



Weston House, 42 Curtain Road, London EC2A 3NH  
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Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP  
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care  
Department of Health and Social Care  
39 Victoria Street  
London  
SW1H 0EU

Wednesday 28<sup>th</sup> October 2020

Dear Secretary of State,

I know from past experience how passionate you are about understanding and responding to crucial needs identified by the work of our charity and others like us.

Today I am writing to urge that you make sure services for pregnant women, new parents, and their babies are not forgotten in the upcoming restructuring of England's public health services. Over the past month I have been joined by 2,090 members of the public who want to see a clear commitment to supporting pregnant women, new parents and babies.

As we face a second wave of the Coronavirus pandemic it is increasingly clear the Healthy Child Programme is not currently equipped to respond to the lengthening impact of this crisis. The NSPCC has worked with organisations with expertise in supporting pregnant women, new parents and their babies. We are concerned that essential mental health needs are being overlooked at a local and national level. We have developed eight principles (provided with this letter) that in our view must underpin the restructuring of Public Health England, if every child is to be given a fair start in life.

The pandemic has transformed pregnancy, childbirth and infancy. On top of the increased anxiety caused by the health and economic impacts of the pandemic, women have had to give birth alone, new parents have been cut off from family and friends and restrictions to services and redeployment of staff have resulted in significant disruptions to support services.

The *Babies in Lockdown* report (attached) produced by Best Beginnings, Home Start UK and Parent-Infant Foundation gives an insight into how these additional stresses are affecting new and expectant parents across the UK. Of the 5,000 parents surveyed, 61% reported concerns about their mental health, but only 32% felt confident that they could find help for mental health if they needed it. This crisis is not just affecting parents; 68% of respondents reported the impact of the pandemic was affecting their babies and a quarter were concerned about the quality of the relationship with their baby.

Without the right support, perinatal mental health problems and difficulties in the parent-infant relationship can have serious immediate and long-term consequences for both children and families. Unfortunately, the cornerstone of this provision - health visiting and community based support delivered through the Healthy Child Programme - is currently not equipped to meet the challenge of this crisis. Even before the pandemic, reductions in the public health grant, a decline in the number of health visitors and inconsistent availability of targeted support resulted in a service that isn't managing to support struggling families across the county and identify parents who need further help.

**EVERY CHILDHOOD IS WORTH FIGHTING FOR**



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NSPCC research with over 2,000 mothers, conducted with YouGov prior to the pandemic, found only 6% had been supported by the same health professional during the perinatal period, and one in four mothers had reviews conducted via letter, text message, or a phone call instead of in-person support. The 2020 National Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel's review into sudden unexpected death in infancy highlights how high caseloads are undermining the ability of health visiting and social care services to build relationships and identify vulnerabilities, particularly in areas of high deprivation. The first 1001 days of childhood are recognised as a crucial window for child development, but for over 350,000 babies born in the 215 days since the start of the initial national lockdown, this period has never been more challenging or important.

The restructuring of national public health functions is an opportunity to go beyond organisational structures and rebuild our nation's public health services for children and families in the early years. We look forward to working with you and your officials on delivering these principles and giving every child a fair start in life. Please contact Andrew Fellowes [andrew.fellowes@nspcc.org.uk](mailto:andrew.fellowes@nspcc.org.uk) to discuss how we can support this vital work.

Yours Sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Peter Wanless', is positioned above the typed name.

Peter Wanless  
**Chief Executive**

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