



Department
for Education

Children's social care reform

A vision for change

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Contents

Vision	3
Our reform programme	4
People and leadership	4
Practice and systems	6
Governance and accountability	7
Where do we want to be by 2020?	9

Vision

Children's social care is about changing lives. It has the ability not just to improve the circumstances of vulnerable children but to transform them completely.

We want every child in the country, whatever their background, whatever their age, whatever their ethnicity or gender, to have the opportunity to fulfil their potential. Children's social care services have an essential role to play – whether by keeping children safe from harm, finding the best possible care when children cannot live at home, or creating the conditions that enable children to thrive and achieve. To make that happen, it is essential that everybody working within children's social care has the knowledge and skills to do their jobs well, and the organisational leadership and culture to support and challenge them to keep improving.

Over the last five years, we have begun to lay solid foundations for the improvements required. We have made significant progress towards reforming the child protection system, stripping back bureaucracy and reforming adoption, as well as securing crucial additional support for children in care and those leaving care. We have also started the process of creating a culture which prioritises excellent practice, based around the principles of innovation and excellence, supported by our £100m Innovation Programme.

Building on that work, we have a real opportunity over the next five years to truly transform the quality of children's social care services in England. This government is fully committed to making sure that is what we achieve for the children and families who need our help. Over the last 6 months, the cross-government taskforce on child protection has been working on a comprehensive new reform programme for children's social care, and this document outlines the vision and principles which underpin those reforms.

Our reform programme

Our ambition for this Parliament is radically to reform the children's social care system, putting practice excellence and achieving more for the children we serve at its heart. Reforms will be structured around three areas:

- First, **people and leadership** – bringing the best people into the profession, and giving them the right knowledge and skills for the incredibly challenging but hugely rewarding work we expect them to do, and developing leaders equipped to nurture practice excellence.
- Second, **practice and systems** – creating the right environment for excellent practice and innovation to flourish.
- Third, **governance and accountability** – making sure that what we are doing is working, using data to show us strengths and weaknesses in the system, and developing innovative new organisational models with the potential to radically improve services.

This document outlines our overarching reform vision across these areas, and acts as a precursor to our full children's social care strategy, which will be published in the coming months.

People and leadership

The best children's social care services in England deliver truly excellent services to children and families. The crucial ingredient of this success is a highly skilled and expert children's social care workforce. Making change happen for children and families is a task which draws on the skills and expertise of a range of professionals – residential care workers, family support workers, professionals within the police, health and education. It is only through rigorously training, developing and supporting workers across these professions that we can truly achieve the change we need to for children.

The profession which bears the heaviest burden of responsibility is children's social work. Child and family social workers hold the statutory responsibility for keeping children safe, and making the right decisions about their futures. That is why ensuring the highest possible standards for this profession is our first priority. In excellent children's social care services, the professional judgement of social workers is deeply respected, frequently sought and can always be trusted. Social workers know how to effect change within families, but also know when success cannot be achieved and they must pursue a stable and secure alternative family future for them. They know how to help young people rebuild their social world and leave the care system brave, hopeful and equipped for the adult world.

This work is not easy. Not everyone can do it and no-one can do it alone. All social workers need to be provided with excellent, frequent and relevant practice supervision by people who have a solid depth of practice knowledge and skill, and who can work through complex planning and decision making about children and families with their social workers and all relevant partners.

Every local area needs a senior social work Practice Leader who holds full responsibility for day-to-day operations and what happens to children and their families. The strongest Practice Leaders in England are in daily touch with the detail of practice on the front line. They identify problems early on, believe that something can be done about them, and have the professional and technical experience to know how to make positive change happen.

Until recently, we have not been sufficiently clear or robust about what a social worker needs to know and be able to do. We know thanks to the reports of Sir Martin Narey (2014)¹ and David Croisdale-Appleby (2014)² that initial social work education is not consistent in adequately preparing trainee social workers for the highly skilled task ahead of them. We have already moved to establish new, incontrovertibly clear statements of the necessary knowledge and skills for children's social work, but now we need to embed these through a reformed system for creating and maintaining rigorously high standards of professional excellence. We also need to continue to bring the best and brightest people into social work, and to innovate as to how these people are supported to develop the skills they need.

Furthermore, too often in the past reform of social work education and training has been solely focused on the initial and generic qualification of social workers. This is not sufficient to bring the social work profession to its full potential. We need instead an end-to-end practice-focused national career pathway which develops talent from practitioner to Practice Leader.

To deliver this change we must:

- Bring the best and brightest into social work and give them the training and development they need to succeed at this highly complex work. We will expand the Frontline and Step Up programmes to bring more excellent practitioners in via work based graduate training, and we will expand Teaching Partnerships between universities and employers to ensure students are properly prepared for the social work task.
- Set the highest professional standards for social work, and hold people to them. The Knowledge and Skills Statements published by the Chief Social Worker for Children and Families provide the standards, and we will roll out a national system of assessment and accreditation to guarantee the practice skill of every practitioner, at every level of seniority.
- Create and implement a coherent and rigorous career pathway for social workers, to take professionals through from practitioner to practice supervisor to practice leader, ensuring professionals have the necessary specialist knowledge and skills at every stage. This will provide social workers with a way to develop their careers whilst keeping practice excellence and innovation at the centre of their work.
- Invest in developing leadership talent, so we have a healthy pipeline of new

¹ [Making the education of social workers consistently effective, February 2014](#)

² [Re-visioning social work education: an independent review, February 2014](#)

practice leaders. We will identify the most able individuals who wish to be future Practice Leaders and prepare them for one of the biggest challenges in public service through a new talent programme.

- To help implement these reforms, set up a new regulatory body for social work – with a relentless focus on raising the quality of social work, education, training and practice in both children’s and adult’s social work.

Practice and systems

No system can be better than the workforce operating within it. But whilst the changes set out above are essential, they will not alone deliver the radical reform. A system can either harness the talents of those working in it, or stifle them. Too often, the social care system has stifled them. Professor Munro’s review (2011)³ described a system in which the actions of social workers had become driven by a pressure to comply with process. This burden of process accumulated over many years and was generally well intended, often responding to specific child protection failings. But by the time Professor Munro began her work, she found a system which was “doing things right rather than doing the right thing”.

We need a system which frees up excellent front line social workers and their leaders to focus on the needs of children and families. There will, of course, need to be clear frameworks and laws in which to operate, as for all effective public services. But, just as in schools the government is working to free up the best teachers and school leaders to take new approaches to education, so we need the future shape of children’s social care in England to be defined not by Whitehall, but by the very best professionals and leaders using the very best evidence. We need to make sure that children’s social care services are places where excellent social work is nurtured and the talents of social workers are harnessed to the full.

To deliver this change we must:

- Ensure central government plays its correct role. It is essential that the government, with Parliament, sets out a clear regulatory framework for an effective social care system. But it must not over-reach its role and dictate practice which is best developed locally by front line professionals. That means further rolling back unnecessary regulations and guidance, as was done in the last Parliament when statutory guidance on child protection was reduced by 700 pages and distorting statutory timescales were removed. It means asking rigorous questions about which elements of our work with children and families genuinely add value, and which do not.
- Give permission and support to innovators. There have always been bold local leaders willing to do things differently – for example in North Yorkshire, where a radical new approach to supporting adolescents in care has been developed. But we see far less genuine innovation in children’s social care than in comparable services,

³ [Collection: Munro review reports, October 2010 to May 2012](#)

with most areas feeling unable to take measured risks in the interests of children for fear of falling foul of prescribed approaches. This must change. We have made a strong start with our £100m Innovation Programme – but need to go further and drive a fundamental cultural shift.

- Demonstrate for the whole system what can be achieved for children when a social care service is at its very best. We need to back the best, most innovative local areas to show us what they are capable of achieving when they are given the freedom to design practice around an uncompromising focus on what children and families need. We will work with the best areas through our Partners in Practice programme to show the way.
- Learn when things go wrong. The system is still too often characterised by repeating the same mistakes. We need a deeper and more sophisticated understanding of why mistakes occur and how the system can learn to avoid them. This requires overhauling the serious case review process.
- Learn from 'What Works'. In the best public services, expert practitioners are supported by authoritative 'What Works' centres. In health we have the National Institute for Clinical Excellence; in schools we have the Education Endowment Fund. We need to establish a similarly authoritative body for children's social care.

Governance and accountability

Finally, we must ensure that these reforms are driven forward by dynamic children's social care organisations, designed with practice excellence and innovation at their heart. These organisations must be well governed and held intelligently to account. We need the highest performing organisations to spread their influence, supporting others to improve. We need failing organisations to be turned around quickly. We need better, more meaningful use of data, to sharpen organisational improvement. We need to ensure that 'checks and balances', including inspection, are proportionate and support high-quality and innovative practice. And we need effective coordination between social care and other services, including the police and health.

Some areas of children's social care – such as foster care and residential care – have long been served by a diverse range of organisations. But core social work functions have remained the preserve of 'in house' local authority teams. At their best these services are excellent: some of the most effective and innovative work in children's social care takes place in well-led local authority services, with a clear model of practice and a consistently strong workforce. Historically, there have been too few opportunities for these local authority services to spread their influence to other areas or support improvement elsewhere. But there have also been too few examples of excellence: too many local authority services are not good enough, with over 60% currently 'inadequate' or 'requires improvement'.

In the last few years, the organisational and geographical landscape of children's social care has begun to change. We have seen the emergence of new 'combined authority' models – with local authorities joining together to provide social care across larger areas; and the emergence of new not-for-profit organisations, established by local authorities to deliver social care functions at arm's length. For the people who have driven forward these innovations, operating outside of the local authority context provides an opportunity

to innovate and create an organisation with absolute clarity of purpose and vision, rather than the children's social care department being one small cog within a much bigger and more diverse corporate context.

These changes have been driven by local authorities themselves, with the government playing a supporting role – changing legislation to allow not-for-profit organisations to run child protection functions; and supporting individual areas through our Innovation Programme. Government has also used its interventions in failing areas to support these trends – helping to broker arrangements between good and poor authorities and, in extreme cases, establishing new independent social care trusts away from council control when the traditional model has persistently failed.

Alongside dynamic organisations with a singular vision for children, effective local coordination and accountability is critical. Too often serious case reviews show a continued failure to work together across different local agencies, and Local Safeguarding Children Boards are not currently driving sufficient improvement. We need to find a better way.

Therefore to deliver this change we must:

- Work with the best local authorities – including those areas which are part of the Partners in Practice programme – to streamline 'checks and balances', ensuring sharper and more focused accountability, as well as exploring the potential for making better use of data to drive performance.
- Support new collective arrangements between local authorities for commissioning or delivering excellent services. We are already working with most authorities to establish Regional Adoption Agencies to drive improved practice and greater scale. In the same spirit, we will support combined models across other elements of children's social care, including through 'city deals'.
- Support the emergence of new not-for-profit children's social care organisations as part of a more dynamic and diverse range of provision. Through our Innovation Programme we will support those local authorities who wish to establish organisations, mutuals and trusts covering all, or part, of their children's social care functions, working with children's charities to explore the scope for their involvement.
- Intervene strongly in cases of failure. Where local services are 'inadequate' we will intervene to secure rapid improvement. We will identify opportunities for the best local services to take over the poorest. In cases of systemic or persistent failure we will create new independent trusts.
- Continue to work with Ofsted to ensure that, in the spirit of changes implemented following the Munro Review, any new inspection framework strongly supports innovation and evidence-based social work practice; and review and improve local arrangements for coordination and accountability, including the role of the Local Safeguarding Children Board.

Where do we want to be by 2020?

By 2020, we need to ensure that every local children's social care service across this country has a workforce – on the front line, in leadership positions and in between – with the knowledge and skill to do this highly challenging work. This needs to be verified through robust assessment and accreditation. The social work qualification must have credibility and mean professionals are equipped to work with the highest levels of social complexity, dealing with the highest levels of risk, and striving for the highest standards of practice excellence.

The future we want to see is one where these excellent professionals do not shape their practice to comply with the diktat of Ministers, or guidance from Whitehall officials, or even the Ofsted framework – but rather they form a confident social work profession, constantly pushing the boundaries and redefining what works through rigorous and evidence-based practice.

To support this innovation and drive for excellence, by 2020 we want to see a more diverse range of children's social care organisations, operating over new geographical areas, supported by meaningful data and an inspection regime that supports high-quality evidence-based front line practice, with local arrangements that best support coordination across agencies. And crucially, the performance of these new organisations must be driven by challenging, sharp and practice-focused accountability.

Our most vulnerable children and their families deserve nothing less.



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for Education

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