



BRIEFING PAPER

Number 8543, 12 March 2021

Children's social care services in England

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Summary

Local authorities in England have a range of duties and powers relating to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children. They are also the statutory point of referral for any concerns about children at risk of harm.

Demand for children's social care

Department for Education (DfE) data on local authority social care activity between 31 March 2010 and 2020 showed an increase in activity across a range of measures: children in need (+4%), child protection enquiries (+125%), child protection plans (+32%) and looked after children (+24%). The number of referrals made to children's social care services per year also increased by 5% from around 615,000 in 2010/11 to 643,000 in 2019/20. However, there is also considerable variation between local authorities in the activity of children's social care.

While it is argued that there remains "a lack of clarity" about what has driven the increase in demand for children's social care over the last decade, a number of factors have been suggested, including:

- A growth in the number of children aged 0-17.
- Parenting capacity and needs – adults experiencing domestic abuse, mental health difficulties or substance misuse are the most common reasons why children come to the attention of children's social care services.
- Poverty and the continuing impact of welfare reforms and economic downturns.
- A growing awareness of risks faced by adolescents outside of the family home, including exploitation by criminal gangs.

The coronavirus outbreak has placed greater stress on some children and families. Concerns have also been raised about the reduced visibility of vulnerable children during the pandemic and that this may have manifested in reduced referrals to children's social care. It has additionally been suggested that the pandemic may have impacted the availability and cost of placements for looked after children.

Funding for children's social care

Children's services are funded through local government. The majority of children's social care funding is not ring-fenced and it is for local authorities to decide how to prioritise their spending based on local priorities and need. Local authorities in England spent £9.93 billion on children's social care in 2019/20.

However, in recent years the Government has announced additional ring-fenced funding for children's social care. Most recently, the [Spending Review 2020](#) announced £300 million of additional grant funding for adult and children's social care. This was on top of an additional £1 billion of funding, which was announced at the [Spending](#)

[Round 2019](#) and is being maintained in each year of the current Parliament.

The Government has also provided additional funding for support services for children and families during the Covid-19 pandemic. This includes £4.6 billion of un-ringfenced funding for local authorities to help them respond to pressures faced as a result of the pandemic, across all service areas.

Expenditure data suggests that local authorities have generally protected spending on children's social care services, despite Government funding for local authorities falling in real terms for much of the period.

However, concerns have been raised that children's social care is facing significant funding pressures. The Association of Directors of Children's Services has, for example, [estimated](#) that the total required to close the budget gap in-year is £824.1m to 'stay still'. There is also evidence that spending on non-statutory children's services, in particular for early help and preventative interventions, has been reduced in many areas.

Review of children's social care

In its [manifesto for the 2019 general election](#), the Conservative Party stated that it would "review the care system to make sure that all care placements and settings are providing children and young adults with the support they need."

Following delays as a result of the coronavirus outbreak, the [review was launched on 15 January 2021](#). It will be led by Josh MacAlister, the founder and chief executive of the children's social work charity Frontline.

The [terms of reference for the review](#) state that it will look "at the whole system of support, safeguarding, protection and care, and the child's journey into and out of that system, including relevant aspects of preventative services provided as part of early help."

The review launched a [call for advice](#), aimed at anyone with an interest in the review, to guide its early work. On 1 March, a [call for evidence](#) was also issued, aimed "primarily at the research community and those with robust evidence the review should consider". At the time of writing, the call for advice "remains open for now" and the call for evidence closes on 30 March 2021.

The review plans to set out a case for change in the summer, before beginning to build recommendations for how the system can be improved.

Further information is available on the review's website at: [An independent review of children's social care in England](#).

1. Introduction

This briefing provides a high-level overview of local authority children's social care in England. It focuses primarily on funding and demand for children's social care, including how both have been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. However, brief information is also provided on standards of social care as assessed by Ofsted (section 4) and statistics relating to the social care workforce (section 5). Section 6 provides a brief overview of recent policy, including the launch of the independent review of the care system, and the final section provides links to selected stakeholder reports.

A number of separate Library Briefings provide more detailed information on specific areas, including:

- Library Briefing 7730, [Local authority support for children in need \(England\)](#).
- Library Briefing 6787, [An overview of child protection legislation in England](#).
- Library Briefing 7560, [Looked after children: out of area, unregulated and unregistered accommodation \(England\)](#).
- Library Briefing 6793, [Child protection: Duties to report concerns](#).
- Library Briefing 8429, [Support for care leavers](#).

1.1 The legislative framework

Local authorities in England have a range of duties and powers relating to safeguarding the welfare of children and promoting their well-being. These include:

- A general duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in need in their area by providing appropriate services (Children Act 1989, section 17). More detailed information is provided in Library Briefing 7730, [Local authority support for children in need \(England\)](#).
- A duty to provide accommodation to children in need who require it for prescribed reasons (Children Act 1989, section 20).
- A duty to make the necessary enquiries to decide whether it needs to act to safeguard a child's welfare where it suspects that a child is suffering, or is at risk of suffering, significant harm (Children Act 1989, section 47).
- A power in certain circumstances to apply to the court for an order placing a child in the care of the local authority (Children Act 1989, section 31).
- A duty to make arrangements to promote co-operation with key partners and local agencies with a view to improving the well-being of children in its area (Children Act 2004, section 10).

The Department for Education (DfE) is responsible for the legal and policy frameworks within which children's social care operates. The main policy guidance is contained in the DfE's statutory guidance,

[Working Together to Safeguard Children](#). The guidance sets out how individuals and organisations should work together to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people in accordance with the relevant legislation. Local authorities (and other prescribed persons and bodies) are required to have regard to the guidance.¹

Further information on the legislative framework is available in Library Briefing 6787, [An overview of child protection legislation in England](#).

1.2 Local authority children's social care

A [research report published by the DfE in 2016](#) provided the following summary of children's services provided by local authorities:

Local councils describe their children's services by using a four-tier model, which may be represented as a pyramid or continuum of needs.

Tier 1: Universal services such as schools, and health visiting.

Tier 2: Targeted services for children and families beginning to experience, or at risk of, difficulties; for example school counselling, parenting programmes, and support for teenage parents.

Tier 3: Specialist services for children and families with multiple needs such as intensive family support, and services for children with disabilities.

Tier 4: Specialist services for children and families with severe and complex needs, including child protection services, and looked after children.²

It added that non statutory services for children with lower levels of need fall within tiers one and two (including early help services) and that statutory services for children in need and looked after children (children's social care) fall within tiers 3 and 4.³

Referrals to children's social care

Local authorities are the statutory point of referral for any concerns about risks to children's welfare. Depending on what the local authority assesses the severity of the risk to the child to be, courses of action can include:

- At the referral stage, a local authority can decide to take no further action, or refer a child to more universal services, such as those provided by children's centres.
- If, following an initial referral and assessment, a local authority decides that a child requires further support to reach a reasonable level of health or development, then they will be defined as a child in need under section 17 of the Children Act 1989. The local authority is required to provide the child with a range and level of services appropriate to their needs.

¹ Children Act 2004, section 11(4).

² Department for Education, [Children's services: spending and delivery: Research report by Aldaba and the Early Intervention Foundation](#), July 2016, p7

³ As above, p9.

- In cases where there is reasonable cause to suspect that a child is suffering or likely to suffer significant harm, the local authority can launch an investigation into their welfare under section 47 of the Children Act 1989. If concerns are substantiated then a child protection plan is put in place.
- At the initial child protection conference, the decision will be made as to whether the child needs to become the subject of a child protection plan.
- In the most severe cases action will be taken to take a child into the care of the local authority. These children will be looked-after by local councils, and usually live with relatives, foster carers, or in residential care settings such as children's homes.⁴

⁴ National Audit Office, [Pressures on children's social care](#), HC 1868, 23 January 2019, para 1.8.

2. Demand for children's social care

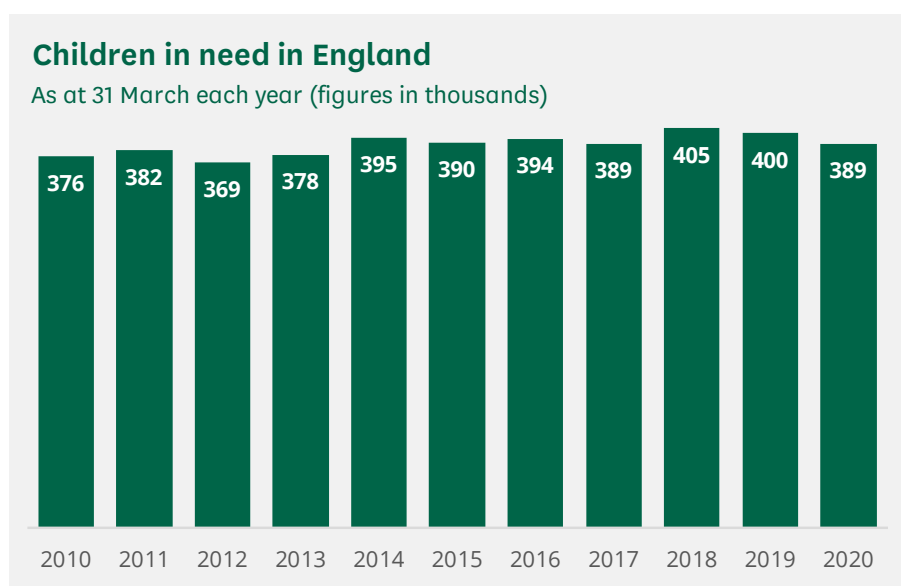
There is no single objective measure of the number of children who need or might benefit from support or intervention. Data on levels of local authority activity in response to social care referrals is generally used as a measure of demand. However, activity is also determined by local thresholds and the scale of any need not identified through referrals is unknown.

DfE data on local authority social care activity between 31 March 2010 and 2020 showed an increase in activity across a range of measures: children in need (+4%), child protection enquiries (+125%), child protection plans (+32%) and looked after children (+24%). The number of referrals made to children's social care services per year also increased by 5% from around 615,000 in 2010/11 to 643,000 in 2019/20.

The DfE data is examined in more detail below.

2.1 Number of children in need

The chart below shows the number of children in need in England since 2010. The number was at its highest as at 31 March 2018 when 404,710 children in England were classed as in need. Since then, numbers have fallen slightly and there were 389,260 children in need as at 31 March 2020.

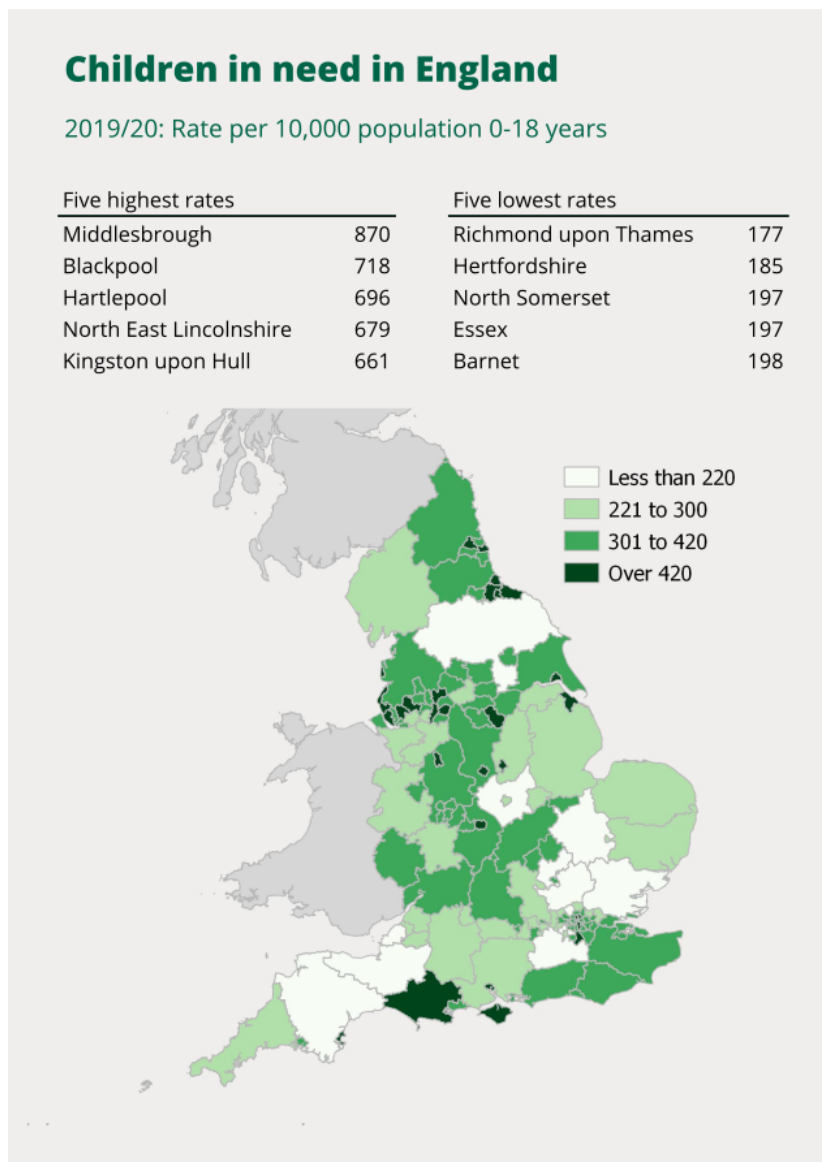


Source: [DFE Children in Need Statistics](#)

The rate of children in need per 10,000 population of 0-18 year olds has remained relatively stable over time. As at 31 March 2010, there were 325 children in need in England per 10,000 of those aged 0-18 years. The comparable rate for the 31 March 2020 was 324.

Rates of children in need show considerable variation across local authority areas. As the map below shows, in 2019/20 some local authorities had a rate of over 600 children in need per 10,000 population while others had under 200 per 10,000.

Middlesbrough had the highest rate of children in need in 2019/20 – 870 per 10,000 of the 0-18 population – while Richmond upon Thames had the lowest rate (177 per 100,000).

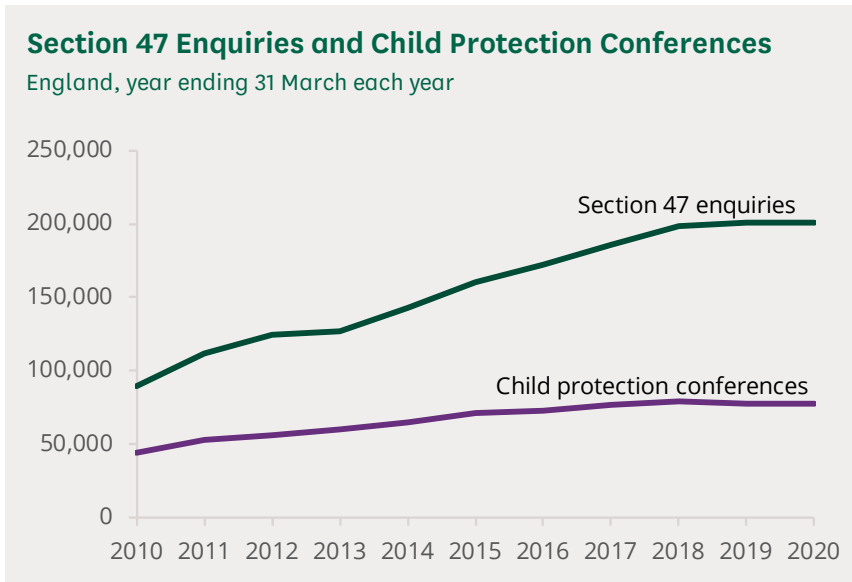


2.2 Number of section 47 enquiries and child protection conferences

If a local authority identifies there is reasonable cause to suspect a child is suffering, or is likely to suffer significant harm, it will carry out an assessment under section 47 of the Children Act 1989 to determine if it needs to take steps to safeguard and promote the welfare of the child. If concerns are substantiated and the child is judged to be at continuing risk of harm then an initial child protection conference should be convened within 15 working days.

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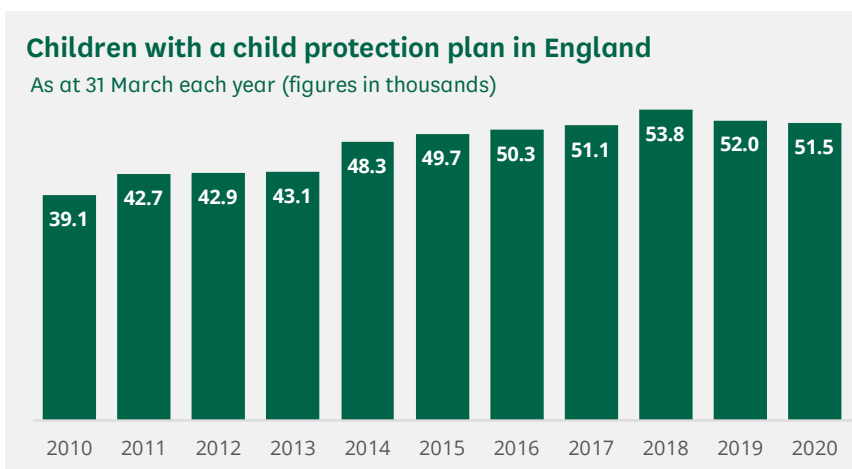
The chart below shows that Section 47 enquiries and child protection conferences have increased year on year since 2010. The number of Section 47 enquiries increased by 125% from 89,300 in 2010 to 201,000 in 2020. Over the same period the number of child protection conferences increased by 76% from 43,900 to 77,470.



Source: [DFE Children in Need Statistics](#)

2.3 Number of child protection plans

At the initial child protection conference, the decision will be made as to whether the child needs to become the subject of a child protection plan. The number of children who became subject to a child protection plan has also increased since 2010. In the year ending 31 March 2020 a total of 51,510 children in England had a child protection plan in place, compared with 39,100 in 2010. Figures peaked in 2018, with 53,790 children with a plan in place.



Source: [DFE Children in Need Statistics](#)

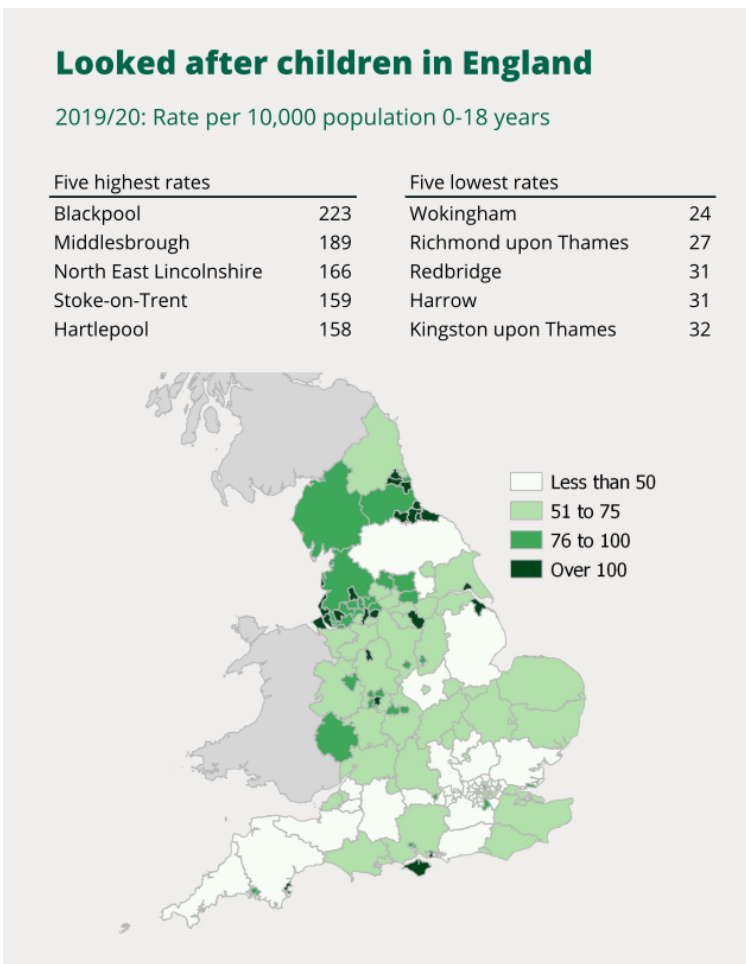
2.4 The number of looked after children

The number of looked after children has also increased in recent years. As at 31 March 2020 there were a total of 80,080 children looked after in England. This number has increased by around a quarter since 2010 (64,470 looked after children) and the rate per 10,000 children aged 0-18 has also increased: from 58 per 10,000 as at 31 March 2010 to 67 per 10,000 in 2020. The table opposite shows that the majority of looked after children are in foster placements, followed by secure units and children’s homes.

| Children looked after in England by placement type | | | | |
|--|---------------|---------------|---------------------|-------------|
| As at 31 March each year | | | | |
| | 2010 | 2020 | Change 2010 to 2020 | |
| | | | Number | % |
| Foster placements | 46,890 | 57,380 | +10,490 | +22% |
| Placed for adoption | 2,530 | 2,060 | -470 | -19% |
| Placement with parents | 4,210 | 5,400 | +1,190 | +28% |
| Secure units, children's homes | 6,250 | 6,920 | +670 | +11% |
| Other settings | 4,590 | 8,320 | +3,730 | +81% |
| All children looked after | 64,470 | 80,080 | +15,610 | +24% |

[Source: DFE Looked After Children Statistics](#)

In 2019/20 most local authorities had a rate of between 50 and 100 looked after children per 10,000 population of 0-18 year olds. However, some areas had rates of over 150 and some less than 50. Blackpool had the highest rate (223 per 10,000) and Wokingham the lowest (24).



2.5 Variation between local authorities

As demonstrated in the sections above, there is considerable variation between local authorities in the activity of children's social care. In its [report on the seventh phase of its safeguarding pressures research](#), published in February 2021, the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) noted that this variation was now "greater than ever" and identified a range of influencing factors:

The variation between local authorities and the range between those with the highest, and lowest rates is now greater than ever, with evidence of different factors that have influenced this including deprivation, service transformation programmes and other drivers such as housing difficulties, insecure work and geography in relation to the number of unaccompanied asylum seeking children within a local area.⁵

In a [January 2019 report on children's social care](#), the National Audit Office (NAO) carried out a statistical analysis of the number of child protection plans per local authority in an attempt to identify drivers of demand and variations in activity. The NAO identified three key variables that it considered may explain variation in demand between local authority areas:

- **Local authority 'fixed effects'** – features unique to each authority including: custom and practice in children's social care; local market conditions; geographical peculiarities; characteristics of children and their families within the local authority; historical patterns of demand for children's social care; community composition; and historical funding. According to the NAO, these 'fixed effects' may account for 50% of variation between local authorities over time.
- **Deprivation** – may account for 15% of variation in demand and activity between local authorities.
- **'Time effects'** – examples include: the introduction of government policy changes; and shocks to the overall child social care system, such as a high-profile child death. These affect all local authorities at the same time, albeit to different extents. 'Time effects' may account for 10% of variation between local authorities.

25% of the variation between local authorities remained unexplained by the NAO's statistical model.⁶

The NAO's analysis has, however, been criticised for failing to recognise the complexity of children's services, in particular, that local authority intervention rates reflect a balance of demand and supply factors.⁷

Some variation in children's social care activity between local authorities is to be expected, but concerns have been raised about the extent of

⁵ ADCS, [Safeguarding Pressures Phase 7: Executive Summary](#), February 2021, pp10-13.

⁶ National Audit Office, [Pressures on children's social care](#), HC 1868, 23 January 2019, paras 3.12-3.14

⁷ Public Accounts Committee Transforming Children's Services Inquiry, [Written evidence submitted by Professor Paul Bywaters, Centre for Applied Childhood, Youth and Family Research, University of Huddersfield, CSR009](#), February 2019

the variation. The [All-Party Parliamentary Group \(APPG\) for Children's 2018 inquiry into children's social care](#) concluded, for example, that a "postcode lottery" existed whereby children with similar needs, and those facing similar risks, were receiving different levels of local authority support and intervention depending on where they lived.⁸

2.6 Drivers of demand

It has been argued that there remains "a lack of clarity" about what drove the increased demand for children's services in the years prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, although a number of potentially contributing factors have been suggested.⁹

Since 2007, the ADCS has collected qualitative and quantitative data from local authorities on the changes in demand, needs and delivery of children's early help, social care and associated services. The [report on the latest phase of the research project \(phase 7\)](#) was published in February 2021 and covers the period up to September 2020.

The report noted the increase in early help assessments, initial contacts and section 47 enquiries over the past twelve years and set out a range of contributing factors, including:

- **Population:** growth in the number of children aged 0-17, which "accounts for some, but not all, of the increase in demand for services."
- **Poverty:** the "continued impact of welfare reforms...and the economic downturns were significant determinants of presenting factors such as, for example, parental mental ill health, domestic abuse, parental substance misuse and child neglect."
- **Parent capacity and needs:** adults experiencing domestic abuse, mental health difficulties or substance misuse, "remain the most common reasons why children come to the attention of early help and/or children's social care services." However, "a lack of parental capacity to provide an adequate caregiving environment...is likely to stem from wider socio-economic determinants."
- **Adolescents:** a "growing awareness and understanding of the risks and harms facing young people outside of the family home", including "exploitation and the harms associated with gang activity, knife crime and serious youth violence." The numbers of young people identified as involved in gangs or being trafficked have both seen significant percentage increases since 2018.¹⁰

⁸ The APPG for Children, [Storing Up Trouble: a postcode lottery of children's social care](#), July 2018, p4

⁹ Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, [Funding of local authorities' children's services](#), 1 May 2019, HC 1638 2017-19, para 54; see also, National Audit Office, [Pressures on children's social care](#), HC 1868 2017-19, January 2019, p11.

¹⁰ ADCS, [Safeguarding Pressures Phase 7: Executive Summary](#), February 2021, pp10-13.

2.7 Impact of Covid-19 pandemic

Concerns have been raised about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on vulnerable children and families, including:

- Family life has become more challenging for many; domestic abuse helplines have reported an increase in calls and the NSPCC saw an increase in the number of people calling with concerns about children suffering abuse and neglect.¹¹ ADCS has similarly stated that children suffering abuse or neglect as a result of parental mental ill health, drug and alcohol misuse, and domestic violence has increased during the pandemic.¹²
- That gangs used lockdown as an opportunity to increase 'recruitment activity', "taking advantage of young people's increased vulnerability, boredom, and time spent online."¹³
- That the withdrawal of support, the inability to see friends and the stress on wider family life could particularly impact some children's mental health and wellbeing.¹⁴
- That the pandemic has exacerbated disadvantage and many low-income families have seen a significant deterioration in their living standards.¹⁵
- That young carers have been put under additional strain, with over half reporting caring for longer than before the start of the pandemic.¹⁶

At the same time as some children and families have faced greater stresses, there have been significant changes to how formal and informal support is accessed. Schools, nurseries, youth clubs and sports clubs have been closed to most children for significant periods of time. In addition, many services, including health visitors, GPs, day centres, children's centres and family hubs, have often moved their services online, changed the services they offer or, in some cases, closed entirely for periods of time. Informal support has also been reduced for many as a result of the restrictions on meeting family and friends.¹⁷

In a [report published in January 2021](#), the Children's Commissioner for England provided the following summary:

Even before the Covid-19 pandemic there were nearly 2.2 million children in England living in households affected by any of the so-called 'toxic trio' of family issues: domestic abuse, parental drug and/or alcohol dependency, and severe parental mental health issues. The national lockdown and months thereafter only made family circumstances more difficult. Alcohol sales rose, major

¹¹ Local Government Association, [A child-centred recovery](#), 10 September 2020; NSPCC, [How safe are our children?](#) 2020, August 2020, p3.

¹² ADCS, [Safeguarding pressures phase 7: interim report](#), December 2020.

¹³ Children's Commissioner, [How lockdown has affected children's lives at home](#), August 2020, p11.

¹⁴ Reachwell, [COVID-19 Lockdown: A Child and Adolescent Mental Health Crisis](#), 9 July 2020.

¹⁵ ADCS, [Safeguarding Pressures Phase 7: Executive Summary](#), February 2021, p11; Child Poverty Action Group, [POVERTY IN THE PANDEMIC: The impact of coronavirus on low-income families and children](#), August 2020.

¹⁶ Local Government Association, [A child-centred recovery](#), 10 September 2020.

¹⁷ Children's Commissioner, [We're all in this together?](#), April 2020.

domestic abuse charities reported increases in calls, and psychiatrists issued stark warnings about declining parental mental health. Between April and September 2020, the number of child deaths and incidents of serious harm to children where abuse or neglect were suspected was 27% higher compared to the same period in 2019.¹⁸

In her [commentary on Ofsted's 2019-20 annual report](#), the Chief Inspector, Amanda Spielman, stated that "there are obvious concerns around the physical and mental health of children and young people as a result of the pandemic" and that "the impact on children's well-being will be multi-faceted." She also, however, emphasised, the "need to be cautious about drawing strong conclusions in light of the limited evidence of the actual impact of the pandemic."¹⁹

Impact on children's social care referrals

Concerns have also been raised that the Covid-19 pandemic has made many children "even more invisible to services, with schools closed for much of the year and other services such as youth clubs, health visitors and children's centres stripped back or taken online."²⁰

The Children's Commissioner for England has raised concerns about the impact this may have had on referral rates to children's social care:

Between May and November, the total number of safeguarding referrals to children's social care was 10% lower than the average for the previous 3 years. This was largely driven by a drop in referrals from schools – at times during the lockdown these were down by up to 82% compared to the same point in 2018. Some local authorities (LAs) were therefore braced for the school return in September, expecting a surge in referrals of up to 250%.

This, however, did not happen. The latest data shows that referrals to children's social care in September 2020 remained 5% lower than the 3-year average of the same week across 2016 to 2018.

Furthermore, referrals were 12% lower than average in November - a month when schools were open to all children. It is expected that referrals will fall again with children out of school during the current lockdown, on top of rises in poverty and other underlying risk factors.

It is very concerning that referral rates remain at such odds with estimates of numbers of highly vulnerable children.²¹

The report added that the "continuously low rates raise questions about whether enough action is being taken locally to locate these children who are going under the radar."²²

[Ofsted's 2019-20 annual report](#) similarly raised concerns about the "lack of visibility of vulnerable children" and stated that "local

¹⁸ Children's Commissioner, [Too many at-risk children are still invisible to social care](#), January 2021, p2.

¹⁹ Ofsted, [The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2019/20](#), 1 December 2020, p34.

²⁰ Children's Commissioner, [Too many at-risk children are still invisible to social care](#), January 2021, p2.

²¹ As above.

²² As above.

authorities are more likely now to be responding to a legacy of abuse and neglect.”²³

The Department for Education (DfE) has established a survey of local authorities to help understand the impact of the coronavirus outbreak on children’s services, with local authorities asked to report to the DfE every two weeks (each fortnightly return is referred to as a ‘wave’).

The [most recent report on the surveys](#) was published in March 2021 and covered waves 1-19. The report stated that the number of referrals during wave 19 (25-31 January) was 23% lower than the usual number at that time of year and 22% lower during wave 18 (11-17 January). It added that the total number of referrals reported in waves 1 to 19 was around 10% lower than an average of the same weeks during 2017-20.²⁴

In its February 2021 [report on the seventh phase of its safeguarding pressures research](#), ADCS stated that the “longer term and lasting impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on families remains to be seen”. It added:

We have not yet seen the full extent of the escalating needs predicted by many respondents. As the pandemic eases, local authorities anticipate significant increases in children’s emotional and mental health needs. Moreover, the, wider societal determinants of family distress including employment, housing concerns and poverty will emerge as pressures that plunge families that would ordinarily manage into crisis.²⁵

On 4 March 2021, the chief executive of the NSPCC stated that local authorities needed to be ready for an increase in referrals as schools reopened from 8 March.²⁶

Other impacts

The DfE’s March 2021 survey report also notes some of the other impacts of the coronavirus outbreak on local authority children’s social care. These include:

- The proportion of social workers unavailable to work due to coronavirus had stabilised. In waves 18 and 19, 4% of local authorities reported more than 10% of their workforce was unavailable. This compared to a low of 1% in wave 16 (14-16 December) and a peak of 13% in May 2020.
- Local authorities have adapted working arrangements in response the pandemic – for example, using alternative forms of communication for social work visits at times. During waves 18 and 19 some authorities had returned to using virtual visits for some children.

²³ Ofsted, [The Annual Report of Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Education, Children’s Services and Skills 2019/20](#), 1 December 2020, p32.

²⁴ DfE, [Vulnerable Children and Young People Survey Summary of returns Waves 1 to 19](#), February 2021, p9.

²⁵ ADCS, [Safeguarding Pressures Phase 7: Executive Summary](#), February 2021, p17.

²⁶ Children & Young People Now, [NSPCC CHIEF: COUNCILS ‘NEED TO BE READY’ FOR SOARING CHILDREN’S SERVICES DEMAND](#), 4 March 2021.

- A “common and consistent” theme across all survey waves has been “an increase in cases involving suspected domestic abuse”.
- From September 2020, a growing number of local authorities have described “an increase in the complexity of cases they are seeing”. Some local authorities had noted “how the presenting issues and cases complexity are related to the pressures arising from the (Covid-19) pandemic.”
- Since wave 17, when the DfE asked authorities to tell it about any pressures related to the pandemic, a “small number of local authorities” said that they were experiencing “some placement sufficiency issues.”²⁷

In response to the DfE’s report, the ADCS noted the workforce pressures and increase in case complexity. It also added that early help and preventative services were experiencing an increase in demand:

As the survey findings note, local authorities are now seeing greater complexity of need being presented by children and families. Added to this, we know that early help and preventative services across the country are experiencing an increase in demand. Now more than ever we need to work with children and families who are at risk of poor outcomes at the earliest possible stage, but only with adequate long-term national investment can we continue to provide this vital support.²⁸

ADCS’s February 2021 [safeguarding pressures report](#) also set out some of the ways the pandemic had impacted on children’s social care services. Among other things, it stated there had been a “a deterioration in placement availability and increasing costs for private provision, including independent fostering agency and residential placements over the past two years, and more so since March 2020 as a result of the Covid-19.” It added that “urgent national action is required to address cost and profiteering. The ‘market’ is clearly dysfunctional.”²⁹

The Government has stated that it “recognises that local authorities sometimes find themselves in positions where the most appropriate placement is difficult to access” and “will be developing plans supported by additional investment to support local authorities to create more places in children’s homes.”³⁰

Box 1: Related Library briefings on Covid-19 and children’s social care

Two Library briefings provide further information on the Covid-19 pandemic and children’s social care. The first provides information on the amendment to regulations relating to children’s social care during the pandemic: CBP 8934, [The Adoption and Children \(Coronavirus\) \(Amendment\) Regulations 2020](#). The second provides information on how the pandemic has affected contact arrangements for children in care: CBP 8901, [Coronavirus: Separated Families and Contact with Children in Care FAQs \(UK\)](#).

²⁷ DfE, [Vulnerable Children and Young People Survey Summary of returns Waves 1 to 19](#), March 2021, pp8-16.

²⁸ ADCS, [Comment on DfE’s Vulnerable Children and Young People...](#), 10 February 2021.

²⁹ ADCS, [Safeguarding Pressures Phase 7: Research report](#), February 2021, p53.

³⁰ DfE, [Reforms to unregulated provision for children in care and care leavers: Government consultation response](#), February 2021, p10.

3. Funding for children's social care

3.1 Government funding for children's social care

Children's services are funded through local government. The majority of children's social care funding is not ring-fenced and it is for local authorities to decide how to prioritise their spending based on local priorities and need. In recent years, however, the Government has announced additional ring-fenced funding for children's social care. This has comprised:

- The [Autumn Budget 2018](#) provided an additional £410 million in 2019/20 for adult and children's social care, as well as £84 million over 5 years from April 2019 to support up to 20 local authorities to improve their social work practice and decision-making.³¹
- The [Spending Round 2019](#), announced a £1 billion grant for adult and children's social care in 2020/21 (with local authorities to determine how to split their allocation between the two).³²
- At the [March 2020 Budget](#), the Government stated that the additional £1 billion for adult and children's social care in 2020/21 would be provided in every year of the current Parliament.³³
- In the [Spending Review 2020](#), the Government announced £300 million of additional grant funding for adult and children's social care, on top of the £1 billion announced at the Spending Round 2019 and maintained in 2021/22. It additionally announced £24 million to "start a new programme to maintain capacity and expand provision in secure children's homes."³⁴

Covid-19 pandemic

During the course of the Covid-19 pandemic, the Government has also provided substantial additional funding for support services for children and families. This includes £4.6 billion of un-ringfenced funding for local authorities to help them respond to pressures faced as a result of the pandemic, across all service areas.³⁵ As of the end of January 2021, around 7% of this additional funding had been allocated to children's social care.³⁶

The Government has also provided additional funding to charities and voluntary sector organisations, including a £7.6 million Vulnerable Children National Charities Strategic Relief Fund.³⁷

³¹ HM Treasury, [Budget 2018](#), 29 October 2018; [PQ 235757 \[Children in Care\] 27 March 2019](#)

³² HM Treasury, [Spending Round 2019](#), CP 170, September 2019, p2.

³³ HM Treasury, [Budget 2020](#), 12 March 2020.

³⁴ HM Treasury, [Spending Review 2020](#), CP 330, November 2020, pp63 & 75.

³⁵ [PQ144890](#), 27 January 2021.

³⁶ MHCLG, [Local authority COVID-19 financial impact monitoring information](#), 2 March 2021.

³⁷ DfE & Home Office, [Vulnerable Children National Charities Strategic Relief Fund](#), June 2020.

3.2 Local authority expenditure

Local authorities in England spent £9.93 billion on children's social care in 2019/20.

In 2014/15 expenditure on 'services to young people' was reclassified to Children and Families Social Care services expenditure. As a result, expenditure on children and families social care cannot be tracked back to 2010/11 on a consistent basis. The table opposite shows two separate time series, but both suggest that expenditure on children's social care has been protected by local authorities, during a period in which Government funding for local authorities has fallen in real terms.³⁸

3.3 Variations in local authority expenditure

There is considerable variation in children's service spending across local authorities in England. In 2019/20, for example, Blackpool spent £1,754 per 0-18 year old, while North Yorkshire spent £442.

Variations in spend per head are likely to be due to several factors, including the number of children supported in specialist placements and residential settings (which tend to be more costly). Area based cost pressures, and competing demands with other non-ring-fenced funding areas will additionally impact on expenditure. Research has also suggested that inconsistent local authority financial returns make it difficult to compare the cost of delivering services in different areas.³⁹

It should be noted that variations in the population of 0-18 year olds will inevitably influence rates of spending. Spending per head figures could be artificially inflated or deflated according to whether an area has a low or high population of 0-18 year olds.

In its January 2019 [report on children's social care](#), the National Audit Office found no link

Local authority expenditure on children's social care England £ billions

| | Cash | Real Terms (2019/20 prices) | Real terms Annual % change |
|--|------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 2010/11 | 6.65 | 7.84 | |
| 2011/12 | 6.42 | 7.45 | -4.9% |
| 2012/13 | 6.61 | 7.52 | +0.9% |
| 2013/14 | 6.92 | 7.72 | +2.7% |
| <i>Break in series: figures from 2014/15 not comparable with earlier years</i> | | | |
| 2014/15 | 8.09 | 8.92 | |
| 2015/16 | 8.30 | 9.07 | +1.8% |
| 2016/17 | 8.48 | 9.04 | -0.4% |
| 2017/18 | 8.84 | 9.27 | +2.5% |
| 2018/19 | 9.38 | 9.60 | +3.6% |
| 2019/20 | 9.93 | 9.93 | +3.4% |

Sources:

[MHLG: Local authority revenue expenditure and financing data](#)

[HMT: GDP Deflator December 2020](#)

Children's services spending in England

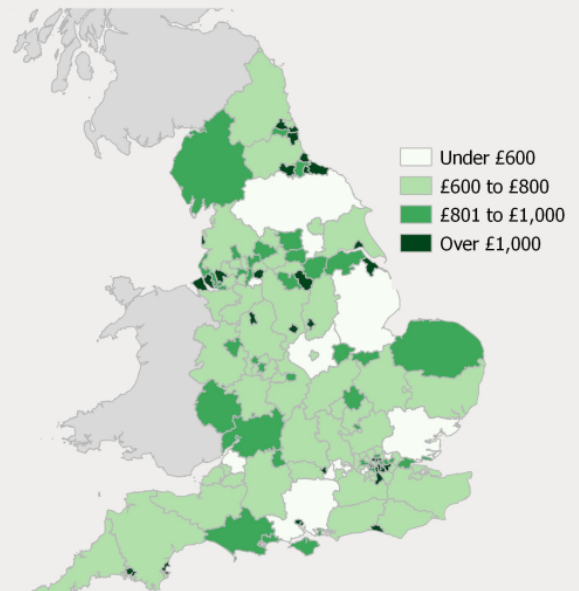
2019/20: £ per 0-18 year old

Five highest rates

| | |
|----------------------|--------|
| Blackpool | £1,754 |
| Torbay | £1,706 |
| Islington | £1,635 |
| Kensington & Chelsea | £1,530 |
| Middlesbrough | £1,476 |

Five lowest rates

| | |
|----------------------|------|
| North Yorkshire | £442 |
| Essex | £457 |
| Wokingham | £497 |
| Windsor & Maidenhead | £528 |
| Leicestershire | £529 |



³⁸ National Audit Office, [Financial sustainability of local authorities 2018](#), 8 March 2018.

³⁹ Local Government Association, [Making Sense](#), Newton Europe, July 2018

between local authority spend per child in need and the quality of services as assessed by Ofsted.⁴⁰

DfE-commissioned research

In January 2021, the DfE published research it had commissioned from the Rees Centre at the University of Oxford regarding [children's social care cost pressures and variations in unit costs](#). The report highlighted "the complexities associated with understanding and categorising variations in spend and costs", but set out a number of factors:

- **Salaries:** variations in the salaries being paid to the children's social care workforce, which are "multi-faceted, and include factors beyond London weighting and those associated with the recruitment and retention of staff".
- **Placement fees:** payments to the independent sector for placements was "one of the most frequently cited concerns". The report also noted that a small proportion of children with the most complex needs could skew the budget for looked after children, particularly in smaller local authorities.
- **Variations in overheads:** the highest reported range was for safeguarding services, with the lowest reported overhead being less than 1% of spend and the highest being 31%.
- **Variations in time use:** the report highlighted the increase in the number of adolescents being placed in care as of particular relevance, with the complexity of their needs "placing an increased pressure on children's social care budgets".⁴¹

3.4 Funding pressures

The increase in demand for children's social care services, combined with reductions in local authority funding from central government and increases in care costs, has created pressure on local authority children's social care budgets.⁴²

In the [State of Local Government Finance Survey 2020](#), conducted by the LGiU and The MJ and published in February 2020, children's services and education was identified as the top immediate funding pressure for local authorities for the third year running. The report stated that this "suggests that councils are no longer able to shield children from the worst of the budgetary pressures."⁴³

ASCS's February 2021 [safeguarding pressures report](#) stated that "Expenditure on children's social care has been increasing due to increased unit costs (especially for placements), increased number of

⁴⁰ National Audit Office, [Pressures on children's social care](#), HC 1868, 23 January 2019, para 14

⁴¹ DfE, [Children's social care cost pressures and variations in unit costs: Research report](#), January 2021, pp19-24.

⁴² An analysis of local authority financial pressures are provided in the following reports: National Audit Office, [Financial sustainability of local authorities 2018](#), HC 834, 8 March 2018 and House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts, [Financial sustainability of local authorities- Fiftieth Report of Session 2017-19](#), HC 970, 4 July 2018

⁴³ The MJ and LGiU, [State of Local Government Finance Survey 2020](#), February 2020, p10.

children coming into care, fewer children leaving care and, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.” It calculated that “the total required now to close the budget gap in-year is £824.1m to ‘stay still’.”

The report identified the top four current funding pressures as:

1. Placement costs for children looked after, specifically independent fostering agencies, independent residential and secure placements. Section 251 financial returns evidenced that the total spend on children looked after has increased by 8% to £5.3 billion in 2019/20.⁴⁴
2. Increase in demand and complexity of presenting needs.
3. SEND and High Needs Block, including transport. Whilst this is not central to Safeguarding Pressures research, this continues to be one of the top three and growing pressures for children’s services.
4. Inequity in funding such as bidding for small one off pots of grant funding, 1-year spending review, lack of ring-fenced funding for early help.⁴⁵

The DfE-commissioned research report on cost pressures (see section above) stated that “within the wider context of increased demand and reduced budgets, rising unit costs..., particularly for looked after children, is a substantive issue for children’s social care.” It added that, “A range of inter-related factors have been identified as causal factors for higher, and rising unit costs.”⁴⁶

Box 2: Private provision in children’s social care

As noted in sections 2.7 and 3.4 above, concerns have been raised regarding the placement availability and increasing costs for private provision in children’s social care.⁴⁷

In November 2020, the Children’s Commissioner published a [report on private provision in children’s social care](#). The report stated that private provision accounts for 73% of the growth in the number of children in care between 2011 and 2019. It additionally estimated that “large private providers make a profit margin of around 17% on the fees they receive from local authorities.”

Regarding the quality of care, the report stated that, on average, as measured by Ofsted ratings, the variation between local authority and large private children’s homes is small. It did note evidence that smaller private providers have lower Ofsted ratings than local authority or larger private providers, but added that “the overwhelming majority of provision is rated “Good” or “Outstanding” regardless of whether it is publicly or privately owned.”⁴⁸

On 12 March 2021, the Competition and Markets Authority announced that it was launching a study to “examine the lack of availability and increasing costs in children’s social care provision, including children’s homes and fostering.” It added that the study had been launched “after concerns have been raised by other organisations about private sector provision of children’s social care making high profit margins.”⁴⁹

⁴⁴ The role of [private provision in children’s social care](#) was the subject of a report by the Children’s Commissioner for England, published in November 2020.

⁴⁵ ADCS, [Safeguarding Pressures Phase 7: Research report](#), February 2021, p101.

⁴⁶ DfE, [Children’s social care cost pressures and variations in unit costs: Research report](#), January 2021, pp15-18.

⁴⁷ See, for example: ADCS, [Safeguarding Pressures Phase 7: Research report](#), February 2021, pp52-3 and DfE, DfE, [Children’s social care cost pressures and variations in unit costs: Research report](#), January 2021, p21.

⁴⁸ Children’s Commissioner, [Private provision in children’s social care](#), November 2020, p4.

⁴⁹ Competition and Markets Authority, [CMA launches study of children’s social care provision](#), 12 March 2021.

Covid-19 pandemic

The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local government is collecting data on the impact of Covid-19 on local authority finances. The latest data, published on 2 March 2021, showed that local authorities had incurred around an additional £379 million of spending on children's social care (excluding SEND) thus far in the 2020-21 financial year. This represented around 5% of all additional expenditure incurred by local authorities.⁵⁰

In a report on local government finance during the Covid-19 pandemic, published on 10 March 2021, the NAO stated that local authorities had forecast cost pressures of £390 million in children's social care over the whole of 2020-21 as a result of the pandemic. This represented 3.9% of spending on children's social care in 2019-20.⁵¹

3.5 Spending on preventative services

As noted in section 3.2 above, in recent years local authorities have generally protected spending on children's social care services, despite Government funding for local authorities falling in real terms for much of the period.⁵²

However, there is evidence that spending on non-statutory children's services, in particular for early help and preventative interventions has been reduced in many areas. For example, in its January 2019 [report on children's social care](#), the NAO found that the proportion of local authority spending on preventative children's services (as a percentage of overall spending on children's services) fell from 41% in 2010/11 to 25% in 2017/18. The proportion of spending on statutory social care activities rose from 59% to 75% over the same period.⁵³

In its [submission ahead of the March 2021 Budget](#), the Local Government Association also referred to the scaling back of early help services despite councils protecting children's social care budgets:

Unfortunately, the dual impact of significant cuts to council budgets over the last decade and increasing demand for child protection services prior to the pandemic means that universal and early help services have been scaled back or even closed in many areas – despite councils protecting and even increasing children's social care budgets at the expense of other services.

The submission argued that “Councils urgently need funding to invest in the preventative services that their local children and families need, so that we can make sure help is available when it's first needed – not later down the line when the situation has reached crisis point.” It called on the Government to “provide additional funding which could be used to strengthen universal and early help services” and added that “Returning

⁵⁰ MHCLG, [Local authority COVID-19 financial impact monitoring information](#), 2 March 2021.

⁵¹ National Audit Office, [Local government finance in the pandemic](#), 10 March 2021, p19.

⁵² National Audit Office, [Financial sustainability of local authorities 2018](#), 8 March 2018.

⁵³ National Audit Office, [Pressures on children's social care](#), HC 1868, 23 January 2019, para 2.21

the Early Intervention Grant to 2010/11 funding levels by providing an extra £1.7 billion would enable councils to reinstate some of these lost services which help tackle and prevent emerging problems and avoid costs escalating later on.”⁵⁴

In [response to a parliamentary question in June 2020](#), the Minister, Vicky Ford, highlighted the importance of early help and noted that the DfE’s statutory guidance Working Together to Safeguard Children “is clear that local areas should have a comprehensive range of effective, evidence-based services in place to address assessed needs early.” She added, however, that it “is right that local authorities are free to decide how to use their children’s social care budget to manage local priorities and deliver the best services for children.”⁵⁵

Further information on early help and preventative services is provided in the Library Briefing: [Early Intervention](#). A [separate Library Briefing](#) provides more information on the Troubled Families Programme.

⁵⁴ LGA, [LGA March 2021 Budget submission](#), 14 January 2021.

⁵⁵ [PO51945](#), 8 June 2020.

4. Standards of children's social care

4.1 Inspections of children's social care

Ofsted is responsible for the formal assessment of local authorities' children's social care services. In 2018, Ofsted introduced a new framework for the [inspection of local authority children's services \(ILACS\)](#) which is intended to support the earlier identification of risk and success.⁵⁶ The ILACS system comprises the following:

- standard inspections (usually for local authorities judged 'requires improvement to be good').
- short inspections (for local authorities judged 'good' or 'outstanding').
- focused visits.
- monitoring visits.
- activity outside inspection.

The DfE is responsible for intervening in services that Ofsted judges inadequate.⁵⁷

Ofsted inspections of children's social care providers, including, for example, children's homes and voluntary adoption agencies, are carried out under the [social care common inspection framework](#). Further information is available on Gov.uk at: [How Ofsted inspects children's social care](#).

Covid-19 pandemic

Regular Ofsted inspections were paused in March 2020 because of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, Ofsted began making assurance visits from September 2020 and focused visits, which do not result in a graded judgement, have been carried for local authorities under the ILACS since January 2021. It is planned that graded inspections will begin from April 2021. Further information is available on the Ofsted website at: [Social care plans from September 2020](#) and in the DfE's [guidance for children's social care services during the coronavirus outbreak](#).⁵⁸

4.2 Ofsted's 2019-20 annual report

Ofsted's [annual report on education, children's services and skills in the 2019-20 academic year](#) was published on 1 December 2020. The report stated that:

- As at 31 August 2020, half of local authorities in England had been judged to be good or outstanding at their most recent inspection. This is an increase from just over a third after each

⁵⁶ For further information see: '[A new inspection system](#)', Ofsted blog, 9 November 2017.

⁵⁷ DfE, [Improvement notices and directions](#), last updated 15 February 2021.

⁵⁸ Ofsted, [Social care plans from September 2020](#), last updated 3 December 2020; DfE, [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): guidance for children's social care services](#), last updated 9 March 2021.

local authority's first inspection under the previous single inspection framework.

- 83% of social care providers were judged good or outstanding at their most recent inspection. This was a small decrease from 84% at the end of 2019.⁵⁹

In her commentary on the report, Ofsted's Chief Inspector, Amanda Spielman noted that examples of strong practice were being seen in "a rising number of local authorities" but that "important challenges remain, including, most commonly, the availability of suitable accommodation."⁶⁰ Issues around sufficiency in the social care market had, she said, been "exacerbated" by the Covid-19 pandemic and should be a fundamental part of the Care Review.⁶¹

Further commentary on the annual report was provided in a blog by Yvette Stanley, Ofsted's National Director for Regulation and Social Care: [An extraordinary year: Ofsted's Annual Report](#).

⁵⁹ Ofsted, [The Annual Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2019/20](#), 1 December 2020, pp78-80.

⁶⁰ As above, p18.

⁶¹ As above, pp25 & 35.

5. Statistics on the children's social care workforce

DfE experimental statistics show that as at 30 September 2020 there were 31,854 full-time equivalent (FTE) children and family social workers, an increase of around 12% from the same point in 2017.

The table below summarises statistics for 2017 and 2020 (changes in data collection procedures prevent reliable comparisons with earlier years).

| Children's social work workforce summary statistics | | | |
|---|--------|--------|----------|
| England: Full Time Equivalents as at 30 September each year | | | |
| | 2017 | 2020 | % change |
| Social workers | 28,496 | 31,854 | +11.8% |
| Leavers | 3,880 | 4,294 | +10.7% |
| Joiners | 5,570 | 5,202 | -6.6% |
| Turnover rate | 13.6% | 13.5% | -0.7% |
| Staff vacancies | 5,820 | 6,100 | +4.8% |
| Vacancy rate | 17.0% | 16.1% | -5.3% |
| Agency staff | 5,340 | 5,800 | +8.6% |
| Agency staff rate | 15.8% | 15.4% | -2.5% |

Source: [DFE: Children's social work workforce 2020](#)

In 2020 more social workers left the workforce than in 2017: 4,294 compared with 3,880. However, since the size of the workforce has expanded in recent years, the 2020 turnover rate⁶² of 13.5% was almost identical to the rate for 2017 (13.6%).

Likewise, staff vacancies were higher in 2020, but the increase in the FTE workforce numbers resulted in the 2020 vacancy rate⁶³ being lower than in 2017 (down to 16.1% from 17.0%).

A similar picture was observed for agency staff, whereby FTE numbers were larger in 2020 but the agency staff rate⁶⁴ fell slightly.

5.1 Variation between local authority areas

The national figures mask large variations in social worker vacancies and the use of agency staff between local authority areas.

The tables below show the local authority areas with the five highest and lowest rates of vacancies and agency staff use.

⁶² The turnover rate is defined as the number of leavers divided by the number of workers in place.

⁶³ The vacancy rate is defined as the number of FTE vacancies divided by the number of FTE staff in post plus vacant posts.

⁶⁴ The agency staff rate is defined as the number of agency staff divided by all FTE staff in post.

As of 30 September 2020, five local authorities reported no child and family social worker vacancies, while five authorities reported rates over 39%. The vacancy rate in Newham was just over half of the workforce.

Highest and lowest children's social worker vacancy rate

England as at 30 September 2020

| Five highest | | Five lowest | |
|-----------------|-------|-------------------|------|
| Newham | 55.1% | Gateshead | 0.0% |
| Isles Of Scilly | 50.0% | Waltham Forest | 0.0% |
| Slough | 44.4% | Brighton and Hove | 1.0% |
| Wandsworth | 42.5% | Portsmouth | 1.0% |
| Lewisham | 39.7% | Derby | 1.2% |

Source: [DFE: Children's social work workforce 2020](#)

Newham also had the highest rate of agency staff use with over half of the workers in place in September 2020 being agency staff.

Highest and lowest children's social worker agency staff rate

England as at 30 September 2020

| Five highest | | Five lowest | |
|-----------------|-------|--------------------|------|
| Newham | 53.4% | Barnsley | 0.0% |
| Isles Of Scilly | 50.0% | Leeds | 0.0% |
| Slough | 46.3% | North Lincolnshire | 0.0% |
| Torbay | 43.8% | North Yorkshire | 0.0% |
| Barnet | 39.5% | East Sussex | 0.3% |

Source: [DFE: Children's social work workforce 2020](#)

ACDS's February 2021 [safeguarding pressures report](#) stated that "recruitment and retention of experienced social workers continues to be a key challenge, more so for some authorities than others, who report having a more stable workforce than previously." It added that, "Strategies to boost recruitment and retention of experienced and skilled workers are in place and were reported to have resulted in reduced reliance on agency staff."⁶⁵

⁶⁵ ADCS, [Safeguarding Pressures Phase 7: Executive Summary](#), February 2021, p15.

6. Policy context and care review

6.1 Background

Since 2010, there have been a number of reviews, reports and policy documents relating to the reform of children's social care.

Munro Review of Child Protection

In June 2010, the DfE commissioned Professor Eileen Munro to conduct an independent review of child protection in England. The [final report of the review](#), published in May 2011, made 15 recommendations designed to create "a better balance between essential rules, principles, and professional expertise" and ensure that children's services could be more "child-centred" and less bureaucratic.⁶⁶

The Government's [response to the review](#), published in July 2011, accepted almost all the recommendations and a [progress report on implementation](#) was published in May 2012.

In June 2014, the Government stated that eleven of the Munro Report's recommendations had been implemented in full, including the publication of revised statutory guidance and the appointment of a Chief Social Worker for Children and Families. It added that "substantial progress is being made on implementing the other key recommendations." The Government also stated, however, that while the Munro Report had recommended that a duty should be placed on local authorities to secure the provision of early help services for children, the Government had "concluded there is sufficient legislation in place to deliver early help services to children and families."⁶⁷

Further information on progress with implementation was provided in [response to a parliamentary question](#) in November 2016.⁶⁸

Social Care Reform Programme since 2015

In a speech in September 2015, the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, emphasised that reform of social services and child protection was a key priority for the Government and "a big area of focus over the next 5 years".⁶⁹

Subsequently, in July 2016, the DfE published [Putting children first: delivering our vision for excellent children's social care](#), which set out an ambition to "transform the quality of children's social care services in England" over the next five years.⁷⁰ This built on an earlier policy paper published in January 2016: [Children's social care reform: a vision for change](#).

The strategy set out three key areas for reform:

⁶⁶ E Munro, [The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final Report – a child-centred system](#), Cm 8062, Department for Education, May 2011, p10.

⁶⁷ [HL Deb 17 June 2014, cWA47](#).

⁶⁸ DfE, [Munro review reports](#), 1 May 2012; [PO 54289](#), 22 November 2016.

⁶⁹ Gov.uk, [Prime Minister: My vision for smarter state](#), 11 September 2015

⁷⁰ Department for Education, [Putting children first: Delivering our vision for excellent children's social care](#), July 2016.

1. **people and leadership** – bringing the best into the profession and giving them the right knowledge and skills for the challenging but hugely rewarding work ahead, and developing leaders equipped to nurture practice excellence
2. **practice and systems** – creating the right environment for excellent practice and innovation to flourish, learning from the very best practice, and learning from when things go wrong
3. **governance and accountability** – making sure that what we are doing is working, and developing innovative new organisational models with the potential to radically improve services.⁷¹

Shortly after the publication of the Government's policy paper, in October 2016, a [report published by the NAO](#) concluded that the actions taken by the DfE since 2010 to improve the quality of help and protection services for children had "not yet resulted in services being of good enough quality." It added that the DfE would need to "show a sense of urgency and determination" to achieve its goal of improving the quality of services by 2020.⁷²

Reform roadmap

In September 2017, the DfE published a '[roadmap](#)' for the delivery of its children's social care reform programme, which set out a revised ambition "to ensure that all vulnerable children, no matter where they live, receive the same high quality of care and support by 2022".⁷³

The reform programme has comprised a number of initiatives, including, for example, the Children's Social Care Innovation Programme. Under the programme, since 2014 the DfE has provided £200 million of funding for 98 projects run by local authorities and public sector organisations with the aim of testing and sharing "effective ways of supporting vulnerable children and young people who need help from children's social care services."⁷⁴

Further information, including a full list of projects, and evaluation and summary reports, is available on Gov.uk at: [Children's Social Care Innovation Programme: insights and evaluation](#). This page also provides information on projects running alongside the innovation programme such as the Partners in Practice programme and the Strengthening Families, Protecting Children programme.⁷⁵

The Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) has published a detailed [children's services policy timeline](#) from 2007 onwards that illustrates the key events and changes that impact on safeguarding children and young people in England.

⁷¹ Department for Education, [Putting children first: Delivering our vision for excellent children's social care](#), July 2016, p5

⁷² National Audit Office, [Children in need of help or protection](#), HC 723, 12 October 2016, pp10-11; National Audit Office press release, [Children in need of help or protection](#), 12 October 2016.

⁷³ [Letter from the Permanent Secretary of the DfE to the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee](#), 18 September 2017

⁷⁴ DfE, [Children's Social Care Innovation Programme: insights and evaluation](#), last updated 28 January 2021.

⁷⁵ As above.

The Government has also carried out reviews and published policy papers on a number of specific areas of children's social care, including [fostering](#) (February 2018); [residential care in England](#) (July 2016) and [unregulated provision for looked after children](#) (February 2020). Further information on the latter two is provided in Library Briefing 7560, [Looked after children: out of area, unregulated and unregistered accommodation \(England\)](#).

NAO and Public Accounts Committee reports

In January 2019, the National Audit Office published a report into [Pressures on children's social care](#). Among other things, the report concluded that it would be a "tall order" for the Government to achieve its goal that all vulnerable children, no matter where they live, should have access to high-quality support by 2022.⁷⁶

The House of Commons Public Accounts Committee's [transforming children's services](#), published in March 2019, also raised concerns about the slow progress in improving children's social care services and the lack of clarity on what sustainable improvements the Government was seeking to achieve.⁷⁷

The [Government's response to the PAC's report](#), published on 10 June 2019, accepted many of the Committee's recommendations and outlined work underway across Government Departments intended to address some of the concerns raised in the Committee's report.⁷⁸

6.2 Review of children's social care

In its [manifesto for the 2019 general election](#), the Conservative Party stated that it would "review the care system to make sure that all care placements and settings are providing children and young adults with the support they need."⁷⁹

Following delays as a result of the coronavirus outbreak, the review was launched on 15 January 2021.⁸⁰ Further information on the review was provided in a [DfE press release](#) and in a [written statement on 18 January](#). These stated that:

- The review will be led by Josh MacAlister, the founder and chief executive of the children's social work charity Frontline.
- The review will "look at the whole system of support, safeguarding, protection and care and the children's journey into and out of that system, including relevant aspects of preventive service that are provided to children and families as part of early help."

⁷⁶ National Audit Office, [Pressures on children's social care](#), HC 1868, 23 January 2019, para 18

⁷⁷ Public Accounts Committee, [Transforming Children's Services – Eighty-Eighth Report of Session 2017-19](#), HC 1741, 22 March 2019, Summary, p3.

⁷⁸ HM Treasury, [Government response to the Committee of Public Accounts on the Eighty-Second and the Eighty-Sixth to the Ninety-Second reports from Session 2017-19](#), CP113, June 2019.

⁷⁹ Conservative Party, [Get Brexit Done: Unleash Britain's Potential](#), p14.

⁸⁰ DfE, [Education Secretary launches review of children's social care](#), 15 January 2021; [PO125246](#), 4 December 2020.

- The review “will address major challenges such as the increase in numbers of looked after children, the inconsistencies in children’s social care practice, outcomes across the country, and the failure of the system to provide enough stable homes for children.”⁸¹

Further information on the scope of the review and its key themes and questions is set out in the [review’s terms of reference](#).⁸²

The review will be supported by a secretariat team made up primarily of civil servants.⁸³ In addition, an Experts by Experience Group, made up of people with experience of children’s social care, will provide further support. Following an [expressions of interest](#), membership of the Experts by Experience Group was announced on 1 March 2021.⁸⁴

The review launched a [call for advice](#), aimed at anyone with an interest in the review, to guide its early work. On 1 March, a [call for evidence](#) was also issued, aimed “primarily at the research community and those with robust evidence the review should consider”. At the time of writing, the call for advice “remains open for now” and the call for evidence closes on 30 March 2021.⁸⁵

On 1 March, Josh MacAlister started working full time on the review and on the same day he published a document with more information about his early plans for the review. Among other things, this set out the following plan for delivering the review:

I plan to set out a case for change in the summer, highlighting what most needs changing in children’s social care. This will give everyone the opportunity to understand the review’s thinking and tell us whether we have missed or misunderstood anything. The review will then begin to build recommendations for how the system can be improved, still feeding in a wide range of views, culminating in the review’s final recommendations and report.

Further information is available on the review’s website at: [An independent review of children’s social care in England](#).

⁸¹ DfE, [Education Secretary launches review of children’s social care](#), 15 January 2021; [HCWS717](#), 18 January 2021.

⁸² DfE, [Terms of reference for the independent review of children’s social care: a bold and broad approach to support a fundamental review of children’s experiences](#).

⁸³ [PO148802](#), 3 February 2021.

⁸⁴ DfE, [Experts by Experience Group: terms of reference](#); Independent review of children’s social care, [Experts by Experience](#).

⁸⁵ [Independent review of children’s social care: call for advice](#); [Independent review of children’s social care: call for evidence](#).

7. Reports

This section provides links to selected recent stakeholder reports on children's social care from parliamentary.

Parliamentary

- Public Accounts Committee, [Transforming children's services](#), HC1741 2017-19, 22 March 2019.
- HM Treasury, [Government response to the Committee of Public Accounts on the Eighty-Second and the Eighty-Sixth to the Ninety-Second reports from Session 2017-19](#), CP113, June 2019.
- National Audit Office, [Pressures on children's social care](#), HC1868 2017-19, 23 January 2019.
- Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, [Funding of local authorities' children's services](#), HC1638 2017-19, 1 May 2019.
- Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, [Funding of local authorities' children's services: : government response to the Select Committee report](#), CP 127, 2 July 2019.
- Education Committee, [Fostering](#), HC 340 2017-19, 22 December 2017.
- Department for Education, [Fostering Better Outcomes: The Government response to the Education Select Committee report into fostering and Foster Care in England](#), Cm 9662, July 2018.
- National Audit Office, [Children in need of help or protection](#), HC723 2016-17, 12 October 2016.

Children's Commissioner

- [Characteristics of children entering care for the first time as teenagers](#), 17 February 2021.
- [Building back better](#), 17 February 2021.
- [Too many at-risk children are still invisible to social care](#), 24 January 2021.
- [The children who no-one knows what to do with](#), 11 November 2020.
- [Private provision in children's social care](#), 11 November 2020.
- [Stability index 2020](#), 11 November 2020.
- [Childhood in the time of Covid](#), 29 September 2020.
- [Unregulated](#), 10 September 2020.
- [Teenagers falling through the gaps](#), 7 July 2020.
- [Children, domestic abuse and coronavirus](#), 2 April 2020.
- [Pass the parcel: children posted around the care system](#), 24 December 2019.

- [Children's Voices: Children's experiences of instability in the care system](#), 1 August 2019.

Association of Directors of Children's Services

- [Children's Services Timeline](#), last updated 23 February 2021.
- [Safeguarding Pressures](#), last updated 7 December 2020.
- [Building a country that works for all children post Covid-19](#), 14 July 2020.
- [Reflections on the Children Acts 1989 and 2004](#), 22 November 2019.
- [A Country That Works For All Children](#), 11 October 2017.

Local Government Association

- [A child-centred recovery](#), 10 September 2020.
- [Evaluation of the LGA Sector Led Improvement programme for Children's Services](#), 30 July 2020.
- [Making Sense: Understanding the drivers of variation in spend on Children's Services](#), July 2018.

Joint stakeholder reports

- Action for Children, National Children's Bureau, NSPCC, The Children's Society & Barnardo's, [Children and young people's services: Funding and spending 2010/11 to 2018/19](#), May 2020.
- Care Crisis Review, [Care Crisis Review: Options for Change](#), June 2018. (For more information, see Library Briefing 0191, [Findings of the Care Crisis Review](#), 4 September 2018.)

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