



ALL PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP FOR
CHILDREN

Storing Up Trouble

A postcode lottery of children's social care



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

July 2018



National Children's
Bureau

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The All Party Parliamentary Group for Children's (APPGC) first Inquiry report into the state of children's social care in England, *No Good Options* (March 2017), shone a light on a struggling system – one that is trying to balance increased and more complex demand against ever stretched resources. The Inquiry also found that approaches to policy and practice varied across the country, with children, young people and families receiving different levels of support and care in different areas.

The APPGC wanted to explore these findings further to assess which thresholds for accessing services varied across the country and whether thresholds are indeed rising across the whole system. In other words, does where a child live affect their chances of getting support, regardless of level of need? And, is it getting generally harder for children and families to get help?

The Inquiry also sought to gather evidence on what factors may underlie these patterns and trends, and what impact they are having on children and families. The key findings are outlined below.

(1) PROTECTING CHILDREN HAS BECOME A POSTCODE LOTTERY

The level of need a child has to reach in order to access support was found to vary across the country. Inconsistency appears to be particularly stark in relation to the provision of early help and wider preventative services.

More than 80 per cent of Directors of Children's Services, surveyed as part of the Inquiry, said that there were variations in thresholds for accessing early help. Almost three quarters reported variable thresholds for 'children in need' support, and almost two thirds said there was variation in thresholds for making a child subject to a child protection plan.

Analysis of Local Safeguarding Children's Board (LSCB) 'threshold documents' found some significant disparities in how local areas were addressing need, particularly in response to children who are self-harming, families with housing problems and even children experiencing physical abuse. These findings suggest that children with similar needs, and those facing similar risks, are receiving different levels of intervention and support depending on where they live.

Local authorities should be empowered to set local priorities that respond to the specific needs of their populations. However, the APPGC believes that a postcode lottery in children's social care is unfair to children and families and is not acceptable.

1) The Department for Education 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.

Some local authorities and their partner agencies are re-thinking their approach to 'thresholds' and the process for assessing need, risk and provision of support. This has included the development of new partnership approaches and more accessible information for children, families and all those working with them. The APPGC welcomes these endeavours. Whilst innovation is to be encouraged, care will need to be taken to ensure that ongoing reforms to local arrangements for safeguarding children do not lead to further variation in the support available to children and families across the country.

2) The Department for Education should work with the What Works Centre for Children's Social Care and sector partners to evaluate new and developing alternative approaches to assessing and meeting the needs of children and families in partnership with other local agencies. This should include work with the Local Government Association and local authorities to ensure that learning is shared widely.

3) The Department for Education should set up an independent scrutiny board to oversee and report on the impact of new local safeguarding arrangements to ensure a consistent approach to child protection within 12 months of implementation.

Academic experts told the Inquiry that gaps in data collection across the children's social care system make it difficult to understand fully the key

risk factors and needs of families, and any variation in intervention and outcomes. This hinders the state's ability to effectively distribute resources and local authorities' ability to reflect on whether they are appropriately supporting families from all backgrounds.

4) The Department for Education should put in place arrangements for the systematic analysis of data on the demographics of children (including age, gender, ethnicity and disability) and collect data on the circumstances of parents and carers whose children are accessing social care services.

(II) CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OFTEN HAVE TO REACH CRISIS BEFORE THEY CAN GET HELP

The APPGC received compelling evidence suggesting that thresholds for accessing children's social care are rising. A survey of social workers carried out by the Inquiry found that 70 per cent felt thresholds had risen for qualifying as a 'child in need' under section 17 of the Children Act 1989 (s.17) and half said the same in relation to making a child subject to a child protection plan. This means that it is getting harder for children and families to access help when they need it. This trend is more evident in relation to early help and services for 'children in need'. Nevertheless, the Inquiry received evidence suggesting that thresholds are also very high, and potentially rising, for access to more acute statutory services.

The Inquiry heard of cases not being taken on until families reached more complex levels of need, and children already receiving support subsequently being deemed to no longer reach the threshold for help.

There was some conflict between the views of social workers and Directors of Children's Services about whether thresholds for accessing services have risen, particularly in terms of statutory services. While the reason for this was unclear, this discrepancy highlighted the importance of effective leadership and of service leaders and practitioners having a shared vision for improving their work with children and families. This could be facilitated by reducing churn amongst leadership and the wider workforce, as well as action to build bridges between leaders and frontline practice.

5) The Department for Education should urgently review and report on the causes of diverging perceptions between frontline practitioners and Directors of Children's Services in relation to thresholds for children's social care interventions.

The Department for Education should also set out measures to ensure Directors of Children's Services and Lead Members for Children's Services are more closely engaged with frontline social work practice.

(III) URGENT ACTION IS NEEDED TO PROTECT PREVENTATIVE AND EARLY HELP SERVICES

No Good Options highlighted how increasing demand and a reduction in resources were hindering the provision of early help services and support for 'children in need' under s.17. Further evidence heard during this Inquiry suggests that thresholds for these services are more likely to vary across the country, when compared to more acute statutory support, and that fewer children and families are accessing help when they first need it.

The majority of Directors of Children's Services responding to the Inquiry's survey said that the qualifying thresholds for early help varied across local authorities, while 90 per cent said that it has become harder to fulfil their duties for 'children in need' over the last three years. The balance of spending has shifted, such that a far smaller proportion of resources is spent on early help and family support.

This not only means 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. Directors of Children's Services giving evidence to the Inquiry called for a 'statutory safety net' for early help services, echoing Eileen Munro's recommendation from her 2011 review into child protection.

6) The Department for Education should consult on how to introduce Munro's proposal for 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.

7) 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.

8) The Government should set out plans to extend the Troubled Families funding beyond 2020, in light of local authorities' reliance on these resources to maintain family support services.

Having heard evidence of significant inconsistencies across the country in the identification, delivery of support, and challenges faced by local leaders in maintaining provision, *No Good Options* called for a review of support for 'children in need' (under s.17).

The APPGC welcomes the launch of the Department for Education's 'children in need' review. However, more work is needed to make the most of this opportunity. We are concerned that the review makes no commitment to address inconsistencies in the identification of 'children in need' and provision of support across the country.

9) The review of children in need should be expanded to gather evidence on thresholds for accessing 'children in need' support under s.17 and what underlies variation in the proportion of children designated 'in need' across the country.

(IV) FUNDING REDUCTIONS ARE IMPACTING DECISIONS ABOUT WHETHER OR NOT TO PROVIDE SUPPORT TO CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

No Good Options highlighted the challenges facing children's services in the context of reduced resources. This Inquiry sought to expand on these findings by exploring the relationship between funding constraints and day-to-day decision-making about care and support for children and families.

Evidence received by the Inquiry indicates that funding is influencing, at least implicitly, social workers' decisions about whether to intervene to support a child. These pressures apply more consistently to decisions about early help and preventative services. However, the APPGC was very concerned to hear from social workers and researchers that decisions about whether to take action to safeguard a child - for example taking a child into care or making a child subject to a child protection plan - have also been affected by funding constraints.

It is unacceptable that children's safety is potentially being undermined by a lack of sufficient resources.

The Inquiry heard evidence that funding pressures are having a disproportionate impact on the most deprived areas. This suggests 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.

10) 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 enable local authorities to invest in early help and preventative services.

11) The Public Accounts Committee should conduct an inquiry into the National Audit Office's forthcoming study which focuses on local authority children's services, to ensure a continued focus on securing high quality support for our most vulnerable children and families.

(V) YOUNG PEOPLE WANT MORE SUPPORT TO UNDERSTAND THEIR HISTORIES

Evidence heard by both Inquiries highlighted that involvement of children in decisions about their care is an area of inconsistent practice. We heard further evidence from young people suggesting that children in care and care leavers are not given sufficient support to access and really understand their stories. All the young people giving evidence spoke about the need for additional support to access content in their personal files, and they suggested that this process starts early with ongoing emotional support as children learn more about their past. Just as children and families should not face a lottery on the level of support they receive, children and young people should not face a lottery on how involved and informed they are about their care.

12) The Local Government Association and Ofsted should work with local authorities to ensure that children and young people's voices are listened to consistently so that they always have an opportunity to have a say in decisions about their own care.