

15 March 2022

Update Paper

Purpose of report

For information.

Summary

The report outlines issues of interest to the Board not covered under the other items on the agenda.

Recommendation/s:

That members of the Board note and comment on the update.

Action/s:

Officers to action any matters arising from the discussion as appropriate.

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Update Paper

Children's social care

1. We have been engaging with the Independent Review of Children's Social Care since it was announced, including through the Review's Design Group and submitting evidence. The Review is now at the stage of drafting recommendations and it is anticipated that the Review will be published in the Spring as planned. Throughout, we have emphasised the importance of children's voices being at the centre of decision-making, the need for adequate resourcing for children's services including early help, and the importance of a well-trained, fully resourced workforce to deliver our ambitions for children. We have also been pushing for improved join up across central government to support partners to work more effectively together at a local level and to ensure that government policies support children and families to thrive.
2. We continue to hear significant concerns from councils around challenges finding suitable homes for children in care with complex or challenging needs. We have previously written to the Minister for Children and Families outlining our concerns, and have been in discussion with officials at the Department for Education. We continue to press for further guidance as to actions that councils should take where regulated placements are unavailable.
3. All councils in the UK have now been mandated to take part in the National Transfer Scheme. Since mandation was introduced, the number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children waiting in hotels has reduced significantly, however the use of hotels has not stopped completely and councils continue to be encouraged to ensure transfers take place as quickly as possible so that children can move quickly to their new homes. We continue to discuss key challenges with the Home Office and the Department for Education, including insufficient suitable placements, funding in particular for care leavers, and age assessment.
4. The Government has formally announced an extension to the Adoption Support Fund. £144 million will be available over the next three years, giving certainty to adoptive families and adoption agencies over the funding after several years of one year funding pots. £19.5 million has also been invested to improve national matching between parents and children, and focus on recruitment of prospective adopters from all communities to help tackle ethnic disparities in adoption.

Housing – Out of Area Placement Protocol

5. In 2018, because of increasing concerns being raised by its member councils, the LGA commissioned an investigation into the issues relating to out of area moves. Out of area moves happen where an individual or family becomes homeless and approaches the council who place them out of their area of approach, usually due to a lack of availability of affordable or suitable accommodation. The aim of the investigation was to develop a better understanding of what is happening and to make suggestions for what the LGA could do to mitigate some of the concerns and improve the position for both councils and the households being moved away from their home area. The LGA engaged the sector widely as part of the investigation into the issue, including several meetings bringing together a range of councils from different areas and from both homelessness and children's services. Given the overlap with children's services, the LGA children and young people team were also involved in this project and papers were sent to the CYP board, the most recent being in January 2021 to inform about next steps and consultation.
6. That consultation took place in December last year and was fairly polarising. There is a huge disagreement across the sector in terms of what is doable and what is acceptable, with some councils feeling that this protocol should already be the bare minimum and others believing it to be unrealistic. Some of the main pillars of the protocol appear to present significant problems for authorities who would need to be on board if the protocol is to be successful in its current form. In particular, the inclusion of children's services placements made under Section 17. It was agreed at board that we would rebadge the protocol to guidance – rather than requiring authorities to formally sign up to a protocol we could ask them to make a pledge (which we could publicise on our website and via LGA comms) to adhere to/champion the guidance and hold a launch event and ongoing training to help lead improvement across the sector. We'll be working on making these amendments and looking at getting as many councils on board as possible, in preparation for an event in June.

Children's Mental Health

7. We have been engaging with the Department for Health and Social Care on the draft of the all-age Mental Health Strategy, this will be out for public engagement in Spring 2022. We expect this will set the future direction for mental health policy. We are pleased that following our engagement, a greater focus has been placed on the causes of poor mental health, such as poverty, and the role that the wider community can play, rather than viewing health-based interventions as the solution.
8. There is an upcoming meeting between LGA, ADCS, NHSE and DfE to discuss support for children and young people who have the most complex needs and ensuring there is sufficient support available for them. This builds on ongoing discussions between all partners on effective support and working together.

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Early Years

9. We continue to engage with the Department for Education on the challenges being faced by the early years sector, particularly regarding recruitment and retention of the workforce. We are hearing from councils that there are particular concerns regarding the guidance surrounding childminders at the moment and work with the Department to identify a solution for this.

Youth Services

10. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport has announced the Youth Guarantee as part of the Levelling Up White Paper which is intended to ensure that by 2025, every young person in England will have access to regular out of school activities, adventures away from home and opportunities to volunteer. This includes all 11-18 year olds, and up to 25 years old for those with special educational needs and disabilities. We are speaking with Officials on the ongoing review of the Statutory Guidance for Councils regarding youth services and further announcements are expected later this year. We are working with regional youth networks to identify good practice and partnership working at a local level.

Youth Justice

11. Following the publication of the joint policy paper between LGA, ADCS and the Association of YOT Managers (AYM), a meeting has been organised with the Ministry of Justice and other partners to identify how the recommendations can be implemented and a child first approach can be embedded in the youth justice system.