



ALL PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP FOR  
**CHILDREN**

# Storing Up Trouble

A postcode lottery of children's social care



July 2018



National Children's  
Bureau

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# FOREWORD

How can it be that as a society we sometimes step in to provide support which helps children to stay at home and thrive with their families, while we leave other children, with very similar needs, to fall into crisis and risk being taken into care? It is unacceptable that some children miss out simply because their local services don't support children at their level of need. In this climate, where children's social care varies wildly from place to place, children's welfare and safety is being undermined.

Our 2016/17 Inquiry into children's social care found a system struggling to keep pace with growing demand. Most strikingly, it found substantial variation in the numbers of children accessing services across the country which had significant implications for their outcomes.

This Inquiry explored that variation in more depth. The findings paint an alarming picture of a system that forces social workers to consider available resources, alongside risk and need, when deciding whether they are able to support a vulnerable child.

We uncovered compelling evidence that children face a postcode lottery of protection from children's social care and issues such as self-harm, bullying and domestic violence are treated differently from one area to another.

Alongside variations in access to services, our evidence also suggests it is getting harder for children and families to get support. 70 per cent of the 1,710 social workers surveyed for this Inquiry told us that the threshold for helping 'children in need' had risen in the last three years, while half said the point at which a child protection plan was triggered had gone up. Knowing the potentially devastating risks of leaving children without appropriate support, it is unconscionable that we are putting children's safety at risk by allowing families to fall into crisis before stepping in to help.

Poverty affects more than one in four children in the UK today. However, as social workers seek to protect children from harm, they are often unable to support families with their immediate and most pressing needs: heating, housing, and food. With limited resources and high caseloads, social workers are unable to help families address the root causes of family issues and are too often forced to view families through a lens of risk. This leads to a damaging culture of mistrust between families and practitioners which needs to be addressed.

*No Good Options* drew attention to the funding crisis in children's social care and called on the Government to take action. This Inquiry presents further evidence that money is influencing decisions about whether to offer support to our most vulnerable children. This is unacceptable. The Government must act now and use the forthcoming Comprehensive Spending Review to put in place a sustainable funding formula for children's services that accounts for local need and enables local authorities to invest in early help and preventative services.

This Inquiry benefited from hearing the views and experiences of children and young people. As it is wrong that some children and families are missing out on support from social care because of where they live, it is also wrong that local authorities are inconsistent in giving children in care the opportunity to participate in decisions about their lives. The Government should take steps to ensure local authorities allow all children and young people to have a say about their care.

Our last Inquiry considered how Ofsted could more constructively support improvements in the sector. The findings of this Inquiry raise further questions about whether children's services are being effectively monitored and held to account. Moving forward we will need assurances that the system is addressing variation and the impact this has on children. In the coming months, we look forward to conversations with colleagues in Ofsted and local and national government to establish how we can monitor progress.

On behalf of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Children I would like to express my gratitude to all the frontline practitioners, service leaders, and other professionals who participated in this Inquiry, and indeed to all of those who dedicate their lives to working to support our most vulnerable children.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'L. Loughton', with a long horizontal line underneath.

**Tim Loughton MP,**  
Chair, All Party  
Parliamentary  
Group for Children

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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.

## **(I) 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.**

# INTRODUCTION

## PURPOSE OF THE INQUIRY

In March 2017, the All Party Parliamentary Group for Children (APPGC) published the report of its first Inquiry into the state of children's social care services in England. *No Good Options* found evidence of a system struggling to meet increasing and more complex demand, while at the same time facing reductions in funding. Local authorities' spending power decreased by over 20 per cent between 2010/11 and 2015/16.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the number of children becoming subject to a child protection plan rose by 29.2 per cent between 2010/11 and 2015/16.

Significantly, the first Inquiry highlighted variation in policy, practice and the provision of support and interventions across the country. For example, the prevalence rate of children classified as 'in need' by their local authority ranged from 115 per 10,000 to 1189 – over ten times the rate.<sup>2</sup> There was similar variation in rates of children subject to child protection plans and rates of children in care. Evidence suggested that only a small proportion of this variation could be explained by genuine variation in the level of need between different local areas.

This follow-up Inquiry, launched in September 2017, seeks to build a clearer understanding of that variation, focusing on thresholds for accessing services. Through the Inquiry, the APPGC has sought to gather evidence on:

- the extent to which thresholds vary across England;
- whether thresholds have risen over time;
- what might underlie these patterns and trends; and
- what impact they are having on children.

## NO GOOD OPTIONS – KEY FINDINGS

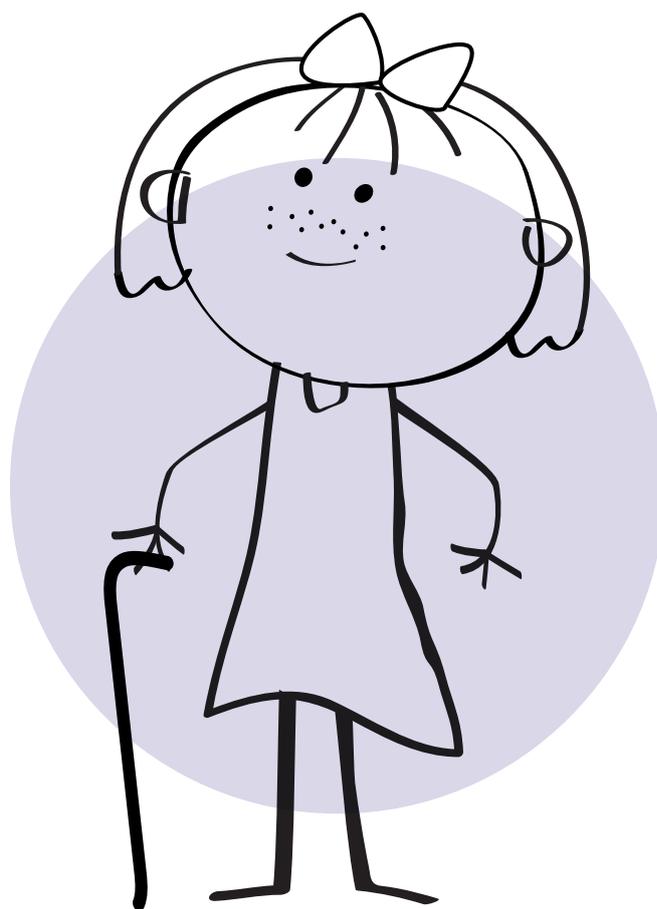
- 1) The children's social care system is struggling to meet demand. Resource is being directed towards children who have already suffered abuse and neglect and away from early intervention and prevention.
- 2) Local authorities are struggling to keep up with demand from rising numbers of children and families needing support.
- 3) Stable relationships are key to achieving positive outcomes for children. However, stable relationships are often undermined by staff shortages and high staff turnover.
- 4) Children in care are not routinely involved in decisions about their own support and sometimes do not understand why they are looked after.
- 5) Negative Ofsted ratings often lead to a period of instability for children's services. Strong, stable leadership is a key factor to help improve performance.
- 6) There is variation in the numbers of children accessing social care services across different parts of the country. For example the local authority with the highest rate of child protection plans had over seven times the rate as the lowest, whilst the local authority classifying the highest proportion of children as 'in need' had over ten times the rate of the lowest. Local practice may be partly responsible for this variation, and this has significant implications for the outcomes of these vulnerable children.

1. Total revenue expenditure of local authorities in England fell from £104,256M in 2010/11 to £94,533M in 2015/16 (calculated using the Bank of England Inflation Calculator to be worth £81,724M in 2010 prices), a real terms decrease of 21.6%. See Department for Communities and Local Government, Local Authority Revenue Expenditure and Financing: Final Outturn, England, <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/local-authority-revenue-expenditure-and-financing> and Bank of England Inflation Calculator <http://www.bankofengland.co.uk/education/Pages/resources/inflationtools/calculator/default.aspx>.

2. Department for Education (2016) Characteristics of Children in Need: 2015-16.

Since the publication of *No Good Options*, in early 2017, more expert organisations and sector leaders, including the Association for Directors of Children's Services and the Local Government Association, are calling out the crisis facing children's services.<sup>3</sup> Ofsted has praised improvements made by some local authorities, but also acknowledged the challenges that the sector is facing.<sup>4</sup> Over two thirds of local authorities were judged 'inadequate' or 'requires improvement to be good' in relation to their work with children in need of help and protection at their last inspection.<sup>5</sup>

It is clear that local authorities are increasingly struggling to provide the support children and families need. The aim of this Inquiry is to increase our understanding of the pressures facing social workers and local authority leaders who make decisions every day about care and services for children, and to make recommendations for ensuring no child or family has to reach crisis point before getting help.



3. Association of Directors of Children's Services (October 2017) *A country that works for all children*; Local Government Association (October 2017) *Bright Futures – getting the best for children, young people and families*; Action for Children, National Children's Bureau, The Children's Society (2017) *Turning the tide: Reversing the move to late intervention spending in children and young people's services*; and National Audit Office (2018) *Financial Sustainability of Local Authorities 2018*.

4. Ofsted (2017) *The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2016/17*. Pp65-72.

5. Ofsted (2017) *Local authority and children's homes in England inspections and outcomes Autumn 2017: main findings*.

## STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

This report is split into five sections:

**Section 1: Inconsistency in criteria for accessing support** outlines evidence gathered to understand whether thresholds for accessing children's social care services vary across the country;

**Section 2: Services are getting harder to access** explores whether thresholds have risen over time, making it harder for children to get help;

**Section 3: A sustainable future for preventative and early help services** focuses on these questions in relation to early help and services for 'children in need', and the implications for current policy development;

**Section 4: Resources are influencing decisions about whether to intervene** highlights evidence relating to the impact of financial pressures on everyday decisions about the provision of help to families; and

**Section 5: Involving children and young people in decisions about their own care** outlines the views shared by young people who have left care about the key issues they think need to be addressed.

## EVIDENCE GATHERED DURING THE INQUIRY

This report is based on evidence gathered by the APPGC through evidence sessions and surveys of practitioners and sector leaders. Key activity included:

- Five evidence sessions, taking oral evidence from local children's service leaders, children and young people, social workers, teachers, academics, the Children's Commissioner and the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families;
- Survey of Directors of Children's Services in England, with 97 respondents<sup>6</sup>;
- Survey of social workers in England, with 1,710 respondents<sup>7</sup>; and
- Analysis of a sample of Local Safeguarding Children Boards' threshold documents, which outline the criteria for referring a child to a local authority for assessment and provision of services.

A full list of witnesses and details of survey methodologies are provided in Annex B.

## ABOUT THE ALL PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP FOR CHILDREN (APPGC)

The APPGC is a group of MPs and Peers with an interest in children's issues and securing effective policy change for children. The APPGC holds regular meetings on current issues affecting children and young people, and works strategically to raise the profile of children's needs and concerns in Parliament. As well as inviting representatives of child-focused voluntary and statutory organisations and government departments to attend meetings, the APPGC hears directly from children and young people to take their views into consideration.

6. See Annex B, part iii.

7. See Annex B, part ii.

### The Officers of the APPGC

**Co-Chairs:** Baroness Howarth of Breckland and Tim Loughton MP (Con, East Worthing and Shoreham)

**Vice-Chairs:** Baroness Walmsley of West Derby, Baroness Massey of Darwen, Baroness Tyler of Enfield and Sarah Champion MP (Lab, Rotherham)

**Secretary:** Alex Burghart MP

**Treasurer:** The Earl of Listowel

**The National Children's Bureau provides the secretariat.**

**APPGC mission statement:** *'To raise greater awareness in the Houses of Parliament on aspects of the well-being of the nation's children aged 0-18 years, and our obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child; and to work with children, young people, children's organisations, and politicians from all sides to promote first-class government policy for children'.*

# SECTION 1: INCONSISTENCY IN CRITERIA FOR ACCESSING SUPPORT

The APPGC's report *No Good Options* found evidence of significant variation in intervention rates across children's social care services in England. One aim of this follow-up Inquiry was to explore the degree to which there is variation in 'thresholds' - the level of need a child or family needs to reach in order to be assessed for, or given, social care support. Overall, the evidence indicates that there is inconsistency in criteria for accessing children's social care services across England. Children with the same levels of need are getting different levels of support.

## THRESHOLDS ACROSS ENGLAND ARE INCONSISTENT

*'Why do we have thresholds? Yes, they're a tool, but they must also, in some way, reflect what we as a society want for children'*

**Anne Longfield,**  
Children's Commissioner for England

The majority of Directors of Children's Services (83 per cent) surveyed by the APPGC said that the thresholds for accessing early help services varied across local authorities while almost three quarters (74 per cent) agreed that thresholds varied for accessing 'children in need' support. A substantial proportion of Directors of Children's Services also agreed that thresholds varied for the more acute statutory interventions making a child the subject of a child protection plan (64 per cent) and applying for a care order (49 per cent).

There is a general consensus that in order for thresholds to inform effective decision making on children's social care, they need to be clear and consistent.<sup>8</sup> However, existing research on thresholds used by local authority children's services strongly suggests that there are issues around inconsistency in how thresholds are formulated and applied.<sup>9</sup>

This Inquiry found that leaders within children's social care in England concur that there is inconsistency in threshold levels for children's social care interventions, particularly in relation to early help and services for 'children in need' under s.17 (see section 3 for further information). This means that the level of need a child has to reach in order to access support will differ from area to area.

8. Bywaters et al. (2017) 'Identifying and understanding inequalities in child welfare intervention rates: Comparative studies in four UK countries. London: Child Welfare Inequalities Project'; Department for Education (2015) 'Working together to safeguard children'; Ofsted (2014) 'In the child's time: professional responses to neglect'; Platt, D., & Turney, D. (2014) 'Making Threshold Decisions in Child Protection: A Conceptual Analysis'; and Webb, C. J. R., & Bywaters, P. (2018) 'Austerity, rationing and inequity: trends in children's and young peoples' services expenditure in England between 2010 and 2015'.

9. Ofsted (2014) 'In the child's time: professional responses to neglect' and Platt, D., & Turney, D. (2014) 'Making Threshold Decisions in Child Protection: A Conceptual Analysis'.

Directors of Children's Services told the APPGC that there is variation across local authorities in thresholds for accessing four different interventions with children and young people.

83%



Said thresholds varied for providing early help

74%



Said thresholds varied for providing services for children in need

64%



Said thresholds varied for making a child the subject of a protection plan

49%



Said thresholds varied for applying for a care order

Social workers responding to a survey carried out as part of the Inquiry highlighted inconsistency in threshold levels across a range of social care interventions. One commented on the 'vast differences' they had observed between thresholds in London boroughs when compared with county councils. A fostering service manager with experience of working with different local authorities shared a similar perspective and raised concerns about a 'postcode lottery' of support.

*'I work for an independent fostering agency. We therefore work with many different local authorities and county councils. What we experience is there is a significant difference in how safeguarding is managed between authorities. Where one authority will call for a Section 47, another one will be happy for us to do an internal investigation... it really concerns me that protecting children becomes a bit of a postcode lottery.'*

**Social Worker**

Another social worker explained that although their team are working on upholding 'relatively consistent thresholds', they believe there are 'issues with parity across the county' and are worried about families receiving different services in different areas.

*'Thresholds for issuing proceedings appear to be rising. We have good step up and step down systems that work well as we work closely with early help and child protection and court teams but I am not confident this happens county wide.'*

**Emergency Duty Team Manager**

Russ Clarke, Designated Safeguarding Lead, Haslingden High School, spoke about his experience working in a school with a catchment area that falls within three different local authorities, each offering a different support system. He told the Inquiry that 'there are lots of differences between the local authorities and these differences relate to differing threshold levels, the availability of local services within that area and the referral process itself'.

The Inquiry heard that inconsistency in the types of support which are offered to a child are particularly pronounced for early help services and support offered to 'children in need' under s.17 (see below). Nevertheless, evidence also indicates variation in the application of thresholds around more acute statutory services (specifically s.47 interventions). Noel Arnold, co-Chair of the Association of Lawyers for Children, told the Inquiry that it is 'not uncommon' to observe two cases where the issues are very similar and yet for the first case the local authority's involvement will be at the s.17 level (child in need) and in the second, the child will be the subject of a child protection plan (s.47). Conceding that some variation is to be expected, Arnold raised concerns that 'the degree of variation is too great'.

## THE ROLE OF LOCAL THRESHOLD DOCUMENTS

In order to investigate this variation in more depth, the APPGC commissioned an analysis of a sample of 'threshold documents' published by Local Safeguarding Children's Boards (LSCBs).<sup>10</sup>

Under existing safeguarding arrangements, every LSCB is required to publish a threshold document that outlines the criteria, including the level of need, for referring a child to a local authority for assessment and provision of services.<sup>11</sup> Threshold documents are primarily aimed at professionals working in universal services to inform them of their responsibilities around the provision of 'early help' services. The documents also explain the kind of support the professionals can expect from children's social care when more serious concerns arise.

Assessments of individual children, which are conducted by professionally qualified social workers, are informed by more detailed guidance and training. They will also typically involve consideration of a wide range of risks and protective factors in combination. However, locally agreed threshold documents still play an important role in helping them to determine the most appropriate level of intervention. Responding to surveys carried out as part of this Inquiry, both social workers and Directors of Children's Services said that locally agreed thresholds, as published by the LSCB, are one of the top three factors that influence decisions about the level of intervention or support (if any) a child receives.<sup>12</sup>

The analysis focussed on how the documents addressed five separate issues: domestic violence between parents; self-harm; housing problems; bullying and physical abuse. We chose to focus on these as they are relatively discrete issues which reflect at least some of the breadth of the risks and needs vulnerable children experience.

10. See full methodology in Annex B, part v.

11. Department for Education 'Working together to safeguard children A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children'.

12. DCSs cited 'individual professional judgement of the child's needs by the social workers managing the case', 'locally agreed thresholds as published by the Local Safeguarding Children's Board' and 'advice or direction from junior managers or team leaders' as the three most influential factors. Social workers agreed that individual professional judgement and locally agreed thresholds were influential. However, they also cited 'finances available to the local authority' as one of the top three most influential factors. See full survey results for DCS and Social Worker survey in Annex B, parts ii and iii.

## FINDINGS OF THE THRESHOLD DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

Our analysis found that children with very similar needs, or who are facing very similar risks, will receive different levels of intervention or support depending on where they live. Although there is a degree of alignment between threshold documents, there are also examples of variation, particularly around the issues of domestic violence, self-harm, housing and bullying. Crucially, some children may not be receiving the help they need, and some may be left in dangerous situations.

*'... thresholds nationally should be in line to ensure all children receive appropriate services at the appropriate level of intervention.'*

**Newly qualified Social Worker**

Threshold documents naturally use differing language to describe similar issues. They also, to varying degrees, describe a continuum of severity and risk for each of the five issues we looked at, and suggest a range of levels of intervention in response. For example, in the case of domestic violence "parental relationship issues" may be listed as a problem to be addressed by early help led by universal services, while "serious, persistent domestic violence" would be an issue for which a child protection investigation is recommended. The analysis categorised the levels of support or intervention recommended by the documents (set out in the box below). It then investigated the extent to which the different documents align regarding the severity of need described as warranting each level of intervention. Further detail of how this analysis was carried out are included in Annex B, part v.

## HOW LEVELS OF INTERVENTION ARE STRUCTURED IN THRESHOLD DOCUMENTS

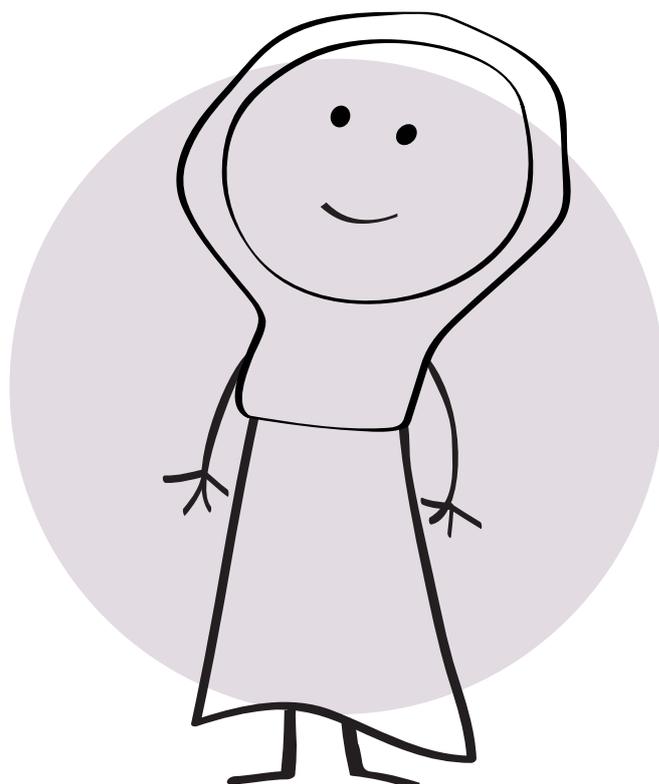
The analysis found that LSCB threshold documents describe four levels of intervention:

- **Level A – Early help** is recommended but this is to be led by **universal services** without support from children's social care;
- **Level B – Early help** is recommended and this involves some kind of advice, coordination or additional service from **children's social care**;
- **Level C** – The child is considered potentially a '**Child in Need**' so should be referred to children's social care for assessment and support under s.17 of the Children Act; and
- **Level D** – Urgent referral to children's social care, so that s.47 inquiries, **child protection** plans and/or emergency accommodation (S20) orders can be considered.

In individual documents these are typically grouped into three categories of threshold levels. There is some inconsistency in how this is done, for example some LSCBs set out just one level of early help while 10 out of 37 documents reviewed combine 'children in need' (Level C) and child protection (level D) into a single level.

## Domestic violence

The vast majority of documents analysed for this Inquiry suggest that serious, persistent, domestic violence is always treated as a serious safeguarding issue (at level D). However, the level of domestic violence required to initiate a s.47 inquiry appears to vary between local authority areas. For example, in some areas, referrals to children's social care for suspected domestic violence are not encouraged unless it meets a certain degree of severity, consistency, or has an impact on the child. There is also variation in the extent to which precursors to domestic violence, such as family conflict, are included at the early help level. Our analysis suggests that children witnessing multiple established instances of domestic violence (as opposed to being at potential risk of such instances) may only be considered for early help and not receive any statutory assessment.



## IDENTICAL SITUATION: DIFFERENT RESPONSE

Whilst most of the variation identified in threshold documents was of a more nuanced nature, there were some examples of identical descriptions of a child's situation being prescribed different levels of intervention. For example:

- "incidents of domestic violence" were said to warrant statutory child protection inquiries (level D) in three documents but in two others only invited early help from universal services (level A).
- "Family characterised by conflict and serious chronic relationship problems" were said to warrant statutory child protection inquiries (level D) in four documents but in one document only were only prescribed early help from universal services.
- Children "experiencing bullying" (or "victims of" or "affected by") were categorised as level A in some areas and level B (early help supported by children's social care) in some others.
- Some areas included "severe and/or persistent bullying" at level C ('children in need') while others placed it at level D.
- "Child subject to discrimination" was an indicator for level A in several areas, whilst this was an indicator for level C in several others.
- "Overcrowded housing" was referred to as justifying support at levels A, B or C depending on the authority in question. The same was true of "housing in a poor state of repair".

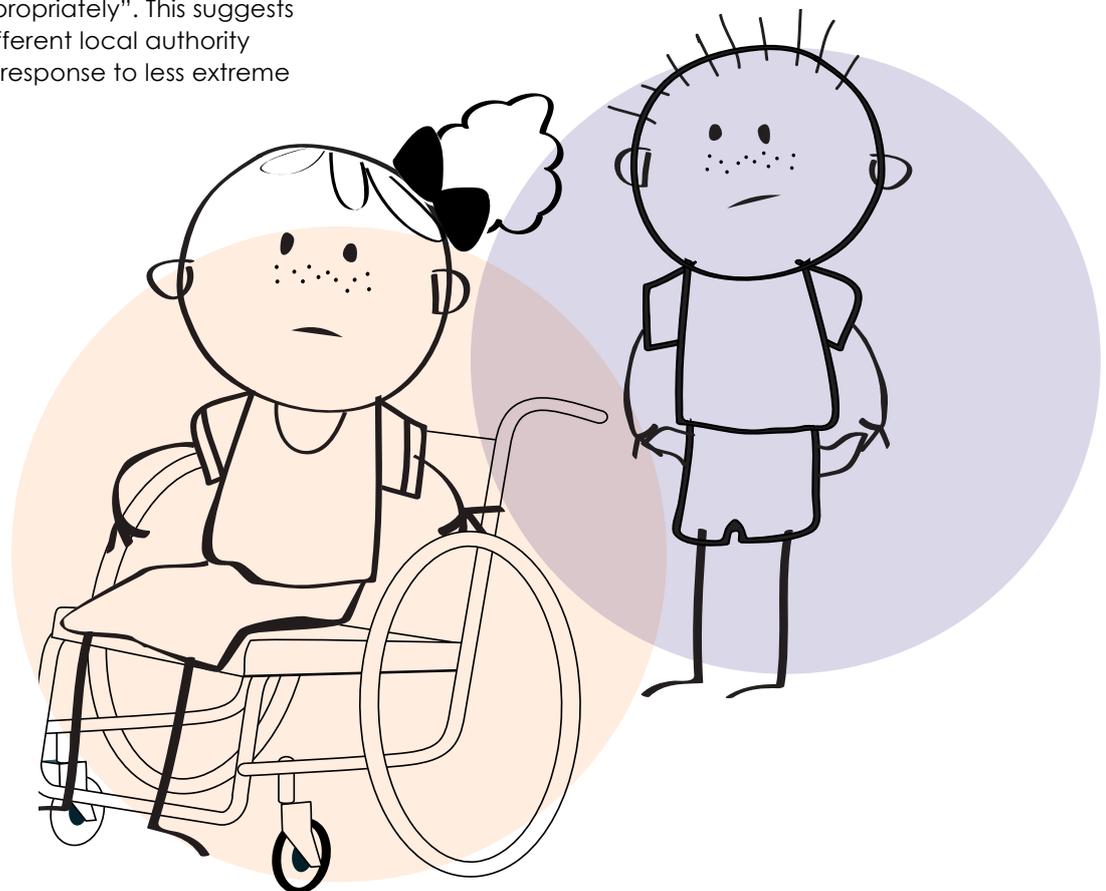
## Self-harm

Threshold documents took a variety of approaches to the issue of self-harm. For example, in some areas, they indicate that no early help is offered in cases of self-harm, while others set out a spectrum of interventions for cases of varying severity. There is also variation between threshold documents in the degree of self-harm that would trigger either a s.17 assessment or s.47 inquiry. It is important to acknowledge that threshold documents may be drafted on an assumption that children and young people's mental health services (CYPMHS) will be able to support most children affected by self-harm. However, a recent review conducted by the Care Quality Commission found that many children and young people experiencing mental health problems do not get the level of care they need.<sup>13</sup>

In some local authorities, descriptors of self-harm such as "single episode of self-harm (including substance misuse)" and "Self harm with suicidal thoughts" were an indicator for early help (levels A and B) whereas in several other threshold documents, the only reference to self-harm was for more severe instances at level D. These severe instances could include, "life-threatening self-harm" or "a child self-harms [repeatedly], the harm is life threatening, and the parent does not respond appropriately". This suggests there is variation between different local authority areas in terms of the agreed response to less extreme cases of self-harm.

## Housing

Poor and overcrowded housing also appears at different intervention levels in different local areas. Housing only appears to become a child protection issue (level D) when conditions present an immediate danger to the child. Some documents did not address housing quality at all, but did mention housing stability or homelessness. There was also inconsistency about the appropriate level of response to families who are at risk of homelessness.



13. Care Quality Commission (2018) 'Are we listening? A review of children and young people's mental health services'.

## Bullying

The ways in which bullying is addressed within threshold documents vary in a similar way to self-harm, with inconsistency in the extent to which less severe needs are addressed. Some documents made no reference to bullying at all. The analysis also suggested that in some local authority areas a child's experience of bullying may result in a child protection inquiry, whilst in others their school would be expected to address the situation without even contacting children's social care.

## Physical abuse

We found that threshold documents are generally aligned when looking at physical abuse. However, there were still inconsistencies which could have a significant impact on decision-making about interventions for children. For example, the indicators of physical abuse required to trigger a s.47 Inquiry appear to be more severe in some local authority areas than others.

Figure 1 shows indicators set out in four different local threshold documents. For the purpose of comparison, we focused on the category of physical abuse and those incidents which would constitute the consideration of child protection proceedings.



**Figure 1: Differing thresholds for child protection proceedings in relation to physical abuse – examples from four LSCB threshold documents**

| LOW THRESHOLDS  | HIGH THRESHOLDS  |
|---|--|
| <p><b>Local authority area 1:</b></p> <p>Deliberately physically hurting a child</p> <p>Children with frequent injuries</p> <p>Parental/sibling disclosure of FGM within the family</p> <p>Children with unexplained or unusual fractures or broken bones/burns or scalds/bruises or cuts/bite marks</p> <p>Indicators and concerns of forced marriage/ honour based violence/female genital mutilation (FGM) that requires further assessment and parental/sibling disclosure of FGM within the family</p> | <p><b>Local authority area 3:</b></p> <p>Clear allegation of harm and/or disclosure of harm</p> <p>Suffering or at risk of suffering serious physical, emotional or sexual harm or neglect</p> <p>Parents have seriously abused/neglected the child</p> <p>Family life is chaotic and there is significant and persistent parental or carer discord /domestic abuse/ honour based violence / forced marriage</p> |
| <p><b>Local authority area 2:</b></p> <p>Physical injury which may be from one single serious injury or a pattern of sustained injuries</p>   | <p><b>Local authority area 4:</b></p> <p>Parents have seriously abused or neglected the child/young person</p>   |

The threshold documents for local authority areas 1 and 2 appear to describe lower thresholds than those for local authority areas 3 and 4. In local authority areas 1 and 2, indicators describe physical injury without requiring judgement on the cause of the injury or any criteria regarding severity. This contrasts with local authorities 3 and 4, which clearly describe what is meant by abuse and neglect, including clear allegations or disclosure of harm or 'persistent... honour based violence'.

### INCONSISTENCY IN PROVISION OF EARLY HELP

The Inquiry heard particularly compelling evidence that there is inconsistency in the types of early support offered to families with similar needs across England.

Of the Directors of Children's Services who responded to the Inquiry's survey, 83 per cent stated that the threshold for qualifying for early help varied across local authorities. Other Directors of Children's Services said that in the absence of a statutory 'safety net' to ensure all children and families that need early help are able to access it, significant variation was 'inevitable'.

Directors of Children's Services explained that the primary reason for this inconsistency is simply that some local authorities have more resource to fund 'early help' services than others. One Director of Children's Services told the Inquiry that thresholds for early help vary significantly around the country because they are 'heavily dependent' on the money the local authority has available. Another explained that 'tolerance' for early help is 'based on resources'. With no statutory obligation to provide preventative services, local authorities are facing tough decisions about which services to prioritise, and are often forced to reduce their early help offer first.

*'After eight years of severe pressure on council finances... early intervention services are the only places councils can turn for that money.'*

**Richard Watts, Chair of Children and Young People Board at the Local Government Association**

Where limited resources for early help services remain, local authorities are using those budgets to tackle specific local issues, such as mental health, leaving families with other needs with little or no early support. As noted from the analysis of threshold documents, in some areas early help is understood to be led by universal services, and involves no targeted support or involvement of children's social care. Witnesses were clear that this restricted availability of early help has, and will continue to have, damaging implications for children and families. Children and families around the country who are presenting with the same needs are receiving significantly different levels of support, or in some cases, no support at all. Likewise, the Inquiry heard of cases where families had moved from one local area to another and were then unable to access the support services they had previously been able to despite their needs remaining the same.

Recent research from the Local Government Association found that the local authority spending of children's services budgets varies wildly. For example, the proportion of spend on areas other than safeguarding and looked after children ranged from 22 per cent, to 56 per cent. The research also identified different approaches to early help and preventative services and noted that higher spend on early help appeared to flow from local political or strategic commitment.<sup>14</sup>

To help overcome this inconsistency, Directors of Children's Services giving evidence to this Inquiry called for a statutory 'safety net' to ensure all children and families are able to access support early. This issue is addressed in more detail in section 3.3, below.

*'To protect vital statutory services, early help and preventative services have, in some places, been severely reduced despite our desire to help children and young people by intervening early.'*

**Alison Michalska, President, Association of Directors of Children's Services<sup>15</sup>**

## WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND FAMILIES?

It is right that, as pointed out by Directors of Children's Services who spoke to the Inquiry, there will be some differences between local authorities' provision of services, as they set their priorities to meet varying local need. However, the APPGC is concerned by the strength of evidence revealed in the Inquiry and that inconsistencies are resulting in inequity in access to care and support, and therefore, variation in outcomes for children.

Noel Arnold, Co-Chair, Association of Lawyers for Children, told the Inquiry that while some local variation is 'naturally sensible', this leads to a 'lack of commonality across the country'. He explained that the service a family receives from one local authority can differ from the service offered by another where the issues faced by the child or family 'could be said to be of a similar nature'. This is supported by a Director of Children's Services who explained that variation in threshold levels means that a child classified as 'in need' who moves from one area to another may become undetected and miss out on support. He suggested that if thresholds were applied consistently then a child with a plan would always be picked up in the new area for the requisite level of support. Currently, this is not the case.

*'...Local Authorities so differ in their application of thresholds that a stranger to social work might form the view that they are not working to a national framework but to locally produced rules and regulations. Localism is all very well but parents and children are entitled to be dealt with equitably wherever they reside and that is not currently the case...'*

**Former Social Work Team Manager**

14. Local Government Association (2018) 'Making Sense – Understanding the drivers of variation in spend on Children's Services'. ic Abuse'.

15. See 'President's Address to the ADCS Annual Conference 2017' [http://adcs.org.uk/assets/documentation/AC17\\_Presidential\\_Address.pdf](http://adcs.org.uk/assets/documentation/AC17_Presidential_Address.pdf).

Russ Clarke, Designated Safeguarding Lead at Haslingden High School, explained how working with a number of local authorities with different thresholds for accessing support makes it challenging to provide consistent support for young people.

*'We feel we have to know the differences between all three authorities' procedures and it puts the outcomes for students at risk as each one has its own way of working'*

**Russ Clarke, Designated Safeguarding Lead at Haslingden High School**

**Recommendation 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.**

## ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO THRESHOLDS

Research has shown that clearly defined thresholds can lead to timely and comprehensive action by children's social care or other partner services, which in turn results in better outcomes for children and families.<sup>16</sup> However, the concept of thresholds has also been critiqued for over-simplifying the complex processes of decision making in children's social care<sup>17</sup> and for promoting an approach to social work where children and events fall into binary categories instead of being seen as parts of a continuum.<sup>18</sup>

The Inquiry heard that some local authorities are encouraging a re-think of the process for assessing need and risk and providing appropriate support for children and families. David Ashcroft, Chair, Association of Independent Local Safeguarding Children's Boards, talked about his work as Chair of the Norfolk LSCB to develop a new child-centred approach which encourages professionals to have early conversations with families and make decisions based upon the child's needs. Steve Walker, Director of Children's Services, Leeds City Council, also told the Inquiry about Leeds's ambition to become a 'truly child friendly city' and their work to develop a new framework which recognises the limitations of thresholds and builds on positive joint-working between children's social care and partner agencies.

Ashcroft told the Inquiry he wants to see a change of terminology because dealing with the lives of children and young people requires a more sophisticated approach. Concurrently, Walker explained why an over-reliance on rigid thresholds in decision making about individual children could be problematic:

- 'They cannot take account of the complexities of individual children's lives;
- They give a false sense of certainty based on limited rule based assessments;
- They are based on unrealistic models of decision-making; and
- They can produce incentives to pass off responsibility by 'gaming' the system, raising or lowering thresholds or tailoring referrals'.<sup>19</sup>

16. Axford, N., & Berry, V. (2018) 'Perfect Bedfellows: Why Early Intervention Can Play a Critical Role in Protecting Children - A Response to Featherstone et al. (2014) - A Marriage Made in Hell: Child Protection Meets Early Intervention', National Audit Office (2016) 'Children in need of help or protection', NSPCC (2014) 'Assessing children and families An NSPCC factsheet', Ofsted (2014) 'In the child's time: professional responses to neglect', Ofsted (2015) 'The quality of assessment for children in need of help' and Ofsted (2017) 'The Multi-Agency Response to Children Living with Domestic Abuse'.

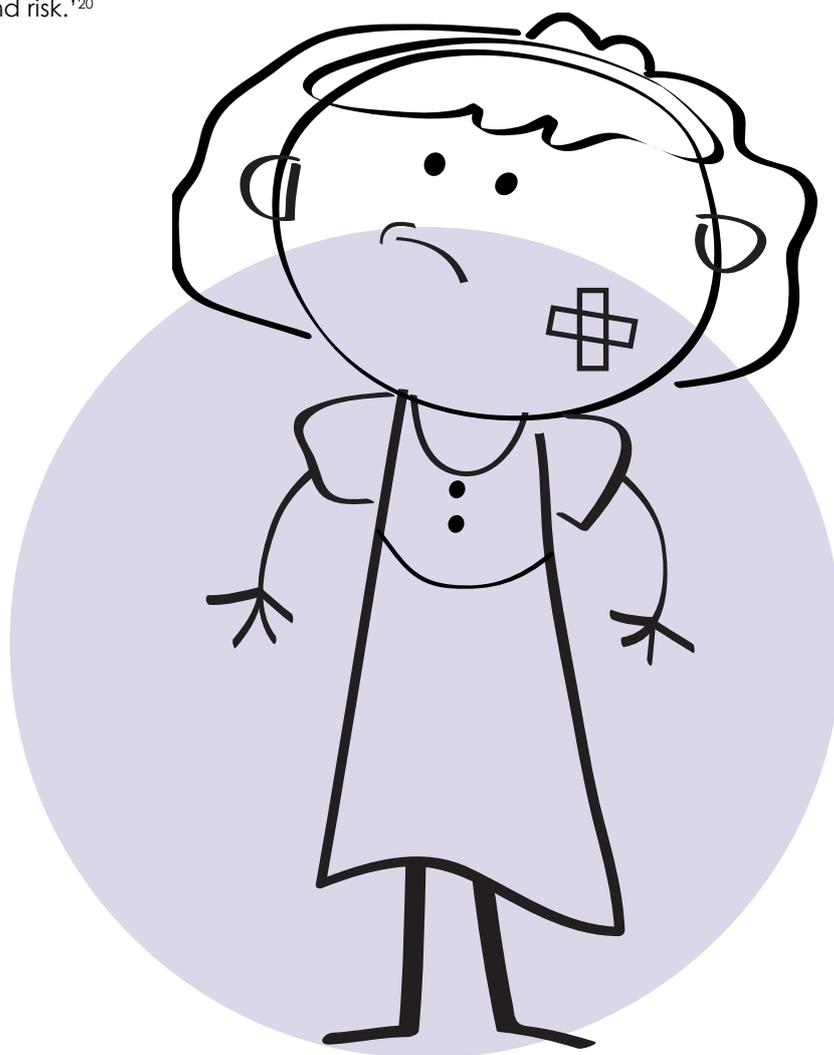
17. Platt, D., & Turney, D., (2014) 'Making Threshold Decisions in Child Protection: A Conceptual Analysis'.

18. Kirk, G., & Duschinsky, R. (2017) 'On the margins of the child protection system: creating space for relational social work practice'.

19. Steve Walker, Deputy Director Safeguarding Specialist and Targeted (2014) 'Beyond Thresholds – Report to Leeds Safeguarding Children's Board'.

However, Steve Walker told the Inquiry that significant groundwork is required in order for local authorities to successfully transition away from the existing threshold model and warned against services plunging into a new approach without undertaking a considerable amount of work with local partnerships on use of language, and change of practice and culture.

Leeds has been praised for its approach by Ofsted: 'The [Local Children's Safeguarding] Board exercises careful scrutiny of the transition from a traditional threshold management model to one where referrals receive considered conversations and responses based on the needs of children, rather than establishing whether a threshold has been met... Board partners, particularly schools (who are the biggest referrers), describe a discernible culture change from rigid threshold discussions with the front door, to one in which productive conversations are held, with growing confidence that the early help offer in clusters is providing reliable, robust and appropriate alternatives based on need and risk.'<sup>20</sup>



20. Ofsted (2015) 'Leeds City Council Inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after, and care leavers, and Review of the effectiveness of the local safeguarding children board'.

## CASE STUDY:

### A CHILD CENTRED FRAMEWORK FOR MAKING DECISIONS IN NORFOLK

Following widespread consultation and a series of co-production workshops, in 2016, Norfolk Safeguarding Children's Board (NSCB) launched a new framework for managing thresholds. The purpose of the new framework was to support the development of early help and prevention work by partner agencies, and to reduce the high level of referrals to children's services that were often resulting in no continuing social care intervention, overloading the local Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) with inappropriate referrals. Upon developing and adopting the new framework, professionals working with children were encouraged to re-think the purpose of thresholds. This was informed by the Signs of Safety approach<sup>21</sup> that had already been adopted by Norfolk County Council and the Children's partnership and has been used by other local authorities.<sup>22</sup>

The new framework is set out in an illustrated, 'family friendly' booklet which can be used by a wide range of workers.<sup>23</sup> This includes more specific guidance on what level of response is appropriate to presenting concerns, and this has given workers more confidence to use the new approach.<sup>24</sup> It is also accompanied by an animation aimed at children and families.

The NSCB have reported that the new Guide helps professionals make decisions that are centred on the child's needs and encourages early conversations between workers about their concerns rather than just promoting a process of referring on.

The way the information is presented has

proved valuable for professionals when they are talking directly with children and families about why agencies may be involved with their lives, and why help and intervention are sometimes required. The feedback has been positive and has reportedly helped reduce the fear of statutory work or intervention.

'We still have more work to do to ensure the consistency of our responses through MASH, to develop better early help support, and to audit how the Guide is being used, but we are sure that this has been a positive and ground-breaking look at what thresholds are for and how we can all work in new ways. Several other authorities are moving away from rigid threshold guides and constructing their work with families so there is no "Wrong Front Door" for seeking help and support. This recognises that even where social care support is required to keep children safe, universal, community and informal services are still vital to help with a child's needs - we all share safeguarding responsibilities and thresholds are not an excuse "to pass the problem on".'

– David Ashcroft, Chair Norfolk LSCB and Association of Independent LSCB Chairs

Norfolk are still in a similar situation to many other local authorities, having been judged as 'requires improvement' for their work with 'children in need' of help and protection. Ofsted have, however, noted the NSCB's efforts to make thresholds clearer to agencies working with children and acknowledged the good relationships many children and families have with social workers.

21. For further information about the Signs of Safety approach in England, see <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/services-and-resources/research-and-resources/2013/signs-of-safety-model-england>.

22. In Norfolk, Signs of Safety was seen not just as a practice model for children's social care, but an underpinning philosophy for how the authority wanted all agencies to work with children and families - building on strengths and capacity, clearly identifying the risks and dangers that face children and being specific about what actions are required by all those involved with a family to mitigate and reduce these risks.

23. The NSCB also produced a short animation, voiced by young people, to explain and support the Guide. The animation is available to watch here: <https://youtu.be/RljeBmXV78Q>.

24. The guide is available to view here: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0Bxl3UsoRvExtUS1NMEJuYmlUQzQ/view>.

## CASE STUDY:

### A FRAMEWORK FOR BETTER DECISION MAKING FOR VULNERABLE CHILDREN IN LEEDS

Starting in 2011, Leeds developed a framework to facilitate multi-agency conversations about the needs of vulnerable and potentially vulnerable children.

A multi-agency Duty and Advice Team was established at the 'front door' to ensure that any professional with a concern about a child had the opportunity to speak to a qualified social worker or a relevant professional. Cluster arrangements between schools were strengthened to support early help through the appointment of a Targeted Services Leader for each cluster, and a weekly multi-agency referral meeting was established to review a sample of all decisions to ensure that these were appropriate. This new approach aimed to recognise the complexity of children's needs and circumstances and helped to ensure that the appropriate support was provided in the most appropriate way.

However, despite these changes, decision making in Leeds was still underpinned by a rigid threshold criteria document and partners were increasingly voicing their concerns that this inhibited, rather than supported, child-centred decision making. As a result, in 2013, the Leeds local safeguarding children's board (LSCB) unanimously agreed to move to a process in which professionals would make decisions based on agreed understanding of need and the most appropriate response.

This new approach built on the existing framework that had been developed in Leeds to support multi-agency discussions about vulnerable and potentially vulnerable children, and introduced the concept of 'threshold conversations' which provide practitioners who have a concern that a

child may need additional support, with the opportunity to have a quality conversation to clarify the nature of the concerns, the needs of the child, and the most appropriate way to respond to them.

It is notable that there was no change in the way in which concerns about significant harm were handled in Leeds. Where concerns were raised that a child may be at risk of significant harm, these continued to be discussed with the Duty and Advice Team to identify and implement an appropriate response.

The rollout of the new approach was led by the Leeds LSCB. To embed the new approach effectively, rollout included focus groups with frontline practitioners, briefings and training events.

Leeds cite the following advantages of the new approach:

- It is founded on collaboration and conversation;
- Promotes shared responsibility and flexibility;
- Increases practitioner confidence;
- Recognises complexity of unique needs of each individual child and family; and
- Reduces bias of individual professional and agency decisions through debate.

Leeds is one of the minority of local authorities which has received a judgement of 'Good' from Ofsted for its work with 'children in need' of help and protection. Ofsted have praised its partnership working in relation to early help and its robust 'front door' arrangements.<sup>25</sup>

25. Ofsted (2015) 'Leeds City Council Inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after, and care leavers, and Review of the effectiveness of the local safeguarding children board'.

Thresholds should not be used to block children from getting the care and support they need. It is important that the right support is found for all children, whichever agency this may come from, and that all those working with the child understand the role they can play. As such, the APPGC welcomes work by local authorities to re-think their approach to service thresholds as this provides an opportunity to address a wider range of support for children and families. In Leeds, for example, there is more opportunity for dynamic conversations between different agencies as opposed to transactional referral system. In Norfolk, the information about support for vulnerable families has been made much more accessible supporting more constructive conversations with families.

**Recommendation 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.**

## NEW LOCAL SAFEGUARDING ARRANGEMENTS

Under new guidance from the Department for Education, LSCBs are being replaced with new local safeguarding arrangements led by three local safeguarding partners (the local authority, a clinical commissioning group for an area within the local authority and the chief officer of police for an area within the local authority area) who will work together to 'identify and respond to the needs of local children'.<sup>26</sup> The three lead partners are responsible for determining which local agencies to work with, and how best to work with those agencies, in order to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in their area.

The APPGC is concerned that schools are missing from the list of safeguarding partners. Children and young people who are at risk of abuse or neglect are more likely to spend a significant amount of time at school than in the presence of any of the other designated safeguarding partners. As such, schools have a critical role to play in the early identification of need.

The APPGC is also concerned that the forthcoming changes to local safeguarding arrangements will lead to more variation between local areas. As local safeguarding partners will be able to determine which local agencies to work with, there will inevitably be further inconsistency in the way need is identified and service provision is offered to children and families in different areas.

In order to ensure consistency in outcomes for children and young people, it is imperative that the Government sets up an independent scrutiny board to oversee and report on how the new arrangements are influencing outcomes for children and families.

**Recommendation 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.**

## UNDERSTANDING NEED AND DEMAND: THE DATA GAP

The Inquiry heard that gaps in data collection mean it is very difficult to fully understand the needs of families and to effectively distribute resources to provide appropriate support.

26. Department for Education (April 2018) 'Working Together to Safeguard Children A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children Draft for consultation'.

## Disabled children

There are rising numbers of disabled children and children with complex needs and/or life limiting conditions. However, recent research from the Council for Disabled Children and the True Colours Trust found that there is currently limited data collected on this cohort.<sup>27</sup> The report recommends improved data collection to understand better both the number of children in this cohort, and the specific needs they are presenting. This will enable children's services to anticipate future demand for specialist services and ensure they are able to provide appropriate support for all children who need it.

## Parents

One particular gap is around parents of children who are known to children's social care services. Professor Bywaters, Professor of Social Work at Huddersfield University, told the Inquiry that at present, 'we collect, extraordinarily, no data on the parents of children we [children's social care services] are working with'. He explained that local authorities and government do not know 'how many [children] are from single parent families, how old their parents are, whether their parents are in work or not, what kind of housing they have.' This is problematic because it means that local authorities and social workers are unable to establish a full picture of the types of issues children and families are facing. Having this full picture is vital for determining the most appropriate provision to maintain in the local area, particularly in terms of early help.

*'The complete absence of any systematic national data about the socio-economic and demographic circumstances of the parents of children in contact with children's services is a key problem in analysing the factors that influence demand for children's services. Collecting such data should be an urgent priority to underpin policy, service management and practice.'*

**Professor Paul Bywaters,  
Professor of Social Work at Huddersfield  
University**

## Ethnicity

Another example, where there is currently minimal data collection, is family ethnicity. While the Department for Education does currently collect data on the ethnicity of children 'in need' and on child protection plans, the Department's annual data release provides no insight into how ethnicity interacts with other factors such as deprivation. It is therefore of little use to local authorities in determining if families from particular ethnic backgrounds are overrepresented in their social care activity.

This is problematic as academic research indicates that ethnicity could play a significant role in helping to improve our understanding of variation in intervention rates. Professor Bywaters told the Inquiry that, once you account for deprivation, there are large inequalities in the rates of looked after children from different ethnic groups and these differences can have an impact on demand.

*'Ethnicity is an almost forgotten subject at the moment. But... there are huge ethnic differences that have big impacts on demands on local authorities.'*

**Professor Paul Bywaters,  
Professor of Social Work at Huddersfield  
University**

Another important finding of Professor Bywaters's research is that once deprivation is taken into account it becomes clear that the broadly accepted notion that 'Black' children are overrepresented compared to white children in out-of-home care, and 'Asian' children are underrepresented is not necessarily accurate.<sup>28</sup> Bywaters told the Inquiry that in the most deprived 20 per cent of local authorities where a third of Asian children and half of all 'Black' children live, the rates of looked after children for white and mixed heritage children are almost 80 per cent higher than for 'Black' children and almost five times higher than for Asian children. This may reflect higher levels of need in white and mixed heritage children, but also raises questions about whether families may be being treated differently by children's social care based on their ethnicity.

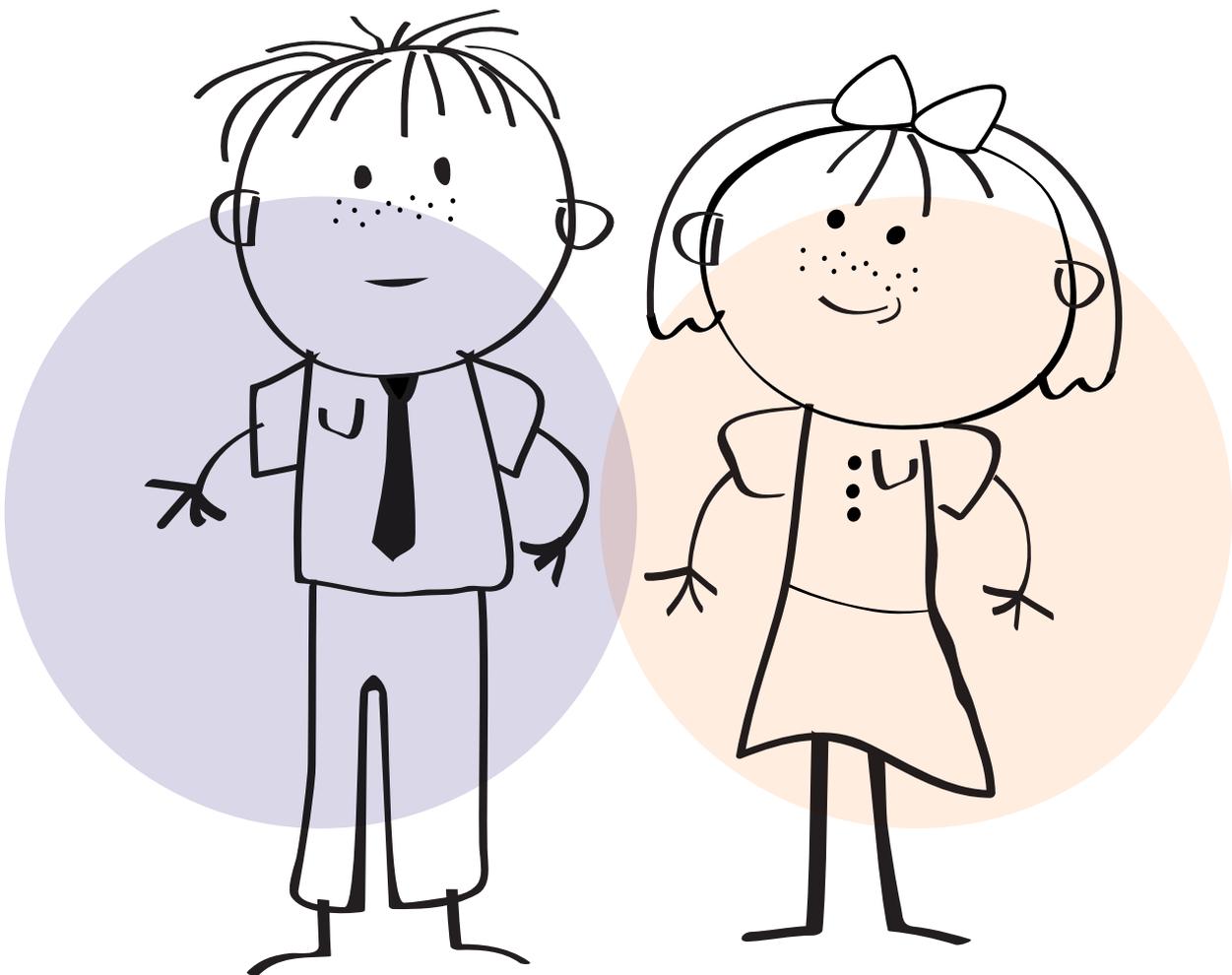
27. Pinney, A. (2017) 'Understanding the needs of disabled children with complex needs or life-limiting conditions what can we learn from national data?'

28. Bywaters et al. (2016) 'Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Ethnic Inequalities in Child Protection and Out-of-Home Care Intervention Rates'.

Bywaters explained that the causes of variation in rates of intervention between different ethnic groups are poorly understood. He encouraged further data collection and analysis to fully understand the forces at play: 'the data is not good. The mid-year population estimates for children give you quite a fine detail of good estimates on age and gender but not on ethnicity. So, you are driven back to 2011 census data as the best source of data about local levels of population. That is clearly out of date.'

The APPGC believes there is no excuse for differential treatment of children and families based on their ethnicity. It is clear that better use needs to be made of data to plan services, understand variation and assure ourselves that children from all backgrounds are getting equal access to support.

**Recommendation 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.**



## SECTION 2: SERVICES ARE GETTING HARDER TO ACCESS

While focusing on the role of inconsistency in the criteria used to decide whether a child or family qualify for social care support, the Inquiry also received compelling evidence that thresholds for accessing services are rising. This means that it is getting harder for children and young people to access the support they need, and that children and families are receiving support later than they would have previously, which can lead to families being broken up unnecessarily. Our survey of social workers indicated that with increasingly limited resources to provide early support to families, social workers often feel that removing a child from their family is the only tool available to them to keep children safe.

### EVIDENCE THAT THRESHOLDS FOR ACCESSING SUPPORT ARE RISING

Melanie Adegbite, independent social worker and director of a semi-independent unit, told the Inquiry that in recent years she had seen cases being bounced around the system because children's social care services are reluctant or unable to provide support. 'There are cases that I would have worked on in the late 90s/early 2000s that are now being worked on by services outside the local authority. I find that very difficult.' She explained that limited resources mean that families may not receive the support they need at an early stage, but those same families are then referred again at a later stage when needs have become more complex. Similarly, Eddie O'Hara, frontline social worker, social work manager and BASW ambassador, told the Inquiry that he had encountered multiple cases where he, or other social work colleagues, had received 'pushback' from senior managers. He explained this happened when trying to advocate for services for a child because the child was deemed to no longer meet the threshold for support.

Adrian Dudley, Designated Safeguarding Lead at Bishop Hatfield's Girls School expressed similar concerns and explained that teachers are on 'shifting sands' where the criteria for referrals and the thresholds for accessing services change year on year. 'We get used to certain criteria which we manage to use for referrals... and then the following year we get a new briefing, a new set of criteria we are having to deal with'.

Russ Clarke, Designated Safeguarding Lead at Haslingden High School, also identified a gap between formalised threshold levels and the actual decisions taken by children's services when a school makes a referral. He shared the experience of

making referrals based on local threshold guidance and receiving pushback from children's social care services: 'practically, on the ground, the bar has increased in terms of what will meet the threshold'. He talked about feeling the need to write up cases in the worst possible light to try and secure help for a child. He also reflected on the implications if the young person was to read that back later: 'you've wrestled with yourselves and what you are going to say, and you are ready to present this case with a damning negative view on this child's life and what is going to happen if you don't... you feel like you are trying to up the scoring... if any child in care was to read their file that I have been responsible for writing, it won't read very well'.

Adrian Dudley agreed that it was becoming harder to meet social care thresholds. He explained the frustration of having to persist and re-refer a case repeatedly before a child gets any help: 'we often come across examples where our persistence eventually pays off. But based on the same criteria that we were referring to in the first place... why wasn't it picked up in the first place?'

*'The pressure we've found is that every time we have a meeting about a child, Children's Social Care representatives seem to come in with an agenda to downgrade the case, almost regardless of the actual situation. We therefore find ourselves having to big up our concerns to ensure that the child retains appropriate levels of support'.*

**Designated safeguarding lead,  
Association of School and College Leaders<sup>29</sup>**

29. See 'Working together to safeguard children: changes to statutory guidance. Response from the Association of School and College Leaders'.

Findings from academics who gave evidence to the Inquiry, although not confirming that thresholds had consistently risen, indicated that a child must reach a very high level of need before a local authority intervenes. Professor Nina Biehal, Professor of Social Work at York University, shared her new research which looked at how severe abuse or neglect has to be for a child to come into care. In her study, 85 per cent of the children who became looked after were rated very high for severity of abuse or neglect (using the European MMCS measure).<sup>30</sup> She said, 'in terms of maltreatment severity, the threshold for actually becoming looked-after is actually very high'.

### DIVERGING VIEWS: THE PERSPECTIVES OF LEADERS AND FRONTLINE PRACTITIONERS

Surveys conducted as part of the Inquiry asked social workers and Directors of Children's Services whether they felt thresholds for children's social care interventions had changed in the past three years. The majority of social workers agreed that thresholds had risen for receiving early help (67 per cent); qualifying as a 'child in need' (70 per cent); making children the subject of a child protection plan (50 per cent); and applying for a care order (54 per cent). However, by contrast, Directors of Children's Services generally felt that thresholds across the same four interventions had not risen. The only exception was early help where 31 per cent of Directors of Children's Services felt that thresholds had gone up.

The reasons for this apparent divergence of opinion are unclear. One Director of Children's Services suggested that 'essentially, Directors of Children's Services will be talking about threshold policy while social workers views are more likely to be based on perceptions (rather than data) around practice.' Emma Lewell-Buck, Shadow Minister for Children and Families, and former social worker, told the Inquiry that 'although thresholds may not have changed on paper or when you speak to a senior manager in the local authority, the subjective thresholds... those actually practised on the ground, may well have changed'. She explained that where teams are comprised of newly qualified and more experienced social workers you will see 'similar thresholds applied differently'.

### Frontline practitioners and Directors of Children's Services had differing views on whether thresholds for children's social care interventions had risen in the last three years.

#### FRONTLINE PRACTITIONERS

#### DIRECTORS OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES



67%

Providing early help



31%



70%

Providing services for children in need



19%



50%

Making a child the subject of a protection plan



9%



54%

Applying for a care order



10%

30. Data obtained from written evidence submitted to the Inquiry following Professor Biehal's oral testimony on 7 February 2018. The full findings of Professor Biehal's research are not published at the time of writing.

*'There is a danger that these [threshold] documents become an 'article of faith' which compromises professional judgement, there is clearly a balance to be struck and this might, to some degree, reflect the differing perceptions of social workers and DCSs across the country.'*

**Director of Children's Services**

The discrepancy between the perspective of frontline social workers and Directors of Children's Services could be symptomatic of a wider disconnect between frontline practitioners and local authority leadership. *No Good Options* found that strong and inspirational leadership was key to transforming children's services and ensuring they remain high performing in the longer term. Dave Hill, then Executive Director of People Commissioning, Essex County Council, explained how a programme of training, development and reduced caseloads coupled with strong inspirational leadership was key in transforming Essex from an 'inadequate' service to a 'good' service in less than five years.<sup>31</sup> However, *No Good Options* also found that local authorities with poor Ofsted ratings often found it difficult to recruit and retain staff including both Directors of Children's Services and frontline practitioners.<sup>32</sup> This sentiment was echoed in the evidence obtained by this Inquiry.

While **64 per cent** of children's services have recently been judged to be **inadequate** or **requiring improvement** by Ofsted, it is likely that turnover of both frontline social workers and Directors of Children's Services will remain high, especially in the poorest performing local authorities.

| OFSTED RATING AT LATEST INSPECTION FOR 'OVERALL EFFECTIVENESS' <sup>33</sup> | NUMBER OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES | PERCENTAGE |
|--|-----------------------------|------------|
| Outstanding  | 3                           | 2%         |
| Good   | 52                          | 34%        |
| Requires improvement   | 68                          | 45%        |
| Inadequate   | 29                          | 19%        |

Indeed, recent figures from the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) reveal that consistency in the leadership of local authorities' children's services is still a challenge. Despite evidence that strong leadership is key to maintaining a high performing service, rates of staff turnover remain very high. The average tenure of current Directors of Children's Services appointed on a permanent basis is just 29 months.<sup>34</sup> Meanwhile, in 2017/18 there were 65 changes to Director of Children's Services post

holders across 57 local authorities. Eight local authorities experienced two Director of Children's Services changes over the 12 month period (the majority of which were due to short-term interim appointments made prior to a permanent Director of Children's Services starting their role).<sup>35</sup> Concurrently, the latest figures from the Department for Education suggest that nearly a third of children's social workers have only been working with their current local authority for two years or fewer.<sup>36</sup>

31. All Party Parliamentary Group for Children (2017) 'No Good Options Report of the Inquiry into Children's Social Care in England'.

32. Ibid.

33. Ofsted (2017) 'Official Statistics: Local authority and children's homes in England inspections and outcomes Autumn 2017: main findings'.

34. Accounting for all interim and permanent appointments this reduces to 26 months.

35. This is the highest number of annual changes since ADCS was established in 2007. See Association of Directors of Children's Services (May 2018) 'ADCS DCS Update – as of 31 March 2018' [http://adcs.org.uk/assets/documentation/ADCS\\_DCS\\_data\\_update\\_2017-18\\_FINAL.pdf](http://adcs.org.uk/assets/documentation/ADCS_DCS_data_update_2017-18_FINAL.pdf).

36. Department for Education (2017) Children's social work workforce 2017: Main tables.

The APPGC is concerned that high levels of turnover for all staff could be adding to the apparent disconnect between frontline social workers and senior management, and could help explain the discrepancy in perceptions about whether thresholds for accessing support are changing. Directors of Children's Services and Lead Members for Children's Services should be well connected with social work practice and should regularly shadow frontline practitioners to ensure they are aware of the challenges of implementing threshold policy on the ground.

In *No Good Options*, the APPGC recommended that the Department for Education establish a national program for developing senior leaders in children's services. The commitment to this issue, demonstrated by Nadhim Zahawi, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families, when he gave evidence to this Inquiry is therefore welcome, as is his department's work with the LGA and ADCS to nurture future children's services leaders. We reiterate, however, our recommendation that the Department for Education should develop a strategy to reduce churn in the children's social work system. We also call for further action to strengthen the link between leadership and frontline practice.

**Recommendation 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.**

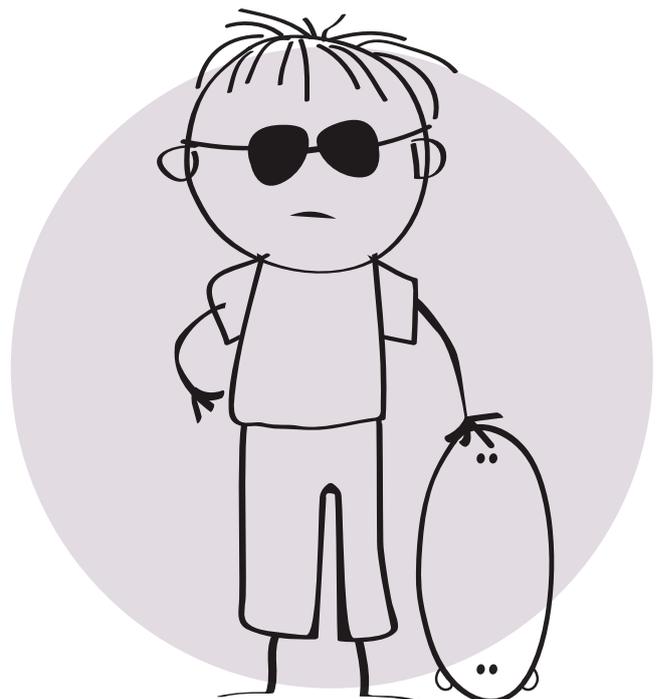
## RISING THRESHOLDS FOR 'CHILDREN IN NEED'

*'... The application of thresholds is mostly disputed at children in need level as there's not enough staff to manage these cases on top of child protection work and there isn't enough money to finance this. There's a lot of pressure to step down and close cases for these reasons...'*

### Newly qualified social worker working in assessment and intervention

*No Good Options* found evidence that local authorities struggle to deliver support to children in need under s.17, due to increasing demand for more acute services. This Inquiry heard evidence suggesting that this challenge is persisting.

As outlined above, responding to a survey conducted for this Inquiry, 70 per cent of social workers felt the threshold for providing services to 'children in need' had risen in the past three years. Additionally, 35 per cent of lead members for local authority children's services told the Inquiry that they did not have sufficient funding to support 'children in need'.<sup>37</sup>



37. See Annex B, part iv.

While 18 per cent of Directors of Children's Services said thresholds for children in need had gone up, 90 per cent reported that it has become harder for children's social care teams to fulfil their duties and responsibilities to 'children in need' in the past three years.<sup>38</sup> They attributed this challenge to rising demand in services (91 per cent), more complex cases involving vulnerable children and families (90 per cent), availability of appropriate services (73 per cent) and reduction in resources (69 per cent).

David Ashcroft, Chair, Association of Independent Local Safeguarding Children's Board Chairs, told the Inquiry that he and other LSCB Chairs had in recent years seen a 'squeeze' in terms of how thresholds are applied for 'children in need'. 'We have seen something like a 10 per cent increase over recent years in looked-after children, 29 per cent increase in child protection but only a 5 per cent increase in 'children in need'... that suggests, in these very crude terms, that the application of thresholds is shifting as to who gets in the system'. Data on 'children in need' assessments appear to corroborate this. The proportion of children assessed under the Children Act whom are deemed not to be 'in need' has increased from 19 per cent in 2011/12 to 28 per cent in 2016/17.

Many social workers told the Inquiry that children are being diverted away from services because there is not enough capacity to support them. One newly qualified social worker explained that 'we have increasingly found that there is no longer a "child in need". Rather there are cases that have to close or they have to go to court/child protection. We do not have the resource or finances.' Another social worker explained that 'we have no money for families' s.17 assistance but are spending thousands on court proceedings'.

### CHANGING NATURE OF 'EARLY HELP'

In the light of diminishing resources and cuts to non-statutory services, both Directors of Children's Services and social workers told the Inquiry that it is becoming much more challenging to respond early to support children and families. As discussed, in surveys conducted for this Inquiry, 31 per cent of Directors of Children's Services and 83 per cent of frontline social workers said that thresholds for accessing early help services have risen in the past three years.

Directors of Children's Services giving oral evidence to the Inquiry sent a clear message that it is getting harder for children and families to access early help. They explained that services described as 'early help' today are more specialist than they were a decade ago and that today's 'early help' services are typically more of a 'crisis response' delivered quite late in the life course of issues that children and parents are facing. Social workers supported this view. One noted that 'thresholds have increased to such a degree that social work is now effectively crisis management' and explained that preventative work and 'early help' remains 'very limited' and 'very difficult to access' while the referral process is 'confusing' and 'very selective'.

Noel Arnold, Co-Chair, Association of Lawyers for Children, echoed this sentiment. He warned that in the context of overstretched services, where needs for early help are either not identified (as a result of rising threshold levels or poor early assessment) or where needs are identified but insufficient support is provided, issues which might have remained a low level concern 'inevitably fester, develop and increase'. The result is that the child's situation may not improve, and in some cases, their adverse experiences will become more severe and/or intense. Arnold warned that although local authorities might take a decision to review their involvement in a case at this later stage, 'it may be that an opportunity for securing meaningful "change" has passed or the change that is now required is more challenging or complicated'.

### CHANGING ROLE OF SCHOOLS AND SCHOOL STAFF

*'We are now feeling like we are working more as social workers in our class where we enter education as teachers'*

**Russ Clarke,  
Designated Safeguarding Lead,  
Haslingden High School**

38. This compares to 89 per cent of DCSs who stated that it had become more challenging to fulfil their duties and responsibilities to 'children in need' in the five years to 2017. See All Party Parliamentary Group for Children (2017) 'No Good Options Report of the Inquiry into Children's Social Care in England'.

Jane Pickthall, Chair National Association of Virtual School Heads, said that she was starting to see the role of virtual school heads being 'watered down'. She told the Inquiry that very few of those coming into the role are 'just' virtual school heads working with looked-after and previously looked-after children, and raised concerns about the services available to children in schools. Pickthall cited cuts to support staff and services in schools and questioned how this would impact on the looked-after children who rely on these staff to remain in school, particularly with regards to mental health services.

*'We are a school when all is said and done that has to do its best for its young people and we will always try to do that. The early help for intervention we can signpost. We can resource to a certain degree within school with counselling and mentoring... but we don't have... the facility and resource to carry that out indefinitely'.*

**Adrian Dudley, designated safeguarding lead, Bishop Hatfield's Girls School**

### HELP FRAME VS. RISK FRAME

Professor Kate Morris, Professor of Social Work, Sheffield University, told the Inquiry that all social workers participating in her study into social work, poverty and child welfare interventions felt under pressure from needs in the families they were working with, such as low or fluctuating income and housing difficulties. However, her research found little evidence of those issues being addressed within individual families' care and protection plans. She explained that this is because social work services are not necessarily engaged in the 'core business of families'.

*'There is a real mismatch between issues that families are concerned about such as sufficient heating, warmth, housing and food, and social workers' preoccupations, which are really about investigating and processing individual reports of child abuse and neglect'*

**Professor Kate Morris,  
Professor of Social Work, Sheffield University**

Professor Morris told the Inquiry that although social workers may well understand the relationship between poverty and child abuse or neglect, support to address this poverty is very often missing from individual interventions. Richard Cooke, Children's Services Development Group, echoed this point and highlighted that although there has been a lot of focus on issues such as domestic violence, mental health and substance abuse in recent years, poverty, which 'absolutely runs through those other issues' as a 'causal factor and a consequence' has often been forgotten as part of the debate.

Morris argued that the mismatch between the issues families are concerned about and social workers' focus on risk has resulted in a 'community folk law' that elicits a profound mistrust of children's services.

*'Children's services are not seen as a source of help and support but... one of accusation and a risk of child removal'.*

**Professor Kate Morris,  
Professor of Social Work, Sheffield University**

The Inquiry heard that this mis-match is problematic, not only in the context of the level of mistrust it elicits between social workers and families, but because certain types of early help could actually prove invaluable for families trying to stay afloat. For example support to help a parent back into work, or providing a family with advice on how to get out of debt, which are not currently supported by social care, could provide a lifeline for some families and prevent them from falling into crisis.

The Care Crisis Review reports that many agencies have lost sight of the principles underpinning the Children Act 1989. In particular, the Review finds that the Government's guidance 'Working Together to Safeguard Children', is 'silent' on a number of key principles, including 'working in partnership with families, promoting children's welfare and the provision of report so that children can safely remain at home'.<sup>39</sup>

The Care Crisis Review team told the APPGC that the children's social care system is currently designed to address the most problematic cases. However, this approach is problematic as these higher risk cases only make up around 10 per cent of all the cases which services have to address. The other 90 per cent, which are less severe and could benefit from a softer approach, still get the same risk based approach from social workers. Coupled with this, the Review team told the APPGC that a reduction in the availability of early help services has left social workers with little time or resource to develop relationships with families to establish exactly what help they need. This results in a relationship between social workers and families that is focused on risk and is ultimately centred on the question of whether a child should be taken into care, rather than on the most appropriate level of support which could be provided to a family.

*'At the present rate of removal of children from their parents by the state no one is safe once referred to children's services.'*

**Team manager working in child protection**

Social workers responding to the APPGC's survey said they currently have a diminishing range of tools to help them protect children. Increasingly, interventions are becoming more invasive, including taking children into care, rather than supporting birth families who are struggling to meet their children's needs. The Inquiry heard that these increasingly invasive interventions are a result of a range of factors including:

- The need to be risk averse because of fear of media scandal;
- A lack of experience in supporting families or knowledge of local services; and
- A general lack of capacity to support children within their birth families which is exacerbated by a lack of early help services.

*'Local support services such as family centres, family support units, parenting classes are no longer available... social workers feel unable to manage and work with risk without those services and therefore seek to remove children from home.'*

**Team manager, fostering and adoption**

Within the wider context of rising thresholds for accessing services, Professor Brid Featherstone, Professor of Social Work at Huddersfield University, explained that both social workers and families are having to 'translate their stories of help into stories of risk' in order to get any help or resource. For example, the Inquiry heard that adoptive parents who are struggling to care for their children can only be heard in a 'risk frame' not a 'help frame'. Featherstone told the Inquiry that this is 'really damaging' to relationships between social workers and families.<sup>40</sup>

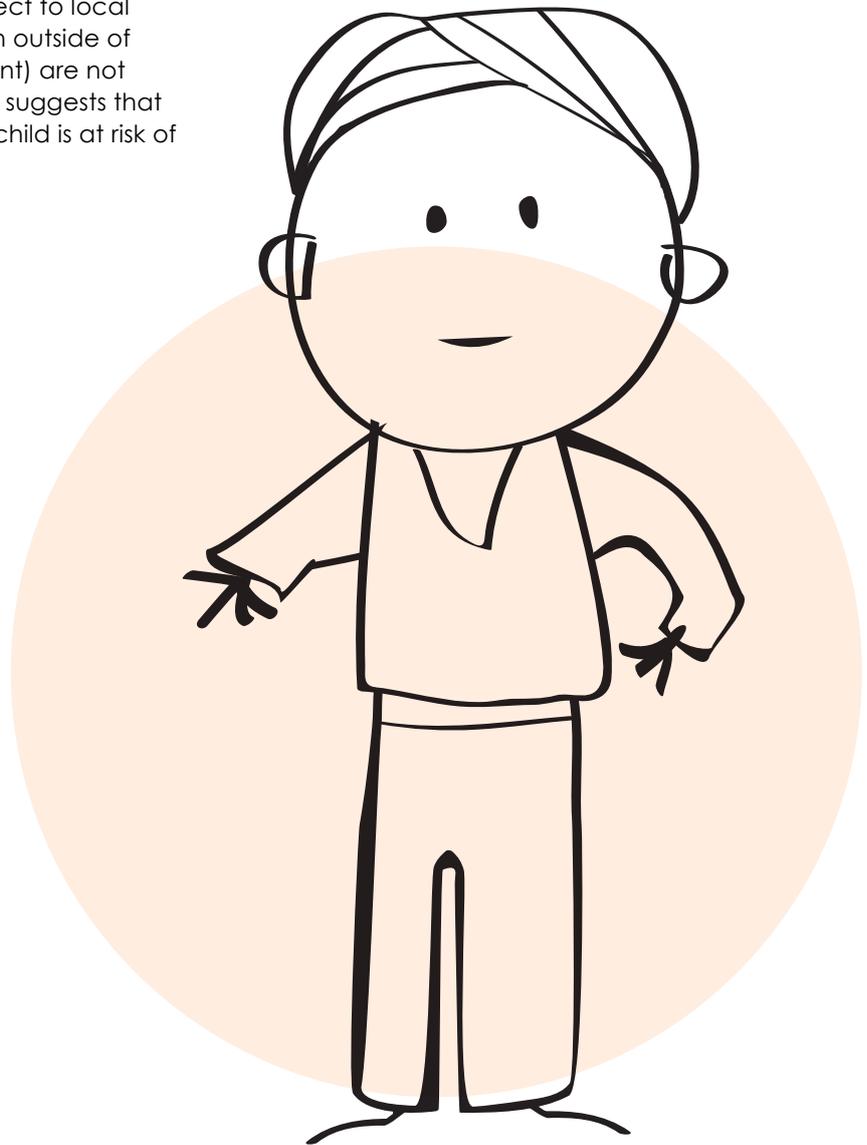
Professor Morris and Professor Featherstone told the Inquiry that a fresh approach is needed to enable social workers to engage confidently with the consequences of poverty and deprivation in order to better support children and families.

39. Family Rights Group (2018) 'Care Crisis Review options for change'.

40. Morris et al, 'Social work, poverty, and child welfare interventions'.

## THE IMPACT OF COURT PROCEEDINGS

The Inquiry heard that children and families are often prioritised for support when their case is in court proceedings (usually for care or supervision orders under part 4 of the Children's Act 1989) but not necessarily before that. Noel Arnold, Co-Chair, Association of Lawyers for Children, told the Inquiry that once a case is in court, 'the oversight and scrutiny of an independent judge provides a unique way of focusing the minds of all involved'. He explained that this is the only stage at which a child will have a children's guardian to act in their best interests, critically review the work of the local children's services team (both during and prior to proceedings), and make recommendations in the best interests of the child. This process can then lead to additional support or services being offered to the child or family which have not previously been considered. However, Arnold told the Inquiry that 'it is all too often the case that children and families who are subject to local authority children's services intervention outside of court proceedings (s.17, s.47 involvement) are not prioritised for support and services'. This suggests that support often comes very late when a child is at risk of becoming looked after.



# SECTION 3: A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE FOR PREVENTATIVE AND EARLY HELP SERVICES ACROSS ENGLAND

Within the context of diminishing resources and increasing demand, the APPGC's report *No Good Options* identified that services which support intervening early to help children and families - such as 'early help' services and services for 'children in need' under s.17 - are subject to unique pressures.

However, despite wide recognition among witnesses as to the benefits of both 'early help' and wider preventative work, the APPGC heard that the provision of preventative and 'early help' services is inconsistent across the country. Many children's social care services are simply not supporting children and families early enough. Increasing demand for acute services, alongside financial pressures, means that local authorities have to reduce early help services. The Inquiry heard that in the long term this will result in increasing demand for those acute services, which will impact children and families and be more costly to the state.

*'Increased demand with shrinking resources has led to increased thresholds for early intervention with families.'*

**Director of Children's Services**

## DEFINITIONS: 'EARLY HELP'

For the purposes of this Inquiry, when we refer to 'early help' we are referring to help and support provided 'early in the emergence of a problem' at any stage of a child or young person's life. This could include family support for parents who are struggling, short breaks for disabled children or targeted youth services.

Despite setting these definitional boundaries for our own Inquiry, witnesses explained that there is a great deal of confusion about what exactly is meant by the term 'early help', sometimes even within a single

children's services department. Often 'early help' is used interchangeably to refer to universal services or preventative services. Sometimes services described as 'early help' can come quite late in the course of issues faced by children and families.

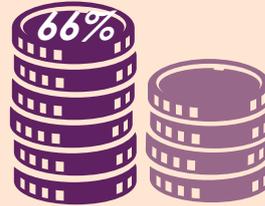
The Inquiry heard that this confusion is highly problematic as language matters when it comes to deciding what a local authority should spend their money on. Directors of Children's Services explained that early help means too many different things in different areas and there is an urgent need to rethink the terminology.

## EARLY HELP: INCONSISTENCY AND REDUCING PROVISION

As outlined in section 1, the ability of a child and his/her family to access help before they reach crisis point is subject to the greatest level of variation across the country. Section 2 demonstrated that fewer children and families are able to access these services, when resources are limited, demand is increasing and local authorities are struggling to even meet their statutory duties.

EARLY HELP SERVICES ARE SUBJECT TO PARTICULAR CHALLENGES<sup>41</sup>

Real terms spending on early intervention services reduced by 40 per cent between 2010/11 and 2015/16



66 per cent of lead members for children's services did not think their local authority had sufficient funding to provide universal services for children and families.<sup>41</sup>



67% of frontline practitioners think thresholds for providing early help services have risen in the past three years



83% of Directors of children's services think thresholds for accessing early help vary across the country

46%

54%

In 2010, roughly half of children's services budgets were spent on family support and prevention while the other half was spent on safeguarding work and children in care.

71%

29%

Today, just under a third is spent on family support/prevention while the remaining two thirds goes on safeguarding/children in care.

Anne Longfield, Children's Commissioner for England explained that early intervention has been 'stripped back so there are fewer and fewer services to step forward' to help children and families. Other witnesses told the Inquiry that there is a 'crisis' in the system and a 'collective failure' to support families across the full course of issues. Brid Featherstone, Professor of Social Work, Huddersfield University, said that family support has been 'hollowed out' in recent years. She gave the example of parents with learning difficulties who are now receiving very 'sporadic', 'time limited' periods of help which are not helping them to look after their children. As a result, parents with learning disabilities are disproportionately having their children taken into care.

*'We have reviewed our Early Help offer and tightened up who we are targeting particularly at an early help level to ensure we are working with those at the cusp of meeting criteria for social care.'*

**Director of Children's Services**

41. See full findings from survey of local authority lead members for children in Annex B, part iv.

*'Lack of funding for early intervention is directly impacting on the welfare of children, meaning more children are experiencing more complex and entrenched abuse, overloading statutory services- so the only way for a service to cope is to increase thresholds. We need investment in good early intervention and more skilled social workers to do meaningful s.17 intervention to turn this around.'*

**Social worker and service manager working in child protection and with children in care**

## EARLY INTERVENTION FUNDING: 'POLICY CHANGE BY STEALTH'?

*'There can be no challenge more pressing than that of achieving the optimum balance between preventive and reactive services (prevention or protection) and between services for children living at home and those that do not or cannot be at home.'*

**Alison Michalska,  
former President, Association of Directors  
of Children's Services<sup>43</sup>**

Social workers and teachers told the Inquiry that in the context of rising demand and diminishing resource, it was becoming harder to secure early support for children and young people. As a result they were seeing a shift to later and more complex interventions.

The APPGC welcomed the Children's Commissioner for England's research into public attitudes around children's services, which added a new and unique perspective to the debate around early help.<sup>42</sup> The research explored public views about which sort of support should be offered to children and families in specific circumstances. The study found that public expectations were generally higher than the reality of what is available, particularly in relation to early help.

Directors of Children's Services highlighted how challenges around school funding are impacting on children's services. They explained that the squeezing of school budgets has led to a big reduction in inclusion staffing. This poses an additional challenge to children's services who previously relied on these services to provide a level of early support which is no longer available. Linked to this, the Inquiry heard that nursery schools, which often offer a comprehensive range of services to children and families, including breakfast clubs, health visits and in-house speech and language therapy, are being cut back and are at further risk due to the school funding formula.

The Inquiry heard that there have been cuts to the Government's Early Intervention Grant of almost £500 million since 2013, with projections for funding to fall by a further £183 million by 2020.<sup>44</sup> Research from Action for Children, the National Children's Bureau and The Children's Society also found that real terms spending on early intervention services was reduced by 40 per cent between 2010/11 and 2015/16 while spending on acute statutory services increased by seven per cent over the same period.<sup>45</sup>

This reduction in funding is reflected in what Paul Bywaters told the Inquiry was a 'radical shift' in the balance of services provided by children's social care. In 2010, roughly half (46 per cent) of children's services budgets were spent on family support and prevention while the other half (54 per cent) was spent on safeguarding work and children in care. Today, the balance has shifted so that just under a third (29 per cent) is spent on family support/prevention while the remaining 71 per cent goes on safeguarding/children in care. Bywaters argued that this reduction in preventive, support services for families has 'major implications' for trust between parents and the state, and for the children involved. The APPGC is concerned that this shift away from preventative services is pushing services down a slippery slope where the only option is to take more children into care.

42. The Children's Commissioner for England (2018) 'Who cares? A Children's Commissioner report on public expectations for the care of vulnerable children'.

43. See 'President's Address to the ADCS Annual Conference 2017' [http://adcs.org.uk/assets/documentation/AC17\\_Presidential\\_Address.pdf](http://adcs.org.uk/assets/documentation/AC17_Presidential_Address.pdf).

44. Local Government Association, 'Core spending power: visible lines of funding 2017 to 2018' <https://www.local.gov.uk/about/news/childrens-social-care-breaking-point-council-leaders-warn>.

45. Action for Children, National Children's Bureau and The Children's Society (2017) 'Turning the tide: Reversing the move to late intervention spending in children and young people's services'.

Despite the known benefits of investing in 'early help' and prevention, and the Government's<sup>46</sup> and local authorities'<sup>47</sup> own recognition of the importance of these services, it appears that the level of spending on this provision is telling a different story. Bywaters described this shift away from early help as 'effectively a policy change by stealth'.

Directors of Children's Services expressed their concern about the future of funding for early help services. In recent years, many local authorities have used funding provided by central government through the Troubled Families Programme to keep their family support services going. However, as this programme comes to an end in 2020, it is not clear how this early help work would be adequately funded in the future. There was a consensus among those giving evidence that the current model, where funding for early help often comes in waves based on current policy priorities or projects (for example the Troubled Families Programme) made it difficult to plan and prioritise a consistent programme of early help services. The Inquiry also heard that this funding model exacerbates variation in access to early help services, because while some local authorities have more money to fund early help, others rely heavily on inconsistent and unreliable programme based funding.

*'The consequence of the rising demands and the constraints on expenditure has been a radical shift in the balance of services... between prevention and family support on the one side and the more heavy end of child protection and looked-after children services on the other.'*

**Professor Paul Bywaters,  
Professor of Social Work at Huddersfield  
University**



46. Department for Education (2016) 'Putting children first Delivering our vision for excellent children's social care'.

47. See the Local Government Association's 'Bright Futures' campaign <https://www.local.gov.uk/about/campaigns/bright-futures>.

## THE NEED FOR AN EARLY HELP 'STATUTORY SAFETY NET'

In her 2011 review of child protection, Eileen Munro presented a threefold argument for why early help is so important to improving outcomes for children and young people. She argued that early help is necessary because it helps to minimise the number of adverse experiences faced by children and young people; it is difficult to reverse the damage to the development of children and young people so intervening before any damage is done is key; and it is a 'cost-effective approach'.<sup>48</sup> Munro recommended that the Government 'place a duty on local authorities and statutory partners to secure the sufficient provision of local early help services for children, young people and families'. However, this recommendation was never implemented and children and families are missing out as a result.

Directors of Children's Services giving evidence to this Inquiry said that action was needed to address the current reduction in provision of early help services, and inconsistency across local authorities in England. They called for a statutory 'safety net' to ensure that all children and families are able to access the support they need when they need it, before problems worsen. Sharing similar concerns, the Children's Commissioner for England suggested that government should put in place a 'transition fund' for early help services to protect and build back up provision while decisions are made about longer-term funding. The APPGC was convinced by both of these recommendations.

The compelling evidence of inconsistency in the provision and funding of early help services makes clear that it is time to revisit the recommendations made by Munro more than seven years ago and reverse the evident decline in early help for children and families. The APPGC therefore welcomed the Minister's commitment to address the challenges of declining early help services.

*'I think there's a lot we can do to make sure that early intervention is not seen as a... nice to have, but actually is a... must have.'*

**Nadhim Zahawi,**  
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for  
Children and Families

**Recommendation 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.**

**Recommendation 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.**

**Recommendation 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.**

48. Munro, E. (2011) 'The Munro review of child protection: A Child Centred System'.

## CHILDREN IN NEED REVIEW – SEIZING THE OPPORTUNITY

No Good Options presented evidence that the number of children starting an episode of need varied significantly between local authorities. It also found that local authorities were finding it increasingly challenging to fulfil their duties to all 'children in need' and were often prioritising support for the children who are at the greatest risk of harm (for example those 'in need' due to abuse or neglect), while children categorised as 'in need' for other reasons (such as disability and illness) were missing out.<sup>49</sup> In that report, the APPGC recommended that the Department for Education should 'consult on a review of the current framework for supporting children in need.

This Inquiry has been presented with evidence indicating that services for children in need under s.17, like early help, are particularly vulnerable to inconsistent and rising thresholds. Almost three

quarters of Directors of Children's Services said that thresholds varied for accessing 'children in need' support. The majority of social workers responding to the Inquiry's survey (70 per cent) said that thresholds for qualifying as a 'child in need' had risen, and a third of lead members for children's services said that they did not have sufficient funding to support these children.<sup>50</sup>

While rates of more acute intervention, such as making a child subject to a child protection plan or taking them into care, have risen significantly over the past seven years, overall rates of children in need have remained fairly static. This suggests a possible 'squeeze', as David Ashcroft puts it, on s.17 provision. Since 2010, the rate of children subject to a child protection plan and looked after children has increased significantly. The number of children in need has stayed relatively stable, but a larger proportion of these are in need due to abuse and neglect than in 2010.

|   | 2010    | 2017    |
|---|---------|---------|
| Number of <b>Children in Need</b>                             | 375,870 | 389,430 |
| Rate per 10,000   | 334.7   | 330.4   |
| PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN IN NEED WHOSE PRIMARY NEED RELATED TO: |         |         |
| Abuse or neglect  | 39.4    | 52.3    |
| Child's disability or illness                                 | 12.0    | 9.4     |
| Family in acute stress  | 10.3    | 9.2     |
| Family dysfunction  | 15.7    | 16      |
| Number of <b>children subject to child protection plans</b>   | 39,100  | 51,080  |
| Rate per 10,000   | 35.5    | 43.3    |
| Number of <b>children looked after</b>                        | 64,400  | 72,670  |
| Rate per 10,000   | 58      | 62      |

49. All Party Parliamentary Group for Children (2017) 'No Good Options Report of the Inquiry into Children's Social Care in England'.

50. See Annex B, parts ii and iv.

It is welcome that, following the APPGC's recommendation in *No Good Options*, the Government has launched an inquiry into services for 'children in need'. This is an opportunity to address a number of the serious issues relating to provision for 'children in need' uncovered in both this Inquiry and *No Good Options*.

The APPGC welcomes the Minister's commitment to look at a variety of outcomes for 'children in need' including, employment, education and 'other outcomes'.<sup>51</sup> We also think this review provides an excellent opportunity for the Government to address the reasons behind the variation in the numbers of children defined as 'in need' across different local authorities and the factors that underlie the apparent reduction of children on s.17 plans while there have been significant increases in other categories of intervention. We urge the Government to expand the review in this regard.

**Recommendation 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.



51. See 'Children in Need' Education Questions, 14th May 2018. Available at <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2018-05-14/debates/BBE3729D-86C0-4E56-98BD-4B1CDB6BFE75/ChildrenInNeed>.

## SECTION 4: RESOURCES ARE INFLUENCING DECISIONS ABOUT WHETHER TO INTERVENE

The APPGC's report on the state of children's social care, *No Good Options*, found that diminishing resources were a key factor impacting on the ability of local authorities to meet children's needs. Since the publication of that report, there has been concern from across the sector about the financial challenges facing local authority children's services.<sup>52</sup>

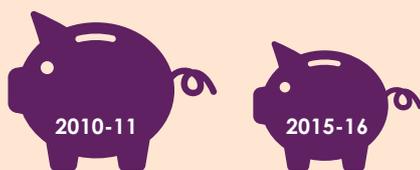
Reviewing the latest figures, it is clear that in the context of rising demand for children's social care, many councils are still struggling to cope. In 2016/17, local authorities spent £430 million more than budgeted on children in care and £172 million more on safeguarding.<sup>53</sup> Between 2010/11 and 2015/16, central government funding for local authority children and young people's services decreased by £2.4 billion (24 per cent) in real terms.<sup>54</sup> Looking forward, the Local Government Association (LGA) predicts a shortfall of up to £2 billion in children's social care by 2020.<sup>55</sup> Giving evidence to the Inquiry, Richard Watts, Chair of Children and Young People Board for the LGA, described this as a 'conservative prediction' made on the assumption that demand for children's social care remains the same over the period.

*'The task of balancing council budgets is tougher than ever before as we simultaneously seek to manage demand, reduce spending and improve outcomes'.*

**Alison Michalska,**  
former President, Association of Directors  
of Children's Services<sup>56</sup>

The APPGC was keen to explore if inconsistent and rising thresholds - particularly in relation to support for 'children in need' under s.17 and early help - could in part be explained by differences in the availability of resources across local authorities.

### FUNDING CRISIS



Between 2010/11 and 2015/16, central government funding for local authority children and young people's services decreased by **£2.4 billion** (24 per cent) in real terms.



In 2016-17, local authorities spent **£430 million** more than budgeted on children in care and **£172 million** more on safeguarding.



The Local Government Association (LGA) predicts a shortfall of **£2 billion** in children's social care by 2020.

52. See joint letter encouraging the Government to close the children's services funding gap <https://www.local.gov.uk/about/campaigns/bright-futures/bright-futures-childrens-services/close-childrens-services-funding>.

53. Local Government Association (2017) 'Bright Futures'.

54. Action for Children, National Children's Bureau, The Children's Society (2017) Turning the tide: Reversing the move to late intervention spending in children and young people's services'.

55. Local Government Association 'Children's social care at breaking point, council leaders warn' <https://www.local.gov.uk/about/news/childrens-social-care-breaking-point-council-leaders-warn>.

56. Alison Michalska, speaking at the ADCS conference in July 2017. See 'President's Address to the ADCS Annual Conference 2017' [http://adcs.org.uk/assets/documentation/AC17\\_Presidential\\_Address.pdf](http://adcs.org.uk/assets/documentation/AC17_Presidential_Address.pdf).

## FINANCIAL CONCERNS AFFECTING DECISION-MAKING ABOUT CHILDREN'S CARE

The Inquiry received evidence suggesting that financial worries and availability of resources are influencing social workers' decisions to intervene to support children and families who need help. The evidence was particularly compelling in relation to the provision of early help and support for 'children in need' under s.17.

*'I would like to see a nationally accepted threshold policy as it varies dramatically from borough to borough in London and means some children are supported while others are not. It seems this can be due to costs and finances'.*

**Senior practitioner working with children in care**

In surveys conducted for the Inquiry, 40 per cent of councillors who are lead members for children's services told the Inquiry that a lack of resources prevented them from meeting at least one of their statutory duties for children.<sup>57</sup> 60 per cent of social workers reported that the finances available to children's services influenced 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'. 45 per cent of social workers, which is a substantial minority, said that finances affected decisions about more acute statutory interventions.

**Frontline practitioners told the APPGC that the finances available to children's services influenced their decision about whether to offer support.**

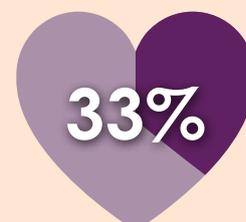
**60% said finances influenced their decisions about whether to offer 'early help' or whether to provide statutory support to 'children in need' under s.17 of the Children's Act 1989.**



**45% said finances affected decisions about whether to apply for a care order.**

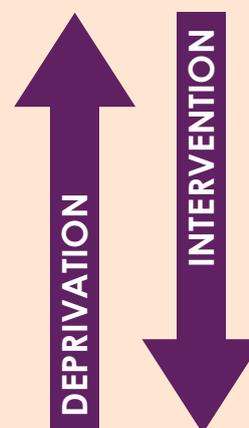


**33% said finances affected decisions about whether to put a child on a child protection plan.**



### THE INVERSE INTERVENTION LAW:

When comparing children in similarly deprived neighbourhoods in low and high deprivation local authorities, the low deprivation local authorities are intervening more than **50 per cent** more often than the local authorities with high levels of deprivation.



57. See Annex B, part iv.

*'Thresholds are very variable by region. Linked to higher complexity in urban/ city areas and funding for suitable services/resources/ placements being spread thinner'*

**Frontline Social Worker**

Richard Watts talked about resource as an 'implicit pressure' which affected social workers' decisions. He told the Inquiry that while he would be surprised to hear of any managers explicitly telling their staff to stop referrals because of a lack of money, the reality is that when social workers hear that their service is struggling, and their managers are worrying about money, it inevitably starts to 'play in the back of one's mind'. He highlighted the subjective nature of the decision process and explained that the broader economic climate affects children's social care decisions: 'If culture is one of explicit worry about money... that will subconsciously play towards decision making'.

Similarly, social workers responding to the Inquiry's survey suggested that money may have more of an impact on some decisions than others. For example if there happened to already be several cases where a care order is being considered, the next child with similar needs may be dealt with more cheaply.

*'I have experienced first hand on two occasions being told that a case meets the threshold for care proceedings but that we would continue to work at PLO<sup>58</sup> as "we have a lot of cases in Court at the moment"'*

**Social worker working in child protection**

Emma Lewell-Buck, Shadow Minister for Children and Families, reflected on her time as a social worker and finding herself in a 'desperate situation' when cases which were not deemed to reach the threshold for intervention because 'there is austerity and there simply isn't anyone available to do the work that is needed'. She told the Inquiry 'if there are not enough resources, if there are not enough outside agencies to help you with a particular case then you can't do it. You look at higher risk cases, you look at cases with higher need'. She explained that social workers often close cases in the knowledge that they will be re-referred later: 'it is the worst feeling in the world because you shut the case and these children need help'.

Eddie O'Hara, frontline social worker, social work manager and BASW ambassador, told the Inquiry that assessments for children were becoming resource led and policy driven. Meanwhile other experienced social workers told the Inquiry that the 'opinion of skilled social workers with knowledge of the family is considered less important than the financial implication for the authority', and that 'underfunded and overstretched services have pushed up thresholds creating a revolving door and delays to statutory intervention leaving vulnerable children at greater risk'.

As discussed in the previous section, the Inquiry received evidence that lack of resources was placing specific pressures on 'early help' services and local authorities' ability to provide the right support to children 'in need' under s.17 of the Children Act 1989. Richard Watts, explained that while budgets for child protection and looked after children services have often been prioritised and overspent in recent years, spending on early help services has actually been around 10 per cent below what was initially budgeted in 2015-16. He said, 'I think everyone understands the short-sightedness', highlighting the costly impact of disinvesting in early help services. The Early Intervention Foundation's latest analysis puts the cost of late intervention at almost £17 billion a year, with £6.2 billion falling directly on children's social care<sup>59</sup>, while a report from the All Party Parliamentary Group for Conception to Age 2 - The First 1001 Days, estimated the annual cost of child maltreatment in the UK to be £15 billion.<sup>60</sup>

58. Public Law Outline – a parent has been warned that there may be a legal intervention but the application has not been made yet.

59. Early Intervention Foundation (2016) 'The Cost of Late Intervention'.

60. All Party Parliamentary Group for Conception to Age 2 - The First 1001 Days (2015) 'Building Great Britons'.

The analysis in *No Good Options* highlighted the overall higher rates of intervention by children's social care services (for example taking a child into care or making them subject to a child protection plan) in more deprived local authorities. However, new research by Bywaters offers a more nuanced picture of the relationship between resource and rates of intervention. When comparing children in similarly deprived neighbourhoods in low and high deprivation local authorities, the low deprivation local authorities are intervening more than 50 per cent more often than the local authorities with high levels of deprivation. Bywaters called this the 'inverse intervention law'. He told the Inquiry 'our evidence suggests that this reflects scarcer resources relative to need in high deprivation local authorities'.

While rightly acknowledging other factors, such as leadership, as key to the success of children's services, the APPGC welcomed the Minister's acknowledgement of the relevance of resources and his department's work to address children's services funding as part of the Fairer Funding Review.

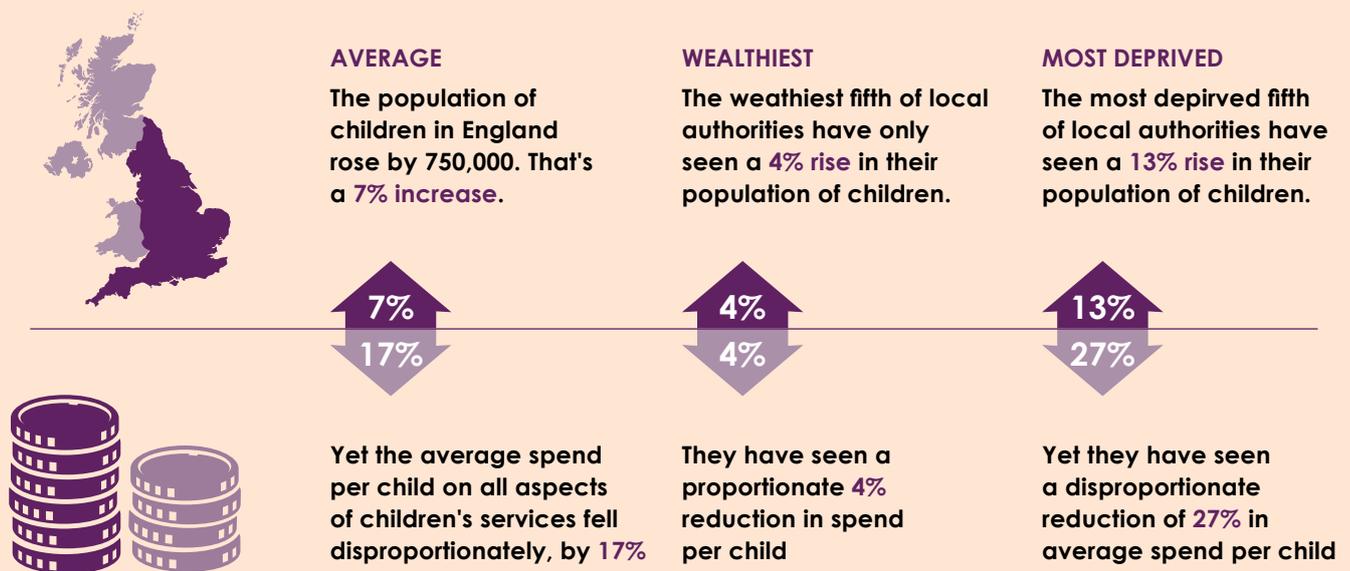
*'It would be remiss of me to say funding is not an issue'*

**Nadhim Zahawi,**  
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State  
for Children and Families

### UNEVEN DISTRIBUTION OF PRESSURES ON THE CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Further evidence provided by Professor Paul Bywaters suggests that resources are playing a part in variation in access to children's social care support across the country. Deprived local authorities are more likely to face greater demand for services, experience larger increases in their child population overall and, therefore, have fewer resources to spend on meeting children's needs.

**Between 2010-11 and 2016-17 average spend per child has fallen disproportionately as the population of children has grown, with the most deprived local authorities bearing the brunt of this**



Overall, between 2010/11 and 2016/17, there has been a 16 per cent reduction in average spend per child on all aspects of children's services. Notably, reduction in expenditure per child was significantly higher in more deprived areas: between 2010/11 and 2016/17, there has been a 27 per cent reduction in spend per child in the most deprived fifth of local authorities compared with a 4 per cent reduction in spend in the wealthiest fifth of local authorities.<sup>61</sup>

Bywaters told the Inquiry that this uneven reduction in spend per child across the country can be attributed to both the reduction in overall spend and the uneven distribution of a substantial increase in the general child population. He explained that there are 750,000 more children in the population today than there were in 2010/11, a 7 per cent increase. However, these children are not distributed evenly across local authorities. The most deprived fifth of local authorities have seen a 13 per cent increase in the number of children in their area, while the most wealthy fifth of local authorities have only seen an increase of 4 per cent.

## WE MUST FIND THE RESOURCES TO PROVIDE ALL CHILDREN WITH THE CARE THEY NEED

*No Good Options* found that funding for children's social care services was not keeping pace with demand and early intervention services were facing the brunt of cuts. New evidence obtained by this Inquiry adds to our understanding of the relationship between funding and the provision of support, and of inequality across local authorities in the demand for services and the availability of resource to meet children's needs.

Evidence from practitioners, system leaders and academics indicates that resources are a factor in decision-making about the provision of services to children, particularly for preventative services, but also for more acute statutory services. The APPGC was particularly concerned to hear evidence indicating that a child growing up in a deprived neighbourhood within a wealthy local authority is more likely to be taken into care, for example, than a child growing up in a similar neighbourhood but within a deprived local authority. It was suggested that this may be because less deprived local authorities have more resources in proportion to the level of need they have to meet, and therefore can afford to take children into care in cases where other local authorities could not. This would suggest that resources are a key factor in decision-making about

whether or not to intervene to safeguard a child, echoing the views of social workers who responded to our survey.

Some local authorities - those that have higher levels of deprivation - are experiencing greater pressures on their service as a result of uneven increases in the child population and therefore greater reductions in their spend per child. The APPGC believes this will likely result in children with similar levels of need receiving different levels of service and intervention depending on where in the country they live. The APPGC believes this is unacceptable.

The gap that has opened up between what vulnerable children need and what local authorities are funded to deliver should not be underestimated. Recently published research from the Children's Commissioner shows that the public generally expects a greater level of provision for vulnerable children than is currently being offered.<sup>62</sup>

This Inquiry welcomes the National Audit Office's decision to carry out a study into children's services departments including the management of demand and resource for services. The funding crisis in children's social care demands greater political attention across the board. There has long been cross-party agreement that a long term solution for adult social care is needed. Similarly, the recent welcome announcement of a five-year funding deal for the NHS followed robust discussions about what would be needed to deliver the service we all deserve. Our most vulnerable children and families likewise deserve a clear settlement for the future of the support they rely on.

**Recommendation 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.**

**Recommendation 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.**

61. Calculations from Professor Paul Bywaters. The calculations are based on the methodology used in the published paper Webb, C. J. R., & Bywaters, P. (2018) 'Austerity, rationing and inequity: trends in children's and young peoples' services expenditure in England between 2010 and 2015' with figures updated for 2016/17.

62. Children's Commissioner's Office (2018) 'Who cares? A Children's Commissioner report on public expectations for the care of vulnerable children'.

# SECTION 5: INVOLVING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN DECISIONS ABOUT THEIR OWN CARE

The principle that children should be involved in decisions affecting them is well-understood, and enshrined in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.<sup>63</sup> However, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has found the UK's record on this issue 'somewhat patchy'.<sup>64</sup>

As set out in the chapters above, the Inquiry devoted particular attention to understanding how decisions are made in children's social care. We heard concerns from professionals that the basis of decisions about whether and how to offer families support is not always clear and transparent. We have stressed our concern that resources appear to have too much influence and that there must be absolute focus on the needs of child. It is also, of course, vital that children themselves are as informed, involved and empowered as possible throughout their interaction with social care services. A key indicator for whether this is happening is the perspective of those children and young people looking back on their journeys into, through and out of care.

*No Good Options* highlighted that many local authorities follow good practice in involving children and young people in strategic decisions about local services, for example, through children in care councils. However, in many instances, children in care are not involved in decisions about their own support. This is another area of social care practice where there appears to be variation. Children's right to be involved in decisions that affect them is universal and should be respected on this basis. To dig deeper into this issue, the Inquiry heard evidence from representatives of the Catch 22 Young People's Benchmarking Forum (hereafter 'the Benchmarking Forum'). They highlighted two key issues on which the social care system fell short.

## CONTACT WITH SIBLINGS

'Siblings with existing bonds should in principle not be separated by placements in alternative care unless there is a clear risk of abuse or other justification in the best interests of the child. In any case, every effort should be made to enable siblings to maintain contact with each other, unless this is against their wishes or interests.' United Nations General Assembly resolution 64/142<sup>65</sup>

Cafcass has outlined the benefits of sibling contact for children in care including positive outcomes relating to mental health, socialisation, academic performance and placement stability. They argue that for some children, sibling relationships can be as important as contact with their birth parents.<sup>66</sup>

*No Good Options* highlighted the fact that children and young people want to have a say in decisions about whether they are able to have meaningful contact with their siblings.<sup>67</sup> However, this Inquiry heard that children and young people are still being separated from their siblings without fully understanding why this decision has been made, and without the option to have meaningful contact until they are much older.

63. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).

64. UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2016) 'Concluding Observations of the fifth periodic report of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland'.

65. United Nations General Assembly resolution 64/142, Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children, A/64/434 (24 February 2010), available at: <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N09/470/35/pdf/N0947035.pdf?OpenElement>.

66. See the blog "'We are family'": Considering the importance of sibling relationships in family proceedings', Anthony Douglas, Chief Executive, Cafcass <https://www.cafcass.gov.uk/2017/05/17/family-considering-importance-sibling-relationships-family-proceedings/>

67. All Party Parliamentary Group for Children (2017) 'No Good Options Report of the Inquiry into Children's Social Care in England'.

The APPGC was concerned to hear the story of one young person from the Benchmarking Forum who shared his experience of growing up in care separated from some of his siblings who were eventually adopted. He told the Inquiry that no one had ever taken the time to explain why he could no longer see his younger siblings once they had been adopted. Visits and regular contact stopped without an explanation, and the only contact he received from that point was a generic typed letter from his siblings' adoptive parents once a year and a photograph where their faces were obscured with face paint. He spoke about the emotional trauma of growing up and asking himself 'am I a danger to my siblings?... what have I done wrong?'

Young people consulted as part of the Review of Foster Care in England suggested that one of the worst things about being in care was having too little contact with their birth siblings.<sup>68</sup> The Education Select Committee has called on the Government to ensure consistency in the application of guidance when it comes to placing siblings together.<sup>69</sup> Given the seriousness of decisions to separate a child from any member of their family, it is right that process be followed in these decisions. We therefore echo this call for consistency.

## UNDERSTANDING THEIR HISTORY

Representatives from the Benchmarking Forum said more work was needed to ensure children and young people fully understood what had happened in their past and why they had been taken into care. They told the Inquiry that it is not enough to explain something like this to a child once and expect them to remember it. Children need to have repeated conversations. Other witnesses shared experiences of the young people they work with misremembering or misunderstanding the reasons they had been taken into care in the first place. For example, the Inquiry heard that young people sometimes 'remembered' the police being present when they were taken into care but in reality, official records indicate that the police were never there. This evidence chimes with research from the Children's Commissioner's Office, which found that more than 50 per cent of children in care did not understand why they had come into care in the first place and the vast majority of children felt they should have been provided with an explanation.<sup>70</sup>

All of the young people giving evidence spoke about the need for additional support around the contents of their personal file in particular, and they suggested that this support should begin in early childhood and continue throughout the teenage years. They explained that accessing a personal file on your own can be daunting, 'everyone's names are crossed out. Your mum and dad's name aren't in it. The only name in it is ours and then a story that doesn't make sense because no one's names are in it so you can't read it'. Personal files contain every comment a social worker has ever made on their case and the young people explained how they felt their whole lives were played out in their personal file: 'it's like a story told by someone else'. They called for more consideration when writing up case files: 'you might be making a comment of a note on the system but that is actually going to be with them for their life. I think it's a hard one. I think there should be more support when looking at files'.

The purpose of delivering early support to young people who will eventually access their personal file would be to ensure that by the time a young person comes to access their file at age 18 (or beyond) he/she is fully aware of why he/she had been taken into care and what kind of information is included within the file. The group suggested that children have access to a simplified version of their file from a young age with increasing detail as they get older and support all along the way.

**Recommendation 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.**

68. Sir Martin Narey and Mark Owers (2018) Foster Care in England A Review for the Department for Education. Appendix A.

69. House of Commons Education Committee (2017) 'Fostering'.

70. Office of the Children's Commissioner (2015) 'State of the Nation: Report 1, Children in Care and Care Leavers Survey 2015'.

# CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Inquiry received consistent evidence that the level of need a child has to reach in order to access support varies across the country meaning that children with very similar needs are getting different interventions based on where they live. Preventative and early help services are particularly prone to variation. This 'postcode lottery' of protection, which risks leaving many children without the support they need, is unacceptable.

Concurrently, the Inquiry heard compelling evidence that thresholds for accessing services are rising, meaning it is getting harder for children and families across the country to access support. Families often have to reach crisis before getting the help they need.

Early help and preventative services, including services for 'children in need' under s.17, are particularly stretched and prone to variation. The Inquiry heard that urgent action is needed to protect these services and a statutory 'safety net' is required to ensure all children are able to access support early.

Money, at least implicitly, is influencing social workers' decisions about whether to intervene to support a child. Finances are particularly influential in decisions about whether to offer preventative or early help services. However, the Inquiry received alarming evidence suggesting that resources are also influencing decisions about whether to offer more acute interventions such as undertaking a s.47 inquiry. It is unacceptable that children's safety is potentially being undermined by insufficient resource.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

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 in need in different local authorities.

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.

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.



## ANNEX A: THE ALL PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP FOR CHILDREN (APPGC)

Officers:

- Tim Loughton MP (Co-Chair)
- Baroness Howarth of Breckland (Co-Chair)
- Baroness Massey of Darwen (Vice-Chair)
- Baroness Walmsley of West Derby (Vice-Chair)
- Baroness Tyler of Enfield (Vice-Chair)
- Sarah Champion MP (Vice-Chair)
- Alex Burghart MP (Secretary)
- The Earl of Listowel (Treasurer)

The APPGC has more than 100 members: 59 MPs and 52 Peers. The National Children's Bureau (NCB) provides the secretariat.

More information can be found on the NCB website: [www.ncb.org.uk](http://www.ncb.org.uk)

## ANNEX B: EVIDENCE COLLECTED BY THIS INQUIRY

### I) ORAL EVIDENCE SESSIONS

The Inquiry was launched on 13 September 2017.

Between January 2018 and May 2018, the Inquiry held four public evidence sessions and one private evidence session. The Inquiry heard verbal evidence from 19 organisations and two parliamentarians. A group of young people also gave evidence to the Inquiry.

#### Session 1. 24 January 2018.

- Tutu Mukelabai, Young Research Adviser, National Children's Bureau
- Faye Martin, Billie-Jo Thompson and Duncan Williams, Young People's Benchmarking Forum Champions, Catch 22 National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum
- Melanie Adegbite, Independent Social Worker and Director of a Semi-Independent Unit
- Karen Goodman, Professional Officer and Qualified Social Worker, British Association of Social Workers
- Adrian Dudley, Designated Safeguarding Lead, Bishop's Hatfield Girls' School, Hertfordshire
- Russ Clarke, Designated Safeguarding Lead, Haslingden High School, Lancashire

#### Session 2. 7 February 2018.

- Professor Nina Biehal, Department of Social Policy and Social Work at the University of York
- Professor Paul Bywaters, Professor of Social Work at the University of Huddersfield.
- Professor Brid Featherstone, Professor of Social Work and Head of Department at the University of Huddersfield
- Professor Kate Morris, Head of the Department of Sociological Studies and Professor of social work, University of Sheffield

- Jane Pickthall, Chair, National Association for Virtual School Heads
- Richard Cook, Children's Services Development Group (CSDG)
- David Ashcroft, Chair, Association of Independent LSCB Chairs

#### Session 3. 19 March 2018.

- Noel Arnold, Co-Chair Association of Lawyers for Children (submitted written evidence to the Inquiry after the session)
- Cllr Richard Watts, Chair, LGA Children and Young People's Board
- Emma Lewell-Buck MP, Shadow Minister for Children and Families

#### Session 4. 9 May 2018.

- Anne Longfield, Children's Commissioner for England
- Nadhim Zahawi, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children and Families

#### Closed evidence session. 28 March 2018.

- Directors of Children's Services from five local authorities gave evidence in confidence to the Officers of the APPGC.

Full minutes of the evidence sessions are available on the website [www.ncb.org.uk/storinguptrouble](http://www.ncb.org.uk/storinguptrouble)

## II) SURVEY OF SOCIAL WORKERS

An online survey of child and family social workers in England was carried out from July - September 2017. It was co-designed with the British Association of Social Work (BASW) and was distributed to all members of BASW who were known to be involved in children and families social work. It was also distributed online via social media and other online communications of the National Children's Bureau and its partners.

All those who started the survey were asked qualifying questions to ensure that they were a training or qualified social worker practicing in England. 1,710 valid responses were received. A further regional and professional breakdown is provided below.

### 1) Which of the following best describes your current role?

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Social worker  | 33% |
| Newly qualified social worker  | 10% |
| Senior/advanced practitioner   | 16% |
| Consultant social worker   | 4%  |
| Supervising social worker  | 3%  |
| Practice manager   | 2%  |
| Team manager   | 10% |
| Principal social worker  | 2%  |
| Service manager  | 4%  |
| Senior manager or director   | 3%  |
| Independent reviewing officer (IRO) and/or independent chair of child protection conferences | 4%  |
| Independent social worker  | 4%  |
| Other  | 6%  |

### 2) Which region do you currently work in?

If you are not currently working in a social work role, please answer according to where you most recently worked in such a role. If you work(ed) in more than one region please select where you carry out most of your work. If you do not want to answer, please select 'prefer not to say' and you will still be able to continue with the survey.

|                          |     |
|--------------------------|-----|
| Prefer not to say        | 3%  |
| North East               | 5%  |
| North West               | 11% |
| Yorkshire and The Humber | 11% |
| East Midlands            | 8%  |
| West Midlands            | 10% |
| East of England          | 6%  |
| London                   | 15% |
| South East               | 15% |
| South West               | 16% |
| Unsure                   | 1%  |

n=1710

## RESULTS

### Question 3

Thinking about your own caseload over the last three years, do you think the level of complexity in cases has changed? Please select the option that most closely reflects your own opinion.

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Yes, cases have generally increased in complexity         | 73% |
| Yes, cases have generally decreased in complexity         | 1%  |
| No, the level of complexity has generally stayed the same | 17% |
| Don't Know  | 1%  |
| I do not have a caseload                                  | 9%  |

n=1630

#### Question 4

Thinking about your own experience, over the last three years, how, if at all, do you think that thresholds for the following interventions with children and young people have changed?

n=1536

|  | THRESHOLDS<br>HAVE GENERALLY<br>RISEN | NO<br>CHANGE | THRESHOLDS<br>HAVE GENERALLY<br>LOWERED | DON'T<br>KNOW |
|--|---------------------------------------|--------------|---|---------------|
| <b>Offering early help (i.e. support provided by children's social care or others on a voluntary basis to those identified as vulnerable but not reaching thresholds for statutory intervention)</b> | 70%                                   | 12%          | 11%                                     | 8%            |
| <b>Providing services under section 17 of the Children Act 1989</b>  | 73%                                   | 12%          | 8%                                      | 7%            |
| <b>Making a child the subject of a protection plan</b>   | 53%                                   | 28%          | 13%                                     | 6%            |
| <b>Applying for a care order</b>   | 57%                                   | 20%          | 12%                                     | 11%           |

#### Question 5

Over the last twelve months, have you been involved in the provision of, or assessment for, early help for children and families? For the purposes of this survey 'early help' is defined as 'support provided by children's social care or others on a voluntary basis to those identified as vulnerable but not reaching thresholds for statutory intervention'.

Only those who answered 'yes' were asked the following question

#### Question 6

Thinking about your own experience, over the last twelve months, to what extent do you think each of the following has or has not influenced decisions about whether to offer early help to a child/family? For the purposes of this survey 'early help' is defined as 'support provided by children's social care or others on a voluntary basis to those identified as vulnerable but not reaching thresholds for statutory intervention'

|  | VERY<br>MUCH | TO A<br>LARGE<br>EXTENT | TO<br>SOME<br>EXTENT | NOT<br>AT<br>ALL |
|--|--------------|-------------------------|----------------------|------------------|
| <b>The locally agreed thresholds as published by the Local Safeguarding Children's Board</b>             | 18%          | 31%                     | 36%                  | 9%               |
| <b>Internal, official, policies set by your organisation</b>   | 28%          | 36%                     | 29%                  | 6%               |
| <b>Advice and/or supervision from a manager or team leader</b>   | 27%          | 34%                     | 32%                  | 6%               |
| <b>Pressure from a superior or senior management within your organisation</b>                            | 31%          | 26%                     | 30%                  | 13%              |
| <b>Finances available to children's services</b>   | 48%          | 21%                     | 19%                  | 10%              |
| <b>Availability of appropriate services</b>  | 51%          | 26%                     | 20%                  | 3%               |
| <b>Individual professional judgement of the child's needs by the social worker managing the case</b>     | 25%          | 37%                     | 33%                  | 4%               |
| <b>The views of statutory partner organisations (e.g. criminal justice, health, education providers)</b> | 15%          | 31%                     | 47%                  | 7%               |
| <b>The views of parents/carers</b>   | 21%          | 26%                     | 43%                  | 9%               |
| <b>Other</b>   | 10%          | 7%                      | 15%                  | 14%              |

n=780

**Question 7**

Over the last twelve months, have you been involved in supporting or assessing children in need (as defined by section 17 of the Children Act 1989)?

Only those who answered 'yes' were asked the following question

**Question 8**

Thinking about your own experience, over the last twelve months, to what extent do you think each of the following has or has not influenced decisions about whether to provide a child with services under section 17 of the Children Act 1989?

n=1053

|  | VERY MUCH | TO A LARGE EXTENT | TO SOME EXTENT | NOT AT ALL |
|--|-----------|-------------------|----------------|------------|
| <b>The locally agreed thresholds as published by the Local Safeguarding Children's Board</b>             | 21%       | 31%               | 37%            | 8%         |
| <b>Internal, official, policies set by your organisation</b>   | 28%       | 38%               | 28%            | 5%         |
| <b>Advice and/or supervision from a manager or team leader</b>   | 27%       | 40%               | 30%            | 3%         |
| <b>Pressure from a superior or senior management within your organisation</b>                            | 30%       | 28%               | 29%            | 13%        |
| <b>Finances available to children's services</b>   | 41%       | 25%               | 23%            | 10%        |
| <b>Availability of appropriate services</b>  | 41%       | 27%               | 26%            | 6%         |
| <b>Individual professional judgement of the child's needs by the social worker managing the case</b>     | 25%       | 45%               | 28%            | 3%         |
| <b>The views of statutory partner organisations (e.g. criminal justice, health, education providers)</b> | 11%       | 32%               | 50%            | 6%         |
| <b>The views of parents/carers</b>   | 13%       | 25%               | 52%            | 10%        |
| <b>Other</b>   | 7%        | 5%                | 18%            | 12%        |

**Question 9**

Over the last twelve months, have you been involved in Section 47 enquiries, child protection conferences or supporting children deemed to be suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm (as defined under section 47 of the Children Act 1989)?

Only those who answered 'yes' were asked the following question

### Question 10

Thinking about your own experience, over the last twelve months, to what extent do you think each of the following has or has not influenced decisions about whether to make a child the subject of a child protection plan?

n=1143

|  | VERY MUCH | TO A LARGE EXTENT | TO SOME EXTENT | NOT AT ALL |
|--|-----------|-------------------|----------------|------------|
| <b>The locally agreed thresholds as published by the Local Safeguarding Children's Board</b>             | 29%       | 33%               | 29%            | 7%         |
| <b>Internal, official, policies set by your organisation</b>   | 25%       | 37%               | 31%            | 5%         |
| <b>Advice and/or supervision from a manager or team leader</b>   | 29%       | 39%               | 27%            | 4%         |
| <b>Pressure from a superior or senior management within your organisation</b>                            | 22%       | 25%               | 32%            | 19%        |
| <b>Finances available to children's services</b>   | 20%       | 14%               | 27%            | 37%        |
| <b>Availability of appropriate services</b>  | 19%       | 22%               | 30%            | 28%        |
| <b>Individual professional judgement of the child's needs by the social worker managing the case</b>     | 34%       | 44%               | 19%            | 2%         |
| <b>The views of statutory partner organisations (e.g. criminal justice, health, education providers)</b> | 20%       | 40%               | 38%            | 2%         |
| <b>The views of parents/carers</b>   | 7%        | 15%               | 54%            | 23%        |
| <b>Other</b>   | 12%       | 9%                | 12%            | 15%        |

### Question 11

Over the last twelve months, have you been involved in supporting children in or on the edge of care, or decisions about whether to apply for care orders for individual children?

Only those who answered 'yes' were asked the following question

**Question 12**

Thinking about your own experience, over the last twelve months, to what extent do you think each of the following has or has not influenced decisions about whether to apply for a care order for a child?

n=977

|  | VERY MUCH | TO A LARGE EXTENT | TO SOME EXTENT | NOT AT ALL |
|--|-----------|-------------------|----------------|------------|
| <b>The locally agreed thresholds as published by the Local Safeguarding Children's Board</b>             | 21%       | 27%               | 37%            | 11%        |
| <b>Internal, official, policies set by your organisation</b>   | 28%       | 32%               | 32%            | 5%         |
| <b>Advice and/or supervision from a manager or team leader</b>   | 36%       | 39%               | 20%            | 3%         |
| <b>Pressure from a superior or senior management within your organisation</b>                            | 33%       | 28%               | 26%            | 13%        |
| <b>Finances available to children's services</b>   | 29%       | 18%               | 29%            | 23%        |
| <b>Availability of appropriate services</b>  | 25%       | 23%               | 33%            | 19%        |
| <b>Individual professional judgement of the child's needs by the social worker managing the case</b>     | 30%       | 42%               | 25%            | 2%         |
| <b>The views of statutory partner organisations (e.g. criminal justice, health, education providers)</b> | 12%       | 29%               | 52%            | 7%         |
| <b>The views of parents/carers</b>   | 8%        | 17%               | 53%            | 21%        |
| <b>Other</b>   | 15%       | 11%               | 17%            | 10%        |

**Question 13**

Overall, thinking about your own experience, over the last twelve months, which of these do you think are the top three most influential factors in deciding what level of intervention or support (if any) a child receives? Select the most influential factor (1) to the third most influential fact (3).

n=1334

|  | 1   | 2   | 3   |
|--|-----|-----|-----|
| <b>The locally agreed thresholds as published by the Local Safeguarding Children's Board</b>             | 19% | 10% | 8%  |
| <b>Internal, official, policies set by your organisation</b>   | 7%  | 11% | 9%  |
| <b>Advice and/or supervision from a manager or team leader</b>   | 12% | 18% | 13% |
| <b>Pressure from a superior or senior management within your organisation</b>                            | 10% | 12% | 10% |
| <b>Finances available to children's services</b>   | 17% | 15% | 11% |
| <b>Availability of appropriate services</b>  | 9%  | 13% | 16% |
| <b>Individual professional judgement of the child's needs by the social worker managing the case</b>     | 22% | 6%  | 15% |
| <b>The views of statutory partner organisations (e.g. criminal justice, health, education providers)</b> | 1%  | 3%  | 9%  |
| <b>The views of parents/carers</b>   | 1%  | 1%  | 7%  |
| <b>Other</b>   | 1%  | 1%  | 2%  |

**Question 14**

If there is anything else you would like to say about decision making and thresholds in children's social care, please type this in the box below.

429 social workers responded to this question. Quotes were taken from these where they added depth to the other findings of the Inquiry.

### III) SURVEY OF DIRECTORS OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES

On 20th February 2018, an online survey was sent to all 152 Directors of Children's Services (DCSs) in England on behalf of Tim Loughton MP and the APPGC. The survey remained open until 19th March 2018.

97 out of 152 DCSs completed the survey. This was a 64% response rate. A summary of answers to the multiple choice questions are given below. The open-ended responses were analysed using NVivo software.

**Question 1: Over the last three years, in your experience, how, if at all, do you think that thresholds for the following interventions with children and young people have changed in your local authority?**

n = 97

| INTERVENTION                                    | THRESHOLDS HAVE GENERALLY RISEN | NO CHANGE | THRESHOLDS HAVE GENERALLY LOWERED | I DON'T KNOW |
|---|---------------------------------|-----------|-----------------------------------|--------------|
| Providing early help                            | 31%                             | 51%       | 18%                               | 1%           |
| Providing services for children in need         | 18%                             | 68%       | 12%                               | 2%           |
| Making a child the subject of a protection plan | 9%                              | 79%       | 8%                                | 3%           |
| Applying for a care order                       | 10%                             | 78%       | 8%                                | 3%           |

If you think thresholds have generally risen please explain why you think they have risen (optional):  
[Open ended responses given]

**Question 2: Currently, in your experience, do you think threshold levels, for the following interventions with children and young people, vary between local authorities?**

n = 97

| INTERVENTION                                    | YES THRESHOLDS VARY | NO THRESHOLDS DO NOT VARY | I DON'T KNOW/ I CAN'T SAY OUTSIDE OF MY LOCAL AUTHORITY |
|---|---------------------|---------------------------|---|
| Providing early help                            | 83%                 | 2%                        | 15%   |
| Providing services for children in need         | 74%                 | 6%                        | 20%   |
| Making a child the subject of a protection plan | 64%                 | 13%                       | 24%   |
| Applying for a care order                       | 49%                 | 23%                       | 28%   |

**Question 3: Over the last 12 months, in your experience, which factors are the three most influential in deciding the level of intervention or support (if any) a child receives? Please rank the three factors from (1) (most important) to (3) (third most important).**

The top three factors were:

1. Individual professional judgement of the child's needs by the social workers managing the case
2. The locally agreed thresholds as published by the Local Safeguarding Children's Board
3. Advice or direction from junior managers or team leaders

n = 95

Other please state: [Open ended responses given]

n = 8

**Question 4: Over the last three years, in your experience, has there been any change in your ability to fulfil duties and responsibilities towards children in need?**

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| It is more challenging to fulfil duties and responsibilities | 90% |
| It is less challenging to fulfil duties and responsibilities | 1%  |
| There has been no change                                     | 9%  |

*n* = 97

**Question 5: Over the last 12 months, in your experience, what, if any, have been the challenges in fulfilling your duties and responsibilities towards children in need? Tick all that apply.**

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Rising demand for services                                    | 91% |
| Reduction in resources  | 69% |
| More complex cases involving vulnerable children and families | 90% |
| Availability of appropriate services                          | 73% |
| No challenges   | 0%  |

*n* = 97

Other challenges please state: [Open ended response given]

*n* = 21

**Question 6: Is there anything additional you would like to feed in to the Inquiry?**

[Open ended responses given]

*n* = 42

#### IV) SURVEY OF LOCAL AUTHORITY LEAD MEMBERS WITH RESPONSIBILITY FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES

NCB and the APPG for Children asked Survation to carry out a poll of Local Authority Lead Members with responsibility for Children's Services during October 2017.

101 Lead Members responded from authorities across England. This included 45 Conservatives, 51 from Labour and five from other parties.

##### Question 1

Thinking about the last 2 years, that is since October 2015, would you say that the demand for children's services in your local authority has:

- Generally increased – (87%)
- Generally decreased – (2%)
- Stayed about the same – (10%)
- I have not been a lead member/ a councillor long enough – (2%)

*n* = 101

Lead Members who said they thought demand for children's services had generally increased were asked why this was the case. Top responses cited included:

- Increased levels of poverty/deprivation/hardship/more difficult to access benefits (50%);
- Cuts to other services for families, such as support with housing, youth services or Sure Start centres (45%);
- Greater awareness amongst professionals of signs of abuse/neglect (36%);
- Increased levels of abuse/neglect (24%).

*n*=87

## Question 2

Thinking about the current financial year that is 2017/18, to what extent do you agree or disagree that your local authority have sufficient funding to:

*n=101*

|   | STRONGLY AGREE | SLIGHTLY AGREE | NEITHER AGREE OR DISAGREE | SLIGHTLY DISAGREE | NOT AT ALL | DON'T KNOW |
|---|----------------|----------------|---------------------------|-------------------|------------|------------|
| Meet statutory obligations to all children in care                          | 35%            | 25%            | 5%                        | 12%               | 24%        | <1%        |
| Meet statutory obligation to all children with a child protection plan      | 32%            | 30%            | 6%                        | 12%               | 18%        | 2%         |
| Meet statutory obligation to all children in need under Section 17          | 23%            | 33%            | 6%                        | 13%               | 23%        | 2%         |
| To provide universal services for children and families to meet local needs | 9%             | 15%            | 7%                        | 15%               | 51%        | 2%         |

## Question 3

If your local authority were to receive an increase of 10 per cent in its annual budget for services for children and young people, what would be your priorities for spending that additional money? Please tell me up to three main priorities.

The top priorities cited were:

- Early support for families (to prevent problems escalating)(54%);
- Support for children in care (foster care; residential care etc)(50%);
- Additional staff (28%);
- Support for children at risk of going into care (23%);
- Support for children with mental health problems (23%).

*n = 101*

## V) LOCAL SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN'S BOARD (LSCB) THRESHOLD DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

A representative sample of 37 LSCB threshold documents were selected taking into account deprivation, Ofsted judgements, number of referrals to children's social care and spend per child in need.

The analysis categorised the levels of support or intervention recommended by the documents. These were:

- **Level A – Early help** is recommended but this is to be led by **universal services** without support from children's social care;
- **Level B – Early help** is recommended and this involves some kind of advice, coordination or additional service from **children's social care**;
- **Level C** – The child is considered potentially a '**Child in Need**' so should be referred to children's social care for assessment and support under s.17 of the Children Act; and
- **Level D** – Urgent referral to children's social care, so that s.47 inquiries, **child protection** plans and/or emergency accommodation (S20) orders can be considered.

Most threshold documents described levels of support at three out of these four levels. All documents described support at level D but 'Child in Need' services were sometimes subsumed within this (so they did not have a separate level C). The documents also described different approaches to early help, with one or two levels being described (A and/or B). Documents frequently described support at levels A, B and D or B,C and D for example.

Each document was analysed focussing on the approach it set out for five issues: domestic violence between parents; self-harm; housing problems; bullying, and physical abuse. The analysis used a set range of search terms to capture as many clearly relevant references as possible.

The analysis categorised the documents' references to the five issues above on a scale of 1 to 6, with 1 being the least severe or lowest risk and 6 being the most severe or highest risk. This was based on a detailed coding guide, which was aligned with the wording of the Children Act 1989. This was piloted with documents to ensure a consistent system of coding had been established.

## ANNEX C: FURTHER READING

The APPGC recognises that this report is building on a wider and constantly growing body of evidence on the challenges faced by children's social care services in England including:

- Action for Children (2018) 'Revolving Door Part II: Are we failing children at risk of abuse and neglect'.
- Action for Children, Barnardo's, The Children's Society and NSPCC 'A Stitch in Time The case for Early Support'.
- Bilson, A. 'Briefing Paper on Adoption and Child Protection Trends in England' (expected Autumn 2018).
- Children's Commissioner's Office (2018) 'Public Spending on Children: 2000 to 2020'.
- Children's Commissioner's Office (2018) 'Voices of Children in Foster Care'.
- Children's Commissioner's Office (2018) 'Who cares? A Children's Commissioner report on public expectations for the care of vulnerable children'.
- Children's Services Development Group (2018) 'The State of Children's Services 2018-19 A consensus-driven call to improve services for vulnerable children and young people'.
- Family Rights Group (2018) 'Care Crisis Review: options for change'.
- House of Commons Education Committee (2017) 'Fostering'.
- Local Government Association (2018) 'Making Sense – Understanding the drivers of variation in spend on Children's Services'. Narey, M., and Owers, M, (2018) 'Foster Care in England A Review for the Department for Education'.
- National Children's Bureau, Action for Children and The Children's Society (2017) 'Turning the tide reversing the move to late intervention spending in children and young people's services'.

Other relevant campaigns and ongoing research projects:

- Local Government Association 'Bright Futures' campaign. See <https://www.local.gov.uk/about/campaigns/bright-futures> for further information.
- Nuffield Foundation 'Inequalities in child welfare intervention rates'. See <http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/inequalities-child-welfare-intervention-rates> for further information.

All Party Parliamentary Group for Children

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