

POLICY ESSENTIALS: CHILDREN'S SERVICES





ABOUT

The County Councils Network (CCN) represents 39 county and unitary councils across England. We are a councillor-led, cross-party organisation that works on behalf of our member councils and their communities to ensure they have a strong voice with national government, and to help deliver positive change for those authorities and the residents they serve.

The CCN aims to articulate the challenges and opportunities of its member councils, alongside their priorities, to the government and other key organisations. This is primarily done through original and impactful research across areas such as adult social care, children's services, housing and planning, and local government finance.

Building on our **Guide to CCN**, our updated series of **Policy Essentials** aims to give county and unitary councillors a short and concise overview of the most important policy issues facing their councils. This includes an overview of the key service responsibilities of councils; why it is a national advocacy priority for CCN; key developments in the national policy landscape; and CCN's key policy positions and advocacy priorities.

This Policy Essentials is focused on **Children's Services**. For more information on our policy work in this area, contact:



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What role do councils play in Children's Services?

Children's Social Care supports children, young people and families who need additional help to protect children and young people from harm – principally abuse and neglect. It also looks after children without parents or guardians, or those whose parents may be unable to look after them for a period due to sickness. Its main aim is to keep families together, but when this isn't possible, the system provides an alternative home to children and young people – becoming their 'corporate parent'.

The Director of Children's Services and Lead Member for Children's Services in local authorities are the key points of professional and political accountability, but the relevant Acts of Parliament also place safeguarding duties on a range of organisations and individuals (including Integrated Care Boards, police and education providers).

Children can be supported through a variety of measures dependent on their family circumstances and the level of perceived risk of harm that they are at.

- **Children in Care:** The council has parental responsibility of the child and must place the child in a safe setting.
- **Child Protection Plan:** A compulsory plan when a specific risk to a child is identified.
- **Child in Need Plan:** A non-statutory plan that recognises a need a child has.
- **Early help:** Non-statutory support to families and children considered to be vulnerable and at risk, alongside discretionary universal preventative services.

Councils also have statutory responsibilities to support children who were formerly in the care system – 'care leavers' – up until age 25, including help with finances, housing, life skills, and accessing education and employment.

Local authority duties with regard to children's social care are set out in the Children Act 1989 (with amendments in various subsequent Acts).



What are the key issues facing CCN members in children's services?

- **There were 81,770 children in the care system (as at 31 March 2025) – a slight 2% drop from the previous year, but still a 17% rise over the past decade.** At the same time, there are also 402,400 'children in need', including 49,400 with a child protection plan, although these figures have remained largely consistent over the same time period.
- CCN's most recent research on the topic found that **in county areas, this number increased by 30% between 2014 and 2024, by which time it totalled 31,214 young people.** This is 37% of the total number of children in care in England. The number of children in need in county areas stood at 140,027 in March 2024. Proportionally, the number of children in need in CCN areas is 35% of England's total.
- Nationally, council costs of delivering children's services will rise £6.1bn between 2025/26 and 2030/31. Over this period, PwC modelling shows **CCN member councils will witness the largest increase in spending pressures, with the increase in costs totalling £2.5bn between 2025/26 and 2028/29.**
- Whilst much of this increase in spending has been caused by the rising numbers of children in the care system, more recently it has been particularly due to the surging costs of regulatory changes and for care placements in social care. This is driven primarily by private providers monopolising the residential homes market for children in care and charging ever-increasing fees to local authorities. **LGA analysis indicates there has been an increase in the number of high-cost children's social care placements, with the number of placements costing £10,000 or more increasing from 120 in 2018/19 to 1,510 in 2022/23.**
- Spending on statutory children's social care has increased while overall council budgets have reduced in real terms, meaning they now take up a greater proportion of spending. As a result of these trends, **local authorities have had little choice but to reduce their spending on preventative and family services that address issues before they reach the point a child needs to come into care.** Councils recognise this is a false economy but are forced to prioritise spend on crisis care.



What is the national policy context for children's services?

- The previous Government's strategy for social care was set out in the document Stable Homes, Built On Love in 2023, based on the findings of the previous year's Independent Review of Social Care led by Josh McAlister (now a Labour MP). The substance of the policy proposals was widely welcomed by the sector, including CCN – especially its measures to reset the children's placement market, the intention of rebalancing services towards prevention, and proposals to improve recruitment and retention. However, it was accompanied by just £200m of extra funding, falling way short of the £2.6bn recommended by the McAlister report.
- The Labour Government has retained much of this direction, but has also extended and strengthened the reform agenda. In November 2024, the government published its proposals Keeping Children Safe, Helping Families Thrive and supportive legislation is incorporated into the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026, passed earlier this year.
- As well as stronger measures to regulate the children's social care market, the Act makes provision for: a potential profit cap on providers to help regulate the care placements market; a requirement for councils to establish a new register of children being home-schooled in their area; improvements to multi-agency working for councils across education and health to safeguard children; and stronger support for care leavers, as well as a range of other measures for local authorities and schools.
- Key initiatives have already been launched by the Government to support its aim to improve early intervention including Best Start In Life and Families First. The government is also piloting 'Regional Care Co-operatives' – designed to improve commissioning of care placements between authorities collaboratively in order to address market dysfunction concerns.
- The government's programme of local government reorganisation will also have significant impact on children's services. CCN has set out wide-ranging evidence on the impact of excessive fragmentation and disaggregation of these services through the creation of new unitary councils at odds with the government's statutory criteria.



What are CCN's key policy positions and advocacy priorities?

CCN's Business Plan 2026/27 sets out the network's priorities for children's services over the coming year. In relation to children's social care and education, CCN will continue to be a leading voice on the pressures facing services, while shaping reforms to improve outcomes for young people and ensure sustainability for councils. In particular, we will:

- **Rebalance the system towards prevention and early intervention**, supported by a major research programme demonstrating how earlier support can reduce care demand, improve outcomes, and inform national reform.
- **Reform the children's placements market**, including evaluating and shaping Regional Care Co-operatives to address sufficiency and reduce high-cost placements, backed by commissioned research into pilot effectiveness and scalability.
- **Influence education system reform**, including the Schools White Paper, to ensure the role of local authorities (e.g. admissions, place planning, home-school registers, trust arrangements) is deliverable and properly funded.
- **Strengthen family support and early help programmes**, by evaluating the rollout of initiatives such as Families First and Best Start in Life and identifying resource and delivery gaps for county areas.
- **Shape inspection and accountability reform**, working with member councils to influence changes to Ofsted's inspection framework and ensure inspections reflect the realities of local authority delivery.
- **Continue to engage MHCLG and wider government departments on their programme of reorganisation**, advocating for evidence-based decisions and outlining the challenges of disaggregation of children's services. CCN will also enhance its programme of support, with an increasing focus on transition and implementation plans.

Read more about all our advocacy and research in the CCN Business Plan & Work Programme 2026/27.





Reports

- Newton – Local Government Reorganisation – analysing the impact on people services (2026)
- CCN Policy in Focus: Children's Mental Health (2026)
- IMPOWER – The Way We Care (2024)

Press Releases



- 16 Jan 2026 – Public Accounts Committee report on children's residential care: CCN responds
- 18 Nov 2024 – CCN welcomes proposed reforms to children's social care
- 13 Nov 2024 – Thousands of young people were placed in council care more than 20 miles away from their home last year due to a lack of available alternatives