

News links from January 2021

With the first week in February designated “[Children’s Mental Health Week](#)” and the publication of the [White Paper](#) prior to the reform of the 1983 Mental Health Act, mental health is, as ever, very much in the news.

The Children’s Commissioner, Anne Longfield, published her [fourth annual report](#) on the state of children’s mental health services in England, and commentators and professionals across the UK have plenty to say about the impact of the pandemic on children’s mental health both now and in the future. It is not a new problem, as the Children’s Commissioner notes:

In the year before the pandemic, referrals to children’s mental health services increased by 35% while the number of children accessing treatment increased by just 4%.

She concludes:

In the longer term, the Government’s ‘building back better’ plans must include a rocket boost in funding for children’s mental health, to expand services and eliminate the postcode lottery. As an absolute minimum, all schools should be provided with an NHS-funded counsellor, either in school or online.

The Prince’s Trust [published a report](#) that highlighted the “devastating toll” on young people’s health and wellbeing, leading [Cat Smith MP to comment](#) that “a sea change in the government’s approach to vital mental health of young people is urgently needed”. [Munira Wilson MP said](#): “The toll of the pandemic on the mental health of our young people has been massive, we can’t just ignore it and hope it will go away”.

Urgent Open Meeting

The APPG on a Fit and Healthy Childhood has called an urgent open meeting with the aim of encouraging and co-ordinating sector-wide activity to press for improved mental health support for children and young people.

Monday 8 February 2021

at 4.30 pm

For more information and a link, please contact the secretariat by emailing phil@royalpa.co.uk.

A Senior Cabinet Minister

We at the Children First Alliance have noticed an increase in the calls for a Cabinet-level Minister for Children. This [BBC report](#) sums up the many ways that the pandemic is affecting children and young people: everything from mental health issues to hidden abuse.

The current setup is not delivering!

The current junior ministerial post does not have the requisite authority to drive an integrated cross-departmental response to the challenges we faced even before this pandemic: without action, our children will become the least healthy adult population in living memory. We need somebody at the highest level of Government to take responsibility and drive improvements -

Independent Commission

In a letter to the Guardian, an array of academics, charities, campaigners and professionals, noting the devastating effects of the pandemic on children, called for an independent commission to inform a cross-government strategy to steer children and young people clear from the lingering effects of Covid-19. They said that the strategy to protect children from the worst effects should build on the principles for recovery set out by leading children's charities and must involve children, young people and parents.

[Read the letter and signatories.](#)

Early Years Providers

The beleaguered Early Years sector has remained open while schools have closed. [Tulip Siddiq MP wrote](#) that the sector has been treated as an “afterthought” and added that the sector is now on the brink of collapse, caused by a pre-pandemic funding gap, massively reduced demand during the pandemic, a row over funding and increased costs related to Covid-compliant operation. 20,000 providers are set to close within six months. [Read more](#). Spring term attendance, according to the [Early Years Alliance quoting DfE figures](#), has been 37% of normal rates. Amidst calls for nursery staff to be vaccinated, this week saw [a steep rise in Covid cases in early years settings](#) (1,267 up from 582 the week before). Compounding the problems, The Early Years Alliance found that [up to 8,000 staff cannot send their own children to school](#) because in some areas the requirement to be a key worker is being applied to both parents rather than just one.

The Early Years Workforce Commission, set up in March 2020, [published their report](#) this week. It was based on a survey carried out in September 2020 and says that the sector is at risk of becoming unsustainable without ‘immediate intervention and urgent action’.

Free School Meals - Food Parcels Row

The news media was full of articles and opinion pieces around Free School Meals, following the publicity given to the low quality of some of the food boxes.

Marcus Rashford met with one of the providers and, together with various chefs, called for a review. Paediatricians, campaigners and nutritionists called on the Government to review its “food parcels first” approach and offer cash or vouchers to parents. Criticism also arose from the fact that half term food will be provided by councils under the Covid Winter Grant Scheme, rather than through schools.

Sport England

Sport England’s new long-term strategy seeks to help those who deliver sport and physical activity to recover from the massive challenges of the past year and to look beyond Covid-19 to tackle the biggest issues of the next decade. Their recent report ([read here](#)) found that the number of children and young people who were physically active fell during the 2019/20 academic year in England, as first storms and then the pandemic restricted the type of activities available. However, youngsters were generally successful in adapting their habits to include new forms of exercise, including walking, cycling and fitness.

Babies

Working for babies: Lockdown lessons from local systems, reports on a survey of 0-2s service providers.

98% of respondents said babies had been impacted by parental anxiety, stress or depression, which was affecting bonding and responsive care. 78% were clear that the Government had not done enough, creating ‘baby blind-spots’. 80% said that some babies they work with had experienced increased exposure to domestic conflict, child abuse or neglect, while 29% said many had.

Vulnerable Children

A new online app - CHLDRN - was released by the Office of the Children's Commission in January. Covering England only, it allows users to access statistics on over 130 measures of childhood vulnerability for each local area. It is possible to find out the number of children with a social worker; how many have been exposed to domestic abuse; have special educational needs, or are at risk of falling out of education or being groomed by gangs. Webinars are available to explain its use.

[More information here.](#)

Anne Longfield, the Children's Commission, has expressed concern that while there has been an increase in domestic abuse calls, the number of referrals to social services has gone down. Domestic abuse is the most common reason why children are referred but for this to happen they have to be identified. Official figures show 174,000 children live with domestic abuse, but it is possible that many more – as many as 789,000 children - have not been identified by the system. This means hundreds of thousands of children potentially going without vital services.

[Read more](#)

Independent Review of Children's Care Sector in England

Children's charities welcomed the announcement of a review of all areas of the social care system - from a child's first referral to outcomes for leaving care at 18. The review will be led by Josh MacAlister (CE of the charity [Frontline](#)) who launched an 'Experts by Experience' Group to advise him on how to include the voices of people with a lived experience of the children's social care system. [More information](#).

Education

As Boris Johnson this week wrote an [open letter](#) to the UK's parents and guardians, there were reports that families are suffering from [lockdown fatigue](#) as they juggle work, childcare, home schooling and financial problems. Ofsted this week produced their research on Remote Education ([download here](#)) having used a range of methods to look at all aspects of online learning during school closures. Earlier in January, Robert Halfon MP [called for a long-term plan](#) to ensure left-behind pupils don't become "*mired in a Covid swamp*".

Online Child Abuse

As the Government published its [strategy to tackle child sexual abuse](#), the Internet Watch Foundation ([IWF](#)) reported that it has seen a 50% increase in public reports to its hotline, and an alarming 77% increase in the amount of ‘self-generated’ material. They warned that children are at greater risk of being approached or groomed by strangers online than ever before as “*what was already a recognised phenomenon has now cemented into a grave and widespread threat.*” A campaign to support parents will be launched in the spring.

[The APPG on Social Media](#) launched an inquiry (about to conclude) last November into the disturbing rise of self-generated indecent images, and the Government published its plans on how it intends to tackle online harms in general.

The IWF’s Report

Inquiry by the APPG on Social Media

The Government’s Child Sexual Abuse Strategy

Tackling Online Harms Strategy