

Post-Election Priorities

Purpose

For discussion and direction.

Summary

The Board agreed priorities for the year ahead at the September 2019 meeting. Following the 13 December 2019 General Election, this paper focuses on children's social care, early years and education which featured in manifestos and the recent Queen's Speech and sets out the commitments made so far and suggests more detailed priorities in these areas for discussion and approval.

Recommendation

Members are asked to discuss and agree the Board's post-election priorities, building on the priorities agreed in September 2019.

Action

Officers to take action as directed by members.

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Post-Election Priorities

Background

1. The Board agreed priorities for the coming year at the September 2019 meeting. Following the General Election, more detailed priorities for education, early years and children's social care are proposed below, for discussion and approval.

Children's social care

2. The Conservative manifesto committed to:
 - 2.1. "Review the care system to make sure that all care placements and settings are providing children and young adults with the support that they need.
 - 2.2. Improve the Troubled Families programme and champion Family Hubs to serve vulnerable families with the intensive, integrated support they need to care for children – from the early years and throughout their lives.
 - 2.3. Prioritise stable, loving placements for those children – adoption where possible or foster parents recruited by the local authority.'
3. A key focus of our post-election work will be the review of the care system. We have called for a seat at the table for this review and will lobby for a wide-ranging review covering issues including:
 - 3.1. Placements market – review of sufficiency and cost, including the role of profit-making providers and private equity firms, and use of unregulated settings
 - 3.2. Workforce – recruitment and retention of social workers and residential children's home managers in particular
 - 3.3. Support for foster carers and kinship carers
 - 3.4. Funding
 - 3.5. Support for children in care including CAMHS and SEND
 - 3.6. Partnerships – particularly with the NHS and police
 - 3.7. Support for care leavers including housing
 - 3.8. Early intervention, edge-of-care support and step-up/step-down arrangements
 - 3.9. Voice of the child
4. We agree that stable, loving placements for children in care are vital, however we believe the form that permanency takes depends on the needs of the individual child and should incorporate their wishes. Adoption will be the best option for some children, while long-term fostering, special guardianship, returning home or residential care will be better for others. We will emphasise this to government as it develops its policies around permanence and work with partners to ensure the merits of all forms of permanence are considered.
5. We will continue to work with councils, partners and MHCLG colleagues to ensure that we draw on the evidence and positive aspects of Troubled Families to build on success to date, and to make the case for integrated, preventative services to improve outcomes for disadvantaged children and families. We will lobby for Troubled Families funding to be

informed by councils' identified priorities, and to be put on a stable, long-term footing to ensure that councils can break entrenched cycles of poverty and social exclusion.

6. The children's social care placements market continues to be a priority for member councils, in particular issues around sufficiency for children with the most complex needs, and increasing costs of placements. We will work with partners including DfE, Ofsted, the Association of Directors of Children's Services and independent providers to identify ways to improve sufficiency, value for money, oversight and support for children.
7. We will continue to make the case for increased funding for children's services. This will include highlighting causes of increased spend (including higher demand, increased complexity of need and higher placement costs) and emphasising the need for re-investment in prevention and early intervention to secure better outcomes for children alongside long-term savings through a reduction in demand for more intensive support.
8. Bright Futures calls for the Government to put children at the heart of decision-making, and we will continue to lobby for improved cross-Whitehall join-up, including a named Minister to oversee this joined up working. We will also support councils to improve whole council approaches to supporting children and families.
9. We will support councils to maximise existing early help budgets by sharing best practice and supporting the use of evidence in commissioning.

Early years

10. The briefing accompanying the Queen's Speech committed to "establish a new £1 billion fund to help create more high quality, affordable childcare, including before and after school and during the holidays. The funding will go to schools and childcare providers to open up more options to families. Our ambition is for 250,000 more primary school children to get onsite childcare over the summer holidays."
11. We have welcomed the Government's announcement of an extra £1 billion funding to develop more high quality, affordable childcare options. However, funding for existing childcare entitlements is insufficient, and as a result there is growing concern about the quality of provision and access for disadvantaged children and those with SEND. In addition, recruitment and retention of suitably qualified childcare practitioners is increasingly difficult, largely driven by low wages and poor career progression.
12. We will continue to lobby the Government to ensure that existing provision is adequately funded, and measures are put in place to recruit and train an appropriately skilled workforce.

Education and school improvement

13. The Conservative Party manifesto included commitments to:
 - 13.1. "Deliver more school places for children with complex Special Educational Needs (SEND).
 - 13.2. Include our existing commitments to increase SEND funding and support pupils.

- 13.3. Expand 'alternative provision' schools for those who have been excluded.
 - 13.4. Intervene in schools where there is entrenched underperformance.
 - 13.5. Continue to ensure that parents can choose the schools that best suit their children and best prepare them for the future.
 - 13.6. Continue to build more free schools.
 - 13.7. Back heads and teachers on discipline.
 - 13.8. Expand our programme to help schools with the worst behaviour learn from the best and back heads to use exclusions.
 - 13.9. Continue to help teachers tackle bullying, including homophobic bullying."
14. The manifesto also comments that "Ofsted inspection serves a valuable purpose not just in improving standards but in improving behaviour" and the Government has launched a consultation on ending the exemption from routine inspection for Outstanding schools.
15. In the Queen's Speech briefing the Government confirmed the additional funding announced for schools (including additional High Needs funding, although this was not mentioned):
- 15.1. "The Government is giving schools a multi-billion pound boost, investing a total of £14 billion more over three years, on top of £4.5 billion for teacher's pensions. Overall, that translates to £150 million a week. The core schools budget will be £7.1 billion higher in 2022-23 compared to this year.
 - 15.2. Every school will have more money for every child and we will level up minimum per-pupil funding for secondary schools to £5,000, and primary schools to £3,750 next year, and £4,000 the year after.
 - 15.3. From next year, we will legally require all local authorities to deliver the minimum per-pupil funding in their local area. And that will be an important first step towards delivering this funding directly to schools, through a single national formula, so that it is fair and equitable for every school in the country."
16. We welcomed the announcement of increased schools funding, including the additional £780 million for council high needs budgets. In the longer term we are keen to work with the Government to tackle the high needs funding gap as demand for support continues to increase. We will lobby the Government to undertake a fundamental review of High Needs funding arrangements to ensure councils are sufficiently resourced to meet their statutory duties to children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities. We want to see all schools become more inclusive so that more children with high needs can be appropriately supported in mainstream schools.
17. We will continue to lobby to ensure that councils have the funding and powers to meet the needs of children and young people with SEND. Specifically councils should have powers of direction and regulation of admissions/exclusions over all schools in relation to excluded pupils and pupils with EHCPs; powers (and funding) to open new special schools; have the levers to hold health partners to account; and sufficient funding to provide suitable home-to-school transport.
18. We believe that the local flexibility allowed under the existing 'soft' National Funding Formula should remain as it plays an essential role in allowing councils to work with schools locally make sure that available funding addresses local needs and priorities.

19. Councils have the unique statutory duty to make sure there are enough suitable school places in their areas, but many of the powers to ensure the provision of appropriate places in areas of need have been removed with increasing academisation. These powers need to be restored, including powers to build new schools; the power to require academies to expand to meet local need; the power to direct academies to admit vulnerable pupils; and the final decision on where new schools, including Free Schools, should be located.
20. We will continue to press for the creation of single, locally held, schools capital funding pot to ensure available resources are used as efficiently as possible to meet local need for new school places and pre-school provision; rebuild schools that are no longer fit for purpose; tackle the extensive backlog in school maintenance and repair; and ensure schools have the funding they need to maintain buildings and facilities in a state of good repair.
21. Councils have a strong track record in school improvement, with 89 per cent of council maintained schools now good or outstanding. Councils stand ready to work with the Government and partners to support any failing school in their area. For this to happen we believe that the strong track record of councils in school improvement must be recognised; maintained schools should be able to sponsor failing academies without having to become academies themselves; and high-performing councils should be allowed to create MATs to support failing schools.
22. It is disappointing that the Queen's Speech did not mention legislation to support councils in helping to make sure home-educated children receive a high quality education. In a minority of cases where home-schooled children are not receiving a suitable education or being educated in a safe environment, councils need the powers and appropriate funding to enter homes or other premises to speak to children and check their schooling.

Implications for Wales

23. This report applies only to England - education, early years and children's social care are devolved matters in Wales.

Financial implications

24. The priorities will be delivered within existing resources.