

Levelling Up for Children

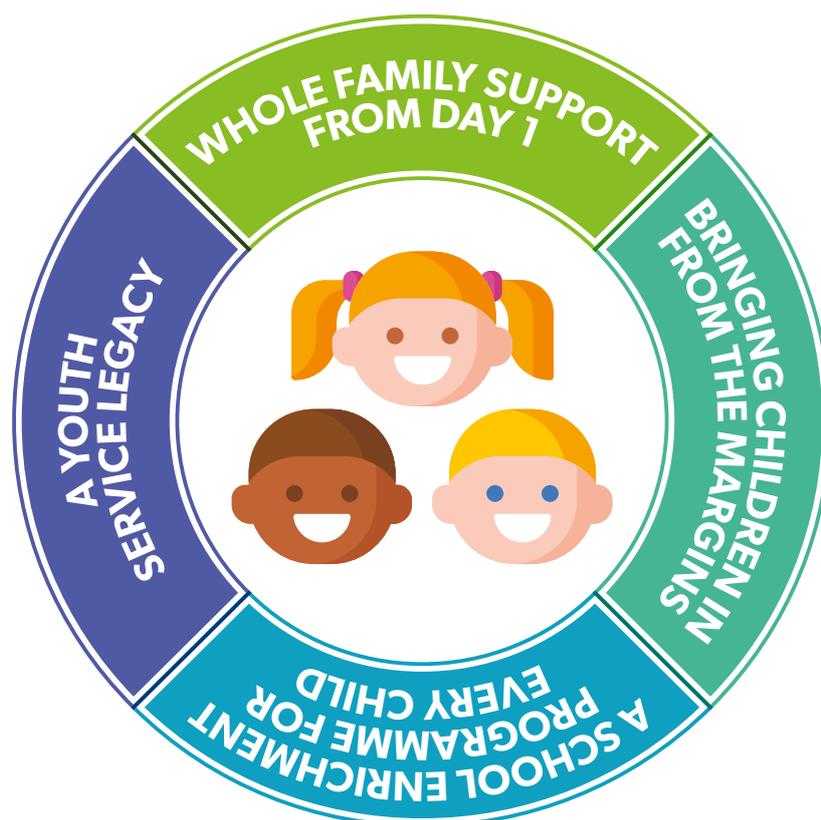
Submission to the Comprehensive Spending Review

Our most disadvantaged children face a barrage of adversity, now made worse by the pandemic. But the untapped potential is huge, and the opportunity to release it is significant.

Children are disengaging from school at frightening pace: in autumn 2020, the number of pupils who were severely absent soared by 54.7 per cent year-on-year. Disadvantaged pupils already faced an 18-month GCSE attainment gap before Covid, which will now grow. Mental health problems are spiralling - the rate of probable disorders among children rose from 1 in 9 in 2017 to 1 in 6 in 2020. One in five young people is obese by age 17, a problem that is particularly acute for disadvantaged individuals. Youth crime is ripping through our communities and as gangs continue to exploit generation Covid, no doubt more will join the roster of 27,000 children who currently self-identify as gang members.

The Government needs a social response to the “levelling up” narrative, alongside the economic one, and this must focus on support for children and families from the first days of their lives. The long-term answer to social problems lies in early help and prevention rather than significant later interventions.

To that end the CSJ is proposing four interventions to the Comprehensive Spending Review, each focused on helping children reach their full potential.



I. Whole family support from day 1

Family Hubs bring together local support services and recognise the importance of family life in improving child outcomes. A national network of Family Hubs gives the Government a mechanism through which to deliver support to vulnerable families and families looking for extra help.

Family Hubs offer support to all family types, including lone parents and separating couples as well as early years support for parents in the first critical 1,000 days. This should be seen as a framework within which all families on a spectrum of need can access early help and support the Government's narrative on "levelling up". It will particularly benefit families struggling with disadvantage and children who need additional help in response to the pandemic, from school catch up to the wider consequences of unemployment.

The CSJ, alongside a number of MPs, is proposing a Family Support Transformation Fund for top tier Local Authorities to develop a localised Family Hubs model for their area. It would build on the announcements made in last year's Spring Budget and provide the resources for a nationwide roll-out of Family Hubs.

If 130 Local Authorities applied for £200,000 per year for four years (£26million per annum) and the remaining 22 applied for £150,000 per year for four years (£3.3million per annum) because they had more of the necessary services, or they had already begun to embark upon reform this would require a funding pot of £29.3 million per year or £117.2million over four years. A potential source of revenue capturing approximately £235 million (over three years) is the anticipated underspend within the Married Couple's Allowance. This money should be ring-fenced to provide funds for a proposed Family Support Transformation Fund.

II. Bringing children in from the margins

When a child disappears from our school system, their future often disappears with them. Over 90,000 pupils are now more often absent from school than they are present. This means 1 in 80 pupils are missing more than half of their education. The latest data for Autumn 2020 shows that, following the pandemic, the number of severely absent pupils has grown at an alarming rate of 55%. As a result, an additional 33,270 pupils are severely absent.

The most likely outcome for many of these children is a grim concoction of economic insecurity, disengagement, and personal turmoil and yet absence and exclusions, official and unofficial, are rising at an alarming rate. And this costs us all. Each excluded pupil costs the state approximately £370,000 in additional education, benefits, healthcare and criminal justice costs across a lifetime, with an annual £2.1billion cost to the Treasury.

We need to extend existing support offered by the National Tutoring Programme with a focus on attendance. The Government needs to match its ambition for academic catch up with getting children missing from school or alternative provision back into education. We need to recruit 2,000 attendance mentors to work intensively with young people most at risk and most likely to have disengaged from education over the last year: for them, school can be as much as a place of safety as a place of learning. The Government is in the process of appointing 'academic mentors' to help children catch up with missed learning. There is no catch up without kids in class. The concept of attendance mentors follows the model of a number of highly successful charities including School Home Support (SHS) who have seen 89% of pupils increase attendance in alternative educational settings over an 18-month period. The cost would be around £300million over three years.

III. A school enrichment programme for every child

A fuller after school enrichment programme would help pupils engage more fully in their education and make more progress - both academically and generally. Mental health would improve and physical health too, with extra sport, for example, helping in the battle against obesity. And they would be safer - both by avoiding the 4-6pm window when half of under-16 stabbings occur, and because extra-curricular programmes move children away from gangs.

We have tried extending the school day before, with highly promising results. The 'extended services in schools' programme between 2003-2010 provides us with a deep reservoir of evidence to support this. According to an evaluation of 1,500 schools that extended their days (97 per cent of which offered activities including sport, music, arts/crafts, study support, volunteering and business/enterprise activities as part of their offer): 71 per cent of schools reported this helped them engage disadvantaged families; 69 per cent found it had at least some influence in raising attainment; 82 per cent reported greater pupil enjoyment of school; 45 per cent noted improved pupil attendance; and 54 per cent said it reduced behaviour or discipline problems.

According to the results of the CSJ-YouGov polling exercise, one in five (19.6 per cent) parents in England report that their primary or secondary school children do no enrichment activities in an average week. This rises to one in four of those in the lowest social grades (C1 and DE). There is also considerable support for the policy of extending the school day specifically for enrichment activities. Only 19 per cent of parents express concerns about the idea.

The Government should introduce a new enrichment requirement in schools, done in partnership with community and voluntary groups, and should provide them with appropriate funding to support this. We estimate the nationwide rollout of such a plan to be substantial at several billion pounds depending on the model adopted, but the economic and social benefits to far outweigh the cost.

IV. A youth service legacy

The 2019 Conservative manifesto promised to "invest £500 million in new youth clubs and services". The money is now earmarked and it is urgently needed. Cuts of £959M since 2010 have drastically reduced the provision of youth services. These are a force multiplier for reaching government targets in education, health and crime. Youth crime, mental and physical health, and job prospects have all become worse recently, especially in deprived areas. Covid has vastly increased the need for provision. CSJ polling also reveals very strong public support for community youth services.

We are not proposing any new money from government, but better use of money to ensure a lasting youth legacy offer that isn't subject to the same funding rollercoaster as previous services. To do this, we need a new, National Youth Legacy Endowment. Of the £500m announced by Treasury almost nothing has been spent (£16.5m post-pandemic support and £30m promised this year, but still not administered yet). There is extensive goodwill in the private sector to match-fund youth services. We can bring these together to deliver £100m / year, match-funded to £200m.

The new Fund should support sustainable capital investment and ongoing provision to ensure that any funded service is permanent. It is essential that *both* infrastructure grants *and* ongoing costs are supported and that infrastructure ideas be ambitious, aspirational, and high impact. Cost support should take the form of endowments to ensure sustainability.

Whether it's the small boxing club, or the world-class youth hub, we can give communities the opportunity for them to build the future their kids deserve.