

Executive Summary

- 1 When the Secretary of State for Education commissioned this review of child protection in June 2010, a central question was ‘what helps professionals make the best judgments they can to protect a vulnerable child?’. This final report sets out proposals for reform which, taken together, are intended to create the conditions that enable professionals to make the best judgments about the help to give to children, young people and families. This involves moving from a system that has become over-bureaucratised and focused on compliance to one that values and develops professional expertise and is focused on the safety and welfare of children and young people.
- 2 The review began by using ‘systems’ theory to examine how the current conditions had evolved. The review’s first report in October 2010 described the child protection system in recent times as one that has been shaped by four key driving forces:
 - the importance of the safety and welfare of children and young people and the understandable strong reaction when a child is killed or seriously harmed;
 - a commonly held belief that the complexity and associated uncertainty of child protection work can be eradicated;
 - a readiness, in high profile public inquiries into the death of a child, to focus on professional error without looking deeply enough into its causes; and
 - the undue importance given to performance indicators and targets which provide only part of the picture of practice, and which have skewed attention to process over the quality and effectiveness of help given.
- 3 These forces have come together to create a defensive system that puts so much emphasis on procedures and recording that insufficient attention is given to developing and supporting the expertise to work effectively with children, young people and families.
- 4 The review’s second report, in February this year, considered the child’s journey through the child protection system – from needing to receiving help – to show how the system could be improved. It concluded that instead of “doing things right” (i.e. following procedures) the system needed to be focused on doing the right thing (i.e. checking whether children and young people are being helped). Extensive consultation on the reform areas set out in that report contributed to the development of this final report.

A system that values professional expertise

- 5 Practitioners and their managers told the review that statutory guidance, targets and local rules have become so extensive that they limit their ability to stay child-centred. The demands of bureaucracy have reduced their capacity to work directly with children, young people and families. Services have become so standardised that they do not provide the required range of responses to the variety of need that is presented. This review recommends a radical reduction in the amount of

central prescription to help professionals move from a compliance culture to a learning culture, where they have more freedom to use their expertise in assessing need and providing the right help.

- 6 The review is recommending that the Government revise statutory, multi-agency guidance to remove unnecessary or unhelpful prescription and focus only on essential rules for effective multi-agency working and on the principles that underpin good practice. For example, the prescribed timescales for social work assessments should be removed, since they distort practice. The underlying principle of timeliness is important and should be applied to the whole process of helping a child or young person, not just the early stage of assessment.
- 7 Inspection is a key influence on priorities in frontline practice so needs to support the change from a compliance to a learning culture. The review has worked closely with Ofsted to look at how inspection can focus on and measure what really matters – whether children have been helped. The review is confirming the recommendation made in its second report, that inspection should be conducted on an unannounced basis in order to minimise the bureaucratic burden. It also recommends that the inspection framework examines the effectiveness of the contributions of all local services, including health, education, police, probation and the justice system, putting the experiences of children, young people and their families at the heart of the inspection system.

Sharing responsibility for the provision of early help

- 8 Like the reviews led by Graham Allen MP, Dame Clare Tickell, and Rt Hon Frank Field MP, this review has noted the growing body of evidence of the effectiveness of early intervention with children and families and shares their view on the importance of providing such help. Preventative services can do more to reduce abuse and neglect than reactive services. Many services and professions help children and families so co-ordinating their work is important to reduce inefficiencies and omissions. The review is recommending the Government place a duty on local authorities and their statutory partners to secure the sufficient provision of local early help services for children, young and people and families. This should lead to the identification of the early help that is needed by a particular child and their family and to the provision of an offer of help where their needs do not match the criteria for receiving children’s social care services.
- 9 Within preventative and other services good mechanisms are needed to help identify those children and young people who are suffering, or likely to suffer, harm from abuse or neglect and who need referral to children’s social care. The association between child abuse and neglect and parental problems, such as poor mental health, domestic violence and substance misuse, is well established. It is not easy to identify abuse and neglect. Signs and symptoms are often ambiguous and so it is important that those working with children, young people and adults have ready access to social work expertise to discuss concerns and decide whether a referral to children’s social care is needed.

Developing social work expertise

- 10 The level of increased prescription for social workers, while intended to improve the quality of practice, has created an imbalance. Complying with prescription and

keeping records to demonstrate compliance has become too dominant. The centrality of forming relationships with children and families to understand and help them has become obscured. The review is making recommendations to enable social workers to exercise more professional judgment but is also concerned to improve their expertise. Building on the work of the Social Work Task Force (SWTF) and the Social Work Reform Board (SWRB), this review makes the case for radically improving the knowledge and skills of social workers from initial training through to continuing professional development. The review highlights the importance of social workers' use of research evidence to help them reach the most appropriate decisions.

- 11 The review has concluded that the high levels of prescription have also hampered the profession's ability to take responsibility for developing its own knowledge and skills. The SWTF and SWRB have laid the foundations for improving skills and have developed a generic Professional Capabilities Framework. For child and family social work, this review gives more detail of the capabilities relating to knowledge, critical reflection and analysis, and intervention and skills. The review recommends that these capabilities explicitly inform initial social work training, continuing professional development, performance appraisal and career structures.
- 12 Reform of the social work profession should significantly improve outcomes for children and young people by making best use of available evidence about what helps to resolve the problems in children's lives. Increasing the expertise of the workforce requires investment, but in areas where local reforms have upgraded the knowledge and skill of their workforce, savings have been seen overall. Skilled help can enable more children and young people to stay safely with their families, bringing significant savings. Initially resources will be required to develop the additional expertise and training necessary to set the profession off on a new path and this is an area that the review considers to be a priority for investment.

The organisational context: supporting effective social work practice

- 13 With the reduction of prescription, leaders in local authorities will have more autonomy but also more responsibility for helping their staff to operate with a high level of knowledge and skills. The review asks local authorities to take more responsibility for deciding the range of services they will offer, defining the knowledge and skills needed and helping the workers develop them. For example, a local authority wishing to implement a particular evidence-based way of working with children and families needs to consider what changes might be needed in the training, supervision, IT support and monitoring to enable this to be carried out effectively. To keep the focus on the quality of help being given to children and young people, they need to pay close attention to the views and experiences of those receiving services and the professionals who help them.
- 14 The review shares the view of the SWTF that the current career structure hampers the development of expertise, both in the individual and in the profession in general, because promotion leads too quickly to leaving direct work with children and families. A more varied career path and a stronger voice for practitioners in management is needed. The review recommends the designation, in each local authority, of a Principal Child and Family Social Worker, who is still doing direct

work, to advise on enhancing practice skills. This role would take responsibility for relating the views of social workers to those whose decisions affect their work.

- 15 The College of Social Work, which is being created on the recommendation of the SWTF, will play a major role in helping the profession build its knowledge and expertise. The review also considers that social work must have greater visibility and voice within Government. It is recommending the establishment of a Chief Social Worker, whose duties should include advising Government on social work practice and the effectiveness of help offered to children and young people.

Clarifying accountabilities and creating a learning system

- 16 A major challenge in building a more responsive child protection system is helping a wide range of professions to work together well in order to build an accurate understanding of what is happening in the child or young person's life, so the right help can be provided. Clear lines of accountability, and roles such as the Director of Children's Services and designated and named persons, are vitally important.
- 17 This review recommends that there continues to be clear lines of accountability as the Coalition Government's plans for reform in the public services are implemented. In particular, the review recommends that local authorities give due consideration to protecting the discrete roles and responsibilities of a Director of Children's Services and Lead Member for Children's Services before allocating any additional functions to individuals occupying such roles, asking whether alternative approaches allow sufficient focus and attention to be paid to the nation's most vulnerable children.
- 18 In moving to a system that promotes the exercise of professional judgment, local multi-agency systems will need to be better at monitoring, learning and adapting their practice. This review recommends regular review of cases becomes the norm and that the 'systems approach' used in the health sector is adopted and applied, in particular, to Serious Case Reviews. This will enable deeper learning to overcome obstacles to good practice.
- 19 Data on performance are an essential source of information for both managers and inspectors. The review sets out how local government and their partners should use a combination of nationally and locally collected performance information to help benchmark performance, facilitate improvement and promote accountability. Performance information should not be treated as a straightforward measure of good or bad practice but interrogated to see what lies behind it. A low number of children being removed from their birth families, for example, can arise from skilled help making the children safe or from a poor quality assessment of risk.

Implementation

- 20 In responding to this review, the Government should provide clarity around roles, responsibilities and accountabilities, and set out what goals the system should aim for, leaving professionals to judge how best to meet those goals. In the past, problems have too often led to more central prescription, culminating in the current over-proceduralised system. This review proposes an alternative view: that the system is complex and it is not possible to predict or control it with precision.

Feedback is the important mechanism for monitoring how the system is working, so that problems are seen early and efforts are made to resolve them.

- 21 The recommendations in this review are geared towards creating a better balance between essential rules, principles, and professional expertise. Helping children is a human process. When the bureaucratic aspects of work become too dominant, the heart of the work is lost. The recommendations are to be considered *together*, and the review cautions strongly against cherry picking reforms to implement. Reducing prescription without creating a learning system will not secure the desired improvements in the system. On the other hand, delaying the reduction of prescription until services show they can take responsibility prevents them from demonstrating it. The review also cautions against taking a short-term approach to reform – the depth of change recommended in this report means it will take time for the necessary knowledge and skills to be developed and for experiences of new ways of working to accumulate to the point where they can be fully effective. Taken together, these reforms will redress the balance between prescription and the exercise of judgment so that those working in child protection are able to stay child-centred.

Summary of recommendations

Chapter three: A system that values professional expertise

Recommendation 1: The Government should revise both the statutory guidance, *Working Together to Safeguard Children* and *The Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families* and their associated policies to:

- distinguish the rules that are essential for effective working together, from guidance that informs professional judgment;
- set out the key principles underpinning the guidance;
- remove the distinction between initial and core assessments and the associated timescales in respect of these assessments, replacing them with the decisions that are required to be made by qualified social workers when developing an understanding of children's needs and making and implementing a plan to safeguard and promote their welfare;
- require local attention is given to:
 - timeliness in the identification of children's needs and provision of help;
 - the quality of the assessment to inform next steps to safeguard and promote children's welfare; and
 - the effectiveness of the help provided;
- give local areas the responsibility to draw on research and theoretical models to inform local practice; and
- remove constraints to local innovation and professional judgment that are created by prescribing or endorsing particular approaches, for example, nationally designed assessment forms, national performance indicators associated with assessment or nationally prescribed approaches to IT systems.

Recommendation 2: The inspection framework should examine the effectiveness of the contributions of all local services, including health, education, police, probation and the justice system to the protection of children.

Recommendation 3: The new inspection framework should examine the child's journey from needing to receiving help, explore how the rights, wishes, feelings and experiences of children and young people inform and shape the provision of services, and look at the effectiveness of the help provided to children, young people and their families.

Recommendation 4: Local authorities and their partners should use a combination of nationally collected and locally published performance information to help benchmark performance, facilitate improvement and promote accountability. It is crucial that performance information is not treated as an unambiguous measure of good or bad performance as performance indicators tend to be.

Chapter four: Clarifying accountabilities and improving learning

Recommendation 5: The existing statutory requirements for each Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) to produce and publish an annual report for the Children's Trust Board should be amended, to require its submission instead to the Chief Executive and Leader of the Council, and, subject to the passage of legislation, to the local Police and Crime Commissioner and the Chair of the health and wellbeing board.

Recommendation 6: The statutory guidance, *Working Together to Safeguard Children*, should be amended to state that when monitoring and evaluating local arrangements, LSCBs should, taking account of local need, include an assessment of the effectiveness of the help being provided to children and families (including the effectiveness and value for money of early help services, including early years provision), and the effectiveness of multi-agency training to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people.

Recommendation 7: Local authorities should give due consideration to protecting the discrete roles and responsibilities of a Director of Children's Services and Lead Member for Children's Services before allocating any additional functions to individuals occupying such roles. The importance, as envisaged in the Children Act 2004, of appointing individuals to positions where they have specific responsibilities for children's services should not be undermined. The Government should amend the statutory guidance issued in relation to such roles and establish the principle that, given the importance of individuals in senior positions being responsible for children's services, it should not be considered appropriate to give additional functions (that do not relate to children's services) to Directors of Children's Services and Lead Members for Children's Services unless exceptional circumstances arise.

Recommendation 8: The Government should work collaboratively with the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, the Royal College of General Practitioners, local authorities and others to research the impact of health reorganisation on effective partnership arrangements and the ability to provide effective help for children who are suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm.

Recommendation 9: The Government should require LSCBs to use systems methodology when undertaking Serious Case Reviews (SCRs) and, over the coming year, work with the sector to develop national resources to:

- provide accredited, skilled and independent reviewers to jointly work with LSCBs on each SCR;
- promote the development of a variety of systems-based methodologies to learn from practice;
- initiate the development of a typology of the problems that contribute to adverse outcomes to facilitate national learning; and
- disseminate learning nationally to improve practice and inform the work of the Chief Social Worker (see chapter seven).

In the meantime, Ofsted's evaluation of SCRs should end.

Chapter 5: Sharing responsibility for the provision of early help

Recommendation 10: The Government should place a duty on local authorities and statutory partners to secure the sufficient provision of local early help services for children, young people and families. The arrangements setting out how they will do this should:

- specify the range of professional help available to local children, young people and families, through statutory, voluntary and community services, against the local profile of need set out in the local Joint Strategic Needs Analysis (JSNA);
- specify how they will identify children who are suffering or who are likely to suffer significant harm, including the availability of social work expertise to all professionals working with children, young people and families who are not being supported by children's social care services and specify the training available locally to support professionals working at the frontline of universal services;
- set out the local resourcing of the early help services for children, young people and families; and, most importantly
- lead to the identification of the early help that is needed by a particular child and their family, and to the provision of an "early help offer" where their needs do not meet the criteria for receiving children's social care services.

Chapter 6: Developing social work expertise

Recommendation 11: The Social Work Reform Board's Professional Capabilities Framework should incorporate capabilities necessary for child and family social work. This framework should explicitly inform social work qualification training, postgraduate professional development and performance appraisal.

Recommendation 12: Employers and higher education institutions (HEIs) should work together so that social work students are prepared for the challenges of child protection work. In particular, the review considers that HEIs and employing agencies should work together so that:

- practice placements are of the highest quality and – in time – only in designated Approved Practice Settings;
- employers are able to apply for special ‘teaching organisation’ status, awarded by the College of Social Work;
- the merits of ‘student units’, which are headed up by a senior social worker are considered; and
- placements are of sufficiently high quality, and both employers and HEIs consider if their relationship is working well.

Chapter 7: The organisational context: supporting effective social work practice

Recommendation 13: Local authorities and their partners should start an ongoing process to review and redesign the ways in which child and family social work is delivered, drawing on evidence of effectiveness of helping methods where appropriate and supporting practice that can implement evidence based ways of working with children and families.

Recommendation 14: Local authorities should designate a Principal Child and Family Social Worker, who is a senior manager with lead responsibility for practice in the local authority and who is still actively involved in frontline practice and who can report the views and experiences of the front line to all levels of management.

Recommendation 15: A Chief Social Worker should be created in Government, whose duties should include advising the Government on social work practice and informing the Secretary of State’s annual report to Parliament on the working of the Children Act 1989.