



Summary

Action for Children welcomes the publication of the Case for Change by the Independent Review of Children's Social Care. This document is the response of Action for Children to the consultation questions raised in the Case for Change, and focuses predominantly on the questions surrounding family help, and looked after children and care leavers.

The questions we directly respond to, along with a summary of our answers are below.

What should be the purpose of children's social care?

We think the purpose of the Children's Social Care system should be to ensure that all children grow up in safe and loving homes. We have heard from care-experienced young people that they want a care system that 'knows' and 'trusts' them and allows them to live like a 'normal person', without feeling 'controlled'. They have told us that everyone deserves love, no matter who they are. Loud and clear, they have said "Don't call me a case!".

What do you think about the proposed definition of family help?

We agree that a common definition would be beneficial for the sector and welcome the outlined principles, particularly on support for the family unit. However, we strongly urge the Review to revise the vision for family help to be a primarily preventative service, designed to support families before they reach the threshold for support under Section 17 of the Children's Act 1989. This should be underscored by practice guidelines for social care teams to consider family support options prior to stepping up children to higher levels of support. In addition, we believe that the Review should recommend that the Department for Education develops a National Outcomes Framework for family help to provide clarity on the purpose of the sector and encourage greater coordination between the different government programmes funding family help.

Is a system designed to offer support and protection impaired in its ability to do both?

We recognise the challenges that families describe about asking for support from the social sector care sector and welcome the Review's focus on this issue. We think the Review should urge government to undertake further research in this area to understand the root causes of families' perceptions of the tension between support and protection. However, we do not believe that these challenges are an inevitable consequence of social care practice and would not support proposals to further separate family help provision from child protection. We urge the Review to address head on the significant decline in funding for early-stage child and family support over the last decade and recommend that government introduces a statutory duty on local authorities ensure provision of and to coordinate family help services in order to create lasting legal balance between early and late-stage social care intervention. This should be monitored by regular data collection on the numbers of families receiving early help, and referral sources, mirroring the existing data on Children in Need and Child Protection. This data could be used as part of the common outcomes framework.



What can we do to support and grow kinship care?

In our view, there are two broad issues to consider. Firstly, how to establish a shift in children's social care practice that sees the exhausting of appropriate community placement options (i.e. kinship and foster care) before residential care is considered, together with a placement market which supports that. Secondly, how to secure investment in support (both practical and financial) for kinship and foster carers, to provide assurance at the outset that it is a viable prospect for potential carers.

What role should residential and secure homes have in the future?

We believe that there will be a continued need for residential and secure homes in the future, as places of care for children with high and complex needs, who need intensive, specialist support. They are often the only appropriate placement type for those children.

Market challenges, which are causing many children to be placed in settings inappropriate for their needs, should not be allowed to overshadow or mask the innate value of residential and secure settings.

However, it is essential that the decision to place a child in one of those settings is only made after it has been determined that: firstly, the child's needs are such that one of those settings is *required*; and secondly, that the setting *can deliver the support needed* by the child – it must be high-quality, tailored to the individual, and support the child's key relationships (such as those with their birth parents).

If we were creating care today that was good enough for all our children, what would it look like?

Our response focuses on 'reunification' (the practice of returning children in care to their birth parents) - an issue we are currently prioritising in our looked-after children and care leavers work. Our submission to the Review's earlier 'Call for Evidence' outlined a major reunification research project we have underway with the University of East Anglia; we will share findings with the Review in due course.

In our view, improvements in reunification practices are essential to creating a care system that meets the needs of children, and promotes good outcomes. An increase in the rate of successful reunifications across the country could also help to reduce currently rising numbers of children in care.

We believe that national guidance is needed to address current inconsistencies in local approaches to reunification. Variations between local authorities in the extent and quality of support offered to children and their birth parents, in the lead up to, during, and post-reunification, are resulting in differing rates of attempted, and successful, reunifications across the country.



About Action for Children

Action for Children is a leading children's charity supporting over 395,000 children, young people, and families across the UK. We offer targeted services for children and young people to ensure that they can have a safe and happy childhood.

Response

The Purpose of Children's Social Care

The purpose of the Children's Social Care system should be to ensure that all children grow up in safe and loving homes. Where possible, this should be with their families, but when help doesn't arrive early enough, or when children cannot live safely, the purpose should be to provide a safe and loving environment in care. This vision is already well articulated in our legislation around children, and we think that the focus of the Review should be on how to deliver on it.

Following the prompt from the Case for Change, Action for Children has launched a consultation project working with care-experienced children and young people across our services to co-design a care system that works for all children. This project is ongoing, and we intend to share results and outcomes from this project with the Review team.

We have heard from the young people that we have spoken with to-date that they perceive the care system as controlling and that it prevents them from living a normal life. They ask why they can't go out to get a haircut or see their friends, without filling in form or undergoing some sort of risk assessment. Whereas they might find themselves in the room for meetings, they feel like decisions about them are sometimes made over their head, and one young person described it as feeling like a 'pawn in a game of chess'.

Underpinning this, the young people have asked to be 'trusted' and 'known' by the social care professionals in their life and have at times felt unable to build relationships with those that are there to support them. They have asked also for empathy and understanding about their identity, ethnic, gender or otherwise, and how it affects important decisions about them such as care placements. Powerfully, one young person said, 'there is a gap of love, and everyone deserves to be loved'. As another young person described it, 'don't call me a case!'.

A Future of Family Help

Early, community-based family support must be at the forefront of social care practice for children and families, and we welcome the focus of the Review on how to improve and expand 'Family Help'.

The Definition and Scope of Family Help

We agree with the assessment in the Case for Change that a shared definition of early help could bring clarity to what is often a diffuse and loosely organised sector, at both the local and national level.



We welcome the outlined set of principles, and in particular the focus on support for the family unit in the new proposed definition. We support the Review in making final recommendations that orient early help services around supporting families to stay together and offer children a stable, safe, and loving environment in which to grow up.

However, we also believe it is essential that the Review emphasises the importance of preventative 'early' support in its recommendations, so that we are not waiting for children to be harmed before they are offered help.

The proposed definition of 'family help' is too focussed on services provided to children and families who are subject to a Child in Need or Child Protection Plan. We recognise that in practice, the distinction between early help and higher-tier services in many localities can be a hard one to draw. However, early help is currently defined in "Working Together to Safeguard Children" as services that should be provided at a lower level of need than the thresholds described by Section 17 of the Children's Act 1989. Essentially family help should be provided *before a child is harmed*.

As highlighted by many others, the retreat of early help services is partly a function of a confused and largely short-term funding landscape, which also has a side effect of creating differing objectives within parts of the system.¹ Some of these programme objectives, such as those connected to Troubled Families funding, might not be explicitly tied to the welfare and rights of the child and have the potential to create mission creep in the early help system. In our internal consultations, early help service leaders from across Action for Children have pointed out that within local systems, there is often confusion about what the overall purpose of early help is. This compounds the challenge of individual safeguarding partners being incentivised to focus on their core deliverables, at the expense of working in partnership to meet the needs of the child. Where plans to support a child are put in place, capacity constraints and data sharing issues mean that there is often little follow up to see if the plan is being enacted.

Our concerns are also motivated by evidence from Action for Children service directors and managers that thresholds for receiving statutory support are being raised, in response to higher service demand and funding cuts. This corroborates wider evidence of inconsistencies in the rates of child welfare intervention between local authorities.² As one Action for Children early help lead put it, "we are now being referred children who, ten years ago, would have been classified as Children in Need". This is particularly concerning, as it suggests that some children in the early help system who are not subject to a Child in Need or Child Protection Plan are already at a high-level of need and might have benefited from earlier support.

In defining the scope of 'family help', the Review should consider Section 17 of the Children's Act 1989 which stipulates that for a child to be assessed as 'in need', they must already be unable to reach or maintain a reasonable standard of health and development. Help that arrives after the conclusion of a statutory assessment constitutes treatment, rather than prevention, for the child and their family,

¹ Early Intervention Foundation, *Realising the potential of early intervention*, 2018. Available at <https://www.eif.org.uk/report/realising-the-potential-of-early-intervention>

² E.g. Calum Webb et al, *Untangling Child Welfare Inequalities and the 'Inverse Intervention Law' in England*, Children and Youth Services Review, 111, 2020.



and cannot be ‘early’ help. The Review should explore whether there are ways to alter decision making practices around the ‘step up’ to higher tiers of social care intervention, such as establishing processes to ensure that decision making teams can evidence that all appropriate family help and support options are considered prior to a ‘step up’ being agreed. In addition, the Review could explore how to emphasise the importance of ‘family help’ by looking at the obligations to families in contact with the social care system. For instance, how could plans that currently focus on the needs of children ensure that the needs of the child’s family are also addressed.

In response to the above, we believe the Review should:

- **Revise the definition of ‘family help’ to clarify and highlight the preventative role that these services ought to play in the children’s social care system** and set an expectation that children and families who might benefit from these services should be identified prior to the need for statutory assessment, in line with the existing guidance in ‘Working Together to Safeguard Children’. This should be bolstered by practice guidelines outlining the types of family help that should be available and that ensure available family help options are considered prior to a child stepping up to a higher tier of support.
- **Recommend that the Department for Education develop and publish a ‘National Outcomes Framework for Family Help’** to help local authorities orient multi-agency partners towards a set of common outcomes, and to provide greater clarity to the purpose of the family help system. This framework should be specific to the children’s social care system and guide Local Authorities in their development of related programme outcome frameworks, such as that for Supporting Families programme. The framework should be designed so it can align with wider services such as health and mental health services. This will help integration of child and family focused outcomes across different programmes at a local level and incentivise cross-departmental coordination on programmes affecting children. The National Outcome Framework should be developed in partnership with children and families from across the UK, and published by the Department for Education as statutory guidance. This approach may need to be supplemented by new approaches to regulating non-multi-agency partners so they are accountable for their role in the children’s social care system.
- **Recommend the introduction of a specific statutory duty on local authorities to ensure provision, and coordinate family help services with local health, education, and police partners.** Such a duty would clarify the roles and responsibilities of the different public authorities involved in supporting families and communities, and importantly will anchor family help as an essential component of children’s social care for the long term. Given that the interaction of limited funding and a lack of clarity on responsibilities for early help is thought to have contributed towards the rise in investigation-culture in social care, we do not believe that a transition away from any excessive interventionism will be possible without equivalent legal duties for family help – characterised by community and relationship-based practice – and the higher-tier child protection duties. A family help duty should also reduce the extent of early help provision gaps between local authorities.



The Structure and Funding of Family Help

The Case for Change asks important questions about a conflict between child protection and support services frequently described by families. We think this is an important theme for the Review to explore, particularly about scoping the scale of this problem, which is often quoted but not yet well understood. It would be useful to learn more about the number and demographics of families that don't come forward for help for fear of entering the child protection system, as well as the number of families who are erroneously subjected to stressful assessments following an ask for help. Where mistrust does exist between families and social care teams, such an analysis might help get at the root causes. The question of community trust also mirrors similar debates in policing and healthcare, and the Review might benefit from exploring whether there are lessons that could be learned from practice in these sectors.

However, despite these challenges, we do not believe that a system that is designed for both support and protection must necessarily be impaired in its ability to do both, and we would not support proposals for the separation of family help and child protection into separate statutory agencies.

Family help must exist on a continuum of care from basic universal services that are available to everyone at the lowest level of need, through to more targeted and intensive support for families experiencing multiple complex needs. The ability of children and families to seamlessly step-up and step-down the system, depending on their needs at the time, will be essential for ensuring the best outcomes, and for building trust between families and social care professionals.

Our consultation with care-experienced young people in preparation for this response highlighted a consistent theme of young people wanting to feel 'trusted', 'known' and cared for by their social workers and child advocates. Young people recognise that families need help but feel like decisions are made over their head despite their nominal-inclusion in meetings. When asked to draw a character that represents the care system today, we saw young people draw pictures that represented complicated networks of buildings, and characters they described as 'broken', 'controlling' and 'lonely'. Those working in children's social care often enter the profession with a passion to work closely and in trusting partnerships with families. We believe that a return to this model of practice is what professionals, children and families want.

This vision for a more joined up social care system is hampered by patchy and inconsistent relationships between early help systems and children's social care services across different local authorities. Many early help systems already operate quite independently of children's social care. Action for Children's 'Revolving Doors' research estimates that only 25% of children who are deemed to be 'not in need' upon assessment receive an onward referral to early help services.³ A recent paper on early help provision found a wide variety of practice models were in effect, and that a significant minority of local authorities couldn't even report on the number of early help cases they had open because the data, if it existed at all, was held by external agencies.⁴

³ *Action for Children, Revolving Door Part 1, 2017. Available at <https://media.actionforchildren.org.uk/documents/revolving-door-report-final.pdf>*

⁴ Steven Lucas and Phillip John Achard, *Early Help and Children's Services: Exploring Practice and Provision across English Local Authorities*, *Journal of Children's Services*, 16(1), pp74-886.



This is a severe policy failure. Despite widespread acknowledgement of the importance of early intervention and early help within the social care system, we currently have no clear picture of what is happening or how much is being delivered.

We have heard that these issues are driven by a mixture of unclear responsibilities for different safeguarding partners, and a lack of stable long-term funding to build the necessary networks, appoint practitioner leads, and set up the data-sharing infrastructure to manage cases across different services. Research by Action for Children, in partnership with Pro Bono economics and other children's charities highlighted that spending on preventative services has declined by 48% in the decade from 2011 to 2020.⁵ This is particularly acute for children living in deprived local authorities, where reduction in spending on early intervention over the last decade stand even higher at 59%. This is part of a wider picture of rising and uneven child poverty. In North East England child poverty is soaring, increasing 11 percentage points over the last five years, equivalent to an extra three children per classroom.⁶ The result of the twin pressures of rising demand and reduced supply is that it is often hardest for families to access early support in the places where it is most needed.

Most importantly, this shift towards late intervention is deeply damaging for the wellbeing of children and families, who are being harmed before they are offered help. But it also an inefficient way to structure the care system, as a lack of early-stage family help services leads to a vicious cycle of increased demand for more resource intensive 'late intervention', which further reduces the pool of funds available for family help.

In response to this, we believe the Review should:

- **Address head on the funding gap for early-stage preventative services and ask government to commit to a long-term funding arrangement for local authorities to enact a new legal duty for family help.** The patchwork and short-term nature of funding for family help needs to come to an end, and government must commit to a single long-term funding settlement with a clear set of aims for family help. To this end, we welcome the letter from the Chair of the Review calling for more funding for family help services in the upcoming Chancellor's Spending Review. Restoring family help funding to the per-child levels of 2010/2011 would represent the minimum level of ambition for government to invest in the needs of children. In keeping with the Government's levelling up agenda, the Review should also recommend that funding is allocated on the basis of need, as measured by deprivation levels and demand for children's social care services.
- **Avoid recommendations that would create a further split between family help and child protection services.** The Review is right to focus on the concerns that some families have about accessing support but should not draw the wrong conclusions about whether support

⁵ Pro Bono Economics and the Children's Services Funding Alliance, *Children and Young People's Services: Spending 2010-11 to 2019-20*, 2011. Available at <https://www.probonoeconomics.com/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=fca940e7-7923-4eb3-90d3-be345f067017>

⁶ See <http://www.endchildpoverty.org.uk/local-child-poverty-data-2014-15-2019-20/>



and protection can coexist. The Review should focus on the way in which the decline in resources available for children's social care has influenced the shift to 'investigative' or 'defensive' practice. As well as creating a clearer policy framework for the provision of family help and the way it should interact with the wider social care system. The goal should be to set out a vision for a social care system that enables professionals to build partnerships with families and communities, and play both a supportive and protective role.

- **Initiate research into the scale and causes of families' hesitancy to seek help from the social care sector.** We believe that more needs to be understood about what drives hesitancy to ask for help. Action for Children's would be willing to support efforts towards this.

The review should ensure it highlights the crucial building blocks that help children grow up in safe loving homes. In particular, it should ensure that any recommendations align with wider work being done to improve support for disabled children, children with special educational needs and disabilities, and children with mental health problems.

Measuring the Impact: Securing a Long-term Future for Family Help

The Case for Change highlights the lack of data as a key barrier to understanding more about the family help sector. We echo these concerns and urge the Review to make recommendations to improve the way that local authorities collect and share data on family help services. As a minimum, local authorities should be required to collect and report data on the number of active 'cases', referral sources and the reach of the different services they operate, modelled on their existing duty to provide data to the Department for Education on Child in Need assessments and Child Protection Plans. If we cannot say accurately how many children and families are receiving help, what type of help they are receiving, and how it affects their outcomes, there is little prospect of making a convincing argument for continued investment in the sector.

There is also a significant research benefit from collecting this data. Several recent projects have successfully linked up care-record data with education or health data to improve our understanding of how experience of the care system affects a person's life over the longer term.⁷ Collecting better data on family help provision will be a long-term investment in making case for the effectiveness and cost effectiveness of early support, diffusing best practice and understanding more about we government can improve the lives of children and families.

In summary, we think the Review should:

- **Recommend that the Department for Education require local authorities to report statistics on the number of families receiving early help support.** Based on the precedent of the Child in Need and Child Protection statistics, this data should also contain information about referral source. The Department should also work towards collecting data on the types of early help support available within each local authority.

⁷ For example, see <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/project/educational-attainment-of-children-in-need-children-in-care>.



Looked-after children and care leavers

Growing kinship care

In our view, there are two broad issues to consider. Firstly, how to establish a shift in children’s social care practice that sees the exhausting of appropriate community placement options (i.e. kinship and foster care) before residential care is considered, together with a placement market which supports that. Secondly, how to secure investment in support (both practical and financial) for kinship and foster carers, to provide assurance at the outset that it is a viable prospect for potential carers.

With regards to the first point, an increase in the quantity and quality of family help at an early stage could give children’s social care practitioners a better view of the child’s wider network beyond their parents, and create opportunities to consider kinship options (where a case escalates to a placement being sought). Greater provision of family help will also enable children and families to grow their support networks.

With regards to the second point, an improvement in the links out from the children’s social care system to communities (members, groups, and organisations) could improve social care practitioners’ ability to direct potential (and current) kinship carers to community-based support that supplements any support provided or commissioned by the local authority.

More broadly, an improvement in those links could help to normalise interactions between communities and the children’s social care system, and reduce potentially stigmatising associations. That may, in turn, help to boost rates of potential kinship and foster carers offering placements in their homes.

We encourage the Review to:

- Identify ways in which a shift in practice could be established, which sees the exhausting of appropriate community placement options before residential care is considered – including incentivising behaviour through possible statutory reform, or other non-statutory means.
- Recommend investment in practical and financial support for kinship carers, to provide assurance at the outset that it is a viable prospect for potential carers.

The role of residential and secure homes

In our view, there will be a continued need for residential and secure homes in the future, as places of care for children with high and complex needs, who need intensive, specialist support. They are often the only appropriate placement type for those children. Local authorities commonly seek these placements when others (such as foster care) have failed, due to the extent of the child’s needs.

Residential care offers placements to children for whom kinship or foster care is not, or is no longer, appropriate, due to: their high and/or complex needs, and need for therapeutic support; or their inability to live in the family environment of a foster placement, arising from loyalty to their birth family. It also provides planned short-term placements for children, including disabled children, who



need specialist support for a limited period, and who will return home at the end of that time. The residential setting model offers children the benefit of a therapeutic environment with specialist, professional staff.

Secure homes offer placements to children who pose a significant risk to themselves or others, and who are often at risk of criminal or sexual exploitation by members of the community. They commonly have challenging behaviour, due to previous traumatic experiences, which could not be safely or effectively managed in other setting types. The secure setting model offers children the benefits of a safe environment, with a high staff-child ratio, which can support their physical, emotional, and educational development.

However, the decision to place a child in a residential or secure home should only be made after it has been determined that: firstly, the child's needs are such that one of those settings is *required*; and secondly, that the setting *can deliver the support needed* by the child – it must be high-quality, tailored to the individual, and support the child's key relationships (such as those with its birth parents).

Residential and secure homes should be seen as sitting at one end of a spectrum of placement options. Children should be moved down the spectrum when their needs or circumstances deescalate, and it is judged that another placement type could meet their current level of needs. Those moves should be considered *necessary* and *desirable* – they are in children's best interests. Conversely, moves that arise from placement insufficiency challenges should be regarded as *unnecessary* and *undesirable* – they need to be tackled through market reform.

Currently, market challenges are having a detrimental impact on local authorities' ability to place children in the setting type they *require*, and the setting type that can *deliver the support they need*. The market is also often preventing effective use of the spectrum of placement options – children are commonly transitioning from one setting type to another too early, or too late, which frequently means their *current* needs are not being met.

Care placement shortages, which are causing many children to be placed in settings inappropriate for their needs, should not be allowed to overshadow or mask the innate value of residential and secure settings.

As part of efforts to tackle care market issues, a national approach to the provision of secure homes should be considered. The Local Government Association has previously highlighted problems with current arrangements, where a small number of local authorities run the settings (and consequently face the associated budget pressures, financial risk, and safety and wellbeing responsibilities) on behalf of all local authorities.⁸ A national approach could correct this imbalance, and resolve secure placement insufficiency issues.

⁸ Local Government Association (2021), 'Submission to Competition and Markets Authority children's social care market study', available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/60a3ca958fa8f56a3c162ab9/Local_Government_Association-response.pdf



Greater national coordination and support for ensuring the right level and type of supply of residential care should also be considered by the Review. Currently local authorities don't have a clear picture of future demand and are faced with fluctuating local needs and the challenge of providing care for small numbers of children with very high needs. Greater coordination of commissioning residential places would act as an insurance mechanism against fluctuations in local need and against very high costs.

A purely demand-led model of funding, in an inherently changeable system, also creates challenges to creating the sufficiency and flexibility needed to provide the placements children require. Sufficient capacity inevitably means spare capacity. That needs to be reflected in how residential places are funded.

We are playing our part in addressing residential placement challenges, by working with local authorities to establish high-quality homes in areas with low placement supply. The major challenge to us as an organisation has been the capital needed to expand our provision, and the 'demand' led approach to funding which causes challenges in a system where need is inevitably changeable. We can provide further details to the review of this work if it would be useful.

We encourage the Review to:

- State the importance of, and continued need for, residential and secure provision in the future, as part of a reformed care system that meets the needs of all children.
- Encourage practice that sees the placement of children in residential and secure settings only after it has been determined that the child's needs are such that one of those settings is required, and that the setting can deliver the support needed by the child. This could be through new statutory provisions or non-statutory guidance. Data should be collected nationally on the number of children unable to be matched with a suitable placement.
- Identify solutions to current residential market challenges, including consideration of the establishment of a national oversight body. We support the Local Government Association's call for national-level monitoring, to determine 'how many children with which variety of needs are going to be appearing, where, and who has the capacity to [meet those needs]'.⁹
- Recommend a national approach to the provision of secure homes and explore how a national oversight body could coordinate commissioning of residential places, including ensuring value for money.
- Recommend new approaches to funding residential placements, including establishing a permanent capital fund – building on the recent approach taken by the government - for not-for-profit providers to support the development of new residential care placements. As well as how to move away from a purely demand-led funding model to enable local authorities to create greater sufficiency and flexibility in the provision of residential homes.

⁹ Local Government Association and Newgate Research (2021), 'Children's homes', available at: <https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/Childrens%20Homes%20Research%20-%20Newgate.pdf>



Reunification

In our view, improvements in the practice of ‘reunification’ (the return of children in care to their birth parents) are essential to creating a care system that meets children’s needs, and promotes good outcomes. An increase in the rate of successful reunifications across the country could also help to reduce currently rising numbers of children in care.

Reunification is the most common route out of the care system in the UK. In 2019-2020, 29% of children exiting the care system did so to return to their birth parents – that is around 8,500 children.¹⁰ However, it frequently fails – many children subsequently return to care after a short period of time with their birth parents. We believe that this is because too little attention has been paid to this area of practice. An absence of official guidance to support practitioners responsible for preparing for, and overseeing, the process, is resulting in inconsistencies in approaches between local authorities, including the extent and quality of support offered to children and their birth parents. Consequently, we see differing rates of attempted, and successful, reunifications, across the country.

We believe that national guidance is needed to achieve high-quality, consistent practice. Any new guidance should seek to establish a common approach to: assessing the support needs of children and their birth parents, in the lead up to, during, and post-reunification; and the provision of that support, including expectations of its quality and quantity.

Assessing the support needs of the child, their birth parents, and their current carers:

Any national guidance should stipulate that, as the first stage of reunification planning, practitioners undertake an assessment of the child’s characteristics and circumstances (including those relating to their birth parents and current placement) to determine the level and type of reunification support required by all parties, to ensure its success. This is because evidence tells us that there are a range of factors, relating to a child’s characteristics and circumstances, that influence the likelihood of successful reunification.

Research by the University of East Anglia (2020)¹¹ investigated the impact of a range of factors on the chances of stable reunification (defined in the research as the child remaining with their birth parents for at least two years). The study focused on 2,208 looked after children in a large UK local authority who entered the care system between 2009 and 2015. The factors studied included: age of child; family ethnicity; family deprivation; reason for child’s care; legal basis for child entering care; child’s placement type; child’s total number of placements; and length of time spent in care by child.

Key findings included, among others: older children (12-17) were less likely to experience a stable reunification than younger children (under 12); children from more deprived families were less likely to experience a stable reunification than those from less deprived families; children who had had more placements were less likely to experience a stable reunification than those who had had fewer

¹⁰ Department for Education (2020), ‘Children looked after in England including adoptions’, available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions>

¹¹ University of East Anglia (2020), ‘Returning children home from care: what can be learned from local authority data?’, available at: <https://ueaeprints.uea.ac.uk/id/eprint/73492>



placements; and children who had spent a shorter period of time in care were less likely to experience a stable reunification than those who had spent a longer period of time in care.

We believe, therefore, that an assessment of the child's characteristics and circumstances is essential to practitioners' initial preparation for reunification, so that they can plan support to mitigate the effect of any factors that may make successful reunification less likely.

Provision of support, including expectations of its quality and quantity:

Any national guidance should stipulate that support for reunification should begin with the child and its birth parents long before reunification is actively considered by children's social care practitioners.

On a child's entry to care, work should continue with the child and their birth parents, to address the underlying causes of the need for care, and to build and maintain the parent-child relationship. Failure to do so may prevent an attempt at reunification, or may prevent a successful reunification. Evidence tells us that, currently, support for birth parents following a child's removal is often insufficient; this is no doubt affecting rates of successful reunification.

When practitioners begin actively considering reunification, that support should be intensified. Any national guidance should specify the types of reunification support that have proven effective in different conditions (i.e. dependent on the characteristics and circumstances of the child), together with their recommended intensity (i.e. the frequency and duration of delivery).

Finally, any national guidance should stipulate that support is not withdrawn too early post-reunification, but instead withdrawn at the point at which it is deemed by practitioners, the child, and their birth parents, to be no longer needed. It should also be recognised that while children's social care support may not be needed for a time, the child and their birth parents may later face challenges, which require the reengagement of practitioners.

We encourage the Review to:

- Raise the profile of reunification as an important practice area within children's social care, and one that can contribute to safely reducing the number of children in care.
- Recommend the development of national reunification guidance, to achieve high-quality, consistent practice across the country.

Please contact sam.atwell@actionforchildren.org.uk if you have any questions about our response