

News links from March 2021

Welcome to the April Newsletter

Scottish children have key rights enshrined in law now that the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child has been incorporated into Scottish law. Could England follow?

The long-awaited Leadsom Early Years Healthy Development Review was published in March, setting out a vision for improving babies' first 1001 days of life. While any proposals for improvements to early years provision have to be welcomed, many campaigners believe a far greater effort is needed – and there's no shortage of evidence to support that, such as the news that the number of children living in poverty had risen to 4.3 million even before the effects of Covid-19 began to have their inevitable impact.

The creation of the Office for Health Promotion was announced. This new body may prove more receptive to policy affecting child health and wellbeing.

We also welcome Dame Rachel de Souza, the new Children's Commissioner for England and wish her well in her important role.

It was also good to see Government recommitting to the Mental Health Green Paper in response to the many voices raised by the Alliance and others.

Mental Health Roundup

All 38 written submissions to the Select Committee Inquiry into ‘Children and young people’s mental health’ have been published and can be accessed [here](#). The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health asked its members which health issues would affect children and young people in 2040. Mental health came top with over 43% and obesity a close second (31%): [Read more](#). Following the announcement of £79m for mental health support, the Government announced [a new action group](#) to boost mental health and wellbeing in schools. The group met for the first time on 9th March to discuss the impact of the pandemic on the mental health and wellbeing of children, young people and education staff across England.

Senior Cabinet Minister for Children

Our call for a Cabinet Post for Children and Young People was in the air again during March, with [a letter in the Guardian](#) from Prof. Sir Al Aynsley-Green of the College of Medicine, following the publication of their “[Hope for the Future](#)” health manifesto which includes the call to “*Establish a Cabinet-level Secretary of State for Babies, Children, Young People and Families*”.

Our Hon. President Baroness Frances d’Souza received support from fellow peers when she called for a Cabinet Minister during a debate on 19th March on the Education and Training (Welfare of Children) Bill. Baroness d’Souza [made a strong case](#) for our primary aim and was supported by Baroness Massey of Darwen and Lord Watson of Invergowrie.

[Please sign and share the Children First Alliance petition for a Senior Cabinet Minister for Children and Young People](#)

School Nurses

Another call in the College of Medicine's [Hope for the Future](#) manifesto (see left) came from Dame Donna Kinnair of the Royal College of Nurses - this one for a nurse in every school instead of the current one nurse for every 10 schools. The call received widespread support from teaching unions and would help to tackle childhood obesity and mental health problems.

Child Abuse

The long awaited [Football Association report on Child Sexual Abuse](#) was finally published in mid March, accompanied by a three-part BBC documentary entitled “[Football’s Darkest Secret](#)”. The shocking scale of that problem and the way it was handled, together with emerging reports from the [Everyone’s Invited](#) website (launched last year to fight back against the normalisation of unacceptable sexual behaviour) pushed child sexual abuse into the headlines in March. Many schools - both state and private - were shocked to find themselves named in anonymous testimonies posted on the site, which has continued to receive thousands of submissions.

Schools and Ofsted were also in the news in this context, with the [DfE warning](#) that schools which fail safeguarding rules risk closure. Children’s Commissioner Dame Rachel de Souza [called for a wider culture change](#) and stressed the importance of using the robust safeguarding systems already in place to provide action and support to children who are bravely speaking out.

The [Internet Watch Foundation](#), the charity that finds and removes online content showing child sexual abuse, has found a disturbing trend whereby sex predators manipulate children into abusing their own friends and siblings on camera. Their [latest study](#) reveals that this trend is far worse than experts had feared. The [Stop It Now! campaign](#) is concerned about an increase in the viewing of illegal material and provides a reporting hotline for callers concerned about their own, or others’, behaviour.

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Child Abuse, cont'd

The Centre for Social Justice produced its [“Unsafe Children: Driving Up Our Country’s Response to Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation”](#) report in March, with the Rt. Hon. Sajid Javid MP referring to an estimated 300,000 perpetrators causing a child sexual abuse epidemic and calling for all of us to better understand *“how broad the cohort of victims/survivors can be, how differently they can present and move away from our erroneous view of these people as a monolith”*.

A Nuffield Foundation report - [Protecting young children at risk of abuse and neglect: The changing face of early childhood in the UK](#) found that incidents of serious harm to children under five where abuse or neglect is known or suspected increased during the early months of the pandemic, and called for an urgent re-evaluation of the current system.

More Covid-Related Research, Reports and News

- From researchers at the Universities of Bristol, Birmingham and Glasgow comes [a study about the impact of Covid-19 restrictions on pre-school children's eating, activity and sleep behaviours, and their readiness for transition to primary school](#). (NB in pre-print so not yet peer-reviewed)
- [Forgotten, Left Behind and Overlooked](#), from the APPG for SEND, reports on the experiences of young people with SEND and their educational transitions, while [this report](#) from the Education Policy Institute think tank describes the variability of SEND support as a “postcode lottery” whereby children from the poorest areas are less likely to get help than those in more affluent areas.
- Child health profiles in England can be accessed here: [Public Health England's profile of child health and wellbeing for each English local authority](#).
- A report from the Troubled Families Programme provides an update on progress made in 20/21. [Read here](#).
- [Podcast](#): Listen to Kate Day, a highly experienced counsellor, discussing child mental health and the long-term legacy of the pandemic.
- Innovation insights: [Coram-I](#) surveyed Children's Services to find out how much the sector is able to innovate to solve key challenges. Adolescent mental health emerged as the biggest issue: [read the results here](#).
- The Children's Activities Alliance reported the [results of a parents' survey](#) on the effects of the closure of classes and activities on children.

Holiday Activities and Food

Holiday food and activity programmes were boosted in March by the announcement of a £220m fund to roll them out, and a coalition of 16 charities and not-for-profit organisations to share knowledge, expertise and best practice gained through past pilot programmes. The [Holiday Activities and Food \(HAF\) Alliance](#) is urging local authorities to contact them. Read more [here](#). The programme has grown from 4 weeks in the Summer to a minimum of 6 weeks including 4 weeks in Summer and a week each at Christmas and Easter.

Active Schools

As attention turns to post-pandemic recovery, a timely study from the Yorkshire Sport Foundation provides a framework for “active schools”. More information [here](#) about a pilot study where the framework was adopted by the Sport England-funded Bradford Local Delivery Pilot - Join Us: Move. Play (JU:MP) - to drive systems change for physical activity.

Welcome Dame Rachel de Souza

The new children's commissioner took up her post at the beginning of March with a promise to listen. Noting that the scale of the challenge will be like reconstructing the social security system in the wake of WW2, she pledged to listen to children via "[*The Big Ask*](#)" and to launch the [Childhood Commission](#), a once-in-a-lifetime review of childhood

To quote Dame de Souza: *"I want to see childhood right at the top of the Government agenda. That means every speech from the Prime Minister and Chancellor mentioning children, and every Government department constantly pushing to improve the lives of children."*