

## **A NEW SOCIAL CONTRACT WITH VULNERABLE CHILDREN AND FAMILIES**

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Devastating cases like those of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson bring out into the open the desperate circumstances in which some children are growing up. We also hear too often about teenagers with their lives ahead of them dying or being seriously hurt at the hands of other young people.

These cases are extreme, but there are many more children and young people just a few steps away from tragedy, and many, many more in households and communities facing huge challenges. Whilst the government has appeared on occasions to understand the risks to the well-being of vulnerable children, its approach on too many occasions lacks coherence, is indecisive and at times appears indifferent.

Since Covid, the levels of childhood vulnerability have become more pronounced and visible. One in six children now have a probable mental health condition, up from one in nine, with older teens being even more prone. Almost a quarter of children are not attending school on a persistent basis, with 140,000 attending less frequently than not. The number of children being home educated has rocketed again.

There has been almost a 30 per cent increase since 2010 in the number of children on child-protection plans and in care. Sal Tariq – Director of the Leeds Relational Practice Centre and former Director of Children's Services in a city which is widely regarded as being at the forefront of getting alongside families – has talked of a children's social care system which is designed around the 10 per cent of families who pose the greatest threats to children, despite 90 per cent of families with children in care being primarily families battling adversity.

Just think about those figures – seven out of the eight children in care may be there because their families can't overcome the challenges they face. How many of those children might stay with their families if they got the right help – and much earlier?

With a growing number of local authorities warning