

Introduction

Since the independent review of children's social care was announced on 15th January, I have been struck by the response I have received, both by the number of people who have offered their support to the review and the overwhelming desire for us to do so much better for children and families.

I am sharing this document on 1st March to coincide with my first official day as chair of the review to set out my current thinking about how the review will work. This has been informed by the approximately 750 responses I have already received from the Call for Advice and the many conversations I have had so far.¹ We will be sharing more reflections and findings from the Call for Advice over the coming weeks, as well as more opportunities to get involved in the review. As always, we'd welcome your views on the plans set out here and you can get in touch with the review team at Review.ChildrensSocialCare@education.gov.uk.

The review's big question

When the government asked me to chair the review, I was given broad and ambitious [terms of reference](#). Whilst these set out the overall scope of the review, there are important decisions I need to make about how the review focuses its work to achieve maximum impact. Having considered the advice I have received so far, my view is that the overarching question that drives the review's work should be as follows.

How do we ensure children grow up in loving, stable and safe families and, where that is not possible, care provides the same foundations?

This simple question needs some definitions to be clear on what this means in practice.

Safety, stability and love

Together these are the basic foundations of a good childhood, which the vast majority of children are able to enjoy with their family, without the intervention of the state. It is those children for whom this is not the case where the review will focus its efforts. A well-established pillar of the Children Act 1989 is that wherever it is possible for children to live safely with their families, they should. A driving question of this review will be investigating what more we can do to ensure children have love, stability and safety in their families. In the circumstances where children do need to enter care, the focus of this review will be how children's social care can work to provide children with those same enduring foundations.

Often there will be a balancing act that children's social care must undertake between these three objectives, taking action to keep children safe, whilst maintaining the glimmers of stability and loving relationships that already exist. At its best the children's social care system can achieve all three - finding the wider networks and relationships that can help keep a child safe, whilst providing an anchor of stability and love.

¹ I am also indebted to the many people and organisations who began collecting evidence for the review before it began and which has fed into my thinking, including: [Our Care Our Say](#), [the Children's Commissioner](#), [Bright Spots 10,000 voices publications](#), [Care Experienced Conference](#) and many others.

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Love

This is perhaps the most important foundation, with the legacy of loving relationships enduring into adulthood. Some people describe this as being connected, belonging and having a strong sense of identity. One of the most striking messages of the Scottish Care review's wide ranging listening exercise was the importance of love. This review will listen deeply to those who have experienced children's social care about what a childhood with love means to them and how it can be achieved. We need to do so much more to ensure that every child feels loved as they grow up.

Stability

Stability is meant in the broadest sense of the word, spanning the places children live, the people in their lives and other factors that provide consistency like education (a factor that has already frequently been raised with me). Where children's social care works well it provides children with stability – either by helping them stay with their family, or where necessary by providing them a stable, permanent alternative. Work by the Children's Commissioner has shown that children who have experienced care want stability in their lives; with moving home, school and changing social worker being an unsettling and at times upsetting experience.² We know that one in four children in care in both 2018 and 2019 experienced two or more 'placement' moves over two years.³

Safety

By safety I mean protecting children from experiencing harm, whether this stems from inside or outside of the home. This includes both the roughly 50,000 children at risk of significant harm who are subject to a child protection plan, as well as the types of harm that would lead a child to being classified as a child in need.⁴ Whilst this review rightly seeks safety for every child, I agree with Eileen Munro when she said that uncertainty and risk are features of child protection work and we can only work to reduce the probability of harm, not eliminate it.⁵

2 [cco-childrens-voices-childrens-experiences-of-instability-in-the-care-system-july-2019.pdf](#) ([childrenscommissioner.gov.uk](#))

3 [Children's Commissioner, Stability Index 2020](#)

4 [Characteristics of children in need, Reporting Year 2020 – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK](#) ([explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk](#))

5 [The Munro Review of Children Protection, Final Report, 2011](#)

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Which children will the review consider?

As the review terms of reference set out, the review will look at children throughout their interaction with children's social care, from referral, to child in need and child protection plans, through to becoming looked after. Broadly speaking, this is the roughly 390,000 children who at one time have a social worker,⁶ we also know that between 2012-2018 roughly 1 in 10 children had a social worker at some point.⁷

I am using a broad definition of "child", looking across childhood, adolescence and into independence. The importance of supporting children as they transition to adulthood has been a key theme in your advice so far and is something the review will consider. This is best described as 0-25, but I am not setting any hard and fast rules, just as parents don't set an arbitrary age where they start considering their child an adult.

This overall group of children is diverse in their background and needs and the review will seek to uncover and listen to a wide range of experiences. More detail about some specific factors that may shape a young person's experience of social care and how the review will consider them are in the box below.

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

Almost half of children with a social worker also have a special educational need.⁸ Children with special educational needs and disabilities are children first and so, as with all children, the review will consider their needs and the support they should receive wherever there is a barrier to them having a loving, stable and safe home, in or out of care. Through the Call for Advice I have heard many moving testimonies from parents of children with special education needs and disabilities who felt that with more support their children could have stayed safely at home – and I am keen for the review to examine this question.

There is currently a review of SEND provision underway, which is looking at how the system can provide the highest quality support that enables children with SEND to thrive and prepare for adulthood and I intend to look for the synergies between the two reviews.

Contact with the criminal justice system in England

Between April 2018 and March 2020, around 19,000 children were cautioned or sentenced.⁹ We know that children in the youth justice system are very likely to have had previous contact with children's social care. Between April 2018 to March 2019, 56% of children sentenced in the Youth Justice System at some point had a social worker.¹⁰ For those children who are remanded in custody they are automatically designated looked after by a court.¹¹ It is therefore essential that the review considers the experiences of children in the youth justice system, building on the recent review of the youth justice system in England and Wales.¹²

6 Characteristics of children in need, Reporting Year 2020 – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK (explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk)

7 [Review of children in need - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)

8 [Special Educational Needs and Disability, an analysis and summary of data sources](#)

9 [Youth Justice Board, Youth Justice Statistics 19/20](#)

10 [Youth Justice Board, Assessing the needs of sentenced children in the Youth Justice System 18/19](#)

11 [Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012](#)

12 [Charlie Taylor, Review of Youth Justice System in England and Wales](#)

Racial disparities

Another issue that has been brought to my attention both through the Call for Advice, and by the many signatories of an open letter coordinated by Home for Good¹³, is the question of racial disparities across children's social care. One example of this is that Black children and children from some other ethnic groups are significantly more likely to be in care.¹⁴ My intention is that the review will look to understand this issue in more depth and consider what should be done to address it.

Care Experienced Adults

The predominant focus of this review must be ensuring more children who are currently in the social care system have loving, stable and safe homes. However we must also acknowledge that, whilst there are a great many children for whom social care has improved their lives, there are also many who have had unacceptably poor experiences. Through the engagement and participation we'll conduct throughout the review, I want to hear from those who have experienced the social care system about what it has meant for them in adulthood. Many care experienced people have told me that many of the principal features of the system have remained consistent over time. It is therefore critical that we learn from care experienced adults and think about what support may be needed into adulthood, for instance many have raised issues around understanding family history and access to case files.

Who is "we"?

This review is not just about the action of the Department for Education, local authorities or even the wider government or public sector. It is about the obligations we **all** have in supporting children and I will make recommendations accordingly. One theme that has come through very strongly in the Call for Advice responses is the importance of support that exists outside of formal services - the community, neighbours, friends and extended family. A focus for this review will be to answer how together all of us can do more to better support children and families.

Achieving whole system change

One question I have been frequently asked is how the review can look at such a broad scope in enough detail to achieve real deliverable change. Part of this will be about me and everyone who supports me moving at pace and building on the significant amount of work that already exists. It also means the review must prioritise the whole system issues that will make the greatest difference to children achieving love, stability and safety. The review will be comprehensive and ambitious, but that does not mean it will be able to resolve every issue that is raised. I will aim to listen deeply and be transparent as I consider the issues in the system and what should be covered.

13 [Open Letter to Secretary of State delivered December 2020](#)

14 [Paul Bywaters, Josephine Kwhali, Geraldine Brady, Tim Sparks, Elizabeth Bos, Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Ethnic Inequalities in Child Protection and Out-of-Home Care Intervention Rates, The British Journal of Social Work, Volume 47, Issue 7, October 2017, Pages 1884–1902](#)

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Not a historical inquiry but a future facing review

The terms of reference of this review are clear that it is a forward-looking review, rather than a historical inquiry. Whilst I want to hear about people's experiences of children's social care to help understand the problems with the current system and improve it for the future, it is beyond the review's remit to investigate or intervene in individual cases past or present. If you have concerns about a child there is more information about what you should do [here](#).

Delivering the review

Successfully delivering the review means bringing together a wide range of voices: including those who are experts by their experience and those who work to support children and young people either professionally or through their communities. These perspectives will be used alongside the best data and evidence of what works.

I plan to set out a case for change in the summer, highlighting what most needs changing in children's social care. This will give everyone the opportunity to understand the review's thinking and tell us whether we have missed or misunderstood anything. The review will then begin to build recommendations for how the system can be improved, still feeding in a wide range of views, culminating in the review's final recommendations and report.



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Engaging experts by experience

At the review's launch I prioritised recruiting an Experts by Experience Board – which will include a small number of children, young people, adults and families with experience of children's social care. We received more than 1,000 applications in total, and we have appointed members today. This Board is going to advise me and the team so that, together, we can engage thousands of people throughout the review and so that these voices are reflected in the final report. The Board is meeting for the first time today and I want it to tell us whether our initial thinking on the methods for hearing other voices is right. Once this is done we will publish our plans, in the next 2-3 weeks. These will include a place for every person who wants to get involved in the review.

This is just the beginning of the work I want us to do to bring the voice of those with lived experience into the review, and I have already had lots of valuable feedback through my call for advice and initial meetings the team have had with some of you about how I should do this. I want the Experts by Experience Board to tell the team and me if we are getting this wrong or right – but also want to be clear now that our ambitions are big. We will have a number of ways for you to get your voice heard in the review – which recognise that some people prefer, or can only do that, in certain ways. I want to make a commitment today that every child, young person, adult or family member in England will have an opportunity to share their views and ideas with us if they want to and we will publish our plans later this month.

Current custodians of the social care system

The other set of voices that must have a say in this review are the many different people who work to support children and families, whether they are social workers, residential care staff, the police, voluntary organisations or the many other organisations and people who are too numerous to list.

I will shortly be setting out a structured plan for engagement that will give all those who are part of the social care system the opportunity to input into the review's work and shape the recommendations. To do this I will be reliant on the many membership bodies and other forums that can facilitate these conversations and many of you have already been in touch – but if you haven't and you can convene one of these conversations then please get in touch with the review mailbox.

Research and analysis

The review's secretariat includes a small team of researchers, and it is key that the review works across the research community and with those working in the children's social care system to ensure recommendations are based on the best available evidence. I am also keen to work closely with other research organisations to ensure we are using the most appropriate and up-to-date evidence and so that there is healthy challenge of the review's emerging findings along the way. If you would like to contribute or can offer support, I'd really like to hear from you.

The review will be starting with an evidence review – considering what we already know about how well the current system provides love, stability and safety. That is why today I am launching a Call for Evidence. This is aimed primarily at the research community and those with robust evidence the review should consider. This asks for specific research and analysis relevant to the big question of the review – it is likely that I will want to ask more specific questions as evidence gaps emerge with further opportunities to submit evidence.



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The Call for Evidence will supplement the Call for Advice – every document submitted through the Call for Advice is being considered.

As our understanding of the evidence and potential areas of focus develop, I will share more about my analytical plans for the review.

Getting involved

I'd welcome feedback and views on the plans in this document and you can contact the review team at Review.ChildrensSocialCare@education.gov.uk. If you want to input into the review here are a few things you can do:

- Give your views about what the review should do: [Respond to the Call for Advice](#)
- Provide evidence: [Respond to the Call for Evidence](#)
- Sign up for email updates about the review, including future events and opportunities to get involved: [Subscribe for Updates](#)