

Independent Review of Children's Social Care

Purpose of report

For discussion.

Summary

The Government launched an Independent Review of Children's Social Care earlier this year.

The Chair of the Review, Josh MacAlister, will attend today's meeting of the Children and Young People Board to hear from councillors about key areas of concern, issues that they believe could helpfully be addressed by the review, and any areas of good practice.

Recommendation

That Board members discuss with the Chair of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care their key areas of concern, issues that they believe could helpfully be addressed by the review, and highlight any areas of good practice

Action

Officers to continue to engage with the Review Team to identify opportunities for councillors to share their expertise with the review.

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Independent Review of Children's Social CareBackground

1. On 15 January 2021, the Secretary of State for Education announced the launch of an [Independent Review of Children's Social Care](#). The [terms of reference](#) for the review were published at the same time, and highlight that the review will look at the whole system of support, safeguarding, protection and care, and the child's journey into and out of that system, including relevant aspects of preventative services provided as part of early help.
2. The review will be led and chaired by Josh MacAlister, a former schoolteacher who founded the social work charity Frontline. The review will be supported by an [Experts by Experience Board](#) to help the lead reviewer hear the diverse experiences of children and families who are supported by social workers.
3. At the launch, a Call for Advice was issued to inform the review. The LGA's response to this is attached at **Appendix A**.

For discussion

4. The review formally began on 1 March 2021, having already received more than 750 responses to the Call for Advice.
5. The Chair published a document on that day, informed by the Call for Advice, setting out [early thinking around the review](#). This document is attached at **Appendix B**.
6. The Chair will be attending today's meeting of the Children and Young People Board to hear the views of councillors about the children's social care system. This is an early opportunity for members to outline their key areas of concern, issues that they believe could helpfully be addressed by the review, and to highlight any areas of good practice.

Implications for Wales

7. The review covers the children's social care system in England only, however officers are in discussion with counterparts in the Welsh LGA to consider opportunities for cross-border learning.

Financial Implications

8. None.

Next steps

9. Officers will continue to engage with the review team, engaging with both CYP Lead Members and the full CYP Board as appropriate as the review progresses.

Appendix A

Independent Review of Children's Social Care – Call for Advice

February 2021

Local Government Association submission

The Local Government Association (LGA) is the national voice of local government. We are a politically-led, cross party membership organisation, representing councils from England and Wales.

Our role is to support, promote and improve local government, and raise national awareness of the work of councils. Our ultimate ambition is to support councils to deliver local solutions to national problems.

1. Who should I prioritise speaking to?

We welcome the review's emphasis on engagement with children, young people and adults with experience of the children's social care system.

We would also encourage engagement with:

- **Lead Members for Children's Services**, to understand the political context in which services operate. We are grateful that you have accepted our invitation to meet with the LGA's Children and Young People Board in March to start this conversation.
 - **Directors of Children's Services**, for an understanding of the wide range of challenges and opportunities facing children's social care departments. We suggest speaking with the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) as a starting point in these conversations.
 - **Children's safeguarding partners**. The police and the NHS must be fully engaged in this review to ensure the wider context around keeping children safe is understood. We would also encourage discussion with **district councils**, to understand the relationship with county councils who have responsibility for children's social care and the complexities this can introduce.
 - **Local authority education leads and Regional Schools Commissioners**. While not statutory safeguarding partners, the role of schools in keeping children safe and well supported cannot be underestimated, as has been clearly shown through the recent pandemic.
 - **Children's charities**, who work with children, young people and their families on a daily basis. The LGA works closely with a group of charities through the Children's Services Funding Alliance, and we recommend discussions with these organisations in the first instance: NSPCC, Barnardo's, Action for Children, The Children's Society and NCB.
- 2. How best should I engage children, young people and families who have experienced children's services?**

Many local authorities would be pleased to arrange for you to meet with their Children in Care Councils, Care Leaver Forums, groups of foster carers and others. The LGA would be happy to put you in touch with councils keen to help with this.

We also suggest some of the organisations who already support those who have experienced children's services, including (but not limited to):

- Become
- Coram Voice
- Adoption UK
- Fostering Network
- Grandparents Plus
- Family Rights Group
- The Black Care Experience

3. What should I be reading? Links to books, blogs, documents, or studies welcome.

- LGA policy position papers:
 - [Bright Futures: Getting the best for 30 years](#)
 - [A Child-Centred Recovery](#)
- Budgets and spending
 - LGA: [Explaining variation in children's services spending](#)
 - LGA: Activity-spend visualisations (sent by email)
 - Newton Europe: [Making Sense – Understanding the drivers of variation in spend on children's services](#)
 - Shared Intelligence: [the impact of local government spending](#)
 - National Audit Office: [Pressures on children's social care](#)
 - Communities and Local Government Committee: [Funding of local authorities' children's services](#) (this includes helpful links to individual local authority submissions which outline specific pressures)
- Children's services improvement and good practice
 - Isos Partnership: [Action research into improvement in local children's services](#) (and [practical summary](#))
 - Shared Intelligence: [Evaluation of the LGA Sector Led Improvement Programme for Children's Services](#)
 - National Implementation Adviser for Care Leavers: [Second Report](#)
 - Department for Education: [Children's Social Care Innovation Programme Round 2 Final Report](#)
- Early help:
 - Isos Partnership: [The key enablers of developing an effective partnership-based early help offer](#)
 - LGA: [The relationship between family violence and youth offending](#)
 - Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government: [National evaluation of the Troubled Families Programme](#)
 - Institute for Fiscal Studies: [The health effects of Sure Start](#)
 - Early Intervention Foundation: [The cost of late intervention](#)

- SEND:
 - Isos Partnership: [Developing and sustaining an effective local SEND system](#)
 - Isos Partnership: [Have we reached a 'tipping point'? Trends in spending for children and young people with SEND in England](#)
- Evidence around demand and external factors
 - ADCS: [Safeguarding Pressures series](#)
 - Family Rights Group: [Care Crisis Review](#)
 - Isos Partnership: [Children missing education](#)
 - Institute of Health Visiting: [Annual Report 2020](#)
 - Shelter: [The impact of homelessness and bad housing on children's education](#)
 - Paul Bywaters: [Inequalities in child welfare intervention rates](#)
- Placements
 - Revolution Consulting: [Profit Making and Risk in Independent Children's Social Care Placement Providers](#)
 - SECNewgate Research: [Barriers and facilitators to the development of children's homes by councils and small providers](#)

4. What are the big questions I should be asking as part of the review?

The Local Government Association welcomes the review of the children's social care system. Recognising that the review will be wide ranging and focussed on improving outcomes for children and families, we particularly encourage reviewers to consider the following areas:

Funding

What funding is needed to deliver the outcomes we want for children, young people and families and how can we ensure services are fully funded?

Councils have worked hard to protect and even increase their children's social care budgets, but in light of significant cuts to overall council funding, it has proven impossible for these budgets to meet increasing demand. A range of issues is impacting upon costs to support vulnerable children, including higher numbers of children in care, on child protection plans and being referred to children's services; increasing placement costs; and increasing complexity of need of those children receiving support.

Councils have been increasingly diverting money away from early help and universal programmes to try to meet this demand for urgent child protection work, however this is not sustainable and fails to ensure the right support for every child at the right time. We must find a way to ensure children's services is fully funded if we are to both support children in care properly, but also safely prevent children coming into care in the first place.

Of course, we must recognise that the review should not stand in the way of more immediate change. The impact of funding shortfalls in the face of rapidly rising demand and increasing complexity of need cannot be overestimated. While the question of funding undoubtedly

needs to be considered as part of the wider review, this must not overshadow the clear and urgent need for more funding as part of this year's Spending Review.

Early intervention, edge-of-care and step-up/step-down

What does a 'good' experience of, or journey through, the system look like?

Any review of the children's social care system, to be truly effective, must look at how we prevent children coming into care, how we support them to leave care, and the journeys children take through the children's social care system. Early support and well-managed transitions can make an enormous difference, whether that is preventing a child from coming into care in the first place, or making sure a child feels safe, supported and listened to as they move between placements and levels of support. Similarly, an excellent experience in care may be compromised by a poorly managed transition back into the family or onto independence.

We must also recognise the enormous impact that other services beyond children's social care have on children and families, including the likelihood of their needing support from children's services. These include health, welfare, maternal mental health and other support. For this reason, along with issues highlighted later in this submission around support for children in care, the review must draw in other government departments, making it clear that there is a cross-Whitehall responsibility to give children in the social care system brighter futures.

Voice of the child

Are children's voices at the centre of policies and decisions affecting them, at all levels of Government and amongst partners?

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is clear about children's rights to have a say in decisions being made about their care and their lives. Care-experienced children must have the opportunity to influence the Government's review, and we must also look at how children's voices are informing practice and policy across the country.

Placements for children in care

What placements are needed and how can these be delivered? What impact is the current 'market' having on children's outcomes and experiences?

Councils are increasingly concerned about the difficulties in finding appropriate placements for children in care, especially those with complex needs, and about the rising costs of these placements. This applies to all forms of formal care, including fostering, residential care and secure children's homes. You will be aware of concerns raised in recent months about the rising use of unregulated placements, which is linked in part to the problems with sufficiency.

Linked to this, the market for children's social care placements has changed significantly in recent years, with increasing involvement of private equity groups and the stock market, and consolidation of providers. We are not clear about how this is impacting on experiences and outcomes for children. Our own research on the levels of financial risk within the largest organisations raises serious questions about the national oversight of the market.

Placements and support for children with complex needs are not only under pressure for those in care, but also for placements within Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), Special Educational Needs and Disabilities high needs placements, and youth

justice. Each of these systems has a significant impact on the others, for example with children who should be in CAMHS provision instead being placed in secure children's homes due to a shortage of beds.

It is essential that the review considers placements for children in care, including unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, and other children with high or complex needs, and how we wish this system to look going forward to ensure not only good value for money, but the very best outcomes for children.

Support for foster carers, kinship carers and adoptive parents

What support do those caring for children who cannot live with their birth families need and are they getting it? What is the impact of that support not being provided?

Linked to the issues raised above regarding sufficiency, it is essential that we properly support our foster carers to ensure stable, loving placements for children, and to retain enough foster carers to meet the needs of all children in care. However we know that some foster carers do not feel as well supported as they could be.

Kinship carers provide invaluable support for many children and allow children to remain with their wider family rather than requiring care from the state. However, despite often having similar levels of need to children in care, children in kinship care and their carers often receive very limited support, putting enormous pressure on those families and risking the stability of those placements.

Recent announcements about the Adoption Support are welcome, but we must ensure that support is provided for adoptive parents in the long term. Good quality support, at the right time, can be the difference between a placement breakdown and a child remaining with their adoptive family long-term – we must get this right.

The review must look at how we support all carers to allow them to give children the homes, family lives and futures they deserve.

Support for children in care

How holistic is the support provided for children in care and are all partners playing their part?

We consistently hear of difficulties encountered by children's social care departments in accessing the support they need for children in their care, in particular mental health support. Meanwhile, children in care are more likely to experience special educational needs and disabilities, however the well-documented pressures on the high needs block means that these children may not always receive the support they need to thrive at school, contributing to poor educational outcomes.

Partnerships between councils, the police, health services and schools are key to providing children in care with the support they need, but councils can struggle to get the buy-in they need from partners to provide the holistic care they would like to.

Workforce

How are we ensuring we have a sufficient workforce with the right skills and qualifications?

We are keen for workforce to feature in the review, in particular looking at how we can ensure we have enough suitably trained social workers and residential care workers, including children's home managers. We know that stability and trusted relationships improve outcomes for children in care, but too often, high turnover of staff can result in changes to those with responsibility for children's care. We also need to make sure we have enough staff to keep workloads manageable, allowing workers the opportunity to build relationships and spend time with children and families, and the funding to suitably reward staff for the vital work they do. The professionalisation of the children's home workforce should also be considered as part of this review.

Support for care leavers

What support do care leavers need to thrive and how can this be effectively delivered?

Despite welcome developments in support for care leavers, including the extension of personal adviser support to 25 and the introduction of the care leaver covenant, outcomes for many care leavers still are not good enough. This is for a wide range of reasons, including a shortage of affordable accommodation and limited access to mental health support. It is not enough to simply support children when they are in our care – our responsibilities must be longer term, and we must properly resource the services providing that support.

Outcomes for care leavers are well-reported: we know they are more likely than their peers to have poor educational outcomes and have a higher risk of homelessness, and we know that they are over-represented in the prison population. Making sure we can effectively support children through care and as they move on to independence is vital.

Of course, we also know that many young people thrive in care and as care leavers. It would be a disservice to those young people and those who have supported them not to reflect these more positive stories in the review as well, highlighting what can be achieved when the right support is available at the right time, and when the child is put at the centre of every decision.

Permanence

Is there sufficient emphasis on all forms of permanence in national and local policy, ensuring the best interests of the child are at the centre, and how effectively do councils, the courts and CAFCASS work together to achieve positive outcomes for children and families?

We are clear that no form of permanence is better than another, and that placing the needs and voice of the child at the centre of all decisions about their care is key. This is increasingly important as issues such as social media mean that the boundaries between, for example, adoption and special guardianship or long-term foster care are increasingly blurred. We must consider how permanence is planned for, and how children and their families are supported regardless of the type of care they are in. We must also look at practice in the family courts and relationships between councils, the courts and CAFCASS to make sure processes are as smooth as they can be, to avoid drift and delay, and to ensure children and families are well supported.

Conducting a thorough review of the care system is an enormous task, but one that can potentially make an enormous difference. The Local Government Association is prepared to support the review in any way that it can.

