

Public Accounts Committee Child Protection Inquiry Written Evidence Submitted by Family Action

Executive Summary

- We welcome the Public Accounts Committee's inquiry into Child Protection and the opportunity to offer the perspective of a Third Sector organisation.
- The publication of the National Audit Office's report, and in particular the data, is very helpful. It enables us to see a more complete picture and draw our own analysis. This inquiry encourages the data to be read widely, which should alone be viewed as a positive.
- Family Action's evidence submitted to this inquiry is rooted in our experience of supporting families with a variety of needs across the country for decades.
- We currently work across 70 local authorities in England, Wales and the Isle of Man.
- Family Action uses a whole family approach throughout all our services, building on strengths, empowering family members and increasing resilience.
- Local authorities, we would argue, should prioritise the same approach - using keyworkers to ensure relationships have time to develop between families and workers, improving engagement and ensuring progress on issues that affect their safety and wellbeing.
- The differences between spend on Children in Need and lack of correlation between high spend and high quality services can be partly attributed to local authorities choosing different levels of need to prioritise in service delivery, and their attitude to innovation.
- Discussion of the child protection system is often generalised, as if it is the same in every local authority, and yet child protection practice and culture in individual local authorities often reflects organisational culture and recent events in that local authority.
- In order to deliver high quality Children's Services local authorities need to invest in the workforce, ensuring ongoing training and development is achieved.
- Local authorities also need to work with high level staff in other agencies in order to ensure thresholds are understood and that data is shared as much as possible. We understand thresholds because we attend local authority training, and have a 75% conversion rate of contacts to referrals to Children's services.
- Until there is a more joined up approach to collecting and interrogating multi-agency data and evaluating the effectiveness of arrangements via multi-inspectorate inspections, we cannot fully understand what is impacting upon local authorities and hindering their work.
- The Department for Education should consider how its performance arrangements support the embedding of Munro principles and encourage evaluation of the long term impact of local authority improvement measures along with the longitudinal outcomes for children who receive help and protection.

1. Family Action is a charity committed to building stronger families by delivering innovative and effective services and practical, emotional and financial support to many of the UK's most vulnerable people.
2. We are submitting evidence which is rooted in our experience of supporting families across the country for decades. We currently deliver support across 70 local authorities in England, Wales and the Isle of Man. Our work includes help for parents-to-be, parenting and relationship support, nurseries and Children's Centres, home-based family support, emotional health and wellbeing services, mental health services, financial grants programmes and training and consultancy services.
3. Family Action uses a whole family approach throughout all our services, building on strengths, empowering family members and increasing resilience. We keep a clear focus on the safety and well-being of children and young people and build relationships with families through persistence, reliability and flexibility. We deliver practical and emotional support to build bridges, win trust and achieve rapid change.
4. Local authority services should also prioritise working with whole families and understand the importance of staff having the time to develop relationships with them in order to improve child protection. We can evidence good engagement with families as a result of relationships developed using a key worker approach. A recent example to illustrate this is our Intensive Family Support Service in Birmingham, where this keyworker approach has led to 64% of the children in the families we work with no longer being on a Child Protection Plan and 43% of children in those families no longer being a Child in Need. The complex needs that families with a Child in Need or on a Child Protection Plan have require an integrated response, and this needs to be reflected in policy, commissioning and service delivery.
5. The report by the National Audit Office (NAO) on Children in Need of Help or Protection states that 'average spending on each Child in Need varies widely across England and is not related to quality' and that the Department for Education (the Department) and other authorities do not understand why this is the case. The scrutiny of expenditure would benefit from being broadened to all Early Help services (including those provided by voluntary organisations) and wider commissioning spend; including public health, Clinical Commissioning Groups and services for adults who are parents or carers.
6. Discussion of the child protection system is often generalised, as if it is the same in every local authority, and yet child protection practice and culture in individual local authorities often reflects recent leadership priorities, whether there have been recent serious case reviews in that local authority, turnover of staff, attitudes to learning and the prevailing organisational culture at any one time. We have

often found that available funding for services that support families where children are in need on or a Child Protection Plan varies depending on what each local authority chooses to prioritise regarding prevention work or support for those who already have high level complex needs. We need to dig down into the detail in order to take a measured view, and even when we do that we need to remember that there are 152 upper tier local authorities in England, so any analysis (unless we do the same analysis in the same way everywhere) is at best partial and can only ever present a snapshot of child protection practice and organisational culture at a given point in time.

7. Local authority discretion in regards to setting their own thresholds for escalating referrals to Children's Services also affects average spending on each child. It is clear the rate of contacts has gone up by a substantial proportion; however the rate of enquiries and subsequent intervention has increased by a much higher rate. This illustrates that thresholds are possibly not increasing within Children's Services, but rather they are decreasing. We have not seen rising thresholds at a national level. However, conversely, Ofsted have a view that in some areas thresholds are set too high. This requires much more detailed case analysis for a measured view to be formed. Ofsted's thresholds should also be tested for consistency.
8. The NAO's report states that sometimes there are issues with partners understanding and adhering to thresholds, however we have always felt that we have a very good understanding of the threshold for referrals in each of the local authorities we work in. Our data illustrates a positive picture whereby contacts to Children's Services lead to a very high conversion rate to referrals, with an average rate of 75% per quarter. Our excellent understanding of thresholds is because we always attend training given by the local authority on the thresholds they have set, and would argue that local authorities need to engage with higher level staff in the police, NHS and education system in order to ensure that all agencies understand the importance of their staff attending such training.
9. Training issues also occur within local authority staff teams. Despite the increase in demand for help or protection identified in the NAO's report, there is still a practice issue of social workers not appreciating the risks of cumulative harm when assessing whether children are in need of protection. There is a lack of continued training and development for social workers in many local authorities as this is often one of the first things to be cut, and high caseloads leave little time for it either. However, in order for social workers to understand and have time to reflect upon how family life and society in general is changing, and the impact this has on keeping children safe, this training is essential.
10. Capacity issues are also caused through the reduction in services available for statutory workers to draw upon in order to provide timely, appropriate support to complex families. It must be considered how cuts to local authority budgets, and the choices they have made in terms of which services to prioritise funding for,

impact upon service delivery and safeguarding. Local authorities need to consider the range of services they fund across tiers of need – step up and step down services are required both to prevent children from needing protection, as well as to sustain progress made by families who have received high level support. The reduction of available services is coupled with the reluctance of some local authorities to fund innovative services because of their limited evidence base, despite these types of services having the potential to provide high quality, efficient support for children in need of help and protection within the budgetary constraints.

11. Although the Department has overall responsibility for arrangements for children, in many areas arrangements are poor due to other agencies' failings or reduced funding for the police, justice and health organisations, for example. Until there is a much more joined up approach to collecting and interrogating multi-agency data and evaluating the effectiveness of arrangements via multi-inspectorate inspections, we cannot fully understand what is impacting upon local authorities and hindering their work. Furthermore, we are not going to get the cross-departmental Government approach required to support root and branch improvement without proper recognition of the importance of strategic multiagency arrangements. It seems somewhat unjust therefore, to say that the issues with the quality of Children's Services are solely down to the Department.
12. Following the Munro review, the child protection system was not reformed at root and branch level. However, performance measures and inspectorate judgments for local authorities have not altered in a way that would make this reform a priority for them, despite Ofsted's framework becoming much more challenging for local authorities. The Department should consider how its performance arrangements support the embedding of Munro principles five years on and encourage evaluation of the long term impact of local authority improvement measures along with the longitudinal outcomes for children who receive help and protection. The finding on the lack of information in relation to the outcomes for children who have required help is welcomed; particularly if this leads to improved longitudinal monitoring in this respect.