



Rt Hon Gavin Williamson MP, Sir Kevan Collins
20 Great Smith Street
Westminster
London
SW1P 3BT

04 April 2021

Dear Secretary of State and Sir Kevan,

A COVID-19 recovery plan for disabled children, young people and their families

We the undersigned are writing to you as leading members of the Disabled Children's Partnership – a coalition of more than 80 charities who represent and campaign for a fairer society for disabled children, young people and their families – to raise with you our calls for a specific COVID-19 recovery plan for those we support, and to request an urgent meeting to discuss this issue. A copy of this letter has been made available publicly.

Our Parent Survey Panel – made up of over 1,200 families - has been established to track the experiences of disabled children and their families throughout 2021. The results have been shocking. From a survey of over 600 families, we learnt that 70% could not access, or experienced delays in receiving, life-changing therapies and routine health appointments that they had before the pandemic. The potential impact on disabled children's long-term development from this delay is catastrophic. Over 50% of parents reported that their child's condition had worsened due to the impacts of the pandemic.

Dan told us about his daughter Elisa, who has cerebral palsy. Elisa relies on regular physiotherapy from her Education, Health and Care Plan to manage her condition. Sadly, she has missed out on this support for a year during the pandemic and her condition has worsened. Elisa has dystonia, a very uncomfortable condition where her muscles contract uncontrollably. Elisa can no longer use her wheelchair due to the worsening dystonia. An opportunity to catch-up on therapy as we come out of the lockdown would be invaluable for Elisa's long-term health and development.

The catastrophic impact of the pandemic has not been limited to physical harm. Our latest findings show that half of disabled children are severely socially isolated, having not seen a single friend online or offline within the last month.

The links between poor mental health and social isolation are well known and highlighted in our findings. 2 in 5 parents reported that their child has lost confidence interacting with even familiar people, like friends, family and carers. All the while, parents continue to suffer themselves with 79% scoring a low level of wellbeing associated with poor mental health.



One survey respondent powerfully described how she was feeling about how she had been treated during the pandemic: "...those three months completely on my own 24/7 taking care of a child who cannot walk, cannot talk... the stress they've put me through, the anxiety, the worry - but it's okay because I'm not important enough."

Disabled children and their families need our help. Although we welcome the government's recent announcement of an education catch-up plan, we are gravely concerned that this plan does not address all the impacts of the pandemic on disabled children and their families. We need a holistic COVID-19 recovery plan that provides support for burnt out families suffering from poor mental health and social isolation, and makes up for the absence of therapies which has impacted on their physical development and opportunities to develop vital life skills.

We believe this recovery strategy should include: a therapies catch-up plan; additional respite care for families; flexibility to extend or allow repeat funding for young people in further education; and additional support for children and young people at key transition points, such as when leaving further education.

As we come out of the lockdown, the Government has the crucial opportunity to implement policies that will help disabled children and their families recover from this terrible year - we cannot lose it.

We are copying into this letter the Minister for Children and Families, the Minister for Care, and the Minister for Disabled People.

Yours sincerely,

Amanda Batten, Chief Executive, Contact and Chair of the Disabled Children's Partnership

Richard Kramer, Chief Executive, Sense and Vice Chair of the Disabled Children's Partnership

Imran Hussain, Director of Policy and Campaigns, Action for Children

Jolanta Lasota, Chief Executive, Ambitious About Autism

Dalton Leong, Chief Executive, The Children's Trust

Dame Christine Lenehan, Director, Council for Disabled Children

Cheryl Ward, Chief Executive, Family Fund

Jackie O'Sullivan, Executive Director of Communications, Mencap

Caroline Stevens, Chief Executive, National Autistic Society

James Taylor, Executive Director of Strategy, Impact and Social Change, Scope

Andy Fletcher, Chief Executive, Together for Short Lives

Colin Dyer, Chief Executive, WellChild