

Briefing for House of Lords
debate

Public Services

Committee A response to
*the Children's Social Care
Implementation Strategy*



Believe in
children
Barnardo's

20 September 2023

Key points

- **The children's social care system is under significant pressure – numbers of children in care increased by a quarter between 2010-11 and 2020-21¹** while the number of children formally identified as 'in need' grew by 12,500 over the same period.
- Recent analysis on the level of children's services funding conducted by Pro-Bono Economics² on behalf of Barnardo's and the other leading children's charities shows that while spending by councils on children's social care is increasing, **80% of the £800m increase in spending in the last year went on late intervention – much on high-cost residential for-profit care placements for children with complex needs.**
- The same analysis also showed that there has been limited new investment in early family help services which seek to prevent children entering care. **Overall, despite a slight year-on-year increase money spent on these services has decreased by 46% in 12 years.**
- The Independent Review of Children's Social Care published in May 2022 and contained several important reforms **including a recommended investment of £2.6bn to refocus the system on providing early support for families.**
- The Government's issued a response to the review in May 2022. While this welcomed many of the recommendations, overall the plans lacked funding and pledged just £200 million over a two-year period, which would be used to fund 12 Family First Pathfinders and Regional Care Co-operatives. **National roll-out of new family help services will not happen until 2026 at the earliest and there is no legislative timetable for introducing further reform.**
- This delay will come at a cost to children and families but also to the state – recent analysis by Alma Economics³ on behalf of the major children's charities showed that the cost of delaying a national roll out for two years will mean **that ten years from now, allowing for inflation, the Government will have spent an additional £1bn more than if they had implemented the reforms on the timeline suggested by the Care Review.**

1. The Independent Review of Children's Social Care.

The Independent Review of Children's Social Care published its final report in May 2022 setting out recommendations for a significant overhaul of the children's social care system⁴. Its proposals include:

- **Radical reform of 'family help'.** This should ensure that the system is able to reach more families before they reach crisis point, in particular it recommends an investment of £2 billion to support local authorities to transform family help. It also recommends

¹ [Children looked after in England including adoptions, Reporting year 2022 – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/explore-education-statistics)

² [Spending on children and young people's services | Barnardo's \(barnardos.org.uk\)](https://www.barnardos.org.uk)

³ [Cost of Delay Briefing Final.pdf \(barnardos.org.uk\)](#)

⁴ [Independent review of children's social care: final report – GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)

that once family help is reformed the Government should ring-fence funding to ensure rebalanced investment is sustained.

- **Reforms to improve the experience for children in care.** This includes a radical extension of advocacy making the system 'opt-out' ensuring that all children have a say in decisions made about them as well as recommending a national campaign to recruit more foster carers into the system.
- **Better support for young people leaving care.** This includes making it easier for young people to stay with their foster carers for longer, giving more financial support to young people when they first set up home and extending Independent Visitors or 'buddies' to this group, helping to combat loneliness and isolation.

2. The Government's plan to implement the review – improved early support for families.

The Government issued its response to the review – Stable Homes Built on Love⁵ – in May 2022. This document was a helpful "first step" which accepted the principles behind many of the key reforms in the review including on family help, changes to advocacy and providing improved support for care leavers.

However, the document contained little in the way of funding to implement the reform programme (£200m over two years). This falls far short of the investment needed to produce the "one in a lifetime" change to the system envisaged by the Josh MacAlister's review. Also, while the document provides several commitments to "*consult further*" or "*bring forward legislation when time allows*" there is no timetable for introducing further reform. **Barnardo's is concerned that given the forthcoming General Election there is a risk that the issue of children's social care could lose momentum.**

Also while Barnardo's welcome the commitment to provide multi-agency family help teams in all communities we are concerned that the Government does not show a similar commitment to extending universal family help services. **Barnardo's believes intensive family support works best when delivery is embedded within communities as part of a wide scale offer of support for all families within a family hub model.** This allows the provision of universal 'help groups' for families to sit alongside service offering specialist targeted support. The approach enables family help to be visible and non-stigmatising within communities and enables families to move easily between different services as their needs change. It would also enable care reform to be delivered in conjunction with the Best Start in Life⁶ reform agenda which also advocated for this model.

3. Proposals to improve the commissioning of children's services.

The Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) 2022 report on the children's social care market found that local authorities were often struggling to find places for some children, particularly those with complex needs⁷. To address this the Government is proposing a change to commissioning arrangements with local authorities grouping together to form regional care cooperatives who would have responsibility for commissioning new fostering, residential and secure care services over a wide geographical footprint. The implementation plan for the Care Review commits the government to piloting this approach in two areas.

Barnardo's are concerned that such a decision is misguided and might make the problems of sufficiency in placements worse. The proposal risks:

- **Fragmenting the care system.** Local authorities typically offer a range of services under the umbrella of children's social care and vulnerable families seldom only access one part. Splitting decisions around the commissioning of placements from other

⁵ [Children's social care stable homes built on love consultation \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/107212/childrens-social-care-stable-homes-built-on-love-consultation.pdf)

⁶ [The best start for life a vision for the 1 001 critical days.pdf \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/107212/the-best-start-for-life-a-vision-for-the-1-001-critical-days.pdf)

⁷ [Final report - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/107212/final-report.pdf)

children's services will hamper joined-up planning and could result in a lack of consistency in the support offered to the child and family.

- **Smaller providers exiting the market** – the requirement to work with regional commissioners risks disadvantaging smaller fostering and residential providers who have strong relationships with their local authority and local community but don't have the capacity to operate over a larger geographical footprint.
- **An increase in out of area placements.** A regional approach to commissioning over too great an area may see an increase in children being placed a long way from their birth families even if placed in a "nearby" local authority.

We believe a better approach to improving commissioning arrangements would be to:

- **Provide more capital funding to enable the commissioning of a greater range of residential provision.** A lack of access to upfront funding makes it difficult for charities and smaller providers to bid for contacts since they often do not have access to funding to enable the initial purchase of a property. Providing more capital funding would enable a greater number of providers to enter the market, increasing competition and ensuring a greater diversity in provision available to meet the needs of vulnerable children.
- **Greater support from central government to help local authorities commission children's social care services.** Local authorities vary in their expertise in understanding different options for commissioning and how to accurately forecast need. Where they struggle to do this, they often resort to expensive spot purchasing arrangements – which increase costs and make it harder for providers to plan. Central Government could play a role in improving knowledge of commissioning in local authorities. We would recommend the introduction of a national oversight body to support local authorities to look at new approaches to commissioning.
- **Investing in better care planning for children in care - including improved mental health support.** Providers often find that the amount of support a child needs is much greater than first anticipated when they were placed – this impacts on both the quality of care a child receives and increases the cost. It is important to improve initial assessment to ensure that children's needs are identified from the beginning and the necessary extra support e.g. through CAHMS is put in place. In turn this helps make the market accessible to a range of providers who can feel confident that they can offer residential care which meets the needs of children. **To improve initial assessment of need, all children who enter care should have a mental health assessment (similar to the physical health assessment already provided).**

Suggested questions:

1. Whether the Minister knows if there will be a Children's Social Care Bill in the next Kings Speech to provide a vehicle to bring forward many of the reforms recommended by the Review?
2. To ask the Minister what progress there has been to introduce the 12 pathfinders promised in stable homes built on love and whether he is confident that these will be completed within two-year framework?

About Barnardo's

Barnardo's is the UK's largest national children's charity. In 2021-22 we supported 357,276 children, young people, parents, and carers, through a mixture of one-to-one support, school-based programmes and our children's centres and family hubs. In 2021/22 we supported 1112 children in care and 2788 care-experienced young people. As the UK's largest voluntary fostering and adoption agency, we placed 976 children with foster families and 124 with adoptive parents. We continually explore innovative models of foster care and residential care that promote strong and long-lasting relationships. For more information contact Nicola Smith, Senior policy adviser on nicola.smith4@barnardos.org.uk