

Jo Churchill MP
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Prevention,
Public Health and Primary Care
39 Victoria Street
London
SW1H 0EU

Your ref: PMPO-1189335

21 October 2019

Dear Jo,

Thank you very much for your thoughtful reply of 10 October 2019.

We appreciate the measures that Government are already taking to address the severe challenges to the health and wellbeing of our children and young people and we understand the pressure on resources both within the NHS and more generally.

Over recent years, we have been documenting and bringing together evidence, much of it from official sources, of the decline in the childhood experience and a substantial appendix of that evidence is attached to this letter.

We take the view that the evidence shows such a decline across virtually every aspect of childhood, that further co-ordinated action is needed to halt and reverse current trends and that without this further action, the problems will only multiply.

The economic case is also overpowering. According to Public Health England in March 2017, annual spend on the treatment of obesity and diabetes is greater than the amount spent on the police, the fire service and the judicial system combined, and the UK-wide NHS costs attributable to overweight and obesity, currently standing at £6.1 billion a year, are projected to reach £9.7 billion by 2050, with the wider costs to society estimated to reach £49.9 billion.

There are of course many other costs incurred including in mental health, social services, the justice system and other physical health issues.

These costs are already onerous and without further action there will surely come a point when they will be simply unsustainable.

I know that you will be aware that recent evidence suggests that Britain may be starting to overtake America in childhood obesity rates. Recent figures show that more children in England are classed as obese at the age of 11 than in the US. The proportion of US children aged 9 to 11 who are obese is 18.5%. The figure for children in their final year of primary school in England is at a record high of 20%.

Secondary-school children are also more obese. According to the Government's Health Survey for England of December 2018, 23% of children aged 11 to 15 were obese in 2016. In America, 20.6% of children aged 12 to 15 were obese. That figure is from the US National Health and Nutritional Examination Survey of 2018.

We also understand that new data from National Child Measurement Programme shows that obesity levels of four and five-year-olds rose 9.5% last year.

The children of today are, of course, the adults of tomorrow and there are already reasonable predictions that we are heading for the least healthy adult population in living memory. I know that no Government would want to preside over this.

We recognise the enormity of the challenge and we do not wish to be critics of the Government, but we do take the view that there is now an emergency regarding the health and wellbeing of our children and young people.

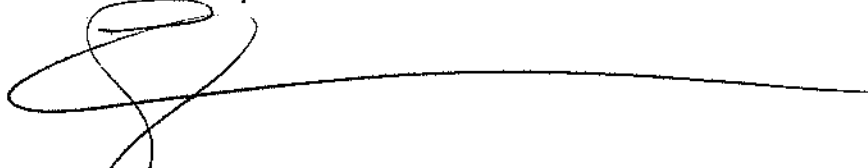
We would like to work in partnership with you and will do everything within our power to assist.

We also believe that the general public would applaud any Government that made the health and wellbeing of our children and young people an extremely high priority.

Could we come in to see you to discuss this further in a constructive manner? We know that we want the same outcomes.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Steve Franks', written over a long horizontal line.

Steve Franks
CEO, Water Babies

Obesity/overweight issues

- Nearly a third of children aged 2 to 15 are overweight or obese and younger generations are becoming obese at earlier ages and staying obese for longer. Obesity in 22% of 4-5 year olds rises to 33% at ages 6-7; projected life-spans are decreasing for the first time in history ([Hardy LR, Harrell JS and Bell RA, Journal of Paediatric Nursing, Mar 2017](#))
- Annual spend on the treatment of obesity and diabetes is greater than the amount spent on the police, the fire service and the judicial system combined, and the UK-wide NHS costs attributable to overweight and obesity are projected to reach £9.7 billion by 2050, with wider costs to society estimated to reach £49.9 billion per year. ([Public Health England, Mar 2017](#))
- The number of children and teenagers admitted to hospital for obesity-related problems is increasing – up from 676 admissions in 2014-15 to 905 in 2016-17 ([Department of Health, Mar 2018](#))
- Britain is starting to overtake America in obesity rates, with the latest figures showing that more children in England are classed as obese at the age of 11 than in the US. The proportion of US children aged 9 to 11 who are obese is 18.5%. The figure for children in their final year of primary school in England is at a record high of 20%. Secondary-school children are also more obese. In the [Health Survey for England](#) (Dec 2018) 23% of children aged 11 to 15 were obese in 2016. In America, 20.6% of children aged 12 to 15 were obese (US National Health and Nutritional Examination Survey 2018)
- The [Annual Health Survey for England](#) (Dec 2018) states that amongst the areas for the highest recorded levels of child obesity are Barking and Dagenham (29.2%), Sandwell (27.8%) and Copeland and Cumbria (25.1%)
- The proportion of children in Year 6 (aged 10/11) presenting as severely obese has reached an all-time high of 20% ([Public Health England, Jul 2018](#))
- The toxic, interrelated mix of severe obesity and widening health inequalities is persistent and entrenched: 'These trends are extremely worrying and have been decades in the making – reversing them will not happen overnight,' [Dr. Alison Tedstone, chief nutritionist at Public Health England](#), Jul 2018

Physical activity/play

- Only 17.5% of children are meeting the Chief Medical Officer's guidelines of more than 60 minutes of activity a day, every day of the week, and 32.9% do fewer than 30 minutes of physical activity a day ([Sport England Survey, Dec 2018](#))

- [The Children's Commissioner, Anne Longfield](#) (Sep 2018) said: "Children are spending two or three hours online every day, but only four hours a week playing out. The result is a generation that is the least active ever. Only one in four boys and one in five girls in England do the recommended 60 minutes of activity each day".
- The Persil/Unilever Project '[Dirt is Good](#)' campaign found that most primary school age children spend less time in outdoor play than prisoners are required to have by law.
- [A report written for the UK National Trust](#) (2012) stated that the area where children are allowed to roam unsupervised around their homes has shrunk by 90% since the 1970s.
- Recent education policy changes have restricted the amount of learning through play and increased pressures on children at school with very high stress levels reported related to examinations, and a strong relationship was reported between loss of free play opportunities and increases in mental health problems ([Rodway C, Tham SG, Ibrahim S et al, 2016](#) and [Gray P, 2011](#))
- There is compelling evidence of play's effectiveness in treatment of mental health conditions. A study of the introduction of a structured play regimen in an Indian orphanage reported highly significant gains on motor, cognitive and social function measures. ([Taneja V, Sriram S, Beri R, Sreenivas V, Aggarwal R, Kaur R. 2002](#))
- By 2020/21 there will have been a decrease in spend on play facilities of 44% since 2017/18. In 2016/17 local authorities closed 63 playgrounds and in 2017/18 a further 70 playgrounds have been closed. Since 2014 local authorities have closed a total of 347 playgrounds across England. ([Association of Play Industries "Nowhere to Play" Mar 2018](#))
- A [recent study](#) by Swim England (Jul 2017) highlights that a third of school pupils aged 11 will finish Year 6 unable to swim despite a national requirement that every Year 6 leaver be capable of unaided swimming over 25 metres. 53% of primary schools either provide no curriculum-guided swimming lessons or fail to achieve any of the three required goals (be able to swim unaided over 25 metres, use a range of strokes effectively and be able to perform self-rescue techniques in various water-based situations).
- [The Breaktime survey](#) by the Nuffield Foundation shows that the amount of time that schoolchildren are permitted outside to play or participate in organised physical activities during a school day has decreased with each passing decade. The main reason given is to create more time for teaching and learning and to manage poor behaviour of students. Primary schools with a higher proportion of pupils in receipt of free school meals and/or in urban areas tended to have less total time for breaks (May 2019).

Health

- The UK has the fifth highest mortality rate for babies under one year out of 19 European countries and one of the highest rates for older children and young people. There are around 130 more deaths of one to nine years olds in the UK every year than the European average. The leading causes are cancer, injuries and poisonings, congenital conditions and neurological and developmental disorders ([Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health 2017](#))
- The number of hospital admissions for tooth decay for children aged 5-9 increased for the second consecutive year from 25,923 in 2016-2017 to 26,111 in 2017-2018. Tooth decay remains the number one reason that children aged 5-9 are admitted to hospital. Almost one in three (31.5%) 5-9 year olds did not visit an NHS dentist in the 12 months leading up to 30 June 2018 ([Royal College of Surgeons](#), Sep 2018)
- The number of children and young people currently receiving treatment for type 2 diabetes in England and Wales has risen from 507 to 715 in four years according to an [audit](#) published in Aug 2018 by the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health.

Mental health

- The current system of child mental health is funded, commissioned and supplied by many differing organisations. Lack of collaboration and fragmented care, waiting list pressure and the infrastructure of allocated funding all add up to a service in crisis. The overall picture is challenging, as illustrated by statistics supplied by Young Minds ([Young Minds Annual Report: 2015](#)):
 - Approximately 850,000 children and young people have a clinically significant mental health problem
 - 1 in 10 children between the ages of 5-16 years (3 in every classroom) have a diagnosable mental health problem
 - 1 in 4 children showed evidence of mental ill health (including depression and anxiety)
 - Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) are, on average, turning away nearly 25% of child referrals
 - 75% of mental health trusts between 2013/2014 and 2014/2015 have had budgets cut or frozen; CAMHS budgets have been annually depleted in this way since 2010
 - Only 0.75% of NHS budget is directed to children's mental health; 6.36% of total NHS mental health-spend.
- The number of girls under the age of 18 treated in hospital in England after self-harming nearly doubled over 20 years, according to NHS figures. The figure reached 13,463 in 2017 against 7,327 in 1997. In comparison, the figure for admissions of boys who self-harmed rose from 2,236 in 1997 to 2,332 in 2017.

- The number of girls treated for attempting a substance overdose increased more than tenfold to 2,736 in 2017 from 249 in 1997, while the number of boys treated increased from 152 to 839 last year (The Guardian, [Aug 2018](#)). There has been a dramatic rise in the number of extremely young children (some aged just three) who are self-harming ([ITV News](#))
- The NSPCC provided young people with 15,376 counselling sessions in 2017; equivalent to 42 per day (The Guardian, [Aug 2018](#))
- The [Care Quality Commission Review of Children and Young People's Mental Health Services](#) found that children were waiting up to 18 months to receive treatment for their mental health conditions
- Three large-scale studies involving 1.1 million American adolescents concluded that 'iGeners' (born around 1995) are on the verge of the most severe mental health crisis for young people for decades ([Twenge, J.M et al 2018b](#)). There was a sudden decrease in psychological well-being after 2012 and links to screen time and the rise of smartphone technology were found.
- [Sigman \(2016\)](#) proposed the possibility that intensive routine exposure to certain screen activities during critical stages of child brain development may alter gene expression in the brain, resulting in structural and functional changes that could lead to Screen Dependency Disorders. These may include internet addiction disorder, internet gaming disorder, video game addiction, mobile phone dependence and social network site addiction.
- The latest [National Education Union \(NEU\) survey](#) of over 8,000 teachers connected to the mental health of children and young people showed 83% had seen an increase in the number of pupil/student mental health problems in the past two years (NEU, Apr 2019)
- [A study by researchers from the University of Liverpool](#) found that obese seven-year-olds are at greater risk of suffering emotional problems, such as anxiety and low mood, when they reach 11. The researchers analysed information on more than 17,000 children born in the UK between 2000 and 2002, using statistical modelling to measure the link between obesity and emotional problems.¹ (Apr 2019).
- A 2016 [Department for Education \(DfE\) survey](#) found that nearly a quarter of teachers (23%) did not feel equipped to identify behaviour linked to mental health issues and more than a third (34%) felt ill-prepared to teach children in their class who have mental health issues. Young Minds has said that more proactive accessible support is needed in schools so that children's wellbeing is prioritised within the education system.

Nutrition

- From a total of 98 snack products aimed at young children, one quarter were fruit-based snacks (dried fruit pieces/gummies) 22% were biscuits, 17% rice cakes, 15% crisps or puffs, 13% were bars, 6% vegetable-based snacks and 55% crackers or breadsticks. These provided little more than a basic source of fuel. ([Derbyshire 2017](#))
- Young children are presently under-consuming vegetables compared to sweeter fruits. Fruit intakes are 44.31% and 35% higher than vegetable intake for one, two, and three-year olds respectively. This is inadvertently developing a sweetened palate ([Derbyshire 2017](#))
- In a new report, Public Health England (PHE) said a Government crackdown was needed to tackle misleading claims and to cut the amount of sugar children consume from shop-bought foods (Jun 2019)
- A study by [Cancer Research UK](#) found that the more junk food adverts seen on TV by young people, the more they eat, Seeing just one extra broadcast advert per week predicted a large amount of HFSS (products that are high in fat, sugar or salt) eating and drinking: around 60 HFSS items more per year (Mar 2018).

Emotional needs

- Children whose emotional needs are unmet by their parents are likelier to have behavioural problems and poor educational outcomes, and are more likely to incur extensive costs from health, education, social and criminal justice services throughout the life course ([The Sutton Trust 2014](#))
- Maternal mental health problems have been found to have negative physical and emotional impact upon children including child anxiety and depression, symptoms of ADHD, conduct disorder and prenatal stress ([NCBI, 2007](#))
- In 2016-17, around 1 in 3 children lived with at least 1 parent reporting symptoms of emotional distress (over 1 in 5 with a mother reporting symptoms of emotional distress and around 1 in 8 children with a father, and 1 in 28 children lived with both a mother and father reporting symptoms of emotional distress). There was an increase across all indicators compared with data from the previous year. ([Public Health England, Mar 2019](#))

Poverty

- The Institute for Fiscal Studies predicted that between 2015-16 and 2021-22, absolute child poverty would increase by around 4 percentage points (on the government's official measure). Of that increase, around three-quarters (equivalent to 400,000 children) is attributable to benefit changes ([Inst for Fiscal Studies, Nov 2017](#))

- Children growing up in low income groups typically live in neighbourhoods with a denser supply of fast food outlets; less availability of fresh fruit and vegetables and fewer safe places for physical activity. Fruit and vegetables can be 30-40% more expensive in poor neighbourhoods ([NCH, The Children's Charity, 2004](#))
- Disability Rights UK has estimated that 40% of disabled children are living in poverty. Families with disabled children can face additional barriers to avoiding poverty, for example, parents can be less able to work and find it more difficult to access childcare ([Papworth Trust, 2018](#))
- There are now constituencies in the UK where more than half of the children are growing up in poverty. Among the twenty parliamentary constituencies with the highest levels of childhood poverty, seven are located in London, three in Birmingham and three in Manchester. ([End Child Poverty: Jan 2018](#)). The top five constituencies are Bethnal Green and Bow, 54.18%, Birmingham Ladywood, 53.46%, Poplar and Limehouse, 52.75%, Birmingham Hodge Hill, 51.46% and Manchester Gorton, 47.97%.
- Statistics from the [Race Disparity Audit](#), updated March 2018, show a firm correlation between ethnic background and poverty in the UK: 'Asian and Black households and those in the 'Other' ethnic group were more likely to be poor and were most likely to be in persistent poverty,' and 'Around 1 in 4 children in households headed by people from an Asian background or those in the 'Other' ethnic group were in persistent poverty, as were 1 in 5 children living in Black households and 1 in 10 White British households'.
- The health gap between rich and poor is growing in England, according to the Department of Health. In key areas the gap has widened since 2010 after narrowing over the previous decade. Taking into account 15 indicators, rates of death from cancer, heart attacks and strokes are rising among residents of the poorest places compared with those in wealthy areas. The gap between rich and poor in relation to "healthy life expectancy" – defined as a life free of disease or disability – has recently widened to almost 20 years. ([The Guardian, Aug 2017](#))
- The average price of holiday childcare is £133 per week in Britain, which is a 4% rise since 2017. Prices in Scotland and Wales are about £10 per week less. There are significant regional variations within England: prices in the East of England are 35% higher than in Inner London and the West Midlands. Parents face considerably higher prices during the holidays than during term time: holiday childcare costs are almost two and a half times as much per week as an after-school club. ([Family and Childcare Trust, 2018](#))
- Childcare in England risks becoming the preserve of the wealthy, unless a £660m funding gap in a free childcare scheme is plugged, MPs are warning ([BBC News Jun 2019](#))

- [The Millennium Cohort Study](#) found that persistent poverty affects one in five UK children and compared with children who never experienced poverty, those in persistent poverty were at three times greater risk of mental health problems, 1.5 times greater risk of obesity, and were almost twice as likely to suffer a long-standing illness. The research team noted that in 2016/17, 30% (4.1 million) of all UK children were reported to be living in poverty, up from 27% in 2010/11. By 2023/24, the figure is expected to hit 37%, affecting an extra 1.1 million children (Jun 2019).

The care system

- Looked after children are almost four times more likely to have a special educational need (SEN) than all children and are just over nine times more likely to have a statement of special educational need or education, health and care (EHC) plan than all children. In 2018, 55.5% of looked after children had a special educational need, compared to 45.7% of children in need and 14.6% of all children. ([DfE Mar 2018](#))
- Half of all children identified as being in need of help by councils have witnessed or experienced domestic violence. Cuts to local services mean councils are struggling to cope with an avalanche of child protection referrals with a child referred to children's services every 49 seconds. In 2017, councils began more than 500 child protection investigations every day – up from 200 per day in 2007 ([The Guardian, Feb 2018](#)).
- An unprecedented 72,670 children were recorded as being in care in 2017 ([DfE, Sep 2017](#))

Food poverty

- [A Sheffield Political Economy Research Institute British Political Economy Brief](#) in March 2018 showed that in almost half (20/45) of families surveyed, parents reported eating less than they felt that they should or skipping meals so that others could eat. In around a third of households in which parents were sacrificing their food intake to protect their children, at least one adult was in paid work. In 13/45 families, children said they sometimes or often went hungry at times and also sacrificed their own food intake to protect younger siblings or parents.
- In a [National Union of Teachers \(NUT\) survey](#) in 2017, 51% of respondents said that pupils at their school were affected by holiday hunger. Almost two-fifths (39%) of these said it was affecting more than a quarter of pupils in their school, with 12% saying half or more of their pupils experienced holiday hunger. Holiday hunger is a growing problem, with 80% of respondents reporting that the numbers affected had increased over the last two years. Almost three quarters (73%) said that their pupils' education was being negatively affected as a consequence of holiday hunger.

- An analysis by the BBC Radio 4 programme, 'You and Yours' of Trussell Trust data covering half a decade, found that demand from children at food banks at Christmas has tripled and looks set to rise further. Typically in December, a higher-than-average 40% of food parcels go to children as demand from single parents and families rises, and school holidays cut off access to free meals ([Trussell Trust, Dec 2017](#))
- Children on free school meals are more likely to be placed in lower sets, have access to less qualified teachers and have lower expectations set for them by the school. They achieve almost half a GCSE grade less progress in 'Attainment 8' core subjects than better-off pupils ([Social Mobility Commission, Feb 2017](#)).

Benefits/services

- The Institute for Fiscal Studies' [Poverty and Inequality in the UK](#) Report in June 2019 found that reductions in working-age benefits pushed down incomes of poorer households by 1.6% in 2017.
- [Policy in Practice](#) predicted that the combined effects of the freeze of benefit rates, the roll out Universal Credit and higher living costs, including rents, will make low-income families worse off by £2,500 a year in 2020. Larger families in work and in the private rented sector will be among the hardest hit.
- Local councils in England have closed more than 500 children's centres since 2010 ([Government response to written parliamentary question from Tracey Brabin MP, Feb 2018](#))
- Research by the Equality and Human Rights Commission into the cumulative impact of Government changes to taxes and social security from 2010-2018 on various groups across society in 2021/22 found that an extra 1.5 million children will be living in households below the relative poverty line with the child poverty rate for those in lone parent households increasing from 37% to more than 62% ([Equality and Human Rights Commission, Mar 2018](#)).