

News links from November 2020

Comprehensive Spending Review

Government has pledged a new £500 million financial package for England's mental health services with the majority earmarked for children and young people including support services in schools. Campaigners recognised this as a necessary step forward given the woeful state of services even before the pandemic and the increasingly worrying reports covered in [last month's issue](#).

On other issues affecting children and young people, the CSR offered less comfort. The promised laptops for every child who needs one has not been kept and [Daisy Cooper MP reports](#) that *'one in five pupils with an Education Health and Care Plan has still not been able to return to school due to coronavirus restrictions and many parents report they are currently not getting enough support to help their children learn remotely.'*

The full extent of the damage to the attainment gap between richer and poorer pupils has yet to be assessed but the results are likely to be felt over many years and questions about the Government's commitment to 'levelling up' are already being asked. The [SNP's new policy](#) of free school breakfasts and lunches to ALL primary school pupils will inevitably lead to further pressure. Why can't it happen in England?

Free School Meals Holiday Provision Saga

**Last month, we said:
WATCH THIS SPACE!**

We're naturally delighted with the success of the Marcus Rashford-led campaign, and echo [The Food Foundation's](#) response. They say: *"Today's announcement shows the government is serious about tackling children's food poverty . . ."* but add *"we must keep in mind that a similar number of disadvantaged children (approx. 1.7 million) will continue to miss out on the benefits of free school meals and healthy start because the qualifying income criteria are currently set far too low. Children's food poverty, like the pandemic, will not go away until we have a lasting solution in place. We've started the journey today, thanks to the Government's commitment, and we need to see it through so we can #EndChildFoodPoverty."*

Reducing Childhood Obesity

Last month we reported on the increase in obesity found by the National Child Measurement Programme for 2019/2020. Related to this, research from 2017 by University College London examined strategies from 25 Local Authorities that had a downward trend in childhood obesity, including examples of practice. All LAs used more than one strategy, including reducing health inequalities and applying a whole-systems approach. [Read more here.](#)

Smacking

Scotland banned smacking a long time ago (1979) but an argument of “reasonable chastisement” remained as a defence for parents and carers. [That defence has now been removed.](#) In January, Wales was the second part of the UK [to pass a law](#) banning people from smacking their children. It will begin in 2022.

There are not currently any plans for England or Northern Ireland to follow suit, although it is widely accepted (e.g. by the [Association of Educational Psychologists](#) amongst others) that smacking is harmful to children’s mental health.

Mean Streets

The [Children's Commissioner](#) for England has become concerned at the level of fear being picked up from children. Both safety when out in public and a general sense of social disorder have consistently been raised as major worries.

In order to understand more about when, where and why children feel unsafe, and what could be done to address these fears, the Children's Commissioner studied seven Sheffield focus groups. Many children said that they didn't feel safe making use of public space, and there were particularly worrying reports about girls facing sexual harassment.

[Read the Report.](#)

Bullying

The Anti-Bullying Alliance [published a poll](#) to mark Anti-Bullying Week in November. They found that the pandemic had changed the way bullying happens but a third of children polled said they had been victims during the previous six months, and a fifth suffered once a week or more. An [article in Psychology Today](#) reported research by four psychologists who tracked the lives of thousands of people from birth to midlife to find out how humans develop. Their book is [The Origins of You: How Childhood Shapes Later Life](#). Their research on bullying describes the effects of bullying on the growing child, and the protective factors, such as strong family bonds, that can increase resilience in bullied children.

Babies in Lockdown

A 20% increase in incidents of deliberate harm to babies between March and October was blamed, by the chief inspector of Ofsted, Amanda Spielman, on a toxic mix of isolation, poverty and mental illness. Violence towards babies was already a worry but the pandemic has been exacerbating the risk factors as well as hampering the work of health staff and social workers. [Read more.](#)

Children's Homes

Anne Longfield, England's Children's Commissioner, has published reports showing how the children's residential social care system is broken and failing many of the most vulnerable children, in particular those who are most at risk of falling through gaps in the system. The first report, '[The children who no-one knows what to do with](#)', highlights issues faced by certain groups of children in care.

The second report '[Private provision in children's social care](#)', explores the growth of private companies providing foster placements and children's homes.

The third report "[The 2020 Stability Index](#)", reports on the instability that children in care experience.

Early Years Funding

Before the Spending Review, MPs and Officers from the [APPG on Childcare and Early Education](#) [wrote to the Chancellor](#) to call for a long-term funding settlement for maintained nursery schools (MNS), following the news that nearly two thirds of them expect to be in deficit in the current financial year.

The letter said: ‘The vast majority of MNS remained open during the pandemic and took in children from other settings which were closed. By remaining open to meet the needs of vulnerable communities they have incurred additional costs and lost vital fee income. As a result, 64% expect to be in deficit in the current financial year . . . ’

The plea fell on deaf ears. The Government will invest ‘£44 million in funding for early years education in 2021-22 to increase the hourly rate paid to childcare providers for the government’s free hours offers’.

[In Nursery World](#), Beatrice Merrick of [Early Education](#), said, ‘This increase in funding for the early years sector is welcome, but is unlikely to keep already struggling providers open. The increase in minimum wage will eat up much of the increased funding. . . ’

Early Years Funding - cont'd

Later in November, it was announced that schools and colleges facing the greatest combined staffing and funding pressures will have access to a new short-term Covid workforce fund, covering the period 1 November until the start of the Christmas holidays. Early Years settings are, however, excluded from this fund.

The [Early Years Alliance's](#) CEO Neil Leitch [described the exclusion as a "slap in the face"](#), saying: *'These are the providers who have made it possible for parents to go out to work throughout the pandemic and they have been offered a paltry settlement. They have had no help to pay for cleaning and were allocated pennies-per-hour in the Spending Review, failing to cover even the mandated increase to the National Minimum and National Living wages to come. Now they are told they will receive no help to stay open as they deal with staff shortages. Early years settings cannot be left without help any longer. They cannot wait to find out if they will have their autumn funding arrangements extended into spring. They are making impossible decisions now about whether they can keep qualified staff on the payroll, and ultimately, if they can keep open the valued settings that their communities so rely on.'*