



RECLAIMING CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Policy Report
Number

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Executive summary

Only good is good enough.

When it comes to services for children and young people, it is worth repeating this ambition clearly and unambiguously. Everyone involved in children's services, from the political and managerial leadership to those who work on the frontline of our social care and education systems, wants the best for children. We aspire to excellence, both in our services and in the outcomes we support for children and young people. Doing this requires corporate interest and commitment, unwavering focus and constant innovation.

Councils have a critical role in the lives of all children, young people and families. They are responsible for children's centres, early help services, youth provision and family information services. They have a strategic accountability for the quality of compulsory education in their area, alongside a more direct role in the governance of the many local authority maintained schools. They help to safeguard and protect vulnerable young people, act as corporate parents for

those whose families pose too high a risk and in the longer term seek to find them adoptive families wherever possible. They scrutinise the local health services on which young people depend and they support the subsidised transport they may rely on to access leisure opportunities.

Every Child Matters – a decade on

It is ten years since 'Every Child Matters' – a set of policy intentions, a legislative agenda and a programme for change – sought to defend and extend our ambitions for children and young people. It laid out a set of outcomes which aimed to provide a focus for everyone working with children and young people. These outcomes also recognised that the state's involvement in young people's lives extends well beyond schools and child protection.

In our initial response to the proposals¹, Solace raised concerns that the policy focus at the time on structures and process would undermine the underpinning

aspirations. Ten years on, we believe that this has been the case.

There was success in setting a national direction and developing a common vision amongst professionals working with young people, particularly those in social care and education. However, we believe that the focus on a 'single' line of sight for all children's issues has also had serious and unintended consequences in some areas. It has made the totality of political and officer accountabilities less than clear. In some places it has also weakened interest in children's matters among those whose commitment is actually essential to ensuring successful outcomes for all children and young people.

The context in which the public sector operates today is also, in some ways, radically different. The era of increasing budgets, ring-fenced grants and command and control Whitehall management has gone. In its place we have a more austere

and more localist climate where place-based budgeting is rapidly becoming the only game in town. Integration is also gaining ever greater credence across increasingly diverse areas, from health and social care to criminal justice and employment support.

Reclaim Children's Services

We believe that the outcomes outlined in ECM still provide a relevant, coherent and comprehensive way to capture what our ambitions for children and young people should be. They can and should be re-stated and, where appropriate, re-framed for the future – but this time by the sector itself. National children and families policy is fragmenting and the local government sector must step up and articulate its own vision; both for outcomes and how to deliver on them. Ten years on, we therefore believe it is time to re-assess the way the state supports the lives of all children and young people.

This is about more than children's social care and local authority education. It is about promoting health and wellbeing, strong economic prospects and social cohesion. It is about decentralising services for children and asking how great outcomes for children, young people and families can be achieved more effectively by a localist state.

The first part of this report outlines our vision of a future local authority role in promoting great outcomes for children and young people. In some areas this involves services directly delivered or commissioned by local authorities. Others involve using 'informal power', influence and partnership approaches to shape local provision. All require local authorities to think hard about how to deliver excellent outcomes for the children and young people in their place.

The report then moves on to consider some cross-cutting areas for reform which emerge from this vision. We look at the need for significant workforce reform to develop a more 'blended approach' to workforce planning which is underpinned by a strategic commitment to integrated, holistic services.

We consider the future of inspection and improvement and make the case for a re-examination of how accountability operates in an increasingly complex system. And we look at the role of leadership – both managerial and political. We make, as we see it, the unarguable case for corporate leadership of the children and families agenda which has both cross-organisational and political buy-in.

Finally, we call on councils to embrace this ambition and use everything at their disposal to champion the cause of the children and young people in their area. The 'Hackney model' of social work urges social workers to 'reclaim social work' from an increasingly bureaucratic professional focus on box-ticking and processes; to rediscover its mission and to place a premium on skilled professionals working in partnership with families to achieve change.

In turn, we believe local authorities need to 'reclaim children's services' from central Government and regulators. Councils must rediscover their mission and articulate their own vision for the way they will work in partnership, acting as 'system leaders' to achieve the best outcomes for children, young people and families.

Great outcomes for children and young people

Councils have a crucial role in the lives of children and young people. They are responsible for early help, safeguarding, child protection, care and permanence, education and family information services.

Beyond the traditional confines of children's services, local authorities also have a fundamental place-shaping role to champion the wellbeing of children and young people across their area. They have statutory responsibility for ensuring suitable education and training provision for all 16-19 year olds. They hold local health services to account through scrutiny. They already hold responsibility for most public health services and will soon directly commission 0-5 public health services for children and families, including health visitors, school nursing and the healthy child programme. They have responsibility for a whole host of areas, such as transport, leisure and economic growth, which have a profound impact on the lives of children and families.

However, local authority children's services departments face some critical challenges over the coming five years. Demand for social care services is increasing at the same time as funding gets tighter. Solace members indicated in our Children's Services survey that since 2010 they have cut funding on average by 10-15%.²

This is against a backdrop in which, by next year, central government funding for councils will have been cut by 40 per cent during this Parliament.³ It is only a matter of time before this relative protection becomes untenable. Chief Executives and Directors have for some time been speaking off the record about having to significantly cut – and in some case almost entirely cut out – preventative, early intervention and early years support in order to maintain safeguarding services in the face of rising demand. Yet prevention, demand management and early intervention are the only ways to secure the fiscal future of local government. Much more importantly, they are also the only way we will begin to turn around the lives of the most disadvantaged children, young people and their families.

It is in this context that we believe local authorities must step up and recapture their universal role as a champion for all children and young people in their place. This will involve thinking about how to deliver their core children's services in new ways. Councils need to think strategically about how to use their informal power, their

democratic legitimacy and their role as place-shapers and facilitators to promote the best possible outcomes for children and families.

In this chapter we consider what the future local authority role could look like across the five outcomes:

- To stay safe
- To be healthy
- To enjoy and achieve
- To achieve economic wellbeing
- To make a positive contribution

TO STAY SAFE

Children's social care is amongst the most challenging issues the public sector deals with. It involves councils in making life altering decisions, complex judgements about risk and the interplay between analytical judgement and emotional intelligence. Services are also rightly subject to a very high degree of public, political and regulatory scrutiny.

The state retains a crucial role in safeguarding vulnerable children and young people from abuse and neglect wherever possible. This will mean councils continuing to ensure the provision of high quality services and professionals to work in child protection and safeguarding. It will also mean redoubling efforts to ensure that every individual and agency working with young people shares intelligence and makes others aware of any concerns. Critically, it will also mean acting earlier.

The risk factors for serious abuse and neglect are well researched and understood. The so-called 'toxic trio' – poor mental health, domestic abuse and substance misuse – are widely acknowledged as strong determinants of risk and future life prospects. Councils will need to continue to prioritise early support for families before statutory intervention, and its very high cost, becomes necessary. This will be both increasingly difficult and increasingly essential in a much tighter fiscal climate. A true dilemma.

It will also mean learning from best practice and seeking to 'think family' throughout. Approaches like Family Intervention Projects (FIPs) are being scaled up rapidly through the Government's Troubled Families programme. In future, all families needing support should receive a joined-up package of assistance. Integration and collaboration between children's and adults services, along with health and other public and voluntary sector services, should ensure that support is holistic, personalised and properly sequenced. This integration will also help ensure that one of the traditional challenges of children's services, transitions to adulthood, is managed much more effectively.

Authorities should also continue to seek to achieve much better outcomes for looked after children. Educational outcomes for children in state care remain far lower than for other young people - with an attainment gap of 41% amongst young people finishing their GCSEs last summer.⁴ They also remain far more likely to end up in the criminal justice system; in 2012 they were four times more likely by age 17 to have been convicted or to have received a final warning than the average for all young people.⁵ In future, councils and other local partners will

need to work even harder to improve the life chances of looked after children. This will come alongside extending the work already underway to improve permanence planning for children and young people – driving up the adoption rate and reducing the number of children and young people in long term state care.

Partnership

However, local authority child protection services do not operate in a vacuum. Schools, GPs, voluntary groups, sports clubs and communities in general all have their part to play in keeping children safe. Serious Case Reviews, external enquiries and research all highlight the need for collaborative working and good communication alongside training and workforce development within and between all agencies who work with children and young people.

Utilising the best available technology will be important in securing this joint approach. Platforms like the KnowledgeHub are beginning to demonstrate the power of networked and digital approaches to supporting partnership working in the public sector. Pilots with a tool called Patchwork, which seeks to connect

professionals working with the same family, have generated promising early results.⁶

Learning will also be available from the move toward integrated information sharing in adult social services mandated by the 'Better Care Fund'. More widespread use, for example, of the NHS number as a unique identifier is a simple change with potentially significant benefits. While previous experience of technology in this area has been mixed, pilots in areas like Staffordshire are demonstrating that well-developed, sensitively implemented solutions can free up significant time for professionals to spend with families and build connections between individuals from different public and third sector bodies.

Many authorities have pursued more integrated and collaborative arrangements for safeguarding and children's social care with great success. Section 75 agreements between councils and health bodies have allowed many to integrate children's services with school nursing, health visiting and other services – ahead of national decisions about where the commissioning of these services will sit in future. Many authorities have also pursued integrated services for early help and support, and/or Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs (MASHs)

which bring together the council, police and others in a specialist, integrated setting dealing with referral, assessment and triage.

These processes and structures are critical. However, good collaborative working is about backing them up with clear strategic commitments from all local partners, adequate resourcing, institutional focus and a genuine partnership ethos. Different models will work in different places, and local buy-in is critical, but we need to examine new ways of ensuring system-wide commitment and focus on protecting vulnerable young people.

RECOMMENDATION ONE

The sector needs to develop new models to facilitate multi-agency working and bind all local partners into the process of safeguarding and protecting vulnerable children and young people.

4. Outcomes for children looked after by LAs in England, Department for Education, 2013

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/outcomes-for-children-looked-after-by-las-in-england>

5. Ibid.

6. More information on Staffordshire's pilot of Patchwork can be found here:

<http://www.staffordshire.gov.uk/health/childrenandfamilycare/FamiliesFirstPartners/Patchwork/ThePatchworkApplication.aspx>

Public attitudes

Even with all of this in place, however, we still have to be clear that services will not be able to protect every child. Media representations of children's social care are regularly cited as a pervasive negative influence by those working in the sector. Professionals often feel they are trapped by difficult binary choices, with public awareness focussed on either cases of failure or of perceived over-zealousness.

Such attitudes need to be challenged. Many people interviewed during the course of this report suggested that the expectations of the public and of national inspectorates may need to reflect a clearer appreciation of the context in which decisions are made on the ground. A national conversation is needed about what we expect the state to do in the interests of safeguarding children, and the powers we afford it to pursue this goal.

RECOMMENDATION TWO

We need a national conversation about what, as a society, we expect children's social care and other professionals to be able to do in the interests of safeguarding children and the powers we afford them to do this.

TO BE HEALTHY

Beyond feeling safe, children have a right to receive good quality healthcare and to be enabled to achieve physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing. Nevertheless, children's health issues can sometimes feel dwarfed by the demographic challenges facing the wider health and social care system. We should aspire for all children to be healthy and happy, not just in a narrow medical sense but within this wider conception of 'wellbeing'.

Solace believes the future of health and social care lies in much greater integration, a new deal with communities which emphasises independence and resilience and a further move from medical to social models of health and wellbeing.⁷ These principles apply just as clearly to the health and wellbeing of children and young people.

Mental and emotional health and wellbeing

75% of people with lifetime mental health disorders will have presented symptoms by the age of 18 – with peak onset between ages 8 and 15.⁸ In future, primary care practitioners, teachers and others will need to receive the training and support they need to feel confident supporting young people with low-level mental health concerns. Early intervention services should better support young people to overcome crises, or learn to manage longer-term conditions. These services, properly

integrated with wider family support, should also help ensure that the ambition of 'parity of esteem' becomes a reality.

Integration

Health and social care integration should also become a reality for young people with long term disabilities or special educational needs. Health and Care Plans for young people will outline their ambitions and the support needed from statutory agencies, voluntary providers and others to help them achieve these.

The Government's SEN reforms in some ways encapsulate what our collective ambition should be. Drawing together educational, medical and social support, they seek to co-produce a clear, holistic package of support with young people and parents. This approach will be critical; for children with special educational needs, those with physical disabilities and those with mental health concerns. As the health and care sectors (rightly) focus in the next few years on the critical challenges posed by ageing populations and increasing healthcare costs – it will be important to ensure the ambitions for a more integrated system influence the structure of services for children.

Independence and resilience

Also important will be seeking to promote independence and resilience where possible, facilitating and supporting groups to design their own solutions and

form collective support networks. This, for example, could involve supporting groups of parents to share how to modify their homes at best cost and to best effect for their disabled child (and help each other make the modifications). It could also involve supporting self-help groups for parents of children with autism, bringing together those with similar experiences to provide mutual help and support.

Public health, early intervention and prevention

Ensuring improved health outcomes for children and young people is a priority on social and moral grounds. It is also one of the critical ways in which we will begin to address the long-term demographic challenges facing our health and care system.

Childhood obesity increases the risk of diabetes in later life⁹ and many adults with mental health conditions experience onset during their teenage years. Children and young people's health and wellbeing is both a fiscal and a moral imperative.

Critical to this agenda will be grasping the opportunities presented by the transfer of 0-5 public health commissioning to local authorities. Services like family nurse partnerships, health visiting and school nursing will be made to better complement and collaborate with other integrated early years services (including children's centres where they remain), schools and children's social care.

7. See Principles for health and social care reform, Solace, Sept 2013

8. Annual Report of the Chief Medical Officer 2012, *Our Children Deserve Better: Prevention Pays*, Ch.8 p.2

9. http://www.noo.org.uk/NOO_about_obesity/obesity_and_health/health_risk_child

This should all form part of a wider strategy, informed by local priorities and assessments of need, for promoting the wellbeing of all children and young people across a place. This strategy will use all of the levers available - from primary care commissioning to the planning system - to further drive improvement in the health and wellbeing of young people.

TO ENJOY AND ACHIEVE

Solace believes local authorities continue to have a crucial role in education. They have a democratic mandate to champion good education for the children and young people in their area; from pre-school, through compulsory schooling into apprenticeships, further and higher education.

The rise of academies

Over the last decade, one of the defining policy directions in education has been the gradual increase in autonomous state-funded schools; firstly academies and, more recently, free schools. Academisation in particular, initially presented as a school improvement policy, has rapidly gathered scale and pace as a governance option of increasing choice (notably in the secondary phase).

The total number of academies has increased over ten-fold since May 2010¹⁰, with academies now making up over half of all state secondary schools in England. There are now council areas where every secondary school is either an academy

or otherwise responsible directly to the Department for Education.

This dramatic and rapid shift has raised questions about the future landscape of education. Local authorities' statutory responsibilities in education now appear confused and insufficient - and certainly difficult to discharge. Councils retain some strategic responsibility for place planning, admissions, support for SEN pupils and other areas. However, as the development of the 'free school' model removes control over even capital planning, the legislative levers underpinning these responsibilities are constantly diminishing.

RECOMMENDATION THREE

Government and the sector need to co-produce a new, simplified accountability system which allows local councils to scrutinise and hold all schools to account regardless of day to day management and governance arrangements.

Solace believes that we should 'promote support and respect the autonomy of schools... just as we expect Government to respect the autonomy of councils'.¹¹ However, we retain a firm belief that local authorities have a clear and justified role in championing the cause of children and young people.

In many ways this role will be similar to the role councils have played in the further education system for some time - to be 'leaders, convenors, facilitators and enablers of local relationships, local partnerships and local solutions'.¹²

This involves pursuing a less hierarchical relationship with both schools and parents. Local authorities already seek to act as challenging partners to schools and champions of the interests of their local parents. In a less regimented, less directed schooling system these roles will come to the fore.

For example, in Wigan schools have self-organised into eight autonomous consortia working in partnership to provide school-to-school peer support in collaboration with the local authority. Democratic accountability comes through 'School Improvement Boards' but the local authority plays a facilitating, enabling and challenging role rather than a providing a traditional school improvement service.¹³

Local authorities need to challenge schools they believe are not performing irrespective of their governance arrangements. In the new education landscape this will be about partnerships and soft power as much as improvement notices and statutory intervention. It will mean building relationships with head teachers, governors and academy trusts. It will mean utilising 'informal power', for example by calling schools in front of council scrutiny committees.

10. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/huge-increase-in-academies-takes-total-to-more-than-2300>

11. As outlined in **Filling the Gap: The championing role of English councils in education**, Solace, 2012.

12. Ibid.

13. **The council role in school improvement**, LGA & Solace, 2013

Above all, it will mean using the council's democratic mandate to work in partnership with schools to secure the best education possible for children and young people. It will be important for Government to endorse and support this rationale.

RECOMMENDATION FOUR

Local authorities need to use their democratic mandate and the 'informal power' at their disposal to champion high quality education for all children and young people in their place.

TO ACHIEVE ECONOMIC WELLBEING

Education, skills and youth employment are critical issues in the post-2008 public sector landscape. Youth unemployment remains persistently high with young people being disproportionately hit by the recession.¹⁴ However, underlying issues have existed for some time about the way the public sector supports young people out of education and into work, particularly those who are not entering higher education.

Employability in schools

Numerous business surveys indicate that employers do not always believe young people are coming out of school 'work ready'. Links between education and employment seem too limited in some areas – sometimes amounting to little more than a non-statutory work experience placement of a week or two.

Employability and 'work aspiration' should be built into the education system in a more integrated way by ensuring that local schools and colleges have strong, long-term links with local employers. Stronger links between employers and education would help young people to understand the world of work and foster 'work inspiration'. They would also enable schools and colleges to use their good understanding of the local labour market to offer information, advice and guidance to young people about their future options.

Local authorities, LEPs and partners have a critical role to play in helping to achieve this. Businesses do not have the time to engage individually with schools, or to complete the sometimes detailed bureaucracy needed to get involved in the classroom. Working through LEPs, local authorities can assist by offering brokerage, helping to facilitate partnerships between individual schools and employers and by offering guidance

– either to businesses who want to get involved or to schools who feel that business involvement would be of benefit to their young people.

A responsive skills system

Beyond secondary education, Solace believes that local authorities continue to have a crucial role to play in the wider education system. In particular, we believe 'councils must be given the ability to govern their skills and education agenda as the body which best understands the local labour market'.¹⁵

It is striking that almost all City Deals agreed so far with Government include a component seeking more influence over local post-16 skills provision. Many local authorities are seeking levers to enable them (often collectively through LEPs) to ensure post-16 provision is more closely aligned with the needs of the local economy.

This is a difficult balancing act, weighing up uncertain economic predictions against student choice. However, we believe local authorities have a critical strategic role – supporting the FE sector to be flexible and forward looking, and utilising their understanding of their local economy to maximise the opportunities for young people in their area.

A more localised and responsive skills systems would also help to ensure that the skills young people are learning will help them to gain good quality local employment. All young people should have a co-owned 'path to work', whether through further or higher education, work based learning and apprenticeships, volunteering or basic skills training. Local public sector bodies need to support further increases in the number of apprenticeships and work-based learning opportunities through brokerage, direct provision and the greater use of social value clauses in commissioning arrangements.

For example, the Sheffield City Region Deal involved establishing a 'Sheffield City Region Skills for Growth and Employment Partnership' which brings together employers, local authorities and skills providers. As well as shaping skills provision in the city, the Board will be responsible for overseeing a new, local programme to boost apprenticeship numbers and increase the number of people in the city with qualifications at NVQ Level 3 or above.¹⁶

14. <http://www.theguardian.com/business/2014/feb/05/unemployment-statistics-age-divide-recession>

15. *Local Roots to Growth*, Solace, April 2014

16. *MADE in Sheffield, a deal for growth*, <http://www.sheffieldcityregion.org.uk/city-deal/>

More local support schemes also need to offer assistance for those young people who struggle to make the transition to employment or further study. English and maths support, work placements and 'traineeships' would drive down the youth unemployment rate and its associated social and economic costs.

This will also involve councils taking more interventionist approaches to tackling youth unemployment. Many sector bodies are now making the case that national Government initiatives are not as effective as locally driven employment schemes.¹⁷ The high long-term costs of youth unemployment are well known. Solace believes that only through coordinated local action will we begin to tackle this issue.

RECOMMENDATION FIVE

Local authorities need to be given clear routes to influence their local skills system, and funding and support for youth unemployment should be devolved, to ensure sufficient alignment with local needs and employment markets.

TO MAKE A POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION

Creating the opportunity for young people to make a positive contribution to their communities involves two related goals. Firstly, it involves continuing to tackle youth crime and anti-social behaviour. All local public services need to continue to take a pro-active approach to identifying young people at risk, intervening early and supporting young people – using punitive measures where appropriate – to stop criminal and anti-social behaviour.

Secondly, councils and others will also need to ensure that children and young people have access to a broad range of activities and opportunities. This is about more than a small number of targeted youth centres or services, though these may be an important part of the mix.

Councils need to ensure the voices of children and young people are heard in areas like planning and economic development. They need to ensure the availability of affordable transport and the existence of places for young people to go of an evening in our town centres. Young people need to be supported and enabled to take part in inter-generational activities and to be active members of their communities.

Finally, underpinning this must be a commitment to understanding the perspective of children and young people and extending their ability to actively participate in decision making processes. A simple but effective example of this approach is the Children's Commissioners 'Takeover Day'.¹⁸ Public bodies are encouraged to invite children and young people to work with adults for the day and get involved in decision-making.

There are mutual benefits to this approach, where young people gain valuable experience and organisations can gain a new perspective on their work. We were fortunate to speak to two young people taking part in Takeover Days at public bodies as part of the research for this report, and would note the valuable and fresh perspective they brought to several issues.

Many local authorities already have children in care councils, youth parliaments and other representative bodies. However, the wider local public and voluntary sector will need to work harder to ensure young people have a voice in wider community debates – on issues beyond traditional 'youth' concerns. Political apathy and low voter turnout are a key democratic challenge for the state, and fostering interest amongst young people must be part of any response.

17. For example: **Getting London Working, London Councils**

<http://www.londoncouncils.gov.uk/policylobbying/economicdevelopment/increasingemployment/employmentreport.htm>

18. More information can be found here: http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/takeover_day

Delivering transformation

Achieving the ambitions outlined in the last section will in the future require thinking differently about the way we structure and deliver services, the way we regulate and assure what we do, the kind of workforce we will need and more besides.

Many of these issues cut across all or many of the outcomes discussed. The workforce challenges present in children's social care are compounded by the organisational silos around health and social care. Inspection and regulation, particularly in safeguarding, do not adequately consider how all players in a local system contribute. Finally, leadership of the children and young people's agenda cuts across almost all local public services.

WORKFORCE REFORM

The children's services workforce is diverse; it includes education professionals, social workers, clinicians, parenting workers, youth justice professionals and many more. The challenges facing the children's services workforce are well documented and exist at all levels - from the frontline to senior officers. When asked to cite the key barriers

to change in children's services; Solace members listed middle leadership capacity (39%) and front line capacity (37%) as the second and third most popular barriers – behind only increased demand (54%).¹⁹ Further, 82% of Solace members believe high staff turnover to be a moderate or serious problem. Other issues highlighted by members were 'insufficient numbers (due to financial concerns)', 'the need for improved training and up-skilling' and 'problems recruiting for leadership positions'.²⁰

Social care

On the frontline, particularly in social work, there remain concerns about recruitment and quality. Several people interviewed for this report indicated that, while they felt standards had risen in the last few years, they remained concerned about

the readiness to practice of some recently qualified social workers. Caseloads in some local authorities also remain too high and it has been acknowledged in several independent reports that some trainee social workers have too little experience of working on high-risk statutory cases.²¹

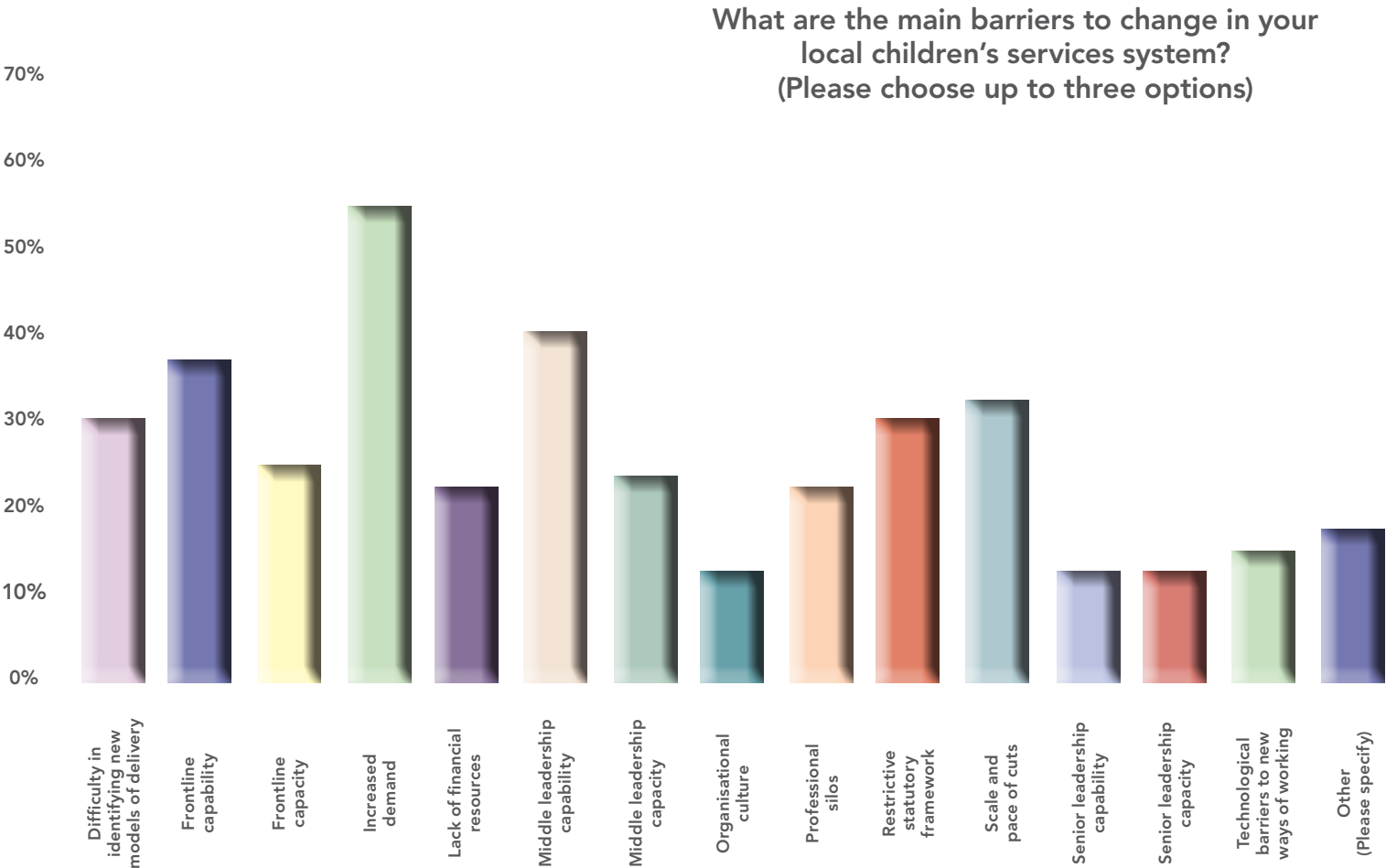
One of the major challenges facing children's social care services is also the retention of experienced social workers. The average working life of a social worker in children's services is estimated to be around eight years.²² Informally, many Solace members speak of losing experienced social workers to agencies, where they can command higher salaries and a better work/life balance. Cracking this retention challenge will be critical to addressing the quality and capacity of middle tier leadership in children's services.

19. Solace Children's Services Survey, 2013

20. Ibid.

21. For example: *Making the education of social workers consistently effective*, Sir Martin Narey, Feb 2014

22. Curtis, L.A. and Moriarty, J. and Netten, A.P., *The expected working life of a social worker*, British Journal of Social Work, 2010



Solace believes that achieving change will require an holistic and sustained approach to reform, characterised by a new approach to risk, a commitment to functional innovation and examining from first principles the role that social workers should play in multi-agency, place-based social care services. Flowing from an analysis of this purpose, the sector and Government should seek to build on the Social Work Task Force's and Reform Board's achievements and build a consensus on new approaches to the recruitment, training and ongoing professional development of the social work (and wider social care) workforce. In particular, a 'life-course' approach to workforce reform will help to ensure that we develop the workforce in a way which ensures it is prepared for the full challenge ahead. Solace remains keen to work with other sector bodies, the Government and the new Chief Social Workers in developing this approach.

The wider workforce

Outside of social work, we need a clearer vision of the children's services workforce. This would involve seeking to mobilise the significant part of the workforce without a formal social work qualification. It would also mean developing a shared vision for how diverse professions and agencies can work jointly together.

In education and school improvement, local authorities will also need a clearer understanding of their future role in order to determine their workforce needs. Solace suggests that a workforce with skills in partnerships, relationship brokering, strategic planning and commissioning will be as important as curriculum or school improvement specialists.

The workforce challenges facing the wider children's sector will only be addressed by a coherent, sustained programme of change. While this will necessarily focus on social work and care staff, it will also need to be broader – seeking to support back-office staff, teachers, non-social care family practitioners, health staff engaged in work with families and others.

This will help enable and support a more 'blended approach' to workforce planning which is underpinned by a strategic commitment to integrated, holistic services. This could involve more regular, and deeper, integration of training and workforce development, more secondments and opportunities to experience different roles.

It could also involve thinking again about how career paths are designed to encourage breadth of experience alongside professional specialisation.

RECOMMENDATION SIX

The sector and Government should collaborate on a programme of workforce reform, including a next stage social work reform programme, which is underpinned by a commitment to integrated, holistic services and which promotes a more blended children's and families' workforce.

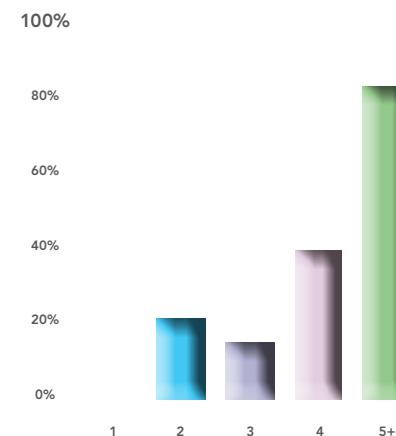
INSPECTION AND IMPROVEMENT IN A COMPLEX SYSTEM

The role of inspection (and the part played by the regulator in improvement) hangs heavily over any conversation about services for children, particularly in education and social care. The fear of a damning Ofsted verdict is pervasive in both schools and local authorities. While inspection is necessary and welcome, many feel that it has become too disconnected from reality. It is shaping practice in unforeseen and unintended ways and is too divorced from the economic realities of an assumed decade of disinvestment.

Half of Solace members based in English councils indicated in our survey that they have been inspected 5 or more times

in the last 5 years by Ofsted and other regulatory bodies in relation to their services for children. This rises to 75% who have been inspected at least four times.²³ While acknowledging the value of an independent review of services, Solace members also speak of an inspection process which is 'essentially a compliant [sic] process', '[disconnected] from wider preventative, innovation agenda' and has 'an unapologetic approach to beating up its victims'.²⁴

In the last five years, how many inspections has your LAs children's services function received (child protection, LAC, school improvement or others)?



Children's Services retain a uniquely extensive and pervasive set of accountability and inspection arrangements within local government. While central oversight and accountability will always be necessary and desirable, we believe it is time to think about what a more localist and grounded approach to children's services assurance could look like.

One of the critical features of such an approach would be a system which sought to identify possible failure and areas for concern much earlier - the central focus of the sector led improvement movement co-founded by Solace in 2010. These 'early warning' mechanisms should exist both within councils and at a regional and national level.

Within councils, political and managerial leaders need better intelligence to inform corporate leadership of children's services. This is not about simple, individually monitored performance metrics. Corporate management teams, and political leaders, need a 'basket' of measures which interpreted as a whole enable them to better understand the health and performance of their whole local system.

At a regional and national level, the sector itself needs to do more to offer collective support. Formal and informal networks, alongside future 'sector led improvement' structures, will need to better understand the performance of councils in their area – with supportive improvement structures in place to offer assistance where it is needed. Several Chief Executives interviewed for this report also indicated their belief that if this is to be achieved, the sector will need to better resource national improvement activity.

RECOMMENDATION SEVEN

The sector needs to develop clearer mechanisms for identifying struggling services and councils earlier and invest in properly resourced improvement mechanisms to offer peer-led early support and assistance.

SYSTEM LEADERSHIP AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Solace believes fundamentally that strong leadership has a substantial and positive impact on councils. Good public leadership, both political and managerial, can have a considerable impact on local communities and the individual lives of those who live in an area. For local authorities to grasp their role as champions of children and young people in their areas they need strong corporate leadership.

Instability and accountability

Many commentators, including HMCI Sir Michael Wilshaw, recognise the concerns which arise from the high turnover of Directors of Children's Services (DCS).²⁵ In our survey, 45% indicated that their authorities' DCS had been in post for less than two years.²⁶ Research by Children and Young People Now indicates that turnover between 2012 and 2013 alone ran at nearly a third.²⁷ It is not an overstatement to say that such instability in the leadership of such vital services is fast becoming a national emergency. We believe this instability is fundamentally the product of a culture in which accountability is seen through the prism of a single individual.

25. For example, in the *Ofsted Social Care Annual Report 2012/13*

26. Solace *Children's Services Survey*

27. *One in three directors of children's services moved on in just a year*, CYP Now

<http://www.cypnow.co.uk/cyp/news/1119149/one-directors-children-s-services-moved>

Likewise, we need a new, localist approach to children's services assurance. Such an approach should be a partnership between central government, national inspectorates and the sector. It should be proportionate to risk, sensitive to local context and draw on the skills and experiences of everyone working with children and young people.

Critically, any assurance system needs to concern itself fundamentally with the safety and welfare of children. This means its reach cannot be artificially limited to certain sectors and institutional settings. We need a system that promotes continuous improvement, identifies areas for concern and acts in a firm, supportive manner to drive up standards; moving away from an 'all or nothing' approach to inspection which is wholly divorced from the journey of improvement.

RECOMMENDATION EIGHT

The sector and Government should collaborate on the design of a new assurance system with the safety and welfare of children at its heart, able to provide external oversight and ensure accountability of the whole system in a way which respects context and champions continuous improvement.

Outcomes for children are everyone's business

We firmly believe that the Chief Executive, Leader/Mayor and wider corporate leadership of local authorities have a crucial role in children's services. Local authorities are interdependent organisations corporately accountable to local residents through the democratic process. Chief Executives, corporate management teams and political leaders should ensure that they are confident in exercising their strategic responsibilities.

This will require a shared, ongoing programme of training and professional development between political and managerial service and corporate leaders. This is a programme we believe only the sector itself should and could coordinate. Solace is already working with the Virtual Staff College, ADCS, LGA and others on joint training and development opportunities for children's services as part of a programme of work to ensure Chief Executives feel they have the knowledge and understanding to support their children's services functions effectively. We look forward to continuing and further developing this work.

RECOMMENDATION NINE

The sector needs to develop new, integrated programmes of training and personal development for children's services and corporate leaders (both managerial and political).

Reclaiming children's services

Within local authorities, much of the focus can remain on the constructs emanating from the 2004 Children Act: the combination of education and children's social care, overseen by a statutory Director of Children's Services and Lead Member; and the local safeguarding system held to account by an independent Chair of a Local Safeguarding Children's Board.

However, we believe that beyond these structures councils have a critical role in embracing a whole system, place-based role as champions of the interests of children, young people and families. This will involve using their 'informal power' and democratic mandate to convene, facilitate and oversee.

This is the context that services for children find themselves placed within the wider reform agenda of local government. The moves toward integration and place-based approaches across local government are gaining momentum: from Troubled Families to Community Budgets, from health and social care to skills and economic development. The local government sector has long made the case for a place-based, localist approach to public service delivery – an approach which does not assume that what works in Westminster will work in Warrington.

Devolution and integration

This approach should extend far beyond social care, education or local authority services generally and embrace the health and wellbeing of young people, their economic prospects and their ability to make a positive contribution. This agenda involves every public service, as well as voluntary and community organisations and others. The local government sector is beginning to converge on a future proposition for local governance. Centred on place-based approaches and an extension to the community budgets principle – this would involve giving local authorities 'commissioner' responsibilities for a much wider range of public services. Enabling local areas to have the ability to consider the totality of their public spending across agency and departmental boundaries would allow them to refocus and prioritise around the specific needs and challenges of their area.

This, in turn, would allow them to come up with solutions that are locally designed, delivered and owned.

This is about taking the next step from collaboration toward shared budgets, shared commissioning and shared outcomes. Whether the focus is on safeguarding, youth unemployment or supporting young people with SEN – integration will be essential to delivery more joined-up, effective support.

This vision is tentatively shared by both the Government and other major political parties. The Public Service Transformation Network (formerly the Community Budgets programme) is seeking to trial different approaches to public service delivery in areas up and down the country. This innovation will be critical to meet the dual challenges of rising expectations and demand in many areas alongside falling resource in all.

However, we believe that the time for relatively small-scale pilots and programmes has passed. The case for transformation has been made and we need a radical step up in scope, scale and ambition.

Local solutions and deregulation

In this context, we believe the sector needs to debate the extent to which some aspects of the statutory and regulatory framework underpinning children's services might help or hinder reform. Every Child Matters, by mandating not just the function, but also the form of children's services accountability and delivery, is in all probability contributing to an isolation of children's services from the wider local government sector and inhibiting innovation. Likewise, the current regulatory and inspection landscape is seen by many as a vehicle which drives councils to focus more and more on an increasingly narrow range of areas measured.

Coupled with increased social care demand and falling budgets, we believe this restrictive framework runs the risk of turning councils into service commissioners and/or deliverers for an increasingly small number of very vulnerable children. This role, while absolutely essential, cannot be sufficient. Local authorities have a critical role to play as champions of the health, happiness and wellbeing of all the children and young people in their area. Furthermore, this system fails to adequately reflect or hold to account the much broader range of stakeholders and leaders who play a role in keeping children and young people safe in a place.

We have made the case earlier in this report for a new regulatory framework based on a localist assurance system coupled with better-resourced and clearer mechanisms to support sector led improvement of children's services.

When Every Child Matters was originally published Solace expressed concerns that the underpinning ambitions and principles - that we need a whole systems approach to supporting children and young people - were at risk of being undermined by the restrictive nature of the proposed statutory framework.²⁸ While having a clear, corporate point of accountability for children and young people remains important, we believe the framework may now be inhibiting innovation and challenging the principles it was established to deliver.

The picture is further complicated by increasing variety in the sector. While the requirement for a statutory Director of Children's (DSC) and Adults (DASS) Services remains, many local authorities have chosen to ignore the received "separatist" wisdom of the 2004 Act and now combine these roles, or bolt other responsibilities on to them. Many now hold responsibility for adult social care, public health and housing.

We believe it is time for the sector to push for greater deregulation to enable staffing and leadership arrangements to properly reflect local needs. In particular, we believe the rigidity of the requirement for a statutory Director of Children's Services responsible for children's social care and education is no longer necessary or even desirable. It is creating challenges in recruitment and hampering efforts to define the wider corporate and organisational role in children's issues.

RECOMMENDATION TEN

Government should remove the current statutory requirements around the Director of Children's Services role to allow local authorities the flexibility they need to ensure the most effective leadership of children and families issues.

RECOMMENDATION ELEVEN

The sector, Government and regulators need to undertake a wider discussion about the nature and extent to which deregulation would help councils to best support children and young people.

Decentralising services for children

Underpinning all of these themes is a belief that children's services, and the wider local government sector, should be free to pursue the priorities of local communities without undue influence and restraint from national government.

Despite some of the challenges discussed in this report, it is important to recognise that the children's services system in England is largely successful – although this itself should remind us that there is no place for complacency. Educational attainment has improved dramatically over the last decade despite almost constant system reform. Infant mortality has fallen remarkably.²⁹ Most, if not all, of these improvements owe a large debt to the efforts of local authorities.

Our vision is of an autonomous, self-confident sector setting its own vision and priorities – informed by professional expertise and democratic legitimacy. Local authorities should be set free to innovate, to define for themselves what 'good' looks like and to use their informal power to shape their localities into places where all children are safe, happy and able to pursue their ambitions.

RECOMMENDATION TWELVE

Local authorities as an autonomous, self-confident sector must be enabled to innovate, to define for themselves what 'good' looks like and to shape their localities into places where all children are safe, happy and able to pursue their ambitions.

28. **Every Child Matters: Solace response**, 2003

29. Office for National Statistics
<http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/vsob1/child-mortality-statistics--childhood--infant-and-perinatal/2011/sty-infant-mortality.html>

Summary of recommendations

1. The sector needs to develop new models to facilitate multi-agency working and bind all local partners into the process of safeguarding and protecting vulnerable children and young people.
2. We need a national conversation about what, as a society, we expect children's social care and other professionals to be able to do in the interests of safeguarding children and the powers we afford them to do this.
3. Government and the sector need to coproduce a new, simplified accountability system which allows local councils to scrutinise and hold all schools to account regardless of day to day management and governance arrangements.
4. Local authorities need to use their democratic mandate and the 'informal power' at their disposal to champion high quality education for all children and young people in their place.
5. Local authorities need to be given clear routes to influence their local skills system, and funding and support for youth unemployment should be devolved, to ensure sufficient alignment with local needs and employment markets.
6. The sector and Government should collaborate on a programme of workforce reform, including a next stage social work reform programme, which is underpinned by a commitment to integrated, holistic services and which promotes a more blended children's and families workforce.
7. The sector needs to develop clearer mechanisms for identifying struggling services and councils earlier and invest in properly resourced improvement mechanisms to offer peer-led early support and assistance.
8. The sector and Government should collaborate on the design of a new assurance system with the safety and welfare of children at its heart, able to provide external oversight and ensure accountability of the whole system in a way which respects context and champions continuous improvement.
9. The sector needs to develop new, integrated programmes of training and personal development for children's services and corporate leaders (both managerial and political).
10. Government should remove the current statutory requirements around the Director of Children's Services role to allow local authorities the flexibility they need to ensure the most effective leadership of children and families issues.
11. The sector, Government and regulators need to undertake a wider discussion about the nature and extent to which deregulation would help councils to best support children and young people.
12. Local authorities as an autonomous, self-confident sector must be enabled to innovate, to define for themselves what 'good' looks like and to shape their localities into places where all children are safe, happy and able to pursue their ambitions.

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Sample

The survey was conducted over a period of three weeks in November 2013 and was sent to all Solace members from the 195 upper-tier authorities (i.e. county councils, unitary councils or London boroughs). It asked 61 questions and received 64 responses. 36% of respondents were chief executives and 31 were directors of children's services. Responses were received from across the UK and from a spread of local authorities, with 64% of responses from unitary authorities or metropolitan boroughs, 22% from county councils and 14% from London Boroughs.