



SUNDAY EXPRESS OPINION

LAST WEEK Britain faced a huge moment of collective heartache with the news our death toll from Covid-19 had gone over 100,000. It was another terrible moment in a nightmarish year.

It's clear there is a long way to go in taming the virus, though lockdown measures are working and vaccines are coming to our rescue as we hope to return to normality as soon as possible.

But while there is still a war to fight with the virus in the here and now, we must also be planning for Britain's future.

In particular, at the start of Children's Mental Health Week, it is important to highlight the toll the last year has taken on our nation's young.

The imposition of restrictions around the country have reached a length of time where experts now talk of Generation Lockdown.

These are the children, teenagers and young adults whose lives have been blighted by the severe restrictions that have been placed on this country and around the world.

Lives have been irrevocably changed as we rightly try to limit further deaths from Covid, which has cruelly taken its toll on our older generations.

We welcome the Prime Minister's letter

SUNDAY EXPRESS CRUSADE

GENERATION LOCKDOWN Never let them lose out

to parents yesterday in which he mentioned the "hundreds of millions of pounds" that will be spent on nationwide catch-up plans so "nobody gets behind".

But planning for where that money is best targeted must get under way now.

Today the Sunday Express is launching a new crusade calling on the Government to guarantee that it will put in measures to help and support Generation Lockdown through the Treasury, health and education to help overcome the damage caused over the past year and to flesh those plans out now.

It is perhaps worth revisiting the true story of 1941 when Winston Churchill appointed Rab Butler as President of the Board of Education in the middle of the Second World War.

The mission handed to Butler was not to fight the war but to prepare for a world after it and to ensure that the war generation of children had the schooling they needed to succeed.

Butler's Education Act gave us the grammar schools that transformed the lives of many and created the most remarkable period of social mobility this country has ever enjoyed.

The legacy of Butler's achievement was that in 1964 Harold Wilson became the first state school pupil to become prime

These men must strive to prevent a lost generation



IN THEIR HANDS: Gavin Williamson, Matt Hancock and Rishi Sunak need to plan now to avoid a crippling legacy

minister and since then seven out of our 10 prime ministers have been state school educated.

It is also worth noting that Butler, a Conservative patrician, was not acting alone but drew up his legislation with a Labour MP and former teacher, James Chuter Ede, as his deputy.

Their efforts prove that government can have a transformative effect when directed properly, but also there is enormous value in cross-party cooperation and collaboration.

This is as true now with Generation Covid as it was in the dark days of the war. This needs to be a national collective effort.

When Butler and Chuter Ede were tasked with reforming education the end of the war was still four years away and victory was far from certain.

FORTUNATELY, victory over coronavirus is closer with the remarkable rollout of the vaccines and we are hopefully just weeks away from lockdown restrictions being eased and eventually lifted altogether.

However, that only adds to the urgency of what now needs to be done to help kickstart the recovery and support for Generation Lockdown.

In today's newspaper, experts, psychologists, politicians and parents have outlined some of the problems that our young people are facing.

We could start with the students who have missed almost two years of their university, highlighted last week by our sister

paper the Daily Express. Their ability to study, make future connections and contacts and expand their knowledge has certainly been dealt a blow.

The GCSE and A-level pupils have missed out on exams and months of direct schooling during some of the most important years of their education.

Their qualifications will forever have an asterisk by them as the years where exams

'We will be living with the damage for years'

did not happen, so will be taken as of less value and may impact their careers.

The loss of schooling has affected all children and teenagers whose education has been damaged as a result.

Home learning has proven to not be a sufficient substitute for most.

But worst of all has been the impact on health, both mental and physical.

There are reports of an increase in suicide rates among the young, which is indicative of an even wider problem.

Most of all, the issues raised about the damaging effects of a lack of social interaction, not least to the way the brains of young children and then later teenagers are "hardwired", is something we should all be concerned about.

Then, layered on top of that, the loss of cultural activities – like being able to go to a concert, the cinema, the theatre, a museum or a football match – all represent lost opportunities.

So, like Butler and Chuter Ede in the 1940s, we believe it is time for our big

three ministers to step up and make some guarantees of future support for Generation Lockdown.

Chancellor Rishi Sunak, Health Secretary Matt Hancock and Education Secretary Gavin Williamson have done their best in incredibly difficult circumstances, but their focus has been on the virus in the present moment.

We acknowledge that they have much to deal with in the immediate days and weeks. But plans for avoiding a crippling lockdown legacy for this generation must be made now.

What we need is a commitment to financial support for Generation Lockdown in the Budgets over the next decade, health provision to be put in place to deal with the mental and physical fallout, and a guarantee of extra educational and training support.

WE BELIEVE Prime Minister Boris Johnson should even consider creating a minister for lockdown legacy.

Even after the worst of the virus is behind us, what is incontrovertible is that we will be living with the damage caused by this crisis for many years to come.

In this crusade the Sunday Express will work with you the reader, with politicians and experts to help come up with answers.

So as we step up the fight to save as many lives as possible, so too must we step up the fight to preserve a prosperous future for our children.

We cannot let Generation Lockdown lose out.