ADCS
Leading Children's Services

Briefing on the independent review of children's social care – the case for change

Highlights and key messages from the report

The Review finds that children and families are: "…not yet getting a good enough deal," but notes that this is not a criticism of the many dedicated professionals working to improve the lives of children and families. "In the majority of cases, families become involved with children's social care because they are parenting in conditions of adversity, rather than because they have, or are likely to, cause significant harm to their child."

The Review finds that **decision making and risk assessment** related to harms is too inconsistent and often isn't good enough in relation to child protection. Too much energy is spent on assessing and investigating families instead of providing support, which is described as costly and intrusive. There is a high level of anxiety when making decisions, both social workers and organisations continue to feel very vulnerable to public, regulatory and government scrutiny if things do go wrong.

The report notes several times that **social workers** spend less than a third of their time working directly with children and families. Too often they don't have the freedom to follow their judgement of what is in the best interests of children and families. The Review finds that too many LAs have disempowering, complicated processes to make decisions and allocate resources.

Evidence shows contributory causal relationship between income, maltreatment and state intervention: "We have now reached the point where the weight of evidence showing a relationship between poverty, child abuse, neglect and state intervention in family life is strong enough to warrant widespread acceptance… this should lead us away from framing these differences as 'variations' in social care interventions and be framed as **welfare inequalities**." A parallel is drawn with the now widely accepted view of education inequalities.

On **policy and practice responses**, the Review finds: "… teens who experience criminal exploitation have been particularly failed," noting different parts of the children's social care, justice and health systems are responding differently to the same children and young people, resulting in gaps, confusion and worse outcomes. Similarly, there has been a long term failure to support parents who have had child/ren removed, this has led to: "… unacceptable entrenched and multi-generational cycles of adversity." With such complex needs, it is unrealistic to expect general family help would ever be enough to stop these parents continuing on the same path.

Investing in **family help matters**, but more money alone is not a silver bullet. The report points to emerging evidence on the impact of early investment in help and support reducing the need for more acute interventions. "The government's focus should be on supporting the resources of families and the wider community… whilst acting decisively and swiftly where children need protection." An agreed definition of early help / family support is needed and a first draft is put forward for feedback.

Care must build rather than break relationships and more must be done to keep children safely out of care, although it is recognised that the state will always need to step in and provide care for some. There have been attempts to improve parts of the system but so far they have failed to prioritise loving relationships. So, shared and supported care options may have a role.

“When children enter care, they are separated from the most significant adults in their lives, even if this is for good reason.” More emphasis is needed on building and maintaining relationships as well as life story work. Too often entry into care means a move away from school and friends; every change has a profound impact on child/ren.

On **placements**, greater focus and attention should be paid to identifying kinship carers before entering into proceedings. The report notes that previous reviews of residential (2016, DfE) and foster care (DfE, 2018) have not led to significant changes. Many concerns about independent and semi-independent placements were raised with the Review, particularly in relation to under 16s and UASCs, however, some young people told the Review this was the right option for them.

The Review finds that the **market for care** and LA commissioning is “broken” and there is significant fragility in the system. The Review is concerned about cost, profit and financial health of providers and the impact of the current system on children and young people. A CMA market review is underway.

Care for children who need a **secure placement** reflects short term, siloed thinking across government and urgent action is needed. Better planning, co-ordination and investment, with leadership across health, justice and social care, is needed. We also need to consider the needs of these children and ask whether any home that currently exists is able to meet their needs while still providing a loving environment.

The Taylor Review (MoJ, 2016) recommended secure schools to replace **youth custodial provision**, which has poor outcomes. The MoJ agrees, yet none have opened and there is no plan to close YOIs: “The alarm has been rung many times and action is long overdue.”

On **support**, parents, carers and care experienced adults told the Review that therapeutic support should routinely be provided to children in care rather than be argued and pleaded for (intensive **CAMHS** support may not be required in all situations). **Education** can be transformative, VSH and PP+ funding is having an impact but “we are not consistently aspirational enough for children in care.” Huge variation in **care leaver support**, including local offers and access to staying put / staying close was evidenced.

Sadly, a resounding theme in feedback and submissions to the Review concerned the **stigma** care experienced children, young people and adults face.

“There is no situation in the current system where we will not need to spend more… Children’s social care is under significant **financial pressures** and urgent action is needed.” The Review notes that the latest MHCLG figures show spend on children’s social care is rising faster than any other area of LA spend. This increase is being driven in the most acute end of the system, a cycle that must be broken.

The complexity of **the policy landscape** around children’s social care has led to uncoordinated policy initiatives from a range of government. Children’s social care needs a clear vision and purpose. The Review is interested in the role communities could play here.

Multiagency arrangements and the partners involved have different footprints, priorities and procedures and health are often not closely involved in safeguarding conversations. Partners know their own roles but lack a shared understanding of their collective goal, echoing the findings of the recent Wood Review (DfE, 2021).

Too often **reform initiatives** over the past decade have had limited impact or are too small scale to transform practice across the country. Similarly, there is a systematic overconfidence that additional top down duties or changes to legislation will lead to positive change for children and families.

The review heard “time and time again” about the role **inspection** plays in driving behaviour. Are we measuring the things that matter to children and families, does inspection take account

of their experiences? We need to be able to measure change and understand whether things are genuinely improving for children and families.

Other areas of interest include disparity in court decision making, SEND support, the need for better facilitation of information sharing for safeguarding purposes, the collection and use of data and metrics for success: “We are over reliant on Ofsted gradings.”

In closing, the Review notes that a significant number of the problems diagnosed in the document have been exposed and described again and again with sensible, considered recommendations for change. Yet actually achieving change has been stubbornly difficult.

Actions the Review will undertake, have commissioned and/or future areas of focus:

- *Deeper look at ethnicity and intergenerational experience of care going forward*
- *The tension between protection and support work*
- *Testing out a definition of family help in the next stage of the Review*
- *A new approach to work with teens who face risks outside of the home*
- *Recognition and support for kinship carers is to be looked at in the next stage of work*
- *The Review has asked WWC CSC and Oxford Uni to look into placement commissioning*
- *Continue to work closely with the CMA on their market review of care placements*
- *Engage with the SEND Review on shared areas of interest, particularly support for children and families e.g. respite care*
- *The Review recognises the stigma children in care and care experienced adults face and wants to hear ideas about how to address this in the next phase of work*
- *What it will cost to achieve a shift from acute to earlier spending and the benefits of this will be the focus of the next stage of the review*
- *Central government’s willingness to work together to develop policy in a coordinated way.*

Specific questions posed by the Review for feedback on or before 13 August

- *What do you think the purpose of children’s social care should be?*
- *What is the role of the Children’s Social Care system in strengthening communities rather than just providing services?*
- *How do we address the tension between protection and support in Children’s Social Care that families describe? Is a system which undertakes both support for families and child protection impeded in its ability to do both well?*
- *What do you think about our proposed definition of family help?*
- *How do we raise the quality of decision making in child protection?*
- *How do we fill the accountability gap in order to take effective action to keep teenagers safe?*
- *What can we do to support and grow kinship care?*
- *Given the clear evidence, why aren’t more programme that support parents at the edge of care and post removal more widely available and what will it take to make this the case?*
- *If we were creating care today, what would it look like?*
- *How can care help to build loving lifelong relationships as the norm?*
- *What changes do we need to make to ensure we have the right homes in the right places with the right support? What role should residential and secure homes have in the future?*
- *How can we strengthen multi-agency join up both locally and nationally, without losing accountability?*
- *How do we free up social workers to spend more time in direct practice with children and families and reduce risk aversion?*

- *How can monitoring and inspection make the most difference to children's and families' experiences and engender greater freedom and responsibility in the workforce?*
- *What will need to be different about this review's recommendations compared to previous reviews so that they create a tipping point for improvement?*