

Executive Summary

This moment is a once in a generation opportunity to reset children's social care. What we need is a system that provides intensive help to families in crisis, acts decisively in response to abuse, unlocks the potential of wider family networks to raise children, puts lifelong loving relationships at the heart of the care system and lays the foundations for a good life for those who have been in care. What we have currently is a system increasingly skewed to crisis intervention, with outcomes for children that continue to be unacceptably poor and costs that continue to rise. For these reasons, a radical reset is now unavoidable.

Achieving this reset starts with recognising that it is loving relationships that hold the solutions for children and families overcoming adversity. While relationships are rich and organic, children's social care can be rigid and linear. Rather than drawing on and supporting family and community, the system too often tries to replace organic bonds and relationships with professionals and services.

Without a dramatic whole system reset, outcomes for children and families will remain stubbornly poor and by this time next decade there will be approaching 100,000 children in care (up from 80,000 today) and a flawed system will cost over £15 billion per year (up from £10 billion now).¹ Together, the changes we recommend will shift these trends and would mean 30,000 more children living safely and thriving with their families by 2032 compared to the current trajectory.²

A revolution in Family Help

For families who need help, there must be a fundamental shift in the children's social care response, so that they receive more responsive, respectful, and effective support. To reduce the number of handovers between services, we recommend introducing one category of "Family Help" to replace "targeted early help" and "child in need" work, providing families with much higher levels of meaningful support. This new service would be delivered by multidisciplinary teams made up of professionals such as family support workers, domestic abuse workers and mental health practitioners - who, alongside social workers, would provide support and cut down on referring families onto other services. These Family Help Teams would be based in community settings, like schools and family hubs, that children and families know and trust, and the service they offer will be tailored to meet neighbourhood needs based on a robust needs assessment and feedback from the families.

To achieve this vision, a temporary injection of roughly £2 billion is needed over the next five years, targeting about half a million children who require extra support.³ By 2030, this will have

1 These costs approximate children's social care spend by local authorities. There is no agreed definition of children's social care spend, but the aggregate presented here includes all those children and young people's services lines from the Section 251 return except: 3.4.5 Universal family support, 3.5.1 Universal services for young people, 3.0.1 Spend on individual Sure Start Children's Centres, 3.0.2 Spend for services delivered through Sure Start Children's Centres, 3.0.3 Spend on management costs relating to Sure Start Children's Centres, 3.0.4 Other spend on children under 5, and 3.6.1 Youth justice.

2 See Chapter Nine Figure 3 for more details of our cost benefit analysis of our recommendations.

3 Throughout the report, we refer to the 'next 5 years'. This means the 5 years ending at the end of financial year 2026-27.



achieved a complete rebalancing of spending within the system so that over £1 billion more every year is spent on Family Help.⁴ After the five year reform programme, there should be a dedicated ring-fenced grant to ensure this extra spending continues to be prioritised in the long term. To increase the quality and consistency of help, funding should be accompanied by a clear national definition of eligibility for support and the outcomes Family Help should achieve, alongside a focus on the use of the best evidenced interventions to realise these outcomes.

A just and decisive child protection system

Whilst the risk of harm to children cannot be eliminated, the system of child protection can and must do better for children. The wider system improvements we recommend will all help to do this - including a more generous multidisciplinary help offer, improved workforce knowledge and skills, more decisive intervention for inadequate and drifting authorities, and strengthened multi-agency arrangements.

Where concerns about significant harm of a child emerge, an 'Expert Child Protection Practitioner', who is an experienced social worker, should co-work alongside the Family Help Team with responsibility for making key decisions. This co-working will provide an expert second perspective and remove the need for break points and handovers. Expert Practitioners will have demonstrated their knowledge and skills through time in practice, and in the future by completing a five year Early Career Framework. There will be clearer expectations on multi-agency capabilities for child protection so that different professionals, including child protection paediatricians and specialist police officers, inform decisions. Information sharing should be strengthened through a five year challenge to address cultural barriers, clarify legislation and guidance, and use technology to achieve frictionless sharing of information.

A more tailored and coherent response is needed to harms outside of the home, like county lines, criminal or sexual exploitation or abuse between peers. We recommend a bespoke child protection pathway – through a Child Community Safety Plan – so that the police, social care and others can provide a robust child protection response.

To boost parental engagement where there are serious concerns, parents should have representation and support to help navigate the child protection process. To enable learning, there should be more transparency about decisions made and outcomes of children in the family courts.

Unlocking the potential of family networks

There are already thousands of grandparents, aunts, uncles, brothers and sisters who care for their family members. However, this group of carers are a silent and unheard majority in the children's social care system and they need far greater recognition, and support.

Before decisions are made which place children into the care system, more must be done to bring wider family members and friends into decision making. This should start with a high quality family group decision making process that invites families to come up with a family led plan to care for the child or children. In some cases, this should lead to a "Family Network Plan", where a local authority can fund and support family members to care for the child.

4 See the 'A revolution in Family Help' recommendation annex

The dysfunction of the current system means that many relatives are forced to become foster carers in order for them to receive financial support to look after their kin. Special guardians and kinship carers with a Child Arrangement Order should receive a new statutory financial allowance, legal aid and statutory kinship leave. A wider set of informal kinship carers should get a comprehensive support package.

Fixing the broken care market and giving children a voice

When finding a home for a child in care, our obsession must be putting relationships around them that are loving and lasting. Providing care for children should not be based on profit. The current system is a very long way from these principles and ambitions being realised.

Local authorities need help to take back control of this system through establishing new Regional Care Cooperatives (RCCs). They will take on responsibility for the creation and running of all new public sector fostering, residential and secure care in a region, as well as commissioning all not-for-profit and private sector provided care for children as necessary. The scale and specialist capabilities of RCCs will address the current weaknesses in the system and establish organisations able to transform the care system for the future. Local authorities will have direct involvement in the running of RCCs but to work they must be mandated rather than voluntary arrangements. Children will continue to be in the care of local authorities.

There are many children living in children's homes today who would be better suited to living in a family environment with a foster carer if we had enough foster carers in the right places, with the right parenting skills to meet the varying and complex needs of children. This will require a "new deal" with foster carers. We must give foster carers the support networks and training needed to provide the best care for children, and then have greater trust in foster carers making the day to day decisions which affect children's lives. In parallel, we are calling upon government to immediately launch a new national foster carer recruitment programme, to approve 9,000 new foster carers over three years so that children in care can live in family environments.⁵ The overwhelming public response to the Homes for Ukraine programme is a signal of how willing people are to open their hearts and homes to others.

It is paramount that children have a powerful voice in the decisions that affect them. Children in care currently have a plethora of different professionals in their lives, but too few adults who are unequivocally on their side and able to amplify their voice. This system should be simplified by replacing a number of existing roles with truly independent advocacy for children that is opt-out, rather than opt-in.

Five 'missions' for care experienced people

The disadvantage faced by the care experienced community should be the civil rights issue of our time. Children in care are powerless, are often invisible and they face some of the greatest inequalities that exist in England today. In spite of these injustices so many care experienced people go on to run businesses, start families, earn doctorates, produce drama, write poetry, become government ministers and contribute to the world in countless ways.

5 See the 'New Deal on Fostering' recommendation annex for more details on our cost benefit analysis of this recommendation.



Five ambitious missions are needed so that care experienced people secure: loving relationships; quality education; a decent home; fulfilling work and good health as the foundations for a good life. Central government and local authorities, employers, the NHS, schools, colleges and universities must step up to secure these foundations for all care experienced people. This will require a wider range of organisations to act as corporate parents for looked after children, and the UK should be the first country in the world to recognise the care experience as a protected characteristic.

Realising the potential of the workforce

The package of recommendations in this report create a radically new offer for social workers. As first priority, the professional development we offer social workers should be vastly improved with training and development which provides progression through a five year Early Career Framework linked to national pay scales. This new framework will provide a desirable career pathway to remain in practice, specialise and be rewarded through higher pay that reflects expertise.

Second, we must identify and remove the barriers which needlessly divert social workers from spending time with children and families. This needs to include action on improving case management systems, reducing repetitive administrative tasks which do not add value and embedding multidisciplinary teams at the heart of local communities who can deliver, not just commission, the help that is needed. Just as senior doctors and nurses work directly with patients, social work managers, leaders and academics should be required to continue working directly with children and families so that the whole system is rooted in the realities of practice. Finally, we need to reduce the use of agency social work, which is costly and works against providing stable professional relationships for children and families, by developing new rules and regional staff banks. Taken together, this will mean social workers work with a smaller number of children and families, with more knowledge and skill, and with more available time and resources to do intensive life changing work for children families.

Finally, we should not forget the importance of a wider workforce that supports children and families and includes, but is not limited to, family support workers and children's home staff. Action is needed to improve the knowledge and skill of these crucial workforces so that they can provide better help and care for children and families - and as a first step this should include a Knowledge and Skills Statement for family support workers, a leadership programme and professional registration for children's home managers.

A system that is relentlessly focused on children and families

There is currently a lack of national direction about the purpose of children's social care and national government involvement is uneven. A National Children's Social Care Framework is needed to set the direction and purpose for the system, supported by meaningful indicators that bring transparency and learning. The government should appoint a National Practice Group, to build practice guides that would set out the best known ways of achieving the objectives set by the National Framework.

Multi-agency safeguarding arrangements should be clarified to put beyond doubt their strategic role, supported by improved accountability, learning and transparency. In too many

places the contribution and voice of education is missing from partnership arrangements, and so schools should be included as a statutory safeguarding partner.

The government should update the funding formula for children's social care to better direct resources to where they are most needed. Inspection should be aligned to take a more rounded understanding of "being child focused" and to better reflect what matters most to children and families, alongside greater transparency about how judgements are made. Government should intervene more decisively in inadequate and drifting authorities, with permanent Regional Improvement Commissioners to oversee progress across regions. Green shoots of good work on data and technology should be mainstreamed through a National Data and Technology Taskforce, which would support three priority actions - drastically reducing social worker time spent recording cases; enabling frictionless sharing of information; and improving data collection and its use in informing decisions.

Implementation

All of this should be delivered at pace and with determination through a single five year reform programme. A Reform Board should be established to drive this programme, includes people with lived experience of children's social care. It should report openly on progress quarterly and the government senior official leading the programme must be given the explicit delegation and backing to accelerate through processes and controls that would jeopardise delivery. The Secretary of State for Education should be responsible for holding other government departments to account and should report annually to parliament on progress.

There is a great deal of implementation that can be initiated by the government now, ahead of new investment.⁶ However, achieving this whole system reform programme will require £2.6 billion of new spending over four years, comprising £46 million in year one, £987 million in year two, £1.257 billion in year three and £233 million in year four.⁷ Government may well provide details of different or better ways to achieve the same ambitions and aims in their response to this review, but the costs of inaction are too high. The time for a reset is now, and there is not a moment to lose.

6 An implementation plan has been included at Chapter Nine, which sets out a phased approach to delivering the package of reform in this report.

7 Our costings have been modelled on the basis that year one corresponds to financial year 2023/24.

