



Department  
for Education

# **Children's Social Care: Stable Homes, Built on Love**

**Government Consultation Response**

**September 2023**

CP 933





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**Government Consultation Response**

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

**September 2023**

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## Ministerial Foreword

### David Johnston OBE MP, Minister for Children, Families and Wellbeing

I am honoured to have been appointed Minister for Children, Families and Wellbeing at such an important time for children's social care. This strategy hinges on love and stability, recognising these two fundamentals are what every child – and adult – needs to thrive. Our aim is to create a children's social care system which priorities love and stability for children and families relentlessly.



In February 2023, the Secretary of State for Education, the Rt Hon Gillian Keegan MP, set out the Government's pledges for the future of children's social care. I am determined to build on the work of my predecessor, Claire Coutinho MP, who launched a comprehensive strategy for transforming the experiences and outcomes of children and families who need support from children's social care. Achieving this vision is a shared commitment across the whole of government, but I recognise that there is much to do to achieve it.

*Stable Homes, Built on Love* is the department's bold and ambitious implementation strategy to achieve this necessary shift. It makes a compelling case for change: one I believe will make the necessary difference to children's lives. We have and will continue to make sure our vision and ambitions are supported by those working hard to achieve this change, and by people with personal experience of the care system. That is why, alongside publishing the strategy, we launched a period of consultation, to get immediate feedback on our aims, and to ensure our direction of travel was the right one.

Building upon what we have heard, we have already taken action to deliver change. In July, the department announced the first areas to take part in the Families First for Children Pathfinder and Family Networks Pilots. Together, these programmes will lead the way in designing and testing our ambitious reform programme for family help and children's social care. Applications also opened in July for local authorities to set up Regional Care Co-operatives, as part of our commitment to establish pathfinders and support local areas to provide enough stable and loving homes for children in the right place at the right time.

I would like to express my sincere thanks to the individuals and organisations who took the time to respond so thoughtfully to the consultation. I am particularly grateful for the 108 responses we received to the children and young people's consultation. I am deeply committed to considering these thoughtful, honest, and insightful views as I embark on my role and continue to drive forward reform. I am also grateful to the hundreds of people

who took the time to share their views at a range of meetings and events during the consultation period, including kinship carers, birth parents, social workers, local authority leaders and others who are expert in the care system, whether through their professional role or their own personal experience.

Now is the time for a once in a generation reform for children's social care. We cannot do this alone. We will build on everything we have heard through this consultation and continue to work incredibly closely with our fellow government departments to ensure we are achieving change across all areas of the system.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'David Johnston', written in a cursive style.

**David Johnston OBE MP**

**Minister for Children, Families and Wellbeing**



## Executive Summary

On 2 February 2023, the government published a new vision to transform children's social care: '[Stable Homes, Built on Love: Implementation strategy](#)' ('Built on Love'). This strategy for reform set out proposals in response to recommendations from Josh MacAlister's Independent Review (Care Review) of Children's Social Care (2022), the Child Safeguarding Practice Panel's National Review into Child Protection in England (following the murders of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson) (2022) and the Competition & Markets Authority (CMA) Children's Social Care Market Study (2022).

The proposals set out in 'Built on Love' are backed by £200 million of additional investment to existing spending over the next 2 years, and organised under 6 'pillars' of reform:

1. Family help provides the right support at the right time so that children can thrive with their families
2. A decisive multi-agency child protection system
3. Unlocking the potential of family networks
4. Putting love, relationships and a stable home at the heart of being a child in care
5. A valued, supported and highly skilled social worker for every child who needs one
6. A system that continuously learns and improves, and makes better use of evidence and data

Alongside the strategy the Department for Education launched a consultation, which was open for 14 weeks and closed on 11 May. The consultation sought views on proposals for:

- support for children and families
- parental representation in child protection
- support for kinship carers, and wider family networks
- reforms to the experience of being in care, including corporate parenting
- support for the workforce
- delivery and system reform

We received 1,043 online responses to the consultation. A breakdown of respondents can be found in Annex A with organisations willing to be named in Annex B.

We particularly wanted to hear directly from children and young people with experience of children's social care, to help make sure we understand what really matters to them. Alongside 'Built on Love' we published a guide to the strategy for children and young people and included 9 questions in the consultation specifically for children and young people under 18, or care leavers up to the age of 25.

During the consultation period we also spoke to around 500 people through in person or virtual consultation events, including children and young people, parents, people with lived experience of children's social care, social work practitioners, other professionals, and sector leaders. Some events were tailored to specific policies, including targeted engagement with local authorities about Regional Care Co-operatives (RCCs). We also ran focus groups, including with care leavers, birth parents, and over 100 kinship carers. We will continue to work closely with these groups on the development of individual policies within the strategy.

We are hugely grateful to the many children, young people, families, carers, practitioners, professionals and organisations who responded to the consultation and spoke to us at events.

In the same period, we separately consulted on:

- A draft Children's Social Care National Framework (National Framework) and indicators for a Children's Social Care Dashboard (Dashboard). The National Framework describes the outcomes that should be achieved so that children and young people can grow up to thrive. The Dashboard is being created to help establish a stronger learning infrastructure, bringing transparency to the system so that the impact of what happens in practice can be understood by leaders and government.
- Proposals to introduce national rules on the engagement of agency social work resource in local authority children's social care.

The [government response to the National Framework and Dashboard consultation has been published separately](#). We are grateful to the many people who engaged with the consultation on agency social work, it is important we take the time to get proposals right and carefully consider the issues raised, we will formally respond to the consultation later this year.

The Public Services Committee have recently conducted a short inquiry into 'Built on Love', publishing a report into their findings on the 25 May. We thank the Committee for assessing the proposals set out in 'Built on Love' and have responded to each of their 17 recommendations through our [response to their Inquiry](#) and have taken their findings into account in this publication too.

We welcomed open and honest views from respondents, including widespread support for the 6 pillars of reform. In their response to 'Built on Love', respondents showed strong support for:

- a focus on love and relationships
- the emphasis on early help and prevention

- a multi-agency approach to safeguarding, supporting and protecting children, young people and families, including more involvement of education professionals
- the commitment to family networks and a family first culture in the strategy, including recognition and support for kinship care
- the ambition of the care experience missions
- recognition of the value of social workers and proposals that strive to improve recruitment, including apprenticeships

Online respondents and others we spoke to during the consultation period also raised some concerns. Largely, the concerns raised were about implementation of the reform programme including the sufficiency of funding, and a need for clarity on how proposed changes would translate into practice. The consultation highlighted polarised views on the timescales for delivery and whether these were too short or too long. Additionally, respondents raised concerns about some specifics, including:

- the challenges in delivering Regional Care Cooperatives
- issues relating to the workforce including recruitment, retention and capacity of practitioners
- greater recognition of the context outside the social care system, such as economic and inflationary pressures on both families and local authorities
- the need for a greater focus on access to health services, particularly mental health support

An independent comprehensive analysis of the formal consultation responses was conducted. More details on the methodology used can be found in Annex A. Evidence from the main consultation and the consultation questions for children, young people and care leavers under 25 have been considered together to inform the government's response and next steps.

## **Purpose of this document**

This document sets out a summary of the consultation findings and the government's response to the findings. It is structured by theme rather than by question to better incorporate views from online responses, written responses, and engagement with children, families, and the sector.

## Where are we now?

Phase one of our reform began in February with the publication of the strategy and the accompanying consultation.

We have started to address urgent issues in the children social care system. We are developing a foster care recruitment and retention programme in partnership with local authorities in the north-east. This is supported by a regional communications campaign and expansion of the Mockingbird programme. We will roll this out across at least 50% of all local areas over the next 18 months. Alongside this we have launched the application process to establish Regional Care Co-operative pathfinders.

We understand how crucial the social worker workforce is to delivering the reforms outlined in 'Stable Homes, Built on Love'. We will be publishing our response to the consultation on the child and family social worker workforce, outlining our plans for national rules on the use of agency social workers. We have commissioned a number of Early Career Framework (ECF) Early Adopter local authorities. We have also appointed the Expert Writing Group.

We recognise that young people leaving care need sufficient funds to meet their needs when they start living independently. We have increased the amount available for the care leavers' allowance from £2,000 to £3,000. This will be accompanied by boosting the care leavers' apprenticeship bursary from £1,000 to £3,000 to give better opportunities for care leavers to start and complete high-quality apprenticeships.

We have made regulations to introduce national standards and Ofsted registration and inspection for supported accommodation for looked after children and care leavers aged 16 and 17. Ofsted started registering providers on 28 April 2023 and registration becomes mandatory from 28 October 2023, before inspections begin in April 2024.

We are committed to setting national direction to achieve better outcomes for children, young people, families and the children's social care system. [We have published our response to the consultation on the Children's Social Care National Framework and Dashboard](#). We are adapting the National Framework based on feedback and will issue it as statutory guidance in December 2023. This will be published alongside feedback we have received on the consultation on revisions to '[Working Together to Safeguard Children](#)'. The response and updated statutory guidance will also be published in 2023.

We have announced that from April 2024, the Supporting Families programme will transfer from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) to the Department for Education (DfE). The transfer of Supporting Families to DfE will enable the department to provide a coordinated, whole system of support for children and families, and ensure services are sustainable for local government. This move came on

top of the 2021 Spending Review announcement of a 40% cash terms uplift for Supporting Families, taking total planned investment for 2022 to 2025 to £695 million.

We have heard and continue to hear examples of good practice in children's social care which we will build upon in developing our approach for future reform. In July, we announced the first local areas selected to deliver the Families First for Children pathfinder and the Family Network pilots<sup>1</sup>. Local areas will be able to apply to join the second wave of the pathfinder, which will start in 2024. From the consultation and other feedback, we have refined our approach to the pathfinders for RCCs and whilst our long-term vision remains unchanged, we plan to develop RCCs on a staged basis.

For 'Stable Homes, Built on Love' to be successful and make sure that children's social care works for everyone, we recognise the need to do more for disabled children and children with complex needs.

For children in the most complex situations and who are currently (or at risk of) being deprived of their liberty, we have launched a cross-government task and finish group, jointly with NHS England (NHSE). This is to improve how system partners work together to improve experiences and outcomes for this cohort of children. We are working on an aligned cross-government approach to design, commission and deliver the best possible models of integrated care.

In April, the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel published phase 2 of its review of the abuse and neglect suffered by children and young adults in 3 privately-run children's homes operated by Hesley Group, in Doncaster. The abuse and neglect suffered by 108 disabled children and young adults in these children's homes was appalling. We are working at pace across government to consider the Panel's recommendations and engaging with stakeholders. We will respond in due course.

We have heard from sector experts in disability at a joint Children's Social Care and Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) roundtable in May 2023. This has informed our policy thinking about the support disabled children and their families need across the full reform programme. We will continue to develop and learn about what works best for these children and families as we reform.

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<sup>1</sup> Dorset, Lincolnshire and Wolverhampton are the first areas announced for the Families First for Children pathfinder. For the Family Networks pilot, Brighton and Hove, Sunderland, Telford and Wrekin, and Gateshead will be the wave 1 local authorities, and Staffordshire, Hammersmith and Fulham, and Hartlepool will join wave 2, starting in spring 2024.

## People with lived experience

We are committed to hearing from and responding to the wishes and feelings of children, young people, parents and families, and a wide range of people with lived experience beyond our consultation as we continue to design policy and deliver our reforms. We know that it is important that the voices of those with care experience and lived experience of care, as well as those working in the sector, are heard throughout the reform period.

We established the National Implementation Board and policy focused reference groups, which include people with lived experience of the children's social care system representing a wide range of experiences. These groups continue to challenge and support delivery of the reform programme. People with lived experience are also members of the National Practice Group, which plays an integral role in supporting the government to set national direction for practice in local authority children's social care.

During our consultation period and as part of our wider engagement, we held sessions with family members including birth parents, kinship carers and adopters. We will continue to grow this engagement throughout the implementation of the reform programme.

Children, young people, parents, families, and other people with lived experience have a vital part to play in our vision to transform children's social care. We want their voices to be at the core of our work as we progress policy development and delivery both at a national and local level. Policy teams, including those working on pathfinders, kinship care, adoption, support for care leavers and those leading on standards for supported education, are all capturing children, young people and people with lived experience's views as part of their policy development and delivery.

We are establishing a Children and Young People's Advisory Board (working title) expected to launch in early 2024, to continue to build on this commitment. We are taking time to establish the board to ensure it has meaning and impact and that we help those who participate in it to develop skills and experiences that will benefit them in the future too. A supplier will support us with this work and we will announce who this will be later in the Autumn. In the interim, we have awarded contracts to Barnardo's and Coram Voice who are working alongside policy officials to facilitate engagement sessions and focus groups with care leavers and experienced young people on a range of policy proposals outlined in the strategy over 12 months to Spring 2024.

We are grateful to sector colleagues who continue to support and challenge us to develop this work and actively demonstrate our commitment to engaging those with lived experience. We are committed to learning from where this engagement is already being done well.

## Funding

In February, we announced £200 million funding alongside the ‘Built on Love’ strategy, which is being used to address urgent issues over this Spending Review period and set the path for longer-term reform. We will test some of the most complex reforms to assess the impact of new measures and learn from our approach to inform future decision making at all levels. In particular, we will be learning through co-design through our Families First for Children and RCC Pathfinder programmes.

This funding is on top of:

- £142 million we will invest by 2024 to 2025 to take forward reforms to unregulated provision in children’s social care
- £160 million we will invest over the next 3 years to deliver our Adoption Strategy
- £259 million over this Spending Review period we are investing to maintain capacity and expand provision in secure and open residential children’s homes
- £230 million over this Spending Review period to support young people leaving care

The 2022 Autumn Statement secured an additional £1.3bn in 2023 and 2024 and £1.9bn in 2024 to 2025 to help local authorities with pressures on their children’s and adult social care budgets. This will be allocated through the Social Care Grant.

The government is committed to investing in key areas for all families, including more targeted support for families who need it. We have already announced over £1billion for programmes to improve early help services, including delivering on Family Hubs and helping families facing multiple-disadvantage through the Supporting Families programme, and Holiday Activities and Food programme. The NHS is investing additional funding in children and young people’s mental health as part of the Long-Term Plan, rising to £900 million in 2023-24. Access has increased in these services by around 35% since 2019/20. This includes through new Mental Health Support Teams in education settings which now cover 3.4m (35%) of pupils in England.

We will reflect on the recommendations set out in the Family Review by the Office of the Children’s Commissioner and publish our response to this review in due course. We will also consider recommendations set out by the Archbishops’ Commission on Families and Households, entitled ‘Love Matters’.

## Collaboration

We recognise that successful delivery of this whole system reform for children’s social care will require alignment with wider reforms for children and families, including SEND, Alternative Provision (AP) and childcare. The [Government response to the final report of](#)

[the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse](#) sets out our cross-government commitment to prevent, protect and support victims and survivors of child sexual abuse.

We are responding to the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel who published phase 2 of its review of the abuse and neglect suffered by children and young adults in 3 privately-run children's homes operated by Hesley Group, in Doncaster. Many of the failures identified by the Panel are parts of the system that we are already beginning to reform. The events in these homes bring into even sharper focus our reforms in SEND and AP, children's social care and in the NHS Long-Term Plan to improve the lives of disabled children.

We all have a role to play in protecting vulnerable children. Within DfE, we are continuing to make sure that at every level there is sustained and considered join up between children's social care, schools, skills and the SEND and AP system. We have explored strengthening the role of education (colleges, schools and early years settings) in our consultation on Working Together, consulting a wide range of voices across the care, further education and higher education sectors on how best an accreditation scheme for higher and further education providers could be delivered, and expanding our Virtual School Heads programme for children in care and care leavers. From August 2023, we have raised the care leaver apprenticeship bursary from £1,000 to £3,000.

We will continue to work across government departments to co-design and deliver our reforms, for example, through the Families First for Children and Regional Care Cooperatives Pathfinder and the statutory guidance Working Together to Safeguard Children. With NHS England, we are jointly leading work with partners across government and with wider stakeholders to develop, commission and deliver joint children's social care and health support for children in the most complex situations. This includes sustaining the implementation of the Framework for Integrated Care (SECURE STAIRS)<sup>2</sup> in the children and young people secure estate in England. We are supporting the work of NHS England and integrated care boards (ICBs) towards meeting the [Long-Term Plan](#) commitments set out for children and young people with mental health needs, learning disability, autism, and those involved with the justice system. We also continue to work in close partnership with the Home Office with regards to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

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<sup>2</sup> This framework aims to support trauma-informed care and formulation-driven, evidence-based, whole-systems approaches to creating change for children in these secure environments and focuses on a 'formulation' approach which considers the child or young person's life experience, rather than concentrating on labels, categories, diagnoses, or settings.



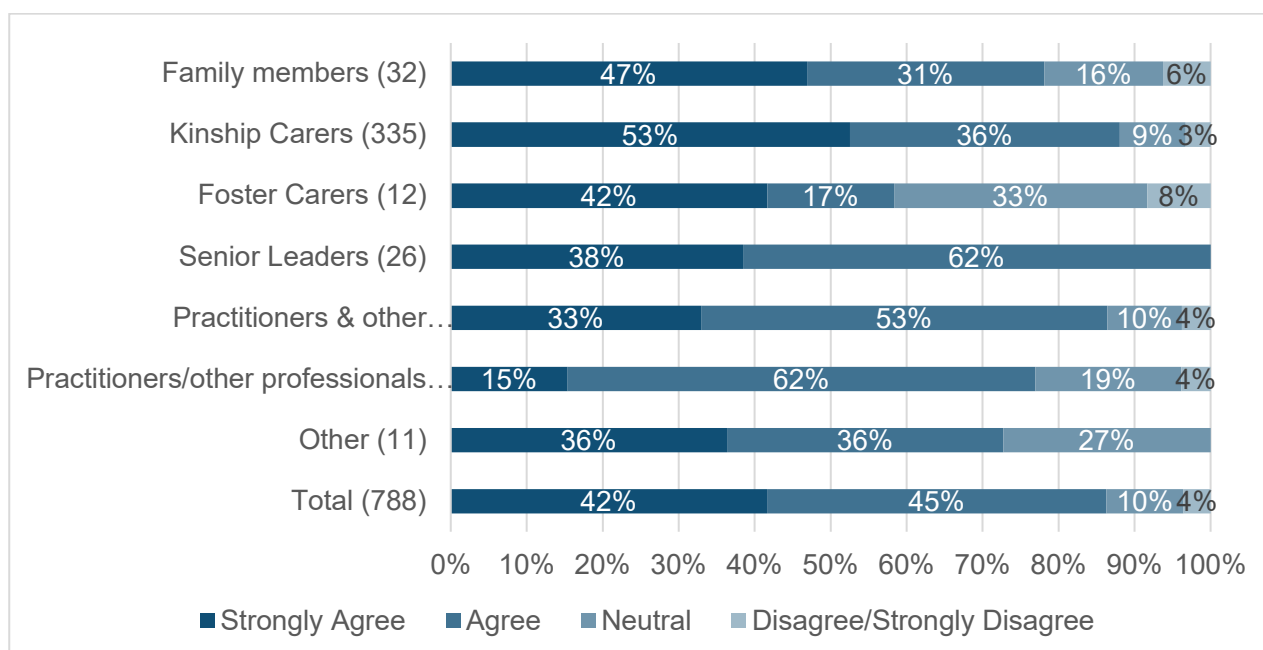
Ministers from across Whitehall will continue to steer and monitor our overall policy direction through multiple cross-government forums, such as the Child Protection Ministerial Group and the Care Leavers Board. We are also pleased to say that since the publication of our strategy, Minister Mercer has been appointed as Cross-Government Care Leaver Lead, supporting DfE to drive the care leaver agenda across government and with our stakeholders in the public and private sectors.

## Our vision, and making reform work for everyone

At the core of the ‘Built on Love’ implementation strategy are 6 pillars of reform. These pillars seek to address urgent issues facing children and families now, laying the foundations for whole system reform and setting national direction for change.

The consultation showed widespread support for the pillars. Approximately 87% (680 out of 788 responses) of respondents agreed (45%) or strongly agreed (42%) that the pillars are the right ones on which to base our reforms for children’s social care. This compares to 4% who disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 10% of respondents who provided a neutral response. Agreement tended to be stronger from respondents who were family members and kinship carers.

**Figure 1: Quantitative analysis of responses to question 7: Overall, to what extent do you agree these 6 pillars are the right ones on which to base our reforms for children’s social care?**



Source: DfE Consultation responses May 2023. Base: 788 respondents<sup>3</sup>

We welcome respondents' support on the emphasis on love and relationships in the strategy, and the prioritisation of a family first approach, including the emphasis on early help, the involvement of family networks in supporting and caring for children, young people and families, and recognition of the value of kinship care. In addition, respondents were encouraged by the focus on multi-agency approaches, including proposals to make education a fourth safeguarding partner, and to celebrate the value of social workers.

“Relationships are the bedrock of the human experience and what enables people to thrive” – a practitioner with lived experience

The respondents that disagreed that the pillars were the right ones raised a need for greater recognition of the context outside the social care system, such as economic and inflationary pressures. Respondents emphasised the importance of adequate, sustained, and consistent funding and consideration of reform in the context of local authority financial deficit. There were also calls for a focus to improve financial support to enable families to continue to care for their children.

“We need funding and better services. We need things like better early intervention with families as the threshold is really high. Yes, we should have good social workers, a culture and system that learns and changes. Love and a stable home should definitely be key. The missing pillar is more funding.” – foster carer

We recognise the financial constraints local areas are facing. Building on investment secured in the 2021 Spending Review, we are investing an additional £200 million into reform for children's social care by 2024 to 2025, including investment for testing innovative new approaches to find more efficient and sustainable models of delivery that can offer better outcomes for children and families. In this first phase of reform until the end of this spending review, we will continue to assess the evidence base for reform, including how to best use funding to achieve ambitious outcomes for children and families.

On a year-by-year basis, children's social care services are funded through the Local Government Finance Settlement. In the current financial year (2023 to 2024), local authorities have up to £59.7 billion core spending power available – an increase of 9.4% in cash terms on 2022 to 2023. The majority of this funding is not ringfenced in recognition that local authorities are best placed to allocate funding according to local

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<sup>3</sup> Excludes 5 respondents that answered 'don't know'. Caution should be taken when comparing proportional responses across categories with a small number of responses (less than 20). This is the case for the 'Foster Carers' and 'Other' categories.

need. As part of the Settlement, the government is providing local authorities with an additional £1.3 billion to be distributed via the social care grant, ringfenced for adults' and children's social care this year, meaning a total social care grant of £3.85 billion.

In a follow up question, over half of respondents (212 out of 363, 58%) suggested important or additional features they felt were required to achieve the ambitions of the pillars. This included more action to address workforce challenges and more detail on working with other sectors and clarity on multi-agency working. Some suggestions mentioned more focus on specific groups (67 out of 212, 32%), particularly children in kinship care and those that care for them, disabled children, and those with complex needs. We are continuing to make sure that this reform focuses on resetting the system and that children's social care works for everyone.

### **Views of children and young people on the vision and 6 pillars of the strategy**

In our [Guide for Children and Young People](#) we translated the 6 pillars into 6 ambitions for children and young people. These were:

Ambition 1: Family help

Ambition 2: Keeping children safe

Ambition 3: Supporting families to help children

Ambition 4: Make care better for children in care and care leavers

Ambition 5: Children have great social workers

Ambition 6: Improving the whole system for children and families

“I think the 6 ambitions listed are very important and valuable and should improve the lives of young people in or entering care. Support for the families is not talked about enough, so I am glad that is included in the 6 ambitions.” – care leaver

In the consultation we asked children and young people what difference they thought our ambitions will make to the lives of children and families. Nearly half (48%) said the ambitions would make a positive difference, 26% felt it was too soon to tell, and 20% said they don't think they will make any difference to the way things are currently. Some children and young people said additional funding was important to the success of these ambitions. Others mentioned additional support for kinship care, decreasing the turnover of social workers, and more training for practitioners.

Throughout our engagement, children and young people were positive about the ambitions and the strategy as a whole. Some key areas where they felt more could be done included supporting kinship care and keeping siblings together wherever possible.

## Support for disabled children

### Since publication, we have:

- consulted on proposed changes to Working Together to Safeguard Children statutory guidance to strengthen the focus on the needs of disabled children and their families
- convened a joint Children’s Social Care and Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) roundtable with sector experts on disability in May 2023
- announced the first 3 local areas for the Families First for Children Pathfinder which will incorporate a focus on support for disabled children and their families

### In the next 18 months, we will:

- work closely with the Law Commission as they review legislation relating to disabled children, and once complete, receive their recommendations
- begin a review in autumn 2023 and is expected to take between 15 to 20 months to complete

The ‘Built on Love’ strategy emphasised the need for children’s social care to work for everyone. To inform this, the consultation asked what more can be done to make sure that disabled children and young people can access the right types of help and support. Respondents called for improvements in mainstream educational inclusion, foster and residential care options, family support and access to health services. Suggestions were also made about how to develop the accessibility of support and services available to disabled children and young people.

Around half of the respondents (281 out of 575, 49%) said support or services should be improved and two-fifths of respondents (244 out of 575, 42%) described ways in which support and services could be delivered more effectively. For both themes, respondents emphasised the need for more and better access to support. Suggestions included earlier assessment, lowering thresholds to access support, reducing waiting times and providing better information about entitlements.

“[We want...] families of disabled children to be better supported by government, local authorities and service providers to navigate the children’s social care system. They must have access to the right information about the services that are available, legal entitlements to support and how they go about accessing this support.” – A charity

In 2022 we launched the Short Breaks Innovation Fund, to trial new approaches to short breaks support for families with disabled children, with a particular focus on early intervention. Local authorities selected to receive funding will share £30 million over 3 years to trial targeted short breaks support.

One-quarter of respondents expressed concerns about funding (151 out of 575, 26%). They suggested more funding was needed for:

- services for disabled children and young people, including early intervention
- financial support packages or allowances
- educational provision in mainstream and specialised educational settings
- recruitment and training for specialist staff and foster carers
- some said that funding should be ringfenced specifically for this group

Between 2023 and 2026, the government is investing £27.3 million a year in Support for Families with Disabled Children (SFDC) funding to support low-income families raising seriously ill or disabled children in England, by providing small grants to purchase equipment, goods and activities which would otherwise be inaccessible. This funding is currently administered by our delivery partner, the Family Fund Trust.

A fifth of respondents (105 out of 575, 18%), mostly practitioners, professionals and senior leaders, suggested improving assessment and support of disabled children and young people, by promoting a needs-based approach rather than automatically approaching support for these families through solely a standard safeguarding or risk lens.

“It must be a priority to address the current Working Together to Safeguard Children guidance which channels parents and carers of children with learning disabilities down a child protection pathway even if there are no child protection concerns.” – A charity

We have consulted on proposed changes to Working Together to Safeguard Children statutory guidance, to strengthen the focus on practical, non-stigmatising and specific support for disabled children and their families. This will recognise the additional, and often distinctive, pressures facing the whole family. This is the next step in strengthening support for these children and their families, and future changes will take account of the findings of the Law Commission Review of children’s social care legislation for disabled children, together with emerging evidence from the Families First for Children Pathfinder.

A quarter of respondents (mostly practitioners and professionals) highlighted communication between professionals and practitioners, alongside multi-agency working as a key priority. Respondents highlighted the importance of children’s social care reforms aligning with other programmes and reforms taking place across government. The SEND and Alternative Provision Improvement Plan was published one month after ‘Stable Homes, Built on Love’. We recognise how important it is to achieve consistency across these reform programmes. The department is working across government and with stakeholders to make sure that reforms are coherent, there are better services and consistent support for all children and families.

Within the consultation period we convened a joint Children's Social Care and Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) roundtable to hear from sector experts on how we can make our systems, family help and workforce reforms work better for disabled children and their families. The attendees emphasised the importance of a tailored approach for children and families entitled to support from social care services. They highlighted that the implementation of the strategy represents an important opportunity to improve and transform how systems provide support for children who have a disability.

Experts also stressed how important it is to make sure that social care support for disabled children and their families is fully integrated with specialist support from health care and education professionals. We will build on the positive engagement and what we heard at the roundtable and continue to engage with stakeholders to inform our policy thinking on what works to support disabled children and their families across the full reform programme.

## **Safeguarding children with disabilities and complex needs in residential settings**

In April 2023, the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel published [Phase 2 of their review into safeguarding children with disabilities and complex needs in residential settings](#). The Panel's report was published after the 'Built on Love' strategy. The review found children suffered appalling abuse and neglect in 3 privately-run children's homes operated by Hesley Group, in Doncaster.

Government is reviewing the recommendations set out by the Panel alongside continuing sector and stakeholder engagement about what action we can take to better help, protect and care for disabled children in England. We are working at pace across government on our response to the Panel's recommendations that we will respond to in due course.

## **Children's rights and equalities**

As part of the implementation strategy, we considered how policy changes may impact children's rights and those who share protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010. Addressing inequalities, protecting, and promoting children's rights and creating a more just system of social care lies at the heart of our reforms.

We asked in the consultation if respondents had any comments on the potential impact of the proposed changes on equalities. The majority of respondents focused on inequalities in the current system and agreed that it was important that equalities are fully considered within the reform programme for the system to provide equal opportunities and access to support. Other respondents emphasised the need for training for practitioners to improve the awareness and understanding of disability and special educational needs. A few respondents commented that the proposed changes as set out in the strategy would

have a positive impact on those who share protected characteristics by improving the whole system.

We also asked respondents about the impact of the proposed changes on children's rights. Half of respondents to this question (97 out of 184, 53%) confirmed the importance of children's rights in the context of these proposals and felt a child-centred approach was necessary within children's social care. Some reiterated that reform needs to consider equality and inclusion. Around a quarter of respondents (41 out of 184, 22%), predominantly kinship carers, expressed that it was important that policy changes include and consider the voices and rights of children, parents, families and carers.

Some respondents, predominantly practitioners, commented on protected characteristics, particularly with views that care experience should be recognised as a protected characteristic. We have heard that care-experienced people face stigma and discrimination. Our ambition remains to extend corporate parenting responsibilities to other government departments and relevant public bodies, subject to legislation (when parliamentary time allows). We believe this will ensure that policies and services that affect children in care and care leavers better take account of the challenges that they face and provide opportunities for them to thrive.

We are committed to considering the impact that reforms have on individuals and groups with protected characteristics and on children's rights. We will continue to update equalities and children's rights assessments for all proposed policy changes, and we will use the pathfinders to assess the impact of new measures and to inform future decision making.

## Family help: support for children and families

### Since publication, we have:

- agreed the first 3 local areas for Wave 1 of the Families First for Children pathfinder programme (announced in July), which will test the implementation of reforms across 4 policy areas:
  - family help
  - child protection
  - safeguarding partners
  - family networks
- started working closely with each area and their partners to co-design a local system of end-to-end reform that will begin in autumn 2023
- announced that we are transferring the Supporting Families programme from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities into the Department for Education from April 2024 - the programme's model of stepping beyond single policy agendas to drive local integration and whole family support will be key for the reforms around family help

### In the next 18 months, we will:

- launch Wave 2 of the pathfinder programme in up to 9 more local areas in 2024
- continue to work closely with Pathfinder areas to support ongoing evaluation, which will provide us with the necessary detail and evidence required to inform further implementation - this will test the future system we want all areas to adopt
- work with local authorities outside of Pathfinders to support their transition to our vision for family help – this will include capturing and cascading best practice from all local authorities, and the development of practice guides

A fundamental element in 'Built on Love' is its vision to provide more meaningful and effective early support and subsequently rebalance children's social care away from costly crisis intervention. This focus on early support and prevention will be tested through the Families First for Children pathfinder.



## What is family help?

We are pathfinding a new approach to family help, building on evidence of what works, that brings together current targeted early help and child in need into a single system in local areas.

Targeted early help describes a service provided to children and families who are identified by practitioners to have multiple or complex needs, or whose circumstances might make them more vulnerable. It is a voluntary service that provides support before statutory intervention is needed and takes a casework approach. A lead practitioner coordinates a whole family assessment to better understand the family's needs and identify the most appropriate support for the child, young person or family. Child in need refers to the statutory support provided under section 17 of the Children Act 1989.

## A single family help service

Respondents were largely supportive of the proposal of a single family help service. Half the respondents to this question (382 out of 747, 51%) were fully supportive of the proposal for a single family help service (51%) and a further third were somewhat supportive (242 out of 747, 32%). Around one-tenth (9%) of respondents were 'neutral' and 7% selected 'somewhat oppose' or 'strongly oppose'.

"I really do hope that this is open to helping more people at an early stage and a step towards helping those in need so that something that maybe small initially doesn't turn into a huge crisis." – Kinship carer

In a follow up qualitative question, one-third of respondents commented on the benefits of family help (146 out of 416, 35%). This included increasing continuity of support for children, young people and families, which would reduce gaps in support and repetitive assessments. Respondents spoke about family help reducing the stigma of family support and encouraging families to engage with services. Some people commented on the value of multi-disciplinary teams enabling support to be effective and joined up.

"This must be more robust; too often 'Early Help' provision is patchy, with no accountability for which agency is providing it." – a multi-agency professional

Around a quarter of respondents to this question highlighted concerns about a single family help service (114 out of 416, 27%). A common concern amongst social workers and professionals was that this would blur the threshold between early help and support for Child in Need Plans, as well as blurring lines between social work practitioner roles. This led to some concerns that help earlier would be more stigmatising and it would reduce the level of support for children in need from qualified practitioners. Linked to this a few respondents asked for more detail about how the service would work in practice, including risk-holding parameters and clarity around the roles of family help workers and social workers.

Colleagues in the charity sector challenged having national eligibility criteria for family help services, and allowing some local discretion was felt to be important. We welcome the responses regarding local discretion. We will use Pathfinders to test how we can effectively set clearer guidance at a national level on the children and families that should be supported by Family Help. Local authorities will have some additional flexibility to determine if that is an appropriate course of action and will of course need to ensure they are prioritising the welfare and safety of children.

## **Delivery of a single family help service**

Over half of respondents (229 out of 416, 55%) identified important implementation issues for a single family help service. These include features for effective delivery, clarity on workforce issues and multi-agency working. Respondents told us there needs to be sufficient funding and value placed in considering the evidence base and co-production.

Pathfinders have been backed by an additional £45 million investment. They will test how to effectively implement family help in a way that reduces the unnecessary and bureaucratic handovers between services and improves consistency and quality of support for children. In co-design, we will work with local areas to make sure they have arrangements in place to appoint lead practitioners with strong oversight, including social workers, with the right capacity and capability, based on the specific needs of the child.

The family help system will work alongside and in coordination with a wider partnership of support, including universal services, non-state support (such as the voluntary and community sector and faith groups) and other support delivered through a Family Hub network, as part of a local areas' wider support for families. Examples of the support available is wide ranging, but might include for example, support with domestic abuse, mental health support, relationship support, school attendance support. These wider services will be available to children and families whether or not they are receiving support from within the family help system.

Respondents to these questions reflected on additional delivery features they felt were important for the effective delivery of family help in local areas. This included staff being able to develop effective relationships, engage with children, families and wider family networks and seeking input from children and families in the service. Respondents also spoke about the accessibility of support and services, including therapeutic and trauma-informed support, and basing the service in a local community. They also spoke about the importance of support being available to the children, young people, families and carers that need it, including kinship carers particularly mentioning financial support here. We welcome these responses, and they will be considered in the development of the family help model to be tested in Pathfinders.

Through our engagement events, we heard examples of good practice in children's social care already taking place. People showed welcome interest in the progress of the Family First for Children pathfinder and a request for transparency about the outcomes and evaluation of this. We are commissioning an independent evaluation of the Families First

for Children pathfinder. Evaluation reports detailing findings and policy recommendations will be published throughout the evaluation.

## Lead practitioners

We asked respondents what they thought were the top 3 features of existing early help that make it a supportive service for families.

The most selected features for this question were:

- people with the right knowledge and skills to help (selected by 382 respondents)
- a strong relationship with a key worker (370)
- designed with the input of children and families (363)

Other features that were seen as important included services being based in local communities, and being able to access the right type of support was also selected by a high number of respondents as their first choice (110 and 76 respectively).

We want to bring the ethos of targeted early help into child in need and this includes greater flexibility around who can be a lead practitioner – based on the principle of the right person at the right time to build a relationship with the family, who also has the right skills, knowledge, experience and oversight. Alongside developing the family help model for Pathfinders, we have used Working Together 2023 to consult on enabling a broader range of practitioners to carry out direct work with children and their families where support is provided under section 17 of the Children Act 1989 and with appropriate safeguards in place to identify risks of harm.

### Views of children and young people on family help

Throughout our engagement, children and young people told us that their relationships with practitioners can provide safety and assurance, particularly in the absence of a family network. Positive, consistent relationships with practitioners are vital and Early Help practitioners were often a consistent presence in young people's lives and this mattered significantly to them.

In the consultation we asked children and young people which trusted adult they would recommend to a friend, if their friend told them they were having serious difficulties with their family at home and they wanted help. We received a total of 57 responses.

Almost half of the young people who answered (47%) said they would trust a teacher or a member of their school staff because they are independent of the family. Family and friends were also suggested as a trusted adult. Just under a third of respondents named another professional, these roles included a doctor, a youth worker and a social worker. Just under a fifth of respondents named an external charity, such as Childline, Barnardo's or the NSPCC. A few respondents mentioned foster carers.

## Working with families

We heard how people would like clarity on how the Supporting Families programme and Family Hubs will be complementary to one another and how these feed into wider plans for family networks. We welcome these comments and can confirm we are working across government to have more systematic and strategic join up in support for families, including gathering learning from existing programmes such as Strengthening Families, Protecting Children, Supporting Families, and from initial Family Hubs delivery. We have recently announced the Supporting Families programme will be moving into the Department for Education to bring together the end-to-end system of support – from Family Hubs through to Children’s Social Care – enabling services to be designed around the needs of children and families, in the communities where they are needed.

Government has invested heavily in place-based planning and delivery of joined up family services and is committed to implementing the Family Hub model. We will use the pathfinder programme to explore and test how the family help system and the local family hub network – where they are established or being established – can be fully integrated as part of the wider support and protection offer for families.

Charity sector respondents highlighted the importance of tailoring support for children with SEND. This includes helping families to navigate the services available to them. Respondents told us of the need to closely align the reform programmes across SEND and children’s social care to help local authorities navigate the changes in the round. Parents helped us to better understand the barriers experienced by the families of children with disabilities and the challenges they face in accessing the right support in a timely manner and whether these could be improved in a family help system.

Central to the Families First for Children pathfinder programme is developing a supportive, non-judgemental service that is tailored to meet the needs of children and families. This includes children with disabilities, recognising that these families may require support with accessing the right help. We will work closely with pathfinder areas to develop and test different approaches to supporting children with disabilities, including exploring more flexible and tailored approaches to assessment for this cohort.

We will put children and family voice at the heart of family help and have therefore tried to use best practice from across the country to inform the design of family help. We will work closely with Pathfinder areas to have the right systems in place to do this.

## Child protection

### Since publication, we have:

- run a consultation on Working Together to Safeguard Children statutory guidance that includes new national multi-agency child protection standards and principles for effective working with parents and carers
- commissioned an evaluation of the multi-agency arrangements in local areas such as multi-agency safeguarding hubs (MASH) that triage referrals, which will start in autumn 2023
- published multi-agency practice principles to support responses to child exploitation and extra familial harm, through the Tackling Child Exploitation Support Programme
- recently invested an additional £10m to test new initiatives to reduce family court delays in public law cases

### In the next 18 months, we will:

- use learning from the Risk Outside the Home report (due in Autumn 2023), to inform expectations for effective multi-agency responses to extra-familial harm and exploitation in the wave 2 pathfinder areas and more widely
- work closely with the Families First for Children Pathfinder areas to determine how to implement effective multi-agency child protection teams, embed the role of the lead child protection practitioner and implement effective parental representation in child protection
- support all agencies, organisations and individuals to play their full role in helping, supporting and protecting children through annual updates to Working Together to Safeguard Children statutory guidance

The Care Review and National Panel Review were clear that we need a decisive and effective child protection system that quickly identifies the risk of actual or likely significant harm and takes immediate action. In 'Built on Love', we explained that achieving this means:

- implementing better multi-agency working in child protection
- ensuring that the practitioners with the right skills and expertise across agencies work directly with families in child protection
- equipping the system to respond to the complexity of the harms all children face, whether from inside or outside their homes

- supporting parents to understand what is happening and engage with services when there are child protection concerns
- being clear about how the change that is required gives parents the best opportunity to keep their children safe

To build evidence of effective approaches to parental representation to test in the pathfinder, we asked whether respondents had experience of parental representation during child protection processes (either providing it or receiving it).

Only 3% of respondents to this question said they had been involved in a child protection process and had received a form of parental representation (13 out of 375). This compared to 12% who said they were a parent that had been involved in child protection but had not been offered parental representation (45 out of 375). Some respondents (15%) said they had provided or received some advocacy, predominately with family members acting as advocates (58 out of 375).

One third of the respondents to this question (31%) said they or their organisation had provided a form of parental representation and one fifth (20%) said they or their organisation did not provide this (116 and 76 respectively).

In a follow up question, some respondents provided further detail about their experience of parental representation. Two-fifths of respondents to this question were positive about advocacy in supporting parents and carers, helping them understand process and decisions, empowering them and ensuring they are heard during the child protection process (75 out of 185, 40%). They spoke about advocacy provided by family members, representative organisations, local authorities and as part of parent and carer forum and peer-to-peer support. Other benefits of advocacy that were highlighted included reducing the adversarial nature of the process and providing those with learning needs with appropriate support.

“I have used an advocate in the form of an alternate family member which has worked well” - an adult respondent

A quarter of respondents described their own experience and some of the issues for parental representation describing a lack of support and limited assistance from professionals (51 out of 185, 27%).

“I was offered no support whatsoever my overall experience with it was soul destroying and made me feel like I was left with nothing and no one to turn to without being on a [child protection] “plan” and having social services involved felt like I was constantly being watched and judged it was not nice as I had given up my whole life so my siblings were not put into care.” - Kinship carer

Social workers and practitioners who responded highlighted barriers in the child protection processes such as language, parents feeling intimidated by the number of

professionals present in meetings, and limited time available for parents before conferences to reflect and access support.

“I provided support for a parent with diagnosed learning difficulties to a child protection conference. The biggest barrier to her engagement was the language being used by professionals, when I asked them to explain what they meant they looked at me as if I was being awkward, as if I should know what they meant. They really didn’t realise that they were not communicating in a way that was suitable for the parent”- Qualified youth & community development worker

We agree that there is not a consistent approach to parental representation in child protection and we agree with the respondents who mentioned the importance of having trusted practitioners to provide information and support to parents and carers during child protection processes. We also note the experiences of wider family members and others who report a lack of information, support and advocacy, when taking on the care of children where a decision is taken, through child protection planning, that a child cannot safely remain at home.

We will use the responses to inform what models and approaches to parental representation will be tested in the Families First for Children Pathfinder. Throughout implementation, we will engage with local areas, parents, families and multi-agency practitioners to understand their experiences of parental representation and what works to improve experiences and outcomes in child protection. We will contact those respondents who want to share more detailed information about the services they have received or provided so we can understand what good looks like.

Alongside Pathfinders, we want all areas to improve the way parents and wider family networks receive help and support, including in child protection. We have consulted on new principles for working with parents and carers as part of the update to Working Together. The principles are focused on build positive, trusting and co-operative relationships, using language that is clear and respectful, enabling parents and carers to be part of decision-making and involving parents, families and communities in designing the services that they use.

## **Views of children and young people on child protection**

“It needs to be a child-centred approach. Social workers, police, NHS, youth workers all need to be trained on taking children seriously and acting on concerns and following the process through in a supportive, understandable way for the child, and properly listening to what the child needs and how they can be supported”- child/young person

We spoke to children and young people more generally about child protection. They spoke about keeping children with their parents and families where it is safe to do so. Those that we spoke to were supportive of taking a whole family approach and effective working across services and agencies.

Children and young people also felt there should be greater accountability and better retention in the social work workforce for this approach to be successful.

In our wider consultation engagement, people emphasised the need for a relational approach to child protection work and prioritising relationships with whole families. We heard positive views about multi-agency working which was seen as one of the most important factors for creating a better child protection system. People also felt that knowledge and experience are vital to delivering effective child protection practice.

We agree there needs to be expertise and experience in front-line practice to work directly with children and families and make crucial child protection decisions. This is why we will use the Pathfinders to test a new Lead Child Protection Practitioner role, working alongside family help practitioners and within the new multi-agency child protection teams.

We have heard mixed views on this new role. Local authority leaders said it could be difficult to recruit to and they felt child protection knowledge, skills and expertise were necessary for all social workers working with families across the system of help, support and protection so harm can be identified early, and decisive action taken. We agree with the importance of child protection expertise across the system. We will test the specific functions and requirements of the role across the system through the Families First for Children Pathfinder programme, to answer key questions about how this could work best on the ground.



## Support for kinship carers and wider family networks

### Since publication, we have:

- announced local areas that will be taking part in the Families First for Children pathfinder and Family Networks pilot - these programmes will be testing how Family Network Support Packages can help family networks overcome financial and practical barriers in supporting children to live with their birth parents
- extended legal aid entitlements to prospective guardians making applications for Special Guardianship Orders (SGO) in private family law proceedings from 1st May 2023
- strengthened guidance on engaging Family Networks and use of Family Group Conferences through updates to Working Together

### In the next 18 months, we will:

- publish a national kinship care strategy by the end of 2023
- launch a national kinship training, information and advice service by Spring 2024, backed by the £9 million investment announced in 'Built on Love'
- set out next steps on extending additional workplace entitlements for kinship carers with a special guardianship order (SGO) or child arrangement order (CAO), as well as the case for introducing a financial allowance for kinship carers with SGOs and CAOs in every local authority

'Built on Love' recognises that family networks can play an invaluable role in supporting families and enabling children to live safely with their parents or extended family. Pillar 3 of the strategy focused on unlocking the potential of family networks by creating a "family first culture" by prioritising family-led solutions.

### Family First Culture

We asked respondents how they thought we could make a success of embedding a 'family first' culture. Over a third of the respondents identified aspects of social worker practice that they thought were important to creating this culture (232 out of 597, 39%). This included the use of Family Group Conferences (FGC), engaging and listening to families, and involving wider family networks as early as possible. We agree that these are significant factors and welcome this confirmation of the priorities in 'Built on Love'.

We have strengthened guidance on family network engagement and FGCs in statutory guidance - Working Together to Safeguard Children, to enable more consistency across local authorities in this area and encourage earlier engagement with family networks.

Just under a third of respondents described the importance of support for families and kinship carers (189 out of 597, 32%). A main area identified was the equity needed between kinship and foster carers particularly financial support and long-term support after a child or young person goes to live with kinship carers.

“Levelling up the benefits and advice given to foster care [to] those in kinship care.” -  
Kinship carer

We recognise that kinship carers often need to manage complex family dynamics. It was identified that better support for kinship carers and the children they care for is important to stop further family breakdowns.

“I do think that to help family to step in more, it may be helpful for them to know what support can be put in place for them to give the child the best outcome, offering training to family members so that they have a better understanding.” -  
Kinship carer

We recognise the importance of support for children and young people in kinship care and for kinship carers. We committed to introducing Family Network Support Packages through the Family First for Children Pathfinder and the Family Networks Pilot. These Packages will include practical and financial support to enable extended family networks to provide additional and substantial care for children when it is in their best interests and prevent them from entering the care system unnecessarily. This can include supporting children to live with parents with family support, where it is safe to do so.

Some respondents commented on the importance of training and support for social workers in enabling them to put families first, including relationship-based practice and understanding family networks. In addition, a few respondents mentioned that a family first approach was already being delivered in some local areas and commented that it was important to make this more consistent nationally.

“There is a negative attitude towards kinship which is happening within areas of education, health, and society. Their lack of vision and behaviour, their attitudes and preferences sadly reflect the negative response to a kinship family. People and services need to be educated to help them understand that kinship relationship should be embraced and seen as a victory not another cause for embarrassment!” – Kinship carer

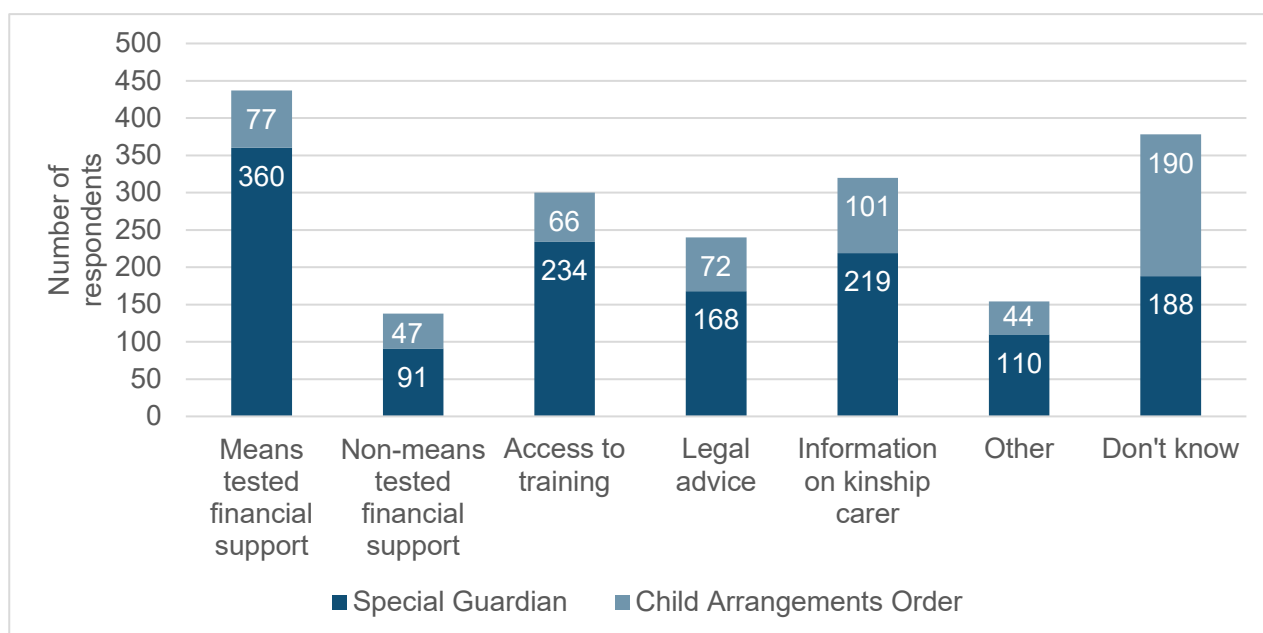
We are due to publish a Kinship Care Strategy by the end of 2023 which will set out our vision for kinship care. We see this as a pivotal moment for kinship care and will provide more detail on how national and local government can promote and support kinship care more effectively. In the revised Children’s Social Care National Framework, we will strengthen references and clarify expectations on the importance of engaging with family networks.

## Support for Kinship Carers

To get a better understanding of the current support being offered to kinship carers, the consultation asked respondents what support their local authority provides to Special Guardians or to a non-parental party with a Child Arrangements Order. The most common support identified by respondents was means tested financial support, which was most commonly offered more to carers with a Special Guardianship Order (SGOs) than carers with a Child Arrangements Orders (CAOs). Non-means tested support was reported by much fewer respondents. Other forms of non-financial support reported by a significant number of respondents included information for kinship carers, access to training and legal advice.

Over a quarter of respondents who provided further detail mentioned that their local authority provided no support. This prompted concerns that kinship carers are left to navigate the process of becoming a kinship carer, and provide a loving stable home, without help from their local authority.

**Figure 2: Quantitative analysis of responses to question 16: What support does your local authority provide to Special Guardians or to a non-parental party with a Child Arrangements Order?**



Source: DfE Consultation responses May 2023 Base: 655 respondents

We recognise that information, advice and support for kinship carers varies significantly across the country, this is why we have made a commitment to invest up to £9 million during this Spending Review period, which will establish a national training and support offer that all kinship carers can access if they wish to, regardless of where they live, as well as exploring the case for mandating a financial allowance for kinship carers with SGOs and CAOs in every local authority.

The consultation asked respondents for their views on what would be the most helpful forms of support that could be provided to a family network, in order to enable them to step in to provide care for their kin. Three-quarters of respondents to this question (471 out of 631, 75%) told us support for family members and access to professionals, housing support, and therapeutic support which could help behaviour management and support a child or young person's mental health would be supportive for a family network.

A key theme across this question, and the consultation as a whole, was financial support for kinship carers. Many of the kinship carers who responded commented on the differences between the reduced financial support given to kinship carers compared to the financial support given to foster carers, which made some kinship carers feel less valued. They call for financial support for kinship care to mirror that for foster care.

“We feel it is important that kinship families are given the same attention and support as foster and adoptive families as we are doing the same job as them, just because we may be family we are still giving up full time employment to bring the best, safe outcomes for our children who just happen to be family.” – Kinship carer

We have committed to explore the case for introducing a financial allowance for kinship carers with SGOs and CAOs in every local authority. We will provide an update on this in the Kinship Strategy, due to be published at the end of 2023.

A quarter of respondents also emphasised the importance of engagement and mediation methods for family networks (156 out of 641, 24%). Respondents told us family network meetings and/or Family Group Conferencing could support open and honest communication around the needs of the child. Respondents also told us consultation with family members would help, as would mediation and facilitation. Respondents also said that sharing information and earlier involvement or intervention would help.

### **Views of children and young people on wider family networks**

Through our engagement, young people told us that they felt wider family networks were important. Young people want to feel a part of a family, but their definition of family is broader and can include distant relatives, friends (often one of their most important relationships), close siblings, mentors, emergency contacts etc. They felt professionals should work directly with children to support them with building these family networks during and beyond their time in care.

Young people were particularly concerned about sibling separation, and the maintenance of these relationship being prioritised. They felt that far too often siblings are separated with little/no explanation to the children as to why this is happening. A recurring theme from those we engaged was that sibling separation should be a last resort and if it has to happen, the process should be more transparent and include a real social worker focus on preserving the important relationships between siblings.

During the consultation period we engaged more than 100 kinship carers directly. To build on this, the department has established a new Kinship Carer Reference Group to inform the development of the kinship strategy. We have also spoken with a range of charities, social workers, academics and other professionals to take their view on the proposed reforms.

Our proposed changes for family networks and kinship care have received a predominantly positive response. The kinship carers we engaged were optimistic about the changes and acknowledged the progress that has been made since the Care Review. However, similar to the response to the consultation, there was a shared agreement that kinship carers need greater support from children's social care professionals practically, financially and emotionally, ideally aligning with the support foster carers currently receive. We also heard that this support needs to be consistent across the country.

## Definition of kinship care

'Built on Love' included a working definition of kinship care and we committed to consulting on this definition so that it reflects the voices of people with lived experience of kinship care.

"A legal definition would enable carers to ask for appropriate aid and services" – Kinship carer

Most respondents were fully supportive or somewhat supportive of the working definition of kinship care. Just under three-fifths of respondents (406 out of 716, 57%) were fully supportive of the definition and just over a quarter (205 out of 716, 29%) were somewhat supportive. One-tenth of respondents selected neutral and 5% were somewhat opposed or strongly opposed to the definition (72 and 33 respectively).

Respondents told us that the definition should have further input from children and their families. Some respondents also felt that a clearer definition was needed and further guidance for how this definition would work in practice and how it would relate to access to support. We agree with this, and have engaged birth parents, kinship carers and kinship foster carers as well as children and young people in the consultation process and will continue to do so. We are now considering the working definition in light of the important feedback we received via the consultation and from the Kinship Carer Reference Group.

A finalised definition that takes into account this feedback will be published in the kinship strategy. Further detail on the establishment and use of this definition will be provided alongside this. We see this as a pivotal moment for kinship care and will be an opportunity to make real and lasting change. The strategy will be informed using this consultation and further engagement to reflect the voices of kinship carers.

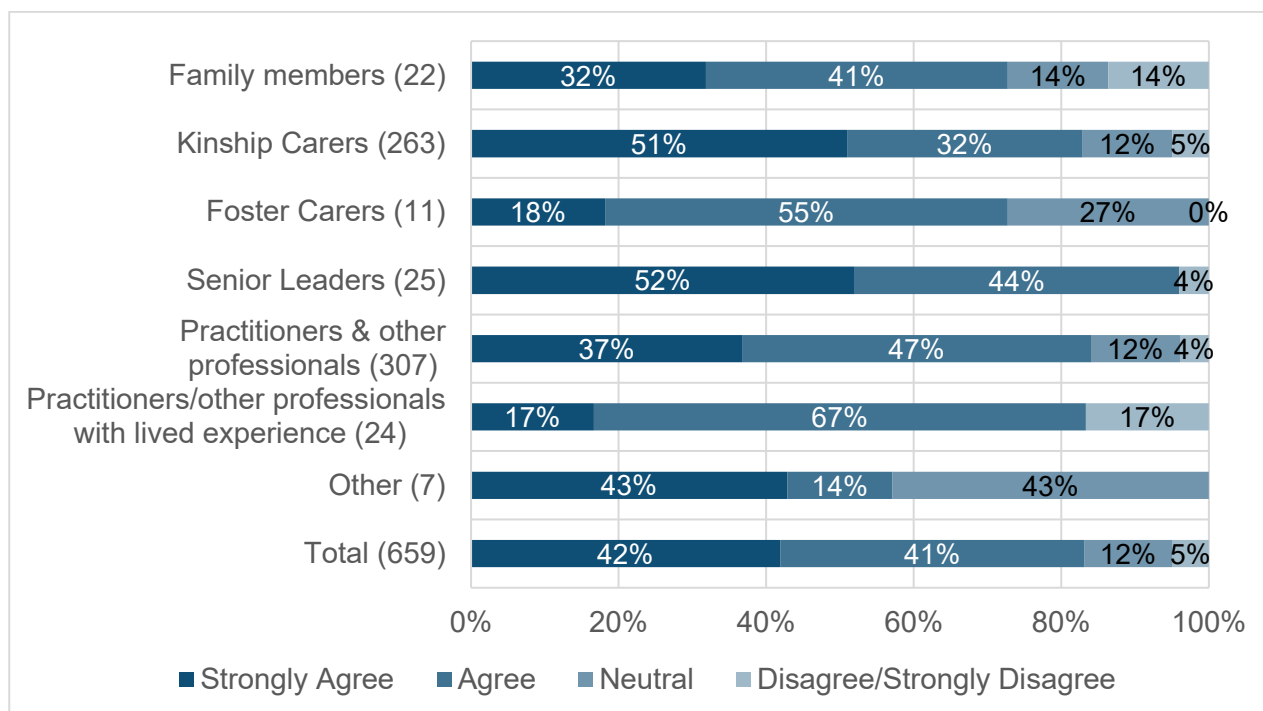
# Transforming the experience of being a child in care or care leaver

## Six key missions

‘Built on Love’ was clear on the importance of providing children in care with stable, loving homes close to their communities. To achieve this, we must prioritise loving and safe relationships for children alongside being world-class corporate parents. We must also be ambitious for our children in care and care leavers. We set out how we will track our progress through six key missions to transform experiences of care.

There was broad support in the consultation for these missions. 83% (548 out of 659) of respondents agreed (41%) or strongly agreed (42%) that the missions are the right ones to address the challenges in the system. Just over one-tenth (12%) of respondents provided a neutral response (‘neither agree nor disagree’) and only 5% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

**Figure 3: Quantitative analysis of responses to question 18: Overall, to what extent do you agree that the 6 key missions are the right ones to address the challenges in the system?**



Source: DfE Consultation responses May 2023. Base: 659 respondents<sup>45</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Excludes 12 respondents who answered, “Don’t Know”.

<sup>5</sup> Caution should be taken when comparing proportional responses across categories with a small number of responses (less than 20). This is the case for the ‘Foster Carers’ and ‘Other’ categories.

In a follow-up question, respondents were able to provide further detail to their answer. Some respondents who were supportive of the missions also suggested further adaptations (111 out of 263, 42%). These included improving the recruitment and retention of foster carers, children's home staff and social workers. Respondents also mentioned support for relationships with birth families, including reunification. We are working with Foundations, What Works Centre for Children and Families. We have asked Foundations to scope the potential for building the evidence base around successful reunification and local authority practice in this area.

“The weakening of relationships with birth families is one factor why care leavers are more likely to be unemployed, homeless, ill etc.” – Family member

One fifth of the respondents (59 out of 263, 22%) to this question supported the missions but also emphasised the need for sufficient and consistent financial commitments to underpin implementation. Funding was mentioned particularly in relation to recruiting social workers, financial support for carers, developing high-quality placements and supporting staff training. Some respondents (47 out of 263, 18%) felt more detail was needed on implementation of the missions, particularly in regard to measurements of success and how the changes will look in practice. The proposed timelines for implementation of the missions were also mentioned, and respondents' views were polarised. Some said that action is needed before 2027, while others saw that target as unrealistic.

“Strongly agree they are the right ones however they will only be effective if followed up by the resources and actions to enable them to happen.” - Senior Leader

Outcomes for care leavers are significantly poorer than those of their peers. Our missions and ambitions set out in 'Built on Love', aim to improve outcomes across a range of areas including education, training and employment, housing, mental health and relationships. The Department for Education is providing over £230 million over this spending review to support young people leaving care with housing, access to education, employment and training, and to help them develop social connections and networks to avoid loneliness and isolation.

While local authorities will remain responsible for fulfilling their legal duties towards Looked After Children and care leavers (as set out in the Children Act 1989), we believe other government departments and relevant public bodies can also play an important role in improving their experiences and outcomes. Our ambition is to extend corporate parenting responsibilities to other government departments and relevant public bodies. We believe this will ensure that policies and services that affect children in care and care leavers better take account of the challenges that they face and provide opportunities for them to thrive. This ambition is supported through the Care Leaver Inter Ministerial Board, chaired by Secretaries of State for DLUHC and DfE, and with Ministerial representation from all other relevant government departments. Minister Mercer has

been appointed as the Cross-Government Care Leaver Lead. In this role, he is supporting DfE to drive the care leaver agenda across government, and with stakeholders in the public and private sectors.

Respondents also emphasised the importance of improving health services for children in care and care leavers, particularly mental health and trauma support. Their suggestions included easier access to health services, prioritisation on waiting lists, better joined up working between health services and local authorities, and free prescriptions for care leavers. Mental health and trauma support was also mentioned as a key skill for practitioners and professionals working with children and families, particularly children and young people who have experience of the care system.

DfE is working closely with DHSC to update the statutory guidance, 'Promoting the health and wellbeing of looked-after children', so it sets out clear expectations of support for the physical and mental health and wellbeing of children in care and care leavers. This guidance applies widely to the public bodies and practitioners that have a role in this area, including local authorities, NHS England and Integrated Care Boards. We will extend the guidance to cover care leavers up to age 25, and we will explore how it can support access to health services, treatment, and support.

We will also incorporate findings from recent research into the emotional wellbeing needs of care leavers, and we will increase access and take up of training by all practitioners and professionals working with children in care and care leavers to help them spot the signs and respond when a child or young person needs mental health support. These actions will help consistent provision across England that meets the needs and addresses the particular barriers experienced by children in care and care leavers.

During our consultation period and as part of our wider engagement, we have heard from care experienced people. We are continuing to work with Barnardo's and Coram Voice who are facilitating a range of focussed policy sessions with care leavers and care experienced people. We are establishing a Children and Young People's Advisory Board expected to launch in early 2024, to include the views of children and young people in policy development and delivery.



## Views of children and young people on care experiences

“Care and love is the most important thing...young people need much more than [a spare room] for it to be a successful home” – Child/young person

In the consultation we asked children and young people whether they thought missions for children in care and care leavers are the right things to focus on. Over three-quarters selected ‘yes’ (76%), and just under a quarter selected ‘no’ (24%).

Those that provided detail mentioned that kinship and special guardianship carers should be recognised for the support they give children and young people. Other suggestions included more focus on mental health and trauma informed support, more support for carers, and freeing up social workers’ time so they can spend it with children and families and more training for professionals.

*“Care experienced people are humans too!”- Child/young person*

During the consultation, children and young people spoke to us about needing to change the perceptions of social care. They were frustrated that unfair stereotypes around care experience still exist. They explained that terminology and labelling needs to change, and said that media portrayals perpetuate negative stereotypes and assumptions about low aspirations and intelligence. They felt that the government should do all it can to remove any negative stigma attached to either being in care or being a care experienced young person.

“It shouldn’t be surprising when care experienced people achieve!” – Child/young person

## Strong and loving relationships

### Since publication, we have:

- launched the bidding round for Local Authorities to apply for grant funding to deliver family finding, befriending and mentoring programmes for children in care and care leavers in their locality
- started working with a further 27 local authorities to deliver the Staying Close Programme to enhance the support package for young people leaving care from children's homes and other forms of residential care

### In the next 18 months, we will:

- continue to explore how we can best develop and enhance the currently funded programmes of Staying Close, Staying Put and the work to end rough sleeping to improve the lives of care leavers

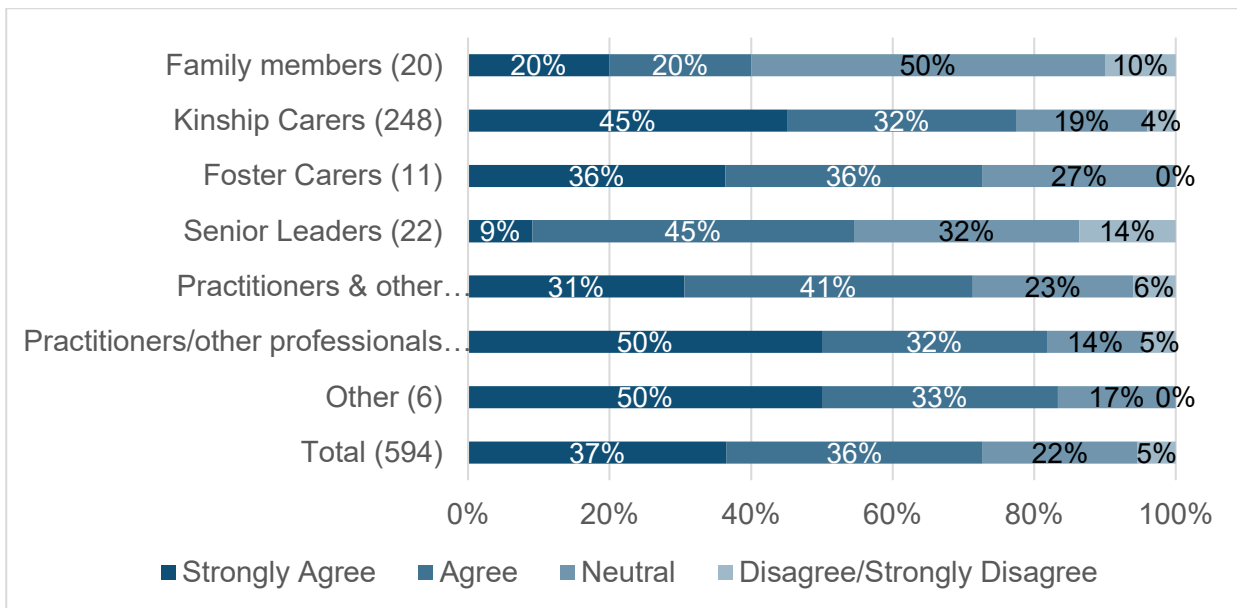
Our first mission is for children in care and care leavers to have and maintain loving relationships with people who are important to them. This includes our aspiration that by 2027, every care-experienced child and young person will feel that they have strong, loving relationships in place. DfE is providing funding to significantly increase the number of local authorities with family finding, befriending and mentoring programme. These programmes will help children in care and care leavers to identify and connect with the important people in their lives and create safe, stable, loving relationships.<sup>6</sup>

As part of this mission we consulted on levels of interest in a lifelong guardianship order, as a way for care experienced people to legally formalise a lifelong bond with someone they care about. Respondents to this question were largely in support of lifelong legal bonds with over two-thirds either agreeing (215 out of 524, 36%) or strongly agreeing (217 out of 524, 37%) that a care-experienced person would want to be able to form such a bond. Just over one-fifth (130 out of 524, 22%) of respondents provided a neutral response and 5% disagreed or strongly disagreed (32 out of 524). Respondents also mentioned support for relationships with birth families.

**Figure 4: Quantitative analysis of responses to question 19: To what extent do you agree or disagree that a care experienced person would want to be able to form a lifelong legal bond with another person?**

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<sup>6</sup> [Family finding, befriending and mentoring programmes: application guide for local authorities - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/612222/family-finding-befriending-and-mentoring-programmes-application-guide-for-local-authorities.pdf)



Source: DfE Consultation responses May 2023. Base: 594 respondents<sup>78</sup>.

We asked respondents what they felt the benefits and disadvantages would be for a lifelong legal bond. Almost two-thirds of respondents to this question identified positive impacts (278 out of 430, 65%). Most of these respondents felt it would give people with care experience a feeling of security, stability and belonging through adulthood, like that felt by those without care experience. A few respondents suggested the legal bond may be able to provide legal rights such as next of kin, inheritance and property rights and mortgage guarantor.

“It’s everything. When you’re living with a family who aren’t biologically your own, you’re always worried they might leave, or you don’t belong, and it brings up a lot of feelings and concerns...making this an option for care experienced people is SO important. Speaking from experience. This is my situation, and it would be so, so reassuring and really improve my emotional well-being and quality of life” – A care experienced person

Over two-fifths of respondents identified potential disadvantages of the lifelong bond model (191 out of 430, 44%). The most prominent concern was about the risk of the relationship breaking down in the future and the impact this might have on the person with care experience. Respondents also raised the possible impact on foster carers who care for multiple young people, including financial impacts or increased responsibilities. These concerns lead to suggestions that this type of legal bond should be optional as it

<sup>7</sup> Excludes 56 respondents that answered ‘don’t know’.

<sup>8</sup> Caution should be taken when comparing proportional responses across categories with a small number of responses (less than 20). This is the case for the ‘foster carers’ and ‘other’ categories.

would not be suitable or desired by all care experienced people or carers. There was also concern about the additional work required from social workers and practitioners.

“There would need to be strong vetting process before the bond is made and regular reviews.”- Family member

In some cases, these respondents also called for greater clarity on the aims of the bond, whether it would need to be legally defined, and how it would work for children and young people in respect to their care order.

We have considered the responses to this consultation and recognise the complexity of this proposal, including both benefits and risks. We recognise that risks include the potential for conflict or breakdown of relationships and the implications in the longer term of a permanent legal position. We are currently exploring non-legally binding policy options, which will offer the stability and security of formalising a meaningful relationship but prevent the risks of a legal agreement. Our next steps are to seek further advice as we consider the options further.

## Stable and loving homes

### Since publication, we have:

- started co-designing the North East Fostering Pathfinder to develop a foster care recruitment and retention programme - the 'Foster with North East' Support Hub will be fully operational by September 2023, and we are continuing to work on a regional comms campaign and Mockingbird expansion across the North East
- raised the National Minimum Allowance for Foster Carers by 12.43% and increased the amount of income tax relief available to foster carers
- run engagement sessions with local authorities in all 9 regions to set out our vision for, and seek views on, Regional Care Cooperatives and fostering reforms. We have issued requirements for the Regional Care Cooperative pathfinders and invited regions to apply to set up a pathfinder
- launched the first Residential Childcare Workforce Census which will enhance our understanding of the children's homes workforce
- issued a joint DfE and DLUHC Ministerial Statement to clarify the national policy position on planning applications for new homes for children
- worked with Ofsted on the scope and objectives of a financial oversight regime to monitor and warn of risks of provider failure across the residential care sector for looked after children
- held 5 meetings of our 'expert group' who are helping us develop a set of overarching standards focussed on the individual needs of children in residential care rather than the settings in which they are placed

### In the next 18 months, we will:

- launch a foster care recruitment and retention programme following initial expressions of interest from over 50% of local authorities
- develop a 'National Support Service' for fostering service providers which will provide in-depth diagnostic support of recruitment practices
- work closely with the successful areas to co-design their Regional Care Co-operative operating model ahead of the start of the pathfinder, with a view to having operational Regional Care Co-operative pathfinders in 2024

- deliver national support with forecasting, procurement and market shaping to local authorities - initially, we will commission an external organisation to deliver the support and over time, the function could be subsumed into the RCCs
- develop a programme to support improvements in the quality of leadership of children's homes and continue to progress work on the professional registration of the children's homes workforce, and will explore how best to gather regular data and information about the children's homes workforce
- with NHSE, jointly lead cross-government work to improve how system partners work together to improve outcomes for children who are currently (or at risk of) being deprived of their liberty and who are in the most complex situations

A fundamental part of 'Built on Love' is to provide children and young people in care with stable and loving homes, which is the focus of our second mission. Both the CMA and Care Review found that local authorities often face significant problems with finding suitable homes for children in care to live. There are not enough homes in the right places providing the support that children need, and some children live far from home as a result. They recommended that moving some local authority functions into new regional bodies would help with improving sufficiency and better enable local authorities to meet the needs of the children in their care, including for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and children with the most complex needs.

'Built on Love' committed to co-designing 2 pathfinders to test a regional model for providing homes for children in care, called Regional Care Cooperatives (RCCs). Our vision for RCCs includes them delivering better collaboration with health and justice to improve services for children in care, better and more accurate information to improve planning for care, better economies of scale and better support for foster carers. In the consultation we asked respondents what support they thought was needed to set up and make a success of RCCs. We held 9 regional sessions for local authority Chief Executives, Directors of Children's Services and Lead Members to discuss our proposals for RCCs in more detail and seek their views. We heard that many areas see value in coming together to improve the sufficiency of high-quality care placements across regions.

Almost half of respondents to this question mentioned potential difficulties and challenges of the proposed model (180 out of 372, 48%). Respondents referenced concerns about the size of the RCCs and that, as an organisation, they risk being too far removed from the child or young people person, and may lose relationships with local small providers. Some respondents raised difficulties with aligning budgeting, planning and commissioning practices across multiple local authorities.

In the regional sessions for local authorities, we explained that we were keen to hear more about what a sensible 'footprint' for the Regional Care Co-operative pathfinders would be. We want this to take account of existing partnerships and relationships with local and regional services. It could, for example, align with the footprint for the Integrated Care Board(s) where possible and practical. We remain committed to co-designing the Regional Care Cooperative pathfinders with the sector. Each will have a steering group with representatives from all local authorities involved plus other local and regional services to work through implementation issues. We will also set up an expert group to co-design the overall approach.

Respondents were also sceptical that the Regional Care Cooperatives model would sufficiently address excessive profit-making in the residential care sector.

"We do not believe that Regional Care Cooperatives can be successful in their stated aim of bringing the financial excesses and many other problems caused by the care marketplace under control" – Senior Leader

Regional Care Cooperatives are part of a package of measures that will collectively address key issues in the system, including placement shortages and excess profit-making. This package also includes:

- £259 million of capital funding to maintain capacity and expand provision in both secure and open children's homes
- £27 million to recruit and retain more foster parents.
- implementing the Competition and Markets Authority recommendations on:
  - providing national forecasting, procurement, and market shaping support
  - introducing a financial oversight regime
  - reforming standards of care
- considering changes to ensure that planning requirements, or local interpretation of them, are not a barrier to the creation of more homes for children

Regional Care Cooperatives will operate on a larger scale than individual local authorities, giving them increased buying power and allowing them to use tools such as block-purchasing care places for looked after children. They will establish specialist data capabilities to analyse local authority data across the region to get a greater understanding of children's needs and demand across the area. This will enable more effective planning so that sufficient high-quality provision is available to meet that demand.

One-quarter of respondents provided reasons for their general agreement with the proposal for Regional Care Cooperatives (96 out of 372, 26%). These respondents felt the benefits include:

- providing greater consistency
- reducing disparities in care practices and quality across the country

- enabling each area to look across the regions for elements of good practice

“From [our organisation’s] perspective, [the vision for RCCs] will improve the lives of children...Having the ability to work in RCCs will enable areas to compare and contrast the support offered to young people in their area and also challenge any disparities within their own areas. Will enable each area to look across the regions for elements of good practice.” – a multi-agency professional/leader

Another quarter of respondents suggested additions to the proposed model, or support to implement it (101 out of 372, 27%). These respondents called for clear expectations for all agencies and local authority leaders and clear accountability. A few respondents suggested the value in involving care-experienced individuals in the design, development and delivery of RCCs so the model is based on a good understanding of young people’s needs from those with first-hand experience of the system.

Some respondents commented on funding, and others called for further clarity or guidance. A few respondents, including the Association of Directors of Children’s Services (ADCS) said that the implementation of Regional Care Cooperatives should look to the lessons learned from the implementation of the Regional Adoption Agencies (RAA). ADCS subsequently published their own proposals for Regional Care Co-operatives, which included national conditions for success and differentiated whether action to provide care places for children should take place at local, sub-regional, regional and national level. They felt that local authorities should retain their statutory duties and continue to be responsible for deciding where children in care would live, whereas regions should provide strategic oversight of sufficiency, regional frameworks and find places for children with the most complex needs.

Our regional sessions with local authorities suggested that there were many aspects of the Regional Care Cooperative model that they support, including regional data analysis and forecasting of needs, and regional commissioning for children who need more specialist care. However, they also expressed concerns around Regional Care Co-operatives finding all places for children in care, believing that some functions should remain at local authority level.

We also asked respondents a separate question on whether they had any additional suggestions on improving planning, commissioning and boosting the available number of places to live for children in care. Around two-fifths of respondents to this question suggested a focus on foster carers and residential care staff as a way to increase the number of places for children in care to live (135 out of 347, 39%). They thought this focus should include recruitment, training, support and benefits. Over one-third of respondents suggested changes to current care provision practices with a greater focus on kinship care and local authorities increasing their in-house provision (128 out of 347, 36%). One-fifth of respondents made comments about finances, mostly related to capping the cost of placements and reducing profiteering. (72 out of 347, 21%)



Some respondents also made suggestions about commissioning, including ensuring children and young people in care can keep living locally where appropriate and keeping sibling groups together.

### **Views of children and young people on stable, loving homes**

“We want to stay living in our community, even when we can't be at home. We want to stay close to the people and places we know.” – An organisation on behalf of children/young people

The young people we spoke to through our engagement felt that homes should be tailored to a young person's needs with the option to stay locally should they wish to. They also focused the discussion on support and accommodation choices for care leavers and the transition into independent living. They felt interim support should be available where fully independent options were not yet appropriate, including options like semi-supported accommodation as well as specific options for pregnant parents and young people with disabilities.

“Children need a family rather than a placement” – child/young person

During the consultation period, we heard from a wide range of professionals and sector leaders on the importance of ensuring residential care is focused on helping and supporting young people to thrive, and that care regulations reflect this. However, we also heard concerns about standardisation for anything other than the most basic care expectations. We heard that standards of care for residential care need to be broad and flexible, to meet the individual needs of children and young people.

Sector leaders that we spoke to felt strongly that RCCs need to be co-designed with the sector in order for them to work. They said that the model should ensure that local areas can continue processes where they are working well. We agree with this point and are committed to working with the sector to co-design RCCs.

Analysis of the consultation responses and feedback that we have received at the regional sessions has been used to refine our approach to the RCC pathfinders. We plan to develop RCCs on a staged basis and have developed a set of minimum requirements for the pathfinders. Our long-term vision for RCCs remains unchanged. We expect the pathfinders will enable local partners to test new ways of working together and be a platform to introduce greater regional co-operation. We have invited local authorities to apply to be one of the 2 RCC pathfinders and will announce which regions are successful later this year. Our minimum expectations for the pathfinders include:

- 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 local providers to address needs and commissioning care places required from external providers
- recruiting foster parents through a regional recruitment support hub and improving the support offer to both new and existing foster parents
- developing new regional provision where gaps have been identified, which could include:
  - developing new children’s homes or new models of fostering
  - piloting integrated models of safe, therapeutic care for children who are currently (or at risk of) being deprived of their liberty and who are in the most complex situations
  - developing innovative approaches to supporting children who are looked after and in touch with the criminal justice system
  - delivering new provision for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC)
  - delivering a new regional approach to running secure children’s home(s), if there is one in the area
- 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 have heard the importance of workforce across the sector, including the Children’s Homes workforce. We recognise the challenges in recruiting and retaining staff with the right skills. We welcome the Children’s Homes Association’s recruitment campaign launched earlier this year to support children’s homes providers with recruiting staff. We are undertaking research over the next 2 years, starting first with a workforce census which was launched in March 2023.

We are working with the Department for Work and Pensions to look at how careers in the children’s social care sector can be better promoted to those seeking employment through local employment services. We are working with Home Office to share information regarding the immigration routes available for providers to recruit children's home staff internationally. In collaboration with Home Office, we are also looking to set up engagement sessions for local authorities and children's homes providers to share information and feedback on any challenges.

## Corporate parenting responsibilities

### Since publication, we have:

- increased the Leaving Care Allowance to £3,000 from 1 April 2023
- increased the apprenticeship bursary to £3,000 from 1 August 2023
- procured the care leaver covenant contract, increased its value by 30% to extend its impact, and aligned it to the care review missions with over 400 businesses and organisations signed up

### In the next 18 months, we will:

- extend strengthened corporate parenting responsibilities to government departments and relevant public bodies - this will ensure that policies and services that affect them take account of the challenges they face, remove barriers and provide opportunities for them to thrive
- consider responses to this consultation on adding a specific principle for organisations to reduce the stigma and discrimination that children in care and care leavers face
- continue to explore how we can best develop and enhance the currently funded programmes of Staying Close, Staying Put and the work to end rough sleeping to improve the lives of care leavers

In 'Built on Love', mission 3 for children in care and care leavers committed to strengthen and extend corporate parenting responsibilities. We also committed to consult on these plans. In our consultation, we also asked respondents if there were changes they thought would be helpful to make to the existing corporate parenting principles that apply to local authorities.

Over one-third of respondents suggested changes to the existing corporate parenting principles (115 out of 306, 38%). Some suggested additional services or agencies that should have corporate parenting responsibilities, including health bodies, education providers, and housing providers. Others suggested extending the principles to support care experienced people after the age of 25.

A third of respondents to this question mentioned factors they believed were necessary to support the proposed extension of corporate parenting principles (92 out of 306, 30%). Most commonly, respondents said improving understanding of the principles throughout the corporate parenting network would increase consistency across agencies and services.

“Making corporate parenting responsibilities part of mandatory training for all agencies would enhance practice compliance.” - Safeguarding professional

Some respondents said that decisions made by any organisation or agency in the corporate parenting network are often too far removed from the needs and wishes of children and young people, and they should therefore incorporate their views.

Just over one-fifth of respondents to this question stated they had nothing additional to suggest or stated their general agreement with the existing corporate parenting principles (68 out of 306, 22%).

We also asked respondents which bodies, organisations or sectors they felt should be in scope for the extension of the corporate parenting principles. The most common services that respondents thought should be included were:

- health services, including the NHS, mental health services, integrated care boards and others
- education
- police, probation and other justice systems
- housing services including housing association, companies and private housing
- charities, voluntary and community agencies
- employment services and local businesses

Many of the above services were linked to improving outcomes for children in line with the 6 missions. This included improving education and health outcomes, reducing the criminalisation of young people, reducing homelessness and unemployment and increasing support and understanding of the care experience in these services.

While local authorities will remain responsible for fulfilling all their legal duties towards Looked After Children and care leavers - as set out in the Children Act 1989 – we believe other government departments and relevant public bodies can also play an important role in improving their experiences and outcomes. Our proposals in relation to corporate parenting will not impact on the statutory duties of local authorities under the Children Act 1989 to accommodate Looked After Children.

Our ambition therefore remains to extend corporate parenting responsibilities to government departments and relevant public bodies. We believe this will ensure that policies and services that affect children in care and care leavers better take account of the challenges that they face and provide opportunities for them to thrive.

In light of the consultation responses, we are refining our proposals on primary legislation to support corporate parenting (which will be enacted when Parliamentary time allows). We will engage with individual departments and agencies on our detailed plans for legislation, to reach agreement on any future arrangements, including on how the proposed responsibilities will be implemented and what the accountability arrangements should be, with a pre-legislation consultation from Autumn 2023.

## Support for the social work workforce

### Since publication, we have:

- consulted on proposals to introduce national rules on the engagement of agency social work resource in local authority children's social care
- commissioned a number of Early Career Framework (ECF) Early Adopter local authorities - we have also appointed the Expert Writing Group who will write the framework of skills and knowledge which is at the heart of the ECF
- launched the Child and Family Social Worker Apprenticeship Employer Support Fund, which will support local authorities to offer up to 500 child and family social worker apprenticeships
- launched the national workload action group, which convenes a group of experts to identify and provide recommendations to address unnecessary drivers of workload for child and family social workers

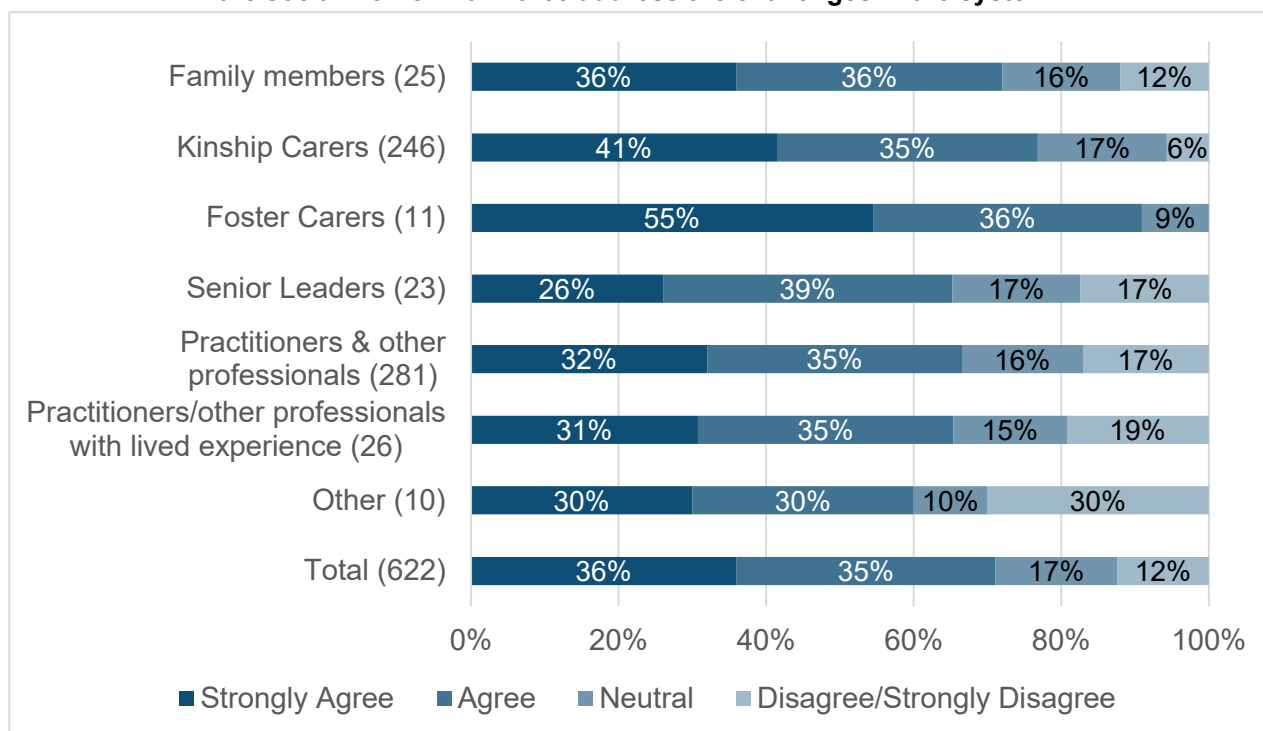
### In the next 18 months, we will:

- formally respond to the consultation on agency social work later in the year
- launch the national virtual hub in early 2024 which will provide a one-stop-shop of support for local authorities to support their recruitment and retention strategies - this will include support to help local authorities comply with the new national rules on the engagement of agency social work resource
- consult on statutory guidance for national rules on local authority use of agency child and family social workers, the first of which will come into force in Spring 2024
- consult on the Early Career Framework document setting out the skills needed by social workers - we will continue to work with the ECF Early Adopter local authorities and stakeholders, to design the programme and explore national implementation from September 2026, and will include further detail on the overall programme design and implementation plans alongside the consultation on framework document)
- appoint an independent, expert supplier to provide resources on retention, which will be hosted on a national virtual hub

'Built on Love' recognises the value and importance of social workers in delivering our ambitions for transforming children's social care. Within the strategy we set out proposals focused on supporting the social worker workforce and addressing challenges in the system. Responses were generally supportive of these proposals: 71% of respondents

agreed or strongly agreed with the proposals (442 out of 622), compared to 12% who disagreed or strongly disagreed (77 out of 622).

**Figure 5: Responses to question Q26: Overall, to what extent do you agree that our proposals on the social worker workforce address the challenges in the system?**



We asked if respondents had any further priorities for longer-term workforce reform. A key theme in response to this question was prioritising improvements to operational delivery and reducing workforce pressures. Respondents emphasised the benefits of reducing caseloads and decreasing bureaucracy to free up time for practitioners to build relationships with children, young people and families.

Social workers have told us (including via the concurrent consultation on the child and family social worker workforce) that they do not always feel supported, valued and trusted. We have heard that there is not enough recognition of the difficult decisions they make on a daily basis, nor of the skills, expertise and challenge required for the role, and that social workers can feel frustrated by the lack of time spent with children and families.

We agree that it is important for social workers to spend more time with children and families. This is a key ambition of the reform strategy, and why it includes measures to tackle unnecessary bureaucracy, improve case management systems (CMS) and address sufficiency issues in the social worker workforce. The newly established National Workload Action Group will develop recommendations to address workload concerns. We have procured Research in Practice to support this work and produce resources to embed the social worker employer standards. Social Work England is taking forward its commitment in 'Built on Love' and considering its approach to asking all social workers how much time they are spending in direct practice, including how they are using it to support their professional development. Building on this the department will work

collaboratively across the sector to create a culture that better allows social workers' practice to thrive.

Respondents also felt that access to the right level of support and supervision is important for social workers' wellbeing, and to improve practice. These factors were linked to improving social worker recruitment and retention, which in turn provides consistency of care for children, young people and families. Respondents saw these workforce issues as integral to the wider aims of our reforms. We agree with that sentiment, which is why increasing recruitment and retention will remain fundamental parts of the reform programme.

“Being a Social Worker is a huge privilege but there is a high risk of burn out and PTSD from the cases that we work with therefore to keep people in the role there needs to be time for the managers to offer proper clinical supervision to support the staff to decompress.” – social work practitioner

Some organisations who responded highlighted the impact of public perceptions of social work and welcomed the opportunity to celebrate the value of social work. There were some calls for a national recruitment campaign to promote social work. We will work with Social Work England to inform and educate people on the role social workers place within society, whilst promoting social work as the rewarding profession it is.

“The status of the profession, how it is perceived and valued in society, is paramount but we continue to await a national campaign to promote the value of child and family social workers from government.” – the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS)

Another priority for respondents is training and development. There was a general agreement with proposals to increase apprenticeships through the employer support fund, and through wider use of the bursaries within university courses. Respondents pointed to the need for more specialist training for social work practitioners, as well as for other professionals supporting children and families. Respondents felt this should include training on Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), the impact of trauma, trauma informed practice, and immigration.

We want all child and family social workers to benefit from high quality professional development. Ensuring social workers have the skills and knowledge they need is vital to improving outcomes for children and families. We will introduce a new ECF for social workers, which will significantly extend the training and support social workers receive in the early stages of their career, helping to equip them with the knowledge and skills they need and retain them in the profession. We are already investing in high-quality CPD at key stages of a social worker's career, and will continue to do so.

We will also strengthen the workforce enabler in the proposed National Framework so that it is clear that social workers at all levels should operate in a working environment that enables them to thrive and provide the very best support to children and families.

### **Views of children and young people on the social work workforce**

“Someone who gets to know me and sticks around. I have only ever been taken out by my social worker once. She taught me how to eat chicken the right way but she left shortly after” – young person in care

In the consultation we asked children and young people, what they felt would make a great social worker. We received 96 responses to this question.

Two-thirds of respondents commented on important characteristics for social workers, including being kind, caring, helpful and supportive. The ability to listen was mentioned the most. Other respondents said that social workers must be able to make time for regular visits and communicate regularly. Ten percent of respondents highlighted the need for consistency and stability, and some respondents spoke about the importance of having the same social worker to form long lasting relationships.

During the consultation period, young people also told us that the stability and quality of a social worker makes a positive difference. They spoke about being frustrated by a constant turnover of social workers and having to retell their traumatic experiences. Young people also said that children’s social care staff should be valued and the profession should be seen as desirable. They said that this inconsistency meant building a good rapport was difficult. They also felt there should be more mental health support for practitioners, which will help them do their job better and make a difference to their lives.

Alongside responses to the online consultation, we heard from approximately 220 social workers and sector organisations during the consultation period. We are pleased that there is strong recognition from practitioners and sector leaders that the government has sought to address recruitment challenges through programmes such as Step Up to Social Work and Frontline, and through the reforms proposed in the strategy. However, the practitioners we spoke to felt that more needed to be done. This included a focus on career progression and changing the public image and narrative around social work.

We heard widespread enthusiasm for the ECF, with an emphasis that the ECF needs to be supportive and not limit the wide range of career paths that social workers can take. We also heard views that progress through the ECF programme should recognise that, for many social workers, 5 years in the profession is no longer ‘early’ in their career, and that progression should be linked to pay to effectively improve retention. We do not intend to intervene in individual local authority employers’ decisions about what they pay their employees. Local authorities have their own existing pay and grading structures for



their employees. It is likely employees will move up their own local authority pay and grade structure during the 5 year ECF programme. We are considering how we can bring greater transparency on pay and different social worker role types, which would provide a better evidence base to understand the impact of pay on retention and career development.

## System reform and delivery

### Since publication, we have:

- spoken to practitioners, leaders, and those with lived experience, to understand how good practice is already being shared, both nationally and regionally, and what more is needed to ensure we collectively build upon what is working well
- separately consulted on the Children's Social Care National Framework and Dashboard indicators, and have published a response to this consultation, which is available here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/childrens-social-care-national-framework-and-dashboard>
- continued to work closely with Ofsted on how they can continue to act as a lever for improvement, in line with reform and considering how the local authority inspection framework (ILACS) might evolve to mirror reform priorities and learning and evidence from the reform programme. Ofsted have indicated that they remain confident that they will be able to adapt their approach to inspection as long-term reforms unfold and we publish new statutory guidance)
- piloted the Enhance programme with three persistent 'Requires Improvement' local authorities - this programme tested a new diagnostic support model and worked with local authorities to develop evidence-based and data-driven improvement plans, and we are now supporting these local authorities to implement their findings and evaluate the overall impact the programme has on local authority improvement
- launched an internal evaluation programme looking at the Department's approach to children's social care improvement and intervention to make sure our funding is reaching the right local authorities at the right time
- launched a consultation on a revision to the Information Sharing Guidance for practitioners providing safeguarding services to children, young people, parents and carers
- published our policy paper on multi-agency information sharing

### In the next 18 months, we will:

- continue to work closely with the sector to establish and deliver a 'learning loops' strategy to support sector collaboration, sharing learning and embedding the most impactful and innovative approaches to practice across the system
- continue to work closely with Ofsted to explore what changes to inspections and regulations across the sector are required to make sure they reflect new policy and drive improvement

- issue the Children’s Social Care National Framework as statutory guidance and continue to test and develop the indicators and Dashboard
- use learning events and forums to support local authorities on this reform journey, including helping areas to improve outcomes through embedding the practice described in the National Framework, and discussing emerging findings from the Pathfinder and pilot programmes
- publish a CSC Data Strategy by the end of the year

## System reform

In the section of the strategy focused on improving the system, we asked what would help ensure we have a self-improving children’s social care system that continues to share and apply best practice, so that it can learn from itself. We recognise that reforms must be replicable in local authorities, even where there are differences in circumstances or demographics. We will listen to local authorities and their partners so that there is sufficient capacity for reform to be embedded alongside improvement and intervention.

One-fifth of respondents (predominantly practitioners and professionals) suggested that changes to workload, working practices and culture were needed to help the system learn and improve. (80 out of 406, 20%) This included a culture of taking responsibility at all levels and fully considering complaints and feedback to develop learning. However, some respondents felt that issues around retention and workforce capacity constraints are barriers to learning, as they hamper practitioners’ and professionals’ ability to take time to reflect and learn.

“The workforce felt that having a feedback loop between children and families and practitioners was essential and that we should focus on ‘Lessons of Success’ in line with ‘Line of Sight Reviews’ ensuring that we embrace learning in a positive and strength based manner... if something has worked well that we have the time and space to share learning nationally and regionally, this should include voluntary sectors and large organisations... more people to share local work from LAs to boost morale and pride across public sector.” – Local Authority Children’s Services

One-fifth of consultation responses, half of which were from kinship carers, highlighted the importance of listening and engaging with people with lived experience, so that their feedback is fed into reflective practices and learning. (87 out of 406, 21%)

“I would want to speak with as many carers and children as possible regularly so that I know if anything starts going wrong.”- Kinship carer

A further fifth of respondents also commented that communication and working across multiple agencies would promote best practice by ensuring information about what is working is communicated with social work practitioners and other professionals working to safeguard and support children, young people and families. (83 out of 406, 20%) Some also noted that it was important this included school and third sector and community organisations.

## Delivery

In ‘Built on Love’, we described the phases of activity for reform, the outcomes we want to achieve and what measures we will use to determine success. In the consultation we asked how respondents thought we could ensure the delivery of reform is successful.

One third of respondents (predominantly practitioners and professionals) said that additional investment is essential to the successful delivery of reform (145 out of 472, 31%). Some people commented that sustainable, long-term funding was required to take forward meaningful implementation.

“This reform needs the right financial investment across the whole system if we want to see real change and improve outcomes for children, young people and families”. - Safeguarding professional

We are investing £200 million over the first phase of the reform to test and learn from our approach. In ‘Built on Love’, we recognised that subsequent phases of reform will require more investment and a wider programme of support.

A third of respondents to this question mentioned the need to focus on children, young people, families and carers, and the support they need, and that their voices shape the reform programme (142 out of 472, 30%). Similarly, a quarter of respondents (mostly practitioners and professionals) highlighted the importance of listening to social work practitioners, other agencies and professionals across sectors that work with children, young people and families (122 out of 472, 26%). Most respondents commented that this would increase the sharing of information and prevent working to a one-size-fits-all approach.

Several views in the consultation emphasised the need for national consistency across all local authorities. Respondents also mentioned the need to maintain consistency at national government level by ensuring the reform programme has universal support.

“Any reforms must be sustainable and capable of being replicated in any local authority. ... If they are to deliver for vulnerable children and families everywhere, they have to be demonstrably achievable everywhere.” – Ofsted

Respondents told us that they wanted better accountability, pay and workforce retention so that current workforce pressures and burdens facing practitioners and professionals do not create a barrier to successful implementation.

We are working to support local authorities to strengthen their approach to recruitment and retention and help stabilise the workforce as outlined in the previous section.

The Children’s Social Care National Framework was published for consultation in February 2023 and will be issued as statutory guidance in December 2023. Through the National Framework the government will set greater national direction for children’s social care, bringing a greater consistency to practice. We think that alongside issuing the National Framework it is right to provide advice for local authorities on what they might want to do differently in response to the new statutory guidance. We are developing a plan to support local authorities to identify areas of practice that are preventing children and families from having positive experiences with children’s social care and from achieving the best possible outcomes. We will publish this plan, along with the National Framework, by the end of the year.

### **Views of children and young people**

“Ask all of us and actually hear what we are saying!” – Child in care, under 11 years old

We asked children and young people what they thought would be the most important thing to change in children’s social care if they were Prime Minister. 100 children and young people answered this question.

Most of the children and young people who responded mentioned more funding, including funding for children and young people, care leavers, carers, the local authority, and additional services. Others said that they would reduce workload pressures on professionals so they could spend more time with them and build relationships. They also commented they would like to reduce the number of social workers a child has.

Children and young people also said that kinship care needs more recognition and highlighted the benefits of living with and being cared for by extended family networks. Some mentioned that financial support for kinship care should match foster care.

## Next steps

The Secretary of State for Education, Rt Hon Gillian Keegan MP, has described 'Built on Love' as the first step towards achieving once-in-a-generation reform. It is a commitment to making determined, focused, and long-term change. In 'Built on Love', we explained that over the next 2 years we would be focussed on Phase One of reform, which includes addressing urgent issues, setting national direction, and laying the groundwork for future reform. In this consultation response we have set out the steps we have already begun to take following publication of 'Built on Love', and how delivery will continue over the next 18 months to achieve our aspirations for the system.

The responses we received to this consultation, and through the events we held whilst it was open, have helped us develop and refine our plans for reform. In some cases the responses have reaffirmed how important it is to act now to offer additional support. For example, we recognise the level of interest in support for kinship carers and remain committed to publishing a national kinship care strategy by the end of 2023. We will also take forward the legislative reforms and guidance changes to remove the local connection requirement for care leavers seeking to access social housing.

In other cases, we want to continue building on what we have heard to understand what good looks like. For example, we will use consultation responses to inform the models and approaches to parental representation we test in the Families First for Children Pathfinder. We will contact respondents who want to share more detailed information about the services they have received or provided so we can understand what good looks like. We will also use learning from the Risk Outside the Home report (due in Autumn 2023), alongside feedback to this consultation, to inform expectations for effective multi-agency responses to extra familial harm and exploitation in the wave 2 pathfinder areas and more widely.

We have also reflected on where we can make changes to policy direction now in response to the findings from this consultation. We have heard local authorities' concerns about the potential scope of RCC pathfinders, particularly as these would operate under current legislation. We are proposing to develop the pathfinders on an incremental basis, with certain elements that we'd need to see as a minimum now and an expectation that the pathfinder would expand its remit in future after we have tested and evaluated the concept. We will consult on our pre-legislative proposals on extending strengthened corporate parenting responsibilities to government departments and relevant public bodies for children in care and care leavers. As part of this, we will consider responses to this consultation on adding a specific principle for organisations to reduce the stigma and discrimination that children in care and care leavers face.

In all cases we look forward to continuing to work in partnership with the sector, and in ongoing dialogue with stakeholders of all kinds, including those with experience of children's social care.

## Annex A: Methodology

The main consultation involved an online survey comprising 31 questions. Alongside this we published a Guide to the Implementation Strategy for Children and Young People and included 9 specific consultation questions for child and young people under 18, or care leavers under the age of 25.

The following data was analysed:

- 902 responses to the main consultation
- 108 responses to the children and young people’s consultation
- 92 responses from adults to the children and young people’s consultation
- 33 email submissions made to the consultation, largely from representative groups and organisations

We commissioned York Consulting to conduct the full analysis.

The data was analysed using a combination of qualitative analysis software (Nvivo) and Excel. Nvivo was used to code qualitative responses to the consultation. Excel was used to analyse responses to quantitative questions.

In total 902 responses were received to the main consultation. Questions 1 to 6 of the main consultation asked questions about the respondents. Respondents were categorised into 7 main groups as shown in Table 1 below. Questions seeking respondents’ views began at question 7.

**Table 1: Main consultation respondent categories**

Respondent category	Category description	Number	Percentage
Family members	Birth parents, adoptive parents, family networks with no caring arrangements	38	4.2%
Kinship carers	Kinship carers and those with special guardianship orders	405	44.9%
Foster carers	Foster carers	12	1.3%
Senior leaders	Senior leaders from local authorities and other sector organisations	26	2.9%
Practitioners and other professionals that work with children and families	Social work management, social worker or social work practitioners, safeguarding professionals (health and police), education professionals, professionals supporting children and families, other professionals, and representative groups	374	41.5%

Practitioners and other professionals with lived experience	Respondents that identified as both a practitioner or professional and a person with lived experience of the children's social care system	29	3.2%
Other types of respondents	Academic and other organisations or professionals	18	2.0%
<b>Total</b>		<b>902</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: DfE Consultation responses May 2023. Base: 902 respondents

## Children and young people's consultation

In total, 108 responses were received to the children and young people's consultation. There were 3 groups of respondents:

- those who identified themselves as a child (47)
- those who identified themselves as adults responding on behalf of a child (58)
- those who identified themselves as a child's response collated by an organisation (3)

In addition, there were 92 responses from adults not responding on behalf of young people who answered the children and young people's questions. These responses were analysed alongside the main consultation questions.



## Annex B: List of organisations that responded to the consultation

We want to thank all the individuals, organisations, charities, multi-agencies and local authorities for engaging and responding to the consultation. Below is a list of those who were content with being named in the final report.

- ADCS (Association of Directors of Children's Services)
- Adfam
- Alliance for children in care and care leavers
- Article 39
- Barnsley College
- Become - the national charity for children in care and young care leavers
- Birth Companions
- Blue Cabin CIO
- Children Heard and Seen
- County Councils Network
- East Sussex
- Families in Harmony
- Family Law Bar Association
- Family Solutions Plus
- Gloucestershire ICB
- Havering
- Hull Safeguarding Children Partnership
- Intentional parenting community organisation
- Kinship Carers
- Local Government Association
- London's Independent Chairs and Scrutineers of Local Safeguarding Children Partnerships
- Mulberry Bush Organisation
- National Children's Bureau
- NHS England – South West Region
- NHS England South West - Quality Team
- NHS England South East
- North-East North Cumbria ICB (North ICP Designated Safeguarding Professionals)
- North-East Lincolnshire Council Children Services
- Ofsted
- Parent and Carer Alliance CIC
- Parents, Families and Allies Network
- Refuge
- Refugee and Migrant Children's Consortium

- Regional Adoption Agency Leaders group
- SFAC
- Social Care Network Solutions Limited
- Social Work England
- South West London Integrated Care Board
- Staffordshire and Stoke-On-Trent Integrated Care Board
- Suffolk and North East Essex ICB – NEE Alliance
- Surrey Heartlands ICB
- The Care Experienced Movement
- The Challenging Behaviour Foundation
- The Fostering Network
- Warrington Safeguarding Partnership
- West Nottinghamshire College
- West Sussex county council
- Youth Justice Board



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