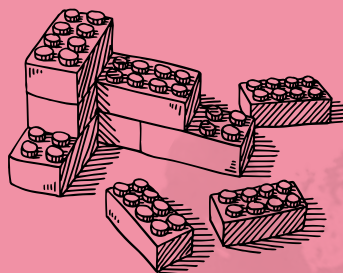


BRIGHT FUTURES

GETTING THE BEST
FOR CHILDREN,
YOUNG PEOPLE
AND FAMILIES



" MY SOCIAL
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SHE'S HELPED
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Care leaver, 17

FOREWORD

Councillor Richard Watts Chair, LGA Children and Young People Board

Councillor Dick Madden Chair, LGA Children's Social Care Task Group

Making sure all children and young people can have the bright future they deserve is a key ambition of every council. If we want the best possible outcomes, children must be at the heart of everything we do – councils are central to making this happen. But our children's services are under increasing pressure.

Councils are facing a £2 billion funding gap for children's services by 2020, and were forced to overspend on their children's services budgets by £605 million across England in 2015/16. Government funding for the Early Intervention Grant has also been significantly cut, by almost £500 million since 2013. It is projected to drop by a further £183 million by 2020.

Within these limitations, councils have worked hard to protect budgets for essential child protection services despite large reductions elsewhere. Many see improving outcomes as a council-wide priority, looking carefully at the impact of wider economic and social policy on future life chances and encouraging all services to take a more child-centred approach. A stronger move towards the devolution of powers from national to local government would give councils greater flexibility to design joined-up local services to meet the needs of children and families.

Just as a single service cannot make a difference on its own, neither can a single partner or a single local area. Although councils shape services around the priorities of their local

communities, they must do so within the wider policy and financial framework set by central government and delivered by numerous agencies. To truly get the best for every child, we strongly believe that improved outcomes must become a golden thread that runs through all areas of public policy.

Our colleagues at the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) have set out their vision of a country that works for all children and families, highlighting the conditions that are required for all children and young people to thrive. We support and share this vision, while recognising that councils currently face considerable challenges in delivering consistently high quality services. Funding has been significantly reduced across the public sector, whilst the demand for services to support children in need has surged.

We cannot carry on like this. This paper sets out seven clear priorities for coordinated action across the public, community and voluntary sectors, which we believe will help drive the improvement necessary to consistently offer the brightest future for children and families. Taken together, we believe that this represents an ambitious plan, whilst at the same time recognising the challenges and actions we can take in response. If we want to make sure every child and young person can look forward to a bright future, local and national government must be united in their determination to get the best.

GETTING THE BEST FOR CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND FAMILIES

To support the delivery of consistently strong services that offer children, young people and families the brightest future, councils and their partners must work together to deliver:

- ★ **A STRONGER FOCUS ON OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN**
All partners at a local and national level must keep a strong focus on the needs of children, young people and families.
- ★ **CONSISTENTLY STRONG LOCAL LEADERSHIP**
National and local bodies must do more to nurture consistently strong local leadership for children's services at all levels.
- ★ **A CULTURE OF CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT**
Local and national government must work together to ensure that improved outcomes for children remain an ongoing priority, with improvement led by local government and subject to independent scrutiny.
- ★ **THE RIGHT SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN AT THE RIGHT TIME**
Stronger investment in early help is vital to ensure that children and families can access the support they need when they need it.
- ★ **SUSTAINABLE FUNDING TO HELP CHILDREN THRIVE**
Local and national government must ensure that sustainable funding is available and used effectively to provide the vital services that children, young people and their families rely on.
- ★ **A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT WORKS FOR CHILDREN**
Local and national government must develop a better understanding of 'what works' and 'what good looks like' for children's services.
- ★ **STRENGTHENED MORALE AND SUPPORT FOR SOCIAL WORKERS**
Local and national government must do more to showcase the excellent work of social work teams across the country, and support councils to recruit and retain high quality social workers.

A STRONGER FOCUS ON OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN

All partners at a local and national level must keep a strong focus on the needs of children, young people and families.

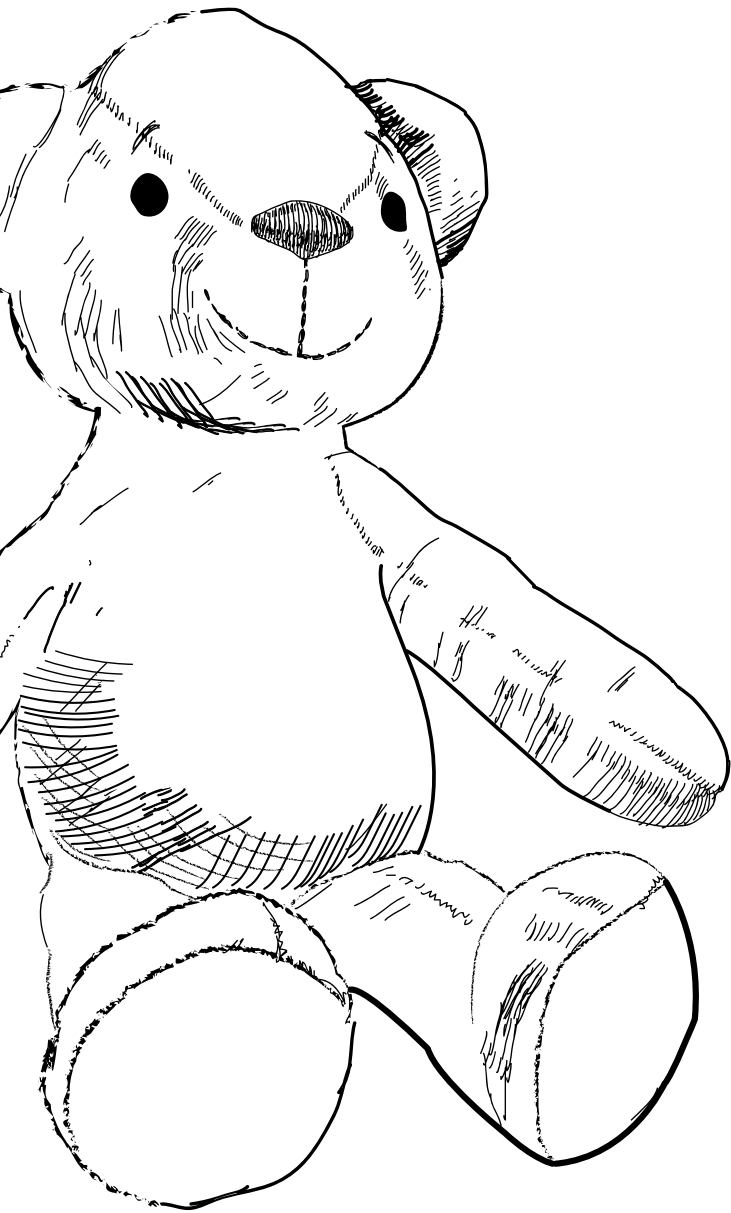
We are clear that improving the lives of children and young people is not just a job for children's services, but a responsibility owned by the whole council and shared with the wider public and voluntary sector. This sense of shared ambition for children must be replicated across the local safeguarding partnership, with all agencies working together in the interests of children and families. Similarly, there should be a golden thread running through the business of government, with every department considering how their activities will impact on children and families.

Research has consistently shown that high performing councils benefit from a clear vision for children's services, developed in partnership with staff at all levels but coming from the very top of the organisation and jointly owned by all areas of the local authority.¹ Many of the issues that make the biggest difference to the lives of children and families, such as the availability of safe, affordable and comfortable housing and local employment prospects, are outside the remit of the children's services department and

it is therefore vital that the whole council is engaged in this agenda. A genuine commitment to hearing and acting upon the wishes of children and young people will be central to this, and greater devolution from national to local level will give councils the tools they need to draw services together and deliver on this vision.

But it is clear that delivering high quality support that meets children's needs cannot be achieved by councils alone. The Children and Social Work Act² sought to improve partnership working by creating a shared responsibility between health, police and the local authority, while also offering more flexibility in the design of local safeguarding arrangements. However, this focus on three key agencies risks diminishing the crucial role of other partners, including the increasingly diverse community and voluntary sector, and we are particularly concerned to ensure that schools of all types are fully engaged in local safeguarding systems.

Consistent engagement across the hugely complex health economy is also vital. The sustainability and transformation plan process, for example, is designed to better integrate health and social care but has created new footprints for services that do not always align easily with existing local safeguarding partnership arrangements.³ And while the delivery of high quality child and adolescent mental health services is essential to meet the emotional health and



wellbeing needs of local children, provision is inconsistent at best and not always well coordinated across the partnership. Local health and wellbeing boards have a crucial role to play here, working closely with whatever arrangements emerge as the successor body to local safeguarding children boards.

The importance of local partnership working is mirrored at the national level, as the lives of children and young people are inevitably affected by decisions over which councils and their partners have little control. It is therefore vital that Whitehall approaches improved outcomes for children with one voice, but it is clear that this is not always the case.

For example, the Children and Social Work Act signalled a commitment to care leavers by boosting support up until the age 25 and requiring local areas to publish their own support offers, yet research has recently shown that care leavers are five times more likely than the general population to have their welfare benefits sanctioned by the Department for Work and Pensions.⁴ The application of the spare room subsidy to rooms actually occupied by foster children is another example of an issue where the actions of one department appears to run counter to the ambitions of another.⁵

A clearly articulated ambition for children, young people and families, shared and owned across Whitehall, is crucial to ensuring that government is truly putting children first.

OUR OFFER

- Many areas are already modelling a whole-council approach to children's services.⁶ We will gather case studies and hold events to help share this practice more widely across the country, including amongst partner agencies.
- We will produce guidance for all local councillors, including backbench members, to help them act effectively as corporate parents. We will continue to encourage scrutiny chairs to attend our children's leadership essentials course to develop skills in the effective oversight of children's services.
- We will revise the existing peer review offer for local safeguarding children boards,⁷ taking into account the changing landscape of multi-agency safeguarding. We will recruit additional peer reviewers to enable a wider reach for these reviews and ensure that all partnerships are able to access an expert 'health check' on a regular basis.
- We will develop and publish guidance for health and wellbeing boards and scrutiny members to strengthen local leadership and accountability for the quality, delivery and spend on children's mental health and wellbeing services through local transformation plans.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

- The Government should coordinate the development of a cross-Whitehall ambition for children and young people, clearly articulating the role that all departments will play.
- The Government should consider developing a new 'children and young people impact assessment' for public bodies to use alongside existing equalities impact assessments, to ensure that the needs of children are central to all policy and legislative changes.
- The Department for Education (DfE) must ensure that schools of all type are adequately represented and actively participate in local multi-agency safeguarding arrangements.
- When considering new arrangements for multi-agency safeguarding partnerships, the Government must ensure that all relevant agencies are appropriately represented and engaged, and that funding does not fall disproportionately on one agency.
- The Government must ensure that the promised £250 million a year for children's mental health and wellbeing services⁸ is released in full and extends beyond this Parliament, with greater transparency in how mental health funding is spent. All local transformation plans should include expenditure relating to CAMHS services, signed off by local health and wellbeing boards.

CONSISTENTLY STRONG LOCAL LEADERSHIP

National and local bodies must do more to nurture consistently strong local leadership for children's services at all levels.

Research has highlighted strong leadership and governance as a central factor for improving underperforming services, but it is also vital for maintaining and further improving provision that is already good.⁹

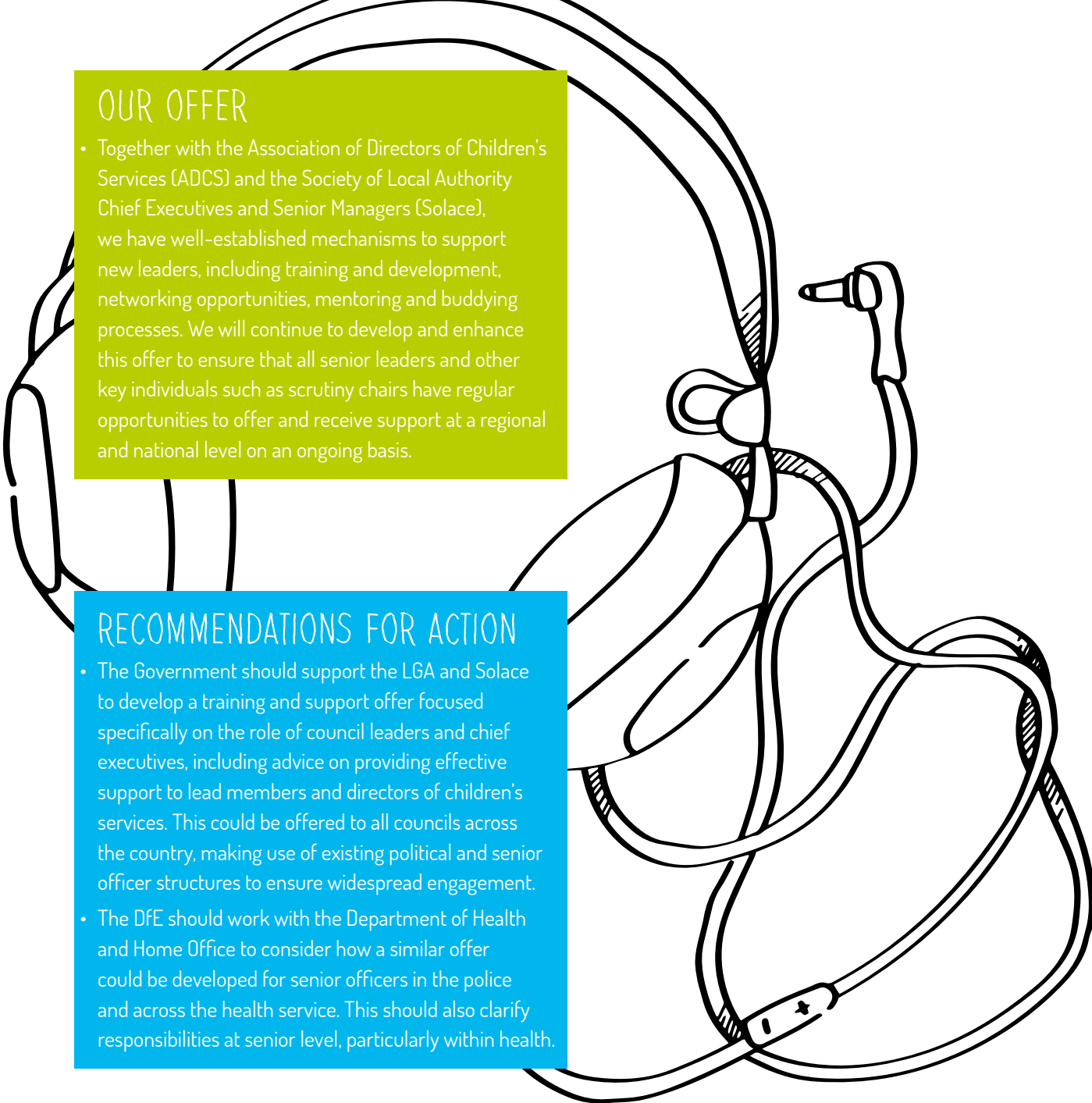
It is well evidenced that turnover amongst the senior leadership of a children's services department can have a damaging impact on service quality.¹⁰ New leaders at officer and political level face a particularly challenging task, and it is important that they are able to access high quality, tailored support when they need it. In many cases, leadership roles will be filled by interim appointments while long term arrangements are clarified, and support should therefore be ongoing and available to all.

But leadership is not limited to those with direct responsibility for children's services. It is difficult to deliver high quality children's services in an environment where other services are failing, and many areas speak about improvement as a council-wide journey rather than something focused solely on children's services.

Political leaders and chief executives have a vital role in establishing the right environment for children's services to thrive, and it is important that they are supported to do so in a way that is long-term and sustained. Support for officers and members in leadership roles should be ongoing, and not just available for those taking up their post for their first time.

Partner agencies should have a similar commitment to children's services from the very top of the organisation. Supporting children and families must not be seen as an 'add-on' for agencies such as health, the police and schools, but should be placed front and centre with senior leaders having a clear understanding of the issues facing children in their area and the role of their agency within the wider partnership.

The role of local safeguarding children board chair, currently undergoing review following the changes in the Children and Social Work Act, is also vital in providing independent leadership across the local safeguarding partnership.



OUR OFFER

- Together with the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers (Solace), we have well-established mechanisms to support new leaders, including training and development, networking opportunities, mentoring and buddying processes. We will continue to develop and enhance this offer to ensure that all senior leaders and other key individuals such as scrutiny chairs have regular opportunities to offer and receive support at a regional and national level on an ongoing basis.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

- The Government should support the LGA and Solace to develop a training and support offer focused specifically on the role of council leaders and chief executives, including advice on providing effective support to lead members and directors of children's services. This could be offered to all councils across the country, making use of existing political and senior officer structures to ensure widespread engagement.
- The DfE should work with the Department of Health and Home Office to consider how a similar offer could be developed for senior officers in the police and across the health service. This should also clarify responsibilities at senior level, particularly within health.

A CULTURE OF CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Local and national government must work together to ensure that improved outcomes for children remains an ongoing priority, with improvement led by local government and subject to independent scrutiny.

It is important that public services are open to rigorous, independent scrutiny and challenge, but the core purpose must be to drive continuous improvement for children and young people. The LGA has long been concerned that children's services inspections have lost sight of that purpose, with research highlighting that many areas rated inadequate subsequently suffer accelerated decline rather than improvement, hampered by staff turnover, an increase in referrals and a significant reduction in the timeliness of interventions.¹¹

The impending rollout of a new Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services (LACS)¹² is an opportunity to address some of these issues, with a more proportionate process that should reduce the damaging impact of negative judgements and the burden of the inspections themselves.

But it is also important that services are given the best possible support to continue their improvement journey between inspections, regardless of the rating they receive.

With more than a third of children's services in England judged to require improvement to be good in March 2017,¹³ it is concerning that these councils are currently only able to access limited support. With national investment largely focused on turning around inadequate services¹⁴ or supporting time-limited and service-specific innovations,¹⁵ we believe that a more comprehensive improvement offer needs to be developed. This should support and enable all councils to deliver good or better children's services, with a focus on embedding a culture of learning and continuous improvement across the service.

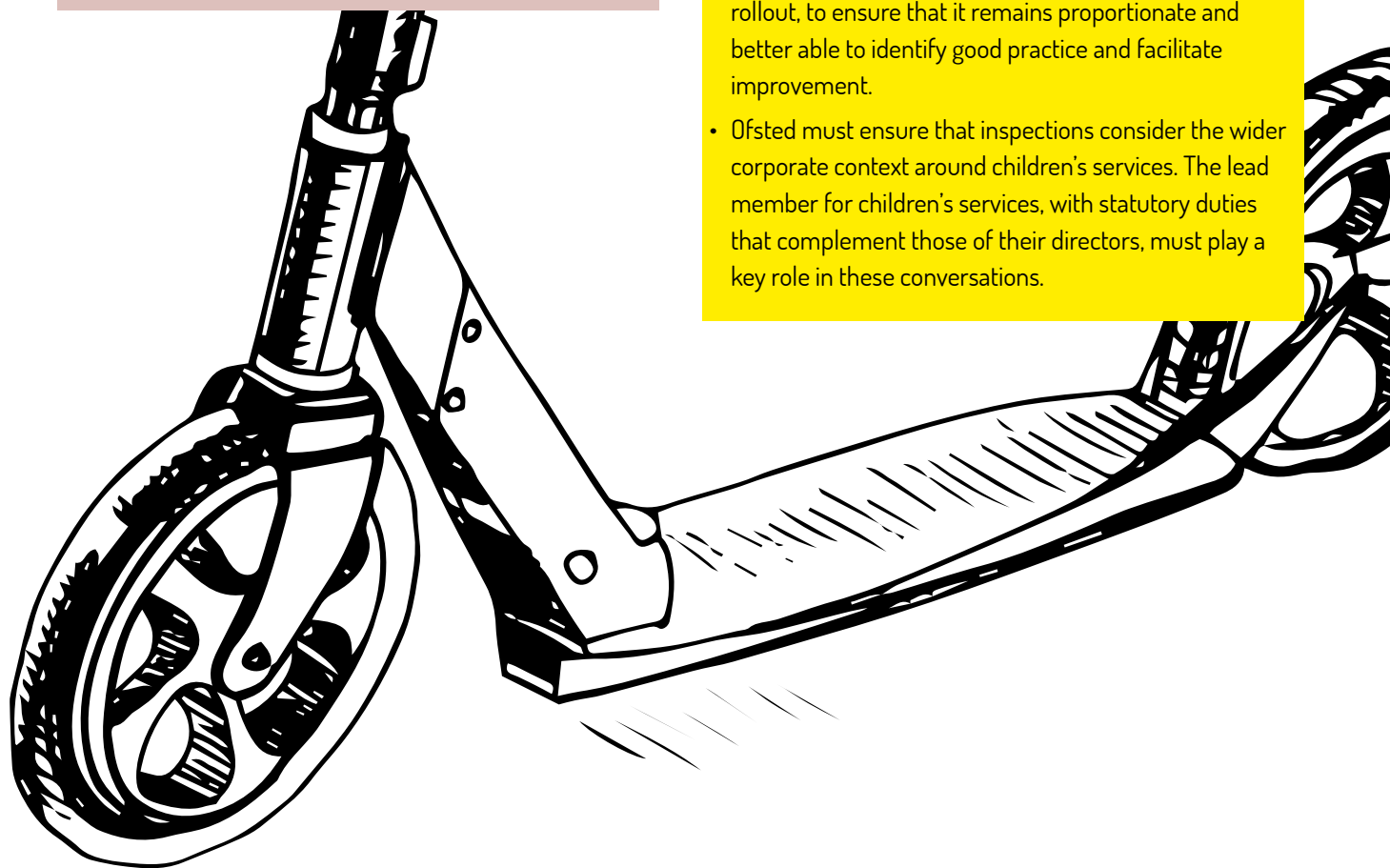
We strongly believe that the right experience to deliver improvement is already within local government, and it is vital that the full range of this experience is harnessed in the offer made to councils, including the expertise of political and corporate leaders from across the sector.

OUR OFFER

- We will work with ADCS, Solace and others to develop an enhanced programme of sector-led support for children's services, coordinating national, regional and local elements into a coherent whole sector approach. This will offer everything from regular 'health checks' and benchmarking information to a range of diagnostics and support on specific areas of concern, made available to all councils regardless of Ofsted rating.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

- The DfE should devolve a proportion of its £300 million budget for improvement and innovation¹⁶ to support this new sector-led offer, enabling a stronger focus on delivering service-wide improvement in addition to the specific innovations currently funded through the Children's Social Care Innovation Programme.
- Ofsted must work with local authorities to monitor the impact of the new ILACS inspection process following rollout, to ensure that it remains proportionate and better able to identify good practice and facilitate improvement.
- Ofsted must ensure that inspections consider the wider corporate context around children's services. The lead member for children's services, with statutory duties that complement those of their directors, must play a key role in these conversations.



PROVIDING THE RIGHT SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN AT THE RIGHT TIME

Stronger investment in early help is vital to ensure that children and families can access the support they need when they need it.

Councils have dealt with unprecedented demand for child safeguarding services in recent years. The past decade has seen a 140 per cent increase in the number of child protection enquiries undertaken by councils, while the number of children on child protection plans has almost doubled over the same period.¹⁷

The reasons for this increase are complex and poorly understood. Increased public awareness and/or willingness to report abuse is often cited as a factor,¹⁸ while better partnership working may mean that more issues are identified and escalated to children's services (though some areas report that poor partnership working can result in issues being escalated inappropriately, rather than being addressed by the referring agency).

Recent research from Coventry University highlights that children living in areas of highest deprivation are up to ten times more likely to come into care than those in the areas of lowest deprivation,¹⁹ suggesting a link with wider social and economic factors that will require a deeper, coordinated response from across government.

It is well understood that early help can play an important role in catching issues early and preventing problems from escalating. But meeting the increasing demand for high need services appears to be forcing councils to move funding away from services such as children's centres, early years and services for young people, with spending on these areas around 10 per cent lower than budgeted in 2015/16.²⁰

In this context, local areas need more support to ensure that the early help they do provide is as effective as possible. It is vital that commissioning is well matched to local need so that children and families are able to access the support they need when they need it, to prevent further unsustainable increases in the number of children and families reaching crisis point.

The Early Intervention Foundation's latest analysis puts the cost of late intervention at almost £17 billion per year, £6.2 billion of which falls directly on children's social care.²¹ Our analysis shows that the national Early Intervention Grant to councils has been cut by almost £500 million since 2013, and is projected to drop by a further £183 million by 2020.²² It is clearly vital that this unintended shift towards reactive spend is addressed as a matter of urgency.



OUR OFFER

- We will work with partners across the statutory and voluntary sector to develop a clearer picture of the factors driving increased demand for child protection services.
- We will work with the Early Intervention Foundation to identify and disseminate any available evidence about which approaches have been shown to be effective for different groups of children and families..
- We will commission new research to establish and disseminate the factors that facilitate an effective early help offer, including how best to engage partner agencies and the community and voluntary sector in developing a joined up early help offer.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

- The Government must commit to sustainable investment in preventative services by reversing the cuts to early intervention funding for local councils.

SUSTAINABLE FUNDING TO HELP CHILDREN THRIVE

Local and national government must ensure that sustainable funding is available for the vital services that children, young people and their families rely on.

Our most recent analysis suggests that councils face a £2 billion funding gap for children's services by 2020.²³ Children's social care is one of the few areas where councils are consistently forced to overspend on their budgets, by £365 million across England in 2014/5 and £605 million in 2015/16.²⁴ Perhaps unsurprisingly, most of this overspend is reactive, with budgets for children in care and safeguarding overspent by £430 million and £172 million in the last year alone.²⁵

However, it is also the case that these pressures appear to manifest differently in different areas. Looking only at councils currently rated good by Ofsted, ten areas spent less than £585 per child in 2015/16 while ten areas spent more than £1043.²⁶

There are a number of reasons why this might be the case. Financial data in children's services is notoriously unreliable, with CIPFA describing the main financial returns used by government ('section 251') as "not fit for purpose" due to the variable way in which councils account for spend.²⁷ Support from partner agencies, including the community and voluntary sector, is also significant, with some councils benefiting from a local safeguarding partnership that is willing and able to share the responsibility of supporting vulnerable families, particularly in terms of early help, while others are left to provide the bulk of this support themselves.

Historic factors can also play a part, with some 'good' councils still recovering from previously poor performance while others operate from a more stable base. Similarly, long-term investment in early intervention may be paying dividends in some areas, which are subsequently supporting a smaller cohort of children and families, while wider factors such as levels of deprivation will also have a significant impact.

But whichever factors are driving spend locally, it is important that councils are supported to make best use of the resources available to them, while recognising that even those areas that appear to be coping better than their peers are now facing significant pressures in maintaining that position.



OUR OFFER

- We will commission new research to better understand local variations in spending, working with a sample of councils to develop a more complete picture while identifying areas of good practice and 'top tips' for the benefit of the wider sector.
- We will work with ADCS, Solace and others to develop a diagnostic support offer with a specific focus on children's services finances, helping councils to understand how to manage their budgets in a way that allows savings to be made safely and without a detrimental impact on vulnerable children and young people.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

- The Government must act quickly to ensure councils can continue to provide essential services for vulnerable children and families by closing the £2 billion funding gap for children's services by 2020.
- The Government must address longstanding problems with financial returns in children's services by implementing the recommendations of the 2014 joint CIPFA/LGA review of section 251 returns.²⁸

A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT WORKS FOR CHILDREN

Local and national government must develop a better understanding of ‘what works’ and ‘what good looks like’ for children’s services.

Recent research from the Early Intervention Foundation highlights a significant evidence gap in services for children and young people, identifying a number of interventions with proven results that have not been widely publicised or implemented while highlighting that some popular practices and approaches lack a similarly robust evidence base.²⁹

The Government’s proposed What Works Centre for Children’s Social Care,³⁰ with a remit including commissioning and disseminating evidence of effective practice, provides a valuable opportunity to fill this gap at national level but it must also provide capacity to boost local learning and evaluation. The children’s social care innovation programme, for example, has provided over £100 million for local areas to test innovative projects and interventions,³¹ many of which appear hugely promising, but evaluation and learning has been slow to report and often lacks the detail required for clear learning and replication in other areas. Councils need to understand what will work

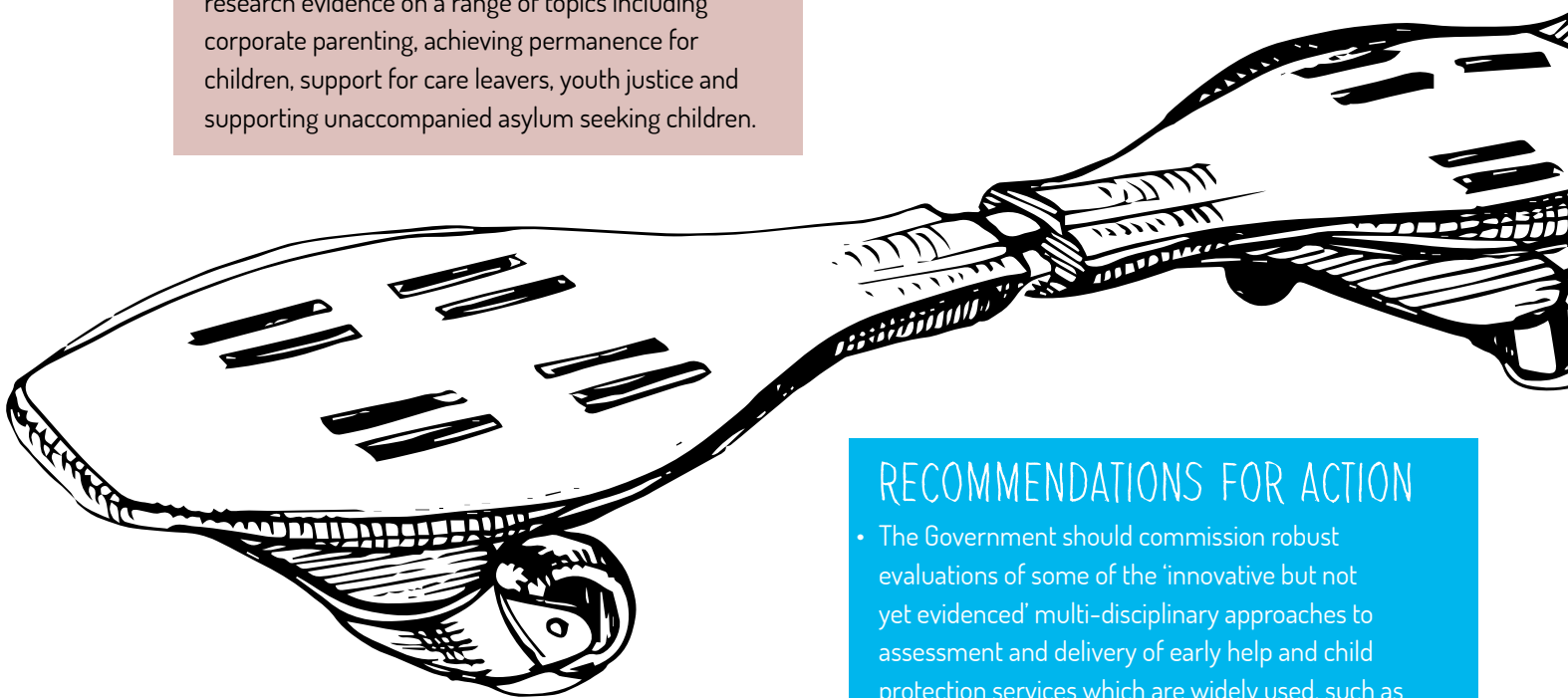
in their area, for the specific children and families they are working with and within the resources available to them. Government must resist the temptation to provide a centrally-focused, one-size-fits-all solution to the notion of ‘what works’.

Similarly, our understanding of ‘what good looks like’ across children’s services is at best partial. Attempts to use data to fill this gap have largely failed, with one study finding that two of the six council areas with the strongest performance across a range of indicators had recently been rated inadequate by Ofsted.³²

We are therefore left in a position where the strength of the English child protection system is assessed almost exclusively by inspection results that are often years old and based on a framework that changes over time. It is important that councils strive to deliver services that children and young people consider outstanding, rather than focusing purely on achieving the Ofsted grade.

OUR OFFER

- We will work with partners to explore a new framework for assessing outcomes in council children's services, making greater use of comparable data alongside Ofsted inspection results.
- We will produce and disseminate a series of resource packs for councils, highlighting current practice and research evidence on a range of topics including corporate parenting, achieving permanence for children, support for care leavers, youth justice and supporting unaccompanied asylum seeking children.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

- The Government should commission robust evaluations of some of the 'innovative but not yet evidenced' multi-disciplinary approaches to assessment and delivery of early help and child protection services which are widely used, such as multi-agency safeguarding hubs (MASH).
- The Government must ensure that the What Works Centre for Children's Social Care provides capacity to boost local learning and evaluation, and delivers clear, practical information to councils in a timely fashion.

STRENGTHENED MORALE AND SUPPORT FOR SOCIAL WORKERS

Local and national government must do more to showcase the excellent work of social work teams across the country, and support councils to recruit and retain high quality social workers.

Maintaining a stable, high quality workforce is central to the delivery of effective support for children and families, but recruiting and retaining social workers remains a big challenge for councils across the country.

In 2016, the Education Select Committee reported that social worker morale was 'extremely low', with the average career lasting less than eight years and 5540 full time children's social worker vacancies in England – 16 per cent of the total workforce.³³

Recruitment and retention is not helped by the public perception of the child protection system as a service that consistently fails the children it is charged to protect – whether through the Public Accounts Committee's 2016 conclusion that 'children [have] for far too long been let down by the support available',³⁴ a decline in Ofsted inspection ratings, or public and media vilification of staff in the wake of tragedy.

Yet the five-year average rate of children in England dying due to assault or undetermined intent has dropped by 51 per cent since 1985, for child homicides has decreased by 27 per cent over the last decade,³⁵ and the UK's under-five mortality rate has fallen from 21 per 1000 live births in 1970 to five in 2013.³⁶ This does not suggest a system in crisis, and the UK continues to compare favourably on a global scale.

Local government is clear that there is room to improve, and this paper highlights areas where we feel councils and partners could do better. But while it is important to address improvement, we must be careful to avoid creating such a negative working environment that good social workers, managers and senior leaders are driven away from the profession as a result of low morale and disillusionment.

Caseloads remain a big concern, and tackling this is made more difficult by the combination of reduced funding and increased demand described earlier in this paper. Indeed, coordinated action on many of these issues would make a big difference to the experience of social workers across the country, from a council-wide commitment to children's services that takes account of issues such as back office support, good quality HR and even the availability of parking, to a better understanding of how to most effectively help children and families, through to more resources to invest in those programmes and interventions.



OUR OFFER

- We will build on our 'Come Back to Social Work' campaign³⁷ to develop a clearer public understanding of the role of social workers, and the wider support provided to children and families under the umbrella of council children's services.
- We will build on our existing online resources around good practice in recruitment and retention of social workers,³⁸ highlighting positive work and providing a valuable learning resource for councils.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

- The Government should work with local government on a major national recruitment campaign to improve the image of social work.
- The Government should work with the LGA, ADCS, Solace and others to ensure that Social Work England takes full account of the needs of employers as it develops its remit.

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