

Briefing for MPs

General debate on children's social care in England

Tuesday 9th October 2018

Key messages

- Children with very similar needs or who are facing very similar risks receive different levels of support from children's social care services depending on where they live.
- Tens of thousands of children have to be referred to children's services multiple times before receiving the support they need.
- Social workers say that finances available to children's services affect their decisions about whether or not to step in to provide support for children and families.
- Early help services are facing particular pressures, with demand rising and funding being reduced.
- It is unacceptable that children's safety is potentially being undermined by a lack of sufficient resources.

Key asks

- The Government should use the Autumn Budget to put in place an interim funding arrangement in order to stabilise the crisis in early intervention services and prevent more children and families reaching breaking point.
- The Government must address the £3bn shortfall in children's social care funding and put children at the heart of the forthcoming Spending Review.

Background

The Local Government Association has reported that, between 2006 and 2016, the number of child protection enquiries undertaken by local authorities rose by 140 per cent while the number of children subject to a child protection plan almost doubled. The Association of Directors of Children's Services has similarly found that entrenched and more complex problems are increasing among children and families, making the provision of support more resource intensive.

In July 2018 the All Party Parliamentary Group for Children, supported by the National Children's Bureau, published their report [Storing up trouble: A postcode lottery of children's social care](#) which found that it is getting harder for children and families to access support and that there are significant disparities in how local areas are addressing need.

Action for Children also published [Revolving door part 2: are we failing children at risk of abuse and neglect?](#) in July 2018 which reveals that 23,000 children needed repeated referrals before receiving statutory support to help them with serious issues like abuse, neglect and family dysfunction, with a further 13,500 not getting statutory support despite multiple referrals.

The Children's Society's [Crumbling Futures](#) research highlighted that almost 60,000 children aged 16 and 17 are in receipt of support as a child in need, but as many as 46 per cent of those referred to children's services did not

meet the threshold for support. The study highlighted that as many as 35 per cent of children aged 16 or 17 who were supported by children's services had been referred at least one other time in the preceding two years.

Protecting children has become a postcode lottery

The support children receive from children's social care services varies from place to place. This variation is particularly prevalent in early help and preventative services, but also exists for more acute services such as making a child subject to a child protection plan or applying for a care order.¹

We know that there are significant disparities in how local areas are addressing need, particularly in response to children who are self-harming, families with housing problems, children being bullied and domestic violence in the home.² **These variations suggest that children with very similar needs, or who are facing very similar risks, will receive different levels of support depending on where they live.**

Recommendation: The Government should urgently respond to emerging evidence about variation in thresholds and their application across children's social care departments, and the implications for children and families.

Children and families often have to reach crisis before they can get help

There are an estimated **140,000 children** on the fringes of social care in England not receiving any kind of support³ and it is getting harder for these children to access the help they need.

- 67% of social workers say thresholds for accessing early help have risen;
- 70% of social workers say thresholds have risen for qualifying as a 'child in need';
- 54% of social workers say thresholds have risen for applying for a care order; and
- 50% of social workers say thresholds have risen for making children the subject of a child protection plan.⁴

The result of this is that social workers have a diminishing range of tools to help them protect children.

A recent YouGov poll by Barnardo's revealed a range of professionals including police, teachers and social workers are concerned about the increase of complex cases of children in the care system and reduced funding available to help them.

- 60% of police, teachers and social workers said there has been an increase in the number of particularly vulnerable children in the last five years;
- 77% said there was insufficient resource to meet demand across services;
- 67% said a lack of early intervention services is contributing to this increase; and
- 85% of social workers said they are unable to give all the children on their caseloads the support and time they need as a result of the increased pressure of interacting with particularly vulnerable children.

A further survey undertaken by The Children's Society and the British Association of Social Workers found that 8 in 10 social workers report that they have seen an increase in the numbers of children aged 16 and 17 who require support from children's services.⁵

¹ All Party Parliamentary Group for Children (2018) 'Storing Up Trouble A Postcode Lottery of Children's Social Care'.

² *Ibid.* See analysis of LSCB threshold documents pp. 11-17.

³ Action for Children (2018) 'Revolving Door Part 2'

⁴ All Party Parliamentary Group for Children (2018) 'Storing Up Trouble...'

⁵ A survey of social workers conducted by the British Association of Social Workers and The Children's Society.

Urgent action is needed to protect preventative and early help services

Services which intervene early in the development of problems are key to preventing children and families falling into crisis and needing more intensive support. But in recent years there has been a radical shift in the balance of services provided by children's social care. Reductions in funding and increased demand means many councils have had to concentrate their limited resources on work with children with the highest level of need. This means fewer children and families are able to access help when they first need it.



Cuts to early help services not only mean children and families are missing out, and left to face increasingly complex challenges, it also stores up problems for the future, resulting in further demand for intensive support.

When an assessment does not lead to help, an opportunity to act early is missed and, although these children do not reach statutory thresholds, they are still likely to be vulnerable. Without such early help, it is difficult for problems to get better and vulnerable children risk falling in and out of the system, with some not receiving help until crisis point is reached.

Currently, there is no legal duty or incentive from central government to provide early help. Yet, when faced with budget pressures and increasing demand, local authorities have little choice but to reduce spending on early help and increase spending on those statutory later interventions that they have a duty to provide.

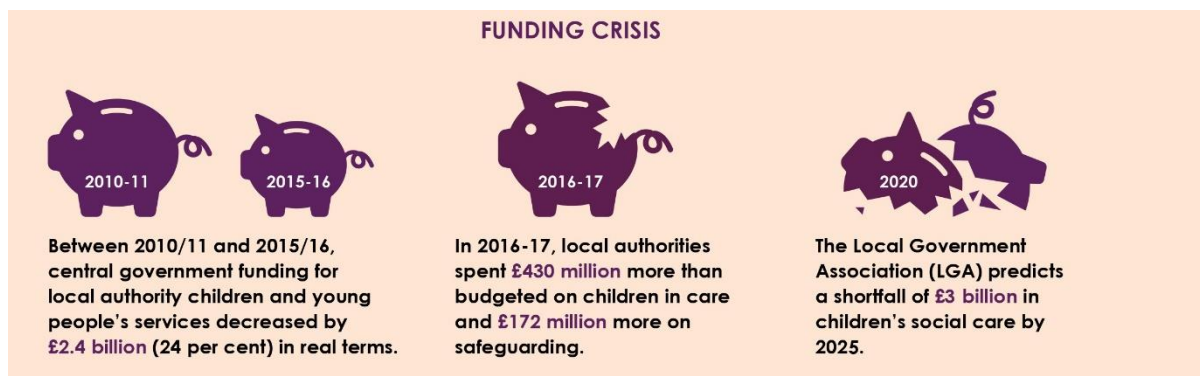
Recommendation: Local authorities urgently need additional funding if they are to have the resources available to invest in children and families at an earlier stage to prevent problems escalating. The Government should use the Autumn Budget to put in place an interim funding arrangement in order to stabilise the crisis in early intervention services and prevent more children and families reaching breaking point.

Recommendation: The Government should undertake a review of early help and how local authority children's services and wider safeguarding partners can be better supported, and incentivised, to meet the needs of children and young people before they reach crisis point.

Recommendation: The Department for Education should consult on how to introduce a legal duty on local authorities and statutory partners to provide early help to children, young people and their families, including putting a definition of 'early help' in statute.

Funding reductions are impacting decisions about whether or not to provide support to children and families

The gap between demand for children's services and the resources available to local authorities is unsustainable.



We also know that funding is influencing social workers' decisions about whether to intervene to support a child.

- 60% of social workers report that the finances available to children's services influences their decisions about whether to offer 'early help' or whether to provide statutory support to 'children in need' under s.17 of the Children's Act 1989 either 'very much' or 'to a great extent'.⁶
- 45% of social workers, report that finances affect decisions about applying for a care order.⁷
- 6 in 10 migrant families who have the No Recourse to Public Funds condition applied to them and are at risk of destitution were not supported by children's services.⁸

Crucially, funding pressures are having a disproportionate impact on the most deprived areas. This means that in these areas, concerns about budgets will loom larger in decisions taken and access to support for children will be more restricted than in other, wealthier, areas.

As a result, some children are missing out on support, not because they don't need it, but because services, particularly in poorer areas, can't afford to deliver it.

Recommendation: The Government should use the Comprehensive Spending Review to address the gap in funding for local authority children's services, and put in place a sustainable funding formula that takes into account the level of need among children and families living in the local authority. Any financial settlement must incentivise and enable local authorities to invest in early help and preventative services.

Disabled children are facing particular challenges

Many disabled children and their families rely on support from social care, such as short breaks, personal care, and adaptations to their homes. However, most disabled children receive no regular support from outside their own close family and friends.

The shift in the balance of services provided by children's social care has impacted adversely on services for disabled children and their families. The number of disabled children who receive social care is reducing, despite the number of disabled children in the UK increasing by over a third in the last ten years to around 1.1 million and their needs becoming ever more complex.

Research by the Disabled Children's Partnership – a coalition of more than 60 charities – has found that only 3 per cent of parents think that health and social care services for disabled children are adequate; that 65 per cent of

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ The Children's Society (2016) 'Making life impossible' <https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/making-life-impossible.pdf>

family members think the quality of social care services has declined in recent years; and that there is an annual funding gap of £434 million.

Failure to provide services risks the health, wellbeing and development of the child and impacts on the emotional and physical wellbeing of all the family. Providing services at an early stage has the potential to significantly reduce expenditure on crisis intervention and long-term costs.

Children in Care with complex needs

More and more children are being taken into care. As of March 2017, there were 72,670 looked after children in England, an increase of 3 per cent since 2016⁹, the highest level since the mid-1980s. Evidence from analysis of referrals to Barnardo's fostering services¹⁰ highlights how children entering the care system have higher levels of need.

- **16%** of children referred to Barnardo's fostering services had suffered sexual exploitation;
- **17%** of children referred were unaccompanied asylum seekers or had been trafficked;
- **5%** of children referred had offending behaviour; and
- **6%** of referrals indicated harmful sexual behavior.

With 90 children being taken into care every day¹¹, early intervention is essential in supporting families on the edge of care and preventing children from entering the care system.

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About NCB

NCB is a leading children's charity working to build a better childhood for every child. We listen to children and young people and work with those supporting them to develop evidence on what needs to be done to enable children to enjoy their right to be safe, secure and supported so they can flourish and fulfil their potential.

About Action for Children

From before they are born until their twenties, Action for Children helps disadvantaged children across the UK. We improve the lives of over 300,000 children, young people, parents and carers every year by doing what's right, doing what's needed, and doing what works for children.

About The Children's Society

The Children's Society is a national charity that runs local services, helping children and young people when they are at their most vulnerable, and have nowhere left to turn. We also campaign for changes to laws affecting children and young people, to stop the mistakes of the past being repeated in the future. In 2017/18 we worked with over 11,000 vulnerable children and young people in our services.

About Barnardo's

Barnardo's is the largest national children's charity in the UK. We exist to transform the lives of the most vulnerable children and young people. Last year we supported more than 301,100 children, young people, parents and carers through over 1,000 services. We believe in children – no matter who they are, or what they've been through.

⁹Department for Education. Children looked after in England (including adoption), year ending 31 March 2017.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/664995/SFR50_2017-Children_looked_after_in_England.pdf

¹⁰ Barnardo's., 2016. A profile of children referred to Barnardo's fostering services in England

https://www.barnardos.org.uk/profile_of_children_referred_to_barnardo_s_fostering_services_in_england.pdf.

¹¹ Department for Education. Children looked after in England (including adoption), year ending 31 March 2017.

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