

# 'HELD BACK FROM THE START: THE IMPACT OF DEPRIVATION ON EARLY CHILDHOOD'

## THE UK COMMITTEE FOR UNICEF (UNICEF UK)

### PARLIAMENTARY BRIEFING – JUNE 2025

#### Poverty and inequality in early childhood

While the link between poverty and poorer outcomes over a lifetime is well-established, what is often overlooked is that these links are rooted in early childhood. What happens during this time is not only important for their current health and wellbeing, it lays the foundations for lifelong outcomes, shaping future health, educational and earning potential, mental wellbeing, and ability to build strong relationships. Despite this, 1.2 million (35%) of babies and children under the age of five live in poverty in England, more than any other age group.<sup>i</sup> Child poverty has increased more in the UK than any other OECD and EU country, while at the same time spending on 'cash and family benefits' decreased by almost 40%,<sup>ii</sup> and funding for Family Hubs decreased by 77%.<sup>iii</sup>

#### Deprivation and early childhood outcomes

New analysis, ['Held Back from the Start: The Impact of Deprivation on Early Childhood'](#) shows that across England, young children who live in areas with higher levels of deprivation and child poverty have poorer outcomes across a range of health and developmental measures.

**Every Local Authority in the highest quintile (20%) for deprivation is in the bottom quintile for multiple measures of early childhood health and development.**

- **Early Years Development:** Children in England's most deprived areas are less likely to achieve a good level of development by the age of five. The most deprived areas are more than twice as far away from achieving the government's target for 75% of young children to reach a 'good level of development' than the most affluent areas. **There is a clear link between attainment and deprivation: 9 out of the 10 local authorities with the least children reaching a good level of development are in the most deprived areas of the country.**
- **Oral Health:** 22% of five-year-olds in England have late-stage, untreated tooth decay. In the most deprived areas, nearly twice as many children suffer from this condition (29%) compared to the least deprived (15%). **Five-year-olds in the most deprived areas are three times more likely to have had teeth removed due to decay than those in wealthier communities.**
- **Healthy Weight:** Nearly a quarter (24%) of reception-age children in the most deprived areas are overweight or obese. Levels of obesity in reception-aged children

in the most deprived areas is more than double than those of children in the most affluent areas (12.9%, compared to 6%).

- **A&E Attendance:** Babies and young children **in the most deprived areas of the country have 55% more visits to A&E than those in the least deprived areas**, an average of 1,020 A&E attendances per 1,000 young children in the most deprived areas, compared to 658 attendances in the most affluent areas.

## Meeting the Government's own commitments

The Government have made a series of commitments to improve outcomes for children, including creating **'the healthiest generation of children ever'** and breaking the link between background and opportunity by improving early childhood development. For this, the Prime Minister announced a **'early years milestone measure'** to increase the proportion of children who reach a good level of development at age 5 to 75% by 2028.

Our findings highlight how critical these commitments are, as well as the urgency with which they need to be met. There is no guarantee that increasing the number of children achieving a good level of development aged 5 will break the link between background and opportunity, without equal effort given to reducing wider disparities embedded by this age. The Government's commitments must be matched by meaningful action to reduce the number of babies and young children experiencing deprivation and poverty.

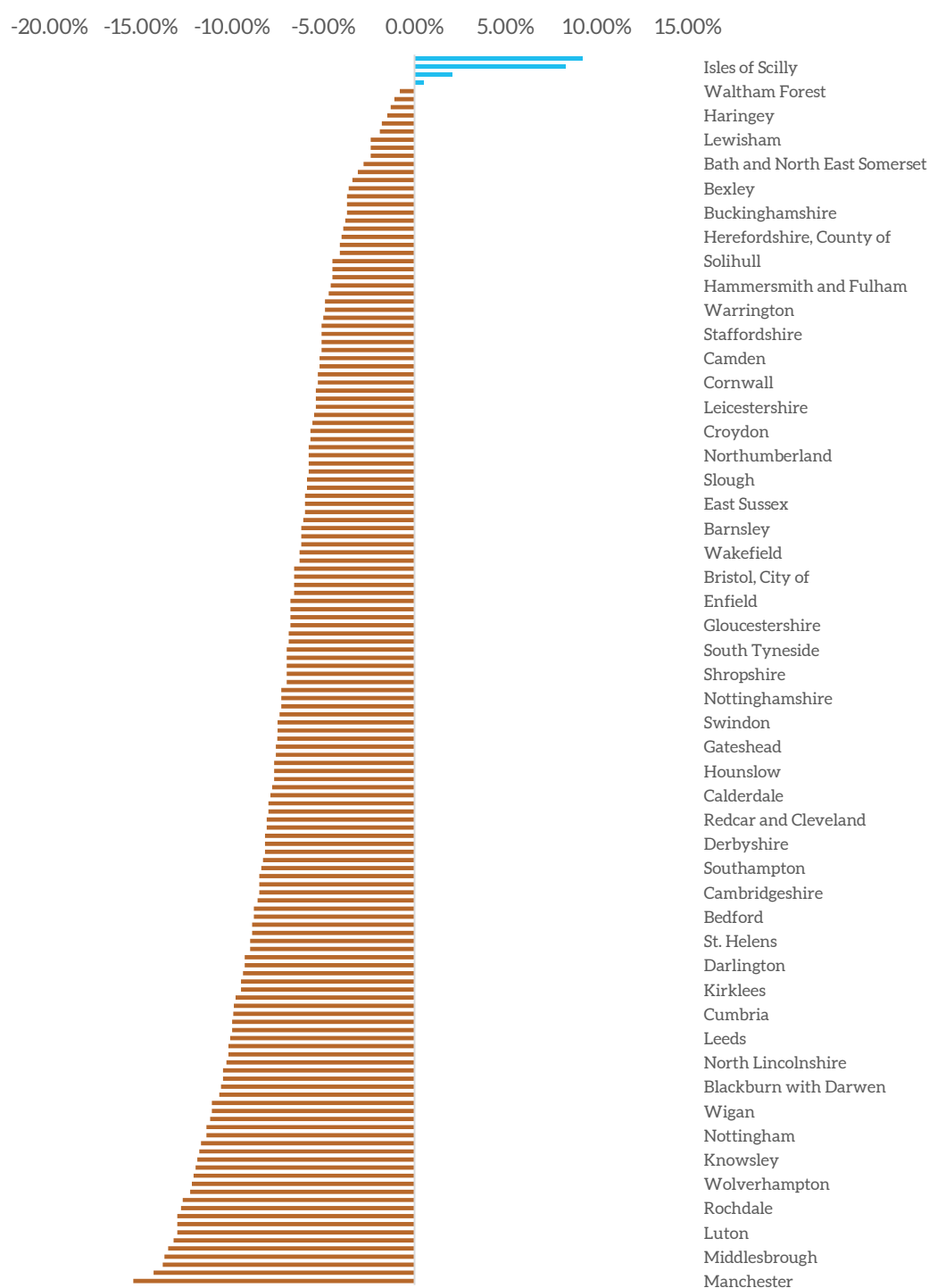
## UNICEF UK is calling on the UK government to:

1. **Improve financial stability of families with babies and young children and lift more children out of poverty by:**
  - **Immediately removing the two-child limit on Universal Credit and ending the Benefit Cap** which disproportionately affects families with young children.
  - **Expanding eligibility and increasing value of the Sure Start Maternity Grant** to improve health outcomes right from birth.
2. **Invest in essential services which support young children's health and early development, and can mitigate against the impacts of poverty by:**
  - **Ensuring long-term, sustainable funding for Family Hubs and expanding provision** so every baby and child that needs to can access integrated family support.
  - **Equalising access to government funded childcare hours for all children from two-years old**, irrespective of their location, parental employment, or immigration status.
  - **Restoring the capacity of the health visiting workforce**, by recruiting an additional 1,000 health visitors a year over the spending review period.

Families with young children need more support. Without urgent action, these disparities will continue to hold thousands of children back before they have even started school. Babies and young children cannot wait - the government must invest in early childhood without delay.

**For more information, please contact Senior Political Affairs Adviser Lauren Pizzey [lauren@unicef.org.uk](mailto:lauren@unicef.org.uk).**

## Distance from Goal '75% children at Good Level Development' aged 5 by UTLA



<sup>i</sup> Fabian Society, *First Steps: An Ambitious Strategy to Tackle Early Years Poverty with Public Consent*. 2025

<sup>ii</sup> UNICEF Innocenti, *Report Card 18: Child Poverty in the Midst of Wealth*. 2023

<sup>iii</sup> Centre For Young Lives, *A Fresh Start for Children and Family Support: Delivering joined-up place-based support through Family Hubs*. 2025