



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

The Rt Hon Sajid Javid MP
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care
Department of Health and Social Care
Ministerial Correspondence and Public Enquiries Unit
39 Victoria Street
London
SW1H 0EU

Our Ref: SO28490

15 December 2021

Dear Secretary of State,

We write to you with regards to the alarmingly low percentage of health visits being conducted face-to-face with babies and their families. In the month of August 2021, emerging evidence from the NHS shows that only a third of mandated health visits were being conducted in-person^[i], even though COVID-19 restrictions had lifted, and the redeployment of health visitors had ended.

This is a serious safeguarding concern, as 94% of practitioners reported that virtual contacts were less effective than face-to-face contacts for identifying families' needs and enabling the disclosure of risk factors like domestic abuse^[ii]. It should not become 'business as usual' to conduct the five mandated health and development checks virtually, without evidence that this is a safe and effective method.

We know that the earliest years of life are a time of heightened vulnerability. Government data shows that 275 children, aged 5 and under, died or were seriously harmed due to abuse or neglect in England in 2020-21.^[iii] One of these cases was 16-month-old Star Hobson who died in September 2020, after suffering a catalogue of abuse at the hands of her mother and her partner.

To prevent more tragic deaths, we ask that you urgently invest in the health visiting service, as the frontline 'eyes and ears' for vulnerable children. Health visitors are well placed to see every child before they start school and a well-resourced service can identify families' needs and risks, and deliver appropriate support.

Quality face-to-face health visits can support the Department for Health and Social Care to achieve its aim of improving healthcare outcomes by:

- Relieving pressure on NHS Emergency Departments, by providing early intervention and making timely referrals to health and social care services.
- Protecting children from preventable diseases, by administering vaccinations and encouraging healthier choices.
- Identifying babies and young children with complex health conditions and disabilities, supporting parents to adjust, and improving the effectiveness of treatment.
- Preventing perinatal and infant mental health problems developing and escalating, by

spotting early signs, and providing additional support or referrals.

In the Spending Review, it was welcome to see a £300 million investment in the “best start for life”, however additional public health investment in the health visiting service was notably missing. MPs have continued to make the case for further investment in quality health visiting support, including in the recent Backbench Business debate on “giving every baby the best start in life”.

It is deeply concerning that revised public health guidance^{[\[iv\]](#)} now recognises virtual contacts as valid mandated health and development checks. This weakens the standard of support parents should expect to receive and it puts babies and young children at risk, as they remain unseen by the health professionals that can help them.

We urge you to update public health guidance to make the five mandated health visiting contacts face-to-face by default and to invest in rebuilding the health visiting workforce so this can be delivered to every baby and their family.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sarah Olney".

Sarah Olney
Member of Parliament for Richmond Park

Wendy Chamberlain MP
Daisy Cooper MP
Ed Davey MP
Tim Farron MP
Wera Hobhouse MP
Christine Jardine MP
Kim Johnson MP
Layla Moran MP
Bell Ribeiro-Addy MP
Jamie Stone MP

[ii] NHS Statistics on Health Visitations, August 2021.
<https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/community-services-statistics-for-children-young-people-and-adults/august-2021/data-sets>

[iii] [iHV-annual-report-2020-21-Year-9.pdf](#)

[iii] [Serious incident notifications, Financial Year 2020-21 – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)](#)

[iv] [Children's public health 0 to 5 years: Interim national reporting process for the universal health visiting service \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)