

Children's Social Care Policy

Purpose of report

For discussion.

Summary

To provide an overview of current children's social care policy issues to inform discussion on the Children and Young People Board's work for 2012-13. This report should be read in conjunction with the accompanying report on the Children's Improvement Board and sector-led improvement which sets out the support for councils in this area.

Recommendation

That members of the Board use the report as the basis for discussion on children's social care.

Action

Officers to action as directed.

Contact officer: Cassandra Harrison
Position: Senior Adviser
Phone no: 020 7665 3878
E-mail: cassandra.harrison@local.gov.uk

Children's Social Care Policy

Introduction

1. Keeping children safe is one of the most important things that councils do and although it is not a service most residents access, it has a high public profile. It is high cost and high risk and faces the twin pressures of increased demand for services at the same time as reduction in budgets. Referral rates and the looked after children population have all steadily risen over recent years and in general, councils have sought to protect services from cuts.
2. In parallel to these challenges, there have been significant policy changes in recent years. This paper provides an overview of some key policy issues and is intended to be read in conjunction with the paper on the Children's Improvement Board for this agenda item which focuses on sector-led support.

The Munro review of child protection

3. The Government largely accepted the recommendations of Professor Munro's independent review of child protection which were published in May 2011. It represents a significant change to the way the child protection system operates, with a welcome emphasis on increasing the scope for professional judgment and reducing overly burdensome central prescription and bureaucracy so that social workers can spend more time with children and families. It also recognises that other services e.g. health and schools have a crucial role to play. This is a long-term, system-wide reform programme and implementation is ongoing. For example, the streamlined statutory guidance Working Together to Safeguard Children is currently being consulted on and there is still work underway on safeguarding within the reformed health system. Councils are also implementing reforms locally, such as developing an early help offer, with support from the Children's improvement Board.

The Family Justice Review (FJR)

4. Lengthy delays in the family justice system are not only financially costly, but also detrimental to children's wellbeing. The Family Justice Review identified that the system is under huge strain and made recommendations on how to improve the way the system operates. The LGA supported these and the Government accepted the majority. Action is required at both local and national level to implement the reforms and work is underway locally between councils and courts to build more effective relationships and better working practices. Other elements, such as a six month time limit on cases, will be included in the forthcoming Children and Families Bill, the draft of which is expected this autumn. The review also challenged the adequacy of social worker court skills and this is being taken forward by the new College of Social Work.

Item 3a

Adoption

5. Adoption reform is a Government priority this year, seeking to address the reduction in numbers and the length of time the process takes. The Action Plan for Adoption: Tackling Delay, published in April, sets out proposals including speeding up the adopter assessment process; a fast-track process for those who have adopted before or who are foster carers; creation of a National Gateway; and making 'fostering for adoption' easier.
6. The Government also published local authority 'adoption scorecards' which the LGA lobbied strongly against as they do not provide a fair picture of local authority performance. They do not take into account the difficulties councils face in finding families for harder to place children, such as sibling groups, older children or those with disabilities; nor recognise the shortage of adopters. In addition, an Ofsted report found that the most significant cause of delay was the court system, which is outside of local government's control. The scorecards will be updated with more recent data this autumn. The LGA has also argued the narrow focus on adoption fails to take into account the wider picture of permanence for children, which include special guardianship and long-term foster care that may be more appropriate for some children.
7. The upcoming Children and Families Bill is anticipated to contain elements related to adoption, in particular to address what the Government views as unnecessary delay caused by local authorities seeking a 'perfect ethnic match'. Additional proposals on post-adoption support are expected in due course and the House of Lords select committee on adoption, to which the LGA gave evidence, will report in January.

Child sexual exploitation and missing children

8. The related issues of children running away and child sexual exploitation have become more prominent in the past few months for several reasons:
 - 8.1. The high profile court case in Rochdale, in which several men were found guilty of sexually exploiting children.
 - 8.2. A joint report by two All Party Parliamentary Groups (APPG) highlighted serious concerns about failings in the system to protect children who go missing from care and the associated risk of sexual exploitation.
 - 8.3. A two year inquiry into child sexual exploitation in gangs and groups by the Office of the Children's Commissioner, including an interim report focused on residential children's homes this July.
 - 8.4. The Government's progress report on the Child Sexual Exploitation National Action Plan, also published in July.
9. This year the LGA worked with Barnado's, as part of their 'Cutting them Free' campaign, to produce a practice briefing to support local areas in developing effective responses to child sexual exploitation. A successful launch event was held in June.

Item 3a

Children's homes

10. The reports into child sexual exploitation and children missing from care have also been highly critical of residential children's homes. In particular, serious concerns have been raised about out of area placements and the quality of care provided in homes. The Government has stated the need for urgent reform and has established two working groups on these subjects, on which the LGA has representation. There are significant gaps in the understanding of how the system and market are operating in practice which the working groups are seeking to address before making proposals.
11. Key issues include the relationship and balance of responsibilities between the placing authority and host authority; local authority commissioning; and the geographical clustering of children's homes. The Children and Young People Board discussed a paper on this subject at its July meeting and officers are developing a work programme.

Early Intervention Foundation

12. A key recommendation of the independent reviews into early intervention carried out by Graham Allen MP was the creation of an Early Intervention Foundation. The purpose of an independent Foundation would be to build a robust evidence base on the effectiveness of early intervention programmes and to provide advice to local commissioners. The Department for Education has been carrying out a procurement process and the LGA Leadership Board agreed to lend the LGA's support to a bid by a consortium of organisations, led by Mr Allen. A decision is expected imminently. The Chairman of the Children and Young People Board has been nominated to be the LGA representative on the Board of Trustees.

Additional issues

13. The issues set out above are some of the key changes and policy developments shaping children's social care. The LGA also maintains a watching brief for example by engaging with stakeholders, responding to consultations and submitting evidence, as appropriate, on a range of other issues such as children's centres and early years, Ofsted inspection frameworks and youth justice.