

REWIRING PUBLIC SERVICES

CHILDREN'S SERVICES





SUMMARY

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These propositions would help revitalise local economies by enabling a better connection between schools and other education providers and the needs of local employers. They would help make public services sustainable again by using a place-based public service budgets approach to boost early intervention and prevention.

Children, families and communities need to be resilient enough to cope with life's challenges. But when children, and their parents, do need help they should get it early on, so that the situation can be improved as soon as possible. This should be done in a way that makes sense to them, with their voices at the core of decision making. Not jumping through the bureaucratic hoops of different organisations but getting what they need, when they need it, regardless of whether it is from a children's centre, a social worker, the school, their GP, a more specialist health service or some combination.

When there is no choice but to take children into care, we want to give them a model of stable, loving homes and wider support networks which give them the very best chances in life. The propositions would allow better use of staff and other public sector assets. They would make it harder for weak service provision to shelter behind formal compliance with paper processes.



➤ RECOGNISE THE CRUCIAL SUPPORT OFFERED BY EXTENDED FAMILY MEMBERS WHO CARE FOR CHILDREN WHO MIGHT OTHERWISE BE IN THE CARE SYSTEM

KEY PROPOSITIONS

Drive local public service effectiveness and end waste and red tape at all levels, by bringing local services and decisions together in one place, for each place, for issues ranging from economic development to health and law and order.

Give councils the flexibility they need to redesign services around individual and family needs, and promote effective early intervention, by:

- making place-based public service budgets arrangements the norm for service delivery in local areas; bringing local services and decisions together in one place, for each place, including education and children's social care, allowing greater investment in early intervention
- giving people back a meaningful local vote on a range of tax and spending decisions to reinvigorate the civic and community involvement that people want and public/children's services need
- making the most of the transfer of public health for young children to local government: ensuring health and wellbeing boards are strengthened to extend their leadership across local services and keep children's health and wellbeing at the top of local agendas
- end flawed and bureaucratic tick-box inspections and replace them with a process where genuine consumer champions focus on the service local people receive from schools, hospitals, policing or care homes.

Rebuild the role of families and communities in supporting each other by:

- recognising that "it takes a village to raise a child", raise expectations that communities will help families, and that families will help each other – building on the strengths we already find in communities and in families themselves
- renewing civic education in our schools, ensuring young people understand the rights and responsibilities of government and citizens
- recognise the crucial support offered by extended family members who care for children who might otherwise be in the care system
- incentivising businesses to support children and young people in their locality, making it a standard part of corporate social responsibility.

Strengthen links between the local community and schools by:

- giving local people a more direct say how school buildings are used out of hours
- developing clearer employer involvement in schools' work on education outcomes and as an introduction to the world of work
- removing the protection and ring-fencing of the schools' budget, which creates an obstacle to better working between schools and local agencies
- reversing the decision which prevents schools from pooling budgets so they can cooperate with and support wider services for children and families to improve child development and attainment.



WHEN WE HAVE NO CHOICE BUT TO TAKE CHILDREN INTO CARE, WE WANT TO GIVE THEM A MODEL OF STABLE, LOVING HOMES AND WIDER SUPPORT NETWORKS WHICH GIVE THEM THE VERY BEST CHANCES IN LIFE

POLICY

PRINCIPLES

Putting people at the heart

Services should take a whole child and family approach, recognising that individual problems cannot be addressed effectively without considering the wider context of people's lives.

Building civic and community responsibility

Services should build greater capacity and resilience in families and neighbourhoods to help themselves and each other.

Sustainability of public services

Place-based public service budgets should be used to deliver financially sustainable local services, tackling waste and inefficiency and with a focus on prevention.



DETAILED DISCUSSION

The current position is unsustainable: Increasing demands on safeguarding and looked after children services, combined with shifts in policy and funding have resulted in councils' statutory duties and local accountability being woefully out of step with available resources and levers to influence.

Background to the policy issues

Safeguarding pressures

There has been a substantial increase in demand on children's social care over the last few years, shown by significant increases in referrals and numbers of children coming into care¹. Beyond this, expectations have been raised by the Secretary of State for Education's view that more children should be taken into care and earlier. Increasing public and professional awareness of the sexual exploitation of children and young people may also serve to increase referrals. The impact of welfare reform is not yet known, but there is a potential risk that it could put additional pressure on families who are struggling, exacerbating the risk of crisis or neglect, and increasing pressures on the system still further. Domestic violence is known to increase during periods of financial stress, and is a consistent feature of child protection cases and serious case reviews. There are increasing numbers of children with highly complex needs and disabilities, in part as a result of advances in medical science. This also has an impact on the adult social care system, where there are increasing pressures from adults with high care needs and dependencies.

The argument that resources should be re-focused on early intervention and prevention, to improve outcomes and reduce demand on safeguarding services in the longer term commands widespread support. However, there is a real challenge to make this a reality against a backdrop of increasing demand on statutory services; less money and

reduced local discretion over it; political and budgetary cycles that are shorter than the period in which the benefits of early intervention are realised; costs and benefits falling to different agencies; and incomplete evidence to inform decisions.

Funding

Total spending on children and young people's services in the 2011/12 financial year was £8.6 billion (the second biggest area of spend after adults) and cost pressures are rising. Local authorities spent a total of £3.1 billion (gross) on Looked After Children, an increase of £94.9 million (3.2 per cent) compared with the equivalent figure for 2010/11. Spending on child protection services is planned to rise by 2.1 per cent between 2011/12 and 2012/13.

Children's services have not been immune to the effects of the 33 per cent reduction in council budgets, even though councils have sought to protect frontline services from the impact. Cuts to the Early Intervention Grant have been substantial over the last two years and the £150 million top-slice for 2013/14 is being re-badged to support adoption, of which £50 million will be ring-fenced. The cuts make it more difficult for councils to plan for the longer term in the way they commission services and for children and families to experience consistent and secure support. Whilst increased adoption should over time help to reduce the number of children looked after by the local authority, this further restriction on funds will make it harder for councils to invest in early intervention to prevent problems within families from escalating, potentially increasing the pressures on safeguarding and care still further.

There are also other significant funding cuts to key partners, including the police service. The withdrawal of government funding for the sector-led improvement of children's services and the vulnerability of children and families accessing these services introduces significant future risks.

Part of the reason for the squeeze on the children's services budget is the ring-fencing of schools funding over previous spending review periods. Children's social care has been protected by councils, but at the cost of cutting youth work and services such as Connexions. There is a significant risk that we are approaching a tipping point where the only services which can be squeezed further are those non-statutory prevention and early intervention services which help reduce costs further into the system.

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- The number of children subject to a Child Protection Plan at 31 March has steadily increased from 29,200 in 2008 to 42,850 in 2012.

 - Care applications have risen by 70 per cent between 2008/9 and 2012/13, with February 2013 seeing the highest ever number recorded for a single month.


 - The number of looked after children grew by 10 per cent between 2009 and 2012.



Public service reform

Against a backdrop of reform in public services, councils are coping with rapid and radical changes which have an impact on children's services.

- The changing role of councils with new responsibilities for public health, a shift to more commissioning of children's services and joint working with health and other partners. There are concerns that some NHS bodies may not be well equipped to deliver their own safeguarding responsibilities during this period of rapid change; and the reforms are fragmenting responsibility for commissioning children's health services which could make it even harder to join up.
- Adoption reform, improving residential care, and reforms to the system for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (a relatively high proportion of whom will also be vulnerable or looked after) alongside changes to high needs funding will all place new duties and expectations on councils.
- The Munro Review and Family Justice Review represent a welcome policy direction, but implementation presents significant challenges in reforming the way children's social care operates locally.
- New duties placed on councils to support the raising of the participation age, on top of existing duties to re-engage young people not in education, training or employment. Both are particularly challenging for vulnerable young people. Councils' ability to have an impact is being made more difficult as funding and levers are being increasingly centralised. Councils must be at the heart of commissioning 16-19 education and training provision to identify, plan, target and tailor provision to the needs of young people and manage sustained transitions into sustainable learning and work.
- The impact of welfare reform on families is not yet known. But if people get into debt and face other problems, there may be a further increase in the numbers of children who need extra support, protection or to be looked after by the local authority, particularly in those areas that currently have a high proportion of families on benefits.



COUNCILLORS ARE
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What people have said

In the course of developing this paper we have spoken to council leaders – political and managerial – from across the country. We have engaged with policy experts and charities. What emerged was a great deal of consensus about the need for change and the risks we face if we fail to do so.

Those we have spoken to have been clear about the fundamental need to put people, not organisational structures or boundaries, at the heart of children's services. This included discussion about meaningful participation in services, greater control and personalisation.

"It's about people, not institutions."

"Councillors are restlessly ambitious on behalf of residents for better services and outcomes."

"You will get better services if you involve people in their design."

"People don't think 'I'm saving the council money'. They are just doing what families do."

People broadly considered whole systems transformation, for example through place-based public service budgets, to be essential: a bit of a 'no-brainer' in fact, given the challenges facing the public sector. Though making it happen in reality is of course more difficult than signing up to the principle.

Many thought that central government has a role to play in driving this, by making the boundaries between organisations and funding more porous and in incentivising their delivery agencies on the ground to participate in local integration.

"It's about how to spend money in a place most efficiently."

"Government must encourage partners to integrate and jointly invest."

There was a great deal of consensus that the current relationship between the State and citizens is not sustainable; that the public's expectations about what could and should be delivered are out of kilter with the reality facing the public sector. A related topic was the need to look at the whole population from "cradle to grave" and across the whole community: only councils have a broad enough remit, and the democratic mandate, to do this.

"We need to move from people being consumers of public services to citizens."

"We need to keep an eye on universality at a time when the mantra is 'focus on the most vulnerable'."

PROPOSITIONS IN MORE DETAIL

Give councils the flexibility they need to redesign services around individual and family needs, and promote effective early intervention.

Children live in families made up of individuals with varied strengths and needs, living in very different circumstances. Services to support those families must therefore be flexible enough to support individuals and families in ways which make most sense for them – and the more complex and challenging the circumstances, the more nimble and ‘joined up’ local services need to be. So, local areas need the flexibility to re-design services around individual’s needs, rather than inflexible organisational or legal structures.

The current system for family support and children in care is too rigid: children are either in care or out of care. This doesn’t make sense. A much more flexible system, enabling things like respite care breaks for children away from parents could, where safe and appropriate, avoid family breakdown. This kind of approach would also support improved transitions when children return home from care, instead of an ‘all or nothing’ approach which places a huge pressure on everyone.

There is great consensus that intervention to support a child or family has to be as early as possible, but to do this effectively in all areas, councils need the flexibility to configure services to meet families’ needs in the best way possible.



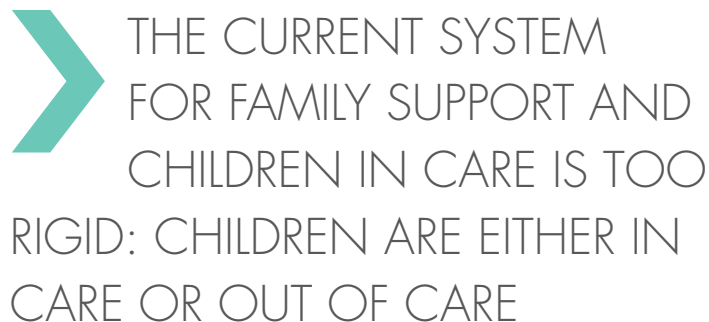
To deliver a step-change in the effectiveness of services we need to:

- Make place-based public service budget arrangements the norm for service delivery in local areas; bringing local services and decisions together in one place, for each place, including education and children’s social care.

Public services currently concentrate on trying to handle failure rather than on preventing it. This is not only unsuccessful in helping people, but is also incredibly expensive. One of the main barriers to prevention and early intervention is the split incentive: where one part of the public sector pays, but another benefits. Protection of traditional organisational budgets hinders investment in outcomes that would, in the longer-term, both benefit society and save taxpayers’ money. Greater integration of different parts of the public sector, with increasingly porous organisational and financial boundaries, is also essential to coping with the wider pressures facing not just local government, but the entire public sector.

By aligning budgets much more closely and taking a place-based public service budget approach everywhere, local areas can see the benefits of effective early intervention and can find ways to reinvest longer term savings in the health and criminal justice systems in local services.

- Give people back a meaningful local vote on a range of tax and spending decisions to reinvigorate the civic and community involvement that people want and public/children’s services need.



THE CURRENT SYSTEM FOR FAMILY SUPPORT AND CHILDREN IN CARE IS TOO RIGID: CHILDREN ARE EITHER IN CARE OR OUT OF CARE

We want people to be more engaged in civic and community life. People want that too. But at the moment they are disillusioned and disengaged. People tell us they want a reason to care about voting and a reason to feel positive about belonging to their civic life. They want more of a stake in public debate. That can be achieved by giving people back a meaningful local vote on a wide range of tax and spending decisions.

- Make the most of the transfer of public health for young children to local government.

Bringing public health for 0-5 year olds within local government presents a unique opportunity to strengthen the links between the universal health visiting service and wider children's services, and Family Nurse Partnership programmes which are one of the most effective early intervention services in the world. Health and wellbeing boards will be crucial to building these links effectively and taking a strategic view across the commissioning of these and other services to support children's health and wellbeing. They need to be strengthened to extend their leadership across local services by involving community, mental health and acute trusts much more actively in their governance.

- End flawed and bureaucratic tick-box inspections and replace them with a process where genuine consumer champions focus on the service local people receive from schools, hospitals, policing or care homes.

Ofsted's increased reach into children's services and school improvement is driving increased costs in local government. But let's face it: people don't care all that much about compliance with bureaucratic process; whether a social worker has recorded something in one box on a form instead of another or the detail of a teacher jumping through a particular administrative hoop.

As long as services are making their lives better and helping their children to be all they can be, because that is what really matters. But the current inspection process does not tell them very much about the quality of services. It implements a paper-chasing, tick-box process which diverts resources away from the very frontline services that people care most about. And after all that, the majority of services end up in the same category anyway. Instead, inspectorates should put people at the heart of their work and transform into something much more valuable: a true consumer champion on behalf of children and families, focussed on the services local people receive.

This is not about councils hiding from hard truths about weak performance. Quite the opposite. This approach will make it much harder for services to shelter behind formal compliance with paper processes. It also means we need to get even better at listening to children and parents, involving them and giving them greater control, not only in individual decisions in a meaningful way, but in the design of services. That might feel like a more risky relationship, but is a risk that we are willing to take.



Rebuild the role of families and communities in supporting each other

- Recognising that “it takes a village to raise a child”, raise expectations that communities will help families, and that families will help each other – building on the strengths we already find in communities and in families themselves.

A child’s best interests are always at the centre of social workers’ decisions, but children do not exist in a vacuum. The system is creaking under current pressure and needs people – families, neighbourhoods – to take more responsibility where they are able to. That does not mean stepping away from our legal and moral duties to help people when they need it, but that personal responsibility is expected in return. This means helping communities to develop the capacity and resilience to support each other and make the positive changes that they want to see, focusing on their strengths and how these can be encouraged to flourish, not just the deficits that grab attention because they require statutory services. It also means joined up services in a place that think about the whole person and the whole family.

Councils have specific duties as ‘corporate parents’ for looked after children and care leavers. But if we are to replicate the help that most children receive from their families, they need support networks which reach beyond the council and expand out to local communities, including businesses and education providers.

- Renewing civic education in our schools, ensuring young people understand the rights and responsibilities of government and citizens.

There is evidence that good and substantial civic education has an impact on the engagement and participation of young people as they enter adulthood. If we want to strengthen civic and community life, schools have a crucial role to play in shaping the expectations of children and young people of their own rights and responsibilities in later life.

- Recognise the crucial support offered by extended family members who care for children who might otherwise be in the care system.

When children cannot live with their birth parents, other relatives such as grandparents, aunts and uncles sometimes step in to provide a stable and loving home. We need to consider how we can best support this kind of ‘kinship care’, so that wider family networks have greater capacity and ability to take responsibility for children that might otherwise need to be taken into care.

- Incentivising businesses to support children and young people in their locality, making it a standard part of corporate social responsibility.

There are great examples of businesses working with local children and young people, supporting community projects and building resilience locally. This type of work should be seen as a standard element of corporate social responsibility for every business, recognised and celebrated more widely.




Strengthen links between the local community and schools

Schools provide the only the universal service which has interactions with school age children day in, day out. Teachers are increasingly becoming involved in child protection issues and picking up concerns about neglect. Through initiatives such as the pupil premium the Government has put schools in the front line of 'narrowing the gap' and reducing disadvantage. Schools cannot therefore operate in isolation from the other agencies with responsibility for supporting and protecting the most vulnerable children and young people. There is a need to clearly articulate the benefits to schools of working with each other and with councils on early intervention in terms of improved attainment and behaviour. And schools need to be able to pool budgets to support early intervention in their own interest.


Working closely with councils on delivering early help and support for children and families benefits schools directly – helping children to be school ready, reducing drop-out rates and improving physical and mental health.

- Give local people a more direct say how school buildings are used out of hours.

Schools provide a community asset which is under-used – with many schools still standing empty in the evenings and at weekends. We cannot afford as a country to waste this resource – and local people should be given the right to request community use of their school halls at a reasonable fee.



EMPLOYERS CONSISTENTLY
SAY THAT YOUNG PEOPLE
DO NOT HAVE THE SKILLS
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THE WORLD OF WORK



- Develop clearer employer involvement in schools' work on education outcomes and as an introduction to the world of work.

Employers consistently say that young people do not have the skills they are looking for in the world of work. We need to put school leavers' readiness higher up the list of educational priorities, by consciously increasing links between local employers and schools, drawing on the excellent examples that already exist.

- Remove the protection and ring-fencing of the schools' budget, which creates an obstacle to better working between schools and local agencies.

Protection of schools' budgets at a time of significant cuts elsewhere, whilst also ringfencing funds within the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) risks protecting inefficiency in one part of the public sector, and limits local partners' ability to work together effectively.

- Reverse the decision which prevents schools from pooling budgets, so they can cooperate with and support wider services for children and families to improve child development and attainment.

However, the scope for schools, by agreement, to make a contribution to early help approaches through a 'top-slice' or pooling of DSG resources at a local authority level has been reduced with recent schools funding reforms, which explicitly prevent schools from entering into 'pooling' arrangements of this sort. As well as inhibiting a shift to funding preventative measures, economies of scale are being lost by reducing schools' discretion to pool their budgets and balances with councils to purchase shared services and achieve shared objectives.

This restriction should be lifted to allow schools to work with councils and other local agencies to use DSG to support early intervention, help to reduce demand on local public services and improve educational and other outcomes for children and young people.



CONCLUSION



Today's model of public services is unsustainable. Demand and costs are going up but funding is going down. It is time for a new settlement between communities and the state: growing dependency on increasingly intensive care and support for individuals and families is often an indicator that we have collectively failed to provide the right support early enough.

We all have a stake in the future outcomes for children. The majority of our children and young people make positive contributions to our society and continue to do so as they grow into adulthood. But if we fail those who need extra support, we will collectively bear the costs further down the line: welfare payments, the criminal justice system, health care.

Children, families and communities need to be resilient enough to cope with life's challenges. But when people do have problems, they want – and should get – help when they start to emerge. Not having to wait for a crisis to tip them over the threshold for access to services.

Local government wants to rise to this challenge – but it needs the flexibility offered by a place-based public service budgets approach, and appropriate involvement of all local partners, including schools, to do it.

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