

EIGHT

**A system that is relentlessly
focused on children and
families**

Introduction

So far we have set out the individual recommendations across different parts of a child's journey through children's social care. This will dramatically improve the support families get to bring up children well, the decisiveness of child protection to keep children safe, the overlooked role of family networks, the quality of homes for children in care and how we support those with care experience to have fulfilling lives. However, there are system wide barriers to achieving this change that need to be tackled.

In this chapter we explore in more detail the recommendations that will underpin the new system through:

- *establishing a National Children's Social Care Framework to give national leadership and direction about what success looks like, supported by a balanced scorecard and a more coherent regulatory landscape and rulebook*
- *strengthening multi-agency working to achieve joined up services and decisions for children and families*
- *addressing structural problems in how social care is funded*
- *improving the role of Ofsted as a driver of accountability and intervening more effectively when services are not good enough*
- *establishing a National Data and Technology Taskforce to drive improvements in priority areas such as case management systems, information sharing and use of data*

Together these changes will set out a clear direction and roles and responsibilities in the system to enable it to continue improving. A diagram setting out roles and responsibilities for the future system is at the end of this chapter.



8.1 A National Children’s Social Care Framework to set direction, supported by transparency and learning

Setting the purpose and a direction for the system

There is a lack of national direction about the purpose of children’s social care, with Ofsted often viewed as the main measure of success.¹⁰⁴ National government involvement in children’s social care is uneven, with some areas of the system highly devolved (e.g. early help or extra familial harms), whilst others have significant levels of national intervention (e.g. adoption). Whilst overly prescriptive national processes can harm professional autonomy (Munro, 2011), this does not mean that national government should step away from providing ‘train track’ guidance and leadership - indeed government has a unique role in doing this, stemming from its national democratic mandate.

In recent years the government has focused on improving adoption, supporting innovation, addressing underperformance and building the evidence of what works to support children and families with a social worker.¹⁰⁵ Whilst there have been attempts to draw shared lessons from these initiatives and to scale up specific programmes with individual grants, there has been no genuine attempt to use this to set a whole system direction.¹⁰⁶ This lack of leadership is now a barrier to improvement.

We therefore recommend that the government works with people with lived experience of services, practitioners, researchers and other public services to develop a National Children’s Social Care Framework to set the purpose, objectives and outcomes for children’s social care alongside the best available evidence for achieving this. This would sit alongside a balanced scorecard of indicators for learning and improvement.

The Framework would apply to all areas of children’s social care - from Family Help through to supporting children in care and working with care experienced adults. Following the review, the Framework would form an important mechanism to deliver the review’s proposed *Relationships Protect* reform programme, tying in additional funding to rebalance the system with clear outcomes, objectives and indicators.

104 For example the DfE has a performance metric targeting the number of inadequate authorities (Department for Education, 2021n), and the Partners in Practice Programme used an Ofsted based criteria for inclusion (Ruch & Maglajlic, 2020). The only area the review is aware of where there is a national scorecard and set of outcomes is adoption, where the adoption scorecard looks at specific metrics - see adoption scorecards <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/adoption-scorecards>. Ofsted acknowledged this in their response to the review’s Case for Change report, stating: “We agree that sometimes there is an over-reliance on Ofsted judgements as a single measure of success or quality.” (Stanley, 2021).

105 Examples of these programmes include the Innovation Programme; Partners in Practice programme; establishment of a What Works Centre for Children’s Social Care (and subsequent trials); Strengthening Families, Protecting Children Programme, and Supporting Families, Investing in Practice Programme.

106 The Department published seven principles of effective practice, which draws useful lessons from successful Innovation Programme projects, but this is not widely promoted or published on gov.uk (Spring Consortium, 2017).

System objectives and outcomes

The National Children's Social Care Framework would set the overall outcomes the system should be achieving for children and families, as well as a set of system objectives and principles for achieving them. These objectives and principles would be values based, ambitious, informed by evidence, and non-negotiable.

This part of the Framework would be set collectively by national government departments, in consultation with those with lived and professional experience and sector leaders, and would be reviewed roughly once every Parliament to adapt to changing contexts and keep momentum as the system changes and improves. The Framework should have a statutory footing to give it an enduring status, but with enough flexibility to enable it to be regularly updated.

An illustration of the high level objectives and outcomes we think could be included in the National Children's Social Care Framework are set out below, based on the review's work to date and would also form the objectives for the *Relationships Protect* Programme.

Objectives for children's social care

Child and family objectives

1. Children in need are supported to thrive within their families, through an effective, non-stigmatising Family Help offer that focuses on providing support to the whole family
2. Children are protected from abuse, maltreatment and exploitation, through better sharing of information, family engagement and skilled and decisive, multi-agency intervention where there is risk of significant harm
3. Where children cannot remain safely at home, there is a relentless focus on engaging and supporting a child's wider family network to step forward, supporting successful reunification with a birth family or other forms of permanence that promote lifelong relationships
4. All children in care have a loving, high quality home that is as close as possible to a family environment and that provides stability in their local community where this is best for them
5. Children's voices are heard and prioritised in decisions about what happens to them through reinvigorated advocacy
6. The impact of care experience is recognised and our collective efforts are focused on ensuring every young person leaving care has at least two loving relationships, a good home, access to well paid purposeful work, double the chance of attending university and a life expectancy equal to the wider population



System objectives

7. The children's social care workforce has the knowledge, skills, time, resources, systems and autonomy to support children and families
8. National and local leaders continuously learn and improve, supported by transparent data, effective inspection and accountability
9. Resources are used effectively so that children and families receive the maximum benefits
10. Strong multi-agency working means that services and decisions are joined up and focused on what is best for children and families

Under each of these objectives would be principles for how they should be delivered, for example, for Family Help the Framework might set out that it should be: non-stigmatising; clear on purpose; reduce handovers between workers and services; use a multidisciplinary workforce so that support is available when it is needed; build on the strengths of families and communities; and be embedded in communities and locally delivered.

Draft outcomes we believe could be set for children's social care are below, building on the Supporting Families Outcomes Framework.

Outcomes for children's social care

	Family Help (parent outcome)	Family Help (child outcome)	Children in care	Care experienced adults
Good quality lifelong relationships	✓	✓	✓	✓
Safe from abuse, neglect or exploitation		✓	✓	✓
A stable, loving home	✓	✓	✓	✓
A good education		✓	✓	✓
Improved physical and mental health	✓	✓	✓	✓
Diverted from crime	✓	✓	✓	✓
Stable employment	✓			✓

	Family Help (parent outcome)	Family Help (child outcome)	Children in care	Care experienced adults
Avoiding drug and alcohol misuse	✓	✓	✓	✓
Financial stability	✓			✓
Safe from domestic abuse	✓	✓	✓	✓
Good experiences of children's social care services	✓	✓	✓	✓

Recommendation: A National Children's Social Care Framework should set the objectives and outcomes for children's social care.

A balanced scorecard of indicators for learning and improvement

System objectives and outcomes should be supported by a balanced scorecard, which can bring transparency and learning to how local systems are delivering against these objectives and outcomes. This does not mean setting “performance targets”. Studies of the impact of targets on public service delivery find that whilst when they are well planned they can improve performance, they can also “hit the target but miss the point” (Davies et al., 2021).

However, there are significant benefits to bringing transparency and clarity to a complex system, by having baskets of meaningful indicators for each local authority as part of a process of system learning, focused on improving services for children and families. The legitimacy of proposed reforms rests on understanding whether services are doing better for children in families, and if not then understanding why and course correcting.

To achieve this there will need to be a shift in the data that we collect, in order to more meaningfully reflect what matters to children and families. Priority areas for this would include: a national indicator of child and family satisfaction with services (learning from the Friends and Family test in the NHS); overhauling data collections for child in need status to better capture the support children and families receive; improving data collections about kinship care and collecting important information about children in care that they think should be understood nationally. For example, LGBTQ+ young people in care have told the review they feel gender identity and sexual orientation data should be collected nationally in a way that is sensitive to young people's needs (The independent review of children's social care, 2021c).



We will also need to improve the consistency of data collected. As an example, the financial data collection (known as “251”), which is widely acknowledged to be poor quality and not comparable between local authorities, is creating major problems in understanding how local authorities are using their resources (Freeman & Gill, 2014). This work should begin immediately following the review, as part of the development of the Framework, and should involve practitioners, researchers, and those people whose data is being collected. Examples the review has identified of where new data should be collected or improved, or duplication should be removed, are in the corresponding annex and could provide a starting point for this.

In undertaking this work it will be possible to prune back some data collections. The guiding question should be whether the data has enabled meaningful learning. If it has not, then the collection should be removed or replaced. Government and other national bodies should look for opportunities to remove duplicate data collection, either through better sharing of data between national bodies or better use of linked data.

Alongside this work, there is a need to improve the way that data is collected and how it is used, to make it more frequent and less burdensome for local authorities - this task will form part of the work of the National Data and Technology Taskforce, as discussed later in this chapter.

Recommendation: *The National Children’s Social Care Framework should include a balanced scorecard of indicators to support learning and improvement. To support this there should be an overhaul of what data is collected and how those collections work, so that we have more meaningful metrics and more regular data to help drive transparency and learning in the system.*

Practice guides

Alongside a tightly defined framework of objectives and outcomes and a balanced scorecard, the National Children’s Social Care Framework should include guidance on the best known ways of achieving these objectives. These guides would need to bring together evidence and learning from research and practice.

These would take some learning from NICE guidelines, which give evidence based recommendations about how to improve health and social care (whilst recognising limits to the applicability of medicine to social care).¹⁰⁷ As much as possible, practice guides should point to the features of effectiveness from the best interventions currently being used. For example, on the objective of Family Help, practice guides could include effective features of multidisciplinary teams (building on evaluations of effective models); embedding social workers in community settings (building on the social workers in schools evaluation) and best evidenced models of help for different needs (building on the Early Intervention Foundation’s summary that has been published alongside the review) (Early Intervention Foundation, 2022c).

107 See, for example, <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/published?ngt=NICE%20guidelines>

Setting practice guides will require a mixed set of expertise - effective leaders operating in complex systems, alongside experts in specific issues and fields. Practice guides should be agile, kept up to date based on evolving feedback and evidence, with updates made and effectively disseminated at least annually. To oversee the development of practice guides and advise government on objectives and outcomes set by the Framework, government should appoint a National Practice Group to take oversight of setting direction on questions of practice in children's social care, which would include voices of practice, evidence and lived experience. More details about how this group would work in practice are in the corresponding recommendation annex.

An important part of being able to set practice guides is having and continuing to build evidence about effective practice. Through the review we have identified areas of research where we think there are particular gaps, which are identified in the corresponding recommendation annex. This list should be built on and prioritised for future research.

Recommendation: *The National Children's Social Care Framework should include practice guides, setting out the best evidenced approaches to achieving the objectives set out in the Framework.*

Embedding learning cycles

For the proposed objectives, indicators and practice guides within the National Children's Social Care Framework to be a genuine means of improving outcomes for children and families, it needs to form part of a new pattern where every part of the system is focused on considering feedback, data and information and participating in an open and honest dialogue with others about how to improve. These learning cycles are an important part of helping the system move from a reliance on new public management methods over time, towards a system with greater freedom and responsibility.¹⁰⁸

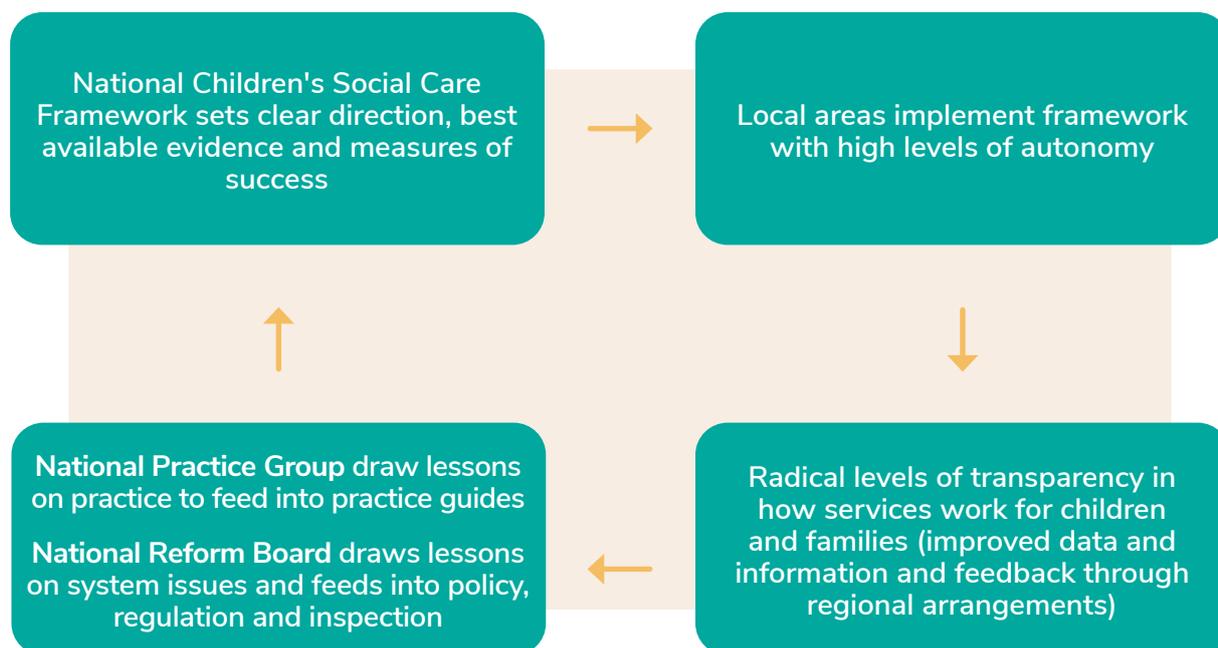
At a local level this means areas having candid self reflection about what data, information and feedback is telling local authorities and partners about the quality of their work. Existing regional improvement arrangements should form a part of areas having robust conversations about how reforms are working, in order to learn from each other, for instance having conversations about how national definitions are being applied.

Similarly for national learning, it means coordinating national actors to respond to feedback as it emerges and continuing to update the National Framework, guidance, regulation and inspection. The National Practice Group, who support the development of practice guides within the framework, should draw in feedback on how these are working to continually improve them. At a system level we are recommending a National Reform Board, to oversee implementation of the recommendations (discussed in more detail in Chapter Nine). This board should also look at feedback, data and intelligence on the success of implementing reforms and how this is translating into improvements for children and families. This will mean regular adaptation and course correction in how reforms are being implemented and how regulation, guidance, inspection and other system levers could be improved. Both the National Practice Group and the National Reform Board should include those with lived experience of children's social care to ensure their views are properly represented.

¹⁰⁸ The dynamics of learning cycles are described helpfully in *Human Learning System Approached* (Lowe et al., 2021)



Figure 2: National Learning Cycle



There is also a need to strengthen and clarify the roles of individual national bodies whose role is to bring together national learning. Significant work has been done in recent years to try and build a learning system in children’s social care, including through the establishment of the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel and various What Works Centres that look at issues facing this cohort, for example the Early Intervention Foundation, What Works for Children’s Social Care and Youth Endowment Fund.

These are all positive developments in building and disseminating evidence. There is a risk, however, that the number of evidence bodies looking at such a similar group of children from different perspectives, leads to duplication and risks setting different directions for the system. For example, work to support teenagers at risk of criminal exploitation could arguably fall to all three What Works Centres. As part of the review’s wider drive to simplify and align how we respond to children supported by social care, we believe there should be a single authoritative What Works Centre that looks at evidence to support this cohort of children. In the first instance, we think this would mean integrating the Early Intervention Foundation and What Works for Children’s Social Care where there are very significant overlaps. The introduction of a single Family Help category, bringing together work undertaken at section 17 and targeted early help, means that alignment here is urgent.

In the longer term we think there is a strong case for wider integration of What Works Centres that focus on this cohort of children (which includes the Education Endowment Fund, the Youth Futures Foundation and TASO). The most obvious addition would be the Youth Endowment Fund, which aims to prevent children and young people becoming involved in youth violence. This would support the review’s recommendation to have a more joined up response locally and nationally between education, police and social care to extra familial harms. In the short term the Youth Endowment Fund should look to make sure it is as joined up as possible with other What Works Centres to simplify the environment that local partnerships are working in.

This integrated What Works Centre, should be given a more meaningful role in the system, in a way that NICE have in the health sector. Part of this would be supporting the development of practice guides and disseminating evidence to practitioners.

Recommendation: *Data and feedback should be used to prompt local and national learning to continually improve services. At a national level this should be via a National Practice Group and a National Reform Board. The evidence and learning landscape should be strengthened through the integration of overlapping What Works Centres, starting with the integration of the Early Intervention Foundation and What Works for Children's Social Care.*

8.2 A more coherent rulebook

A 2018 review of statutory duties for local authority children's services identified 298 duties from nine different central government departments or arms length bodies, including over 160 for social care or related services (ADCS, 2018).

Through the review we are recommending changes to reshape the system, many of which are likely to require changes to legislation and guidance and could risk further complicating the landscape. As we have undertaken this work, we have tried to identify areas of regulation and guidance that could be changed or simplified, or would no longer be necessary. For instance, removing the requirement to appoint an Independent Reviewing Officer alongside the introduction of Independent Advocacy on an opt-out basis, and removing statutory targets for timescales for assessment alongside bringing in a new approach to Family Help.

However, simplification of legislation and guidance is not enough to make children's social care more flexible for children and families. Legislation and guidance interact with inspection, incentives, systems, training, attitudes, expectation and culture. When a local leader thinks they do not have the freedom to implement a new approach, the solution is rarely changing a single rule. Instead it might be about a leader being confident that they will not be criticised by Ofsted or the Department for Education (DfE), or they might need greater freedom over grant funding. This requires an open dialogue between partners about the rulebook for children's social care.

This dialogue should be facilitated through the National Reform Board, with an aim of creating fewer but better rules to help the system best meet the needs of children and families. Local authorities should have a specific mechanism for raising examples where they perceive a lack of freedom to act in the best interests of children and families. There should be transparency in this process, with information about freedoms made publicly available and proper scrutiny used when legislation or guidance are changed. The public and advocacy groups will rightly expect that greater freedoms come with deeper levels of responsibility taken by services.



Recommendation: The National Reform Board should establish a mechanism for local authorities to raise where they feel there are national regulatory blockers to taking a course of action that is in the best interests of children and families, with action taken to address this.

8.3 Strengthen multi-agency working to achieve joined up services and decisions for children and families

Throughout the review we have seen examples of different agencies coming together to provide better services for children. Whether this is seconding workers into multidisciplinary teams, pooling budgets to provide joined up services, or using technology to give different workers a single view of a family. Yet, we have also heard about the problems with partnership working in practice - from arguments about who pays for what, to misalignment about eligibility for services, or the failure to share information. Reviews of serious cases frequently point to poor partnership working as a contributing factor (Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2021).

Many of the review's specific recommendations aim at improving how partners work together: delivering multidisciplinary support in Family Help and leaving care services, integrated plans for children open to youth offending and social care, extending corporate parenting duties to a wider set of bodies and setting a target to use technology to achieve frictionless sharing of information across partners by 2027. However, these recommendations will only succeed if we get the underlying strategic roles and responsibilities right.

Over the years, there have been many versions of multi-agency arrangements. The Children Act 2004 introduced Children's Trusts, Local Safeguarding Children's Boards (LSCBs) and a duty to cooperate on a number of agencies.¹⁰⁹ By 2016, there was widespread concern that too many LSCBs were ineffective and unable to establish a coherent and unified voice for strong multi-agency arrangements, leading the government to commission a review by Sir Alan Wood (Wood, 2016). Following this, the Children and Social Work Act 2017 introduced equal and joint responsibilities for three safeguarding partners - local authorities, the police and health - to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in their area.¹¹⁰ These responsibilities were designed to address the limitations of LSCBs, bring senior strategic leaders together and offer local areas greater flexibility in how they achieve effective joint working (Department for Education, 2016). This was the right change and policy objective, however, five years on from the legislation being passed there are clear problems.

109 Children Act 2004 - <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2004/31/contents>

110 Children and Social Work Act 2017 - <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2017/16/contents/enacted>

As set out in the objectives for children's social care within the National Children's Social Care Framework, every area should have strong multi-agency arrangements that mean that services and decisions are joined up and focused on what is best for children and families. Greater clarity on the functions of the safeguarding partners and how they provide senior, strategic, leadership is now needed to ensure the reforms meet their original intentions. We must keep the shared duties on partners, but have clearer expectations for how multi-agency arrangements provide strategic oversight of the system, delegate operational delivery and ensure arrangements are properly resourced.

The strategic role

The intention of the 2017 multi-agency reforms was to put responsibility for safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children at the most senior levels of local government, the police and the local NHS (Department for Education, 2016). However, in many safeguarding arrangements, attendees do not have the authority to speak on behalf of their agencies or agree resources (funding or otherwise) to implement the changes needed to deliver effective partnerships (Wood, 2021). Sir Alan Wood's review into the implementation of these reforms, highlights examples of delegation where police representatives were five steps below chief constables, and as a consequence the representatives simply could not make decisions about police participation (Wood, 2021). Sir Alan Wood concluded that currently too many partnerships are stuck in the weeds of operational and delivery issues because they were not focused on the key strategic challenges. Therefore the most important problems, about whether partners are adequately funding arrangements and meeting the needs of children, often cannot be satisfactorily resolved. In his original report, Sir Alan Wood is clear that partnerships should be strategic (Wood, 2016), with suggestions for how to fulfil this function. This was not translated into policy implementation (with guidance in *Working Together* more vague about the strategic functions of partnerships) (Department for Education, 2018b). The result is that they are a fudge, doing neither strategic or operational functions well enough.

We therefore recommend that the government clarifies the roles of safeguarding partners, as a strategic decision making arrangement accountable for effective multi-agency practice, by amending roles set out in *Working Together* to have clearer functions (suggested functions are within the box below). It should put beyond doubt that the lead representative in arrangements should be at a sufficiently senior level to fulfil these functions and there should be transparency about who it is delegated to.

Suggested strategic functions for strategic arrangements

- lead local services in their duties to safeguard and promote the welfare of children, meeting objectives and outcomes set out in the National Children's Social Care Framework and oversee learning from serious incidents
- allocate organisations' resources to ensure they can meet objectives, including publishing the contributions of each partner to joint working
- delegate power for the operational delivery of services and hold leaders accountable for exercising this, including resolving any disputes about the operational delivery of multi-agency arrangements



Recommendation: *The responsibilities of multi-agency safeguarding arrangements should be amended to emphasise their role as a strategic forum focused on safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children, with attendance reflecting this.*

The operational role

To enable senior safeguarding partners to focus on strategic issues, there needs to be greater clarity about the functions of operational multi-agency working. We therefore recommend that the government sets clearer expectations for the operational aspect of partnership working locally, which would report into the strategic arrangements. A suggested set of joint and equal responsibilities, based on our work so far, is set out below. This list is not necessarily exhaustive and should provide a foundation for further development. In fulfilling these functions partners should involve a wider set of relevant agencies, such as probation, community groups and housing.

Suggested responsibilities for operational arrangements

- monitor, understand and improve the overall contributions of partners to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children:
 - ensure all multidisciplinary and multi-agency working for Family Help and child protection is effective, including ensuring professionals have the time and resources needed
 - ensure information is shared and used effectively, and ensuring that information sharing agreements are in place and there is adequate staff training
 - undertake rapid reviews of serious child safeguarding cases. Establish arrangements to commission and oversee Local Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews and decide when these should be carried out. Implement learning from these alongside national reviews from the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel
 - implement the proposed reforms in this review
- develop a strong understanding of the needs and experiences of relevant children and families in the area and ensure services respond to this need:
 - coordinate work to complete a thorough population needs assessment, using data and intelligence to understand disparities in how needs are met. For instance, responses to racial disparities locally
 - develop a shared understanding of eligibility for Family Help alongside the National Children's Social Care Framework and what constitutes significant harm, and ensure these are applied consistently

- respond to feedback from children and families about their experiences of services
- align responses where there are tensions in organisational objectives that are a barrier to acting in the best interests of children and families:
 - ensure that agencies' responses to children at risk of extra familial harms are aligned (for example when a child is both a victim and a perpetrator of crime)
 - align responses to families where the needs of either the child or a family not being met by other partners, will impact systemically on help or protection of a child

Each partner should have a named operational lead who has responsibility for their contribution to these objectives. However, the overall duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of children (and to investigate where there are concerns about significant harm) rests with the local authority. It therefore follows that the Director of Children's Services (DCS) should be in charge of overseeing the coordination and delivery of multi-agency working, acting as the primary interface between strategic and operational leaders locally. This would not encroach on the operational responsibilities of individual agencies or their joint and equal responsibility for local safeguarding arrangements.

Recommendation: *Working Together should be amended to set out clear joint and equal operational responsibilities for partners. The Director of Children's Services should be the primary interface between strategic and operational leaders to facilitate effective multi-agency working.*

Clarifying the role of the local authority as a champion for children and families within a locality and bringing greater clarity to individual responsibilities of partners

Alongside clarifying the status and functions of partnerships, there is an opportunity to clarify the individual roles of the Director of Children's Services (DCS), local authority and other partners. This review comes alongside several major policy interventions relevant to the DCS, lead member and wider role of the local authority in providing support for children - namely the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) and Alternative Provision (AP) Green Paper and the Schools White Paper. In 2016 Sir Alan Wood recommended that the DfE review the role of the local authority, given the implication of academisation (Wood, 2016). This has not so far happened and the statutory guidance for the DCS and lead member roles has not been updated since 2013 (Department for Education, 2013; HM Government, 2022).

Consideration should be given for what these three reforms mean for the role of the local authority and DCS. The Schools White Paper has set out that all schools will become academies,



giving local authorities a strengthened role in overseeing admissions arrangements and setting out their role to champion the interests of children (HM Government, 2022). However, building on what is set out above on partnership working, we think this conclusion could be extended, so that the DCS takes on the role of champion for not just children but also for families across a whole place, given that working with and supporting families is often the best route to helping children. We therefore recommend that the government reviews the role of the DCS and the local authority to ensure that they have a clear role as a champion for children and families across a local area. This should include ensuring they have the levers they need to play this role. For instance, introducing a duty to consult the DCS for relevant partner agency strategies that are relevant to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children, for instance local mental health plans.

It is also important to be clear about the unique contributions of partners and what they must do to fulfil their duties to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. At present these are set out in *Working Together* but they are largely focused on the actions of practitioners, rather than organisations. We believe these responsibilities should be refreshed, looking across the review's reforms to make sure the individual contributions of partners are clearly set out in one place. For instance, making clearer the expectations on police in cases of extra familial harms or on health in how mental health services should work with children. Guidance should also reflect that outcomes and objectives should be embedded in partners' own strategic plans and objectives, for example within the police force strategies and Integrated Care Board plans. This should be supported by the national leadership of partner agencies, like NHS England or the National Police Chiefs Council.

Recommendation: *The role of the Director of Children's Service should be reviewed to give clarity to the role following this review, the SEND and AP Green Paper, and the Schools White Paper, to reflect their role as a champion for children and families within their area.*

Recommendation: *The individual contributions of partners to achieving the review's vision should be set out clearly in Working Together and reflected in each organisations' strategic plans.*

Improving accountability and learning

If areas do not fully participate or undertake their duties there is very little consequence. Accountability for the performance of partnerships relies on independent scrutiny of arrangements and a yearly report which is sent to the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel and What Works for Children's Social Care. Individual agencies continue to be inspected by Ofsted, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS), Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP) and the Care Quality Commission (CQC). There are a small number of Joint Targeted Area Inspections (JTAs),

which have considered multi-agency working.¹¹¹ These mechanisms are relatively weak and the opportunities to build evidence of effective multi-agency governance and share learning is limited. We propose increased transparency, improved evidence, learning and support, and joint inspection where concerns are identified. These reforms will require improved national leadership from ministers and government departments who should offer a more coherent approach and support for partnerships.

1. Increasing transparency and oversight

Partnerships should become more transparent in how they operate, for example publishing minutes of partnership meetings, decisions made and the financial contributions of each partner. Yearly reports should continue to be sent to the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel and What Works for Children's Social Care, but the format should be aligned to the strategic and operational responsibilities set out above.

The Safeguarding Children Reform Implementation Board (SCRIB), the national partnership board that oversees implementation of multi-agency reforms, should be reviewed and strengthened, so it provides proper national leadership to safeguarding arrangements. A key function it could play is in focusing on frequently raised gaps in practice, asking all safeguarding arrangements to submit information. For example, following ongoing concerns with information sharing, we are recommending in Chapter Three that all partnerships audit their information sharing practice and confirm to the SCRIB that they have information sharing agreements in place, and that this list should be published.

Recommendation: *Partnerships should become more transparent, including publishing minutes of partnership meetings and the financial contributions of each partner. The Safeguarding Children Reform Implementation Board should be reviewed and strengthened to take a greater leadership role in safeguarding arrangements, including requesting and publishing critical information about partnerships.*

2. Improving support and learning

At present there is relatively limited support for partnerships in how they work together. The bulk of the DfE's improvement activity is focused on the contributions of local authorities, and the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel generally makes recommendations at a national level. We therefore recommend that the Panel works with the newly integrated What Works Centre, as well as the respective What Works Centres for each partner, to build evidence on effective partnerships alongside their National Reviews, and to take a more hands on role in supporting partnerships to improve. There is also a case for training aimed at leaders for how to discharge their role as strategic partners. The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel should consider how this should work in practice, drawing on learning from their national review into the deaths of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson.

¹¹¹ The most recent Joint Targeted Areas Inspection Frameworks were published in March 2022: see <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-frameworks-for-joint-targeted-area-inspections-jtais>



Recommendation: *The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel and relevant What Works Centres should take a more hands on role in promoting evidence and supporting partnerships to improve.*

3. Inspection of partnerships

As we have seen in the recent case of Solihull (Ofsted et al., 2022), JTAs can play an important role in shining a light on the contributions of different agencies and holding them to account. We recommend that each agency inspectorate reviews their framework to ensure there is sufficient focus on individual agency contributions to joint working. Where there are concerns about partnership working raised through individual inspections or other channels, a joint follow up inspection should be triggered. These should be risk based and focused both on the role of the statutory safeguarding partners and how they are supporting operational working.

Joint inspections should have judgements attached to them and where priority actions are attributed to individual partners, the respective interventions regime for each partner should act to ensure that recommendations are implemented, and intervene where services are not good enough.

Recommendation: *Each agency inspectorate should review their framework to ensure there is sufficient focus on individual agency contribution to joint working. Where there are concerns about the functioning of partnerships, joint inspections, with a judgement attached, should be triggered.*

Making education a statutory safeguarding partner

Another issue that has been raised with the review is the involvement of schools in partnership working (The independent review of children's social care, 2022; The independent review of children's social care, 2022c). Teachers spend more time with children than other professionals. When legislation was passed to establish new safeguarding partners in 2017, schools were not included as a full statutory safeguarding partner¹¹² but schools were to be named by every area as a "relevant agency" (Working Together to Safeguard Children, HM Government, 2018). The rationale being that the structure of the schools system meant that there was no single voice that could represent all schools within an area (Wood, 2016).

Although some arrangements have worked hard to bring schools to the table, in too many places the contribution and voice of education is missing. In our deep dives, we found that the relationship between social care and education was consistently fraught (The independent review of children's social care, 2022c). Children who have needed a social worker are present in 98% of state funded schools, are between two to four times more likely to be excluded than their peers and have some of the poorest educational outcomes; being 25% - 50% less likely

112 Children and Social Work Act 2017 - <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2017/16/contents/enacted>

to achieve a strong pass in Maths and English GCSEs (Department for Education, 2019b). Despite the importance of social care and education working together to protect children from harm and improve their outcomes, Sir Alan Wood found that some schools were 'kept out' of safeguarding partnership conversations and others did not recognise the importance of schools being named a relevant agency (Wood, 2021). Schools are less motivated to work collaboratively because there are fewer opportunities to engage with safeguarding partners (Department for Education & Kantar Public, 2021). Given we are recommending that safeguarding arrangements will have an important role in overseeing Family Help, and schools have a critical role to play in the identification and delivery of this, schools and children's social care need to be brought into lockstep. We therefore recommend that the DfE amends legislation and guidance to make education the fourth statutory safeguarding partner. The DfE should work with social care and school leaders to identify the best way to achieve this, ensuring that arrangements provide clarity. The upcoming reforms to the schools system, in particular, offer an opportunity to act.

One option for delivering this that should be considered, would be that within an area schools nominate one representative, with the seniority to work alongside the local authority chief executive, the accountable officer for a Clinical Commissioning Group (soon to be Integrated Care Board) and a chief officer of police to take a shared and equal responsibility for safeguarding arrangements. This would require a mechanism to enable this representative to come to meetings able to make decisions on behalf of schools within an area. The review believes it is likely that representatives will need to be at the level of the CEO of a Multi-Academy Trust. The upcoming reforms to the schools system, whereby all schools will be part of a Multi-Academy Trust, means that this may become a viable option. These reforms include a new collaborative standard, which will require trusts to work constructively with each other, their local authorities and wider public services - this could be invoked to bring the local schools systems together to participate collectively in arrangements. Better alternative models may be available, but in any event the safeguarding arrangements will need to establish the means for all schools to take full responsibility for their role in safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children.

Recommendation: *Schools should be made a statutory safeguarding partner and contribute to the strategic and operational delivery of multi-agency working.*

Financial integration

In the health and adult social care space, pooled budgets through the Better Care Fund have been a major driver of integration (Forder et al., 2018). Through the review we have seen examples of good practice of areas using pooled budgets as a means of driving more integrated decision making for children and families: for instance health, education and social care resources to support children with 'complex needs' who require a residential setting or pooled budgets to commission preventative services (The independent review of children's social care, 2022c). There have been suggestions to the review that we introduce the equivalent of a Better Care Fund for children's social care.



Pooled budgets are a facilitator of integration, enabling areas to take joint decisions in the best interest of a child. However, we have concluded that the complexity of children's social care means that designing a top down, single pooled fund would likely end up being overly bureaucratic and add additional complexity to an already confusing landscape. We do think, though, that government should strongly incentivise partners to pool their resources to integrate services for children and families. This is why we suggest above that all are asked to publish their financial contributions.

In addition, as we set out in Chapter Two, as part of funding to implement *Relationships Protect* there should be a financial reward mechanism that means that full funding is only available to areas if partners are able to demonstrate a level of joint contribution. As a minimum, we recommend that 20% of the reform programme funding will only be made available to local areas if it is matched by other partners, representing 120% investment and shared financial commitments for reforms. This figure could be increased over time and it would generate locally determined pooled funding for meeting objectives set out in the National Children's Social Care Framework.

Thrive Salford and pooled budgets

Partnership working in action

In 2015, Salford introduced an integrated partnership approach for children and young people aged 0-25. In 2019, Salford City Council and Clinical Commissioning Group extended pooled budget arrangements to include children and young people, services, public health and primary care under the Integrated Care Fund to further embed this approach. The decision to pool these budgets was taken to allow for more integrated decision making to provide more coordinated care to achieve population health outcomes; protect investment into front-line services; and improve services to better meet local needs.

Under the Integrated Care Fund, each partner contributes to the cost of budget pressures in proportion to the contributions made to the pool for each service area. The approach has enabled improved collaborative investment and led to more intensive multi-agency prevention services. As a result, there has been a reduction in the need for children to enter care; better support for children and young people with special educational needs; and positive feedback from young people about their mental health following community support interventions.

Recommendation: Government should incentivise greater partner contributions through requiring partners to publish their financial contribution and making receiving the full funding for reform contingent on partner contributions.

8.4 Improving national government leadership and alignment

Alongside strengthening local working, national government needs to take a greater leadership role and more care in the collective impact different policies have on children and families. The review has heard time and again, pleas from local leaders that national government needs to better role model the behaviour it asks services to demonstrate. Throughout the report we have tried to identify actions that can be taken nationally to create better alignment. Examples of this include recommendations to better align and integrate plans for children who are open to multiple services (e.g. AssetPlus Youth Offending Assessments and Education Health and Care plans with child in need plans) and recommendations to better align national funding streams (e.g. integrating different funding streams into a single Family Help pot, and integrating funding streams around different types of harms).

However, beyond these individual recommendations there is a need to ensure that there are the right underlying conditions for government to align policy making in future and understand how their respective areas contribute. This includes making sure there is sufficient cross government leadership driving the reform programme set out, which is covered in Chapter Nine.

Family policy

Family policy is necessarily a cross government endeavour and there will be a need for health, welfare, the family courts, police, housing and education in particular to work together to ensure families have a joined up experience of both social care and other services. However, this means there does need to be a single government strategy on families, with sufficient leadership and resources, a single actor driving it forward and a mechanism for coordination.

The government has previously stated that this leadership for Families policy should come from the DfE. It should therefore back this decision and the Department should have a robust and sufficiently senior cross government mechanism for coordinating family policy and bringing in relevant government departments. As the review is recommending that several pots of funding around support for families are integrated, this will have implications for the departments that currently own them. For instance if the Supporting Families programme is mainstreamed into an overall Family Help programme, it would naturally move to the DfE.

Youth offending and young people in secure accommodation

Earlier in this report we made a recommendation that detaining children should always be a last resort, but that where necessary this should be done in secure children's homes, secure schools or remand fostering, meaning a phasing out of Young Offender Institutions (YOIs) and Secure Training Centres (STCs). Young people are currently detained in secure accommodation on both justice and welfare grounds, and yet, despite often living in the same home, guiding policy affecting these children is split across the DfE and the Ministry of Justice (MoJ). Analysis by the Youth Justice Board and Ministry of Justice found that more than half of children in custody are known to have had a child in need or child protection plan (Ministry of Justice & Youth Justice Board, 2020).



Without the need for YOIs and STCs, the future direction of youth justice policy would no longer have a link to the prison estate and the rationale would not remain for it sitting within the Ministry of Justice. Youth justice policy should be moved to the DfE.

Recommendation: National government should ensure it has an oversight mechanism in place to ensure policy relating to children and families is aligned in contact with children's social care. Government programmes should be streamlined to support these reforms and youth justice policy should move to the Department for Education.

8.5 Rebalance resources to address disadvantage

Children's social care is under significant financial pressure. Total spending on children's services reached £11.1 billion in 2020/21, and costs are rising in the majority of local authorities, leaving little to no budget to improve services.¹¹³ The most deprived areas, which have the highest levels of social care needs, have also seen the biggest pressures on funding, further compounding this situation (Harris et al., 2019). At present, the vast majority of funding for social care comes through the wider local government finance settlement, combined with local income from council tax, business rates and other commercial income. Every spending review, national government funding for children's services is estimated based on what it is predicted local authorities will need to spend, it is then allocated to local authorities annually based on a funding formula.

The funding formula for children's services is out of date, relying on statistics dating back to 2001 and it has not been significantly updated since 2013/14 (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2013). Since that time our understanding of what drives local need for children's social care services has moved on substantially, particularly the significant role that poverty plays. A consultation to update the overall local government finance settlement funding system was launched in 2018 as part of a wider review of the balance of needs and resources between local authorities (Ministry of Housing Communities & Local Government, 2018). However, since then no announcement has been made on if or when a new formula will be introduced. It is essential that government makes the best use of the resources available. The government should therefore update the funding formula for children's services to better direct resources to where they are most needed.¹¹⁴

113 S251 data - This figure is higher than the £10 billion quoted in the executive summary, as it also includes spending lines 3.4.5 Universal family support, 3.5.1 Universal services for young people, 3.0.1 Spend on individual Sure Start Children's Centres, 3.0.2 Spend for services delivered through Sure Start Children's Centres, 3.0.3 Spend on management costs relating to Sure Start Children's Centres, 3.0.4 Other spend on children under 5.

114 The review recognises that children's services don't operate in isolation from wider local services. However, the timetable of any wider reforms to local government funding should not delay the urgent introduction of the new children's formula. The new children's formula should take better account of deprivation and other contextual factors than the existing formula, and should replace it in the wider formula used to distribute Revenue Support Grant funding between local authorities. The government should also use the new formula to allocate the proportion of Social Care Grant funding that is intended for children's services, as this is currently distributed based solely on the pattern of need for adult social care.

In addition, government needs to ensure that in future the total funding that local authorities receive is based on the most up to date evidence about the contextual factors that will increase the costs of meeting child and family needs. This means that if deprivation increases nationally, the funding formula and total funding for children's social care should respond to reflect the amount we spend on social care (just as it does with other safety nets within the welfare state, or with educational entitlements such as Pupil Premium funding). Government should also more explicitly consider where policy changes have a knock on impact for the funding needed. For instance, the reduction in young people in custody is a positive development that has saved the MoJ significant sums of money, but the costs across all local authority services of supporting a group of highly vulnerable young people elsewhere has never been properly understood (Centre for Justice Innovation, 2016). A similar situation is happening in health where in-patient mental health beds have been reducing, with a saving for the NHS, but without adequate alternative social care or NHS funding and facilities to support these children (Waldegrave, 2020).

Recommendation: *Government should introduce an updated funding formula for children's services, and take greater care to ensure that changes in government policy that impact the cost of delivering children's social care are accompanied by additional resources for local government.*

8.6 Improve the role of inspection as a driver of accountability

Ofsted play an important role in measuring quality and what they focus on becomes a significant driver of behaviour. Inspection and regulation is an important and necessary lever for holding services to account and regulation is crucial for ensuring compliance with clearly defined standards. There are, rightly, consequences when services are found to be inadequate.

Throughout the review's work we have listened to front-line professionals, leaders, shadowed a local authority and a children's home inspection, and engaged with Ofsted about the impact of the inspection frameworks in both measuring quality but also regulating against standards. We have identified three overarching changes in Ofsted inspection that are needed to support the reforms set out by this review, that in turn improve services for children and families:

1. Increase transparency about how judgements are made and ensure they have a rigorous underpinning

There is evidence that perceptions around Ofsted can drive system behaviour. Rates of child protection activity temporarily increase at the time of Ofsted inspections (with a more pronounced and longer term effect in inadequate authorities) (Hood & Goldacre, 2021). We have heard from secure children's homes, residential care and providers of fostering services that one of the reasons they will not take in particular children, is in case they receive a poor inspection outcome if things go wrong.



This is driven, at least in part, by a lack of understanding and transparency about what Ofsted are looking for, and professionals seeking to second guess what Ofsted is looking for or what they might disapprove of. This has improved in recent years and areas have told us they welcome the more regular dialogue that takes place with Ofsted through the ILACS channels. However, there is more to do. It is not always clear in their frameworks what Ofsted means by quality, effectiveness and impact of services provided to children and families, and children in care.

There is also very limited published research about the reliability of inspection (especially when compared with school inspections) (Hood et al, 2019; Wilkins & Antonopoulou, 2020; Ofsted 2017b; Ofsted, 2019b). Ofsted should seek to increase the transparency of how judgements are made in children's social care and ensure that inspection has a rigorous underpinning. Specific ways we think this could be achieved:

- As it does in schools, where Ofsted have in recent years been much more explicit about how they understand and inspect curriculum and quality of teaching, Ofsted should more clearly define what they mean by good quality and the features of effective practice for children's social care. There are ways of doing this that are not overly prescriptive. This should align with the National Children's Social Care Framework, discussed earlier in the chapter.
- Ofsted should be clear about how it inspects decision making. Work undertaken for the review concluded there are different ways the quality of decision making can be measured including accuracy, consistency, outcomes, practice and equity of decisions, and the organisational context they are made in (Hood et al., 2022b). This work should also be used to conduct validity and reliability assessments of inspector practice across all frameworks, which is again something they have begun already to do in the schools remit.
- Ofsted should, as it does in school inspections and used to do in social care, recruit practice leaders as standing Ofsted Inspectors to improve the robustness of judgements and dispel myths.
- Ofsted should be more transparent in general with the data, information and tools it holds - for example, publishing data on notifiable events (such as police callouts to the home or "serious concerns about a child's missing behaviour") and what Ofsted has done about them (Ofsted, 2018c).

2. Apply a more rounded understanding of 'being child focused'

As the review has set out elsewhere, children's rights are most often realised through their families. Focusing on the effective engagement of parents and focusing on supporting change in adults is very often the way to be focussed on what children need. Yet, some of the best performing practice leaders and Directors of Children's Services have told the review that Ofsted's position on this runs counter to their efforts. Ofsted should therefore develop a more rounded understanding of what it means to be 'child focussed'.

It is important that inspection focuses on the things that matter most to children and families. Through engaging with local areas and shadowing an Inspection of a local authority inspection and a children's home inspection we have identified some areas where we believe inspection should expand to have greater focus. At Family Help, there should be a greater focus on the proportionality and quality of the help children and families receive, and therefore what the

experience of families is. For children in care there should be a greater focus on meaningful relationships with adults who love them as a key feature of good quality care. For care leavers, Ofsted should introduce a standalone care leaver judgement (something they are currently consulting on) that reinforces the missions we have set out for care experienced adults.

Giving children's voices greater prominence is also about how inspection takes place. For example, children's homes inspections should take place at times when children are at home. Inspections of local authorities should take more care to gain feedback from families as well as children (as happens in local area SEND inspections).

3. Support the delivery of the new infrastructure suggested by the review

As well as amending how frameworks currently work, Ofsted will need to support the introduction of review's suggested reforms with new responsibilities across a number of areas. This includes supporting the government in updating Care Standards for the providers it regulates; financially regulating Independent Fostering Agencies and children's homes; developing inspection frameworks for advocacy and Regional Care Cooperatives; and working with other partners to undertake joint inspections of partnerships.

More broadly Ofsted will need to align inspection behind the principles, objectives and guidance set out in the National Children's Social Care Framework. Together we believe these changes would have a significant impact on how we understand and measure success.

Recommendation: *Ofsted inspection should be reformed to increase transparency in how judgements are made, ensure inspection applies a rounded understanding of being 'child focussed' and to ensure inspection supports the proposed reforms.*

8.7 Intervening when services are not good enough

By establishing a clear national direction and high levels of transparency through inspection and better data, with an enabling infrastructure that can take action on national issues like IT and technology, local authorities will be able to learn and improve. However, this only works if there are consequences when services fail.

At present the DfE intervenes when local authorities are inadequate, providing support and in some cases formal direction through a range of models such as appointing a Commissioner who will make recommendations about the future of services (Local Government Association, 2019). In some cases decisive action is taken and progress is made - with the turnaround of services



in Sunderland and the Isle of Wight being good examples of where trusts and local authority partnerships have made services better for children (Ofsted, 2018d, 2021d)

However, too often we are leaving children's services stagnating, leaving children unsafe. As an example, Bradford children's services were found to be inadequate in 2018 with warnings that children were at risk of significant harm (Ofsted, 2018b). Following this poor result, Ofsted had undertaken six - further monitoring visits and one focused visit - four finding progress was "slow" and three commenting on only "some" progress, improvement or steps forward.¹¹⁵

An intervention commissioner was appointed in September 2021, following serious concerns raised by Ofsted about the safety of children in care. It was only in late January 2022 that a decision was taken to remove the services from the council. In cases like these the DfE must intervene more effectively when progress is too slow.

There is also a similar issue with drifting 'requires improvement' authorities, who are not providing good enough services for children. Whilst 'requires improvement' authorities will be offered voluntary improvement support, they do not necessarily need to accept it. As of April 2022 there was 21 local authorities that have been assessed 'requires improvement' in at least two consecutive inspections.¹¹⁶

We should be clear that local authorities being persistently "requires improvement" is not good enough and if local authorities are not able to improve and are not accepting support, then this should be a trigger for intervention. We have three related recommendations that would make the Department's interventions regime more robust.

1. Intervene more decisively in inadequate and drifting authorities

Part of the reason that more robust intervention does not happen with failing and drifting authorities is the DfE's policy framework for intervention, which holds a high bar for when the Department can intervene. To counter this, the DfE should strengthen its intervention framework so that it intervenes more decisively, including making any necessary changes to legislation or statutory guidance to enable this more robust approach. The Department should make it unequivocally clear that services can be removed, even where a service was not inadequate across the board in its Ofsted judgement, if there are reasons for concern (as there was with Bradford).

In the longer term it should be made clearer that being continually 'requires improvement' is not good enough for children. Therefore the Department should act in all local authorities that receive 'requires improvement' consecutively, without mitigating circumstances, either through an improvement notice or formal intervention.

As the system will be undergoing a period of reform in the coming years, including both to the resources available and what is measured by inspection, this intervention should not come into effect until the most significant reforms have taken place. However, the DfE should confirm its intention to do this now, so that there is clarity that requires improvement is no longer considered satisfactory.

115 See Ofsted reports from 11 June 2019 to 02 February 2022, available on Ofsted website at: <https://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/provider/44/80449>

116 Data based on reports published on Ofsted website at: <http://reports.ofsted.gov.uk/inspection-reports/find-inspection-report>

2. Strengthen the role of commissioners

Second, there is scope to strengthen the role of intervention commissioners. Commissioners are generally former DCSs, who are paid by the DfE to advise on specific local authorities. They make recommendations to ministers, who are advised by civil servants on whether to accept their recommendations. An independent evaluation of the DfE's regime found that a proliferation of different people involved in an improvement journey could be an issue, and highlighted inconsistencies in how commissioners approached their task (for instance whether they get involved in specific improvement activity) (Department for Education, Upcoming Release).

The role would be strengthened if Commissioners were brought into the DfE as Regional Improvement Commissioners, with responsibility for overseeing the improvement of local authorities in a specified region. This would mean they had "skin in the game" in achieving the improvement across a region, with deeper understandings of the issues individual authorities were facing.

Commissioners would themselves be accountable for providing advice and support that results in improvement. Regional Improvement Commissioners would also take a role in challenging local authorities who require improvement to ensure they take up support to improve, using the new more transparent data and direction provided by the National Children's Social Care Framework to support this.

3. Embed sector led improvement

At present there is a structure of "Regional Improvement and Innovation Alliances", that bring together local authorities on a regional level to support and challenge improvement. The DfE has provided funding for these individual regional arrangements as well as funding the Partners in Practice Programme (now Sector Led Improvement Partners), which funds 'good' and 'outstanding' local authorities to provide support to areas who need it (Department for Education, Upcoming Release).

We agree that using successful local authorities is the best way to support improvement, and support for sector led improvement should continue. An evaluation of these programmes demonstrated that areas who used the support found it helpful in their improvement, but authorities were not consistently aware of the support available (Department for Education, Upcoming Release). It also found that authorities wanted easier access to evidence based information about improvement.

Learning from improvement programmes in other public services such as schools, the DfE should simplify and bring together the support for Regional Improvement and Innovation Alliances and Sector Led Improvement Partners into a single clear improvement offer.

Recommendation: *Strengthen intervention powers and introduce Regional Improvement Commissioners to provide more robust challenge in the system. Ensure there is a clear expert improvement offer for local authorities.*



8.8 A National Data and Technology Taskforce

Across the review we have identified a range of areas where better use of data and technology could achieve significant progress for children and unlock better use of resources. This should include having more user friendly case management systems and automating the way practitioners share information.

Insight Bristol

Using technology to help practitioners support families

Insight Bristol is a data analytics hub with employees from Bristol City Council and Avon and Somerset Constabulary, which collects and analyses data to identify vulnerable families across Bristol to better understand the issues they face. Insight Bristol runs the Think Family Database (TFD), which facilitates multi-agency working by allowing professionals to access a joined up single view of a child.

The Think Families Database covers approximately 50,000 families across Bristol and helps identify risk and vulnerability using the criteria from the Supporting Families Programme. The database pulls together data from around 30 different public sector sources including:

- Bristol City Council
- Avon and Somerset Constabulary
- the DfE
- Department for Work and Pensions
- the NHS
- social care systems

This approach helps professionals coordinate support for families who are most in need. Sometimes those families are obvious but often they are hidden, so the database tells professionals about issues they might not have seen before. It also allows professionals working with families to know which other professionals are also working with them. Using targeted analytics, the system also helps identify children at risk of:

- sexual exploitation
- criminal exploitation
- not being in education, employment or training

The models are not replacing professional judgement or making decisions on their own. They guide and supplement the work of lead professionals and provide information about children at risk that they may not easily see. This early identification means that support and interventions can be put in place early to stop problems turning into crises.

Some investment has been made in recent years in achieving progress and individual areas are innovating and finding solutions, for example through the Data Accelerator Fund and Regional Improvement and Innovation Alliance funding (Ministry of Housing Communities & Local Government, 2021). These have been successful at supporting individual areas to build their capability (including in Bristol). However, this work has been hampered by inconsistent and patchwork funding, without a true attempt to scale this, resolve system barriers or achieve common system breakthroughs that they cannot solve on their own.

Other areas of the public sector have demonstrated what is possible when action on technology and data is coordinated. For example, NHS Digital (soon to become part of NHS England) for health care, which has driven forward the introduction of the Child Protection Information Sharing system, as well as wider improvements in NHS systems (NHS Digital, 2021).

We are therefore recommending a National Data and Technology Taskforce - a single, operationally focused team, with the right technical skills and knowledge that can help coordinate local authority and national action to achieve progress across the country, building on the best of what is already happening. It would need to work out the right ways to achieve progress, but also have practical, hands on capacity that helps get these solutions implemented in local authorities. The Taskforce would report into and make recommendations to a Partnership Board made up of key representatives with the levers to enable this change to happen - whether this is requiring a particular technical standard across all providers or making a change to data collection.

The Partnership Board should include the DfE (policy and technical expertise), Ofsted and local authority representation (both children's services and technical leads). The Taskforce should be co-owned by all Partnership Board participants and should be independent of any one directing organisation. It should link into the group members' respective resources and existing work, and develop work packages to meet the targets set below.

There would be three national targets that the Taskforce would be set to achieve within five years; enabling social workers to spend more time with families through improved case management systems, achieving frictionless sharing of information through technology, and improving how areas are able to analyse their data to inform decision making. The case for each of these is set out in more detail below, with further information in the "Data and Technology Taskforce" recommendation annex.

We suggest that the Taskforce is funded nationally and that the solutions it develops should be co-funded by local and national government. Current funding pots that exist to improve children's social care technical capacity should be brought into the Taskforce to achieve the goals set below.

1. Reimagine case management systems to drastically reduce social worker time spent recording cases

As set out earlier in the report, poor case management systems are a significant driver of social workers' time away from families (see Chapter Seven). We also know they are currently not enabling data and information to be easily retrieved and turned into actionable intelligence. This impacts both the ability to have regular, timely data and impacts analysts who often have huge time burdens to appropriately check and clean data and make sure it is fit for use (Owen, 2022; Ofsted, 2018).



Yet, despite this issue being known for many years, local authorities report finding it extremely difficult to procure effective case management systems. The market for case management systems is not functioning effectively, with 152 individual local authorities individually commissioning two major providers, and not spending enough to incentivise improvement and innovation (Begley & BetterGov, 2021). This means there is little incentive for existing providers to innovate or new providers to enter the market.

The National Data and Technology Taskforce should coordinate action to improve case management systems nationally in children's social care. The objective should be to significantly reduce the time spent recording, improve practice and make access to data more automatic. It would be within the remit of the Taskforce to agree the best way to achieve this, but a first action might be getting a grip of the market by understanding when different systems are coming up for reprocurement, local budgets, and different technological requirements. It could then make a business case to individual authorities and central government to fund either the procurement of the challenger system or action with an existing provider to improve their system.

2. Use technology to achieve frictionless sharing of information

In Chapter Three we set out a five year challenge, to end the persistent issue of poor information sharing between partners by 2027. A key part of this is using technology to achieve frictionless sharing of data between local authorities and partner agencies, and also between different local authorities. The Taskforce would be critical to achieving this goal and would need to work closely with NHS England and the police (who would also need to take coordinated action) to precisely define the target (in consultation with the information commissioner), the right technological and legal approach to achieving it (e.g. whether this is achieved through interoperable systems or another route and whether common data standards and data quality agreements are needed) and agree the interim milestones that areas should meet.

The Taskforce's work would be supported by wider action on information sharing including the adoption of a consistent identifier, action to address cultural barriers and clarifications to the legal framework (set out in more detail in Chapter Three).

3. Improve data collection and how it's used to inform decision making

At present huge amounts of data is gathered by local authorities and reported to national government, but not enough is done to make good use of it to inform decision making.

Analysis and insights from data can support better decision making at a practitioner level (helping understand the different risks a child may be facing), at a strategic level (understanding needs in areas), and at a national level (helping to inform policy making). The feedback loop generated from a transparent set of valuable indicators will only work if there is analysis. Improved use of data and data analysis is also critical to the success of specific recommendations. For example, in Chapter Two when we discuss Family Help, we set out the importance of areas being able to take local intelligence and utilise it to design an evidence based Family Help offer that responds to local need. To do this, local authorities need to be able to understand and turn data into actionable intelligence, and yet recent analysis in 2020 by the Ministry of Housing

Communities & Local Government (MHCLG) suggested that 81% of local authorities had low levels of data maturity (three or lower on a six point scale) (Ministry of Housing Communities & Local Government, 2021).

Some work has been done in recent years to improve local use of data, for example through the Data to Insight programme, which has helped local authorities to develop and maintain tools to make better use of their data. This has included the development of the 'ChAT', which uses Annex A data that local authorities already collect for Ofsted, to enable them to generate usable and real time data outputs that aids decision making.¹¹⁷ However, there is more to do to make these tools mainstream and deploy them effectively across local authorities. The Taskforce should work closely with Data to Insight to disseminate and continue this work across local authorities, and look for other opportunities where national coordination might help. This might include supporting usage of analytical software, reviewing data standards and management, preventing unnecessary duplication of effort in analytical tasks, and reviewing local authorities' access to useful data held by DfE.

There is also a need to ensure data can be shared in a timely manner, without creating large additional costs and burdens. At present, significant time locally is spent cleaning management data for statutory returns, when in many cases what is being collected simply is not useful or arrives too late (Valle et al., 2019). Earlier in the chapter we recommend an overhaul of what data is collected and how those collections work, so that we have more meaningful metrics and more regular data to help drive transparency and learning in the system. The Taskforce should have a role in guiding what redesigns are practical and possible, and how data collections can be made as burden free as possible.

The system should in the longer term aim for more imperfect, routine flows of the most useful pieces of information, that are shared in real time and made useful and usable to local authorities. A frequent, highly transparent publication schedule of the key system indicators set out as part of the proposed balanced scorecard, is essential to ensure that learning loops work in practice. If the learning system relies on out of data information, it will break down.

Recommendation: Government should establish a National Data and Technology Taskforce to drive progress on implementing the review's three priority recommendations to achieve frictionless data sharing by 2027, drastically reduce the time social workers spend on case recording and improve the use and collection of data locally.

National government action to make better use of data

Beyond the work of the Taskforce, there is also activity that government should lead to make better use of data for decision making and building evidence in children's social care.

117 More information on the ChAT can be found on the Data to Insight website - <https://www.datatoinsight.org/tools>



The data we collect nationally is of huge value, and under explored. The recent Drivers of Activity report from the DfE, published alongside the review, has very significant findings that impact our understanding of what drives need for social care services (Fitzsimons et al., 2022). Yet, these types of projects are not the norm. The DfE should develop a plan for making better use of data in children's social care.

In addition, there is more to do on linking data. Linked data sets are one of the most efficient ways we can understand the fuller picture of what happens to children and families and holds a huge opportunity for how we might streamline the number of data asks we make of local authorities. Several innovative projects have helped link novel datasets, such as the ECHILD data linkage project which will bring together education, social care and hospitalisation data.¹¹⁸ However, at present data linkage is piecemeal and painstakingly slow. We must move to a situation where we have key data sets linked regularly and consistently, enabled by a constant identifier. With this in place, bringing regular insights from national and anonymised linked data sets into the public domain and making them available to researchers should start from 2025.

The DfE will have a role to play in identifying, planning and facilitating the linking of data sets. Within adult social care there is a clear published data strategy which lays out future plans relating to data linkage (Department for Health and Social Care, 2022). This model helps provide transparency and allows for researchers to plan their work accordingly. No similar strategy exists in children's social care. Consideration for which data sets to link should involve consultation with the relevant services, the academic community, care experienced people and the third sector.

One particular area of opportunity that the DfE should proactively pursue is to make use of the Integrated Data Service.¹¹⁹ The Office for National Statistics (ONS) is leading the delivery of the Integrated Data Service (IDS) in collaboration with partners across government. The IDS is built for analysts in government departments, Devolved Administrations and external accredited researchers, and is currently in the New Private Beta Phase. The ONS's IDS is currently looking for projects to pilot their approach to robust, systematic and secure data linking. DfE should now make it a priority to submit an expression of interest to incorporate and link education data, social care data, hospitalisation data, census data and justice data.

Recommendation: *The Department for Education should have a proactive strategy on making better use of data in children's social care, including a strategy for data linking for children's social care with other data sources that makes use of the ONS integrated data service.*

118 <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/child-health/research/population-policy-and-practice-research-and-teaching-department/cenb-clinical-20>

119 <https://www.gov.uk/service-standard-reports/integrated-data-service>

Future children's social care system

		Organisation	Function	
		Leadership, learning and improvement		System Leadership
System improvement and learning	National Practice Group			<p>Advise on objectives & outcomes</p> <p>Set practice guides</p> <p>Facilitate learning cycles</p>
	National Data and Technology Taskforce			<p>Coordinate local authority and national action to achieve progress on use of data and technology</p>
	Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel; Consolidated what works centre			<p>Review learning and evidence, to inform practice guidance, and local delivery</p>
	Regional Improvement Commissioners			<p>Intervene with underperforming local authorities</p>
Inspection and regulation	Ofsted			<p>Inspect and regulate services</p>
	Social Work England			<p>Professional registration of social workers and the residential home workforce, and approval of initial social work training programmes</p>



Delivery of services

Organisation	Function
Local authorities; children's homes and fostering services; and partner services	Deliver children's social care
Advocacy service	Strengthen children's voice in decisions affecting them Monitor children's home quality
Cafcass	Represent a child's best interests in care proceedings
Regional Care Cooperatives	Commission placements
Multi-agency safeguarding arrangements	Strategic leadership and oversight of multi-agency working
Family Courts; Local Family Justice Boards	Set direction and oversee performance for the local family justice system