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Institute of Health Visiting
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John Snow House
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10 03 2023

To: Neil O'Brien MP,
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Minister for Primary Care and Public Health)
Department of Health and Social Care

Dear Neil,

Re: Imperative to strengthen health visiting and school nursing to address key health priorities in England – the whole of society benefits when strong foundations for health are built in childhood.

As Chief Executives of leading health visiting and school nursing professional bodies, we appreciate the significant pressure that the Government is facing to rebuild services in the wake of the pandemic and cost-of-living crisis. We also value the commitments that you have already made to address some key health priorities for babies, children, young people and their families through the Start for Life programme, Family Hubs and investment into mental health services for school-aged children.

We are concerned that these measures, however, fail to provide the much more comprehensive plan and wide-ranging action needed to actually deliver the government's own blueprint for health for all children as set out in the Healthy Child Programme. In particular, there are not enough health visitors or school nurses in England to deliver this Programme as intended. There is indisputable evidence that too many babies, children and young people are missing out on the support that they need due to a yawning postcode lottery of service provision. This cannot continue. With such a poor state and downward trajectory of child health in England, compared to other similar nations, and widening health inequalities that take root in childhood, this is too important to be left to chance and requires a national plan. The benefits of prevention and early intervention are unequivocal and far-reaching. When families are supported, babies, children and young people thrive, and the whole of society benefits.

We look forward to next week's Spring Budget and stand ready to lend our weight of support as you set out further plans to help protect the most vulnerable in our society and give greater weight to prevention and early intervention.

There is a clear case for action now. Babies, children and young people are our most vulnerable citizens, and they are currently being badly let down by policies that have high ambitions but are not matched by the investment required to address the scale of rising need. There are also widespread

concerns that an unacceptable number of vulnerable children are invisible to services and not getting the support that they need - this includes children with undiagnosed complex health conditions and disabilities, as well as safeguarding concerns. Without strong systems in place to prevent, identify and treat problems before they reach crisis point, more and more money is being sunk into costly late interventions (estimated to be more than £23 billion per year 'getting it wrong'¹, and increasing every year). There is no doubt that prevention and early intervention are cheaper, more effective and kinder than cure.

The benefits of an effective health visiting and school nursing service accrue to numerous government departments, contributing to a whole system response to address a multitude of policy priorities:

- Health visitors have been recognised as one of six essential services central to achieving the Start for Life Vision. However, the benefits of an effective health visiting service extend way beyond the remit of this Vision which is largely focused on improving school readiness, mental health and breastfeeding. We are concerned that health visitors' vital contribution across multiple other public health priority areas, as well as clinical pathways that straddle public health and the NHS, are being overlooked in current plans – this includes flagship national plans like the new-born genome screening programme. These are set out in our infographic enclosed².
- School nurses welcome and are placed at the heart of the recently launched Core20PLUS5CYP strategy designed to support integrated care systems to drive action in health inequalities improvement and, whilst targeting our work towards asthma, epilepsy, diabetes, oral health and mental health in the most deprived 20% of the national population, they too risk being overlooked and other public health priority areas of focus diluted and diminished.

We now have 40% fewer health visitors since 2015, with school nursing experiencing similar losses. Cuts have consequences and the ripple effects are being felt across the wider health and care system - for example, families that would previously have been effectively supported by a health visitor or school nurse with minor illnesses, or long-term conditions, are now turning to A&E when they are worried and can't get their needs met elsewhere. Alongside the plans that you have set out for urgent care, we must also invest in services like health visiting and school nursing to address the root cause, by supporting parental confidence and health literacy to manage common childhood illnesses.

We have worked with hundreds of other organisations and services across the health and care system who have also reported similar consequences of cuts to health visiting and school nursing and have called for reinvestment in these vital services – see the Why Health Visitors Matter report enclosed³. UNICEF UK captured the key message, describing health visiting as **"the backbone of the early years... a safety-net for all families"**⁴. UNICEF also join the World Health Organization who has long recognised the link between health and education and the key role that school nurses play in safeguarding student health and well-being⁵.

We have the utmost admiration for practitioners who are doing all they can to support as many families as possible, but the fact is that every single local authority in England is now unable to deliver the full Healthy Child Programme as intended. Sadly, we are hearing about more and more service cuts that are planned – if enacted, they will strip out this vital safety-net and leave even more children without the support that they need.

It is time for solutions that look beyond a short political cycle and build services with the needs of babies, children and families at the heart. Please find enclosed the latest Institute of Health Visiting

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School nurses are welcomed and placed....
OR
School nurses welcome the recently launched Core20PLUS5CYP strategy designed to support integrated care systems to drive action in health inequalities improvement, and are placed at its heart. However, whilst targeting our work towards asthma, epilepsy, diabetes, oral health and mental health in the most deprived 20% of the national population, school nurses also risk being overlooked and other public health priority areas of focus diluted and diminished.

'State of Health Visiting' survey report and full set of recommendations that we believe will help to rebuild this vital service⁶ and the evidence and research-based SAPHNA Vision⁶ for school nursing.

We welcome the Department's commitment of £10m for workforce pilot schemes. However, we would respectfully suggest that, in addition to this, **an urgent uplift to the public health grant is needed now, alongside a national workforce plan for health visitors and school nurses**. This cannot wait for another 2 years for these pilots to report their findings, this will only make matters worse. We need to 'put the brakes on' now to avoid further workforce losses, retain the highly skilled staff that we have, and build a service fit for the future.

We would welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss these concerns, as well as our proposed plans to address them, and would also be glad to assist in any way possible.

Yours sincerely,



Sharon White OBE
Chief Executive
School and Public Health Nurses
Association



Alison Morton
Chief Executive
Institute of Health Visiting

Copies:

Pamela Goldberg, iHV Chair

¹ <https://www.theyworkforyou.com/debates/?id=2019-01-17a.1398.2>

² <https://ihv.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/FINAL-Spending-Review-Infographic-1.pdf>

³ <https://parentinfantfoundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Why-Health-Visitors-Matter.pdf>

⁴ https://www.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/EarlyMomentsMatter_UNICEFUK_2022_PolicyReport.pdf

⁵ [WHO guideline on school health services](#)

⁶ [WSA1029002-SAPHNA-Vision-Paper-Single-Pages.pdf](#)