

PRESS RELEASE FROM THE CENTRE FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE
AND FABIAN SOCIETY

Conservative and Labour MPs join forces to call for better and fairer access to parental leave

- *Cross-party Early Years Commission calls for major post-Covid-19 support for the youngest children and their parents as part of ‘levelling up’ response.*
- *Just 1 per cent of families surveyed believe that early years were prioritised the most by the Government during the pandemic.*
- *Commission calls for a significant shake up in parental leave rights.*

Covid-19 has further exposed significant gaps in early years provision which, unless addressed, will impact on the Government’s ability to ‘build back better’, a new report from The Early Years Commission, set up jointly by the Centre for Social Justice and the Fabian Society, has found.

According to a YouGov survey—undertaken for the commission—just one per cent of adults in England believe that children under five have been prioritised the most by the Government during the Covid-19 pandemic.¹

¹ All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 3,023 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 16th - 18th December 2020. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all English adults (aged 18+).

The Early Years Commission was co-chaired by Labour's Sharon Hodgson MP and former Conservative Minister for Children & Families, Edward Timpson CBE MP, and set up to explore how to improve services for children from conception to age five.

The Commission's new manifesto recommends the immediate expansion of employment rights for new and expectant parents, including time off for antenatal appointments and expanded maternity and paternity rights throughout the first years of a child's life.

Research has found that around 8 per cent of fathers and 10 per cent of mothers do not currently have access to paid maternity or paternity leave because they haven't worked for long enough.² The report recommends that this changes so that all employed parents have access to such leave from the first day in their job.

The Commission heard from organisations and individuals committed to giving every child the best start in life, and pushing for a change in early years policy as part of the 'levelling up' agenda, focusing on children from conception to age five.

It combined a review of current policy with written evidence from 64 organisations, oral evidence from 15 witnesses, a YouGov poll, 3 roundtables, and numerous focused discussions with stakeholders across the early years sector.

In addition to increased maternity and paternity rights from conception, the Commission recommends that the Government should work with local authorities to develop dedicated, locally-led parent support services in every community. These would offer families relationship-based support from the conception of their child, both for parent-child relationships and parent-parent relationships.

The Commission also recommends building a holistic, cross-departmental strategy on the early years, led by a cabinet minister.

Government should also roll out children's centres and family hubs across the country, prioritising disadvantaged areas; support the professional development of early years practitioners; increase compulsory interactions between children and health visitors; and build more support for the professional development of those who work in early years.

Ofsted has warned that the pandemic will leave a legacy of child abuse, neglect and harm, as vulnerable children slip out of sight of public services.³

The damage done to early years support has also been severe for families most reliant on the welfare system. Over 2 million families with children under five are living in poverty, and poverty is rising fastest for the youngest children.⁴

²<https://www.modernfatherhood.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Inequalities-Parental-Leave-Report-21st-Nov-2017-full-report-FINAL.pdf>

³'Toxic lockdown' sees huge rise in babies harmed or killed, Hannah Richardson. BBC, 6th November. Vulnerable children in lockdown 'national concern', Sean Coughlan. BBC, 1st December 2020.

⁴Households below average income. Department for Work and Pensions, March 2019; Best beginnings in the early years. Children's Commissioner, 2020.

There is widespread public support for early years investment—YouGov’s poll for the Commission found that 43 per cent would actively support an increase in spending if it were paid for by raising taxes, or by redirecting funds from other services, and just 19 per cent of adults in England would oppose it.

The Centre for Social Justice and the Fabian Society worked together as the secretariat for the Early Years Commission.

Commission Co-chair and Labour MP, Sharon Hodgson, said:

"Every single child across the UK deserves the best start in life, which is why I have campaigned for over a decade on the importance of a child’s early years, from conception to 1001 days and valuable early years provision.

"I am proud to have co-chaired this manifesto, which presents concrete policies to improve the nation’s early years offer.

“The Government must take these recommendations on board to make the UK the best place to grow up in and the best place to grow old in.”

Commission Co-chair and Conservative MP, Edward Timpson CBE, said:

“We know instinctively how important the early years of a child’s life are. The evidence only confirms it.

“The pandemic has been tough for us all, but none more so than babies and toddlers. We owe it to them to prioritise their futures as we plan our Covid-19 recovery.

“By coming together across the political divide, we want to demonstrate what is possible if the nation acts as one in ensuring every child has a great start in life.”

Kindred² Director, Felicity Gillespie said:

“Kindred² is delighted that this independent, expert-led Commission has delivered a consensus on the importance and priorities for the early years of childhood.

“We hope this shared, cross-party manifesto will serve as the basis for action to secure the high quality support and education needed to give every child the best start in life.

“We are hugely grateful to the Commissioners and all those who contributed to the report for their participation and perseverance, especially in light of the challenges of these last 18 months.”

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NOTES TO EDITORS

About the Early Years Commission

Both the Centre for Social Justice and the Fabian Society came together in 2020 as the secretariat for the Early Years Commission, in recognition that giving all children the best start in life should be front and centre of every government's policy agenda.

Over 9 months, the Early Years Commission heard from organisations and individuals committed to giving every child the best start in life and pushing for a change in early years policy. The Commission's remit was broad, but its central focus was on children from conception to age 5.

Its work started with a review of the available evidence on early years and the recommendations made over the past 10 years. This identified common themes and ideas to focus on, and received written evidence from 64 organisations and oral evidence from 15 witnesses. It held 3 roundtables and numerous discussions with stakeholders across the early years sector.

The evidence these experts presented informed cross-party, cross-sector recommendations and a manifesto for change. This manifesto is a declaration of consensus on short-term and longer-term changes which, together, would provide comprehensive support for young children at home and in the community.

The Commission also commissioned YouGov to survey 3,023 adults across England. The survey was carried out online and sent to members of YouGov's panel. Fieldwork was undertaken between 16th and 18th December 2020. Five questions were asked on the Covid-19 pandemic, investment in public services for children under five, and the facilities that are important for families.

The remit of this manifesto is England only. Early years, health, and local government policy are devolved matters.

About the Centre for Social Justice

Established in 2004, the Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) is an independent think-tank that studies the root causes of Britain's social problems and addresses them by recommending practical, workable policy interventions. The CSJ's vision is to give people in the UK who are experiencing the worst multiple disadvantages and injustice every possible opportunity to reach their full potential.

The majority of the CSJ's work is organised around five 'pathways to poverty', first identified in our ground-breaking 2007 report *Breakthrough Britain*. These are: educational failure;

family breakdown; economic dependency and worklessness; addiction to drugs and alcohol; and severe personal debt.

Since its inception, the CSJ has changed the landscape of our political discourse by putting social justice at the heart of British politics. This has led to a transformation in government thinking and policy. For instance, in March 2013, the CSJ report *It Happens Here* shone a light on the horrific reality of human trafficking and modern slavery in the UK. As a direct result of this report, the Government passed the Modern Slavery Act 2015, one of the first pieces of legislation in the world to address slavery and trafficking in the 21st century.

Our research is informed by experts including prominent academics, practitioners and policy-makers. We also draw upon our CSJ Alliance, a unique group of charities, social enterprises and other grass-roots organisations that have a proven track-record of reversing social breakdown across the UK.

The social challenges facing Britain remain serious. In 2021 and beyond, we will continue to advance the cause of social justice so that more people can continue to fulfil their potential.

About the Fabian Society

The Fabian Society is an independent left-leaning think tank and a democratic membership society with over 7,000 members. We influence political and public thinking and provide a space for broad and open-minded debate. We publish insight, analysis and opinion; conduct research and undertake major policy inquiries; convene conferences, speaker meetings and roundtables; and facilitate member debate and activism across the UK.

As a think tank we have a reputation for high quality, politically salient projects that have a real impact on political and policy debate. Our [staff team](#) in London, Manchester and Edinburgh work with leading politicians and policy experts to develop and promote new ideas and to influence the climate of political opinion. Read about our [current projects](#) and our four [thematic priorities](#).

We are affiliated to the Labour Party and work very closely with Labour politicians, as well as influencing debate across the political spectrum. Every Labour prime minister has been a Fabian, and today hundreds of Labour politicians are members of the Society, including Labour Leader the Rt Hon Sir Keir Starmer KCB QC MP and more than half of his shadow cabinet, as well as senior figures in devolved and local government. Our elected [executive committee](#) currently includes five Labour frontbenchers.

About the YouGov sample

All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 3,023 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 16th - 18th December 2020. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all English adults (aged 18+).

MEDIA ENQUIRIES

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An embargoed copy of the report is available on request.

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