



Briefing: a h œ o

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Vital support: the importance of health visiting services

Children and young people across the UK face significant health challenges and have concerningly poor health outcomes. From the earliest stages of their lives, throughout childhood and into adulthood, numerous studies have shown that the UK fares particularly poorly on key child health measures compared to other similar countries.

Health visiting and maternity services are vital for mothers and children during the first 1,000 days to provide necessary support and guidance. Many of the risks and challenges that prevent a healthy start in life can be mitigated or overcome through the interventions and support that health visitors, health promotion and early intervention services offer.

The RCPCH has significant concerns that, after a century of decline, the number of deaths in infancy in the UK has risen for two consecutive years. This is unprecedented and unacceptable. The RCPCH's *Child health in 2030* report found that, if this trend continues, the UK's infant mortality rate will be 140% higher than comparable wealthy countries in 2030.

Whilst the causes behind child deaths are complex, mortality is heavily influenced by factors including the UK's comparatively high rates of smoking during pregnancy and low rates of breastfeeding. On these measures the UK performs poorly compared to similar wealthy countries, but these can be mitigated through support from health visitors.

Health visitors build trusting relationships and dialogue with parents as their baby grows. They are uniquely placed to identify emerging problems and refer children and families to early intervention services before a crisis point is reached. They can be particularly beneficial in providing support to the most at risk and deprived parents, whose children can be at increased risk of adverse outcomes.

Preventing poor outcomes: the importance of public health interventions

Public health services for children offer the most powerful way to improve the UK's health for the long-term. By preventing risk factors for poor health throughout childhood and sustaining healthy behaviours into adulthood, we can improve the health of the whole population.

Child health and the factors that affect it are complex and diverse. Many of the UK's negative child health outcomes are preventable, as are many of the societal, economic, political, personal and medical factors that underly them. Given the scale of the UK's child health challenges – and their lifelong impacts – it is absolutely vital that concerted efforts are taken locally and nationally to support public health, early intervention and prevention programmes.

