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APPG for Children inquiry into children's social care

Call for written evidence

The All Party Parliamentary Group for Children (APPGC) has launched a new inquiry to address local arrangements for the delivery of children's social care services in light of changes in resources and demand, a new inspection framework and diversity in performance and outcomes. While the focus of the inquiry will be on services in England, the inquiry will seek to draw upon evidence of challenges and effective responses across the devolved nations in order to share examples of practice across the UK.

To inform the inquiry, the APPGC is calling on stakeholders across the children's sector to submit written evidence on the current state of arrangements for the provision of children's social care, including services for safeguarding children and for helping looked after children and children in need. The Group would also welcome hearing about the delivery of early intervention services which enable children to remain with their family.

Evidence indicates that, over the past five years in England, overall demand for children's social care services has increased, while English local authorities' spending power has decreased. The nature of children's need has also change, with greater concerns, for example, about radicalisation and child sexual exploitation. In addition, children's social care services are implementing a range of reforms following recent changes to the legislative framework, such as those relating to special education needs and disability and adoption. These are taking place at the same time as the implementation of reforms to social work practice led by the Chief Social Worker for children and families.

In light of these ongoing and emerging challenges facing children's social care services, the APPGC has decided to conduct an inquiry to:

- bring together evidence about the current resourcing of children's social care services and changes in the nature and level of demand
- explore the impact (or potential impact)of these changes on the delivery of children's social care services and on children and young people
- build a picture of the key elements of a successful children's services department and the challenge facing areas that are struggling to improve, and share examples of good practice

- assess whether changes are needed to policy and legislation in order to improve the delivery of children's social care services and in turn outcomes for children
- identify any learning that can be shared from Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

Local authority leaders and service providers from across the United Kingdom will be invited to present examples of good practice in the delivery of children's social care services, and to outline the barriers to improvement they are facing. The inquiry will also hear directly from children and young people about their experiences of children's social care services.

Oral evidence sessions will be held in Parliament between April and July 2016, and findings from the inquiry will be published by early 2017.

Deadline for submissions is Monday 7th March 2016 – please see call for evidence form below.

APPG for Children inquiry into children’s social care: call for evidence form

The All Party Parliamentary Group for Children would welcome written evidence from a range of stakeholders including:

- Directors of Children’s Services
- Children’s social services managers and practitioners
- Chairs of Local Safeguarding Children’s Boards
- Children’s services providers – including the private and voluntary sector
- Children in Care Councils
- Organisations representing the voices and interests of children and young people

Written submissions will inform the setting of oral evidence sessions, which will be held between April and July 2016. The questions below cover a range of issues relating to the delivery of children’s social services. Please feel free to answer only those which relate to your area of expertise.

Contact details

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Please indicate if you would be prepared to give oral evidence: YES

1. Changing demand and funding for children’s social care services
How has demand and funding for children’s social care services in England changed? What changes are expected in the future?

There are now expectations of improved outcomes for children in need, where the need stem from disability, due to the special educational needs and disability reforms implemented via the Childrens and Families Act and this has increased the demand for preventative social care support. The SEND reforms expect social care teams to work in closer partnership with education and health colleagues to deliver shared outcomes for children and young people with SEND. Social care teams need to have a wider understanding of how effective support is delivered for children with disabilities and their families. This is happening at a time where funding for children social care in general is reducing.

The Care Act also places increased expectations on social care teams to take a proactive role in supporting young people with disabilities in particular through transition and to include identify before the age of 18, young people who have not been known to children’s social care but may need social care support in adulthood.

The Children’s and Families Act has introduced a system that rightly intends to deliver better outcomes for children and young people who would be classed as children in need due to disability, specifically around achieving;

Employment

Independent Living

Community Inclusion

Good Physical and Emotional Health

Achieving these outcomes in adulthood for children with disabilities means a greater focus on preparing for adulthood pre 18 and potentially an increased role for social care in the everyday lives of disabled children.

This increase in expectations from both legislation and families however has happened at a time when funding for social care is under particular pressure and while adult social care is being afforded some degree of protection this is not always the case with children's social care funding, especially when there are no child protection issues involved.

Demand for social care support for children and young people with disabilities is also increasing because more children with severe disabilities are surviving childbirth and living longer. This combined with an increased understanding of the impact that raising a children with a disability has on a family is also contributing to an increasing demand. (See Contact a Family's Counting the Costs and Forgotten Families Reports http://www.cafamily.org.uk/media/805120/counting_the_costs_2014_uk_report.pdf

http://www.cafamily.org.uk/media/381636/forgotten_isolation_report.pdf)

Some families of disabled children would have historically have received support from children's hospices but families are now reporting that in some areas children hospices are tightening their admission criteria because young people with complex needs are living longer – resulting in again more demand being placed on statutory social care services.

As aspirations of society and families are increasing, in terms of what outcomes young people with disabilities should achieve in adulthood, there is a greater focus on the role of children's social care in preparing this vulnerable group to become successful and confident adults, who can play a full role in their local communities.

This means that demand is increasing for social care support that prevents and addresses from the earliest point, the impairment of the health and development of children with disabilities and enables them to achieve the best possible outcomes. This is in line with guidance provided in 'Working Together to Safeguard Children-March 2015' but requires a change in actual practice, which has more traditionally focused on crisis intervention.

As mentioned above all this is happening in a financial context where Local Authority funding is being considerably reduced this means that all local budgets including Social Care are being reviewed and reduced.

2. The impact of changes on the delivery of children's social care services

What has been, or could be, the impact of any changes to funding and demand on the delivery of children's social care services?

We have already highlighted that social care services for disabled children are currently most likely to be reactive services that are instigated at a point of crisis, rather than preventative services that are part of a planned approach to delivering the best possible outcomes for disabled young people and their families. The reduction in funding identified above is leading this to be even more so the case, just as new legislation and the development of society is creating increasing aspirations for young people with disabilities, which requires an increasingly proactive approach across all services.

A reduction in funding for social care has resulted in an even greater narrowing of focus on to child protection issues, to the detriment of social care outcomes that are as a result of the provision of support to vulnerable individuals who need support to lead an ordinary life. Locally we have had numerous families contact us to tell us that when requesting assessment for social care support for their disabled child they have been told that they are not eligible for assessment unless there are child protection concerns, which is not in accordance with the statutory guidance provided in the' Working Together' document

We are also finding that families are being made to jump through an increasing number of hoops before they are provided with support. There is a sense that there is an increasing amount of gatekeeping happening to enable Local Authorities to 'manage' demand for social care services. One particular challenge is the lack of transparency in local social care decision making and while legislation is in place to address this it is proving difficult to achieve the level of transparency that is needed. There is a lack of clarity around the criteria for accessing a child in need assessment that is being used by Local Authorities to limit the number of assessments that are carried out. We recognise that it would not be cost effective to carry out comprehensive social care assessments for all children who might be legally defined as a child in need due to their disability but we are concerned that we are hearing of increasing number of cases where families and disabled young people who clearly have a significant level of need across multiple aspects of their lives are also being denied a child in need assessment.

While overall demand for social care support for children with disabilities is increasing there are also a group of parent carer who are not asking for help due to the emphasis of social care services on child protection. The role of social care in delivering support to children who are not considered at risk of deliberate harm has been overshadowed in this time of reduced funding by a focus of resources on safeguarding. Whilst we would not suggest that child protection shouldn't be a priority for Local Authorities and we recognise that disabled children can be particular vulnerable to abuse, we are in danger of creating a system which only responding to situations where damage has already happened and where statutory services do not see themselves as having a role in supporting disabled young people to have a good quality of life.

The National Institute for Social Care states that;

"Social Care concerns itself with helping people live their lives comfortably, particularly those people who require a certain degree of extra practical and physical help. Social care workers endeavour to provide this service of practical support with a view of helping individuals maintain their independence, to increase their quality of life and to help them lead fuller more enjoyable lives."

This is not a description of local social care service that most families of a disabled child would recognise and because of this a third of parent carers who responded to our recent survey on accessing social care support for disabled children in Shropshire stated that they had not requested social care support because they were scared of being judged as parents.

3. The impact of changes on outcomes for children and young people

What has been, or could be, the impact of any changes to funding, demand and service delivery on children and young people?

This increasing focus on only providing intervention where there are child protection concerns means that families of children and young people with disabilities are receiving less support to cope with the additional pressures placed upon them by caring for a child with a disability. These additional pressures are well researched and evidenced, with families of children disabled children facing isolation, higher levels of breakdown, financial hardship and ultimately poorer outcomes than other families.

Essential Short Break services, that offer vital opportunities for children and young people to have positive experiences of life, learning new skills, and develop their independence outside of their family are under threat due to a reduction in funding for children's social care. Not only does this impact on the children and young people themselves it also means that there are less opportunities for parents of disabled children to have a break from their caring role, which results in a reduction in family resilience and an increased possibility of parent carers suffering from a deterioration in both their physical and emotional health.

The Every Disabled Child Matters Campaign recently published their report 'Short breaks in 2015/16 – An Uncertain Future' http://edcm.org.uk/media/162179/short-breaks-in-2015-an-uncertain-future-final.pdf highlights the current threat to Short Breaks for disabled children and the likely impact of this.

Children's social care services play a key role in enabling children who are disabled to achieve positive outcomes as adults. The Children and Families Act places new duties on local Authorities to ensure that children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities are well supported to prepare for adulthood. This includes developing their lives as independent individuals outside of their families. Children's social care services have a key role to play in this but families are finding it increasingly difficult to access this support. Following an increasing number of concerns being reported from local families about difficulties in accessing social care support for disabled children, the Shropshire Parent and Carer Council published our 'Accessing Social Care Support for Disabled Children In Shropshire' report. This report details the challenges that families of disabled children face in when requesting support in Shropshire and its potential impact. It highlights the level of unmet need and includes a case study that illustrates how families are being failed by the current system. As part of the ongoing work that Shropshire PACC is doing in this area we worked with the family from the case study to ensure that they received an appropriate response to their request for support. An appropriate support packaged is now in place and PACC recently received this update from the family;

"As we had a bit of a struggle getting respite allocated we wanted to fill you in on what a difference it's making. Having the 4 respite experiences (starting with a 1 night stay she now spends 3 full nights) for us this has been a big help. Normally our daughter has a surge of independent behaviour at least once a month, as she is 17, of course it's quite normal, but just accentuated due to her having Downs Syndrome and just having a neutral place for her to go and chill out has been a real help. She looks forward to going on respite and treats it like a hotel, only better; there are friends from school and familiar staff, who are tuned in to her needs. She has her DVD's and goes off to her Saturday club, football club etc.

The main difference for us is that's it's lessened the pressure on us, we've been able to have our own schedule and actually get out and visit people, making a big improvement to our own social life. So it was definitely worth the struggle."

A copy of the PACC report 'Accessing Social Care Support for disabled Children in Shropshire' is included in this submission.

4. The role of the local authority children's social care services

What are local authorities doing to respond to changes in demand and funding? What barriers do they face to meeting these challenges? What distinguishes the best performing children's social care services from those that are not performing so well?

This is not a positive picture unfortunately and most Local Authorities are focusing on reducing services and narrowing the criteria to access support, in order to deliver short term savings, rather than considering long term implications.

One of the challenges is that the data on local populations of disabled children is very poor. Local Authorities are required to establish a disabled children's register for their area but the majority of these are not well maintained and not considered a priority activity for most Local Authorities. This means that local commissioning decisions are often not well informed and most likely to be made in response to financial pressures rather than in response to a good understanding of local needs and how that might develop and change in the future. This means that services are constantly 'fire fighting' rather than implementing a planned and well thought out approach to supporting disabled young people and their families into adulthood, which inevitably has a negative impact on outcomes.

There is also a significant disconnect between children's social care and adults social care. This means that instead of these two services being seen as being interdependent and on a continuum; they are treated as two totally separate systems. This results in a lot of wasted resources and distress for families, due to duplicated assessments, a lack of forward planning and poor communication between professionals.

5. The policy and legislative framework

Is the current and developing policy and legislative framework sufficient to enable children's social care services to meet children's needs in the current context? How could it be improved?

There is currently a lot of confusion about overlapping legislation that is creating a lack of transparency and is sometimes used as a barrier to families accessing service.

There needs to be improved guidance about how different areas of Legislation such as the Children and Families Act, the Care Act, the Children's Act 1989 and the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act work together when delivering services for disabled child and their families.

There also needs to be improved guidance on the status of disabled children as 'children in need', the right of disabled children to a statutory social care assessment and the role of children's social care in delivering positive outcomes for disabled children in cases where there are no child protection issues.

6. Learning from the devolved nations

Are national and local authorities in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales facing similar challenges? How are they responding to these challenges? What learning and examples of effective responses could be shared across the UK?

No information submitted

7. Sharing good practice

Finally, we welcome examples of good practice from across the United Kingdom, and in particular examples relating to one of more of the following themes:

- improving local arrangements in the delivery of children's social care services including:
  - services for children in care and adopted children
  - safeguarding and child protection services
  - services for disabled children and children with special educational needs
  - early intervention services including for example family support, housing, and public and mental health services
- collaboration across cities/areas/regions in the delivery of children's social care services
- the use of evidence (e.g. on local need/demand) and best practice in informing the commissioning, configuration and delivery of children's social care services
- securing effective leadership

Shropshire PACC is a local parent carer forum that is part of the National Network of Parent Carer Forums. We are a pan disability service user led organisation that uses the knowledge and experience of families of disabled children to influence and improve service provision. We believe that when Local Authorities have a positive and effective working relationship with parent carers at a strategic level they deliver services that are cost effective and deliver positive outcomes for disabled children and their families. The NNPCF is supported by Contact a Family, who is a member of the Short Break Partnership, which was created to support the development of short breaks and to share good practice throughout England.

Information about the NNPCF and parent carer forums can be found at www.nnpcf.org.uk

Information about the Short Break Partnership including good practice can be found at http://www.cafamily.org.uk/what-we-do/parent-carer-participation/improving-short-breaks-services/

Completed forms should be returned to hransom@ncb.org.uk by Monday 7th March. Submissions received after this date will still be considered, but may not inform oral evidence sessions.