

BASW England policy statement on the Independent review of children's social care

The Department for Education announced its [Independent Review of Children's Social Care](#) (the review) in January 2021. This policy statement comes after consideration by relevant BASW England member-led groups and the National Standing Committee. While social workers, other professionals and those with lived experience have expressed an urgent need for reform and would welcome a review to push for much needed improvements and investment, the manner in which the review has been announced, its framing, and how preliminary stages have been conducted raises many concerns.

The scope of the review is intended to be extensive. We believe it would require a considerable amount of time, resource and expertise to do it justice. However, the proposed timeframe of 12-15 months, in the context of a global pandemic, suggests a rushed approach which is unlikely to deliver on the 'once in a generation' opportunity for transformation that has been promised.

Such an unrealistic timeframe, coupled with knowledge of the Review chair's previous proposals for aspects of children's social care, has led many members and others in the sector to believe the shape of reform has already been set. This undermines the argument that the Review will be both evidence-based and inclusive.

Reflecting on BASW UK's '[Vision for Social Work with Children and Families](#)' and the [BASW Code of Ethics](#), which underscores the importance of transparency, professional integrity and adherence to human rights and social justice, we urge the government to:

1. Defer and reframe the review, and significantly extend the timeline - a realistic timescale for real improvement.

The short timeframe, compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, raises concerns as to how comprehensive the review will be. It is imperative to reflect the broad scope of the review and to ensure the process is not rushed, tokenistic and that it is transparent and inclusive. Our decades of experience tell us that 12-15 months is unrealistic for such a large-scale review unless the outcomes have already been agreed and the reform footprint developed. The timing of this review is not right, the pandemic continues to have a significant impact on the wellbeing of the workforce and the children, families and communities they support.

2. Reconsider the leadership of the review and through a transparent process, appoint a co-chair and review panel to include social work expertise and familiarity with the necessary knowledge base.

Members expect chairing and leadership arrangements for a 'once in a generation' fundamental review of the children's social care system to include a leader who has publicly championed and advocated for those in the care system and who has substantial direct experience of working across the children's social care system. The appointed single chair does not meet that expectation. A co-chairing arrangement including someone with extensive experience and knowledge, and preferably including someone with lived experience, would be more credible and effective.

Concerns have also been raised about lack of transparency in the process by which the current chair of the review was appointed and that their appointment reflects a bias towards predetermined outcomes and models rather than an open, inclusive and evidence informed approach which we expect.

3. Integrate lived experience of care and social work services into the heart of the review.

For the review to be meaningfully co-produced, it should be led and designed for and by care experienced people. Care experienced people must be leaders within the review team, rather than peripheral players as currently seems the case.

4. Ensure an anti-racist, anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive approach.

The voices of black and minoritized care experienced people must be central to a review which has such significant implications for their communities. The children's social care system disproportionately fails people from black and minoritized communities.

Children and families living in the most deprived areas and experiencing structural inequalities must not be ignored and must have a strong voice in any review. The review must also take account of the disadvantage implications of all protected characteristics on parents and adults as well as children in families, including the central importance of women's rights and experiences of oppression including the impact of domestic violence and greater risk of poverty. The current pandemic has had devastating impacts on women's rights across almost every sphere of life, and this context must be clearly recognised in any review.

In addition, engagement by experts by experience must in any review take account of accessibility requirements such as interpreters in the deaf community, those who speak English as a second language, those who need advocates and other methods. The needs of those who are neurodivergent, or who have any complex or additional needs such as learning disability or other forms of disability must be supported and empowered to be able to contribute on an equal platform. There must be an accessibility budget to ensure the most marginalised care experienced people can participate.

5. Tackle the impact of austerity, the role of poverty including food insecurity* and discrimination in family distress, risk and statutory intervention.

The experiences of children and families most in contact with such services are also heavily shaped by family poverty, housing stress as well as poor access to early support arising from years of public service austerity.

The children's social care system is hugely underfunded. The Review must deal with this upfront and powerfully in order to have real credibility.

The voices of children and young people with care experience and their families on their experiences of poverty, and the impact of underfunding in services, must be integral to the review. This includes paying care experienced people for their time for practical and ethical reasons and to show the value of their contribution. Parents and adults in families receiving and impacted by care, support and interventions from children's social care must also have a voice and the impact of multiple disadvantages on many such families should be integrated into the scope of the review.

Food poverty is a key issue for families in need at the moment, worsened by Covid. The fact that children in care experience food insecurity* speaks to a failing of the children's social care system and requires attention. The impact of this failing is wide reaching, from affecting children's health and education, to undermining their confidence to build and sustain relationships. To ensure the independent review *'improves children and young people's lives and outcomes at the earliest opportunity'*, achieving food security for all children in care needs

to be a focus. (*Food insecurity defined as 'the lived experience of food poverty' at BASW 50th Festival 2020).

6. Uphold and strengthen children and family legal rights and reflecting the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child.

The review should be grounded in a children's rights perspective. This should include a clear statement of commitment stating that the legal, safeguarding and wellbeing rights of children will be core to the review, that legal rights for children and families will not be watered down and that all children will be covered by these rights (e.g. including asylum seeking and refugee children). The review should ensure the rights of children to wellbeing and being free from harm and risk are upheld and at the same time, ensure the rights of parents and families are also protected. Any review must ensure its provisions are underpinned by the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child.

7. Ensure transparency about membership of the review team, business support and resourcing.

Any review should be based on principles of transparency and shared information about all members of the review team, how they are recruited and appointed, and the projected cost of the review. The plans for spending the resources should be available.

8. Be independent of government - inclusive, transparent and accountable.

The review needs to be independent of government, inclusive, transparent and accountable. The unclear processes of appointment within the DfE and terms of the review to this point raise many questions about whether this is/can be independent and can scope and use the best evidence.

For such a broad ranging review BASW England would expect registered social workers, support practitioners and leaders with extensive experience of children and family social work and social care to lead this review.

9. Involve practising social workers and BASW the professional association of social work throughout any Review

BASW, child rights campaign groups and other organisations were not invited to the announcement launch event of the review. If the review is to be truly inclusive it must ensure the voices of all are heard including the voices of people with lived experience, of social workers based on their experience, wisdom and the vital work they do day in day out across the country.

10. Diversify channels of communication across the sector

Communication about the review must be diverse, not just Twitter (arguably elitist in that it is designed for professionals). Engaging through Instagram, Tiktok, WhatsApp, Snapchat and more would open up the review to a younger demographic, as just one example. And using telephone calls and letters would reach those without access to social media or funds to pay for Wi-Fi or electronic devices.

11. Ensure the review is rooted in the best evidence available from the UK and beyond.

Social work is an evidence-based profession, and this review would be best placed to use a wide variety of evidence when drawing conclusions and to ensure no pre-existing models of social care reform dominate and predetermine Review outcomes.

12. Ensure future children's services are developed and provided through public and not-for-profit organisations and approaches.

Children and families are not commodities and the future of children's services must not be developed based on market segmentation and 'for profit' organisation contracts. We need to make the case for increased and sustained funding of services. We are particularly concerned these could include models that lead to more fragmented services, market segmentation and a reduced role for public services and local authority democratic accountability in the delivery of children's services.

13. Making Time for Social Work

The review needs to focus on early help, strengths and relationship-based practice as highlighted in the [BASW England 80/20 campaign](#), and make time for direct work and adopt an interdisciplinary approach that also develops the role of social workers. Most importantly the review must focus on creating a well-resourced system (including preventative provision) that provides the right conditions for good social work practice with a focus on improving the outcomes for children and young people.

Further information regarding the above can be found in our recently published '[Vision for Social Work with Children and Families](#)', as well as the BASW England Children and Families group on the [Context, Roles and Tasks of Child and Family Social Workers in England](#).

Next Steps

- The BASW England Review Steering Group comprising of members of the Children and Families Group, National Standing Committee, will be the lead working group for collating views of members.
- We will be consulting with BASW England membership and seeking their views about the Independent Review of Children's Social Care via surveys, open events, and other accessible means based on the needs of members.
- We ask BASW members with experience of working with children and families and/or who have knowledge of the relevant data and research respond to the review, a) with initial views about how the review process can increase the confidence of practitioners and those who need social work services and b) respond in detail as proposals from the review begin to emerge. The BASW England Review Steering Group, will welcome and collate responses from Branches and individual members (either by [filling out this form](#) or emailing rebekah.pierre@basw.co.uk Members are encouraged to read more about the review and may choose to respond directly to the review at <https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/independent-review-of-childrens-social-care>
- We will work in collaboration with experts by experience, advocacy groups, social work managers academics and researchers, members of allied professions to ensure the voice of children, families, carers and social workers are heard.
- We will lobby MPs, other identified stakeholders and partners based on statements generated in partnership with members.

Appendix: background notes

Poverty and austerity

Tackling poverty and material disadvantage should have a central part in any review of children and families services in England today. The need for sustainable funding for children's services is also acute.

A decade of austerity has exacerbated the economic impact of the pandemic on families; the number of children living in poverty is set to reach 5 million this year (The Children's Society). This has led to an unprecedented reliance on food banks, with nearly two million people in the UK using them in 2019-20 (Trussell Trust, 2020). The ripple effect of poverty has also extended to accommodation; by the end of June 2020, 98,300 households were in temporary accommodation – a rise of 14% on June 2019 (House of Commons Library, 2020).

The Terms of Reference for the review state the government wants to:

- *Improve children and young people's lives and outcomes at the earliest opportunity,*
- *To strengthen families,*
- *To realise the benefits of establishing firm and loving foundations early in life, both to individuals and to society for generations to come.*

However, Local government and Children's Social Care has been underfunded for many years; funding available for children's services has fallen by £2.2 billion between 2010/11-2018/19 (Action for Children, 2020). The impact of austerity has been far reaching for children and families and the impact of the pandemic has highlighted ever more stark inequalities.

The lack of funding and investment in children's services means that social workers are working in poorly resourced settings, where they are not receiving the support required to undertake such a complex role.

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic

The review is starting while we are still in the midst of the pandemic. Social workers and others maintaining children's social care services are working in extraordinary and stressful times. Engaging in this review and having confidence that it will be able to learn from the pandemic and its aftermath for the long term may be compromised by its timing as well as its scope and terms of reference.

BASW's '[Social work during the Covid-19 pandemic: Initial Findings](#)' explored the impact of COVID-19 on children's services. Only 51.2% of BASW members agreed or strongly agreed that they were able to carry out their role with the confidence and support they need at this stage of the pandemic. It is therefore unsurprising that 77.5% of members agreed or strongly agreed that their concerns about the capacity to safeguard/protect adults and children have increased since March 2020.

Furthermore, the impact of the pandemic, paired with such working conditions, has had a significant impact on social worker mental health. 58.8% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that working during the pandemic had negatively impacted their own mental health.

In the midst of adversity, social workers have worked incredibly hard, and there have been countless examples of creative, dynamic and innovative practice amidst unimaginable hardship.

BASW England commends the dedication and commitment of social workers and celebrate the good practice that does exist in children's social services, including the dedication and contribution of children and family practitioners and support staff.

It is essential this Review respects existing good work and engages social workers effectively and wholeheartedly in pandemic circumstances and is not rushed.

The scope of the review

In advance of the outcome of the Review, the Terms of Reference state the “*review will contribute to ambitious and deliverable reforms, taking into account the sustainability of local services and effective use of resources*”.

The scope of the review is incredibly broad and will also consider:

- How the children’s social care system responds to all children who are referred to the system,
- Major challenges, including the sharp increase in recent years in the number of looked after children,
- High and rising unit costs,
- The inconsistencies in children’s social care practice and outcomes across the country, and the failure of the system to provide *sufficient stable loving homes for children*,
- The review will give due regard to the SEND Review, which will consider the main questions relevant to children with special educational needs and disability,
- A children’s social care system which can respond appropriately now and in the future is a key agenda of this review focusing on children in need, safeguarding, protection, carers, fostering, residential care, alongside analysis of support in and around schools. In addition, the review will focus on “raising standards” in local authorities, boosting adoption, improving support for care leavers, and responding to the consultation on unregulated provision,
- Children who are in care in formal settings such as fostering arrangements or residential care and also those receiving support under informal, kinship care. The review may want to consider support for children as they prepare to leave care and those receiving ongoing support once they have left care, drawing on care leavers’ experiences. It may also want to consider the support provided for adoption,
- Services, roles, responsibilities and accountabilities of partner organisations will also be reviewed and how they interact with children’s social care and recommend improvements to the way they work together.

Evidence-led approach

The Westminster Government has announced it is committed to ‘levelling up’ the experiences of children across the country, focusing on the needs of the most vulnerable ‘to reduce the downstream impacts and costs to both the children themselves and society’. This Review might be seen as an important part of this agenda.

However, downstream impacts and costs have not been defined in the Terms of Reference of the review and neither have the ‘most vulnerable’ children and families.

A child is defined as ‘in need’ under section 17 of the Children Act 1989 and as being ‘unlikely to achieve or maintain, or to have the opportunity of achieving or maintaining, a reasonable standard of health or development without the provision for them of services by a local authority’. The Children Act 1989 (section 17) states:

It shall be the general duty of every local authority (in addition to the other duties imposed on them by this Part) to:

- (a) safeguard and promote the welfare of children within their area who are in need; and*
- (b) so far as is consistent with that duty, to promote the upbringing of such children by their families.*

BASW England strongly believes that the rights enshrined in current law must be upheld and the rights and needs of children and young people should be integral to this review. There are over 400,000 children and their families that access support and services from children’s social care (Ofsted, 2020) and, as of December 2020, there are 80,080 children in care (Department for Education, 2020).