

Terms of reference for the independent review of children's social care: a bold and broad approach to support a fundamental review of children's experiences

Context

Government is committed to levelling up across the country. In order to do this, it is absolutely vital that we start with children and families – particularly the most vulnerable – to reduce the downstream impacts and costs to both the children themselves and society. Every child, no matter their background or the circumstances in which they grow up, must have the opportunity to fulfil their potential. Children's social care is at the heart of this endeavour, with a unique ability to protect children and young people from risks or harms both inside and outside the home, and to help them realise their talents and aspirations for the future. We want to improve children and young people's lives and outcomes at the earliest opportunity, to strengthen families, and to realise the benefits of establishing firm and loving foundations early in life, both to individuals and to society for generations to come.

It is for this reason that in our manifesto we committed to undertaking a review – the review will take a fundamental look at the needs, experiences and outcomes of the children it supports, and what is needed to make a real difference. In doing so, the review will contribute to ambitious and deliverable reforms, taking into account the sustainability of local services and effective use of resources. The review will also consider how the children's social care system responds to all children who are referred to the system. It will address major challenges, including the sharp increase in recent years in the number of looked after children, high and rising unit costs, the inconsistencies in children's social care practice and outcomes across the country, and the failure of the system to provide sufficient stable loving homes for children.

The review should consider the capacity and capability of the system to support and strengthen families in order to prevent children being taken into care unnecessarily.

Building on what we know and taking an evidence-led approach

This review will be bold and broad – a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reform systems and services. Children's needs and the context in which they are growing up have evolved. A children's social care system which can respond appropriately now and in the future is needed. The review will build on the strong foundations we have established: recent reviews over the past decade have given us rich insights into the component parts of the children's social care system such as fostering and residential care, alongside analysis of support in and around schools though the review of children in need. We have learnt a great deal about a range of policy 'enablers' and tools at our disposal, such as workforce reform and increasing professional freedom, that have unlocked real changes. We will improve our understanding of which levers offer the greatest potential to make a difference to children's experiences through social care and be open to new ways of conceiving and delivering them. The wealth of existing evidence from national reviews and local practice should act as a stepping off point – so that we build on this understanding and move forwards, taking an evidence-led approach throughout. The review will also work alongside ongoing programmes for

reform around raising standards in local authorities, boosting adoption, improving support for care leavers, and responding to the consultation on unregulated provision.

Scope for a bold and broad review

- **Starting from children's experiences.** What marks this review out is the singular opportunity it presents to take a fundamental look at the experiences of the people who matter most, children and young people themselves, and the services they receive through children's social care and partner agencies. This starting point will ensure the review tells us what would serve children best based on their needs. The review will consider how the provision of services in one part of the system influences a child's experiences and outcomes later. The review will prioritise hearing the voices of children, young people, and adults that have received the help or support of a social worker, or who have been looked after.
- **All children who are referred to or involved with statutory children's social care.** The review will look at the whole system of support, safeguarding, protection and care, and the child's journey into and out of that system, including relevant aspects of preventative services provided as part of early help. This will include children throughout their interaction with children's social care, from referral, child in need and child protection plans, through to becoming looked after. Evidence has shown that the outcomes of all children involved with children's social care in this way are comparably challenging – for instance, children on a child in need plan had an average Attainment 8 score of 23 in 2016, the same as children in care (the national average is 50). The review will focus on what is needed to meet these children's needs, starting with the contribution that children's social care can make to these children's lives – keeping them safe, improving their lifetime outcomes and reducing the impact to children and to society of failing to provide effective support – whilst also considering the role and contribution of the wider multi-agency system. The implications if we are not able to fully support children to achieve their potential are clear: children who have been in care comprise 25% of the homeless and 24% of the prison population. Over a third of care leavers (39%) are not in education, employment or training compared to 13% of all 19-21 year olds and just 13% progressed to Higher Education by age 19 compared to 43% of all other pupils.

The review's focus should include children who are in care in formal settings such as fostering arrangements or residential care and also those receiving support under informal, kinship care. The review may want to consider support for children as they prepare to leave care and those receiving ongoing support once they have left care, drawing on care leavers' experiences. It may also want to consider the support provided for adoption. The review will give due regard to the SEND Review, which will consider the main questions relevant to children with special educational needs and disability.

- **Children's social care and interaction with partner agencies.** Children's social care is central to improving lives but cannot achieve it alone. The influence of related social issues is fundamental, for instance domestic abuse, mental ill health and substance abuse. The responses to these issues are led by key partner agencies, such as police and health settings. In order to fully meet children's needs it is necessary that they and their families receive all the right support. The review will investigate how those services' roles,

responsibilities and accountabilities interact with children's social care and recommend improvements to the way they work together.

- **Deliverable reforms that make the most effective use of resources.** The review must be workable, leading to deliverable reforms that are evidence based and demonstrate a measurable impact. It is vital that recommendations are made following consideration of the key questions of sustainability and how social care funding, workforce and other resources can be used most effectively to change children's lives and represent good value for money.

The review will focus on the following themes and questions:

- 1. Support:** what support is needed to meet the needs of children who are referred to or involved with social care, in order to improve outcomes and make a long-term positive difference to individuals and to society?
- 2. Strengthening families:** what can be done so that children are supported to stay safely and thrive with their families, to ensure the exceptional powers that are granted to the state to support and intervene in families are consistently used responsibly, balancing the need to protect children with the right to family life, avoiding the need to enter care?
- 3. Safety:** what can be done so that children who need to be in care get there quickly, and to ensure those children feel safe and are not at risk of significant harm?
- 4. Care:** what is needed for children to have a positive experience of care that prioritises stability, providing an alternative long-term family for children who need it and support for others to return home safely?
- 5. Delivery:** what are the key enablers to implement the review and raise standards across England, such as a strong, stable and resilient workforce, system leadership and partnerships, and what is needed so that this change can be delivered?
- 6. Sustainability:** what is the most sustainable and cost-effective way of delivering services, including high-cost services, who is best placed to deliver them, and how could this be improved so that they are fit for the future?
- 7. Accountability:** what accountability arrangements are necessary to ensure that the state can act appropriately, balancing the need to protect and promote the welfare of children with the importance of parental responsibility, and what is needed to ensure proper oversight of how local areas discharge those responsibilities consistently?

The review will engage with children, young people, and adults with direct experience of children's social care, in order to ensure those individuals' views and lived experience are fully embedded in the review's work.

The review will report to ministers and the government will publish a report and response.