improve outcomes for babies, children, and young people, with their voices and insight represented from the start and throughout. This commitment must also include investing more of our national wealth so that we can achieve this transformation and shift the dial from crisis interventions to proactive and early help.

We stand ready to work with the next UK Government, devolved Governments, all politicians, the voluntary and community sector, academics, and healthcare professionals to give children a seat at the table and transform childhoods for the better.

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- Paul Carberry** CEO, Action for Children
 - Lynn Perry** MBE CEO, Barnardo’s
 - Anna Feuchtwang** CEO, National Children’s Bureau
 - Sir Peter Wanless** CEO, NSPCC
 - Mark Russell** CEO, The Children’s Society
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Children at the Table means:

- 1** Committing to an **ambitious cross-Government strategy and outcomes framework** to drive improvements for babies, children and young people.
- 2** 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.**
- 3** **Investing more of our national wealth** in improving the lives of babies, children and young people and spending strategically on early intervention and prevention.

The upcoming general election and a new incoming Government present a key opportunity to address the urgent issues facing babies, children and young people today. With coordinated prioritisation across Government, a commitment to listen to the voices of children, and the right policy interventions and investment, all children can have the chance to thrive.

Why we must act

A child's health, wellbeing and life chances are shaped by the circumstances of their birth and early life experiences. Yet in the UK today, around 4.2 million children are growing up in poverty, including 48% of children from Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups.¹ One million children are living in extreme poverty and one in 12 parents have a child who has had to share a bed with them or a sibling because they cannot afford another bed.²

Paediatricians are seeing worsening health outcomes in areas such as oral health, nutrition, respiratory health and mental health with the impact of growing inequalities starkly apparent. It is unacceptable that the most deprived 10% of children are nearly twice as likely to die as the most advantaged 10% of children.³

The wellbeing and mental health of too many of the UK's children is in decline. Children's happiness with their life as a whole was significantly lower in 2020-21 than in 2009-10. In June 2023 fewer than four in 10 children in the UK felt positive about the future of the country and the future of the world.⁴ One in six children aged 7-16 and one in four young people aged 17-19 has a probable mental health disorder,⁵ with young people from families on the lowest incomes 4 and a half times more likely to experience severe mental health problems than those from families on the highest incomes.⁶

More children than ever need support from children's services due to issues they may be experiencing at home or because they are at risk of abuse and exploitation from people outside their families. In 2023, more than 640,000 children were referred to children's social care.⁷ In 2022, more than 80,000 children in England were looked after by local authorities – an increase of 22% over the last 10 years⁸ – and 201 children died due to known or suspected abuse and neglect.⁹

Babies, children and young people have been overlooked for too long. We need a positive vision for transformational change and this report sets out a roadmap to achieving that.

4.2 million children

Around 4.2 million children in the UK today are growing up in poverty, including 48% of children from Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups.

1 million children

One million children are living in extreme poverty and one in 12 parents have a child who has had to share a bed with them or a sibling because they cannot afford another bed.

80,000+ children

In 2022, more than 80,000 children in England were looked after by local authorities – an increase of 22% over the last 10 years.

1.4 million children

In 2021-22, of the 1.4 million children estimated to have a mental health condition in England, less than half (48%) received at least one appointment with NHS children and young people mental health services – 32% of children referred for support were turned away.

Making the UK the best place to be a child: Our roadmap to a better today and a better tomorrow for babies, children and young people

Commitment and leadership from the very top to a transformational strategy and outcomes framework

To transform children's lives, we must transform the policy and decision-making process that impacts them. We have explored the most effective way to drive this change, partnering with the Institute for Government to bring together former senior civil servants and children's policy thought leaders to consider the most effective ways to co-ordinate children's policy across Government.

"Cross-cutting policy priorities require the commitment and collaboration of different parts of Government, not least the main departments and by extension their Secretaries of State. To achieve this, political leadership from the centre of Government is essential. Ultimately, that leadership and authority must come from the Prime Minister and/or the Chancellor, even if practical leadership is then delegated through the system to a lower level."

Institute for Government²³

The personal commitment of both the Prime Minister and the Chancellor to cross-cutting programmes of Government is key to achieving transformational change. **This is why we are calling for a personal pledge by the next Prime Minister and Chancellor to be champions for children, to put children at the heart of their next Government and drive forward the scale of change we need to ensure children are safer, happier, healthier and have more equal access to opportunities.**

Insight from our Institute for Government-convened experts highlights the importance of a strategy to provide a theory of change to a cross-cutting programme and provide *"an explanation of how the Government intends to allocate its resources and organise its work to achieve a particular result"*. In addition, an outcomes framework can act as a powerful means of rallying partner institutions, organising around a common purpose and judging performance over time.¹⁰ **To deliver a transformation of children's lives and futures, we need the next Government to commit to an ambitious, multi-year strategy and outcomes framework involving all relevant departments.**

An ambitious strategy and outcomes framework will also need metrics to ensure that the decisions taken and policies implemented are making positive progress towards the outcomes specified. Currently, it is difficult and time-consuming to identify children across different databases, and opportunities to intervene early are often missed. **We are calling for Introduction of a single, consistent child identifier to make it easier to identify what works for children and young people by assessing their experiences and outcomes across health, education and social care, and to enable improved information sharing across agencies to keep children safe.**

Recommendations:

Commit to an ambitious cross-Government strategy and outcomes framework to drive improvements for babies, children and young people growing up in the UK.

- A personal pledge by the next Prime Minister and Chancellor to be champions for children, putting them at the heart of the next Government.
- The Prime Minister to drive forward co-ordinated work to deliver the strategy through a Cabinet Committee attended by Ministers across Government to ensure children today and tomorrow are safer, happier, healthier and have more equal access to opportunities.
- Introduction of a single, consistent child identifier to make it easier to identify what works for children and young people by assessing their experiences and outcomes across health, education and social care, and to enable improved information sharing across agencies to keep children safe.
- Coordinated leadership across the four UK nations to ensure the needs of babies, children and young people are the political and investment priority of every nation of the UK, including in inter-Governmental engagement and structures.



Involving babies, children, and young people every step of the way

At the heart of each individual charity within the coalition are the babies, children and young people our organisations were set up to protect and support. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that any child or young person has a right to express their views and have them given due weight in decisions affecting them. Children and young people are the experts in their own lives and it is vital that they are involved every step of the way. It will also be important to involve parents and carers, particularly for those who cannot participate directly. Making provision to hear children, young people and the parents and carers of babies in a meaningful not tokenistic way will improve policy development and delivery.

“Institute for Government research has consistently found that problems with policy making – including a tendency for Whitehall parochialism – can be addressed by departments making much more extensive use of deliberative methods to give the public a greater stake in policy making... participants reflected that directly engaging children can also be of use to cross-cutting programmes in particular, because users of public services do not see organisational, bureaucratic boundaries in the same way policy makers do. So the process of engagement can force policy makers to view problems differently, prompting more cross-departmental collaboration.”¹¹

The voices and insights of children, young people and the parents and carers of babies and children must be at the heart of policy making. This requires real cultural change in children's policy development: moving away from engaging children and young people in a tokenistic way at the end of the policy making process, to engaging them meaningfully as expert partners from the start and throughout.

The cross-Government strategy needs a ‘check and challenge’ committee of children, young people and the parents and carers of babies, representing diverse communities and needs, that shadows the development and implementation of the cross-Government strategy and outcomes framework, and ensures this work is informed by the experts themselves every step of the way.

We know that the voices and insights of children are not heard frequently enough by Government. For example, children's rights organisations recently gave evidence to the UK Covid inquiry, which re-examined the Government's policy making process during the pandemic. They called out the lack of consideration of children in wider policy making and the enormous impact this has had on children's lives. We believe that not only must there be a proactive strategy to improve the lives of babies, children and young people across the UK, but also that Governments across the UK must consider the impact that all policy decisions will have on these groups, through **introducing Children's Rights and Wellbeing Impact Assessments across Government decision-making.**

Recommendations:

A new approach to decision-making that places children's interests, wishes and outcomes at its heart, involving children and young people every step of the way.

- Cultural change in children's policy development: moving away from engaging children and young people in a tokenistic way at the end of the policy making process, to engaging them meaningfully as expert partners from the start and throughout.
- A ‘check and challenge’ committee of children, young people and the parents and carers of babies, representing diverse communities and needs, that shadows the development and implementation of the cross-Government strategy and outcomes framework, ensuring this work is informed by the experts themselves.
- The needs and best interests of babies, children and young people to be cemented into all policy development and decision-making across Government, through mandatory Children's Rights and Wellbeing Impact Assessments.

Focused investment on early intervention and prevention

As a nation we must spend more of our national wealth on improving the lives of babies, children and young people.

There is a rich evidence base showing the cost benefits of investing in health, education, children's social care and welfare. For example, Public Health England examined the returns on public health interventions and found the median cost-benefit ratio of public health interventions targeted at babies, children, and young people, such as on mental health support, conduct disorder support, nursing services, and multisystemic therapies, were between £2.97 and £6.55 for every £1 spent.¹² Sure Start community provision prevented over 13,000 hospitalisations of 11- to 15-year-olds each year at its peak and the benefits were particularly long-lasting for children from disadvantaged neighbourhoods.¹³

However, new analysis by Alma Economics of the UK's spending in four key areas for babies, children and young people – education, welfare, children's services and social care, and health – shows the UK falls behind many comparable OECD countries in terms of the proportion of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) invested in these key areas, with outcomes lagging in many areas too.

In 2023, the UK spent 8.57% (£191.1bn) of its GDP on babies, children and young people in these four key areas. This is significantly less than leading OECD counterparts: the top 10 OECD countries for overall investment in these areas are spending, on average, 9.47% of GDP on babies, children and young people, representing an additional investment of around £20 billion.¹⁴

The OECD Child Well-being Dashboard shows that the UK performs ‘*well below average*’ across all OECD countries in key areas of ‘*children living with limitations in physical activity due to health problems*’, ‘*children who express self-efficacy*’, ‘*children who believe their life has meaning and purpose*’, and ‘*children who report high satisfaction with their life as a whole*’. The UK does perform ‘*well above average*’ compared to all other OECD countries in certain areas, ‘*children age 15 who are top performers in reading, maths and/or science*’¹⁵ and ‘*children who express a growth mindset*.’ This shows policy makers can boost outcomes for children

in the UK but a lack of focus on health and wellbeing means our children's lives are not as good as they should be.

We need strategic investment, focused on early intervention and prevention, to improve the health, happiness and resilience of the next generation.

Recommendations:

Invest more of our national wealth in improving the lives of babies, children and young people and spending strategically on early intervention¹⁶ and prevention.

- A commitment to increase the proportion of our national wealth that we invest in babies, children and young people.
- A commitment to eradicate child poverty, once and for all.
- The first King's Speech after an election should include a Bill to enshrine a target to end child poverty in legislation, with clear milestone commitments every two to three years and a clear overall deadline.
- Wholesale reform of children's social care backed by significant investment in early intervention services, to reduce the number of children who need to enter the care system and to achieve better outcomes for those who do.
- Investment in improving babies, children and young people's physical health, mental health and wellbeing.
- Equitable distribution of funds across the UK to ensure the benefits of additional investment are felt by babies, children and young people in every nation of the UK.

About this report:

This report contains voices from the Children's Charities Coalition's core participation group of 18 young people, and data and insights from newly commissioned research from the Institute for Government, and Alma Economics.

1.

Why we must act

It is unacceptable that right now, across the UK, too many children are not safe, healthy, happy and do not have equal access to opportunities. The upcoming general election and a new incoming Government present a key opportunity to prioritise babies, children and young people across Government. We must reverse the unacceptable trends we see in increasing child poverty, poor health and mental health and more children requiring support from children's social care. With the right policy interventions, investment and prioritisation, many more children can have the chance to thrive.

Child poverty

A child's health, wellbeing and life chances are shaped by the circumstances of their birth and their early life experiences. Around three in ten of all children (4.2 million) in the UK today are growing up in poverty¹⁷ and one million children are living in extreme poverty.¹⁸ By almost every financial measure, families with children are among the hardest hit by the cost-of-living crisis with one in five households with children – an estimated 1.5 million – in serious financial difficulties.¹⁹ The Trussell Trust food bank charity has reported it distributed over a million food parcels to children last year²⁰ and recent research shows one in 12 parents have a child who has had to share a bed with them or a sibling because they cannot afford another bed.²¹

Children should not have to grow up worrying about money, yet an estimated one in five children (20%) are worried about how much money their family has, whilst half are 'sometimes' worried (52%).²² Children who worried about how much money their family had were more likely to be unhappy with every aspect of life in the Good Childhood Index (which consists of ten key areas) than those who did not worry about how much money their family had.²³

"I'm really worried about my future. All the food shortages and things are ruining the economy. I'm scared that I'm gonna be in a future where I live in poverty because I can't afford anything or live well. I don't want to be trapped in a job that I hate for the rest of my life."

Childline caller, 15

"Poverty affects families more than anyone else and the children within these families will continue to suffer by going hungry, not having clothes on their back, stress and anxiety over the home's financial state if the increasing level of poverty in the UK is not addressed properly."

Young person

1. Why we must act



Sir Michael Marmot has highlighted the inextricable link between poverty and health: “*stress associated with poverty will damage children’s brains, it will damage child development.*”²⁴ The stress that comes with experiencing poverty can overload parents, affecting their interactions and relationships with their babies and children. Healthy child brain development is nurtured by responsive care and a stable home environment. Poverty can therefore make it harder for parents to meet their children’s emotional and developmental needs, as well as their material needs.²⁵

Our social security system isn’t protecting children from poverty. A major feature of household finances in the last decade has been the falling value of social security benefits. Welfare cuts were a key plank of the UK Government’s deficit reduction programme from 2010-2020, and the normal benefits uprating process did not apply during this period. Between 2013 and 2016, increases to most working-age benefits were capped at 1%. Benefits were then frozen entirely between 2016 and 2020. Consequently, the real-terms value of working-age benefits has declined significantly, contributing to a broader weakening of the social safety net.

Certain social security reforms impact particularly on children, such as the two-child limit which affects those born into families that are entitled to benefits but have three or more children. In 2023, an estimated 1.5 million children will live in families affected by this policy and the majority of them will be working.²⁶ Research shows that the two-child limit is not achieving its aim to encourage parents to make decisions about whether to have children based on what they could afford but is instead pushing larger families further into poverty.²⁷

For many families, work does not offer a route out of poverty. There are estimated to be up to 1.95 million children in poverty and living in families that face at least one significant barrier to taking on extra work such as child or parental disability, both parents or a single parent working full time and parents with a child aged under two.²⁸

“The idea of working your way out of poverty is totally unrealistic. If people take a pay increase, they lose access to Free School Meals, to the 16-19 bursary. Then your children don’t have access to the things they need.”

Young person

Child poverty is also negatively impacting our economy. Child poverty costs the UK £39bn a year due to the additional cost to public services of addressing harm caused by growing up in poverty and the greater risk of unemployment and lower earnings potential of adults who grew up in poverty.²⁹

Physical health, mental health and wellbeing

Children’s physical and mental health and wellbeing are in crisis. The impact of growing inequalities on children’s health, wellbeing and safety is also starkly apparent. The most deprived 10% of children in England are nearly twice as likely to die as the most advantaged 10% of children, and children in more deprived areas are more likely to face a serious illness during childhood and to have a long-term disability.³⁰ Prevention and early intervention are crucial to ensuring children and young people’s health and development. The ‘*Covenant for Health*’, published in July 2023, evidences the need for urgent action in early years and on obesity, physical activity and mental health.³¹

Physical health

Paediatricians are seeing worsening health outcomes in areas such as oral health, nutrition, respiratory health and mental health.³² The average height of children in the UK is falling behind the height of children in other European countries; height is a strong indicator of general living conditions, including illness and infection, stress, poverty and sleep quality.³³ Data from NHS Digital shows that more than one in five children in England are obese by the time they finish primary school and those living in the most deprived areas are more than twice as likely to be obese compared to those living in the least deprived areas.³⁴

The earliest years of a child’s life lay the foundations for their future health and wellbeing. As skilled health professionals, health visitors play a critical role in identifying and managing common and serious health problems for babies and young children. However, since 2015, the number of health visitors has plummeted to an all-time low in England and one in five babies are not receiving the health visiting check they are entitled to at one year old.³⁵ Babies and children from more deprived areas or from Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups are also less likely to receive these important health visits.³⁶

Rising childhood poverty and poor diets are linked to various childhood diseases, from Type 2 diabetes which has increased by 50% in England and Wales over five years,³⁷ to Victorian era diseases like rickets and scurvy which are reemerging. Child poverty is an entrenched problem in the UK. More than one in four children live in poverty (29%) and though this figure has fluctuated, it has grown across the last 13 years.³⁸ Some children and young people are disproportionately affected, such as the 48% of children from Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups living in poverty.³⁹ Poverty has lasting impact on children and young people’s health and wellbeing including increased incidence of diabetes, obesity, asthma, and long-term conditions as an adult. Therefore, groups more likely to be living in poverty including Black, Asian and minority ethnic children and young people are more at risk of poor health.

Mental health and wellbeing

Children’s wellbeing is declining. The Children’s Society’s Good Childhood Report 2023 found that children’s happiness with their life as a whole was significantly lower in 2020-21 than it was in 2009-10. Children’s average happiness scores with their friends, appearance, school, and schoolwork were also all significantly lower than they were when the survey began in 2009-10. In June 2023, fewer than four in 10 children in the UK felt positive about the future of the country and the future of the world.⁴⁰

Universal services for children and young people that support health and wellbeing, have also been in decline. Over the 10 years between 2010/11 and 2020/21, investment in early intervention support by councils in England fell 50% from £3.8bn to £1.9bn.⁴¹

1. Why we must act

“Mental health issues affect a massive amount of young people in the UK and not having the right support systems in place or enough of them can lead to severe consequences if serious change is not made.”

Young person

Half of mental health conditions arise by age 14, but many begin to develop in the early years of life.⁴² One in six children aged 7-16 and one in four young people aged 17-19⁴³ have a probable mental health disorder, equating to around 1.4 million children and young people.⁴⁴ Young people from families on the lowest incomes are four and a half times more likely to experience severe mental health problems than those from families on the highest incomes.⁴⁵

The system providing support for children’s mental health is particularly stretched. In 2021-22, of the 1.4 million children estimated to have a mental health condition in England, less than half (48%) received at least one appointment with NHS children and young people mental health services (CYPMHS or CAMHS) – 32% of children referred for support were turned away. The average waiting time for help increased from 32 to 40 days.⁴⁶

The youngest children are often overlooked in CAMHS provision and there is currently no national data collection on the prevalence of mental health conditions in under-2s in England.⁴⁷ Despite the crucial brain development which happens in the early years, laying the foundations for future mental health and wellbeing, The Parent-Infant Foundation found that only 9% of CAMHS professionals surveyed felt there was “sufficient provision available for babies and toddlers whose mental health was at risk” in their area. Only 36% report that mental health services in their area worked effectively for those aged 0-2 years.⁴⁸

Schools and colleges are playing an increasing role in identifying children and young people at risk of or experiencing mental health conditions. However, they do not always have access to early intervention services for their students. Mental Health Support Teams (MHSTs), which support teachers and mental health leads to provide a whole school approach to mental health,

and which provide support for children and young people with mild to moderate mental health conditions, are currently only available to around 35% of schools and colleges.⁴⁹ The UK Government’s current commitment to expanding teams to 50% of education settings still leaves millions of children and young people without support.⁵⁰

School attendance has not recovered after the Covid-19 lockdown, with persistent nonattendance (missing 10% or more of education sessions) and absence remaining stubbornly high.⁵¹ For the last three consecutive years, the attainment gap between the most and least disadvantaged children and young people has been widening.⁵² Pupils eligible for free school meals (a marker of family disadvantage) have worse school attendance and attainment.⁵³ A recent Education Select Committee report exploring the reasons for low attendance and recommendations for improving attendance rates found that mental health and child poverty were the two most common reasons for persistently low attendance.⁵⁴

Children’s social care

Local authority children and young people’s services cover a range of vital support, from parenting programmes in children’s centres and local safeguarding teams who step in and protect children from harm, to acting as a parent to the children in their care. This work is crucially important as 201 children in England died due to known or suspected abuse and neglect in 2022-23 and more than 250 others were seriously harmed. The youngest children are particularly vulnerable to abuse and neglect, with under-ones representing 35% of these serious cases. Children’s social care is there to help families cope with and overcome a range of issues – from parental and child mental health to domestic abuse or children being exploited by adults outside their families.⁵⁵

Current funding gaps in children’s services are severe – recent evidence from the Association of Directors of Children’s Services revealed the whole system is currently close to breaking point, with £778m needed in one year just to close the current budget gap.⁵⁶ The funding that is available is now primarily spent on delivering late intervention statutory services – such as child protection and residential care – meaning there is

less money being spent on the early intervention services that help prevent families reaching crisis point. Spending on residential children’s care is putting a particular strain on council budgets. Recent research by our charities has shown that in the past 12 years, the number of children in residential care in England has increased by 79% and spending has risen by 61%. At the same time, spending on early intervention services has reduced, with a 45% drop in the last 12 years.⁵⁷

There are now more children than ever in the care system in England, with latest figures showing the number has reached 82,170 – an increase of 22% over the last decade.⁵⁸ Recent years saw an increase in the number of older teenagers with complex needs coming into care and requiring high levels of support.⁵⁹ Outcomes for these children also remain poor and well below those of children who do not require social care intervention. They are less likely to gain good qualifications,⁶⁰ nearly half of children in care have a mental health disorder⁶¹ and it is estimated that 25% of homeless people have been in care at some point in their lives.⁶² Research over many decades has also shown care leavers are financially vulnerable and a significant number live at or near the poverty line, often struggling to make ends meet.⁶³

The Independent Review of Children’s Social Care in England (2022) recommended £2.6 billion of new spending over four years, which was predicted to deliver cashable savings within children’s social care that could have been reinvested for children and families over the medium-term, to reduce wider public spending pressures and provide social benefit. However, the proposed timeline and funding package have not been enacted and the longer the delays, the higher the cost.

Research shows that delaying the national reform process for children’s social care will cost taxpayers billions in the long run, and lead to thousands more children and families reaching crisis point. Even in a best-case scenario where reforms are fully implemented after the current two-year Pathfinder period, this period of limited action and investment will bake-in an extra £200 million to the long-term average annual cost of delivering children’s social care. This means that ten years from now, allowing for inflation, the Government will have spent an

additional £1bn more than if it had implemented the reforms on the timeline suggested by the Care Review. The extra costs are due to the missed opportunity to support more children in the intervening period, and therefore not preventing their issues from escalating to the point where they may need to enter care, as well as the Government’s decision not to take forward some of the Care Review’s reforms.⁶⁴

Investing in early interventions that will reduce demand for high-cost late intervention services will result in more families staying together in healthy ways, more children with stable and loving homes to grow up in, and fewer young people experiencing neglect, abuse, exploitation or harm.

82,170
children

There are now more children than ever in the care system in England, with latest figures showing the number of children in the system has reached 82,170 – an increase of 22% over the last decade.

1.4 million
children

In 2021-22, of the 1.4 million children estimated to have a mental health condition in England, less than half (48%) received at least one appointment with NHS children and young people mental health services – 32% of children referred for support were turned away.

2.

Making the UK the best place to be a child:

Our roadmap to a better today and better tomorrow for babies, children and young people

Driving ambitious outcomes for babies, children and young people

Leadership from the very top

The scale of the challenge, and the importance of success, make it essential that the machinery of Government works to the best possible effect to achieve positive change for babies, children and young people across the UK. To that end, the Children's Charities Coalition has considered carefully the best way to ensure that transformational change for babies, children and young people is achieved.

In September 2023, the Children's Charities Coalition partnered with the Institute for Government to convene a high-level group of experts, including former senior civil servants, academics and children's policy leaders, to test ideas and consider how to drive real change in policy for babies, children and young people – policy areas that cut across the brief of almost every UK Government department.

There was consensus that the following principles should be applied to achieve transformational change for babies, children and young people:

- Senior political leadership, usually from the Prime Minister or Chancellor, is a prerequisite for effective cross-cutting policy making, although the exact shape of this might change over time.
- Successful cross-cutting programmes require a range of planning, budgeting and delivery 'levers' to pull in the same direction – no single mechanism is, on its own, sufficient.
- The fundamental impact of economic trends and, especially, living standards on social policy such as children's cannot be underestimated and, so the Government's – and in particular the Treasury's – role in the economy should not be neglected.
- Place is a powerful basis around which to organise collaboration between institutions. This partly explains why cross-cutting policy making can be better co-ordinated at regional or local Government level.⁶⁶

“Nearly every department, tier of Government and public service have a stake in and responsibility for children's policy, making it a prime example of the need to be able to organise policy and delivery across organisational boundaries.”

Co-ordinating children's policy across Government, Institute for Government⁶⁵



“Cross-cutting policy priorities require the commitment and collaboration of different parts of Government, not least the main departments and by extension their Secretaries of State. To achieve this, political leadership from the centre of Government is essential. Ultimately, that leadership and authority must come from the Prime Minister and/or the Chancellor, even if practical leadership is then delegated through the system to a lower level.”

*Institute for Government*⁶⁷

Treasury support is key to the success of any programme *“in part because many of the most powerful levers at the Government’s disposal for addressing social policy issues sit within It. By setting departmental budgets, and through macroeconomic policy, it controls powerful levers for determining children’s living standards and the public services they have access to.”*⁶⁸

The personal commitment of both the Prime Minister and Chancellor to cross-cutting programmes of Government is therefore key to their success. **This is why we are calling for a personal pledge by the next Prime Minister and Chancellor to be champions for children, to put them at the heart of their next Government** and drive forward the scale of change we need to ensure children are safer, happier, healthier and have more equal access to opportunities.

An ambitious cross-Government strategy and outcomes framework

The Institute for Government highlights the danger of pursuing a target without a practical plan and the importance of a strategy to provide a theory of change to a cross-cutting programme. This would avoid *“the danger of ticking off a long ‘to do list’ without a sense of the Government’s overall goal”* and provide *“an explanation of how the Government intends to allocate its resources and organise its work to achieve a particular result.”*⁶⁹

To deliver a transformation of children’s lives and futures, **we need the next Government to commit to an ambitious, multi-year strategy involving all relevant departments.**

We need such a strategy to focus on improving every area of children’s lives, including a focus on child poverty, and for experts in all areas to work on its development. Most importantly, these experts must include children, young people and the parents of babies themselves.

The evidence shows that social and economic inequalities are borne out in educational, health and social care outcomes.⁷⁰ To drive improvements for babies, children and young people, we need a clear mechanism for change.

“Participants emphasised that an understanding of outcomes is required to define the eventual policy goal to which the Government is aiming. In other words, a successful children’s policy requires some sense of the ways policy is intending to improve children’s lives.”

*Institute for Government*⁷¹

Insight from our Institute for Government-convened experts highlights that outcomes frameworks act as a powerful means of rallying partner institutions, organising around a common purpose and judging performance over time, whilst also noting the importance of carefully designing any targets to reduce the risk of creating perverse incentives.⁷²

The Institute for Government notes that: *“It is unrealistic to expect political sponsorship of any form to remain wholly consistent throughout a cross-cutting, long-term programme. So, it is wise to build in systemic means of keeping attention focused on a programme as far as possible, such as through regular evaluation processes, reporting to parliament and sources of independent scrutiny.”*⁷³ We therefore recommend that reporting on progress of the strategy to Parliament is built in from the start.

We believe an **ambitious outcomes framework that sets clear goals for improvements in every area of children’s policy** will be crucial to ensuring that children are safer, happier, healthier, and have more equal access to opportunities. To set this framework, we stand ready to work constructively as partners with the next Government to develop a strategy and outcomes framework that includes insight and expertise from across the third/VCO sector, academics, healthcare professionals, experts in the machinery of Government and most importantly children, young people and the parents and carers of babies. One model of an outcomes framework is already in progress, led by For Baby’s Sake Trust and Kindred Squared.⁷⁴

Many areas of delivery of children’s services are the responsibility of local Government, therefore it is vital that strategy and outcomes development and implementation engage expertise from local Government, from the start and throughout.

This strategy and outcomes framework must be truly co-produced and it must include work to eradicate child poverty once and for all, reform children’s social care, invest in early intervention services to reduce the number of children who need to enter the care system and achieving better outcomes for those who do, and invest strategically in improving children’s mental health and wellbeing.

2. Making the UK the best place to be a child

Case study: Data sharing with 'A Better Start'

A Better Start is a ten-year (2015-2025), £215 million programme set up by The National Lottery Community Fund, and the five A Better Start partnerships, based in Blackpool, Bradford, Lambeth, Nottingham and Southend, are supporting families to give their babies and very young children the best possible start in life. Learning that has emerged supports the importance of shared data as being central to good systems change work.

Across the A Better Start areas, partners have worked hard to ensure that they can share data with each other to facilitate joint working and a shared responsibility for key outcomes. For example, in Southend, all the organisations in the partnership have integrated their data protection policies and compliance so that they can more easily share data across the partnership. This has resulted in the development of 'live' dashboards of data for the partnership allowing all the different organisations to see their contributions to the overall improvements being made in the area. For families it means a more seamless service where they do not need to regularly provide the same information to different organisations because all the relevant information needed to deliver quality support is held in common between the delivery partners in a secure way.⁷⁸



Data and evaluation

An ambitious strategy and outcomes framework will also need metrics to ensure that the decisions taken and policies implemented are making positive progress towards the outcomes specified.

"A combination of input and output metrics need to be tracked to clarify how the resources and activity of the Government are helping achieve those outcomes."

*Institute for Government*⁷⁵

"Participants reflected that New Labour's Sure Start programme was hindered by a lack of data infrastructure in place to evaluate the effectiveness of the programme during its initial implementation. Recent Institute for Government research into data sharing between public services during the pandemic found that technical difficulties arising through incompatible IT systems undermined efforts to share data in support of the public sector's Covid response."

*Institute for Government*⁷⁶

The Institute for Government makes clear that *"Creating a shared, single version of the truth that is as close as possible to live, pooled data between organisations will make analysis easier and more fruitful."*⁷⁷

Effective data sharing across health and care services is essential to deliver more integrated support and improve health and care outcomes, particularly for those who are the most vulnerable.

For over two decades, reports, serious case reviews and policy papers have concluded that improvements to data sharing across services for children are urgently needed in order to safeguard children and improve their health and wellbeing. For example, a report from the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (CSPRP) into non-accidental injury to babies emphasised that *"many of the local case reviews seen by the Panel detail failures in sharing relevant information at the relevant time to relevant agencies. It is no surprise therefore that this study identified lack of information sharing as a key factor that prevented practitioners from seeing and responding in a timely way to risk to babies."*⁷⁹

We believe that the introduction of a consistent child identifier would make it easier to identify what works for children and young people by assessing their experiences and outcomes across health, education and social care and enabling improved information sharing across agencies to keep children safe. It is difficult and time consuming to identify children across different databases, and opportunities to intervene early are often missed. A single consistent child identifier, potentially the NHS number which is allocated at birth, would allow professionals interacting with children to share information easily, better provide for their needs and drive better outcomes.⁸⁰ It would also allow national Government to have a fuller picture of how policy was driving improvements across the spectrum of children's outcomes.

A Cabinet committee to drive forward transformation

Maintaining momentum will be key to sustaining a multi-year strategy and outcomes framework with such a mountain to climb. The Institute for Government notes that prompt vision-setting and momentum-building is vital to the success of cross-cutting programmes.⁸¹

To ensure that this happens we believe the work of the Children's Strategy and outcomes framework needs to be carried forward by a cabinet committee comprising of all relevant departments, including the Department for Education, Department for Health and Social Care, Department for Levelling Up and Communities, Department for Work and Pensions, Home Office, Ministry of Justice Department for Science, Innovation and

Technology, Department for Culture Media and Sport, the Treasury, the Cabinet Office and the Territorial Offices, led by and reporting to, the Prime Minister.

To maximise effectiveness, it is important that membership of this committee is carefully designed, and that extending its membership to relevant senior civil servants as well as external experts is considered. The Institute for Government notes that:

"Beyond the inter-ministerial politics of committee membership, Government's preparations for Brexit and response to Covid-19 showed that there is value in opening membership beyond ministers to include, for example, senior civil servants and representatives from other tiers of Government. There is no reason that membership of leadership structures could not also include other key leaders from public sector institutions and beyond. Participants reflected on the effectiveness of the Criminal Justice Board, and its local equivalents, in the 2000s during the time of the Office for Criminal Justice Reform, which brought together political, official and expert leaders from different organisations on a regular basis."⁸²

Such is the importance of transforming the lives of children across the UK that prioritisation of children should not be limited to the work of the UK Government but should extend to collaboration between the administrations of the UK. As such, there is a role for relevant intergovernmental structures to play in coordinating efforts to improve the lives of children across Scotland, England, Northern Ireland and Wales. While there is an Inter-ministerial Group for Education, there would appear to be no existing forum for Governments across the UK to consider wider issues affecting children.

Children at the Table across Government

Genuine co-production

At the heart of each individual charity within the coalition are the babies, children and young people our organisations were set up to protect and support. We understand that children and young people are the experts on their own lives and that it is their right to be involved in decisions made about them. This counts no less in policy development. It is vital that they are involved every step of the way. Children at the table means not only the needs of babies, children and young people being heard and acted on, but they themselves also being heard.

Participation is a child's right. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child states that any child or young person has a right to express their views and have them given due weight in decisions affecting them. Participation is not a privilege and it does not have to be earned; rather, it values children and young people as citizens in their own right. The UK has ratified the convention and increasingly public services are required by law to take seriously the wishes and feelings of children and young people.

However, this is not just a rights issue. We believe making provision to hear children and young people in a meaningful not tokenistic way will improve policy development and delivery.

"[Ministers] should liaise with a youth board that echoes the voices from across the UK and then the minister advocates for our ideas and thoughts on particular issues."

Young person

"Institute for Government research has consistently found that problems with policy making – including a tendency for Whitehall parochialism – can be addressed by departments making much more extensive use of deliberative methods to give the public a greater stake in policy making⁸³... participants reflected that directly engaging children can also be of use to cross-cutting programmes in particular, because users of public services do not see organisational, bureaucratic boundaries in the same way policy makers do. So the process of engagement can force policy makers to view problems differently, prompting more cross-departmental collaboration."⁸⁴

Engaging with children and young people has been used successfully in both local and national Government. For example Camden Council's youth citizens assembly used engagement to consider approaches to violence against women and girls.⁸⁵ In Scotland, there is an annual 'Cabinet Takeover', where children and young people meet directly with the Scottish Government Cabinet and talk directly to members of the Scottish Government about the issues which affect them.⁸⁶

A new cross-Government strategy to drive improvements for babies, children and young people should engage children, young people and the parents of babies as expert partners, from the start, and throughout. We believe that one way to ensure this should be to convene a 'check and challenge' committee of children, young people and the parents of babies, representing diverse communities and needs, that shadows the development and implementation of the cross-Government strategy and outcomes framework, ensuring this work is informed by the experts themselves.

Children always considered in policy development

Alongside an ambitious proactive strategy and outcomes framework to transform childhoods and enable positive futures, it is important to ensure that strides forward are not set back by the unintended consequences of other Government policies.

The Institute for Government notes that research has found that policy tests can be a *"backstop check on policy, capable of at least identifying and evidencing incoherence between policies"* citing environmental impact assessments as a mechanism that has *"improved the consideration of environmental consequences in policy making."*⁸⁷

Pandemic era policymaking is a recent example of the consequences of not fully considering the impact wider Government policy making can have on babies, children and young people. A recent report by the Children's Rights Alliance for England, Just for Kids Law and Save the Children UK, concluded that *"the Covid-19 pandemic disproportionately impacted children and young people because decision-makers did not consistently and robustly consider their rights and interests."*⁸⁸

In 2016, in its Concluding Observations, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child looking at children's rights in the UK, recommended *"the State party:*

(a) Introduce a statutory obligation at national and devolved levels to systematically conduct a child rights impact assessment when developing laws and policies affecting children, including in international development cooperation;

(b) Publish the results of such assessments and demonstrate how they have been taken into consideration in the proposed laws and policies."⁸⁹

The UK Government subsequently introduced a 'Child's Rights Impact Assessment' template, however in England, as in Northern Ireland, there is no statutory requirement for assessments to be carried out. Elsewhere in the UK, children's rights are more thoroughly considered in Government decision-making. In Scotland, a Child Rights and Well-Being Impact

Assessment (CRWIA) process was introduced in the Children and Young People Scotland Act (2014). CRWIA are used to assess how Scottish Government policies, measures and legislation impact on children's rights, and whether they protect and promote the wellbeing of children and young people.⁹¹ In Wales, Ministers must have 'due regard' to the UNCRC, with the Welsh Government meeting this duty through Child Rights Impact Assessments.⁹²

Evaluations of the Scottish and Welsh schemes show that Children's Rights Impact Assessments ensure attention is paid to the implications of policy decisions on children and young people.⁹³ Alongside them it is important to give early consideration of children's rights in the policy development process, proper engagement with children and young people, and ongoing monitoring of the real-time impact to ensure policies deliver for children.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) reiterated its call on the UK in its most recent report in 2023 to *"develop mandatory child-rights impact assessment procedures for legislation and policies relevant to children in England, Northern Ireland and Wales."*⁹⁰

We believe the needs and best interests of babies, children and young people must be cemented into UK Government policy and decision-making through mandatory Children's Rights and Wellbeing Impact Assessments for all new policies, to ensure that unintended negative consequences of new policies on children are reduced.

The Department for Education in Whitehall is responsible for both children's services and education. We believe that work needs to be done to ensure that children's welfare and wellbeing are considered as equal, and indeed supportive to, their educational attainment to ensure children's needs are considered holistically by the department.

2. Making the UK the best place to be a child

Investing more of our national wealth in babies, children and young people

Investing in babies, children and young people is associated with improved health, wellbeing and educational outcomes.⁹⁴ For example, Public Health England examined the returns on public health interventions and found the median cost-benefit ratio of public health interventions targeted at babies, children, and young people, such as on mental health support, conduct disorder support, nursing services, and multisystemic therapies, were between £2.97 and £6.55 for every £1 spent.⁹⁵

Early years services for babies and their parents are a cost-effective investment, reducing demands on GPs, hospitals and social care and reducing health inequalities later in life. The Institute for Fiscal Studies found that children who had greater access to Sure Start in their early years were far less likely to be hospitalised later on and, at its peak, Sure Start provision prevented over 13,000 hospitalisations of 11- to 15-year-olds each year. The benefits were particularly long-lasting for children from disadvantaged neighbourhoods.⁹⁶

More recent interventions such as Family Hubs⁹⁷ and The Best Start for Life⁹⁸ are built on a strong evidence base but as whole programmes have not yet been independently evaluated in relation to their impact on children's outcomes, however some evidence suggests that Family Hubs are a cost-effective intervention.⁹⁹ The Best Start for Life is based on research evidence which finds that high-quality early years education has a beneficial impact on children's social, emotional and educational outcomes.¹⁰⁰

Increased spending on children's social care preventative services (including family support and early help) has a positive impact on Ofsted judgements, numbers of Children in Need and rates of 16–17-year-olds starting periods in care.¹⁰¹ Between 2012 and 2019, each additional £100 per child spent on preventative services for adolescents in a given year was associated with an average decrease of 1.9 per 10,000 16- and 17-year-olds entering care the following year.¹⁰²

Investing in our social security system is the best tool we have for tackling child poverty. During the pandemic, 400,000 children across the UK were pulled out of poverty, largely thanks to the UK Government's decision to temporarily increase Universal Credit by £20 a week. But with the withdrawal of the £20 increase in October 2021, followed by the onset of a major cost of living crisis, this progress was pushed firmly into reverse. By 2021/22, the number of children in poverty had almost risen to its pre-pandemic levels, to 4.2 million (or 29% of children). But this progress is easily undone without a proper, long-term commitment to protecting the childhoods and life chances of children growing up in low income families.

The positive impact for children of enhanced welfare provision can be seen in Scotland. In 2021, the Scottish Government introduced the Scottish Child Payment to provide extra support for low-income families. Initially a weekly payment of £10 for every child under six living in eligible households, it now stands at £25 for every child under 16 in households in receipt of other means-tested benefits. The payment is estimated to reduce the relative child poverty rate by five percentage points in 2023-24, lifting around 50,000 children out of poverty. And there is already evidence that this payment is having an impact on poverty rates in Scotland compared with the rest of the UK.¹⁰³

We believe that the first King's Speech after an election must include a Bill to set targets relating to the eradication of child poverty, and to make other provision to tackle child poverty.

To begin the work of bringing this goal about, and to prove serious intent, we advocate the following specific policy changes:

- Scrapping the two-child limit to benefit payments, investing £1.3 billion a year to lift 250,000 out of poverty and reduce the depth of poverty for 850,000 children.
- Scrapping the benefit cap, investing £300 million to reduce depth of poverty for 250,000 children.
- Boosting the child element of Universal Credit by £15 a week – which is the best way to target financial support at families with children.

- A Child Lock, whereby child-related benefits are uprated by the rise in average earnings or the rate of the Consumer Price Index each year, whichever is higher.
- Taking initial steps towards implementing an Essentials Guarantee and extending its principles to children's benefits by:
 - Establishing an independent process to advise on the right level for the Guarantee, and how a similar approach could be applied to determining the right amount for children's benefits.

New analysis by Alma Economics of the UK's spending in four key areas for babies, children and young people – education, welfare, children's services and social care, and health – shows the UK falls behind many comparable OECD countries in terms of the proportion of GDP invested in these key areas, with outcomes lagging in many areas too.¹⁰⁴

In 2023, the UK spent 8.57% (£191.1bn) of its GDP on babies, children and young people in these four key areas. This is significantly less than leading OECD counterparts: the top 10 OECD countries for overall investment in these areas are spending, on average, 9.47% of GDP on babies, children and young people, representing an additional investment of around £20 billion.^{105 106}

The OECD Child Well-being Dashboard shows that the UK performs *'well below average'* across all OECD countries in key areas of *'children living with limitations in physical activity due to health problems'*, *'children who express self-efficacy'*, *'children who believe their life has meaning and purpose'*, and *'children who report high satisfaction with their life as a whole'*. The UK does perform *'well above average'* compared to all other OECD countries in the areas, *'children age 15 who are top performers in reading, maths and/or science'*¹⁰⁷ and *'children who express a growth mindset.'* This shows policy makers can boost outcomes for children in the UK but a lack of focus on health and wellbeing means our children's lives are not as good as they should be.

As a nation we can and need to do better. **That's why we are asking the next Government to commit to increasing the proportion of our national wealth that we**

invest in babies, children and young people. Investing a higher proportion of our national wealth in babies, children and young people is an investment that should pay dividends in the improved health and prosperity of our nation – one we must make.

Investment in early intervention

Public services are caught in a cycle of increasing demand and late intervention, with spending becoming ever more concentrated on the most complex and expensive interventions. This means less resource for preventative work and fewer early intervention services, leading to further escalation of needs and increased cost.

With demand and costs intensifying, children's services have consumed a growing proportion of local Government budgets over time. As a result of financial pressures intersecting with the need to fulfil statutory duties, councils in England have radically changed the services that they fund. Combined spending on early intervention services such as children's centres, family support services and services for young people has fallen by more than 46%, while total expenditure on late interventions like youth justice, safeguarding and child protection and children in care have risen by 47%. 2021-22 typified this approach, with more than £4 in every £5 of additional spending going into late intervention services.¹⁰⁸

This cycle can still be reversed. For example, the Independent Review of Children's Social Care in England put forward a fully costed reform programme which would deliver cashable savings to be reinvested in the system to intervene earlier.¹⁰⁹ **Investment must be targeted strategically at early intervention and prevention to shift the dial from crisis interventions to proactive and early help.**

“Young people should be at the centre of decision making and financial investment as we are the future, if the UK Government does not allow us to be involved in the present then this will have a knock on effect in the future.”

Young person

3.

Conclusions & recommendations

“Because it’s about our future and trying to make it a little better and more accessible for us. It’s not just us [young people] but it’s the youngest kids as well.”

Young person

“The biggest policy problems facing the UK rarely fit neatly into departmental siloes and require co-ordination across Government. But there is a reason cross-departmental working has tripped up so many governments over such a long time. It is hard. It takes time and concerted effort to lead cross-cutting policy programmes.”

Institute for Government¹¹⁰

As a coalition of the UK’s leading children’s charities, we are urging the next Government to support our vision for transforming childhoods in the UK. We are committed to working with the next UK Government, devolved Governments, politicians of all parties, local Government, charities across the sector, academics and medical experts, thinktanks and, most importantly children and young people themselves, to make this a reality.

We must transform children’s lives, today and for the future. We believe that we can.

Children at the Table means:

- Committing to an **ambitious cross-Government strategy and outcomes framework** to drive improvements for babies, children and young people.
- 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.**
- **Investing more of our national wealth** in improving the lives of babies, children and young people and spending strategically on early intervention and prevention.

Recommendations:

Commit to an ambitious cross-Government strategy and outcomes framework to drive improvements for babies, children and young people growing up in the UK.

- A personal pledge by the next Prime Minister and Chancellor to be champions for children, putting them at the heart of their next Government.
- The Prime Minister to drive forward co-ordinated work to deliver the strategy through a Cabinet Committee attended by Ministers across Government to ensure children today and tomorrow are safer, happier, healthier and have more equal access to opportunities.
- Introduction of a single, consistent child identifier to make it easier to identify what works for children and young people by assessing their experiences and outcomes across health, education and social care and to enable improved information sharing across agencies to keep children safe.
- Coordinated leadership across the four UK nations to ensure the needs of babies, children and young people are the political and investment priority of every nation of the UK, including in inter-Governmental engagement and structures.

A new approach to decision-making that places children’s interests, wishes and outcomes at its heart, involving children and young people every step of the way.

- Cultural change in children’s policy development: moving away from engaging children and young people in a tokenistic way at the end of the policy-making process, to engaging them meaningfully as expert partners from the start and throughout.
- A ‘*check and challenge*’ committee of children, young people and the parents and carers of babies, representing diverse communities and needs, that shadows the development and implementation of the cross-Government strategy and outcomes framework, ensuring this work is informed by the experts themselves.

- The needs and best interests of babies, children and young people to be cemented into all policy development and decision-making across Government, through mandatory Children’s Rights and Wellbeing Impact Assessments.

Invest more of our national wealth in improving the lives of babies, children and young people and spending strategically on early intervention and prevention.

- A commitment to increase the proportion of our national wealth that we invest in babies, children and young people.
- A commitment to eradicate child poverty, once and for all.
- The first King’s Speech after an election should include a Bill to enshrine a target to end child poverty in legislation, with clear milestone commitments every 2-3 years and a clear overall deadline.
- Wholesale reform of children’s social care backed by significant investment in early intervention services to reduce the number of children who need to enter the care system and to achieve better outcomes for those who do.
- Investment in improving babies, children and young people’s physical health, mental health and wellbeing.
- Equitable distribution of funds across the UK to ensure the benefits of additional investment are felt by babies, children and young people in every nation of the UK.

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The children's charities coalition is formed of Action for Children, Barnardo's, National Children's Bureau, NSPCC, and The Children's Society. We are working together towards the vision for every child in the UK to be happier, healthier and have more equal access to opportunities.

Children
at the Table



NSPCC

**The
Children's
Society**