



CHILDREN'S
SERVICES
DEVELOPMENT
GROUP



The State of Children's Services 2018-19

A report from the Children's Services Development Group (CSDG)

A consensus-driven call to improve services for vulnerable children and young people

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- A close-up photograph of a Black woman with dark, wavy hair, smiling warmly. She is holding a young Black boy who is looking up at her with a joyful expression. The background is a soft-focus outdoor scene with trees and foliage.
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1 FOREWORD by Tim Loughton MP

Making sure every vulnerable child and young person receives the care they deserve is at the heart of the children’s services sector.

If we are to secure the best possible outcomes for these children, they must be at the forefront of how and why we commission the services they depend upon.

Local authorities have weathered funding constraints over recent years and are increasingly raising concerns about their ability to meet rising demand for services without sacrificing the quality of their provision.

Local authorities and independent providers have, to date, done an excellent job providing high-quality services with the budgets afforded to them. However, they will have no choice but to make further efficiencies in the future. It is essential, now more than ever, that the private, public and voluntary sectors come together to put forward solutions to efficiently meet the increasing demand for services while ensuring children and young people continue to receive the high quality, bespoke care they require.

In meeting this demand, the care that children receive must be all-encompassing and seen as a priority at both a local and a national level. It is vital that those with special educational needs, in foster care, or placed in a children’s home have their whole care

and education pathway understood holistically by all agencies. This is essential to improving children’s outcomes and ultimately their overall wellbeing and life chances.

The work undertaken by the Children’s Services Development Group to develop a consensus-driven approach to children’s social care is a positive step. This type of collaborative working is vital if we are to truly tackle the issues in the system.

I welcome this report as an important contribution to the debate on children’s services. Its recommendations should be taken forward at both a national and local level, by government, local authorities and providers, to ensure we develop a truly child-centred, needs-driven approach to care and education for the most vulnerable young people.



Tim Loughton MP
Member of Parliament for East Worthing and Shoreham



2 INTRODUCTION

The children’s services sector provides an essential lifeline to the most vulnerable children and young people in our society.

With increasing numbers of children and young people entering care and requiring support for additional and complex needs, it is essential the whole sector works collaboratively to provide the education, care and support these young people require.

This is not an area being ignored by the government. There have been a number of high profile reviews into the sector over the last few years, from the National Fostering Stocktake to the Narey Review of Residential Care in England to the Lenehan Review (co-authored by Mark Geraghty) of experiences and outcomes of children and young people in residential special schools and colleges, Good intentions, good enough? The recommendations from these reports are important but they assess the sector through the prism of siloed service areas, rather than considering children’s services, and indeed the children and the young people they support, in the round.

All elements of the sector are interlinked, and vulnerable children and young people have varying needs that can require them to receive support from a range of providers. Among others, they may need to be looked after, to receive specialist education, or be given therapeutic care. It is vital these needs, and the whole children’s services sector, are viewed holistically and policy is developed to reflect this – as well as on specific service areas.

That is why the Children’s Services Development Group (CSDG) has produced this report. It puts forward a consensus-driven approach developed in collaboration with a number of leading sector representatives – including providers, local authorities, academics and the charitable sector.

We held a policy roundtable, chaired by former Children’s Minister and longstanding campaigner for vulnerable children and young people, Tim Loughton MP. This focused on taking stock of the current state of children’s services, the challenges facing commissioners and providers, and, most importantly, those facing vulnerable children and young people and their families.

This report and its recommendations stem from that discussion and subsequent conversations with others in the sector. It sets out a set of policies that should be taken forward and the types of best practice that should be shared to ensure the best outcomes for the children and young people in our care.

This is intended to provide a snapshot of current sector thinking and offer a basis for more in-depth discussion about children’s services policy and the nature of care and education for vulnerable children and young people.

As sector representatives, we are pleased to publish this report and put forward our recommendations for the government’s, and the wider sector’s, consideration.

3 OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The government must work with local authorities and providers to develop a vision for the purpose of children’s social care and specialist education, recognising that this should focus on achieving permanence for each child and young person.
2. Guidance should be developed to ensure children and young people are placed at the heart of commissioning and service development decisions, ensuring better assessments are undertaken so the focus is on their needs rather than short-term cost considerations.
3. Commissioning must be underpinned by improved use of data to understand how needs can be best met and which providers are best-placed to achieve this. This should include consideration of developing a National Outcomes Framework that benchmarks all children’s services provision on value, quality, cost and outcomes.
4. An improved Commissioning Support Programme, that takes full account of the nuances of children’s services commissioning, must be reinstated to equip commissioners with the skills and tools to analyse population data, build relationships with providers, and make decisions that will improve outcomes. This will help to address the issues caused by the lack of a split between local authorities’ commissioner and provider roles.
5. Personal development outcomes, such as building strong relationships and being able to live more independently, should be seen as important long-term outcomes to achieve from children’s services, as well as educational and employment outcomes.
6. A “team around the child” approach should be the default position for all care and education, ensuring a holistic package of support is given to every child, based on their individual needs and involving all relevant agencies to ensure they are met.
7. A more consistent approach to transitions should be introduced, where existing requirements within measures like the SEND Code of Practice are met, alongside clearer collaboration between local authorities and providers to achieve this. This should enable a seamless move from child to adult services, with preparation for adulthood seen as a fundamental purpose of care and support.
8. Local authorities must be empowered to work with providers in their area to understand service demand and develop innovative ways of meeting this. Local authorities should be required to work together to develop and maintain a detailed understanding of current and future demand across all children’s services, including health and education, and the provision that is available and/or required to meet it.



4 THE CHANGING NATURE OF CHILDREN’S SERVICES

Over the last few years, local authorities have been under significant financial pressure as demand for essential services has continued to increase. The Local Government Association (LGA) has estimated that local authorities will face an overall funding gap of £5.8 billion by 2020.

Moreover, whilst local authority funding continues to fall, the number of looked after children in England continues to increase. There were around 7,000 more looked after children in England in 2016/17 than in 2010/11, with the number rising from 65,520 to 72,670 during this period.

Additionally, there is also a significant impact on services from the increasing complexity of needs that must be met. For example, special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), mental health difficulties, and needs stemming from prior traumatic experiences, including from the increasing number of asylum seeking children entering the care system. The therapeutic needs of these children need to be better met and this type of support must be better entrenched in the system as a whole.



There needs to be a holistic view of the system with a real vision for children in need and how they will be raised.” Natasha Finlayson, Become

Local authorities have a statutory duty to promote and safeguard the welfare of children in need by making provisions for care and support to meet those needs, including accommodation. However, this increase in demand and complexity of needs at a time of funding constraints is placing significant pressure on services.

In some cases, this is leading to commissioning decisions being driven by costs rather than meeting young people’s needs and



Children and young people are at the heart of this and we must stop them taking on the system’s failures as their own.” Dame Christine Lenehan, Council for Disabled Children

securing their longer-term outcomes. This can lead to multiple failed placements and further emotional distress for vulnerable children and young people, as well as costing more over the longer-term.

This approach to commissioning takes an outdated view of the purpose of care and specialist support; one that does not place



We need to develop a view of permanence and enable more flexibility and appropriate placement options for each child.” Nicola Smith, Barnardo’s

children’s needs at the heart of decision-making and assumes that young people will return to their family home or mainstream education.

Increasingly this is no longer the case and needs to be better recognised in commissioning; care and support for looked after children and those with SEND should be viewed as a route to permanence, not a stop-gap or short-term solution.

Only when this is understood as a core purpose of care and specialist education can commissioning for longer-term needs be effectively embedded across children’s services.

Recommendation 1 The government must work with local authorities and providers to develop a vision for the purpose of children’s social care and specialist education, recognising that this should focus on achieving permanence for each young person.

Recommendation 2 Guidance should be developed to ensure children and young people are placed at the heart of commissioning and service development decisions, ensuring better assessments are undertaken so the focus is on their needs rather than short-term cost considerations.

5 GETTING THE RIGHT SUPPORT FIRST TIME

Overall the children’s services sector is committed to providing stable, long-term placements and support for vulnerable children and young people. However, reforms to the commissioning process are needed to make this a reality for every child and to ensure they are able to access the most suitable placements for their needs the first-time round.

One way of achieving this is through the better use of data by commissioners to understand which services and providers are best-placed to meet a young person’s needs, while ensuring value for money. This requires a better understanding of outcomes achieved and the associated savings for local authorities.

This could underpin, for example, a National Outcomes Framework that benchmarks all children’s services provision on value, quality, cost and outcomes. This would allow for outcomes-based commissioning, enabling commissioners and providers to make strategic use of data to ensure better placements for children, and afford them the time to make well-thought through placement decisions. Further consideration of how outcomes are identified and quantified would be required.



The social ecology of placements has been lost... we need to improve our knowledge about looked after children at a granular level.”

Jonathan Stanley, ICHA

However, this is one option that should be considered as to how data can be better used to focus on a child’s needs, the best placement to meet them, and improve permanency by commissioning the right services the first time – instead of making commissioning decisions based on short-term costs. However, commissioners need support to be able to do this effectively. the skills and tools to analyse population data, build



Commissioners must use a range of skills in order to increase the chances of success – improving local and regional commissioning skills must be a priority.” Simone Vibert, DEMOS

relationships with providers, and make decisions that put Think tank Demos has recommended reinstating the Commissioning Support Programme, to equip commissioners with children’s needs at the forefront of their work.

It is essential that children and young people are always kept at the heart of this process and that their voices are heard. Their views must be considered and, where appropriate, choice of service recognised.



We need to get SEND into the debate and not view it as just an issue in schools. Local authority special schools are full beyond capacity, but the number of children and young people with SEND continues to increase.”

Claire Dorer, NASS

This is particularly important for children with SEND and their families/carers who need to make an informed choice about the education and care they wish to receive. The local offer was introduced to provide this, but its accessibility and detail varies between local authorities, creating a postcode lottery. Independent special schools must be included clearly in their local offers, alongside information on schools’ specialisms and details on providers from outside the local area that may be able to cater for more complex needs.

Recommendation 3

Commissioning must be underpinned by improved use of data to understand how needs can be best met and which providers are best-placed to achieve this. This should include consideration of developing a National Outcomes Framework that benchmarks all children’s services provision on value, quality, cost and outcomes.

Recommendation 4

An improved Commissioning Support Programme, that takes full account of the nuances of children’s services commissioning, must be reinstated to equip commissioners with the skills and tools to analyse population data, build relationships with providers, and make decisions that will improve outcomes. This will help to address the issues caused by the lack of a split between local authorities’ commissioner and provider roles.

6 ACHIEVING POSITIVE LONGER-TERM OUTCOMES

Children’s care and specialist education aims to help every young person to achieve positive longer-term outcomes. However, what makes a good long-term outcome has yet to be consistently agreed.

This comes back to the need for a conversation about the purpose of support for vulnerable children and young people. Permanency is crucial and should be viewed as a core aim. This includes in terms of placement but also the young person developing long-term relationships (and having a trusted adult consistently in their lives), developing good wellbeing, and good education and employment outcomes (where appropriate).

It is also important, where appropriate, children and young people are prevented from entering care in the first place through the provision of effective early intervention services. For these children, permanency is about staying in the family home and reducing future need for more specialist services.



We need to focus on positive long-term relationships as being a good outcome. Relationships are at the core of all social work. Relationships are essential.” Professor Julie Selwyn, University of Bristol

As well as understanding the purpose of provision, it is also essential a joined-up approach is taken to care and education to meet a child or young person’s needs – instead of viewing this in



We need a system that recognises the need for long-term care and commissions for long-term outcomes.” Kevin Williams, Fostering Network

isolated service silos. Effective collaboration between all parties, or a “team around the child” approach, is essential to ensuring all needs are met across care, education and health, and achieving positive long-term outcomes. This should be the default approach for all provision.

Focusing on outcomes also requires consideration of what these look like when children’s services provision ends. The sector has noted a “cliff-edge” of support at age 18, despite the fact many care leavers will still be coping with previous traumatic experiences and need continued support. Similarly, providers have reported the provision of Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans for those aged 18+ is being limited by funding and an inaccurate expectation adult social care budgets will be used.

This transition period is a crucial time for ensuring good wellbeing and life chances. A more consistent approach is required to enable a seamless move from child to adult services, and to ensure all care leavers are supported in those crucial early years of adulthood. For much of the above, required structures are in place, for example the SEND Code of Practice, but these are not applied consistently. Preparing young people to successfully live their adult lives should be seen as a fundamental purpose of care and support and a core positive long-term outcome to achieve.

Recommendation 5 Personal development outcomes, such as building strong relationships and being able to live more independently, should be seen as important long-term outcomes to achieve from children’s services, as well as educational and employment outcomes.

Recommendation 6 A “team around the child” approach should be the default position for all care and education, ensuring a holistic package of support is given to every child based on their individual needs and involving all relevant agencies to ensure they are met.

Recommendation 7 A more consistent approach to transitions should be introduced, where existing requirements within measures like the SEND Code of Practice are met, alongside clearer collaboration between local authorities and providers to achieve this. This should enable a seamless move from child to adult services, with preparation for adulthood seen as a fundamental purpose of care and support.

7 IMPROVING COLLABORATIVE WORKING

In order to realise what has been discussed previously, collaboration between local authorities, providers and representative groups is essential, as part of renewed partnerships between local authorities and providers.

Reports such as the Lenehan Review’s report *Good intentions, good enough?* have found evidence of some antagonism between local authorities and independent providers that acts as a barrier to children and young people accessing the best services for their needs. This is counter-intuitive and ultimately to nobody’s benefit, and certainly not those who need care and support.



Effective collaboration is essential to ensuring quality support is provided for each young person. This should be the default approach for all local authorities, health agencies and schools”Phil Norrey, Solace

Despite this, many providers and local authorities are actually already working collaboratively with each other to address some of the issues noted in this report. In particular regarding tackling placement churn and identifying ways to achieve demonstrable outcomes for vulnerable young people. For example, once CSDG member has worked with Birmingham City Council under a four-year Social Impact Bond contract, to find foster families for 60 children. The payment-by-results scheme aims to improve outcomes for the children, which also benefits the local authority – after three years the council has made a net saving of over £1.2 million through reduced nights in care.

Joint working on innovative service provision is also key, for example as shown by the programme to implement the Mockingbird Family Model in foster care. Led by the Fostering



If we are to understand the system then we need to create time in order to make the right decisions.” Harvey Gallagher, NAFP

Network in collaboration with 18 partner councils and independent providers, the programme enables groups of foster homes to support each other to address problems before they escalate or lead to placement breakdown.

By operating across every local authority in England, independent children’s services providers have a unique view of the circumstances faced by different local authorities and an understanding of good and poor commissioning practices. Working flexibly with local authorities, ensuring they can provide a range of placements to meet commissioner’s requirements, is integral to how the sector seeks to operate. For example, this can include offering different placement lengths, from 52-week placements to short breaks for those with particularly complex needs.

Work also needs to be done by local authorities, supported by providers, to better understand current and likely future service demand, and the provision available within their region to meet this. This could be undertaken on a regional consortia basis as recommended by the Narey reviews of fostering and residential care – but across all children’s services provision, including for SEND. Independent and voluntary providers can support this work, ensuring their current and future provision capabilities are factored in to longer-term planning – and so they can develop services to meet future needs.

Effective collaboration is essential to ensuring quality support is provided for each young person. This should be the starting position for all local authorities, health agencies and schools when deciding on the care that a child receives.

Recommendation 7

Local authorities must be empowered to work with providers in their area to understand service demand and develop innovative ways of meeting this. Local authorities should be required to work together to develop and maintain a detailed understanding of current and future demand across all children’s services, including health and education, and the provision that is available and/or required to meet it.

8 ABOUT CSDG



The Children’s Services Development Group (CSDG) is a coalition of leading independent providers of care and specialist education services for children and young people with complex needs. Members include Compass Community, Core Assets Group, National Fostering Agency Group, Outcomes First Group, SENAD Group and Witherslack Group.

Members provide a large number of settings and services, including fostering, residential care and special educational needs, across all of England’s 152 local authorities. As a collective voice for the independent sector, CSDG champions child-centred, meaningful support for vulnerable young people in order to ensure a stable and successful transition into adulthood.

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Phil Norrey, Solace
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CSDG
80 Petty France
London
SW1H 9EX

Tel: 020 7222 9500
Email: info@csdg.org.uk