**Children’s Social Care Reform: Where are we?**

**Introduction**

The British Association of Social Workers (BASW) is the professional association for social work and social workers. BASW represents social workers across England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales. We represent just under 21,000 social workers. BASW are committed to upholding the highest standards of practice. We work on behalf of our members and with the government and other stakeholders to promote and support both social workersandthe social work profession.

In May 2022 the publications of the National Safeguarding Review report and the Independent Review of Children’s Social Care chartered a potentially new policy landscape for children’s services. The two reports were published concurrently. Earlier in the year, in March 2022, the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) published their review into the children’s social care market.

BASW responded to the CMA report in March 2022 ([see here](https://www.basw.co.uk/media/news/2022/mar/cma-review-children%E2%80%99s-social-care-basw-england-statement)). We published our analysis of the Independent Review of Children’s Social Care in August 2022 ([see here](https://www.basw.co.uk/media/news/2022/aug/independent-review-childrens-social-care-basw-england-full-response)). There are cross-cutting themes and proposals with the Safeguarding Review Panel Report. In November 2022 the newly appointed Minister for Children, Families and Wellbeing Claire Coutinho has confirmed that the government’s implementation strategy for bringing about reforms to the children’s social care system will be published early in 2023. The Minister’s speech to Parliament is published in full [here](https://eu-west-1.protection.sophos.com/?d=www.gov.uk&u=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ292LnVrL2dvdmVybm1lbnQvc3BlZWNoZXMvY2hpbGRyZW5zLW1pbmlzdGVyLWNsb3Nlcy1kZWJhdGUtb24tY2hpbGRyZW5zLXNvY2lhbC1jYXJl&i=NjAwZTkxZDc5M2FkM2IyOGU5YzUwZjVk&t=SW9KcEVqQ3VBZzhlWlkvMTYxRC9ZdEJwbjB6TFhZZ1FNVDVjQnpOM2x4ST0=&h=1f1c7a6b63704674b49b09578ee407c3&s=AVNPUEhUT0NFTkNSWVBUSVZtb5w0aDu_WAICODdrKNTtzZ8hhEAk9MOgD_mLxEUWYQ). The full debate in parliament on reforms to the children’s social care sector is published [here.](https://www.basw.co.uk/media/news/2022/nov/mps-debate-independent-review-childrens-social-care)

Alongside other stakeholders in the sector we have been waiting to understand more about the strategic response to the reports. This short paper summarises the recent and significant policy developments and provides links to BASW responses. The focus on behalf of our members is on the implications of policy for the social work profession, for social workers, and on the potential impact on the children and families served by the profession. Our responses are informed by our thematic groups, from engagement events and by members feedback, across a range of forums. We will continue to engage and work with our members, the government and sector partners.

**The Child Safeguarding Review Panel**

The Children and Social Work Act 2017 provided for the creation of the independent Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel. The panel is an independent group commissioning reviews of serious child safeguarding cases. The panel meets regularly to decide whether to commission national reviews of child safeguarding cases based on the possibility of identifying improvements from cases which it views as complex or of national importance. The panel has its own statutory powers. The statutory guidance on [‘Working together to safeguard children’](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/working-together-to-safeguard-children--2) sets out how the panel operates and works with safeguarding partnerships.

**Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson**

In December 2021 the national Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel was instructed by the Government to examine the death of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes. This was the first review the panel had undertaken about one child. The focus was to be on the learning from Arthur’s life and the circumstances leading up to his death in order to understand the detail of what happened and why.

Alongside the [**Joint Targeted Area Inspection**](https://files.ofsted.gov.uk/v1/file/50177948) , the review set out to inform improvements locally and identify any national improvement and policy and practice changes. The Panel also stated that national learning and recommendations would be “made available for the Independent Review of Children Social Care to draw on as appropriate”. On the 9th of February 2022 the Panel updated the terms of reference to include a review of the circumstances leading up to the death of Star Hobson.

The report [**Child Protection in England**](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1078488/ALH_SH_National_Review_26-5-22.pdf) **w**as published on the 22nd of May 2022. The Panel set out its intention to give focus to Star and Arthur as individual children and address their specific experiences. In analysing what happened to Arthur and Star and how public agencies responded the report identified the following:

• Weaknesses in information sharing and seeking within and between agencies.

• A lack of robust critical thinking and challenge within and between agencies, compounded by a failure to trigger statutory multi-agency child protection processes at key moments.

• A need for sharper specialist child protection skills and expertise.

• The need for leaders to have an enabling impact on child protection practice, creating and protecting the optimum organisational conditions for undertaking this complex work.

The review panel set forward 8 specific recommendations which are aligned with the recommendations set out in the Care Review. They are:

1. A new expert-led, multi-agency model for child protection investigation, planning, intervention, and review.
2. Establishing National Multi-Agency Practice Standards for Child Protection.
3. Strengthening the local Safeguarding Partners to ensure proper co-ordination and involvement of all agencies.
4. Changes to multi-agency inspection to better understand local performance and drive improvement.
5. A new role for the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel in driving practice improvement in Safeguarding Partners.
6. A sharper performance focus and better co-ordination of child protection policy in central Government.
7. Using the potential of data to help professionals protect children.
8. Specific practice improvements in relation to domestic abuse.

The Care Review recommends the creation of three new national bodies and a National Children’s Social Care Framework which will “set the objectives, goals and values and guide underpinning practice for all those delivering children’s social care”. The three proposed bodies are:

* The National Reform Board – to oversee implementation of the review’s recommendations and monitor system feedback.
* National Practice Group – to take oversight of setting direction on questions of practice in children’s social care, including the voices of practice, evidence and lived experience.
* National Data and Technology Taskforce – to co-ordinate local authority and national action to achieve progress on the use of data and technology.

The government announced the appointees to what is now being called the Implementation Board in July 2022 (details of the appointees can be found [here](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/childrens-social-care-national-implementation-board/list-of-members-childrens-social-care-national-implementation-board)). BASW Chief Executive Ruth Allen wrote to the Minister to request a seat on the Board to help ensure the National Children’s Social Care Framework was underpinned by social work knowledge and expertise.

**BASW England Response**

As the professional body for social work, we are committed to upholding the highest standards of practice. We welcome the publication of the Child Protection in England Report and fully support the focus and emphasis given to the individual children and their specific experiences. There is much to be said about the report and each of the recommendations, yet it is also difficult to do so without more details and without a strategic response. We will expand on our response when further information is available.

We agree with the Panel that the focus in safeguarding children “should be to get to the truth of what life is like for children” and to do so we must create “…the optimum conditions and environment” for practice. We also welcome the acknowledgement that “complexity is a central feature of child protection work” and would add that this applies to all child and family social work services provided under the remit of the 1989 Children Act.

It is important to recognise at the outset that what happened to Arthur and Star was difficult to predict and understand. Arthur and Star were surrounded by loving extended families who were looking out for them. Professionals and family members had previously thought their parents capable of providing good care to them.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The COVID-19 pandemic and the requirement for social distancing profoundly disrupted social work and child protection practices. The pandemic has been described as a ‘moment of dramatic disruption’.[[2]](#footnote-2) The abuse and deaths of Arthur and Star occurred during this time. Restrictions made it much harder for social workers to assist and to protect children, to have contact with children, and to find out what was happening within families during lockdown.

We must also recognise the devastating impact of austerity on services and communities. 12 years of government cuts have increased the pressures on families and at the same time made it harder to identify children who are in significant danger. The report notes issues with funding levels, capacity and turnover with all services involved in safeguarding children and families. For example, the issue of capacity in health visiting services is recognised as a national concern. The loss of early intervention and the defunding of local services has been a political choice over the past 12 years. It has led to children’s social services and social workers being under significant and sometimes intolerable pressure and to difficulties in recruiting and retaining social workers. This was known to be the position in Bradford and Solihull where Star and Arthur died. That situation is not unique to those areas.

The number of social workers leaving children’s posts in English councils is at its highest point since comparable data collection began.[[3]](#footnote-3) Almost 5000 full-time equivalent children’s social workers left their roles in the year to September 2021. We have a nationwide crisis. Children services social care is only able to function due to the long hours that social workers and their managers work. This was unsustainable even before the pandemic. We are only just beginning to understand the emotional impact of working during COVID. Rising child and family poverty, the increased rates of children’s emotional and mental health difficulties, and the lack of other services has created a perfect storm.

Poor understanding of social work and negative media coverage is contributing to the difficulty in recruiting and retaining social workers and does nothing to make children safer. BASW’s ‘A Vision for Social Work: Children and Families’ document sets out what social work is, and indeed what social work is, and what it can be for the future. The Social Work Union, working with the UK’s press regulator, IMPRESS, has recently published new guidelines on media reporting of social workers.[[4]](#footnote-4) The Government and the sector must consider how to improve public understanding of social work. This includes consideration of how the media covers serious cases and how media and politicians discuss children’s social care more widely.

We hope that this review also provides a window of opportunity to enhance public understanding about the realities of child protection.[[5]](#footnote-5)

BASW welcomes the Panel’s recognition that issues of recruitment and retention and workforce stability are key to good practice. We have a fatigued workforce having to manage and ‘hold’ intolerable levels of demand. Without a supported and emotionally nourished workforce the quality of practice will be at risk of being poor. Retention and recruitment challenges will persist.

We are calling for an effective nationally funded and professionally mounted recruitment strategy to increase the applications for all the social work education and training routes, including encouraging experienced social care practitioners to train and qualify as social workers. It is vital that the Departments of Education and Health work collaboratively with employers, social work representative bodies including BASW, and the social work academy.

We must work together to train practitioners, provide for continuing professional development and improve the workforce conditions to ensure retention of our skilled and experienced child and family social work practitioners. The stressful nature of the work and its emotional impact require much greater recognition. Resources are required to provide social workers and managers with the emotional support they need.

**Summary**

We must be clear about what social work is. We are concerned that across both the Review and the Panel Report the breadth and depth of social work practice is not acknowledged. Social work is reduced to specialised child 'protection' work and the recent debates in parliament reflect that reductive and narrow framing. This is unhelpful or the profession.

Social work must be understood as the complex, relational and deeply emotional task it is. This requires leadership and practice models within the profession to reflect our ethics and value base. We welcome the emphasis within the Child Protection in England report and the Care Review on systems and leadership. Leaders and those with authority must abide by established processes, any failure to do so undermines trust in authority and impacts on the whole system. We need leaders who understand and value our profession, who are accountable, and who will work tirelessly to uphold the rights of children and their families.

We wish to acknowledge the enormous contribution that children and their families make to different parts of our children’s social care system. Their expertise and vital role in improving services and policy must be recognised and supported in the months and years ahead. BASW are committed to working collaboratively with the sector to uphold the highest standards of practice on behalf of those we serve.

1. The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (2022) [Child Protection in England](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1078488/ALH_SH_National_Review_26-5-22.pdf)  (p.9) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ferguson, H. et al. (2022) Social work and child protection for a post-pandemic world: the re-making of practice during COVID-19 and its renewal beyond it. [Journal of Social Work Practice](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02650533.2021.1922368). 36(1), 2021, pp.5-24. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Children’s Services Statistics (2021[) Children's social work workforce, Reporting Year 2021](https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-s-social-work-workforce)  [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.impress.press/downloads/file/media-guidelines-for-reporting-on-social-workers.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (2022) [Child Protection in England](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1078488/ALH_SH_National_Review_26-5-22.pdf)  (p.6) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)