



Department
for Education

Keeping Children Safe, Helping Families Thrive

Breaking down barriers to opportunity

November 2024



Government of the United Kingdom
Department for Education

Keeping Children Safe, Helping Families Thrive

Breaking down barriers to opportunity

Presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for Education by Command of His Majesty

November 2024

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Foreword by the Secretary of State

Our government is on a mission to give each and every child the very best life chances. We will ensure opportunity, not just for some of our children, but for all of our children.

Children's social care is a top priority because it has the power to transform children's lives. Around five children in every classroom will need support from a social worker at some point during their school years. Despite committed support from social workers, these children are more likely to be persistently absent, less likely to go on to university, and less likely to earn a decent living. Their life chances have been weighed down so heavily by their background.



Now is the time for change. It's my department's job to support families, of all shapes and sizes, and to break the links between background and success. Our vision for children's social care reflects our child-centred approach across government, where children come first and services are designed around the support they need to be safe, to be healthy and to flourish in life.

We need more families to thrive together, while keeping children safe from harm. The foundation of a loving family gives children the security and stability they need to live happy, prosperous lives. But all families encounter challenges. We will prioritise helping families, we will tackle problems before they become crises, and we will build on what we know works well.

Local government spending on children's social care has risen by £4.4 billion over the last decade whilst preventative services have been hollowed out, in part reflecting a greater number of children in care. However, outcomes for children and families remain poor. This paper sets out our first actions to address this. We are focused on working with children and families, supported by multi-agency teams, to deliver clear plans for each child and support to prevent escalating needs.

Our priority is to keep families together. But for some children, at certain times, the safest place to be is in care. There are pockets of excellent practice where care provides safe, loving and supportive homes. But sadly, there are too many homes that fail to meet this standard. A shortage of homes in the right places means children in care are often moved many miles away from their support network and loved ones. And the increasing number of very high-cost placements for children and young people is putting enormous pressure on local authority budgets. We will drive high and rising standards in care. This government will also never tolerate excessive profiteering. In partnership with local government, we will reshape how placements are delivered. As set out in our manifesto, we will strengthen regulation so that children's social care works in the best interest of all children.

This important new statement marks the first steps of this government's journey towards a children's social care system that delivers the best start in life for the children who most need it. It articulates our vision for the system, and sets out our legislative agenda for this new decade of reform. I thank all staff in the sector for your hard work and dedication, as well as the many committed carers across the country. You are all vital partners in this journey.

Children in social care are too often left feeling forgotten, powerless, and invisible. Our opportunity mission is for them. We are breaking down barriers for them, and delivering services that will support all children to succeed, regardless of their background. I was lucky enough to grow up in a family filled with love. That was my springboard to success. Life shouldn't come down to luck. Success belongs to each and every child. I want to build a country where all children grow up with the love, care and support they need to achieve and thrive. The proposals in this statement bring us closer to that goal.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Bridget Phillipson". The script is cursive and fluid, with the first name "Bridget" and the surname "Phillipson" clearly legible.

The Rt Hon Bridget Phillipson MP, Secretary of State for Education and Minister for Women and Equalities

Our vision for the system

Children's social care has the ability to transform lives. At its best, it allows professionals to spend meaningful time helping families, and enables children to thrive and have the best life chances. It allows extended family members the space and resources to actively participate in a child's upbringing, and provides high quality foster carers, adopters and children's home places which give children who cannot remain at home the space they need to recover from childhood trauma, abuse and neglect. Children's social care also has a vital role in supporting the wellbeing of disabled children and their families: from provision of early help and short-term community-based short breaks to longer-term plans of regular care and support.

Over the last three decades we have seen incremental progress, collective learning and improving practice across children's social care. The introduction of [Youth Offending Teams](#), the [Sure Start children's centres](#), and [Every Child Matters](#) kickstarted far greater prioritisation of early intervention and multi-agency working. More recently, we have seen national and local government working to innovate together through the [Strengthening Families, Protecting Children \(SFPC\) programme](#) and the launch of the [Families First for Children \(FFC\) Pathfinder programme](#). Both of these programmes draw together reforms across family help and child protection. These reforms, as well as more than £700 million additional investment since the publication of the [Independent Review of Children's Social Care](#), have enabled many local authorities to safely reduce the number of children in care and improve the support offer available to families. We have also seen significant improvements in the number of local authority children's services rated 'good' or 'outstanding' by Ofsted, with a 20% reduction in services rated 'inadequate' or 'requires improvement' since 2022. However, we must recognise the challenges that remain.

Firstly, far too many children grow up in poverty and in households that struggle to afford the basic necessities which provide a secure home environment. Some families are particularly vulnerable. For example, poverty rates are higher for people living in families that include a disabled adult or child¹. We must build a country where background is no barrier. Children must have the best start in life irrespective of their family's financial situation. They simply cannot achieve and thrive if they are facing poverty that can leave them going to school hungry or living in unheated homes. That is why we have already established a new [Child Poverty Taskforce](#) and are taking a cross-government approach to tackling child poverty, alongside expanding free breakfast clubs in every primary school so all children are able to learn and succeed.

The external landscape has also fundamentally changed. There are several factors which might mean children are unable to grow up in a safe and loving home. An increase of online harms, rising mental health challenges, the prevalence of domestic abuse and addiction, extra familial harms, and an increase in serious youth violence, gang culture and knife crime – to name but a few. These factors will form important strands of our better joined up missions-led approach to government. For example, through the Opportunity and Safer Streets missions, we must ensure a cross-government focus on tackling violence against women, and improve national oversight on multi-agency working to protect children. We must also tackle the inequalities that children encounter too. We recognise there is much more to do.

¹ The [Social Metrics Commission 2023](#) report found that 30% of people in these families are in poverty, compared to 17% of people in families where no one is disabled. Disabled pupils have much lower attainment rates at school than non-disabled pupils and are significantly more likely to be permanently or temporarily excluded, according to the [Equality and Human Rights Commission](#).

Secondly, despite welcome improvements, we still see significant variation in the outcomes and support children and families receive, driven in part by the years of austerity imposed on local government finances, which must be addressed if we are to succeed. It is unacceptable that a child's postcode determines whether they get the support and services they need. And in too many cases unacceptable and unjustified profiteering has made a challenging financial position even worse. It has also contributed to an increasing proportion of funding being spent on statutory and acute services - at the expense of investment in early intervention.

Finally, it must be widely recognised that keeping children safe is everyone's business. From the local taxi drivers who can play a role in helping to identify child trafficking, to the health visitors, A&E staff and local police who help to spot child abuse and forced child labour, to the youth workers that support children's development. Too often this cross-system approach is stymied by poor information sharing and a lack of accountability. Yet history shows effective partnership working enables innovation and prevents barriers to opportunity. [The Care Leaver Covenant](#) is a great example of when private, public and voluntary sectors come together to support opportunities for care leavers and is starting to make a difference. We are building a child-centred approach across government and aim to ensure that, on both a national and local level, the system works for each and every child.

Delivering reform for children

As we enter a new Parliament, the time is right to reset the children's social care system. We are delivering a whole-system and child-centred approach to reform, and this will reset how national government works in collaboration with local government and local partners. All of our actions will be guided by four key reform principles, which are summarised below. At Annex A, we also include an overview of the actions we will take under each pillar.

- Firstly, wherever possible, **children should remain with their families and be safely prevented from entering the care system** in the first place. We are focused on working with the whole family, supported by multi-agency teams, to offer a clear plan and support to prevent escalating needs. We will take the evidence from the [Supporting Families programme](#), the [Strengthening Families, Protecting Children \(SFPC\) programme](#), and lessons so far from the [Families First for Children \(FFC\) Pathfinder programme](#), to further roll out reforms to family help and child protection, working in step with partners. Through future legislation we have an opportunity to embed family group decision making as an offer to all families before care proceedings and ensure more extended family members can play a role in children's lives. We will also take the opportunity, learning from the successes of Youth Offending Teams and other multi-agency approaches, to legislate for new multi-agency child protection teams. This approach will move us closer to creating a decisive child protection system, where partners and agencies work together to share expertise, experience, time and support to keep children safe.
- Second, where children cannot remain at home and it is in their best interests, we should **support children to live with kinship carers or in fostering families, rather than in residential care**. A reduction in reliance on children's homes will support better outcomes for more children. It will reduce spend on costly children's home provision and ensure that there is capacity and better quality of provision for children who need and benefit from residential care. Building on new legislation to embed family group decision making, we will achieve this through rolling out reforms to better support kinship care, recruit and retain more foster carers, provide increased opportunity for short breaks for disabled children, and provide access to support for both kinship and foster carers. Finally, we must also pay particular attention to ensure homes are available to children in the most complex

circumstances, and that we have foster carers who are properly trained and supported to care for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

- Next, it is vital that we **fix the broken care market**. In 2022 the [Competition and Markets Authority](#), and the Independent Review of Children's Social Care, identified that the levels of profit made in the care placement market were above those that would be expected in a well-functioning market. Placements for children in care – foster homes, children's homes and supported accommodation – are, first and foremost, homes for young people to live in – and we must bring a swift end to excessive and exploitative profit making in a sector which supports our most vulnerable children. We will do this through introducing a range of measures, including through legislation, which will improve competition, regulation and commissioning, as well as shine a light on the levels of profit being made and bring greater visibility to the prices local authorities are paying. We will also ensure we are able to take action in the future to cap profits if these measures do not sufficiently improve the functioning of the market and reduce costs that arise from unnecessarily high levels of profit.
- Finally, we need to invest in the **key enablers** which underpin the children's social care system – including the workforce, better data and information sharing and, as mentioned above, to scale and spread evidence-based programmes which have improved children's outcomes. Legislation gives us the opportunity to do more to drive better information sharing in children's social care – including through a new Single Unique Identifier. We will also use legislation to improve the experience and outcomes of children and families by reducing local authority reliance on agency workers in children's social care services. And we will prioritise investment in the recently published [Children's Social Care National Framework](#) – which sets a clear vision for the outcomes we want the whole system to achieve. Whilst taking this action, we will continue to support local authorities through partnership working to improve how they deliver children's social care through our improvement and intervention work.

We are making a long-term commitment to working together better across organisational boundaries, continuing financial investment, and taking the opportunity we have to legislate where necessary to drive reform forwards.

Taking forward new legislation

Legislation must reflect our ambitious outcomes for children, young people and families. To bring forward our vision for reform we will require changes to the law in some areas. In the following chapters we set out where we expect this to be necessary. We expect that the legislative framework for children's social care will need to change further than the plans we have set out here, including to account for the Law Commission's reviews into [legislation for disabled children](#) and [kinship care for children](#). Where we need to change the law further, we are committed to engaging with the sector and those with lived and personal experience of children's social care to discuss this. Below, we set out more details about each of the legislative measures we plan to take forward subject to parliamentary time.

Chapter 1 - legislating to keep families together and children safe, and to remove barriers to opportunity

Summary

- We will help more families to stay together by mandating the offer of family group decision making for every family at the point before it is necessary to initiate care proceedings for a child.
- To keep children safe, we plan to improve the sharing of information across and within agencies by enabling the use of a Single Unique Identifier. To better protect children from harm, we also plan to strengthen the delivery of a local decisive multi-agency child protection model through integrated multi-agency child protection teams, put a new duty on safeguarding partners to ensure education is sufficiently involved in multi-agency safeguarding arrangements, and ensure parents have consent from local authorities to home educate children where there are safeguarding concerns.
- We will remove barriers to opportunity for children and young people in care by extending the corporate parenting duty for children in care to a range of public bodies that provide housing, health, education and employment services.
- We will also extend the duty on local authorities to promote educational outcomes for all children with a social worker through the Virtual School Head role. And, to reduce the risk of homelessness as a barrier to getting on in life, we will provide Staying Close support to care leavers.

Our plans to change the law

Mandating local authorities to offer family group decision-making

Family group decision making (FGDM) is an umbrella term to describe family-led meetings that allow a family network to come together and make a plan in response to concerns about a child's safety and wellbeing². A Family Group Conference (FGC) is a specific model of FGDM which has strong evidence of diverting children from care, as shown by the [findings of the randomised control trial conducted by Foundations – What Works Centre for Children & Families](#). Children whose families were referred for an FGC as part of this randomised control trial were less likely to have had care proceedings issued (59%) compared to those not referred (72%) and were less likely to be in care one year later (36%) compared to those not referred (45%).

² A family network is a group of people close to a child made up of relatives and non-related connected people, such as stepparents, siblings, grandparents or close family friends.

The Independent Review of Children's Social Care reported that too often care proceedings commence without a FGDM meeting having taken place and that in some cases too little attention is paid to the inherent strengths of the child's extended family network and wider community. This can contribute to delay in the family court, which can often be the first place extended family members are made aware there is an issue.

We have seen widespread take up of FGDM by local authorities with most now offering a service to some children and families. However, the evidence from Foundations suggests that strengthening the offer of FGDM further will reduce applications for court proceedings as well as prevent children from entering the care system. In doing so, this will improve outcomes for children and families, as well as create significant savings for local government. Building on the excellent practice already offered by many local authorities, through legislation we will ensure every local authority must offer an FGDM meeting to families at the pre-proceedings stage. It will give parents the legal right to be involved in planning and decision making at this critical point, alongside their family network and with the support of coordinators, social workers and other professionals.

Existing statutory guidance, such as [Working Together to Safeguard Children](#) and the Children's Social Care National Framework, currently encourages local authorities to consider FGDM meetings, such as FGCs, from the point a family has involvement with children's social care and that they should be repeated as necessary. Identifying and involving family networks also ensures that if a child cannot remain in the care of their parents, alternative arrangements, such as [Special Guardianship](#), can be explored within the child's family network as a priority. To ensure that a family-led alternative plan can be considered before the local authority makes an application to the court, the Independent Review of Children's Social Care recommended a new legal entitlement to FGDM.

We acknowledge that there may be barriers for local authorities in implementing FGDM at scale, including financial constraints and challenges around the recruitment or training of staff. Our ambition is that through investment, better shared understanding of best practice and new legislation, every family will have the right to access this support before circumstances escalate, where it is in the best interests of the child. Where this offer is not in the best interests of the child, the local authority will explain why an offer of an FGDM meeting would not be appropriate to the court and to the child and family wherever possible.

To facilitate local authority implementation and support best practice, we plan to update relevant statutory guidance, drawing on the latest evidence on what works. We will also set out any exceptions to this new duty in legislation and statutory guidance.

Improving data sharing and introducing a Single Unique Identifier

Sharing information in a timely way can help identify and address risks to a child's safety and wellbeing and enable better provision of services to support their health and wellbeing. It enables practitioners to make informed decisions and provide timely interventions. For too long poor information sharing has been identified as a contributory factor to serious child safeguarding incidents and the barriers to improving this are well documented, including in reviews following the death of, or serious injury to, a child. The Independent Review of Children's Social Care and [the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel report 'Child Protection in England'](#) highlighted that barriers to information sharing need to be broken down, to improve outcomes for children and families.

Subsequent reports, including from [the Children's Commissioner for England](#), have also highlighted that many agencies, especially those outside the education sector, are not aware of crucial data, such as attendance records, which can provide evidence for the whole picture of a child's wellbeing and health. A lack of effective data sharing at the right points can leave families feeling both unclear about what professionals know, and frustrated at having to repeat the same information multiple times. The knowledge gaps can make it harder for professionals to support families, and make it harder for families to be aware of their entitlements and access the support they need.

Tackling information sharing issues across agencies will be a long-term endeavour. One that is rooted in changing the law and in changing practice. In our manifesto we committed to improve data sharing across services to better support children and families by introducing a Single Unique Identifier. We plan to make two legislative changes to start to deliver on this ambition. The first is to introduce provision to enable the specification of a Single Unique Identifier, and the second is to clarify information must be shared for safeguarding purposes.

The use of a Single Unique Identifier (which has also been referred to in the past as a 'consistent child identifier') has been regularly cited as a potential solution to bring together data on children's interactions with different services³. An identifier has potential to increase confidence that practitioners from different agencies are talking about the same child and increase the ease and possibility of linking data together across datasets. We want appropriate agencies and practitioners to spend less time chasing information and more time acting on the full picture of relevant information about the child. This will enable practitioners to provide the right services at the right time to meet the needs of children and families.

We recognise the tangible impact an identifier could have on improving data sharing and linking, but also accept that there are broader cultural changes that need to be tackled for it to have sufficient impact. Barriers to effective implementation include confusion on when to share information, the need for clear leadership to increase practice confidence in the implementation of data and systems reform, as well as sector capacity and resource. Alongside legislating, we will pilot the implementation of the SUI first, so we can establish what works to resolve these challenges for each sector. We recognise that the new SUI must be delivered proportionately and only where it has impact. Our plan is to put provisions in law at the earliest opportunity to allow us to introduce an SUI nationally at a later point. Once we have the evidence from the delivery of

³ The National Children's Bureau (NCB) has been actively advocating for the implementation of an SUI and the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH) has expressed strong support. During discussions on the Health and Care Act, several parliamentarians, including Baroness Tyler, Baroness Walmsley, Baroness Meacher, Baroness Hollins, and Baroness Finlay, advocated for the introduction of an SUI.

pilots to inform secondary legislation, we will define the number for the SUI (expected to be the NHS number), and who will be required to use it.

Importantly, the SUI will work in tandem with wider reform to systems and processes to fully tackle the recurring issue of information sharing. We are committed to undertaking work to tackle system and process challenges, and will seek to make further changes to optimise the way systems can connect and accurately link records. We will bring the sector and their technology suppliers together to develop and agree the standards which will resolve information flow problems that matter to them.

Alongside this, we plan on tackling the perceived legislative and regulatory misconceptions practitioners tell us they face when sharing information. The Independent Review of Children's Social Care outlined that whilst legislation and guidance allow for information to be shared for the purpose of safeguarding, practitioners perceive it as a barrier and find organisational information sharing agreements confusing⁴. As clearly reflected in the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) [10 step guide to sharing information to safeguard children](#), it is currently lawful to share information without consent in order to safeguard and protect the wellbeing of children. Data protection legislation (the Data Protection Act 2018 (the DPA 2018) and UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR)) does not prevent the sharing of information for the purposes of safeguarding children, when it is necessary, proportionate and justified to do so. However, agencies often only feel confident doing this where there are serious child protection concerns.

User research by the Department for Education, the Home Office and the Department of Health and Social Care published in [Improving Multi-Agency Information Sharing](#) confirmed this. Research found that practitioners were generally confident in sharing information when there was clear evidence of harm. However, where risk was unknown or unclear, practitioners felt much less confident in sharing information given the complex judgements required in making decisions under the public interest test, which can lead to overcaution. To address this, we will introduce a new duty that provides absolute clarity on the legal basis to share information for the purposes of safeguarding children. The new duty will ensure a focus on safeguarding and provide the impetus for culture change around information sharing.

As set out in the Children's Social Care National Framework, our ambition is that practitioners seek, share, and analyse information proactively, that leaders put clear information sharing structures in place, and that those working with children champion careful consideration of how information and data about their lives is shared across organisations, including thinking about how information sharing impacts minority groups. Through these two intended changes, legislation should provide clarity for practitioners on when and how it is appropriate to share information for the purpose of safeguarding children so that this is no longer a blocker for providing targeted, timely and accurate support to families.

⁴ [Independent review of children's social care: final report](#)

Strengthening the role of education within multi-agency safeguarding arrangements

Often, teachers and educators are the ones that spend the most direct time with children, and education leaders can offer valuable insight into trends and concerns at a local level. Schools were the second largest ‘referrer’ of cases into children’s social care after the police in 2023-24, making close to 126,000 referrals nationally⁵. Although education settings are considered relevant agencies in multi-agency safeguarding arrangements, the Independent Review of Children’s Social Care, and the Child Protection in England report recommended that education becomes a statutory safeguarding partner, alongside local authorities, police and integrated care boards. The intent behind these recommendations was to ensure that the contribution and voice of education was included when identifying priorities and support for children and families, as well as education settings taking the ownership to sufficiently engage with safeguarding arrangements as set out in Working Together to Safeguard Children. The review found that although some arrangements have worked hard to bring schools to the table, in too many places the contribution and voice of education is missing. Teachers and educators should have a seat around the table in safeguarding decision-making, and so we will mandate consistent and effective join-up between local authority, police and health services with schools and other education and childcare settings (or providers).

Existing safeguarding partners have the infrastructure in place that allows a single point of accountability for the organisations they represent – they can contribute resource, make decisions, and speak on behalf of their sector. The education sector is not set up in this way and therefore there is not currently an organisation or individual who can take on the role of a safeguarding partner. Our goal is to strengthen the role of education in multi-agency safeguarding arrangements (MASAs) to better protect children from abuse, neglect, and exploitation. We aim to build on existing legislation and recognise that the current system needs to change to ensure education is adequately represented both operationally and strategically.

Legislation needs to ensure consistent and effective join-up between children’s social care, police, and health services with education. The aim of our legislative change is twofold, to ensure that:

- all education settings⁶, including schools, colleges, early years and childcare settings, and alternative provision, are named as relevant agencies by default so that they are automatically included in safeguarding arrangements in a local area; and
- local safeguarding arrangements include representation from education as an agency at both operational and strategic decision-making levels.

To facilitate implementation and support best practice, we plan to update relevant statutory guidance such as Working Together, to set expectations of safeguarding partners and education based on models we know are working in local areas that involve education effectively in their arrangements. We will draw on the evidence of what works from the Families First for Children Pathfinder local areas and extensive work done with local areas on the implementation of statutory guidance. This legislation will enable consistency across all local areas in how education is involved in local safeguarding arrangements so that families have access to more consistent levels of care and support, and children are protected by more effective multi-agency working.

⁵ [Children in need, Reporting year 2024 - Explore education statistics](#)

⁶ Education settings as set out in the Schedule to [The Child Safeguarding Practice Review and Relevant Agency \(England\) Regulations 2018](#)

Strengthening multi-agency child protection

Our ambition is for a child protection system that is decisive and multi-agency with multidisciplinary skills – a system where practitioners have the expertise, experience, time and support to identify actual or likely significant harm quickly and take rapid and effective protective action. We want a child protection system where the rationale for decisions in relation to children is clear, and decisions focus on the needs and best interests of children, involving parents, family networks and others in a transparent and compassionate way.

Evidence shows poor and ineffective multi-agency working is an issue in child protection, when the system has failed to protect children. In addition to information sharing, key problems include: a lack of robust critical thinking and challenge within and between agencies; insufficient specialist skills and capacity; and inadequate multi-agency leadership. The Independent Review of Children's Social Care identified that "health, police, education and other partners must all play a role in child protection to ensure that the needs and risks to a child are fully understood and responded to. This includes sharing critical analysis and challenge across professional boundaries. Poor multi-agency working at child protection is a perennial issue that has been raised in every recent review that has considered child protection, from Laming to Munro and before."

The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel report 'Child Protection in England' most recently concluded that "whilst we have a well-embedded concept of partnership working across agencies, enshrined in statutory guidance, in practice, the key ingredients of effective operational delivery are not hard wired into our current arrangements. Trust, shared values, and identity are crucial behavioural factors in frictionless sharing of information between professionals. The current reliance on quickly pulling together a team from across overstretched agencies to think and act together to protect a child every time child protection processes are triggered is certainly inefficient and often ineffective"⁷. It recommended that multi-agency child protection units be established in every local authority area. It is our intention to legislate for this change.

The units will be integrated teams, staffed with multi-agency, experienced child protection practitioners from agencies working to protect children, including local authorities, police, health, and education settings. Other relevant agencies such as probation services, may also be part of the core team. Led by the local authority, these teams will support the delivery of core child protection statutory functions including investigating child protection concerns, decision-making, planning and overseeing support and protection activity. Integrated multi-agency involvement with specialist child protection skills across agencies is critical for these teams to ensure more children are protected at the right time.

Multi-agency child protection teams, based on the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel's recommendations, have been a key element of the Families First for Children Pathfinders. In the ten pathfinder areas, multi-agency child protection practitioners from the local authority, police, health, education and other relevant agencies are expected to work together in a much more integrated way with overall responsibility for protecting children from harm, alongside social workers with the highest levels of knowledge and skills in child protection work. We know that by working together, agencies are better able to accurately and quickly identify when children are likely to experience, or are experiencing, significant harm and take decisive and skilled action to address this.

⁷ [The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel report 'Child Protection in England'](#)

We therefore intend to create a new legal duty for local authorities to establish multi-agency child protection teams and require other named agencies to be part of this provision. We plan to align commencement of the duty with the findings from the Families First for Children Pathfinder, so we can include specific expectations in regulations to ensure the multi-agency child protection teams are informed by the evaluation of the Pathfinder programme and provide areas with time to prepare. We will also use this time to engage with all sectors that will be part of the multi-agency child protection teams.

We would expect the teams to include dedicated, highly skilled, suitably qualified practitioners from local authority children's social care, police, education, and health. In addition to the core members, local authorities and their partners will want to include other relevant agencies aligned with local demographics, needs, and patterns of harm including extra-familial harm. We intend that MASAs will have strategic oversight of these teams. Teams will report into and inform strategic level safeguarding arrangements and vice versa.

Home education and child protection

The right to home educate is derived from Section 7 of the Education Act 1996, which states that parents have a duty to ensure that their child receives a suitable education either by regular attendance at school or otherwise, i.e. at home. There is agreement that elective home education is not in itself a safeguarding risk⁸. However, regular attendance at school can be a protective factor for children at risk of or experiencing harm in the home – a conclusion drawn by the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel's paper about safeguarding and elective home education.

Parents in England do not currently need consent to home educate, unless the child attends a special school arranged by the local authority. We propose to introduce a new requirement whereby if a child registered at a school is subject to an enquiry under Section 47 of the Children Act 1989, or on a child protection plan, their parent will need local authority consent to home educate that child. If a child in those categories is already being home educated, the Local Authority will have a power to require them to attend school. This will help ensure further help and protection for children suffering or likely to suffer significant harm. This will be further aided by our plans to enable local authorities to consider the home and any other learning environment when determining whether home education is suitable. We are also planning to create a duty on local authorities to have and maintain Children Not in School registers. These measures will create registers of all children not in school in every local authority in England, as well as a duty on local authorities to provide support to families, where it is requested by the parent.

⁸ [Safeguarding children in elective home education](#)

Extending corporate parenting responsibilities

‘Corporate Parenting’ is the term used to describe the local authority’s role in caring for and supporting children in care and care leavers, in recognition that these children and young people may not have the family support networks that others rely on throughout their life. The Children and Social Work Act (2017) introduced a requirement on local authorities to ‘have regard to’ a set of corporate parenting principles when exercising functions in relation to children in care and care leavers. This has resulted in numerous and significant improvements to local authorities’ local offers, including Council Tax exemptions, free access to leisure services and help with deposits/rent guarantor schemes. However, while local authorities play a crucial role in delivering services for children in care and care leavers, they do not have all the levers at their disposal to tackle barriers to opportunity to ensure that these children and young people can thrive.

We plan to extend corporate parenting responsibilities to government departments and relevant public bodies to create a culture change in which we realise our shared ambition to support children in care and care leavers. In this role, all “corporate parents” can help to break down barriers to good outcomes for care experienced children and young people in different ways, for example, by: ensuring that relevant policies and services that impact on children in care and care leavers’ lives take account of their additional needs and circumstances; taking steps to reduce the stigma or discrimination they face; or providing additional support as a parent or family member might. The examples below illustrate how these corporate parents can create a culture in which they recognise and embrace the role they play in improving the lives of some of the country’s most vulnerable children and young people.

These corporate parenting proposals will not change the current legal responsibilities on local authorities to accommodate and care for looked after children, nor the existing requirement for local authorities to support care leavers to transition from care to independent living. These responsibilities are set out in the Children Act 1989.

Examples of how corporate parents could meet their corporate parenting responsibilities

- Taking account of the challenges that care-experienced children and young people face when designing and delivering services that impact on them.
- Taking appropriate steps to ensure that children in care and care leavers can gain equal access to and benefit from the services and support they provide.
- Raising awareness of children in care and care leavers’ needs and circumstances among those who provide support and services to them.
- Providing opportunities (including employment, work experience and training opportunities for care leavers) that would support better outcomes for children in care and care leavers.
- Providing clear and transparent information on services they provide and on any specific rights and entitlements.

Government departments and relevant public bodies will be named as corporate parents and will be subject to the proposed corporate parenting responsibilities, in so far as it is consistent with their existing functions and to the extent that it is reasonably practicable for them to do so.

Proposed corporate parents

The list of corporate parents will be named in legislation, following agreement from other government departments. We expect named government departments to produce three-year plans and reports to set out how they are supporting children in care and care leavers, and a government-wide overview report will be produced by the DfE every three years to provide a summary of actions taken and progress made across all corporate parents.

Promoting educational outcomes for children with a social worker – through Virtual School Heads

The role of the Virtual School Head was created to champion the education of all children and young people in care within a local authority and to address the considerably lower educational outcomes of children in care. All local authorities have a statutory duty to promote the educational achievement of children in their care and are required to appoint an officer, known as the Virtual School Head, to ensure this duty is discharged.

The Virtual School Head plays a key part in the local authority's role as corporate parent for children and young people in care, acting as the education advocate that parents are for their own children. The Virtual School Head is the lead officer responsible for ensuring that arrangements are in place to improve the educational outcomes of the authority's looked after children, including those placed out of authority, and for championing their progress. Virtual School Heads use their expertise to support these children and young people to overcome barriers to attendance and attainment.

The role of the Virtual School Head has had considerable impact since introduction – galvanising the care and education systems to work together to improve educational outcomes. As a result of their intervention, children in care for 12 months or more now have some of the lowest rates of absenteeism of all children (see Figure 1, below) and of permanent exclusions. This cohort also makes better progress at both Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 4 in comparison with other children in need, and in stark contrast to children on child protection plans. While it is overwhelmingly positive to see children in care succeeding, we want to see the same for all children with a social worker.

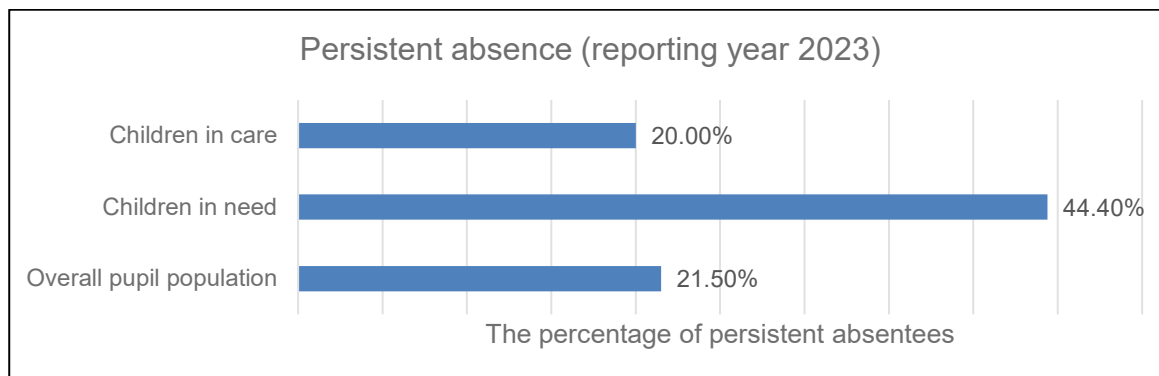


Figure 1 - A chart setting out the percentage of persistent absence for children in care, children in need, and the overall pupil population. Persistent absence in the reporting year 2023 was 20% for children in care, 44% for children in need and 21.5% for the overall pupil population. Note: this chart also relates to children in care 12 months plus to this reporting period too.

That is why the role was extended in 2018 to champion the education of previously looked after children. It was extended again in 2021, on a non-statutory basis to support children on child in need and child protection plans, following a key recommendation from the [Review of Children in Need](#), published in 2019. This review highlighted for the first time that 1.6 million children needed a social worker between 2012/13 and 2017/18, equivalent to 1 in 10 children. It found that these children had worse educational outcomes than their peers, and that poorer outcomes persist even after social care involvement has ended. We believe that background should be no barrier to education, which is why we expect to make two legislative changes, including: to extend the role again to represent children in kinship families, and to place a new statutory duty on local authorities to promote the achievement of all the cohorts of children represented by the Virtual School Head.

We know that children who grow up in kinship care typically have better outcomes than children who grow up in other types of non-parental care. However, their outcomes still fall behind children with no social worker involvement. We want to act quickly to go further to improve the attainment of these children. As part of our approach to championing support for kinship families, as of September 2024 the role of the Virtual School Head has been extended even further to include children in kinship arrangements.

We also plan to change the law to place a statutory duty on local authorities to promote the educational achievement of children on child in need plans, child protection plans and in kinship arrangements. This legislative change will mean that local authorities will have a duty to appoint an officer of the local authority who is responsible for promoting the educational achievement of these children. In practice, we expect this role will be undertaken by the Virtual School Head.

This legislative measure will bring consistency to the deployment of the role of Virtual School Heads nationally, and will mean that all these cohorts of children will receive consistent support no matter which local authority they live in. Virtual School Heads will champion attendance, attainment and progress and will ensure that children with a social worker and those in kinship care are in school, safe and are learning. Education provides safety and stability for these children and provides support and relieves pressures on families often facing multiple challenges in life. We will continue to collect data on the role to inform our understanding of what helps Virtual School Heads to be most effective in supporting children with a social worker and children in kinship arrangements. In time, we hope to see similar evidence of progress for these cohorts as we have seen with children and young people in care.

We will also consider whether the extensions to the role of the Virtual School Head should include a requirement to support all children leaving custody. This is a small group of children that faces significant barriers to education, including on their release from custody, but at present only those with care status benefit from the expert support and championing of the Virtual School Head.

Providing Staying Close support to care leavers

A secure and stable home gives young people the foundation they need to get on in life. All children and young people deserve the security of a safe home, and support to thrive as they move into adulthood. Nationally, we see young people often stay at home with their parents until their mid to late twenties⁹. When young people do make the step into independent accommodation, where they can, parents and families often act to support their children during this transitional phase, by providing pastoral as well as financial help, whether that's help with housing deposits, purchasing white goods or supporting with budgeting and bill management. We have heard that many care experienced young people are not getting this continuity of support, particularly from age 18 when they leave care to live more independently.

Expert reviews have shown that many care leavers face barriers to securing and maintaining affordable housing. An unacceptable number of young people end up in crisis and experiencing homelessness shortly after leaving care. Care leavers are overrepresented amongst those sleeping rough. Combined Homelessness and Information Network (CHAIN) data 2020 shows that 11% of all rough sleepers aged 25 and under in London are care leavers. We must tackle this to secure a better future for these young people.

That is why, alongside other cross-government work to review and remove barriers to accessing housing for the most vulnerable groups, we intend to legislate to ensure all local authorities consider whether each former relevant child (up to age 25) in their area requires a package of support known as 'Staying Close support' and if their welfare requires it, provide that support. Staying Close support could include the support to find and maintain suitable accommodation/move-on accommodation for young people in residential or similar care placements, alongside a package of practical and emotional support from someone who they know and trust, just as a family would during this transitional time. Importantly, all the support and care given under Staying Close should be tailored to the needs of the young person, to help develop their confidence and skills for independent living, and for their emotional health and wellbeing.

Staying Close was first introduced as a pilot in 2018, working in collaboration with the third sector. Evaluation of the initial pilots showed Staying Close found promising evidence the programme can support better outcomes for care leavers. The evaluations found that in the pilot areas there were clear improvements in outcomes including: a 20% improvement in mental health outcomes, a 13% reduction in the number of young people who were NEET and a 21% reduction in anti-social behaviour. The independent evaluations also found that Staying Close supported young people to develop and build the skills needed to prepare for independent living. Meanwhile, feedback showed that young people's life skills had improved after six months of participating in the project. There was also evidence that young people felt happier in themselves, had better stability in their accommodation (most had lived in their house-share for six months or more) and there was increased participation in activities, whether education, employment or getting involved with other activities in the project. The Centre for Homelessness Impact (CHI) is currently undertaking an evaluation to further assess Staying Close's impact and is due to report in early 2025.

⁹ [Milestones: journeying through modern life - Office for National Statistics](#)

Since 2018, the Staying Close provision has expanded. The programme is now run in 47 local authorities and by the three original charities. We want to go further and widen its impact, so we intend to legislate so all local authorities consider whether each former relevant child (up to age 25) in their area requires a package of support known as 'Staying Close support' and if their welfare requires it, provide that support. It is our intention that this remains a broad framework of support, so that local authorities can consider care leavers' needs and views and ensure their choices are central to the decision-making process. We recognise that local authorities will need time to establish the Staying Close support programme within their local areas, and so we propose that the provisions will come into effect three years after legislation is made. There will be barriers to overcome to roll out the programme nationally, including to ensure there is sufficient staffing to support delivery. That is why during these 3 years we will support local authorities to set up the programme in their area, with both practical and financial support, including through the networks we have with current partners.

Chapter 2 - legislating to make the care system child-centred, and to tackle profiteering

Summary

- Some children need their local authority to step in and provide another form of care because it is in their best interests. When residential care is needed it should be a positive experience for children in care and give them the best start in life. We need to make sure those providing care are held to account for the quality of the homes they provide to make this vision a reality. This chapter sets out how we will boost the number of good quality homes, both through legislative and non-legislative changes, so children receive the homes they deserve.
- It needs to be easier to open more good quality homes where they are most needed to enable children to maintain relationships close to their communities. We are already investing in children's homes, including secure provision, but we want to go much further to remove barriers to creating new high-quality provision in the right places. We will break down planning permission and location assessment barriers, to establish new homes in areas where they are most needed. We will diversify the types of providers in the placements market by encouraging non-profit providers back to the market. And we will make sure the provision being built matches what the evidence tells us about the needs of children. Namely, there is a gap in provision for children who are deprived of their liberty, and so we will amend legislation to provide a statutory framework to place children in a new type of accommodation.
- However, it's not only about the volume of homes in the country. We also need to make sure there is the right level of accountability for the quality of homes children grow up in and ensure they are regulated and inspected. We are working with Ofsted as they look to update the [Social Care Common Inspection Framework](#). We are also working with Ofsted and CQC in response to '[Safeguarding children with disabilities and complex health needs in residential settings](#)'.
- We want to raise the standards and professionalism of staff and managers in children's homes. As announced in the Ofsted Big Listen response, we will work with Ofsted to improve the re-registration process when a manager moves to a different children's home, and to make sure expectations on providers are clear and unambiguous.
- To ensure the right quality of homes we need to address the rising number of homes that are unregistered and operating unlawfully, as well as ensure group level accountability for provider groups that provide multiple homes. Unregistered homes are out of sight to Ofsted, and so we have no visibility of the level of care and support provided to children living in these homes. We want to give Ofsted greater powers to tackle persistent use of unregistered provision by giving them the power to issue civil penalties against providers of unregistered settings.

Our plans for reform, and to change the law

Making it easier to open the right kinds of homes which meet children's needs

The planning process, reforming registration and location assessments

We recognise that planning permissions and the need to register a children's home can be challenging to overcome when establishing new residential provision where it is needed. That is why we will work with Ofsted to consider a fast-track route for the registration of selected new children's homes, ensuring that the type of providers we are encouraging back into the market – as set out below – can establish new homes more quickly where they meet the entry criteria and checks specified by Ofsted.

Alongside this, in partnership with the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) we are looking at options to reform the planning process to enable providers to more easily set up homes where they are most needed. MHCLG has recently consulted on changes to the National Planning Policy Framework to make it explicitly clear that local planning authorities must consider the need for children's homes as one of the types of specialist housing in their areas. We will look to go further and work with MHCLG to consider potential legislative options or further changes to support the delivery of small children's homes. Any planning changes taken forward will be coupled with the strengthened location assessment helping to ensure the right homes are provided in the right places.

Additionally, according to Ofsted, 25% of all children's homes are located in the North West of England, compared to 6% in London, 7% in the South West of England, and 8% in the East of England. This regional imbalance of homes means that there are not enough homes to meet local need. As a result, some children are – contrary to their care plan and their overall wellbeing – placed away from their home which breaks vital relationships with family, friends, education, and places they know. That is why, as part of Ofsted's registration assessment for new provision, we are going to strengthen the location assessment¹⁰ by including a requirement for an application to register a children's home be accompanied by an endorsement from the relevant children's services team that they have determined that there is a local need for the proposed children's home. This will give local authorities a greater say on the type and quantity of provision they need in their area, and will allow Ofsted to refuse registration where provision is deemed not needed.

Making the best use of existing homes

It's important that where we have registered homes, we are able to make the best use of them. Our workforce census in 2023 showed that the average number of places in children's homes was 4.2 and that almost 1 in every 4 places were unoccupied. For many homes, this might be a temporary vacancy (whilst they are waiting for a child referral), a deliberate decision so that they have capacity to accommodate a child or young person at short notice, or space is needed to maintain stability in the home so that the needs of children can be met. For example, a child's behavioural or mental health needs, may need fewer children and young people to be living in the home at the same time. Children must live in a home that is appropriate for them and can meet their specific needs, and not just somewhere that has a space. The Registered Manager of the home is

¹⁰ As set out in guidance from Ofsted ([Introduction to children's homes](#)) - a location assessment must show the steps taken to make sure that the home is needed locally, is in the right place and is safe, and promotes positive opportunities for children.

accountable for ensuring the safety of all the children and young people living there and making the decision to accept a child into the home.

However, our workforce census also showed the stark challenges around recruitment and retention in children's homes; 28% of homes who responded cited the reason for unoccupied beds was insufficient staff due to recruitment and retention issues. There are also wider challenges such as adequate provision of community and multidisciplinary services which residential homes rely on. We will continue to support local authorities to meet their sufficiency duty through a programme of capital investment to maintain existing capacity and expand provision in both secure and open children's homes.

Diversifying the market and managing new entrants to the market

The overwhelming majority of children's placements are provided by private sector providers. The growing prevalence of private providers, coupled with an overall shortage of appropriate places, means that local authorities are in many cases being charged excessive amounts. We will explore options to rebalance the market by encouraging new providers, for example, charities and voluntary sector providers and ethical investors, and by reducing barriers to creating and maintaining affordable provision.

We recognise that a major barrier to establishing new residential provision is the initial set-up cost. To encourage non-profit providers back into the market, national government will act as an enabler. We will work with providers, investors, and the sector at large to support them with innovative funding mechanisms – for example, social financing models like social outcomes partnerships – to break down barriers to setting up new residential care. As set out above, we will continue to support local authorities to meet their sufficiency duty through a programme of capital investment to maintain existing capacity and expand provision in both secure and open children's homes. In the Autumn Budget 2024 we announced £90m for 2025/26 which includes a multi-million-pound package of funding to create 200 additional open children's homes beds. This will provide high quality, safe homes for some of our most vulnerable children, including those who may need to be deprived of their liberty. This funding was secured to help tackle the challenges in supporting children with the most complex needs, and we expect the extra capacity will reduce local government reliance on costly emergency provision and improve outcomes for children by providing them with more suitable placements.

We want new provision to be established by providers who are motivated to deliver high quality outcomes for children in care in a financially sustainable manner. Therefore, we will explore introducing a requirement that any new provider wishing to enter the market must be owned and domiciled in the UK, including corporate owners and majority shareholders. In addition to working with MHCLG and others on reforming the planning and location assessment processes, we will also work in partnership with Ofsted, and other stakeholders where appropriate, to work out the practicalities of managing new entrants to the market and the requisite changes to secondary legislation that this will require.

Introducing a community-based approach to provision for children that can be deprived of their liberty

There is a gap in provision for children deprived of their liberty, due to challenging behaviour and complex mental health needs, often linked to trauma. This can result in children being placed in unregistered or otherwise unsuitable homes. In recent years, we have seen a steep rise in the number of children deprived of their liberty under the inherent jurisdiction of the High Court. We have commissioned research to build understanding for this cohort, including mapping the child's journey, and in the meantime we are acting in recognition that these children are some of the most vulnerable in our society and we must do all that we can to keep them safe and help them get on

well in life. We want new forms of provision to address the rising need for suitable homes and intend to change the legislation so that it supports this new type of provision.

To facilitate the use of such new provision, we will amend primary legislation to provide a statutory framework for LAs seeking to place children in a new type of accommodation, where they may be deprived of their liberty, but where the accommodation is not explicitly designed according to the same design specification as current Secure Children's Homes. For some children, and for a limited period, accommodation under the Secure Children's Home model will be most suitable. Other children would best be supported in provision that is able to respond more flexibly to their changing and fluctuating needs (i.e. in provision that can reduce restrictions at times when it is safe for the child), as well as provide the crucial therapeutic care and, when necessary, restriction. This new legislation will ensure that, where a secure children's home cannot meet a child's needs, there are clear criteria for when children may need to be deprived of liberty and mandatory review points to ensure that no child is deprived of liberty for longer than is required to keep them safe.

The changes to legislation are only one part of a significant programme of work to help ensure the wider system is set up to provide these children with the right place to live, which offers the right level of care, and that can truly meet their needs and keep them safe. DfE is working with NHS England, as well as with partners across national and local government, to support social care and health partners to commission joint care across sectors, which delivers integrated, consistent, and collaborative practice for these children and young people.

Drawing on the best evidence, including the voice of children, input from professionals and commissioned research, we will, in collaboration with NHS England, pilot a new, community-based approach to pathways and provision which provides treatment and care, bringing in professionals from children's social care, health, justice and education. This will enable the system to deliver specialist care and accommodation for children who have complex needs, which has the potential to reduce both local authority reliance on costly unregistered placements and immediate and lifetime costs to the health and justice systems.

The Office of the Children's Commissioner has recently published a report, commissioned by the Department for Education, which sets out the views and experiences of children who have been deprived of their liberty, their parents and the professionals that support them. We have also recently commissioned independent research on how the system works, its current impacts and how we could do things differently to achieve better outcomes for children and young people. We plan to publish this research in summer 2025. We will draw on these reports to support the development and testing of evidence-based models of safe, therapeutic care that delivers integrated, consistent, and collaborative practices for these children and young people. In addition, we will issue further guidance and resources that are informed by evidence, existing good practice, and, importantly, by what children, young people and their parents and carers say they want and would find helpful.

We will work directly with the South East Regional Care Co-operative to test an integrated assessment, commissioning and delivery model, including input from health, justice and children's social care professionals, and evaluate the effectiveness of the approach.

Improving accountability for the quality of homes

Strengthening Ofsted's enforcement powers

Children in residential settings are some of the most vulnerable in the country and need high quality care and support that they can trust to be in their best interests, and meet their needs. This is why it is a legal requirement for children's homes to register with Ofsted; it means the managers are checked, the homes children live in can be inspected to ensure they are suitable and compliant with the regulations, children are safe, and where there are failings, those responsible can be held to account.

Despite it being a local authority's duty to ensure that they have sufficient, registered places for children to live, local authorities' reliance on private providers means they have a limited ability to shape their local market. The lack of appropriate and affordable homes in the right places for children means that we are seeing a worrying trend in the rise of the use of unregistered provision – most notably in children's homes and supported accommodation, but Ofsted have also seen it in independent fostering agencies and residential family centres. Often these settings are wholly inappropriate places for vulnerable children to live in, and sometimes children are living there for extended periods of time. In 2023-24 Ofsted opened cases on 1,109 potentially unregistered settings and found that 887 (87%) should have been registered (compared to 370 in 2022-23). We suspect there are more unregistered settings operating than Ofsted have received intelligence about, but at a minimum this shows that nearly 1000 children were placed in unregistered settings in 2023/24 alone.

We must work with local authorities to ensure that there are the right homes, in the right places for children, and that the registration system works to protect children wherever they need to live. This is why we are supporting local authorities to meet their sufficiency duty by investing in new placements and opening up to 560 additional beds by March 2029. Where local authorities are using unregistered places, they tell us it is because they cannot find a suitable place in registered provision to meet the child's needs. We strongly believe in the principle that any setting accommodating children in care should always seek to register with Ofsted – if new provision has been stood up very quickly, it should be registered as soon as practicable. Ofsted will work with settings through the registration process, providing advice where needed, and we are working with them to expand their existing priority application process. Our wider reforms across children's social care seek to divert children away from residential care where their needs can be better met in family environments – we're recruiting new foster carers, and investing in kinship and family help so that children can stay with their families and receive more support in the community.

However, we must also act against those who are persistently seeking to avoid being held to account for the support and care, or lack of, that they provide to children, who can charge excessive amounts to local authorities who don't have sufficient places, and who knowingly repeat this behaviour multiple times, and across the whole country. Whilst Ofsted already has some enforcement powers to tackle unregistered settings and agencies, it is clear that Ofsted needs alternative options. We are therefore strengthening Ofsted's enforcement powers so they can issue civil penalties by way of a monetary fine against providers of unregistered settings. These are an alternative to criminal prosecution and will allow Ofsted to act at pace to tackle more unregistered settings, in a proportionate way (i.e. a single offence may warrant a financial penalty, whilst a repeat, or very serious offence may warrant prosecution). The Care Standards Act 2000 contains further offence provisions for which Ofsted can prosecute¹¹ – these may be subject to the new civil sanctions regime. This is logical and brings consistency to Ofsted's enforcement powers.

¹¹ [Care Standards Act 2000, Section 22A, 24-28 and 29](#)

Improving the quality of placements through a provider oversight scheme

The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel published its [Phase 1](#) and [Phase 2](#) reports on safeguarding children with disabilities and complex health needs in residential settings, in response to the case of unacceptable abuse of the children living in homes managed by the Hesley Group. The findings highlighted that systemic and organisational weakness can cause the conditions for harm¹². We plan to legislate to ensure these conditions are not created, by increasing the transparency of governance arrangements of independent provider groups that own multiple children's homes and other children's social care provision, and by giving Ofsted stronger powers to hold these providers to account. We want to see cases of abuse eradicated, and where quality issues are found, for the legislation to enable Ofsted to act quickly and decisively to prevent harm. Such changes will mean that Ofsted will be better equipped to act in instances where poor quality of care exists across settings.

Ofsted's current registration and enforcement powers are limited to individual registered providers, such as the provider of an individual children's home. Ofsted's current inspection framework, the [Social Care Common Inspection Framework](#) (SCCIF), applies to inspections of individual homes and focuses on the care and experience of the child¹³. A poor inspection result can lead to enforcement actions. The reach of current inspections is limited when quality issues are identified that exist across multiple settings owned by the same provider group. Where there is weakness in organisational structures, under the current framework Ofsted must inspect each individual setting and it cannot act at scale to improve the quality of provision and keep children safe. We want to make changes to the framework to empower Ofsted to be able to drive improvements to the quality of care for children more quickly.

It is important that we update the legislative framework to reflect the current placements market. Private provision has increased – 83% of children's homes are now privately owned – many of which are owned by larger provider groups who run multiple homes and influence decisions relating to the care of many children. Some groups own over 100 children's homes. Currently, Ofsted cannot hold these provider groups to account for any weaknesses across their organisation, despite their overarching influence in the care of children, both in individual homes and across the wider sector. We will change the regulatory framework so that where there are quality issues across several settings owned by the same provider group, Ofsted can hold provider groups to account for these.

Ofsted will be able to request an improvement action plan in which provider groups will be required to detail the actions that they will take to resolve any identified issues. Ofsted will have the ability to enforce the development of the improvement action plan, and the measures detailed within it. This should help to resolve issues quickly at a higher level in the organisation, before they spread or escalate.

¹² [Safeguarding children with disabilities and complex health needs in residential settings: phase 2 report](#) (page 86)

¹³ [The Social Care Common Inspection Framework \(SCCIF\)](#) provides a common approach to inspecting various social care services in England.

Government will also strengthen Ofsted's enforcement powers to hold provider groups to account where necessary. The measures will be proportionate, and it is expected that they will only be used when absolutely necessary. Enforcement could include a civil penalty by way of a monetary fine or Ofsted being able to restrict growth of the provider group, by refusing further registrations based on non-compliance of provider oversight requirements or place applications on hold where actions to resolve concerns are not fully implemented by the provider group. Once issues are resolved, registration of additional homes will be allowed.

Ensuring inspection reflects the makeup of the children's homes market

Working with Ofsted as they change their inspection frameworks

Ofsted have responsibility for inspection in children's social care through their framework for [inspecting local authority children's services](#) (ILACS) and their [Social Care Common Inspection Framework](#) (SCCIF). Understanding the effectiveness of the services that local authorities provide, and the quality of the provision for children is critical for driving high and rising standards.

As we move forward with our reform activity, we will continue to work with Ofsted to rebalance inspection and regulation to align with the direction of children's social care reform and the legislative measures set out in this statement. This includes working with Ofsted in response to the Big Listen to ensure inspection is a constructive force in the sector that champions good practice, empowers leaders and practitioners, and drives improved outcomes. Inspection needs to continue to focus on the areas that matter most to children and young people and reflect the outcomes that are included in the National Framework.

Improving the Ofsted registration process for children's homes managers and registered managers of other establishments and agencies

We are committed to ensuring high quality care for children living in residential children's homes. We know that the manager of a children's home plays a crucial leadership role in delivering this care and want to support people working in these roles. We are aware that the current process when a registered manager moves to a different children's home is costly and time-consuming. It creates a burden on people working within this profession. In their [recent report](#), the Competition and Markets Authority noted the registration process made opening new provision slow and costly, which can add delays to opening new provision.

We will work with Ofsted to improve the re-registration process when a manager moves to a different children's home, to reduce the administrative burden on the individual manager, provider and Ofsted. This will aim to accelerate the process, so managers can take up new positions more efficiently and providers can deploy managers to locations where they are needed.

Ensuring expectations for residential care are clear and unambiguous

We know that in children's homes and supported accommodation, there are examples of skilled and passionate staff, who go above and beyond for the children and young people they work with. We believe that through the design of national policy there needs to be a greater focus on factors which influence the experience of children in residential care, ensuring that for those who need it, residential care is a place where all children thrive. This includes how we ensure that everyone is ambitious and hold high standards for the children they care for and support, how providers respond to the needs of different groups of children, how effectively Ofsted and CQC can both assess and act in response to areas of concern and celebrate best practice, and how the voices of children in care are heard more loudly. We will engage with partners in the sector and those with lived experience to shape this programme of work alongside our proposals to legislate to make sure our work meets the diverse and changing needs of children in care, paying particular attention to how a child's identity shapes their experience of care.

Improving local authorities' ability to shape the market

Shaping the market through Regional Care Cooperatives

Building on recommendations by the Competition and Markets Authority, and the Independent Review of Children's Social Care, the government will enable local authorities to set up Regional Care Co-operatives (RCCs) to plan and commission children's social care places regionally. We are currently working with two RCC pathfinder areas, in Greater Manchester and the South East, to support the delivery of this regional approach under current legislation. These pathfinders have been working closely with the Integrated Care Boards, youth justice partners, and others in their area to deliver the following set of minimum requirements:

- Carrying out regional data analysis and forecasting future needs of homes for children in care, in partnership with health and justice.
- Developing and publishing a regional sufficiency strategy setting out current provision and action to fill gaps.
- Market shaping, working as one customer with providers to address local needs, improve value for money and commission the care places required from external providers.
- Recruiting foster carers through a regional recruitment support hub and improving the support offer to both new and existing foster carers.
- Developing new regional provision where gaps have been identified. The Department is providing up to £5m capital funding per pathfinder to support this, and RCC members are also pooling sums of their own funding alongside this.
- Creating the leadership and governance arrangements necessary to allow the RCC to make swift decisions and invest sums of money over the long term.

We expect RCCs to gain economies of scale and harness the collective buying power of individual local authorities. They will facilitate greater collaboration with relevant partners (including health and justice) to improve services for children in care. Furthermore, RCCs will develop expertise in areas such as data analysis and forecasting, as well as targeted marketing, training, and support for foster carers. Working collectively with improved specialist capacities should allow for greater innovation so that local areas are better able to deliver services for children in care. For example, both pathfinders are trialling measures to boost the regional workforce for children's homes in response to local and regional recruitment challenges.

We plan to legislate to enable groups of local authorities to set up RCCs, encouraging them to do so in partnership with health and justice. The legislation will learn from the experience to date of setting up the two pathfinders. It will set out the RCC functions, which will be similar to the requirements for the pathfinders to deliver transformational change to the care system. This will be the minimum required of the RCC but local authorities are free to decide if they want the RCC to take on a greater range of functions. Our plan is that the legislation will create an RCC function to support local authorities to meet their statutory duties to accommodate looked after children¹⁴ and ensure sufficient accommodation for looked after children¹⁵. It will give government the power to direct local authorities to establish an RCC if necessary, for example in the case of failure of local authorities to perform their own statutory functions effectively, and to intervene if an RCC is not delivering services to a required standard. The legislation will also give Ofsted (and other inspectorates) the power to inspect RCCs. We know that any new inspection programmes will need careful consideration in partnership with the sector once RCCs have become established.

Alongside the RCCs programme, we are also working with local areas to improve their local and regional capacity for commissioning, forecasting, and market shaping activities. This programme will support areas in forecasting their future placement needs more accurately, and better understand the overall number of children likely to come into the care system and the different types of placements they might need. The programme is working primarily with RCC pathfinders in the first instance to spread identified good practice and put RCCs on a firm footing to be as effective as possible in these areas of practice. The programme will also support local authorities more widely through seminars and online learning materials so all areas can improve their ways of working.

Regulating the placements market to ensure financial stability and tackle profiteering

Bringing transparency to the costs of homes

We want to ensure that local authorities are supported to better understand, shape and commission placements that suit the needs of children in their area and bring transparency to the cost of placements. Currently, there is a gap in the data around the underlying costs of different types of children's social care provision. It is difficult to access the data that individual local authorities hold on the prices paid for private placements and their cost breakdown, and there is often only piecemeal sharing of this data across some local authority groupings¹⁶.

These gaps create challenges for assessing whether prevailing price levels in the sector are appropriate. Local authorities need more shared cost information to inform their commissioning practices and enable them to negotiate effectively with providers to secure the best placement for children at the lowest possible cost. We will engage with the sector to bring about greater cost and price transparency which will aid local authorities in challenging profiteering providers, as well as enabling greater central government oversight of the placements market.

¹⁴ [Section 22A of the Children Act 1989](#) states that when a child is in the care of a local authority, it is their duty to provide the child with accommodation.

¹⁵ [Section 22G of the Children Act 1989](#) places a general duty on local authorities to ensure there is enough accommodation in the local area to meet the needs of children that it looks after.

¹⁶ [Competition and Markets Authority Final Report](#)

Introducing a financial oversight scheme to ensure financial stability

To promote the stability of placements, we will introduce a new financial oversight scheme led by the Department for Education. The scheme will increase financial and corporate transparency among the most 'difficult to replace' providers, allow for an accurate, real-time assessment of financial risk, and provide advance warning to local authorities of likely provider financial failure, so they can take swift action and minimise disruption to children.

Currently, local authorities have no way of knowing if a provider of placements for children is at risk of failing financially. If a large or 'difficult to replace' provider did fail, it could lead to them closing their provision suddenly, causing huge disruption to children who could lose their home. This could leave local authorities having to find appropriate placements for a significant number of children at very short notice, making it challenging to meet their statutory duties. In addition to this, the ownership structures of some of the biggest companies that provide placements for children and young people in care can often be complex and opaque. We also know that some providers, especially those owned by private equity, can carry very high levels of debt¹⁷. The current system leaves open the risk of provider financial difficulty and the likelihood of business failure going undetected.

To participate in this market, we believe providers and their owners must be more accountable for how their business impacts the lives of the vulnerable children who live in their provision or who access fostering agency services. In their [study into the children's social care market](#), the CMA recommended that government create a proportionate statutory financial oversight scheme that could operate in a similar way to the Care Quality Commission's (CQC) current market oversight role. As a result of the Southern Cross failure in the adult social care sector in 2011, which led to the closure of care homes at very short notice (at its peak, Southern Cross owned or operated over 700 care homes across the UK), CQC's Market Oversight Scheme was set up under the Care Act 2014 to assess the financial sustainability of potentially difficult to replace adult social care providers. If a provider within the Scheme is considered likely to cease to provide a service because of business failure, the CQC will notify the relevant local authorities. This allows action to be taken by local authorities to ensure adults who use these services continue to have their care needs met. CQC's Market Oversight Scheme's purpose is not to prevent business failure, nor does it have a role in monitoring the financial sustainability of the entire adult social care market. We have been working closely with CQC to learn from their oversight scheme. This learning will inform the development of a tailored scheme that responds to the children's social care placements market.

Although Ofsted can request financial information at the time of inspection from children's homes and fostering agencies, registered providers are not required to submit ongoing, regular financial information or undergo rigorous financial checks. Moreover, Ofsted is not at present set up to conduct regular, forensic financial monitoring¹⁸.

Currently, local authorities and national government do not have the powers to obtain detailed information that give a full, live picture of the financial health of a provider and their owners. There are also few requirements on providers to plan what they would do in the event of financial distress to responsibly manage market exit and minimise disruption to children in their care.

¹⁷ [Competition and Markets Authority Final Report](#)

¹⁸ [The Care Standards Act 2000 \(Registration\)\(England\) Regulations 2010](#)

To deliver an effective financial oversight scheme, we will:

- set criteria for the most ‘difficult to replace’ providers to become subject to the scheme.
- require information from providers, up to the parent company level, to enable the Department to carry out ongoing assessments of the financial viability of the totality of the organisation.
- work closely with Ofsted to effectively bring together financial, corporate performance and quality indicators to inform an overall assessment of risk.
- introduce requirements for providers to have in place a contingency plan with assurances that providers have the appropriate cash reserves and will allow the necessary time to enable orderly transitions to new ownership, or to wind down operations in a well-planned manner if they need to exit the market.
- introduce an advance warning system to support local authorities to meet their statutory duties.
- notify Ofsted of concerns where they can play a role in evaluating the impact of any financial concerns on the quality of children's experiences.
- introduce enforcement mechanisms to ensure compliance and cooperation with the requirements of the scheme from providers up to the parent company level.

Creating a mandatory notice period for market exit

To complement the advance warning system, as part of the financial oversight scheme detailed above, we will explore introducing a new requirement for all providers to give both hosting and placing local authorities sufficient notice if a provider makes the commercial/business decision to actively exit the market. While it may not always be possible to predict financial failure in advance, we think it is appropriate that all providers operate their businesses responsibly, including ensuring a managed wind-down that allows sufficient time where they have decided to close or reduce provision. This ensures providers who operate placements for some of our most vulnerable children are more accountable and give more consideration to the impact of their decisions on the children in their provision.

Regulating the placements market further

As set out, we know that the placement market is not functioning properly and costs to local authorities are rising unsustainably. In addition to the CMA’s 2022 report, evidence from the Association of Directors of Children’s Services¹⁹, the Local Government Association²⁰, and Ofsted inspection, shows that children’s social care budgets are under significant pressure, largely due to rapidly increasing placement costs for children in care. Local government spending on looked after children has increased from £3.1 billion in 2009/10 to £7 billion in 2022/23. We know that some providers are making unjustified levels of profit.

¹⁹ [Safeguarding Pressures | ADCS](#)

²⁰ [High-cost children’s social care placements survey | Local Government Association](#)

If the reforms detailed throughout this chapter, do not have the anticipated impact in tackling profiteering across the children's homes placement market, we will not hesitate to take legislative action to prevent private providers continuing to make excessive profits from publicly funded services for some of our most vulnerable children. We plan to introduce powers for the Secretary of State to cap the level of profit which can be made from children's social care placements through secondary legislation in the future. We will allow time for our other market reforms to rebalance the market first and will only step in to cap profits if this does not happen. We expect that the secondary legislation needed to bring about a cap would include provisions for a limit on the level of profit that could be made in each financial year from the provision of specified children's social care placements. We plan to further engage with the sector before any such a measure is introduced.

Introducing a regulation-making power to govern LA use of agency workers within children's social care services

The Independent Review of Children's Social Care identified that the engagement of agency social workers is costly and a barrier to providing stable professional relationships for children and families²¹. In recent years, use of agency social workers has risen in local authorities delivering children's social care. There were 7,200 agency social workers in post on 30 September 2023, the highest since the data series started in 2017 and representing an increase of 6.1% from 2022. While agency social workers can play a role in allowing the children's social care sector to manage fluctuations in demand and fill in for staff that are temporarily absent, they should not replace a permanent workforce.

Work has already started to reform the use of agency child and family social workers in local authority delivery of children's social care. Between February and May 2023, a [consultation](#) focused on introducing national rules through statutory guidance, under section 7 of the Local Authority Social Services Act 1970 (LASSA)²². There was broad support for its [proposals](#)²³. Then, between January and February 2024, a further technical consultation sought views on the detail of the statutory guidance 'Agency Rules for Local Authority Children's Social Care', which again received broad support. The final statutory guidance was published on 12 September 2024 alongside the Government's response to the consultation, and the guidance comes into effect on 31 October 2024²⁴.

However, statutory guidance is as far as we can go within the current legislative framework to address the rising use of agency staff in children's social care. That is why we intend to legislate to allow us to go further than statutory guidance in regulating the use of agency, to drive the right conditions for children's social work practice. We also want to look wider than local authority engagement of children and family social workers at local authority engagement of other agency workers in children's social care. Currently, the statutory guidance introduced this year applies solely to child and family social workers. However, we know that driving the right conditions for lasting relationships with children and families does not stop at social workers.

²¹ [The Independent Review of Children's Social Care](#) (page 188-189)

²² [Child and family social workers: agency rules statutory guidance](#)

²³ [Child and family social worker workforce](#)

²⁴ [Child and family social workers: agency rules](#)

The updated [Working Together](#) statutory guidance confirms that a range of lead practitioners can carry out section 17 work with children and families and we are keen that any future regulations do not create perverse incentives for the wider workforce. In the responses to the ‘Child and Family Social Worker Workforce’ Consultation in 2023, concerns were shared that limiting the agency rules to only child and family social workers may result in unintended consequences: for example, we heard that there may be a potential risk of agency growth in other parts of the children’s social care workforce not subject to the same regulatory framework.

Fundamentally, creating the right conditions to allow those who work in children’s social care to thrive and give the best support to children and families relies on a stable, effective, and supported workforce. Therefore, we are proposing a regulation making power that will enable us to strengthen the rules on how local authorities procure and manage temporary workers within children’s social care services. The intention is that this regulation making power would also be used to make regulations which may apply similar provisions to those already introduced by statutory guidance to a broader cohort of agency workers within children’s social care²⁵. This will ensure the supply of temporary workers in children’s social care is directed towards supporting children and families while retaining workforce sustainability.

The regulation making powers we plan to bring forward will extend to local authorities in England only. The powers are likely to include the ability to make regulations on governance arrangements to ensure, for example, local authorities retain oversight and clear accountability over social work practice delivered, over workers’ pay and labour costs, and over quality assurance provisions such as minimum experience requirements and pre-employment checks. It is our intention to engage with the sector ahead of introducing secondary legislation, on the detail of the regulations. If introduced, the regulations and related guidance will replace the guidance ‘Agency Rules for Local Authority Children’s Social Care’²⁶. We are not seeking further data collection powers relating to the use of agency workers in children’s social care as we already have powers in this regard²⁷.

²⁵ [Child and family social workers: agency rules](#)

²⁶ [Child and family social workers: agency rules](#)

²⁷ The data collection on the agency child and family social work is under [Section 83 of the Children Act 1989](#) and [Section 251\(1\)\(b\) of the Apprenticeships, Skills, Children and Learning Act 2009](#).

Glossary of Terms

Abuse - a form of maltreatment of a child or young person. Somebody may abuse or neglect a child by inflicting harm, or by failing to act to prevent harm. Harm can include ill treatment that is not physical as well as the impact of witnessing ill treatment of others. This can be particularly relevant, for example, in relation to the impact on children of all forms of domestic abuse, including where they see, hear, or experience its effects. Children may be abused in a family or in an institutional or extra-familial contexts by those known to them or, more rarely, by others. Abuse can take place wholly online, or technology may be used to facilitate offline abuse. Children may be abused by an adult or adults, or another child or children.

Act - an Act of Parliament creates a new law or changes an existing law. An Act is a Bill that has been approved by both the House of Commons and the House of Lords and been given Royal Assent by the Monarch. Taken together, Acts of Parliament make up what is known as Statute Law. Definition taken from UK Parliament.

Adoption agencies - the focus of all adoption agencies is on placing children successfully into adoptive families. These are families who the agency recruits, assesses, prepares and supports, so that they will meet the children's needs and enable them to develop and achieve throughout their lives. The services maintained by local authorities are described in section 3(1) of the Adoption and Children Act 2002. Local authorities place children with adoptive families recruited and approved by themselves, by other local authorities or by voluntary adoption agencies that must register with Ofsted. Adoption agencies may also provide birth records, counselling and intermediary services to adoptees and birth relatives.

Child in need - is defined in section 17 of the Children Act 1989 as a child who is unlikely to reach or maintain a satisfactory level of health or development, or their health or development will be significantly impaired without the provision of children's social care services, or the child is disabled.

Looked after child - Section 22 of the Children Act 1989 defines a looked after child as one in the care of the local authority or provided with accommodation by the local authority. A child provided with accommodation under section 20 of the Children Act 1989 is looked after once they have been in local authority accommodation for 24 hours. In this document we use the term 'children in care' or 'care experienced young person' interchangeably to mean the legally defined 'looked after child' as we have heard that is the language preferred by young people.

Child protection - part of safeguarding and promoting welfare. This refers to the activity that is undertaken to protect specific children who are suffering, or are likely to suffer, significant harm.

Children - anyone who has not yet reached their 18th birthday. The fact that a child has reached 16 years of age, is living independently or is in further education, is a member of the armed forces, is in hospital or in custody in the secure estate, does not change their status or entitlements to services or protection.

Children Act 1989 - the Children Act 1989 sets out what local authorities, courts, parents and other agencies in England should do to safeguard children.

Children's homes - the Care Standards Act 2000 provides that 'an establishment is a children's home if it provides care and accommodation 'wholly or mainly' for children. 'Wholly or mainly' means that most, or all, of the people who stay at a home must be children.

Children's Homes Regulations - the Children's Homes (England) Regulations 2015 cover children's homes; children's homes that provide short break care; secure children's homes; and residential special schools or boarding schools who accommodate children for more than 295 days per year.

Children in care - in this document, the term 'children in care' refers to all children whose care is being provided by the local authority. Legislation uses the term 'looked after children' to refer to children who are being cared for by the local authority, whether that is accommodated by the local authority or in the care of the local authority by virtue of a court order. Legally, the language of 'children in care' does not include children accommodated and looked after under section 20 of the Children Act 1989. However, children and young people often tell local and central government that the term 'looked after children' is unhelpful, and we have made the deliberate choice to prioritise the use of 'children in care' throughout this document to refer to all children, regardless of the legal provision under which they are being cared for by the local authority, except where we need to be explicit about the legal cohort we are referring to.

Child Protection Plan (CPP) - support for a child where there is reasonable suspicion that the child is suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm.

Children's Social Care National Framework - the Children's Social Care National Framework is statutory guidance for local authority children's social care. It sets out the purpose and principles of children's social care and the outcomes that should be achieved for children, young people and families so that they grow up and thrive with safety, stability and love.

Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) - the [Competition and Markets Authority](#) is an independent non-ministerial government department, which helps people, businesses and the UK economy by promoting competitive markets and tackling unfair behaviour.

Corporate parent - the term used to describe the local authority who has the responsibility to support children in care and care leavers in a way that other children are supported by their parents. The existing corporate parenting 'principles' are set out in section 1 of the Children and Social Work Act 2017.

Deprivation of Liberty - the term 'deprivation of liberty' comes from Article 5 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), which provides that everyone, of whatever age, has the right to liberty. Article 5 of the ECHR protects everyone's right to liberty by setting out the limited circumstances in which a deprivation of liberty is allowed and requires strict safeguards to be in place for those who are deprived of their liberty. The family courts can authorise a child's deprivation of liberty via section 25 of the Children Act 1989 (and section 119 of the Social Services and Well-being Act (Wales) 2014), which authorises the placement of looked after children in a registered secure children's home, subject to meeting the criteria outlined in section 25. Alternatively, the inherent jurisdiction of the high court can be used to authorise the deprivation of liberty of a child in an alternative placement, when none of the other statutory mechanisms apply (i.e. there are no places available in secure children's homes or the criteria under s.25 are not met). There are additional routes to deprivation of liberty outside of the family court, including the provision under the Mental Health Act 1983.

Domestic abuse - the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 introduced the first ever statutory definition of domestic abuse (section 1 of the Act). The statutory definition is clear that domestic abuse may be a single incident or a course of conduct which can encompass a wide range of abusive behaviours, including a) physical or sexual abuse; b) violent or threatening behaviour; c) controlling or coercive behaviour; d) economic abuse; and e) psychological, emotional or other abuse. Under the statutory definition, both the person who is carrying out the behaviour and the person to whom the behaviour is directed towards must be aged 16 or over and they must be 'personally connected' (as defined in section 2 of the 2021 Act). The definition ensures that different types of relationships are captured, including ex-partners and family members. Section 3 of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021 recognises the impact of domestic abuse on children (0 to 18), as victims in their own right, if they see, hear or experience the effects of abuse.

Early help - in the current system, early help is non-statutory multi-agency support provided by local authorities and partners to children and families. Early help is often delivered within universal services at lower levels of need.

Elective home education - a term used to describe the practice of a parent providing a child's education at home full-time, or at home and in some other way that a parent chooses (for example, a tuition centre) instead of choosing to send the child to school.

Extra-familial harm - children may be at risk of or experiencing physical, sexual or emotional abuse and exploitation in contexts outside their families. While there is no legal definition for the term extra familial harm, it is widely used to describe different forms of harm that occur outside the home. Children can be vulnerable to multiple forms of extra-familial harm from both adults and/or other children. Examples of extra-familial harm may include (but are not limited to): criminal exploitation, such as county lines and financial exploitation; serious violence; modern slavery and trafficking; online harm; sexual exploitation; child-on-child (non-familial) sexual abuse and other forms of harmful sexual behaviour displayed by children towards their peers; abuse, and/or coercive control, children may experience in their own intimate relationships (sometimes called teenage relationship abuse), and the influences of extremism which could lead to radicalisation

Family network - a group of people close to a child, made up of relatives and also non-related connected people (where connected people has the same definition used in The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 – relatives, friends and other persons connected with the child). A family network could include stepparents, siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, or close family friends.

Family Help - a service that is coordinated by local authorities for families who need a higher level of support than can be provided solely through universal services and where it is beneficial for the child and family to work closely with a Family Help Worker. This service will be for families to engage with and will support children and families that are currently in targeted early help, child in need (including disabled children) and child protection.

Foster care - when children enter care, many are placed with an approved foster carer. Foster carers will have responsibility to care for the child and must be approved by the local authority or an independent fostering agency.

Fostering agencies - are defined in section 4 of the Care Standards Act 2000. Local authority fostering agencies and independent fostering agencies (IFAs) recruit, prepare, assess, train and support foster carers. Independent fostering agencies are private companies or charities. They are registered with Ofsted and provide placements to children and young people with foster carers approved by them. IFAs work closely with local authorities to deliver these placements.

High Court - the High Court of Justice in London, together with the Court of Appeal and the Crown Court, are the Senior Courts of England and Wales. It deals at first instance with all high value and high importance civil law (non-criminal) cases, and also has a supervisory jurisdiction over all subordinate courts and tribunals, with a few statutory exceptions.

Law Commission - the statutory independent body created by the Law Commissions Act 1965 to keep the law of England and Wales under review and to recommend reform where it is needed.

Legislation - legislation is a law or a set of laws that have been passed by Parliament. Legislating is the act of making a new law.

Local area - the 'local area' is the geographical area of the local authority. This includes the local authority, CCGs, public health, NHS England for specialist services, early years settings, schools and further education providers.

Location Assessment - an assessment completed as part of Ofsted's children's homes registration process which considers the proposed location for a children's home, whether it is suitably located, accessibility of local services, and any safeguarding concerns. Regulation 46 of the Children's Homes Regulations (England) 2015 introduced a requirement for providers or managers to 'review the appropriateness and suitability of the location of the premises at least once in every calendar year'.

Multi-agency working - work across organisations to safeguard children including effective information sharing, joint decision-making and co-ordinated interventions.

Multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) - a team which brings together agencies (and their information) to identify risks to children early and to respond with the most effective, joint interventions. The Hub team enables the multi-agency safeguarding team to carry out a joint initial assessment, research and the referral of vulnerable children to services.

Multi-agency safeguarding arrangements - Local organisations and agencies that provide services for children and families to work together to discharge their duties to safeguard and protect the welfare of children. The way that these organisations and agencies work together is known as a multi-agency safeguarding arrangement (MASA). The safeguarding partners oversee the functions of the MASA and are responsible for its delivery and effectiveness. The MASA must help to ensure that information about a child and their family is shared effectively, risk of harm is correctly identified and understood, and that children and families receive targeted services that meet their needs in a co-ordinated way.

Multi-disciplinary working - a range of practitioners and professionals from different backgrounds working together to enable the best outcomes for children.

National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) - first published on 27 March 2012 and updated on 24 July 2018, 19 February 2019, 20 July 2021, 5 September 2023 and 19 December 2023. This sets out the government's planning policies for England and how these are expected to be applied.

The Office of the Children's Commissioner - promotes the rights, views and interests of children in policies or decisions affecting their lives. They particularly represent children who are vulnerable or who find it hard to make their views known. Office of the Children's Commissioner is an executive non-departmental public body, sponsored by the Department for Education.

Ofsted - the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills, who inspect services providing education and skills, and inspect and regulate services that care for children and young people.

Parent - our definition of parent (as it relates to the working definition of kinship care— this is not a legal definition) includes:

1. 'any birth parent, with or without parental responsibility for the child'.
2. 'any stepparent, with or without parental responsibility for the child, who is in a subsisting relationship with the birth parent'.
3. 'any adoptive parent who prior to the making of the adoption order in respect of the child was not a 'friend or family member' as defined in this Act'.
4. 'any parent by virtue of section 42 or section 43 of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 2008, whether or not they have parental responsibility for the child'.

Pathfinders - the programmes to test how reforms should be implemented and manage the associated risks, before wider roll-out (subject to various approvals and funding).

Providers - the institutions, organisations or agencies that provide services to the relevant children and young people.

Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs) - bring together specialised adoption professionals from local authorities across a region, providing expertise and support at every stage of the adoption process. RAA's offer a new, innovative, and collaborative approach to recruiting adopters, finding families for the children with a plan for adoption in their region and providing long-term adoption support for families.

Regional Care Cooperatives (RCCs) - the organisations or arrangements between local authorities that we intend will plan, commission and deliver care places regionally.

Safeguarding - the broad set of actions that are taken to promote the welfare of children and protect them from harm. This includes protecting children from abuse and maltreatment; preventing harm to children's health or development; ensuring children grow up with the provision of safe and effective care; and taking action to enable all children and young people to have the best outcomes.

Safeguarding Partners - a safeguarding partner in relation to a local authority area in England is defined under the Children Act 2004 as: (a) the local authority, (b) an integrated care board for an area any part of which falls within the local authority area, and (c) the chief officer of police for an area any part of which falls within the local authority area. The three safeguarding partners should agree on ways to co-ordinate their safeguarding services; act as a strategic leadership group in supporting and engaging others; and implement local and national learning, including from serious child safeguarding incidents. To fulfil this role, the three safeguarding partners must set out how they will work together with any relevant agencies as well as arrangements for conducting local reviews.

Section 17 - section 17 of the Children Act 1989 is a general duty on local authorities to safeguard and promote the welfare of "children in need" in their area.

Section 47 - under section 47 of the Children Act 1989, where a child is the subject of an emergency protection order or is in police protection or there is reasonable cause to suspect that a child who lives, or is found, in their area is suffering or is likely to suffer, significant harm, the local authority must make or cause to be made enquiries to decide if any action must be taken to safeguard or promote the child's welfare

Secure Children's Homes - Secure Children's Homes accommodate children and young people who are remanded or have been sentenced for committing a criminal offence; and those whose placement there is authorised by a court because if kept in any other description of accommodation, they are likely to injure themselves or others or because they abscond from other types of accommodation and are at risk of significant harm if they abscond. Secure Children's Homes are children's homes for vulnerable young people aged between 10 and 20. These homes restrict children's liberty to ensure their safety. Secure Children's Homes are run by local authorities, voluntary organisations, or are privately run.

Social Work England - a specialist regulator focused on enabling positive change in social work.

Supported accommodation - is defined in the Care Standards Act 2000 (Extension of the Application of Part 2 to Supported Accommodation) (England) Regulations 2022. Supported accommodation provides accommodation with support for 16- and 17- year-old looked after children and care leavers, to develop their independence as they approach adulthood.

The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel - An independent expert committee that was set up to identify, commission and oversee reviews of serious child safeguarding cases across England. The Panel brings together experts from social care, justice, policing, health, education and the third sector to provide a multi-agency view on cases which they believe raise issues that are complex, or of national importance.

Unregistered provision - Section 11 of the Care Standards Act 2000 provides that it is unlawful for any person to carry on or manage an establishment or an agency (as defined in Section 4 of the Care Standards Act 2000) without being registered with Ofsted. Any provision therefore that is required to be registered, but is not is called 'unregistered provision'.

Working Together - Working Together to Safeguard Children (2023) is statutory guidance on inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. It clarifies and builds upon the core legal requirements, making it clear what individuals, organisations and agencies must and should do to keep children safe. It seeks to emphasise that effective safeguarding is achieved by putting children at the centre of the system and by every individual and agency playing their full part.

Young Offender Institutions - a type of custodial setting that children may be placed in if they are sentenced to or remanded in custody. Young offender institutions are for boys aged 15 – 17 and young adult men aged 18 – 21. There are five young offender institutions (YOIs) in England and Wales.

Annex A – a summary of our actions to reform children's social care

We will give families the support they need, keep children safe, and break down the barriers to opportunity for children in care and care leavers by:

- Rolling out a single offer of help and protection for children and families experiencing multiple and complex challenges. Lead practitioners with appropriate knowledge and skills will support families, working seamlessly with a reformed child protection system, when the fiscal situation allows. This offer will be underpinned by whole-family working, engagement of and support for family networks, evidence-based interventions and mechanisms to enable effective multi-agency leadership and practice.
- Strengthening the role of 'education' in multi-agency safeguarding arrangements and providing national direction to the child protection system through reviews to the multi-agency safeguarding statutory guidance entitled 'Working Together to Safeguard Children'.
- Improving multi-agency data sharing across services by bringing forward plans to deliver and implement a Single Unique Identifier to support children and families.
- Responding to the Law Commission's review of the legal framework governing social care for disabled children in England and taking forward actions to ensure the law is fair and allows children with disabilities to access the support they need.
- Removing barriers to opportunity for children in care and care leavers through a cross-government programme of work to improve outcomes across education, training, and employment, housing, mental health, and relationships.
- Extending corporate parenting responsibilities to a wider range of public bodies so that they consider their needs when designing and delivering services for children in care and care leavers.
- Extending the duty on local authorities to promote educational outcomes to all children with a social worker through the statutory Virtual School Head role.

We will empower family networks and offer secure and loving homes through kinship arrangements by taking the following actions:

- Bringing forward legislation that requires local authorities to offer family group decision making at pre-proceedings, before decisions are taken on whether a child should go into care, to empower family-led solutions in response to concerns about the safety and wellbeing of the children.
- Legislating to place a statutory duty on local authorities to promote the educational achievement of children in kinship arrangements, building on the non-statutory extension of the Virtual School Head role from September 2024.
- Publishing updated Kinship Care statutory guidance which sets out how local services should support children in kinship care and their families.

- Delivering a £40 million package to trial a new kinship allowance to test whether paying an allowance to cover certain costs – like supporting a child to settle into a new home with relatives – can help increase the number of children taken in by family members and friends.
- Continuing the delivery of the Family Network Pilot which is testing flexible funding and practical support for extended family networks to help keep families together and children out of care.
- Providing a training, information and advice offer so kinship carers across the country know where they can get support to provide loving homes for their kin, and funding peer support groups across England for all kinship carers so we can build a community of support for kinship carers.
- Appointing a National Kinship Care Ambassador who will advocate for kinship children and carers across government and work directly with local authorities to improve services.
- Engaging the Law Commission to undertake a review into the legal orders and statuses underpinning kinship care arrangements and provide recommendations to government to ensure that the legislative framework is fair, modern, and meets the needs of its users.

We want all placements to be secure, high-quality and designed with children's interests in mind, including by:

- Investing in and promoting the use of the Adoption and Special Guardianship Support Fund for eligible adoptive and eligible kinship families so children can access therapeutic support where they have experienced trauma.
- Providing funding for Adoption England to support Regional Adoption Agencies (RAAs) to improve recruitment, matching and post adoption support while promoting consistency by setting national standards in adoption practice across the country.
- Investing an additional £15m to boost the number of foster carers to offer children a stable environment to grow up in. This will make sure every local authority has the offer of a regional fostering recruitment hub to help raise awareness about fostering and offer prospective carers support from the start of their fostering journey and also improve the support offer to existing foster carers.
- Introducing a provider oversight scheme to increase Ofsted's existing powers to ensure provider groups are held responsible for the quality of the children's homes and other children's social care provision that they own.
- Enhancing Ofsted's enforcement powers so that they can fine providers illegally operating unregistered children's homes, so we can make sure children are safe, and placed in homes that are properly regulated by Ofsted.
- Undertaking joint work with NHS England to develop integrated, multi-agency community provision to provide care and/or treatment where restrictions that amount to deprivation of liberty can be imposed.
- Improving our data on placements to give local authorities the information they need to assess need in local areas and assess longer-term demand for placements.

- Enabling local authorities to set up Regional Care Co-operatives (RCCs), working in partnership with health and justice stakeholders. RCCs will carry out regional data analysis, develop regional sufficiency strategies, and develop regional provision.
- Boosting the supply and diversity of placements by encouraging non-profit providers back into the market to reduce costs and provide placements which better meet children's needs closer to home.
- Creating a fast-track route for the registration of some new children's homes to make it easier for homes to be set up where they most need them.
- Introducing a financial oversight scheme to increase financial and corporate transparency among the most 'difficult to replace' providers, increase provider contingency planning for financial failure, and provide an early warning system to local authorities.
- Exploring introducing registration requirements for companies that provide placements to children to ensure they have responsible tax practices and are domiciled in the UK.
- Introducing powers for the Secretary of State to cap provider profits from the provision of children's social care places in the future in the event that excessive profiteering is not brought under control.

To drive the change, we want to see in the system, we will take actions across enablers like leaders, multi-agency working and the workforce to:

- Embed the Children's Social Care National Framework (National Framework) and align policy with these expectations for practice, driving the whole national system to focus on the highest aspirations for children and families. We will also deliver a Dashboard to have a real-time picture of how the system is moving towards embedding the outcomes in the National Framework.
- Galvanise local leaders to drive improvements in their region, with a focus on outcomes, through work with the Local Government Association, through Regional Improvement and Innovation Alliances (RIIAs) and other sector-led programmes such as Sector Led Improvement Partners (SLIPs)²⁸. We will continue to intervene in local authorities where Ofsted have found poor social care practice, to drive service improvements to keep children safe.
- Enable strategic multi-agency working by supporting statutory safeguarding partners across local authority, police and ICB with multi-agency national facilitators and use safeguarding partnerships yearly reports as an accountability and learning tool to improve the system.
- Support safeguarding partnerships to prevent or reduce the risk of recurrence of serious harm or abuse, through the sharing of data and evidence from the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel.

²⁸ [Get support from children's social care sector-led improvement partners](#)

- Enable learning from data and take forward digital solutions to build a better understanding of children, young people and families and to create better support for individuals and communities.
- Address the drivers which cause delays in the family court, and improve the experience of children and families, by improving pre-proceedings practice and investing in developing local solutions.
- Support, champion and empower the social work workforce through recruiting and retaining social workers, and professional development programmes. The work social workers deliver for children and families is essential and deserves to be recognised and supported. We know a key part of retention will be about improving the offer of support social workers receive so we will populate a national virtual hub with resources to support local authorities with best practice on retaining social workers, including improving working conditions.
- Implement statutory guidance published on local authority use of agency child and family social workers to reduce the impact of workforce instability on children and families, improve quality and reduce costs, and underpin the agency rules with a new regulation making power which will create a legally binding framework in relation to the use of agency workers in children's social care which local authorities must adhere to.
- Work with Ofsted in response to the findings of their Big Listen, to explore how improvements to their frameworks can ensure inspection is a constructive force in the sector that champions good practice, empowers leaders and practitioners, and drives improved outcomes.
- Work in partnership with MHCLG, to ensure we have systematic and strategic join up in how local areas are funded and supported to deliver effective services. We will work to address some of the burdens placed on local authorities by consolidating small grants wherever possible and distributing funding as effectively as possible.

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