



Children's Charities Coalition Written Evidence to The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill Committee (CWSB211)

11 February 2025

Introduction

The Children's Charities Coalition is formed of Action for Children, Barnardo's, National Children's Bureau, NSPCC, and The Children's Society. We are working together towards the vision for every child in the UK to be happier, healthier and have more equal access to opportunities. That's why we've come together as five of the largest charities working to support children and young people in the UK. We want the UK Government to put babies, children and young people at the heart of Government policy making, backed by a step-change in investment to transform childhoods across the UK.

The Children's Wellbeing & Schools Bill marks a pivotal moment for child protection and safeguarding. It is the first major piece of legislation in over a decade with a clear focus on improving safety and care for children and families. Drawing on our rich evidence base and sector expertise, we have identified three major areas in which the bill can be strengthened even further, to maximise the impact of this landmark piece of legislation.

While we welcome the Government taking action to ensure laws better reflect the needs of children and families, urgent investment in the services they rely on is also required if the changes in the Bill are to have the impact envisaged. Analysis by Alma Economics of the UK's spending in four key areas for babies, children and young people – education, welfare, children's services and social care, and health – shows the UK falls behind many comparable OECD countries in terms of the proportion of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) invested in these key areas, with outcomes lagging in many areas. In 2023, the UK spent 8.57% (£191.1bn) of its GDP on babies, children and young people in these four key areas. This is significantly less than leading OECD counterparts: the top 10 OECD countries for overall investment in these areas are spending, on average, 9.47% of GDP on babies, children and young people, representing an additional investment of around £20 billion.¹

The Government has a key window of opportunity to dramatically improve outcomes and lived experiences of childhood, and we hope that they use evidence-driven approaches to improving this bill as a foundation for this change.

¹ [UK public spending on babies, children, and young people - Alma Economics -Nov 23.pdf](#) Research to underpin the case for increasing the percentage of GDP spent on children in the UK (Alma Economics, 2023)



Executive Summary

The Coalition has three priority areas of focus:

1. Single Unique Identifier (clause 4 of the Bill)

The Children's Charities Coalition welcomes the government's intention to improve multi-agency information sharing, and its [manifesto commitment](#) to introducing a Single Unique Identifier. The draft legislation requires scrutiny on:

- o The breadth of the government's ambition to introduce a Single Unique Identifier for all children. In particular, the drafting of the bill appears to limit the scope of the SUI in some crucial ways.
- o Whether the SUI can be used to unlock the benefits of anonymised cohort data for research and commissioning purposes.

2. Early Intervention

The Coalition welcomes the bill's provisions improving the acute end of services in children's social care. But, to ignite real change and deliver the Opportunity Mission, the government must address the challenges families face before they reach crisis point. This means a **commitment to wholesale reform of children's social care backed by significant investment in early intervention services to rebalance spend**, reduce the number of children who need to enter the care system, and to achieve better outcomes for those who do.

3. Child Voice

We recommend that government involves babies, children and young people in the development of this bill and call on them to deliver on their aim to place children at the heart of government by:

Creating a 'check and challenge' committee of children, young people and the parents and carers of babies, representing diverse communities and needs, that shadows the development and implementation of the 5 government missions, including the development of this bill.

Throughout the existing clauses within the Bill, strengthening requirements to ascertain and give due weight to the views, wishes and feelings of the child in decisions that impact them;

Mandatory child rights and wellbeing impact assessments to be undertaken when developing any policy or legislation directly or indirectly impacting babies, children and young people (including budgetary decision-making).

1. Clause 4 – Information sharing and Single Unique Identifier (SUI)



a. Duty to share information

The Coalition welcomes the proposed provisions in the bill around placing a new information sharing duty on a range of local authority, health, police, justice agencies, along with childcare and education providers. This duty does not apply if the relevant person considers that the disclosure would be more detrimental to the child than not disclosing the information. **We recommend that the government ensures that this new information sharing duty does not pose increased risk for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.**

b. Single Unique Identifier (SUI)

The Children's Charities Coalition welcomes these potentially transformative proposals – the introduction of an SUI is something that the coalition has consistently called for as part of the Children at the Table Campaign. However, we would like further scrutiny of the government's ambitions and intentions for an SUI.

- The introduction of an SUI for children would require services to use a consistent code across the different data systems for which they are responsible and when sharing information about an individual child. This can be valuable at different levels, notably:
 - The sharing of personal information related to a child to support the delivery of public services for that individual. An SUI will enable a child to be identified with more confidence across different information management systems used by professionals and enable information to be shared more efficiently and securely when consent has been received or a safeguarding decision has been made to do so.
 - The sharing of de-identified data on cohorts at risk of poor outcomes (e.g. children with SEND, children missing education or children looked after), allowing commissioners and researchers to aggregate different data sources and to analyse needs, risk factors and outcomes across different services. This will provide a more complete picture of children and young people's needs in the area and gaps in provision, to inform commissioning and targeted interventions. It will also support the development of new qualitative indicators that measure impact. **We recommend that the scope of the SUI include this crucial research and commissioning work.**
- Our collective view is that the NHS number is the leading contender for adoption as the SUI, given that it is allocated at birth and is already used as the single unique identifier for adults. This has been recommended by successive research reports and policy inquiries. The NHS number as the SUI will also support the transition from children to adult services, preventing delayed decisions and gaps in care.
- We recommend that the SUI be used consistently for all babies, children, and young people and all services who come into contact with them should be mandated to attach it to their records as standard to ensure that the most vulnerable children will benefit from the improvements in system architecture.
- We recommend that the Government give an indicative timeframe for when the Secretary of State will introduce regulations for the consistent identifier, and how



the police, local authorities, health and education services will be required to use it within their systems

- We recommend that the SUI go beyond the current limited use for 'safeguarding and welfare' purposes, and extend to 'wellbeing', to ensure the best possible outcomes for children.

2. Early intervention

The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill includes a number of clauses that strengthen safeguarding and child protection responsibilities, and the arrangements for children who are looked after. While we welcome the changes the government has brought forward in the bill, without a fundamental rebalancing of the children's social care system towards early intervention and away from crisis intervention **these changes will not fix the broken children's social care system.**

The erosion of early intervention services in England has been examined in great depth. Spending on early intervention services like children's centres, family hubs, family support services and youth services has **nearly halved** since 2011, while the numbers of children in care and the associated costs have rocketed.

The Children's Charities Coalition [produces a report each year](#)² analysing spending on children's services across England. The most recent report found:

1. Local authority spending on children's services continues to grow at pace and now accounts for more than a quarter of councils' spending power. In 2022-23 councils in England spent just over 12.2bn on children's services an increase of £600mn (5.2%) from the previous financial year.
2. Expenditure on early interventions has almost halved while late intervention services has increased significantly. Since 2010-11 overall spending on early intervention services has fallen by almost £1.8bn, a decline of 44%. While in the same period expenditure on late interventions has risen by more than £3.5bn, an increase of 57%.
3. Spending on looked after children has driven the growth of late intervention spending, with residential care the main contributor to that increase in recent years. Spending on looked after children has risen by £2.8 billion since 2010-2022, while other late interventions have only increased by £800 million. Much of this growth in spending is down to the rise in cost of residential care placements.

In light of these findings, the Children's Charities Coalition recommends that the government consider the 2022 Independent Review of Children's Social Care recommendation that an injection of roughly £2 billion was needed across five years to embed a new offer of Family Help, targeting about half a million children and re-balance the system towards early intervention.

² [Childrens-services-spending_2010-2023_Final-report.pdf](#)



While we welcome the new Children's Social Care Prevention Grant in the Local Government Finance Settlement. We see this investment as a much needed down-payment which must pave the way for greater investment in phase 2 of the Spending Review for the Family Help that many so sorely need.

We look forward to the upcoming multi-year funding settlement giving local authorities certainty to plan and invest for the long term. As a nation we must spend more of our national wealth on improving the lives of babies, children and young people. **This must include the further investment needed to transform the whole children's social care system and support for local authorities to prioritise early intervention.**

Increasing the investment in early interventions will reduce demand for high-cost late intervention services such as complex residential care placements³. It will result in more families staying together in healthy ways, more children with stable and loving homes to grow up in, and fewer young people experiencing neglect, abuse, exploitation, or harm.

We know that local authorities are under increasing financial pressure and are struggling to prioritise early intervention. We believe that alongside increased funding there must be a stronger legal framework on early help delivery and that the children's wellbeing bill is an opportunity to introduce this

The Coalition would be keen to gain further information on how the government is planning to support Local Authorities to prioritise spending on early intervention and rebalance the system without legislation.

3. Child Voice

At the heart of each individual charity within the Coalition are the babies, children and young people our organisations were set up to protect and support. We understand that children and young people are the experts on their own lives and that it is their right to be involved in decisions made about them. It is vital that they are involved in policymaking every step of the way. This means the government not only acting on their needs, but also hearing babies, children and young people themselves.

Meaningful participation is a child's right.

The importance of hearing the voices of children when making decisions affecting them is a critical foundation of the Children Act 1989. There are very few provisions in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill as it is currently drafted that strengthen the duty on local authorities and other relevant public authorities to ascertain the views, wishes and feelings of children and young people when making decisions that impact them, which we believe is a missed opportunity to embed children's voices in the heart of the Bill.

Institute for Government research⁴ has consistently found that problems with policy making – including a tendency for Whitehall parochialism – can be addressed by departments making much more extensive use of deliberative methods to give the public

³ [Childrens-services-spending_2010-2023_Final-report.pdf](#) page 30

⁴ <https://cms.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-11/Co-ordinating%20children%27s%20policy%20across%20government%20report%20-%20Nov%202023.pdf>
Co-ordinating children's policy across Government: Summary of Institute for Government research and private roundtable discussion – September 2023 P.7 (Institute for Government, 2023)



a greater stake in policy making. Participants reflected that directly engaging children can also be of use to crosscutting programmes in particular, because users of public services do not see organisational, bureaucratic boundaries in the same way policy makers do. The process of engagement can force policy makers to view problems differently, prompting more cross-departmental collaboration.

In its recent examination of the UK (2023), the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child found that children's voices were not sufficiently represented in decision-making impacting children, particularly in relation to seldom heard and marginalised groups of children. The Committee called for further measures to involve children and young people in the development and implementation of budgetary decisions, policies and programmes relating to children; and to strengthen the capacity of professionals to assess, determine and give due weight to the best interests of the child.

Our experience with centring children's voices in policymaking

The Children's Charities Coalition led the [Children at the Table Campaign](#), which platformed children and young people as key decision-makers in the issues affecting their lives. The direct involvement in the campaign of children ensured that the campaign brought their messages to life and amplified their voices within the political agenda.

From early brainstorming sessions to video script writing, to meeting and talking to senior political figures, the children and young people involved have championed the voices of children from across the country, holding those in power to account to ensure that they make changes that will improve children's lives. We have seen the tremendous impact that involving babies, children and young people can have on government, and on their own lives.

Some feedback from young people included:

"I felt really proud to be a part of this."

"Watching the politicians read our quotes on the handprints felt like they might actually do something."

"I actually felt heard by decision makers, and spending time with them was fun!"

Our recommendations for the bill

We recommend that the government involves babies, children and young people in the development of this bill and call on them to deliver on their aim to place children at the heart of government.

We recommend creating a 'check and challenge' committee of children, young people and the parents and carers of babies, representing diverse communities and needs, that shadows the development and implementation of the 5 government missions, including the development of this bill.

Throughout the existing clauses within the Bill, we recommend strengthening requirements to ascertain and give due weight to the views, wishes and feelings of the child in decisions that impact them;



We recommend mandatory child rights and wellbeing impact assessments to be undertaken when developing any policy or legislation directly or indirectly impacting babies, children and young people (including budgetary decision-making).

Conclusion

The Children's Charities Coalition is optimistic about the potential changes that the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill presents to help our most vulnerable children and families. We welcome this government's ambition to be a 'child-centred government' and we see this bill as a crucial opportunity to make real positive changes to the lives of babies, children, and young people. We are keen to work with government as this bill continues to develop, strengthening propositions to ensure that they provide the greatest benefit to babies, children, and young people in practice. To transform children's lives, we must always ensure that their voices are at the centre of legislative decision-making.

Contact Details

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