



ALL PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP FOR  
**CHILDREN**

# No Good Options

Report of the Inquiry into Children's Social Care in England



Executive Summary and Recommendations

March 2017



National Children's  
Bureau

# Executive Summary

Over the past five years, demand for children's social services has increased, while local authorities' overall spending power has decreased. There is also evidence that the nature of need has shifted, with much greater focus on issues such as radicalisation and child sexual exploitation.

This Inquiry has brought together evidence about the current resourcing of children's social services and changes in the nature and level of demand, to improve our understanding of the challenges facing under-performing children's services, and how to address them.

The Inquiry has identified key areas in which improvement is essential, if children's services are to reach all children and young people in need of support.

## **(i) A system struggling to meet demand**

Local authorities are too often failing to reach children and families who need help, whether through early intervention services, statutory support for 'children in need', or statutory support for children in care.

The Inquiry heard repeatedly that increasing resource is being directed towards children who have already suffered abuse or neglect, or those at high risk of harm. Correspondingly, fewer resources are allocated for early intervention and prevention, including support for families. The result is a shift towards late intervention, where needs have often escalated significantly before any support is put in place. This often results in more children being taken into care, and ultimately in poorer outcomes for children and families.

Strain on resource is a key limitation in meeting children's needs. However, in reality, children's services cannot be solely responsible for transforming vulnerable children's life chances. Schools, health services, police and other agencies must all play a key role.

**1. The Department for Education and the Department for Communities and Local Government should conduct a review of resourcing of social care services.**

**2. The Government should incentivise investment in early intervention and prevention.**

**3. The Government should strengthen duties on schools, health services, police and other agencies, in the context of the new local safeguarding partnership arrangements.**

## **(ii) Supporting all 'children in need'**

The number of 'children in need', who qualify for support under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989 ('S. 17') is rising, and the Inquiry heard compelling evidence that local authorities are struggling to keep up with the rise in demand.

A survey of directors of children's services carried out by the Inquiry found that a staggering 89 per cent reported finding it increasingly challenging to fulfil their statutory duties under S.17 in the last five years. Furthermore, where children are in touch with services, interventions are focused on child protection concerns, rather than on identifying and responding to a broad range of needs.

**4. The Department for Education should consult on a review of the current framework for supporting 'children in need'.**

## **(ii) Variation in practice and outcomes**

There is significant variation in the application of law and policy across local authorities. Statistics suggest wildly different approaches to early intervention, identification of 'children in need', and to rates of children taken into care.

Evidence suggests this variation does not result from differences in demography or resource. Crucially, local policy decisions are leading directly to stark contrasts in children's outcomes, including the likelihood that they are taken into care.

Innovation is vital in order to drive practice improvements and develop more effective and efficient ways of meeting children's needs. Local authorities already can and do innovate, and the Inquiry was not convinced that legislative change in this area is necessary or desirable. A strong statutory and policy framework is essential so that children and families can always rely on the protection of clear, universal entitlements, wherever they live.

**5. The Department for Education should commission an independent Inquiry into variation in access to children's services across England, and the impact on outcomes for vulnerable children.**

## **(iv) Supporting stable relationships**

There is growing evidence about the importance of stability and positive relationships in helping children achieve positive outcomes.

However, stability is consistently undermined by staff shortages, high turnover of social workers and multiple care placements, with consequences for the quality of care. In some areas agency staff account for more than 40 per cent of social workers.

**6. The Department for Education should develop a strategy to reduce churn in the children's social work system.**

**7. All local authorities should be required to sign a regional memorandum of understanding on the payment of locum staff.**

## **(v) Giving children a say in their care**

Many councils follow good practice in involving children in strategic decision-making, including through Children in Care Councils. However, the Inquiry heard that in many places children in care are not routinely involved in decisions about their own support. In some cases, children do not even understand why they are looked after by the local authority.

**8. The Department for Education should support and incentivise local authorities to improve participation practices so that vulnerable children play a meaningful role in their care.**

**9. Children's participation entitlements, including to advocacy and support from Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs), should be protected.**

## **(vi) Improving services for children and families across England**

The Inquiry heard that where a local authority is judged 'inadequate' or 'requires improvement', the response by central Government and the local authority itself often fails to drive improvement. Specifically, staff changes and uncertainty often lead to a period of instability for children's services, which can filter down to children and families. Often what is required is strong, stable leadership bolstered by external support.

**10. The Government should adopt a more flexible approach to intervening in failing children's services.**

**11. The Department for Education should develop an outcomes framework for children's social care to help drive practice improvement.**

**12. The Department for Education should work with the Local Government Association (LGA) and the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) to establish a national program for developing senior leaders and a 'buddying' system whereby failing local authorities partner with outstanding counterparts.**

All Party Parliamentary Group for Children

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