Getting it right for future generations

Recent reports from the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health[1] and others[2] paint a stark picture of children's health across the UK. Infant and child mortality, immunisation uptake, oral health, obesity and mental health are all moving in the wrong direction, with the greatest impact felt by children living in our most deprived communities. These are not isolated statistics; they are indicators of a nation failing to invest in its future.

The evidence is clear, tackling poverty, inequality and the wider determinants of health is fundamental if we are to reverse these trends. Prevention is not only better than cure; it is a sound economic investment. Many of the diseases placing increasing pressure on adult health services, including type 2 diabetes, hypertension and cardiovascular disease, have their origins in childhood. Investing early improves lifelong health, reduces demand on public services and strengthens economic productivity.

The challenge is becoming increasingly urgent. Nearly two-thirds of adults in the UK are overweight or obese, while childhood obesity continues to rise. NHS costs associated with obesity alone are projected to reach almost £10 billion by 2050[3]. Yet this is only one part of a much wider picture of widening health inequalities and unmet need.

Alongside these challenges sits one of the NHS's greatest successes. Advances in neonatal, paediatric and specialist care mean more babies and children are surviving health conditions that would once have been life limiting. This is something to celebrate. However, it has also created a growing population of babies, children and young people living with increasingly complex health needs. Many now require long-term, coordinated care across hospital, community, education and social care services. Our health, education and social care system must evolve to meet this changing reality.

Labour's 2024 ambition to raise the healthiest generation of children provides an opportunity to think differently. We have seen before what can be achieved through sustained political leadership at national, regional and local level across the UK. The '*Every Child Matters*'[4] framework transformed the way organisations worked together around five clear ambitions: being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and achieving economic wellbeing. Those principles remain as relevant today as they were twenty years ago.

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[1] Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (2026) State of Child Health https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/work-we-do/state-of-child-health

[2] See 6a632bba366c808025df6c37_state-of-the-nation-2026.pdf

[3] See https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/health-matters-obesity-and-the-food-environment/health-matters-obesity-and-the-food-environment--2

[4] See HM Treasury. (2003). *Every child matters*. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/every-child-matters

The question is whether we now need to refresh this approach for a new generation. A modern Children's Strategy should extend beyond healthcare to include education, housing, employment, social care and public health, underpinned by a dedicated Children's Workforce Strategy[5] that recognises the specific knowledge and skills required to meet the needs of babies, children and young people.

The emerging NHS Neighbourhood Health Service offers a once-in-a-generation opportunity to redesign care around children and families rather than organisations. Prevention happens in homes, schools and communities, not hospitals. Effective neighbourhood teams should bring together general practice, health visiting, school nursing, community children's nursing, mental health services, education, local authorities and the voluntary sector to provide joined-up care that keeps children well, supports families and reduces avoidable hospital admissions.

Community children's nursing services have never been more important. As children's health needs become increasingly complex, community children's nurses are enabling earlier discharge, preventing unnecessary admissions, supporting children living with long-term conditions and dependent on medical technology at home, and helping families navigate increasingly fragmented systems of care. These services should be recognised as essential NHS infrastructure, not optional enhancements.

Similarly, investment in health visiting, school nursing, Family Nurse Partnerships and early years services must be seen as investments in the nation's future rather than discretionary spending. International comparisons consistently demonstrate that the UK spends less on babies, children and young people than many comparable European countries[6], despite overwhelming evidence that the earliest years have the greatest influence on lifelong health, educational attainment and future productivity[7]. Breaking intergenerational cycles of disadvantage and supporting young people into education, employment and training must remain national priorities[8].

Children's nurses witness these challenges every day. From neonatal intensive care units to children's wards, schools, communities and family homes, they see both the consequences of failing to intervene early and the remarkable difference that coordinated, compassionate care can make. They also see the growing complexity of children's needs and the increasing importance of integrated services that support families beyond hospital walls.

Improving children's health cannot be achieved by the NHS alone, nor within a single Parliament. It requires a sustained cross-government focus and investment in the early years, education, housing, public health and children's services. The Association of

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[5] See https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/5456/7/5958-DfES-ECM_Redacted.pdf

[6] See https://almaeconomics.com/research-post-children-and-young/uk-public-spending-on-babies-children-and-young-people/

[7] See https://norfolklscp.org.uk/media/2qqbz3hk/1001-critical-days-manifesto.pdf

[8] See https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/young-people-and-work-interim-report/young-people-and-work-interim-report

British Paediatric Nurses believes that what is needed is not simply another ten-year plan, but a cross-party, twenty-five-year commitment to babies, children and young people. There is perhaps no greater investment a nation can make than ensuring every child has the opportunity to survive, thrive and fulfil their potential.

Will the Labour Government today under Andy Burnham's leadership spearhead the changes needed at national, regional and local level?

Association of British Paediatric Nurses

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