

The independent review of children's social care

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The challenges

The report addresses two major dilemmas in children's social care:

1. How to achieve the right outcomes for local people without unwarranted variation
2. How to provide families and skilled practitioners autonomy to implement the right solution in each case, while also maintaining safeguarding.

Priorities

The report recognises that a conventional response of 'top down' rules is not likely to be fruitful, but it also identifies that many local systems do not have the robustness or resource to take on the full burden of reform. The report therefore advocates a programme to implement change over time, building on six key pillars of:

- Clear objectives and priorities;
- Subsidiarity in delivery, with decisions and delivery happening close to families;
- Transparency on performance indicators, inspection and learning;
- Investment in a skilled, knowledgeable workforce;
- Multi-agency services focused on children and families; and
- Investment, recognising that greater investment will be needed while new systems are introduced.

The report also recognises that children's services needs to be understood in the wider context of poverty, mental health, domestic abuse and inequality, many of which have been exacerbated by the impact of COVID-19.

Vision

As for the vision of how care will be delivered, this is built around an understanding of the potential in supporting families, through consistent multi-disciplinary family help, and doing more to explore the ability for family networks to support children, before resorting to children coming into care.

That said, the report also advocates an empowered, 'just and decisive' child protection system able to intervene when concerns emerge. Interestingly, it recognises that engagement with parents may be improved by ensuring the parents themselves have representation and support to navigate the process, reflecting the desire to enable transparent and effective engagement with families.

The caveat to the principle of subsidiarity is, of course, that some services must be delivered at scale to be effective. The report advocates help for local authorities to 'take back control' through Regional Care Cooperatives (RCCs) to deliver regional public sector fostering, residential and secure care in their region, and with the ability to commission private provision at scale.

Comment

Having engaged with the review and with numerous stakeholders over the period in which the work was being done, it has been encouraging to see Josh MacAlister and his team openly tackling the key quandaries that need to be resolved to increase and clarify purpose of children's services. It was important the report tackles the need for local delivery versus variation, and family relationships versus safeguarding, and it has so.

The RCC concept, which is really a recognition that each service should be delivered at the most effective scale, is not surprising but is important. A key challenge in creating a sustainable system is that this does not always happen at present, creating instability and uncertainty in demand, which can never be good for efficiency. A national care service is not recommended, and at a time when the Integrated Care System (ICS) project aims to increase regional focus local care delivery this makes sense.

That workforce is a priority is not surprising – this is an issue across health and care, and effective, joined up, workforce planning to develop rewarding, respected career paths in these key services is needed.

It is encouraging that the need for funding is addressed, including the recognition that during a system transition this will need to cover both operation of legacy systems, and development of the new. This is in contrast to the ICS transition, in which local authorities were offered no additional funding for the change itself.

Importantly, the report comes back to some of the basics of effective children's social work: that children often thrive best with their own families; that when problems arise this is often multi factual; and that early intervention to address the broader challenges families face can prevent child protection concerns developing.

But the report also recognises that our best tool to keep children safe within their families are locally delivered services, driven with clear purpose, and led by skilled and empowered social workers.

What next?

The recommendations reflect work going on in many areas to improve services, but a national approach, with the right finding in place, could no doubt achieve more.

For those authorities looking to collaborate across regions, the report suggests that they are working with the current, and they are likely to be laying important groundwork for future change. For those who are less advanced in their plans, it may be time to move forward.

Of course, we will look forward to the Government response to the report and proposals for legislation in due course, but recent [research](#) we have carried out with LGiU demonstrates that effective working in systems is significantly driven by relationships rather than structures, and relationships can be built at any time.

In the same report, we also established that adequate, predictable funding was essential, and it is encouraging that the review's report recognises this too.

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