

Safe and happy childhoods for all

Briefing: Family Support

What's happening?

Budget cuts over the last decade have meant that many local areas no longer offer the services that children and families rely on.

Family centres and youth clubs have closed, waiting times for support are getting longer, and thresholds to access help are increasing. As the cost-of-living crisis continues, more families are being pulled into financial hardship, which can exacerbate existing issues.

Expert family support provides a lifeline for families, who otherwise have few places to turn. Family support can also prevent harm and keep families together. Services can support families recovering from domestic abuse, help young people break free from exploitation by criminal groups, or spot a vulnerable parent approaching a mental health emergency.

When families face problems like these, getting the right support, at the right time, is essential. It can be what stops a minor problem from becoming a crisis.

Unfortunately, there isn't enough early help provision in the UK. Instead, the current system is focused on helping children only once they are in crisis. This means that, for much of the UK, more children are going into care when, with the right support, they could stay with their families.

Cuts to support are also having an effect on children's education. More children are struggling to learn at school due to challenges they face in their lives. And despite doing their best, schools can't plug the gaps of other missing services.

What needs to change?

All families, no matter who they are, will need help, support, and guidance at some point in time.

To ensure every child and family gets the support they need at the earliest opportunity, the next UK government should introduce a legal duty on local authorities to provide early help backed by significant funding.

That should include:

- A sufficient universal offer which includes digital support
- Targeted support for families experiencing multiple challenges
- Integrated services so there's 'one front door'
- Specialist provision for older children including mental health support and protection from harm outside the home, including exploitation.

We also want to keep children safe from exploitation and support victims to rebuild their lives.

That's why we're calling for:

- A single, cohesive legal code designed to tackle the criminal exploitation of children, which ensures the rights of children whilst giving new powers to sanction exploiters
- Coordinated policy and practice at a local and national level, led by a national strategy from UK government
- Sustainable and ring-fenced investment in early intervention and prevention services for exploited young people

What services do we offer?

Action for Children has a long and successful history of investing in family support services across the UK. Our approach is a holistic one. We know that every family is different, as such there is a need to tailor approaches which reflects these differences.

We provide:

68 early help services, including children's centres and family hubs,

giving parents the support they need to respond to their child's needs. They also support children and families navigating a range of issues, from poverty to domestic abuse.

1 online parent support service, Parent Talk, which offers free parenting advice on everything from weaning, to supporting a child who has a neurodiversity.

10 support services for young carers, which give them a break from their caring responsibilities, support their emotional wellbeing, and help them manage any educational pressures while balancing their caring role.

56 youth services, including employment programmes; services to reduce involvement in anti-social behaviour, crime and substance misuse; and support to help build resilience, skills and networks.

75 Spring nurseries and Spring Oscars, providing high quality nurseries and childcare.

4 Sure Start Centres in Northern Ireland, providing support to families and parents of children aged 0-4 in disadvantaged areas. This includes a wide-range of healthcare support, high quality play, learning and childcare experiences, support for speech, language and communication development, antenatal and postnatal care, breastfeeding guidance and support groups, as well as programmes for parents on parenting, nutrition, nurturing, emotional wellbeing and much more.

Service Spotlight: Parent Talk

Parent Talk offers free, down-to-earth advice for parents of children aged 0-19 online across the UK: parents.actionforchildren.org.uk

This groundbreaking online service provides articles on the most common parenting questions, written by experts in the field and a live chat where parents can talk 1:1 with a qualified parenting coach about anything that's worrying them.

We connect parents with a parenting coach for judgment-free advice and emotional support. Our parenting coaches, based around the UK are qualified and experienced support workers, childminders, play practitioners, and teachers.

If we didn't have access to early help services, we would probably have had to split as a family. We were at rock bottom. They really picked us up and helped us, and they still are.



Barry, whose family received support from Action for Children

Who are Action for Children?

Action for Children protects and supports vulnerable children and young people by providing practical and emotional care and support, ensuring their voices are heard, and campaigning to bring lasting improvements to their lives.

With 426 services across the UK, in schools and online, we helped 765,905 children, young people and families in 2022/23 alone.

Contact

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