

Children's services in England shaky as Jenga tower, says review lead^[1]

Report says system is bureaucratic, risk-averse and in need of reform and investment after years of cuts

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EXCERPTS

The English children's services system is a "tower of Jenga held together by Sellotape" and needs major reform and investment, the head of an independent review has found.

Josh MacAlister described the children's social services system as bureaucratic, risk-averse, financially strained and over-focused on investigating potential abuse and neglect at the expense of providing practical support for struggling families.

"Our children's social care system is a 30-year-old tower of Jenga held together with Sellotape: simultaneously rigid and yet shaky," said MacAlister, who was appointed to chair the review by the education secretary, Gavin Williamson, in January.

Alongside systemwide reform, in his interim report MacAlister called for a serious policy effort to tackle poverty and deep-rooted child welfare inequalities across England that he said meant children living in the 10% most deprived neighbourhoods were 10 times more likely to be on a child protection plan than children in the least deprived areas.

Deprivation – and in some cases ethnicity – were linked to more frequent social care interventions, he said. "We have now reached a point where the weight of evidence showing a relationship between poverty, child abuse and neglect and state intervention in family life is strong enough to warrant widespread acceptance."

MacAlister added: "Improving children's social care will take us a long way to solving some of the knottiest problems facing society – improving children's quality of life, tackling inequalities, improving the productivity of the economy, and truly levelling up."

The review, which will produce a final report with recommendations for change early in 2022, is looking at early years help, child protection, fostering and kinship care, and care homes, as well as the family support measures needed to prevent children having to enter care.

Other key findings from the report include:

- The state has failed to keep teenagers safe from harm from criminal gangs and trafficking. The largely family-based approach to social work was unable to adequately tackle this harm outside the home, the fastest-growing area of child protection.
- The state is not a "pushy enough parent" when it comes to providing support to children in care and care leavers, who are disproportionately likely to experience poor mental health, poor exam results, homelessness and unemployment. "We are failing to build lifelong loving relationships around these children," it says.
- The children's residential care market needs "a pragmatic rethink" to tackle a system that is making excessive profits for some private providers while delivering an underwhelming experience for looked-after children.

The report says England's children's social services are under significant financial pressure after years of cuts, during which council-run family support services have been reduced by a third, leaving social workers increasingly "stuck in a cycle of spending more on short-term reactive interventions".

Funding has barely kept pace with demand for children's social care over the past decade, the report says: there are now 80,000 children in the care system, up 24% since 2009-10, while numbers on child protection plans have grown 32% to 51,500. Councils estimated this growth would drive a £3bn gap between budgets and need by 2025.

"There is no situation in the current system where we will not need to spend more on children's social care in future years – the question is whether this investment is spent on reform and long-term sustainability or propping up an increasingly expensive existing system," the report says.

MacAlister calls for a change in the practice and culture of child protection social work. "There is a high level of anxiety when making decisions and social workers and organisations continue to feel vulnerable to public, regulatory and government scrutiny if things do go

wrong.”

More needs to be done to recruit and retain experienced social workers and prevent burnout, the report says. Stress levels are high and nearly two-thirds of social workers are in place for less than four years. “We see some clear signs of a workforce under significant strain.”

Anna Feuchtwang, the chief executive of the National Children’s Bureau, said the report showed problems were inescapably linked to the “devastating erosion” of children’s services funding over the past decade. “We know what’s wrong with the system; what we need is the political will and urgency to change it and invest in children’s futures.”

Mark Russell, the chief executive at The Children’s Society, said the report laid bare the scale of the challenge ahead to improve services for vulnerable children. “Cuts to children’s services funding have made it more difficult for councils to offer early help to families to deal with challenges and risks in their lives.”

A government spokesperson said: “The independent review of children’s social care is wide-ranging and seeks to improve the lives of children and families who are supported by social care services.

“Key to this process will be identifying where the social care system can do more to transform outcomes for children, and the work Josh MacAlister has undertaken so far in his role as chair will help feed into this important review.”

Region: Europe [3]

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