

Children's Social Care Review: Response to the Case for Change CoramBAAF, August 2021

We are grateful for the ongoing opportunities to contribute to and engage with the Independent Children's Social Care Review. This is an important review with the potential to improve the lives of children on the edge of care, in care and leaving care.

About us

CoramBAAF is the leading professional membership organisation in the UK for local authorities and the voluntary and independent sector involved in family placement including adoption, fostering and kinship care. Our response is based on discussions across our multi-disciplinary forums, groups and committees and we have also encouraged our members to feedback on the Case for Change.

We are dedicated to improving the outcomes of children and young people in care and provide a range of services that develop, promote and support best policy and practice in family placement including: publications, events, training and consultancy, advice and information, networking and campaigning.

We are part of the Coram group of charities and bring a wide and multi-disciplinary perspective across children's lives. This includes UK and international perspectives of social workers specialising in adoption, fostering and children's welfare; doctors, nurses, paediatricians and medical advisers; lawyers; counsellors, therapists and psychologists; trainers; academics and students; as well as adoptive parents, kinship carers and foster carers.

Our response

The Case for Change report from the Independent Review of Children's Social Care sets out a powerful argument about the need for reform and the need to work more closely with families. Many of the issues it identifies – such as the paucity of early help and lack of protection for teenagers – are the result of both system failures and significant reductions in funding over the last decade of austerity.

The real test for this Review is not in identifying the causes of problems – it will be in turning this case for change into sustainable solutions. For this to happen it needs to make sure that there is adequate funding available – not just for children's social care but for preventative services and early help, political will to implement its recommendations, a clear action plan and an unrelenting and unstinting focus on children, their safety, welfare and well-being.

Key points

- We were pleased to see the recognition of the impact of poverty and austerity and cuts to welfare provision on families, and on the services and support available to them, in the report. We note that local authorities have faced 40% funding cuts in the last decade, funding of Children's Social Care has decreased year on year since 2010/11, while referrals have increased, including more challenging and complex cases. We note again that the UN special rapporteur, in 2019, found that poverty in the UK was 'systematic and tragic' and as such, a breach of its duties and obligations but also that a child's right to safety and to family life must not be compromised in the pursuit of political, social or economic change.

- The review states that “The state is not a pushy enough parent when it comes to getting access to the support children in care need.” Our members tell us that many excellent and committed social workers have children at the centre of all their work, and could indeed not try harder to access the help needed. Local authorities and support services have suffered ten years of cuts, and specialist services provided by charities have been reduced as contracts with local authorities have not been renewed. Far too often social workers find themselves unable to refer families to additional support and services. In many parts of the country, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) have year long waiting lists or will not take referrals from children who are ‘not in a stable placement’.
- In relation to mental health, we were also disappointed to see the review describe mental health support as equating to a child receiving a CAMHS service. We believe there is now ample evidence for the effectiveness of services that have provided support in a way that is more attuned to the needs of children in care, for example mental health practitioners embedded in social care teams, and the NSPCC whole system approach (Bazalgette et al 2015).
- While we were pleased to see the acknowledgment of the experiences of children from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds, we believe that the review needs a greater focus on young people involved with the immigration system while in care and their experiences and voices – those who arrived in the UK unaccompanied as well as those who entered care for child protection reasons. Unaccompanied asylum seekers make up 6% of the population of looked-after children, but many more have unregularised status or are undocumented.
- We would also encourage the review to look more closely at the experiences of children and families who are supported by social care under Section 17 as a result of an ‘No recourse to public funds’ (NRPF) condition on their immigration status. It is estimated that these restrictions directly affects more than 350,000 children in the UK (Pinter et al, 2020). These are some of the most vulnerable children in the country, and work must be done to understand how best to alleviate the harm that these families are experiencing.
- Social work with children and their families is underpinned by a fundamental recognition of the child’s need for belonging, security, stability and continuity – both in the present but also for the rest of their lives. Permanence is a key construct in children’s social care. We have long cautioned about the promotion of hierarchies of permanence which have elevated adoption above other permanence options (including kinship care, foster care and residential care) and there needs to be greater recognition and support for permanence (love, security and a sense of belonging) for all children.
- While the focus on adoption is clearly important for those children where this is the agreed and authorised plan. The vast majority of children who are looked after do not, will not and cannot appropriately have a plan for adoption. They have a care plan for foster care either with approved family members or ‘stranger’ foster carers, some are subject to other permanence orders such as a Special Guardianship Order or a Child Arrangement Order. There must and cannot be a competitive struggle to prioritise one placement type over another. The key drivers must be the child’s safety, welfare, well-being and development, not on the availability of placements or resources.

- We would like to see a greater recognition of the importance of foster care and fostering for its core contribution to the safety, welfare, well-being and development of children. Foster carers support children to sustain relationships with their birth families and step in at times of crisis and provide homes for some of our most damaged and vulnerable children. Fostering interventions help keep children safe and often enhance relationships in the birth family. Foster carers can be kinship carers, they can go onto have special guardianship orders and adopt the children in their care. We would urge the review to engage with the [Education Select Committee's Report](#).
- In relation to kinship care, we believe social workers and other professionals working in this area urgently need substantially improved infrastructure and support. This includes making sure that kinship professionals have the time they need, manageable caseloads, reflective supervision and training, good governance systems (locally and nationally, underpinned by sound data and research evidence). There is an urgent need for reform to alleviate the material pressures facing families.
- Foster care and kinship services also need good governance systems (locally and nationally, underpinned by sound data and research evidence) and a framework of cross-departmental policies to address the significant social problems impacting on children's wellbeing and healthy development.
- Relationships are at the heart of family life and the building of warm and positive relationships based on trust, sensitivity and expertise is at the heart of good practice. We were pleased with the focus on relationships in the 'Case for Change' report. The challenge is how to create the conditions within children's social care and family justice that allow sensitive and responsive relationships to flourish everywhere, within and between agencies, within families, and between families and practitioners. We believe that social workers and a range of other practitioners have a vital role in delivering effective support for children and families, and that their work is underpinned by good relationships. To build good relationships we need an informed, skilled and supported workforce, whose work is respected and acknowledged. Currently, many social workers feel under enormous pressure. Holding practitioners responsible for systemic failure is likely to exacerbate these further by decreasing confidence and increasing staff turnover.
- While it is absolutely key to examine and understand the causes of children coming into care, our members tell us that in many cases, children are only removed after many years of support and failed attempts to help families overcome the challenges that they face. The severest interventions are only used as an absolute last resort as the consequential impacts on children and families are well recognised by both social workers and family justice professionals. It is always a balancing act, one in which judgement about the harm being caused to children has to be carefully considered, with time being a factor in such decisions.
- As the case for change indicates, some parents face acute and long-term challenges. We would welcome a clearer acknowledgement that there is a combination of factors – some individual such as mental health, substance abuse and domestic violence to systemic and societal factors such as environmental/social/economic issues, alongside discrimination and inequalities. Children social care cannot be considered alone. To address these issues will involve not just children's social care but will necessarily involve the welfare system, housing, health, education, immigration and the police and criminal justice system. Every government department will need to play its part.

- We recognise the issues around growing risk aversion in the system, as identified by Professor Munro in her seminal report (Munro, 2011) into the care system. However, this is a result of restricted budgets and increasing demand which inevitably mean that resources become targeted at those cases requiring intervention to protect children as opposed to prevention and early support. To reverse this, we need increased investment in multi-agency support programmes which are required to support prevention work and reduce the number of cases requiring safeguarding intervention. New 'models' of delivery such as FDAC (Harwin et al 2014, Whitehead and Reeder, 2016) and Family safeguarding model (Forrester et al, 2017, Rodger et al, 2020) are being introduced in some local authorities and offer the opportunity to provide support to families in multidisciplinary Teams. Where these are introduced, they are beginning to have positive benefits for families who are involved with Children's Social Care.
- Additionally, we would urge the review to examine whether the increase in numbers of section 17 and section 47 enquiries also reflects an increase in severity of child abuse cases for those requiring intervention, in line with rises in levels of violence as reflected in reported domestic abuse cases and assaults.
- It is important to note, and we are pleased the review has done so, that even in austerity and with rises in case numbers, some children's services achieve 'outstanding' Ofsted results. We believe the review should explore the features of outstanding services and support the sector to develop the confidence and expertise to reform in line with these learnings.

For further information or for any questions about our response, please contact Ellen Broomé, Managing Director, at ellen.broome@corambaaf.org.uk.

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