APPG for Children inquiry into children’s social care: call for evidence form

The All Party Parliamentary Group for Children would welcome written evidence from a range of stakeholders including:

- Directors of Children’s Services
- Children’s social services managers and practitioners
- Chairs of Local Safeguarding Children’s Boards
- Children’s services providers – including the private and voluntary sector
- Children in Care Councils
- Organisations representing the voices and interests of children and young people

Written submissions will inform the setting of oral evidence sessions, which will be held between April and July 2016. The questions below cover a range of issues relating to the delivery of children’s social services. Please feel free to answer only those which relate to your area of expertise.

Contact details

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(E-mail / telephone number):

Please indicate if you would be prepared to give oral evidence: We would be happy to give oral evidence.

1. **Changing demand and funding for children’s social care services** How has demand and funding for children’s social care services in England changed? What changes are expected in the future?

1.1 The eight years since 2007/08 have been notable for a considerable increase in demand for children’s social care services. Over that period:

- The number of children on child protection plans has increased by 60 per cent (from 29,200 to 49,690).¹
- The number of children in care has increased by 17 per cent (59,400 to 69,540).²
- The number of referrals to children’s services has increased by 18 per cent (538,500 to 635,600).³

1.2 These demand increases are unlikely to decrease in the near future, with heightened awareness of issues such as child sexual exploitation coming alongside a growing drive to increase reporting rates across the country. Increasing numbers of unaccompanied asylum seeking children entering local authority care have also placed considerable pressure on some areas, with Kent alone seeing numbers increase from 365 in March 2015 to over 1,000 by December of the same year. Local authorities have a strong track
record of supporting each other in settling asylum seekers and refugees, and councils across the country stand ready to help ease the burden on port authorities and other areas which have long suffered significant resource pressures through their work with unaccompanied asylum seeking children.

1.3 While discussions are ongoing with government to ease the burden on the small number of councils currently caring for the majority of these children and young people, it is clear that even a fairer distribution of unaccompanied minors across the country would carry significant pressure in terms of the care and support needs of this growing population of young people. Home Office data indicates that 3,043 unaccompanied children applied for asylum in the UK in 2015, compared with 1,945 in 2014, a rise of 56.5 per cent. iv

1.4 A consultation on the mandatory reporting of child abuse is expected to be launched shortly, potentially introducing a new duty which would inevitably increase the number of reports to children’s services considerably. While we strongly agree that child abuse should always be reported to the relevant authorities, we must be careful to avoid creating a situation where the social care system is overwhelmed with unnecessary referrals because professionals lack the courage or confidence to take responsibility, exercise their judgement and act appropriately. All agencies must work to create a shared culture of moral responsibility in which people know how to raise the alarm and feel confident that if they come forward with legitimate concerns those concerns will be dealt with in a swift, proportionate and effective way. It is important that social services resources are used effectively, and that any reform does not have the unintended consequence of overloading the system with cases where the child is clearly not in danger of abuse or neglect.

1.5 The changing nature and complexity of need poses particular challenges for local authorities and their partner agencies. In 2013, the LGA commissioned the Office for Public Management (OPM) to conduct an action research project into more effective commissioning of children’s homes vi, working with ten local authorities and a number of providers. Nearly all participants in the OPM study said that more specialist provision was urgently needed nationally and locally, with authorities struggling to match the most complex needs with supply. This remains the case today, and the number of children presenting to children’s services departments with multiple complex needs is continuing to increase. Many of our members are concerned that the paucity of residential services able to meet this need, combined with ongoing shortages in the availability of Tier Four CAMHS provision, often results in councils being charged disproportionately high fees for provision that may not always be of the required quality.

2 The impact of changes on the delivery of children’s social care services
What has been, or could be, the impact of any changes to funding and demand on the delivery of children’s social care services?

2.1 The overall increase in need in recent years is placing considerable strain on children’s social care services, particularly in a period of significant funding constraints. The Department for Education’s (DfE) examination of cost pressures on local authority children’s services departments was completed too late to inform the Spending Review. The Government’s social work reform programme conceded that “it is too early to predict, with any accuracy, the impact of the Spending Review on individual local authorities” vii.

2.2 Local government is already the most efficient part of the public sector. While dealing with a 40 per cent real terms reduction in core government grant funding over the previous Parliament and demand pressures, councils have already made significant savings to their budgets. In adult social care alone, a funding gap of at least £5 billion has been managed through efficiencies and diverting savings from other services.

2.3 In the Spending Review and the Local Government Finance Settlement, the Government stated that total available funding for core council services will broadly be the same in 2019/20 as it is today. This is based on revenue support grant reducing sharply (27 per cent, or £2.6 billion in 2016/17 alone) and assumptions on councils increasing their council tax income significantly to compensate for this by the end of the decade vii.

2.4 With a statutory duty to protect every child in need, councils are rightly committed to providing as much resource as possible to safeguarding and most areas have worked hard to protect funding for front-line child protection services. The LGA’s research, Future funding outlook for councils 2019/20, found a 1 per cent increase for children and families services spending, from £6.97 billion in 2010/11 to £7.03 billion in 2013/14 viii. However, even these figures represent a reduction in real terms and they do not take into account the increases in demand for these services.

2.5 Councils have worked hard to protect safeguarding children services from the full impact of budget cuts, but children’s services are under strain as they work to protect the most vulnerable children from abuse, neglect and child sexual exploitation. The Government recently provided significant additional funding to support an NHS system struggling to cope with winter pressures, and councils urgently need a similar investment to help them respond to these demand pressures across the child protection system.

3 The impact of changes on outcomes for children and young people

What has been, or could be, the impact of any changes to funding, demand and service delivery on children and young people?

3.1 It is difficult to quantify the impact of these pressures on outcomes for individual children and young people from a national viewpoint, and each local authority will make their own decisions on which services and interventions to prioritise in light of their own local context.

3.2 Local authorities take their responsibilities as corporate parents extremely seriously and, as set out in answer to questions 1 and 2, councils across the country have worked hard to maintain funding for services that protect and support vulnerable children and young people. However, this commitment leaves some challenging choices elsewhere, particularly in local investment in early intervention services. The benefits of early help and support on outcomes for children are widely recognised, but the ever increasing demand for high end child protection services can make it difficult for local authorities to safely divert resources to these preventative services. Furthermore, all too often the savings from investment by one agency are recouped by another, resulting in disincentives to invest in early intervention. We urgently need to reform how funding is allocated across local services to encourage joint working and savings to encourage investment in early intervention that shifts the balance from crisis spend towards prevention. Government
funding for early intervention was reduced by 48 per cent during the last Parliament, from £3.2 billion in 2010/11 to £1.4 billion in 2015/16.

4 The role of the local authority children’s social care services
What are local authorities doing to respond to changes in demand and funding? What barriers do they face to meeting these challenges? What distinguishes the best performing children’s social care services from those that are not performing so well?

4.1 These questions are central to much of the LGA’s ongoing work with councils around the country, with a particular focus on the specific actions and behaviours that authorities could adopt to reach the level of the best performing areas of the country. To this end, we recently commissioned the ISOS Partnership to undertake action research in nine local authority areas. The specific objective of this piece of research is to understand how, in the current financial, political and inspection climate, local children’s services can best be supported to improve rapidly and in a sustained way. The research is seeking to understand:

- The experience of a broad range of local authorities in the period following inspection in terms of the actions they took, the other agencies or partners with whom they worked and the constraints they faced.
- The factors or activities which were most likely to support improvement and those which hampered further progress.
- How those factors are influenced by local context.
- Whether there are any common or consistent stages in the improvement journey that might have wider resonance.
- Whether there are essential preconditions that must be in place before meaningful improvement can occur.
- Whether some improvement interventions appear to be consistently more effective than others, and the circumstances in which that might hold true.

4.2 This research is ongoing, but an interim report was published on 3 March 2016 and some key early findings are reproduced here for the APPG’s consideration.

Key enablers of improvement

4.3 Based on initial fieldwork visits to the nine local authorities, and interviews with seven additional stakeholders, seven clear areas of activity have emerged which, taken together, effectively describe the key criteria that can help an authority move towards good.
4.4 In terms of barriers to effective practice, the LGA has previously expressed concerns that the current Ofsted inspection regime does not effectively drive improvement in children’s services. Recent research from iMPower, an independent consultancy specialising in public service reform, suggested that the wider impact of Ofsted’s current approach may in fact hinder a local authority’s ability to perform to the highest possible standard\textsuperscript{xi}.

4.5 iMPower found that, of the 866 councils inspected twice or more since 2010, approximately 25 per cent of those rated as inadequate in 2010 remained inadequate over the five year period, and 56 per cent of those requiring improvement or considered adequate in 2010 maintained that rating on re-inspection. iMPower concluded that, for many councils judged inadequate or to require improvement, this judgement, rather than being a catalyst for helping to deliver improvements to services, can instead act as a trap door, locking them behind and preventing an improvement in performance\textsuperscript{xii}.

4.6 Jo Miller, Chief Executive of Doncaster Council, observed that inadequate councils are then “subject to the resignation or sackings of senior members and officers, vilification in the media and the demoralisation and exit of hard-to-recruit social workers. How does this drive improvement? Councils then start their ‘improvement journey’ with one arm tied behind their backs due to turbulent leadership, an over-reliance on agency social workers and an obsessive need to prove that things are getting better with limited capacity to effect real change.” \textsuperscript{xiii}

5 The policy and legislative framework
Is the current and developing policy and legislative framework sufficient to enable children’s social care services to meet children’s needs in the current context? How could it be improved?

5.1 In light of the concerns noted above, the LGA is calling on Ofsted to radically change the discredited and resource-intensive Single Inspection Framework and work with the sector to develop a truly multi-agency, child focussed, inspection model which drives improvement in children’s social care.
5.2 With this in mind, it is disappointing that Government appears to continue to view the effectiveness of council performance purely through the lens provided by Ofsted, particularly given the inconsistent nature of their judgements. For example:

- In 2007/08, Ofsted reported that none of the councils inspected were considered inadequate, 22 per cent were adequate, 69 per cent were good, and 9 per cent were outstanding.
- Since the latest round of inspections began in late 2013, this picture has changed significantly: 26 per cent of the 76 councils inspected under the new framework by the turn of 2016 were rated as inadequate, 50 per cent required improvement (previously described as ‘adequate’) and just 22 per cent were considered good. No council has been rated as outstanding in the last two and half years, and the last authority to receive this grade has recently fallen into the inadequate category. xiv

5.3 Government have now indicated that children’s services departments rated inadequate will now be given six months to demonstrate significant improvement, or risk being taken over by ‘high performing local authorities, experts in child protection and charities’. xv

5.4 Protecting vulnerable children is one of local government’s greatest responsibilities, and we agree strongly that any failure in this area must be tackled swiftly and robustly. However, transforming a hugely complex child protection system takes time, and evidence suggests that embedding lasting change takes considerably longer than the six-month target suggested by the Government. It is also essential that additional funding is provided for struggling areas to ensure that the necessary improvements are effective and sustainable.

5.5 There is currently little evidence that the developing policy of removing children’s services from council control and transferring responsibility to a third party organisation is an effective tool in driving improvement. It is also unclear which organisations from the private or voluntary sector have the expertise and capacity to take over responsibility for delivery of a complex child protection system. Where it is felt that external assistance of this type is necessary, we believe that it must only be for a period of time to help bring a council back to a high standard.

5.6 Learning from within the sector from the best councils is paramount to securing positive change. In every previous case of service failure, it has been councils with their committed professionals and democratic accountability that have turned the situation around. It is therefore right that the best performing councils are able to support those struggling, but we are concerned that this process must be adequately resourced to ensure that those providing help do not face the risk of services declining in their own area.

5.7 The LGA / ISOS Partnership action research is also considering the current and emerging national policy framework, particularly in light of whether it is helping to support and drive improvements in local children’s services. In particular, ISOS have focused on the three roles of:

- inspection;
- intervention; and
- improvement support.
5.8 An extract from the interim report is presented below, exploring these areas in more detail.xvi

The role of inspection

Local children’s services recognised the fundamental importance of inspection. They agreed that the principle of having a mechanism for providing independent, impartial assessment and scrutiny of services, according to a published, transparent framework was critical to ensuring services improve, that poor performance is flagged up, and ultimately that children are kept safe. Several local authorities spoke specifically about the importance of the role that inspection had played in their improvement journey. These included instances where the local authorities and their partners had used the experience of intervention to:

• undertake rigorous self-evaluation of their own strengths and areas for development;
• provide an external view on how they were performing, from which they could learn; and
• provide an independent baseline, which could be used to engage external partners and develop a new strategy for improvement.

Other local authorities, while supporting the principle of impartial inspection, voiced concerns about the way the current inspection framework was applied. Specifically, they were concerned about:

• the consistency with which the inspection framework was applied, citing what they perceived to be a risk-averse approach from some inspection teams;
• the timing of inspections – some local authorities felt that, rather than providing a baseline or a judgement on how their plans were progressing, they had been inspected at a time when their plans were still embedding, and this the inspection experience had had a counter-productive effect on their organisation; and
• a lack of clarity about what was required to achieve a judgement of ‘outstanding’ in the current framework, and, for some, whether this was achievable – local authorities argued it painted an overly negative picture of the sector that no authorities had achieved outstanding under the current framework.

The role of intervention

As with inspection, there was also recognition of the necessity of a function for central government to co-ordinate intervention where serious failures were identified in local children’s services. Similarly, some of the local authorities described examples where the intervention that was put in place had played an important role in their improvement journey. These included:

• the creation of improvement boards with independent chair-people – as a mechanism for bringing together senior leaders among key partners, ensuring robust and professional governance, and providing expert external challenge; and
• support for the concept of appointing commissioners or creating independent trusts – where appropriate, as a vehicle for creating the leadership and governance structures that enable a strong and undiluted focus on improving children’s services.
Local authorities were, however, less positive about the ‘parachuted leadership’ approach, where children’s services were led by a series of individuals appointed on a short-term basis. This was not a comment on interim appointments per se. Instead, it was a comment on the fact that, as we have highlighted above, driving and sustaining improvement requires, among other things, a clear long-term strategic plan, stable leadership (including corporate and political leadership), and ongoing engagement between leaders and the workforce.

Local children’s services also welcomed the ‘partners in practice’ approach, announced recently by the Department for Education, as one that would bring about a more consistent, systematic, evidence-based, graduated approach to intervention. They considered that such an approach was much needed, and would help to put in place approaches to intervention that drew on the expertise and experience of the sector, informed by evidence of what worked at different stages of local authorities’ improvement journeys, and tailored to each local context.

The role of improvement support

As with inspection and intervention, some of the local authorities we engaged also spoke positively about their experience of sector-led improvement, particularly the process of engaging in peer review with partner local authorities. Importantly, they commented positively on the benefits of being both the reviewee and the reviewer. As with inspection, local authorities that had benefited from sector-led improvement and peer review reflected on the value of being able to present their story, to submit this to external scrutiny in order to test the accuracy of their self-assessment, and use this as a learning experience to refine and enhance their improvement activities.

At least one local authority in our sample had been engaged in a long-term strategic partnership with a neighbouring children’s service to support their journey out of failure. This was reflected on extremely positively by both partners. It had delivered sustainable and embedded improvement rapidly, it had enabled learning to flow in both directions between the two areas, and had resulted in a strong shared culture focused on keeping children safe.

Three implications for support and challenge of local children’s services

At this stage in our research, we suggest that there are three significant implications for the way in which support and challenge is provided.

First, it is clear from some of the positive examples we have provided of inspection, intervention and sector-led improvement that the effectiveness of these activities depends largely on how they are approached by the local authority. Those local authorities that reported getting the most out of inspection, improvement boards or peer review, for example, displayed many of the characteristics we have identified as the seven key enablers of improvement. They were organisations that had embraced the need for improvement, taken ownership of their own improvement journey, and, with the right support, had developed the capacity to do so. The importance of not only the local context, but also recognising whether the conditions for improvement are in place, is an important implication for the development of new approaches to peer-led improvement and intervention.

Second, while inspection, intervention and sector-led improvement have important parts to play in working with individual local authorities experiencing significant weaknesses, clarity about their respective roles, effective alignment, and the avoidance duplication are of vital importance. Local authorities reported to us that a lack of co-ordination could lead
to those responsible for leading improvement in local children’s services spending a disproportionate amount of time servicing the parallel, but unaligned requirements, including reporting requirements, of multiple external masters. The local authorities we engaged emphasised the difference between driving improvement and monitoring improvement – they recognised the latter was important in its own right, but only if done proportionately, in a co-ordinated manner, and did not reduce an organisation’s capacity to drive improvement.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, there is the need for a more co-ordinated approach to children’s services improvement at a system level. Local authorities noted that central government had begun taking a more direct approach to intervention to tackle underperformance in local government and schools at the same time. They considered, nevertheless, that there was now a more well-developed evidence base about how to secure effective turnaround and consequently a clearer national framework of intervention and improvement in the case of schools than for local authority children’s services.

Notwithstanding the changes that the education system is undergoing – including the changing role of local authorities, schools-led partnerships, and the Regional Schools Commissioners – the local authorities we engaged said that they would welcome a more systematic approach to intervention and improvement for local children’s services.

5.9 The fieldwork phase of the ISOS research, extracts of which are included above, has identified some of the key enablers that will help local authorities deal with the growing challenge of balancing increasing demand with reducing resources. It has also begun to consider the effectiveness of the current policy and legislative framework in helping services to improve.

5.10 The next phase of this research will focus in on a question that will be of particular interest to the APPG: “What enables local authority children’s services to improve and/or to sustain high quality over time, particularly in the context of reducing budgets.” The outputs of this process, we hope, will be of benefit to the local authorities involved and may provide blue-prints for future sector or centre-led approaches.

5.11 The final report of our research will be published in April 2016 and we would be happy to arrange for a presentation of the key findings to the APPG at this point.

6 Sharing good practice

6.1 We welcome examples of good practice from across the United Kingdom, and in particular examples relating to one of more of the following themes:

- improving local arrangements in the delivery of children’s social care services including:
  - services for children in care and adopted children
  - safeguarding and child protection services
  - services for disabled children and children with special educational needs
  - early intervention services including for example family support, housing, and public and mental health services

- collaboration across cities/areas/regions in the delivery of children’s social care services
- the use of evidence (for example on local need/demand) and best practice in informing the commissioning, configuration and delivery of children’s social care services

- securing effective leadership

6.2 Improving local arrangements in the delivery of children’s social care services

6.3 The LGA offers a range of support to support councils in improving local arrangements for the delivery of children’s social care services, including a programme of safeguarding peer reviews and diagnostics, children’s care practice diagnostics, leadership academies and a network of children’s improvement advisers (CIAs), contracted for 10 to 15 days a year per region to support the LGA’s Principal Advisers (PAs) on issues specifically related to children’s services. Around 15 children’s peer challenges / diagnostics are currently being carried out each year, free to councils considered at risk.

6.4 The LGA has recently agreed to strengthen this existing offer to ensure that all councils are able to access support when they need it. These new proposals include:

- prioritising those councils yet to be inspected for children’s services, with the LGA’s political and professional networks used to encourage these councils to have a full Safeguarding Peer Review or Safeguarding Practice / Care Practice Diagnostic.

- commissioning the development of an enhanced support offer to councils following a peer review or diagnostic, to deal with any issues identified and likely to result in an inadequate judgement at their next inspection.

- commissioning the development of a bespoke sector-led improvement offer for councils judged inadequate by Ofsted, primarily aimed at supporting them in producing a credible improvement plan and maintaining sufficient progress to avoid full-scale DfE intervention in line with the new proposals.

6.5 The use of evidence and best practice in informing the commissioning, configuration and delivery of children’s social care services

6.6 As referenced above, the LGA has commissioned the ISOS Partnership to understand how, in the current financial, political and inspection climate, local authority children’s services can best be supported to improve rapidly and in a sustained way. The action research phase will enable us to model and test different approaches in improvement in real-time which will be of benefit to the local authorities involved and may provide blueprints for future sector or centre-led approaches. The research will provide a rich evidence base on the challenges and opportunities being faced by local authorities in adapting to the current challenging context, combined with practical examples and case studies of good and innovative emerging practice. These will be of direct value both to policy makers in central government and local authorities themselves. The interim report of this study was published on in March 2016 and is available to download.xvii

6.7 The LGA is currently developing a Children’s Services Efficiency Programme to support the sector in developing and implementing innovative and sustainable approaches to help make further savings, while protecting services and delivering excellent care for children and young people. Grants will be made available to participating authorities to fund external challenge and support to develop savings plans and to deliver transformation strategies. The intention is that through working with these authorities, the programme will
develop a set of evidence about how this can be delivered, for the benefit of all children’s services authorities and the wider children’s sector. The programme will provide external challenge to authorities in shaping their strategies and help them consider how to implement them. It will also help authorities to review progress against existing savings plans and identify further ways to make savings and deliver them.

6.8 The LGA also provides specific advice and guidance on issues of particular concern to councils, collating and sharing case study examples of effective and emerging local practice alongside summaries of recent research or legislative changes. Examples of particular interest to this inquiry include:

- Tackling child sexual exploitation: a resource pack for councillors. xviii
- The council role in special education. xix
- FGM: a councillor’s guide. xx

6.9 These resources prove particularly popular with our membership, and are used regularly by both councillors and senior officers to help inform local practice. The LGA’s child sexual exploitation resource pack, for example, has been downloaded over 11,000 times since its publication in January 2015. The LGA also provides advice on the effective scrutiny of children’s social care services, such as key lines of enquiry for councillors to pursue when considering the effectiveness of local responses to CSE. We have also worked with the Centre for Public Scrutiny (CfPS) to revise and update guidance for councillors scrutinising services for safeguarding children and children in care, with two new guides published in the spring of 2015. xxi

6.10 **Securing effective leadership**

6.11 The LGA has a strong role in promoting effective leadership in children’s services. The Leadership Essentials Children’s Services Programme is a free development event, providing an intensive introduction to the role of lead member and is also regularly accessed by chairs of children’s services scrutiny committees. The programme includes the opportunity to hear from speakers, as well as debate and discussion with fellow attendees, with an emphasis on learning from fellow councillors. While the programme is frequently reviewed to ensure it is addressing the key topics, long-running sessions focus on political leadership in the current policy context, exploring the statutory role and key relationships, discussing a council’s improvement journey and leadership of the education agenda, alongside discussions on the role of the Local Safeguarding Children Board and the wider partnership approach to safeguarding. Nine leadership essentials courses for children’s services were delivered between September 2013 and the end of January 2016, attended by 116 members from 80 councils across the country.

END.

The deadline for both written evidence submissions is **Monday 7 March 2016**. For queries or further information please contact Heather Ransom, clerk to the All Party Parliamentary Group for Children – hransom@ncb.org.uk 020 7843 6013

**Completed forms should be returned to hransom@ncb.org.uk by Monday 7th March. Submissions received after this date will still be considered, but may not inform oral evidence sessions.**


LGA and ISOS report, “Action research into improvement in local children’s services”, available here: http://www.local.gov.uk/web/guest/cyp-improvement-and-support/-/journal_content/56/10180/7727509/ARTICLE


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Ibid.


