# BASW Submission to the House of Lords Public Services Committee Inquiry on Children's Social Care – submitted Oct 2026

## 1. About The British Association of Social Workers (BASW)

1.2 BASW is the professional association for social work and social workers in the UK with teams in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

1.3 We are the independent voice of social work and social workers. We champion social work and help members achieve the highest professional standards of practice. With over 20,000 members we exist to promote the best possible social work services for all people who need them, whilst also representing our members at a public policy level and individual level within their workplaces. Members work across all areas of health and social care, including criminal justice, employed by local authorities, NHS Trusts, the private and VCSE sectors.

1.4 Children's social care in England stands at a difficult juncture. Although the system exists to support children and families early, and offer the best quality care, the current context is severely constrained by systemic pressures. High levels of intervention in the poorest families are linked to the broader political economy and the cumulative effects of a decade of austerity. Central government underfunding has forced local authorities to operate children's services in a reactive manner akin to hospital emergency departments, directing vital funds toward crisis intervention at the direct expense of universal early support. The endless restructuring of services, that can often be costly, is destabilising for staff and detracts from funds being used in other areas.

1.5 To deliver a care system that remains entirely focused on children, families, and long-term wellbeing, government and national policy must prioritise children over profit. Structural reorganisation alone cannot substitute for sustainable, long-term funding. Re organisation of new roles at the expense of professionally qualified roles is not sustainable to move towards a preventative service. Rebalancing the care system requires addressing national workforce instability, curbing profiteering within residential care, closing legal protection loopholes for care leavers, and ensuring anti-racist, anti-oppressive, and trauma-informed practices underpin every statutory decision. Social justice must always be at its core.

## 2. System Demand and Spending Pressures

2.1 The demand for children's social care services has increased significantly in recent years, driven by widespread socio-economic pressures, rising child poverty, and the lingering impacts of the cost-of-living crisis. This rising demand is evidenced by extreme pressure on local authority referral levels, with referrals for Children in Need reaching 650,270 in 2022 which was the highest level recorded since 2019. Going forward, demand is expected to remain high unless central policy addresses the root economic causes forcing vulnerable families into acute hardship. We would also like to see a substantial and on-going investment in increasing the amount of social housing in the UK. Housing is a devolved matter so, alongside England, this funding would be channelled via the Governments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. This provision should be provided by not-for-profit

organisations (local authorities, housing associations, charities) for those in poor or inadequate private sector housing, and/or are on low incomes.

2.2 The key driver behind rising local authority expenditure is a long-term structural imbalance in funding allocation. Spending on acute services, such as high-cost crisis interventions, surged by 43.2% between 2009/10 and 2021/22, drawing critical resources away from universal, preventative provision like Sure Start children's centres. Furthermore, successive government strategies and interventions have failed to meet the challenge, with severe funding shortfalls forcing local councils to operate in perpetual crisis mode, driving up costs through reliance on expensive private placements.

**3. Residential Care, Placements, and Commissioning**

3.1 The current supply of residential placements does not meet the needs of care-experienced children due to an acute shortage of localised high-quality placements. This has driven local authorities to securing placements far from a child's home community, isolating children from their established support systems, schools, and families. The financial strain caused by private provider price inflation exacerbates local authority budget deficits without delivering better outcomes for children.

3.2 The introduction of Regional Care Co-operatives (RCCs), which seeks to streamline commissioning, risks further destabilisation of an already fragile provider landscape. Rolling out structural changes in a staged manner without tackling the shortage of physical beds and state-funded options fails to solve core market dynamics. BASW believes framework must establish a clear "people over profit" model, curbing excess profit extraction by private firms while ring-fencing funds to expand local authority-run and non-profit residential settings.

**4. Kinship Care and Foster Care**

4.1 Kinship carers play a vital role in providing loving, stable homes for children, yet they are routinely expected to absorb complex caring duties with minimal structural, therapeutic, or financial backing. The lack of standardised, non-means-tested allowances forces many kinship families into financial hardship. To build an effective fostering and kinship framework, national policy must deliver comprehensive local offers, including direct therapeutic support and mandatory Family Group Decision-Making (FGDM) early in pre-proceedings to keep children safely within their extended family networks.

4.2 The Law Commission recently consulted on proposed changes which would include the introducing a Kinship Care Order (KCO) which we argued would present significant operational risks, as "enhanced" Parental Responsibility creates legal ambiguity that increases practitioner burden and provokes avoidable frictions over daily decisions.

4.3 Shortages of foster carers stem from stagnant financial allowances that fail to match the rising cost of living, alongside insufficient multi-agency mental health support for young people experiencing trauma. While strategic initiatives seek to bolster foster home availability, success depends on providing long-term financial stability to carers, embedding

community-based support frameworks like the Mockingbird model, and ensuring foster placements are not treated as temporary stopgaps for an under-resourced residential sector.

**5. Workforce Stability, Pay Parity, and Professional Roles**

5.1 Social workers faced a "lost decade" for pay growth, with median salaries increasing by just 4.1% by December 2022 - lagging far behind inflation and representing the worst pay growth across all public sector professions for that period. Student bursaries were also capped and frozen since 2014, forcing trainees into financial distress and driving dropouts which led to a review that was launched earlier this year. Considering the high levels of turnover this reveals a very risky environment within social work.

5.2 Workforce instability directly impacts care experienced children, who face frequent changes of social worker in a single year, preventing the forming of trusting, long-term therapeutic relationships. BASW remains concerned over proposals to delegate core social work tasks to un-registered Family Help Lead Practitioners lacking specialist social work qualifications. Social work is a protected profession anchored in rights-based, anti-racist, and anti-oppressive ethics; delegating statutory case management threatens to deprive vulnerable children of qualified practitioners trained in attachment, trauma, and complex safeguarding. Increasing vocational roles within complex public responsibilities has the potential to lead to increased system failures.

**6. Unregistered Placements and Regulation**

6.1 The continued reliance on unregistered placements represents a massive safeguarding gap in national policy. Under secondary legislation, unregulated placements are banned for children under 16, yet 16- and 17-year-olds can still be placed in independent or semi-independent settings, such as hostels, caravans, or shared adult accommodation, with no statutory guarantee of care or physical protection. This two-tier care system leaves vulnerable care-experienced teenagers exposed to exploitation, abuse, and severe safety risks.

6.2 System partners, including Ofsted and the Department for Education, must replace friend-and-mentor initiatives with statutory care guarantees. The government must support the Keep Caring to 18 Campaign and legally ban unregulated accommodation for all children under the age of 18. Ofsted's regulatory oversight should strictly enforce quality standards across all care environments, stopping the use of non-care accommodation for looked-after children regardless of age.

**7. Outcomes for Care Experienced Children and Equality**

7.1 Long-term outcomes for care experienced people are heavily shaped by structural factors, including placement stability, continuous therapeutic support, and smooth transitions into adulthood. Care experienced people encounter lifelong systemic barriers across education, employment, and housing, compounded by intersecting inequalities relating to race, gender, and disability.

7.2 To address historical disadvantage and dismantle stigma, care experience should be recognised as a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010. Designating care experience as a protected characteristic would provide legal accountability, encourage inclusive policies across public bodies, and ensure tailored long-term support for mental health, housing, and higher education.

**8. Key Recommendations**

**8.1 Meet the challenge with significant funding commitments:** Honour commitments set out in the Spending Review with a long-term, multi-year settlement that matches the ambitions of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care to expand early help and universal preventative services.

**8.2 National workforce recruitment & pay parity:** Launch a centrally funded national recruitment campaign for social workers and introduce national pay review mechanisms to ensure salary parity with other public sector professions. Ensure protection of the title and role within complex family situations, ensuring vocational staff have oversight by professionally qualified social workers

**8.3 Cease unregulated placements for under 18s:** End the two tier care system by supporting the Keep Caring to 18 Campaign, extending statutory care standards and banning unregulated accommodation for all young people up to age 18.

**8.4 Protect professional social work standards:** Family Help Team Managers should be registered social workers, to ensure safeguarding risks are understood and acted upon appropriately across teams that will have staff who come from a variety of professional backgrounds. System change should be social work led.

**8.5 Designate 'Care Experience' as a Protected Characteristic:** Amend the Equality Act 2010 to designate care experience as a protected characteristic, embedding legal protections against discrimination across public institutions.

**8.7 Embed anti-racist and rights-based frameworks:** Explicitly mandate anti-racist, anti-oppressive, and trauma-informed principles within the National Framework and Working Together to Safeguard Children statutory guidance.

**8.3 Universal student bursaries:** Implement universal bursaries for all social work students and lift the cap on postgraduate and undergraduate awards.

**8.8 Develop a strategic plan for the withdrawal of private equity and excessive profit making in children's services:** Curb excessive profiteering and privatisation of children's services with a principle of children before profit.

**8.9 Maintain and protect the social work profession** as a joint generic profession with qualifying routes to support working with children, families, adults and communities. Ensure post qualifying pathways remain generic to children, families and adults, respecting the context in which children live their lives.

BASW England
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