

## CCN Consultation Response

### **Stable Homes Built On Love**

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## About the County Councils Network

1. The County Councils Network (CCN) represents 37 English local authorities that serve counties. The 20 county and 17 county unitary authorities that make up CCN are the largest part of the local government family. They represent all four corners of England, from Cumberland to Cornwall, Durham to Kent, North Yorkshire to Suffolk, Derbyshire to Essex.

## Overview

2. CCN welcomes the direction of travel for strategic reform of children's social care set out in *Stable Homes, Built On Love*. It is clear that the government has listened closely to the voices of children and their families, and the sector as a whole, in constructing the strategy.
3. We are very pleased that much of the proposed strategy reflects the recommendations which CCN highlighted in its report with Newton, *The Future of Children's Social Care*, published in March 2022<sup>1</sup> – in particular, keeping local government at the heart of delivering services for vulnerable children; placing more emphasis on preventative work with families to help reduce the numbers of children in care; and outlining systemic reforms designed to address some of the various existing challenges councils face including those around workforce, assessment, and inspection. We are also delighted that the government has listened to our core recommendation for an aligned national strategy which is particularly reflected in the new National Framework for Children's Social Care.
4. However, CCN is disappointed that the scope of the plan is not matched with the additional investment necessary to deliver all of the many positive elements it contains. CCN supported the recommendation of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care for an injection of £2bn over the next five years – a figure likely to need increasing now in light of the substantial pressures being placed on local authority budgets by rising inflation.
5. Although the pressure on children's services continues to grow year on year – for instance, research by CCN and Newton projects local authorities in England could be spending as much as £7.5bn on children in care by 2024/25<sup>2</sup> – the proportion of grant funding local authorities receive for delivering these services has declined precipitously in recent years, particularly in county authorities. Previous research by CCN showed that this declined by over 35% for county authorities between 2015/16 and 2019/20 whilst at the same time costs continued to rise.<sup>3</sup> Although in 2021 more flexibility was given for

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.countycouncilsnetwork.org.uk/download/4103/?tmstv=1681740693>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.countycouncilsnetwork.org.uk/download/4103/?tmstv=1681392115>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.countycouncilsnetwork.org.uk/download/3003/?tmstv=1681392115>

councils to use wider social care emergency grant funding across both children and adult services (the council tax social care precept), there is little reason to suggest the situation has improved dramatically now.

6. It is vital the Government considers increasing the amount of funding so that local authorities will be able to fully deliver on these many welcome elements of reform. Without more investment, at best these reforms will remain unfulfilled ambition. At worst they may create even more pressures on the system by raising expectations among families and civil society for local authorities being able to offer more than they can – particularly in areas such as family support (particularly children’s centres/ hubs) – when in reality councils do not presently have the resources to meet *existing* demand.
7. Finally, much of the investment that is attached to the strategy is focused on pilot schemes that may be used as the basis for wider roll out at a later date. Whilst, this approach is sensible, CCN would also urge that attention should also be paid to the extensive body of research and understanding that has been gleaned from previous initiatives that have been invested in over the past fifteen years – such as by the Early Intervention Foundation – which may help identify areas that can be invested in immediately.

### **Six Pillars - Key Points**

8. CCN supports the six pillars identified as providing the foundations for reform – feeling that they are suitably broad, covering most aspects of the children’s social care system notwithstanding the need for appropriate funding identified in the overview. For this consultation response CCN’s key points and observations are grouped under the pillars to mirror the structure of the document.

#### *Pillar One – Family Help provides the right support at the right time*

9. CCN strongly supports the emphasis placed on refocusing children’s social care towards prevention and family help, reflecting calls our network has made for a number of years. Over the past decade, as demand has increased, the proportion of councils’ overall spending on children and families that is directed towards services for children in care steadily increased to over 50% in 2019/20, from 42% in 2014/5.<sup>4</sup> This has been at the expense of preventative services, which have been the only option for reductions to local authority spending, given the statutory nature of care services.
10. However, it is preventative services which are crucial to reducing the numbers of children in the care system. It is notable that over the period since 2010 from whence spending on preventative services began to decline, the number of children in care has continued to grow to now record levels of over 80,000 children. Furthermore, CCN’s research with Newton projected that without intervention this figure may rise to as much as 96,000 by 2025.<sup>5</sup> This represents a vicious cycle where savings from reductions to lower-level universal services such as Sure Start or youth services, have led to extensive costs supporting a smaller number of very vulnerable children – exacerbated by a lack of capacity which is driving placement costs sky high. CCN’s research with Newton showed there was a 43% increased in the costs of residential care between 2015 and 2020.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.countycouncilsnetwork.org.uk/download/3960/?tmstv=1681392115>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.countycouncilsnetwork.org.uk/download/3960/?tmstv=1681915944>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.countycouncilsnetwork.org.uk/download/3960/?tmstv=1681915944>

11. CCN therefore strongly supports investment in family help services. The proposals to better align children in need and targeted early help make sense, although some individual authorities may appreciate help and guidance in how best to restructure services in this way most effectively. However, it is important to recognise that the best way of reducing stigma around approaching services is to ensure that there are clear routes into more targeted support via universal services such as children's centres/family hubs. As such guidance should be clear about how universal services should be signposting appropriately into the new aligned targeted services.
12. Additionally, family help must be prioritised not only as a means of preventing children coming into care in the first place, but also to help children exit the care system. CCN and Newton's research showed that the numbers of children entering care year on year began to decline around 2018 – however the overall numbers in the system have continued to grow as children are staying in care for longer, often because not enough support is available to help them return to their families.<sup>7</sup>

### *Pillar Two – A Decisive Multi-Agency Child Protection System*

13. CCN is pleased that *Working Together to Safeguard Children* is to be updated – as recommended in CCN and Newton's report *The Future of Children's Social Care* – and include national Multi-Agency Child Protection standards. CCN is strongly supportive of the government's intention to strengthen multi-agency working arrangements.
14. The proposal to create Child Protection Lead Practitioners is welcome as a means of encouraging progression and retention of social work experience in the workforce – however, it is important that guidance emphasises how this experience should not be solely concentrated in child protection but also shared more widely across the system including supporting the decision-making at earlier stages in the process of working with families including early help.
15. It is particularly key that more emphasis is placed on the importance of children's health within emerging Integrated Care System (ICS) structures to support this approach. CCN member councils consistently report problems engaging with health systems around children's issues. Whilst the initial omission around children within ICS guidance has been addressed by the requirement for them to have an executive lead for children on the Integrated Care Board (ICB), it is vital that this is not just a 'token' role but that it is both responsible and accountable for ensuring local health systems are fully playing their part in supporting children's social care.
16. CCN is pleased the strategy recognises the importance of improving the ability to work with fathers across all aspects of children's social care – both within family help and child protection. Last year, CCN participated in a study led by Leeds Trinity University – *Connected Young Fatherhood* – which highlighted the discrimination faced by many fathers when accessing children's services.<sup>8</sup> It is vital that more work is done on ensuring that the culture of children's services creates a welcoming environment which does not patronise or alienate dads.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.countycouncilsnetwork.org.uk/download/3960/?tmstv=1681480458>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.countycouncilsnetwork.org.uk/download/4372/?tmstv=1681480458>

### *Pillar Three – Unlocking the Potential of Family Relationships*

17. CCN agrees that with the notion of creating a culture of “Family First” that prioritises family-led solutions – ideally before a child needs to be taken into care in the first place. Family-led solutions can better enable the maintaining of connections with familiar people and those who love the child, and is often the preference of children and young people rather than being placed in care with strangers. The best interests of the child must be the ultimate determinant, though, recognising that in some cases a child may be more likely to flourish in an alternative environment even if a kinship care placement is potentially viable.
18. CCN supports the working definition of kinship care as set out in the consultation document, but urges that the strategy promised for later in 2023 is developed in partnership with local authorities to allow their experience of what works to help shape this plan.

### *Pillar Four – Putting Love, Relationships and a Stable Home at the heart of being a child in care*

19. The document is right to stress the importance of love in the lives of children and it is a welcome and bold statement of intent by the government.
20. Stable homes for children in care is highly desirable, however, as the document recognises at present the pressures on the system does not make this possible as often as local authorities would like. Given the scale of the problems in the children’s placement market CCN is sceptical that the introduction of Regional Care Co-operatives will prove much of a panacea. The problem is primarily being driven by a dearth of placements and too many children in the care system, meaning market forces continue to push prices higher. Providers know that local authorities are under a statutory duty to place children in their care and often have no option if there are too few places available.
21. The most satisfactory solution to the current pressure on placements must be to work to bring down the numbers of children in the care system. Research by CCN in 2021 showed that three quarters of the increase in spending on children in care between 2015 and 2020 was driven by an increase in the numbers in care (36%) and an increase in spend per child per week (38%), thought primarily to be driven by rising placement costs largely as a result of a dearth of places as well as more complex needs. The intention of this strategy to put in place more preventative support for families is the right one, but it will take time for this shift to help to bring down costs to a more manageable level.
22. The government must also be cautious about how swiftly it moves in regulating supported accommodation for 16 and 17 year olds. Research is currently being undertaken by CCN and Newton to better understand the existing market for care placements. Initial findings suggest that around 20% of providers will pull out of the market altogether when regulation comes into place, whilst those remaining are likely to

raise their prices by 15-30%.<sup>9</sup> This will only serve to put even more pressure on local authority budgets already struggling to meet demand.

23. The proposals to strengthen corporate parenting responsibilities are welcome. It is important that this includes better advice and support for district councils on their existing responsibilities as a corporate parent. It is understandable that some district councils may not always fully comprehend these responsibilities, as they do not provide any direct services to children and young people, but they do deliver services which significantly impact on the lives of many young people directly or indirectly – for instance with regard to supporting care leavers with housing.
24. This is particularly important given the stated intention to improve the priority for care leavers to access social housing as well as the proposals to prevent them from being able to make themselves intentionally homeless. As it is proposed that Ofsted will be empowered to engage in much stronger scrutiny of the care leaver experience, they must fully understand that county councils do not have direct ability to affect housing policy, unlike unitary authorities. As such the district council responsibility in this regard must be recognised and a process for their accountability for this duty put in place.
25. The strategy's recognition of the important role that virtual schools play in supporting the education of care-experienced children is welcome. However, the Government must be careful not to dilute the success of virtual schools' work with this cohort by extending their reach too far – to children with a social worker and children with special, educational needs and disabilities (SEND). There is undoubtedly a role for virtual schools in supporting the education of this wider group of children, but it must not be at the cost of the existing successes they have made with children in care.

*Pillar Five – A valued, supported and highly skilled social worker for every child that needs one*

26. CCN welcomes the focus given in the strategy to addressing issues around the children's social care workforce. Many of the central issues – including, crucially, the use of agency workers – are covered in the separate consultation around the Child and Family Social Worker Workforce, which CCN will also be responding to.
27. CCN is pleased that the strategy recognises that although the wider term reforms as a whole are designed to reduce the pressure on the system, and therefore the workforce, local authorities are facing immediate pressures which must be dealt with now. This must include a recognition of the impact of inflation on social worker salaries, as well as the greater challenges around recruiting from overseas since the UK left the European Union.

*Pillar Six – A system that continuously learns and improves*

28. CCN welcomes the proposal to develop a Children's Social Care National Framework in keeping with the recommendations made in CCN and Newton's report *The Future of Children's Social Care*.<sup>10</sup> It is right that Ofsted inspections should be aligned with this

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<sup>9</sup> Based on research expected to be published later in 2023.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.countycouncilsnetwork.org.uk/download/4103/?tmstv=1681740693>

framework, and given the significantly higher proportion of CCN member authorities already rated 'outstanding' compared to other types of authority, we recommend that CCN member councils should be widely consulted in the development of this framework.

29. The new framework must, though, be designed in tandem with the proposed updated assessment of needs and resources vital for funding. At present local authorities are carrying too many unfunded burdens in children's services – whether this be the additional costs generated by regulation of supported accommodation back; the extension of the role of Virtual Schools to cover more cohorts of children; and even the initial unfunded extension of SEND support from 18 to 25 year olds arising from the Children and Families Act 2014.
30. All of these policy initiatives have been well intended, and CCN continues to support the principles unpinning them, but local authorities do not have unlimited resources to deliver new burdens without additional funding being put in. If such funding is not forthcoming then it has to be drawn from other areas, such as the reduction in spending on early intervention described earlier in this response.
31. Finally, CCN welcomes the intent to improve the use of technology and data within children's social care going forward. However, the government must work closely with the sector to determine carefully what data collection and reporting will be required by the new Children's Social Care Dashboard to avoid creating unnecessary or inefficient bureaucracy within local authorities.