

Our three challenges for the new Prime Minister

The election of Liz Truss as our new Prime Minister must be a turning point for childhood in the UK. After two-and-a-half years of lengthy school closures, social isolation, and financial worries, our children deserve a brighter future. Building back childhood must be at the heart of her mission.

"Children should grow up in an environment with no limits to their potential... The idea that every child, in every part of the country, should have a fair chance. It is not only the most important thing we can do to unleash the UK's potential, but is at the heart of creating a fair and just society."

Conservative Party Manifesto, 2019

Challenge #1 – protecting children from the collapse in living standards

In 1969, the National Children's Bureau published the ground-breaking study *Born to Fail?* showing that poverty degrades children's potential, leading to poor health and underachievement at school. Despite knowing the damage it causes, we have allowed inequality to remain deeply entrenched in our society and were badly unprepared for the impact of the pandemic on children in low-income families. Now, with inflation reaching its highest rate for 40 years, parents are already skipping meals to put food on the table for their children and going without hot water. Many families have nothing left to cut back on. Liz Truss must not stand by and let this crisis deepen over the winter.

- *The government must restore the social security system to deliver adequate living standards for every child. The best way to protect children is via emergency and permanent increases to Universal Credit and other benefits.*

Challenge #2 – delivering on the government's reform agenda and strengthening the children's workforce

Liz Truss must press on with the delivery of the government's ambitious programme for children and families. The change in political leadership, and the need to deal with the immediate crisis in living standards, must not lead to a loss of momentum within government departments. Much needed reforms for children with special educational needs and disabilities, family help and the child protection system should be prioritised, rebalancing the system towards prevention and early intervention. Alongside this, we need to kick-start a longer-term project to rebuild the children's workforce. These reforms will be built on sand if there is no plan for dealing with the huge retention and recruitment problems in early years settings, schools, and children's social work, alongside the greatest workforce crisis in the history of the NHS¹.

- *The government should press ahead with reforms to the SEND and children's social care systems, while continuing to invest in family hubs and the first 1000 days of life.*
- *The government must take the first steps of a long-term plan to term revitalise and strengthen the children's workforce, including dealing with workload and pay issues.*

Challenge #3 – succeeding where others have failed by addressing children's unmet mental health needs

Even before the pandemic, the level of severe psychological distress among children and young people was unacceptably highⁱⁱ. Now we have compelling evidence that lockdowns, social isolation and bereavement have had a further destructive effect on their wellbeing^{iii iv}. For years, children and young people have been promised that the shockingly long-waiting times for mental health support will be resolved, and for years they have been let down, In fact, things are now getting worse. The solutions are not simple, and do not just sit with the NHS, but we owe it to children and young people to rise to the challenge.

- *The Prime Minister should commit to publishing the government's 10-year mental health plan before the end of the year, along with a clear plan for funding and accountability.*

ⁱ Health and Social Care Select Committee (2022), Workforce: recruitment, training and retention in health and social care

ⁱⁱ Centre for Longitudinal Studies at the UCL Social Research Institute and the National Children's Bureau (2020), Mental ill-health at age 17 in the UK http://www.ncb.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/Research_reports/Mental%20ill-health%20at%20age%2017%20%E2%80%93%20CLS%20briefing%20paper%20%E2%80%93%20Final.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ Pierce, M., Hope, H., Ford, T., Hatch, S., Hotopf, M., John, A., ... & Abel, K. M. (2020). Mental health before and during the COVID-19 pandemic: a longitudinal probability sample survey of the UK population. *The Lancet Psychiatry*, 7(10), 883-892.

^{iv} Levita, L., Gibson Miller, J., Hartman, T.K., Murphy, J., Shevlin, M., McBride, O. et al. (2020). Report 1: Initial research findings on the impact of COVID-19 on the wellbeing of young people aged 13 to 24 in the UK [pre print]. Accessed: <https://psyarxiv.com/uq4rn/>