



ALL PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP FOR

## CHILDREN

**Chair: Jess Asato MP**

**Secretariat: National Children's Bureau (NCB)**

Wednesday 10th June, 5:30–6:30pm

Thatcher Room, Portcullis House

### **Attendees**

#### **Parliamentarians**

- Jess Asato MP
- Lord Russell of Liverpool

#### **Officials**

- James O'Donoghue, Deputy Director, Children's Social Care Strategy & Portfolio, Department for Education

#### **Sector Representatives**

- Councillor Amanda Hopgood, Local Government Association (LGA)
- Luke Cannell, LGA
- Pippa Goodfellow, National Children's Bureau
- Dustin Hutchinson, National Children's Bureau
- Jess Hinks, National Children's Bureau
- Jemima Colaghan, National Children's Bureau
- Rhea Singhvi, National Children's Bureau
- Bia Torres, National Children's Bureau
- Tom Hunter, Foundations
- Sonia Balakrishnan, University of Cambridge
- Yiwon Li, University of Cambridge
- Julia Mannes, University of Cambridge
- Sarah Cattan, Nesta
- Georgia Power, TCS
- Jack O'Neill, TCS
- Nerys Anthony, TCS
- Megan Jacobs, Barnardo's
- Nick Treloar, NSPCC
- Anna Edmundson, NSPCC
- Robert Fleming, Action for Children
- Marie Horton, Pro Bono Economics (PBE)

- Jon Franklin, Pro Bono Economics (PBE)

## **Minutes and Actions**

### **1. Welcome and Introductory Remarks- Jess Asato MP, Chair**

- Jess Asato MP welcomed attendees and introduced the session, noting the importance of the parliamentary cycle, persistent challenges in children's social care, and the value of engaging seriously with the sector.
- Jess Asato also congratulated Dustin Hutchinson on 10 years at NCB during which he has been involved and heavily contributed to the APPGC secretariat work.
- A short video was shown illustrating the data and human impact of underfunded children's services, and the difference that well-funded, accessible, and affordable provision can make.

### **2. Presentation of CSFA 2026 Headline Findings- Marie Horton, Pro Bono Economics**

- Marie Horton presented findings from the fifth year of PBE's Children's Services Finance Analysis (CSFA).
- Previous findings identified disparities across deprivation deciles and variations in funding across local authorities. This report should be used as a baseline, as the Government's recent funding announcements are not yet reflected.
- Key findings on spending trends:
  - In 2016/17, the total amount spent on children's services appeared stable but represented a real-terms reduction of £0.5 billion when accounting for inflation.
  - By 2024/25, there has been very significant increases in funding.
- Possible drivers of higher spending:
  - A 7% population increase does not account for the scale of the rise in spending.
  - Children in need figures have risen broadly in line with population growth (approximately 5%), and are therefore not the primary driver.
  - There are now approximately 82,000 looked-after children (2025), representing a 25% increase since 2011.
  - The average cost per looked-after child is now £100,000. Additional spending would be welcome if it were driving improvements in quality of care however, increasingly complex needs, older children entering care, and exposure to trauma and mental health challenges are compounding cost pressures.
- Early intervention offers benefits across multiple government departments and represents good value for money.
- Rebalancing spend towards early intervention will not be straightforward, but significant progress in children's services is welcome. Success must ultimately be measured by improved outcomes for children and families, with data used to monitor whether investment is leading to meaningful change.

### **3. Sector Perspective – Councillor Amanda Hopgood, Chair, Children, Young People & Families Committee, Local Government Association**

- Councillor Hopgood described the substantial pressures facing councils: operating within constrained budgets while grappling with increasing complexity and demand.
- Nine in ten councils are now forced to overspend on children's social care, with cuts to other services required to balance budgets.
- The LGA has called on Government to shift the focus towards early intervention for vulnerable children. Councils want to support children and young people but require direct investment to do so effectively.
- On placements and fostering: the Government's ambition to ensure children experience a family home environment is shared, but recruitment of foster carers remains very difficult, resulting in private placements and higher costs.
- Recommendations included: tackling underlying issues in the current provision landscape; introducing a profit cap on placements; providing greater support for kinship and special guardianship arrangements; and extending the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund. These challenges cannot be addressed by any single organisation in isolation.
- Greater support for care leavers was highlighted as a priority.

### **4. Lived Experience Perspective – NCB Experts by Experience Care Leavers Group shared their experiences:**

- A great deal comes down to funding- insufficient funding means that the support young people need is simply not available.
- Care leaver was never told what support was available to him- a greater awareness of entitlements could have led to different outcomes.
- With the right support at the right time, crises can be prevented and outcomes improved for young people.
- Mental health support is crucial- without it, educational outcomes are severely affected.
- Early investment and suitable placements are essential- keeping children in placements that meet their needs makes a significant difference.
- Investment in early support for families could prevent children from entering care.
- Care leavers need the right support to transition successfully to independent life.

### **5. Government Response – James O'Donoghue, Deputy Director, Children's Social Care Strategy & Portfolio, Department for Education**

- James O'Donoghue acknowledged that the CSFA report provides a strong evidence base for the pressures facing children's services.
- Reform is not only about funding, it also requires systemic change in how services are structured and delivered.
- The report highlights the inherent challenges of reform, and while a good plan is in place, it now requires implementation to realise its impact.

- The report was described as a valuable tool that provides a clear baseline against which progress can be measured.

## **6. Roundtable Discussion**

- Lord Russell, drawing on his involvement with the Children's Wellbeing Bill, noted the value of having a Minister who listens and is able to make decisions. He raised two questions for discussion:
  - Is the current Ofsted framework used to assess local authorities fit for purpose?
  - What makes for good children's services?
- LGA representatives responded that effective practice should be shared and replicated, while recognising that what works in one area may not transfer directly to another due to geographical and local factors. Work on identifying and sharing best practice has begun.
- Investing in preventative work was identified as the single most important lever, but this cannot rest with children's services alone- funding for adult services must also be considered.
- New proposals are welcome but must be flexible. 'Experts at hand' initiatives are valuable but take time as there is a shortage of specialist skills across the sector to fill vacancies. Built-in flexibility in workforce development is essential.
- Experts by experience highlighted variation in the support offered across councils, and emphasised the particular importance of mental health services for care-experienced young people.
- James O'Donoghue identified leadership capacity as a key obstacle, stressing the need for clear leadership purpose across local authorities. He noted that much work is currently structured around inspection frameworks, and called for all levers in the system to be aligned towards the same goals.
- The importance of collaboration with community services and family hubs was underlined.
- James O'Donoghue suggested that greater public transparency of data could help drive accountability and improvement.
- Expert by experience noted that care leavers face significant challenges and that, in their experience, many struggle to access adequate mental health support through their local council.

## **7. Closing Remarks**

- Dustin Hutchinson from NCB, who had to step in as Chair due to votes in the Commons, thanked all speakers and attendees for their contributions to the session.