

North East response to government proposals following the independent review of children's social care in England



North East ADCS
Leading Children's Services

Introduction

This contribution, from the twelve Directors of Children's Services in the North East, will complement the submissions of others to the consultation on government proposals.

They reflect perspectives from a wide variety of local authority settings: cities, towns and rural counties. Each has passion and a drive to improve the lives of children driven by many decades of professional investment. They have a deep understanding of the front-line challenges of delivery in today's real world.

The [North East submission to the independent review](#) in July 2021 set out the pressing issues of that time. Many of the recommendations from the North East Directors report are strongly reflected in both the independent review and government proposals – notably the welcome proposal of a system shift towards earlier help for families and creating a statutory child protection duty for education partners.

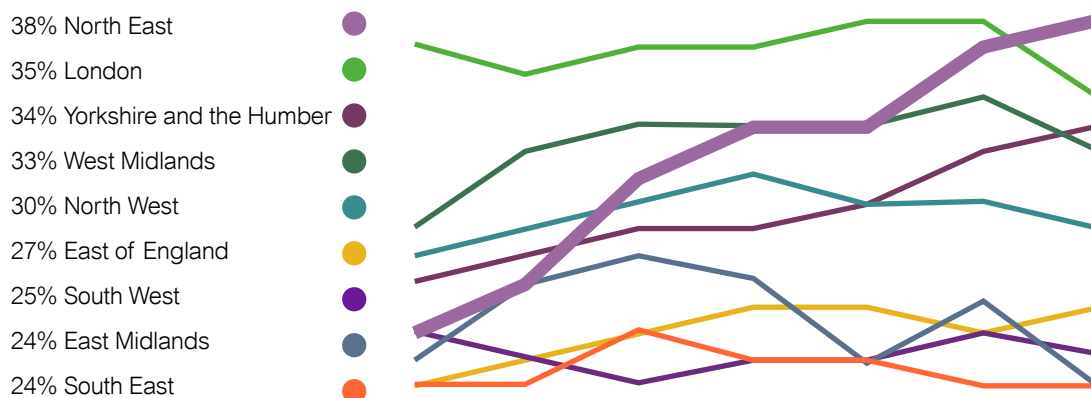
Some issues have not been picked up: notably child poverty and regulation. Poverty is highlighted as significant in the care review report, but not reflected in either the review's final recommendations or the government response, and regulation and inspection is not sufficiently addressed, continuing to be misaligned with changing practice.

Whilst both need and demand for services in the North East continue to be above the national average, the challenges faced are reflective of those faced across the country as a whole. Concerns about poverty, low aspiration, exploitation, and violence have only been exacerbated by the rising cost of living and serve to amplify the need for the socioeconomic context to be tackled by current and future governments.

Since the North East submission to the independent review in July 2021 the latest child poverty data indicates the North East has overtaken London and now has the highest child poverty rate in the UK (38% compared to the UK average of 27%). It is now the case that half of North East local authorities feature in the list of the 20 LAs with the highest child poverty rates in the UK.

Source: BBC [endchildpoverty.org.uk/child-poverty](https://www.bbc.com/news/health-58111111)

Percentage of child poverty across English regions to 2020/21



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Executive summary and key points

Directors in the North East find much to welcome in both the independent review and government response.

In particular the system shift towards early help for families and the strengthening of collaboration with family, kinship carers and communities can break the cycle of rising demand for care. The kinship care proposals are very welcome and proposals to come for children with special educational needs and disabilities must also be fully integrated with family help working.

There is concern about the length of time change may take and the investment needed, which is not yet promised. The Pathfinder approach has value but must not delay new ways of working for all, which is already urgent. Government must not be over prescriptive about the models to be used.

The long-term intergenerational impact of poverty and deprivation is not being addressed and will continue to feed rising demand for services. A new national child poverty strategy is needed.

Many of the proposals to strengthen child protection and partnership working are welcome but could go further. A coherent set of national expectations for all partners should be set out by government. In particular detailed arrangements for education to step into a statutory child protection role will need to be developed.

Directors are unconvinced by what is proposed for the specialist child protection role. They do not support the idea that family help and child protection are distinct and believe that good practice sees child protection work as a continuum. They feel there are issues and risks which need to be carefully thought through and believe the proposal to be ill-judged.

There are abiding concerns that children are not a priority for the health service and that mental health support continues to be inadequate. The proposals do little to address this. Directors would like to take a formal role on ICS Boards to ensure children's health needs are better met coupled with the pooling of resources for improvement, similar to the Better Care Fund in adult services.

The proposals for changing the care markets do not go far enough. Robust government intervention is essential to establish the conditions for success. Including strong action to stop profiteering and improve the availability of placements.

Regional care cooperatives are not seen as a way forward. Directors propose testing the scope for regional collaboration to benefit the supply and availability of placements through cross agency commissioning for children with complex needs, including pooled budgets. Improving the supply of foster carers would be of great benefit and proposals to test ways of doing this are welcome. Attention is needed to ensure that regulation supports better choice and flexibility of placements for children.

The workforce proposals are welcome, particularly robust government support to deal with the use of agency social workers. Greater attention is needed to support the development of the wider children's social care workforce, overseen by a national body to ensure skills development and sufficiency. A career framework for social workers which makes two years fully funded ASYE universal and then offers a range of specialisms would be welcome, but care should be taken to ensure development of specialist roles does not create a two-tier profession. Improving the profile and reputation of children's social care work needs government support.



The arrangements to support performance improvement have become over complicated. A simplified approach to regional oversight, coupled with speedier access to intervention help is needed. A regional assurance model is proposed. A new national framework and revised dataset are welcome but must be carefully developed.

Implementation must be more rapid and across all local authorities. The Pathfinder approach must be used sparingly and only when needed. Much of what needs to happen is already tested and evidenced and should be implemented more quickly.

1. A new child poverty strategy is imperative to tackle the underlying drivers of rising demand for state intervention in family life.
2. The welcome reforms for family help must be fully rolled out everywhere within five years and fully funded.
3. Partnership cooperation for child protection must be in legislation for all key agencies. A coherent set of national expectations for all partners should be set out by government. Specific responsibilities for education must be proscribed. The partnership role in Family Help must also be defined with commitments to resource by partner agencies.
4. The potential role of specialist child protection social worker is not sufficiently thought through. Further development of this idea is needed to avoid diluting the child protection responsibilities of all social workers or disrupting ongoing relationships with families.
5. Children should be made a higher priority in the health system. Ministers must collaborate across government to make this happen. DCS's should be given more control over children's health services at a local level through a formal role in Integrated Care Board governance and pooling of resources, similar to the Better Care fund in adult services.
6. Children's mental health improvements need further measures to ensure that investment and policy intention translates into change at the front line.
7. A review of the children's regulatory system is needed in the light of more flexible working with families and to encourage both better supply and diversity of care settings. Regulation needs to support residential units to do what's best for children.
8. Strong government intervention in the care market is needed to set rules and make the system sustainable. This must include measures to cap costs. Developing not-for-profit capacity should be incentivised to rebalance the market.
9. The proposals for regional care cooperatives should be revisited and an alternative collaborative model should be tested for children with complex needs, with pooled funding from health and youth justice.
10. A national mechanism is needed to oversee coherent development of the wider workforce and social work, with oversight of skills and sufficiency.
11. A career framework for social workers which makes two years fully funded ASYE universal and then offers a range of specialisms would be welcome, but care should be taken to ensure development of specialist roles does not create a two-tier workforce.
12. Government must positively promote children's social care work and tackle public prejudice.
13. Improvement support requires a reset. A regional assurance-based model should be developed building on the Regional Improvement and Innovation Alliances
14. Updating the national performance framework is timely and must capture partner contributions and be outcome focused.
15. Implementation needs to be at pace with investment and opportunity available to all local authorities. Testing must be used only where this is essential. We must get on with implementation where there is already clear evidence of benefit.



General comments and reflections on the North East context

Overall directors feel that there's quite a lot to be pleased and excited about: the right support at the right time, no one is going to disagree with that. It's the detail which counts.

- “The review was good at identifying the need for multi-agency, whole system engagement and it's good that this is now written through from the care review into the proposals. It's right that what is proposed takes us back to the principles of the 1989 Children Act!”

But there are reservations about whether the proposals go far enough and whether the investment and the system levers are on a scale and at the pace needed.

- “It's all very well talking about love and care and belonging, and this is absolutely right, but it needs to be backed up with resources and a real understanding of what we are dealing with.”
- “At a macro level the response just doesn't seem to be on the scale needed or with the financial backing to deliver.”
- “We need specific levers to enable change to be achieved - regulation and financial incentives will need to be created for us to bring about the system change required.”

Directors feel that there is a big gap between their experience locally of what family life is like and the sorts of assumptions that are made by policy makers. There is a lack of insight and understanding of intergenerational neglect and the long-term social impact of poverty driving rising demand for services. They are seeing third generation consequences of poverty and neglect – amplifying each generation and are not yet convinced that government has a real understanding of the complexity of the trauma being dealt with.

- “It feels like three miles of quicksand in between the ‘blue lagoon’ of government aspirations and the reality of what it's like here.”
- “Why do we have a generation of parents who are struggling so much? We have so many grandparent carers whose kids have drugs and alcohol problems, who can't parent their own children. How have we got here as a society? We don't talk about it.”

The big challenge is seen as how to turn the tanker round: with the MacAlister review, the CMA report and the safeguarding report, there is a huge agenda for change. Change takes time, but it feels like the issues are being kicked down the road. Both adequate investment and capacity to proceed at pace are essential if progress is to be made.

- “Overall, my biggest worry is about the changes taking another two years - how will we get to the point of evidencing that the system is underfunded in order to secure the much-needed investment.”



“Nobody will argue against quality multi-agency family help. But will it be resourced?”

Many places, including in the North East, gave a lot of time as part of the local design areas and provided a lot of evidence. There is disappointment that this evidence is still not seen as sufficient to initiate immediate action with the urgency needed.

“The big changes are intended to be implemented via Pathfinders over a two-year period. Two years is a long time, and it makes you wonder whether we’ll ever get to a better position. I fear that wider implementation may be overtaken by events.”

The care review identified that a substantial investment was needed, but that is not currently on the table. Even then, this was about the investment needed in order to change the system and does not address widespread and significant underlying financial deficits. Directors are concerned that continuing financial pressures will lead to further reductions in early help spending in particular.

“The overall funding is very disappointing. The investment is a drop in the ocean and doesn’t reflect the scale of the financial challenge we’re all facing.”

“In spite of having reasonable resources in my authority we still amassed a significant overspend and we still have a budget deficit.”

“We’re all in very challenging medium-term financial planning cycles. If something isn’t statutory it’s in the firing line for budget savings still.”



Overall directors feel that there's quite a lot to be pleased and excited about: the right support at the right time, no one is going to disagree with that.

It's the detail which counts.

Family help and early intervention

The idea of new and innovative interventions and new approaches to funding support are all seen as positive. Emphasis on support for children to stay in their own families is welcome. The proposals around family kinship care are really positive.

“The family support proposals are absolutely the right way to go overall.”

“Rethinking those bits of the system which are not about child protection is good. To bring together assessments and early help is positive and to be able to be more flexible in that space is what is needed - there's a lot to like about what that might lead to.”

But Directors are concerned about how quickly change will happen and about cross government commitment to driving new ways of working.

“What is described about family support and the model proposed I really like. But the timeframe is too distant. We have a problem now.”

“If we can get into a position where we are not dependent upon short-term funding to support early help that will be good. To join up family help thinking and funding across government would be really helpful. It makes sense to get it all in one place and have a joined-up strategy.”

There is a strong consensus regionally and nationally that we do need to understand how the different approach to family help can rebalance the system. New ways of working need to be capable of working in a wide range of settings and it's not clear how this will be tested in a way which is sensitive to the different challenges of different geographies. North East Directors are not sure that policy makers fully understand regional and place-based relationships with partners.

“The approach reflects well what we're doing here: adopting a strengthening families and relational practice working with families and other partners to find solutions within family networks and social context.”

“The proposals don't yet fully reflect the broad support and the role of partners. I would've liked to have seen a requirement to cooperate. We need the full commitment and engagement of partners, particularly from adult services and health, but from others too. This is critical.”

Models

Directors welcome the focus on family networks and feel that the thinking is good. Several places in the North East use 'family group conferencing' and others use 'signs of safety' to ensure wider support with families, from family and community networks, making it a rule that the child has an identified network of support. Directors feel strongly that it shouldn't be mandated that family group conferences are the only way to achieve stronger partnership with families.



DfE have been overly prescriptive when allocating innovation funding in the past, restricting the models which can be used. Directors also value the family drugs and alcohol courts approach which has been very positive and makes a real difference. They would want to see that incorporated into ways of working in future.

- “With recent innovation funding you couldn't use an early intervention approach unless it appeared on the DfE website. We are missing a trick by being too restrictive.”
- “There's a lot to be said for joining up intensive early helping and children in need services. Several years ago, I did exactly that as part of the DfE innovation program. But we should recognise that this is a really radical change. On paper why wouldn't you? But let's not underestimate the size and scale of the task.”

Directors see joining up of family help as very positive. But don't necessarily see a social worker as necessary to lead early help arrangements.

- “A social worker might sometimes be needed, but not always. If this were implemented it would divert social workers away from statutory work which may create capacity problems.”
- “The precursor practice question needs to be how we effectively engage families so that in future they seek support ahead of things going wrong.”

Funding

Directors recognise that there is an obvious challenge about how new ways of working are to be funded and the legacy of loss of investment and capacity during the period of austerity should not be underestimated.

- “It's not popular to say so, but I do remember that this is the sort of stuff we were doing before 2010.”
- “In 2010 I was leading a multi-agency service which had CAMHS, the police, housing et cetera et cetera. We have lost 13 years of impact by this having been dismantled due to austerity.”
- “The baseline assumption is that there is a reasonable level of early help service which can be incorporated into this new model - the reality is that, however hard local authorities have tried to protect services in recent years, they have all seen a significant reduction. So, funding will be needed.”

Directors in the North East with recent experience of introducing earlier help also warn that there are other consequences of changed ways of working and that new challenges and demands continue to emerge, reinforcing the need for fresh approaches.

- “When we put in place earlier help, we know that you spent the first few years sweeping up unidentified need. We need to understand this is complicated.”
- “We are involved in the 'risk outside of the home pathway planning' pilot and this is really needed. Exploitation is an escalating concern. We are also part of the violent crime reduction programme, and this really supports changing the approach.”



Kinship care

Directors welcome the kinship care proposals as really positive but warn there is a minefield around funding the changes needed. A national approach to financial support for kinship carers would be very helpful, but there is still a lack of knowledge about wider implications. For example, uplifting the foster carer allowances to a minimum amount is to be mandated, but with uncertain funding and the wider impact of the knock-on with special guardianship allowances et cetera is not understood.

- “Anything that we can do to help kinship carers, without them having to jump through the hoops of formal fostering assessment, will be good. We certainly need to help them financially too.”
- “Defining kinship care and pulling things together all into one place will be helpful. But the expectation in the care review that there will be no financial implications is simply wrong. Regularising the allowances for kinship carers creates a blank cheque to be paid for by local authorities - this has not been properly understood.”

Special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)

Directors recognise that it is important that alternative provision and SEND developments are linked really closely to family support and embedded in all of our work. They are concerned that education reform is not yet supporting inclusion and current Ofsted inspections do not yet challenge headteachers in schools where children are not fully integrated.

The 2014 reforms put power in the hands of parents who are driving the system and driving up spend, which has been compounded by Covid. There is still a mismatch between what the system promises to deliver and the expectations of parents.

- “We’re getting back on an even keel following a SEND action plan - all this means is that you’ve improved a bit on the things that Ofsted said needed to improve - outside the Town Hall you’ve still got parents protesting because they’re not getting what they feel they need.”



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Child protection and partnership working

Directors want to see greater integration not just multidisciplinary team working. It's still too easy for partners to step away.

Working Together is due for a refresh especially in relation to risks to young people outside of the home and the role of education, which needs to be strengthened. Government must proscribe expectations for local school systems' engagement with and accountability to safeguarding partnerships.

- “I'm concerned that we are seeing more children in care being denied places in schools. Academies, particularly those who have joined wider trusts, are operating a rigid approach to challenging behaviour in schools, and just won't take them.”

Directors describe that in some cases safeguarding partnerships have become talking shops. It is important that the strategic system leadership role of safeguarding partnerships is not confused with local arrangements for multi-agency operational delivery through partnership working. The update of Working Together guidance should make this clear.

- “Multidisciplinary working gets people around the table but doesn't get people working together. We need a different approach, and the review missed that opportunity.”

It will always be the case that partner agencies face their own challenges, for example funding, staffing and inspection requirements. Strong partnerships need to address this challenge but require backing from a coherent set of national expectations across the system set out by government.

- “All partner agencies are struggling to recruit staff, and this is leading to people retrenching into their core roles - this means that they hold back from being flexible and the LA is left holding the virtual or actual baby.”
- “We're still chipping away the same issues with the police. Even where the inspection rating is fine they pitch their response to get 'good' from the regulator, but it's not always what we need across the system.”

Specialist child protection social workers

Directors do not support the idea that family help and child protection are distinct and different things as presented in the Review and government proposals. They believe that this ignores good practice which has developed over many years as a profession, which sees child protection work as a whole continuum. Directors know that this approach can work really well. Directors are unconvinced by much of what is proposed for the specialist child protection role. They feel it raises issues and risks which need to be carefully thought through and believe the proposals to be ill-judged.

- “I'm concerned about what I see is the nonsense of proposals around expert child protection social workers and specialist multi-agency child protection teams. I've not worked anywhere where that is needed or necessary.”



- “The review and proposals talk about child protection work as if it is ‘incident led’, but most of the time we’re concerned about neglect over a longer period of time - so assumptions don’t line up with reality. This new CP worker would not have built a relationship and would not have seen a progression of the issues of concern within a family.”
- “And if we believe that the whole approach is about the quality of relationships, the idea that you would introduce somebody new, who hadn’t got a prior relationship with the family, at a point of crisis, seems really at odds with this.”
- “What bothers me is that these proposals almost suggest that social workers are not already child protection specialists, where as in reality, they are.”
- “I’m also concerned about burnout. Who would want to do solely intensive child protection intervention and for how long?”

Health

Children should be made a higher priority in the health system. Ministers must collaborate across government to make this happen.

Directors are concerned that children and young people are still not a priority on the Integrated Care Board agendas. They are also concerned that creation of the Integrated Care Systems is leading to yet another health reorganisation and that priorities will again shift in the newly configured arrangements. This will lead to inertia for a period of time, at exactly the point when this is most damaging.

Directors feel that the DCS statutory accountability should underpin a new formal role in Integrated Care Board governance to deliver for the health needs of children in their local population, with pooling of resources for improvement, similar to the Better Care fund in adult services.

Mental health is the top priority as health services continue to fall short on the promised delivery. Mental health targets don’t get escalated in the same way for not being met as other targets for waiting times.

- “There is a long-term trend of universal mental health services and the resources to provide preventive support just not being sufficient. But it’s not the top of the list for health agencies.”
- “Whenever you go to the health and well-being board or select committee you find that, despite the national headlines of rising demand and rising waiting times, the health providers and commissioners are playing that down. I want them to shout it from the rooftops and that isn’t happening.”
- “And then there’s the behaviour of provider organisations. A case in point. I had a young person who the hospital was pushing to discharge. We had the resource but couldn’t find an appropriate placement. A couple of days later the hospital came forward saying they had found a placement at £30,000 per week because of a specialist mental health nurse team being in place. And yet two days earlier they had been saying that we could take that young person and put them into an ordinary care placement. Explain that to me!”



Strong government intervention in the care market is needed to set rules and make the system sustainable.

This must include measures to cap costs.

Placements and regional care cooperatives

Directors feel strongly that there has to be a different way of managing the private sector market and this has to be tied into the way that regulation works.

But Directors do not see regional care collaboratives as the solution to fixing a broken care market. There seems to be a reliance on the idea that regional commissioning collaboratives will be able to shape the marketplace which Directors don't think they would. They also see problems which sit with providers and what is proposed doesn't address that.

Strong government intervention in the care market is needed to set rules and make the system sustainable. This must include measures to cap costs. Investment in creating more not-for-profit capacity should be incentivised to rebalance the market.

Directors think policy makers need to paint a picture of how what is proposed would be different, given what is already known about the problems of creating new provision and the stranglehold that providers have over local authority costs.

- “The care market issue is complex and not amenable to resolution by a simple solution. The challenges are well described in the review, but the proposals have come up with a ‘simple but wrong’ solution.”
- “I’m not sure I have anything helpful to say about Care Cooperatives. When I read the proposals I can’t for the life of me see what difference it will make to placement sufficiency.”
- “Care should not be for profit - we should stop profit-making in this sphere.”
- “We’re over a barrel and can be charged the earth.”

Directors do agree that some developments regionally will help. They see, and already benefit from, collaboration and working at scale. They propose that a potential regional commissioning collaborative model should be tested to address the very pressing lack of placements for children with complex needs, invariably with a mental health focus, with funding pooled with health and youth justice.

But Directors do not see regional commissioning as a panacea.

- “We are small and trade upon our reputation to get good placements. Regional arrangements could take that away from us. We have reasonable sufficiency and therefore I’m usually looking outside only for the most complex placements, as providers will pick the easier placements. It’s not in the interests of my small authority to get into regional arrangements, it will be harder for me to get the complex placements that I need.”

Government responsibilities

Directors welcome the strong approach that government is taking to the difficulties of agency social work by looking at national rules and national intervention and see this approach as equally applicable to the placements market. They also see a parallel with adult services where massive attention is going to the fair costs of care and government leadership is vital.

“More of the same is not going to bring about the change that we need. We need a change in national rules. Just collaborating better won't address the issues we face. We need a fundamental change to the market, and we haven't got that from this review.”

“Government could help more but have shown no motivation to do so.”

Directors feel there is missed opportunity to bring in controls around the providers. Government must act to cap costs. It appears the providers are not being required to make any change in terms of profit and there are big issues about how behaviour is managed by many providers, with short notice being given to remove children and a propensity to call the police.

Whilst several Authorities in the North East are developing more local children's homes, Directors would welcome further government incentives to create not-for-profit capacity to rebalance the market.

“We're opening our own provision because market forces have moved around - whilst finance directors were saying you've got to outsource provision because it's cheaper, it's now the other way around.”

Directors are also concerned about the intention to commission an external organisation to assist local authorities with forecasting, procurement, market shaping and sufficiency planning. They don't think that this expertise sits anywhere apart from in local authorities themselves, who should be resourced to do that development work. It would make sense to do this on a regional basis.

Complex needs

Directors know that there are not sufficient placements, but what's worrying them more now is the risks that they are carrying in unregistered and unregulated bespoke placements. All are aiming to have no children in these settings but it's just not deliverable. A safe and sensible 'bridge' is needed until we can create the right capacity in the system.

Directors increasingly find themselves looking for solo placements where children have highly complex mental health needs or adolescents involved in serious criminality, who are also victims. It must be appreciated that tackling insufficiency of placements is not just about how we commission but also about what we seek to commission.

“If the government is serious they need to give us more than just talking about love.”

“We need to not miss the link to tier 4 mental health and those with complex needs. Many of our difficult to find placements are about stepping down from tier 4 mental health provision or have needs around exploitation, criminality, and serious violence.”

“I think we've missed an opportunity around placement sufficiency to take a more joined up approach with health, especially in relation to children with mental health needs.”



- “I currently have four young people I am especially worried about: one is in a placement which is not going well and in danger breaking down; one is in hospital about to be discharged; one is in unregulated provision we have created at the cost of £40,000 per week; and the fourth is in an unregistered placement costing us £15,000 per week. All of these are young men who have been detained under the mental health act and when discharged there is nowhere for them to go.”

Fostering

Directors agree that developing better fostering sufficiency is a good idea. The North East authorities are leading the fostering Pathfinder work which is very positive. They are also clear that there are hazards to be avoided in regional arrangements. Having three regional adoption agencies in the North East has cost more and has not generated significantly more capacity.

- “We host the RAA for five local authorities and after four years we are getting there. But it's hard and time-consuming and I'm not sure this approach transfers easily into other areas of practice.”
- “Only the DFE think the regional adoption agencies have been wholly positive.”

The issues for individual authorities entering collaborative arrangements are unique. For each place the concerns are different.

- “We pay a high rate to our foster carers in my local authority. Would a regional approach raise costs for others? Or would it mean us paying less and losing foster carers?”
- “We pay towards the bottom end of the fee range and I'm worried that a regional approach will cost us more money.”

Regulation

Ofsted has a positive role to play developing the additional capacity that is needed to better meet the needs of children. The key challenge is lack of provision of all types. Registration of new provision is still very slow, hampering the ability to meet children's needs.

There is no dispute about the need for careful regulation, but the impact on the wider system, including supply of placements is not yet fully recognised. Directors would like a review of the children's regulatory system in the light of more flexible working with families and to encourage both better supply and diversity of care settings for children.

- “In the pandemic we were able to get new provision registered in 10 weeks, which shows it can be done.”
- “We don't need a stronger version of what we've already got. We need to change the way that the regulations are delivered. The approach needs to be more sophisticated with children at the heart.”

Consistency in Ofsted is still an issue. Individual inspectors' and regional link inspectors' attitudes vary. Directors want to work with Ofsted to find the best way to support residential units to do what's best for children.

- “Residential homes are often constrained in working creatively by the straitjacket of regulation and the inflexibility of local Ofsted inspectors.”
- “The inspection regime drives us to be too quick to remove children if we can't stabilise their behaviour. If they're running away, we're often removing them and placing them further away, which only makes it worse. There has to be another way.”



Directors find much to welcome in the proposals about workforce and how to stabilise and support recruitment and retention.

Together with the proposals around agency arrangements there is the potential to make a real difference.

Workforce

Directors find much to welcome in the proposals about workforce and how to stabilise and support recruitment and retention. Together with the proposals around agency arrangements there is the potential to make a real difference. They see this as a really good example of where government have been prepared to step into a space and genuinely support local authorities.

- “This was a problem we weren't able to solve ourselves and it's very welcome that government are coming, bringing their bigger stick. This approach will test our appetite to be able to work together to deliver, but my sense is that everyone is up for that.”

Directors want to see greater attention to the development of the wider children's social care workforce, overseen by a national body to ensure skills development and sufficiency. Development of a career framework for social workers is positive and should be supported by attention to attracting more people to the profession.

Directors recognise they will have to play their part to address workforce shortages as well.

- “What are the alternatives for a struggling authority who is desperate for staff and what do we do? It won't be resolved by these changes alone; it will be resolved by how we can all rally round and change the way that we behave in the face of such challenges.”
- “We need to find ways of managing the risk for local authorities in working differently whilst helping families differently too. This requires confident leadership and therefore the workforce dimension is hugely significant.”

Agency social work

Directors think the agency proposals are a helpful way forward and are a pressing priority. In the region there is a memorandum of understanding on the use of agency workers, but these arrangements are under pressure. National direction is needed and would be welcome in relation to the use of project/managed teams. The proposals will stop people bouncing from post to post.

- “I like the proposals around the agency social workers - there is a vigour, there is grip. If these proposals are implemented it will be a good thing for the profession.”
- “I am concerned about managed teams. The agency agreed that they wouldn't recruit our staff, but they have broken that agreement creating instability across the system. There is a missed opportunity to regulate the provider in the agency market.”

The North East region has seen what happens when authorities are under pressure and even where memorandums of understanding are in place, authorities have to operate outside of this if they are desperate. Directors recognise the responsibility to wrap around authorities who are really struggling with workforce challenges.

Directors also recognise that it's not as straightforward as capping what is paid.

- “Authorities are not all on an even pitch, so there can't be a formula which means that everybody gets paid the same, it's not that simple. We should be paying for skills and paying for experience. Agencies are often keeping skilled workers for those who pay the most and sending less experienced people to places who don't pay as well.”

“Yesterday I was contacted by an agency who told me that the hourly rate is £49 in Manchester, £47 in Cumbria and we are paying £36. So, we’re not getting the quality of staff.”

“Why would you come and work in an ‘inadequate’ local authority, when you can go and work in an easier context in a ‘good’ authority down the road.”

Directors know that agency work is here to stay, and some social workers will choose to work that way because of the flexibility. However, they have some concerns about newly qualified social workers moving straight to agency work.

“I have a really excellent social worker who chooses to work all winter, because she wants to travel in the summer. It’s a lifestyle choice. It doesn’t mean that she’s not committed, she’s just balancing her life differently.”

“I get it that young people want career freedom and therefore work for an agency for a few years but the idea that newly qualified social workers don’t spend time learning their trade in councils is unacceptable.”

Skill mix

More attention is needed to develop a wider range of social care roles. A national mechanism is needed to oversee coherent development of the wider workforce and social work, with oversight of skills and sufficiency.

Directors support the idea of a knowledge and skills statement for family support and having a wider range of workers holding family support cases. To develop more diverse roles, better clarity with regulators is needed, with one director who previously used social workers as case managers (similar to adult services) being criticised by Ofsted for doing so.

“Early on in my new role we increased the number of family support workers, replacing long-standing social work vacancies. We’ve done this at scale creating 19 new child and family workers and we’re just starting to see the fruits of that investment.”

“I agree that recruitment and retention of social work staff should be addressed, but for me it’s not just finding sufficient qualified social workers that’s the issue - it’s the skill mix in the wider workforce.”

In relation to the knowledge and skills statement for family support workers, directors agree that this will help to professionalise their work. There are often really skilled people who would benefit from such an approach. But there are also people who do a really good job who do not have basic English and maths qualifications. Some of the older staff don’t want to go back to gaining basic qualifications. We need to use our workforce creatively, valuing peoples’ experience and skills and validating those.

“We need to build career development wherever people want to go professionally - the sole end should not just be becoming a child protection specialist social worker. We should also operate in a way which values quality and skills, not ‘time served’.”

Directors see great value in the role of schools and believe that greater investment in schools-based family support would pay dividends.

“But social workers in schools is an oversimplistic approach - many families need more practical support - the family partner model is a practical approach to this and we should support schools in developing what is needed locally.”

Directors are pleased to see that Social Work England will be picking up the registration of residential managers. They see this as strengthening arrangements which will benefit children.

Social workers

Directors welcome moves to increase social work training capacity and in particular the proposed increase in apprenticeships. Experience in the North East region is that training by this route builds upon the loyalty of candidates, retaining them in the workforce thereby contributing to stability. Greater numbers of apprenticeships should be created together with the additional practice educators needed to guide that development.

“My plan is to work with local universities and up the number of apprenticeships. We will use every channel that's available but we need more options now.”

Directors welcome the proposals to raise the profile of the social work profession and enhance career opportunities. Ideas about how to support newly qualified social workers are all very good. Directors would like to see a two-year ASYE made mandatory.

The idea of a framework, or 'career ladder', is attractive and the opportunity to develop a specialism after two years is very positive. There are reservations about attaching too much focus to child protection as a specialism and concern to avoid creating a two-tier profession with child protection seen as elite. A better title for the framework could be found.

“I like the idea of an early career framework, but not the title, which could undermine status.”

“The idea of a couple of years of generic development followed by many routes to develop specialisms in lots of different areas is a good one.”

“We also need a balanced approach across the system. I don't want one section of the workforce to feel highly professionalised and another left behind.”

Social worker context

Directors feel that recruitment support for children's social care is overdue. There is an interesting comparison across sectors: the resource put into supporting recruitment of teachers and care workers nationally is noticeable. What are we doing about children's social care? The vilification of social workers on the back of difficult cases is a problem, and the impact of Ofsted reports and government intervention is also a major factor. Government can and should positively promote children's social care work and tackle public prejudice.

“We need people to want to be social workers and see this as a valuable career opportunity. In the 25 years I was teaching I don't think I ever had a young person say to me I want to be a social worker. I was principal of an FE college where lots of people were doing health and social care, but very few moved onto social work qualifications. We need to change that.”

Directors also recognise the need to support the local workforce who are dealing with very challenging and traumatic situations. Developing trauma informed practice also involves getting trauma informed support for social workers and multidisciplinary teams.

Framework and performance

Directors agree with the idea of a national framework and that the old set of indicators need updating.

- “There is a radical vision around family help, but the performance dashboard is populated with old standard children in need and child protection metrics. There are couple of proposals around education, but nothing at all about the health contribution which might hold partners to account. This is an opportunity to be grasped.”

Improvement support

Directors really value the RIAs (Regional Innovation and Improvement Alliances) and find their analysis of performance information informative. But improvement support requires a reset. The new proposals for Regional Improvement Commissioners need to be much better understood and must build upon the RIA arrangements. Relationships with DfE Regional Directors will need to be clarified. A regional assurance-based model should be developed building on the RIAs.

- “Strikes me that we have macro level arrangements and micro level arrangements (peer support and performance sharing) in place, but the bit in the middle is not worked through. If you have a struggling place, what can you do which would be different?”

A key issue for directors is how best to support struggling authorities. At present Sector Led Improvement Partners (SLIPs) are the only real vehicle. Directors would like to ‘re-strike’ a conversation with DfE, feeling that there needs to be a different approach.

- “In my view the government intervention model is a busted flush. DfE should be brokering support much more rapidly - it takes too long between recognising difficulty and mobilising support. To be fair it's hard: a couple of places have dedicated capacity but for most local authority releasing their expertise is really difficult to do.”

Political and corporate support is key to success, with relationships with chief executives and lead members critical. For Local Authorities under strain relationships can struggle or even break down. This is profoundly difficult, strikes at the heart of local government accountability and is not that unusual. This is an area in which there need to be some really honest conversations and enhancing support at national level would be helpful.

A potential model

Directors see the first building block as having a set of assurance rather than performance reporting arrangements. The children's social care system is not a factory and is not only driven by the things that are easily measured.

The proposed role of the Regional Improvement Commissioners needs to be steeped in practice. Directors envisage a model where a Regional Assurance Alliance identifies the top issues across the region and “gets under the bonnet” of those issues with an approach across the region. They can see potential for progress through those honest conversations.

- “It’s important to recognise that this relies on a high degree of maturity, trust and confidence to implement, and on relationships and experience, not just having the right systems. It’s a relation approach to building an assurance framework.”
- “I see parallels from the education sphere - the London Challenge and the equivalent in the North East made significant investment and got a grip on things across the region. Really targeted improvement across the region has some merit.”

Proposed framework and data

Directors agree that the pillars and principles reflect well what we’re all here to do, and there’s a lot to like about what is set out as the purpose of the system. The North East region have looked at their performance management system and how this maps across to the proposed framework for evaluation and see the framework as very constructive. They welcome the aim to measure important things in a way which enables accountability and comparisons between different places and different approaches.

- “The vision in the government response and the six pillars set out what it should all be about. The ambition for children hasn’t been stated in that way for a while.”
- “We’ve just looked at the regional data set reported to DfE and there has to be a better dataset than the one we are all using.”
- “It’s never unhelpful to have clear expectations. We need to ensure that they’re not over prescriptive and don’t unintentionally squeeze out innovation.”

Directors recognise how difficult it can be to truly measure outcomes. The hazard is measuring what you can easily count. What’s proposed still seems geography blind - a national set of indicators ignoring context is problematic. They also urge caution in setting aside existing tools.

- “LAIT is a good tool; you can see how data is used to help us - I’m worried that this could be set aside without thinking through a replacement.”
- “There seems to be a heavy emphasis on data. Don’t get me wrong, we are forensic looking at activity and outcome data. But DfE have all the data - what difference does it make?”

There is concern that the framework is too social care focussed and does not yet reflect the complexity of partnership working. There is also a danger that focusing on children’s social care will create a parallel system to Ofsted. It’s easy for data to become for its own sake and not for improving outcomes for children.

- “We need to understand what data is telling us about how things are working and have found the right way of capturing that.”



Implementation

Directors are very concerned about the way in which investment is proposed, perpetuating short-term initiative-based grants, which has been an unhelpful model to support innovation. They find other government departments are more constructive, allocating funds to every local authority for a particular purpose, with accountability built in.

“How are the pilot projects/schemes/pathfinders going to work? What will they look like? Will they be relevant for those facing the biggest challenges? Who and how will they be chosen? What works in one place doesn't necessarily fit with the demographics and challenges of another.”

“The approach of using Pathfinders isn't going to help me – we are too small to qualify to be a Pathfinder authority and therefore will not get access to any of that funding early on. This means we will have to wait until the end of the queue.”

Directors understand the political pressure to show what works quickly. The danger is that we then only do the things that can evidence impact. Directors welcome the national conversation about this complexity and wish to engage in a collaborative approach.

“It's important that we don't just talk about deficit. We are walking a tight rope: tending to only talk to the DfE about things which are challenges, and they in turn are generally raising problems with us. We all need to be better at sharing good practice and best practice every day.”

Directors appreciate that bringing about an innovation programme across the system at the same time as a complex improvement programme is hugely challenging. Care is needed about the amount of change which can be managed at the same time and vigilance exercised to spot unintended consequences.

“If we undertake innovation work does that amplify existing rifts and challenges? We need to be realistic and honest about that.”

“It's very complicated, for example, I see that the agency proposals, which are really welcome, could put some local authorities in real peril.”

Directors have real concerns about the programme being in 'testing mode' and see this as highly problematic. They feel we ought to be able to differentiate the need to test difficult, complex, or controversial proposals where we really need to understand better, from areas where there is already strong evidence and consensus. There is real concern that there is a long period for those not directly involved in pilots to stay engaged with this agenda.

“For me, family support could be implemented at a much faster pace because we already know what works.”

The MacAlister review had evidence from 10 design areas, and we hoped that our close engagement and the detailed evidence we provided would have given the confidence to move forward much more quickly.”

“How much evidence do you need before you can commit to supporting different ways of working?”

Directors have seen a pattern of a small number of local authorities being given large amounts of money to test new ways of working in recent years - some of these local authorities have become experts, inadvertently it's de-skilling others.

“We need a mechanism to turn what is learned into real and beneficial change for everyone - there needs to be a coherent set of answers across the whole system.”

“It will take too long to generate change we are looking for, for the whole of the country.”

Directors are conscious that there are also real risks with trying to implement system changes when individual authorities will continue to be destabilised by adverse inspection outcomes and the need for intervention. Reforming the system against this kind of backdrop is very challenging and the region will not be immune.

