

Public Services Committee

Corrected oral evidence: Children's Social Care implementation strategy

Wednesday 15 March 2023

3 pm

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Members present: Baroness Morris of Yardley (The Chair); Lord Bach; Baroness Bertin; Baroness Campbell of Surbiton; Lord Carter of Coles; Lord Porter of Spalding; Lord Prentis of Leeds; Lord Shipley; The Lord Bishop of Southwell and Nottingham; Baroness Stedman-Scott; Lord Willis of Knaresborough.

Evidence Session No. 1

Heard in Public

Questions 1 – 7

Witnesses

I: Anne Longfield CBE, former Children's Commissioner for England; Josh MacAlister, former Chair, Independent Review of Children's Social Care (IRCSC).

Examination of witnesses

Anne Longfield and Josh MacAlister.

Q1 The Chair: Welcome to the first evidence session of our committee's new inquiry into the implementation of the children's social care strategy. Our witnesses today are Anne Longfield and Josh MacAlister. We have looked at this issue before, and have had both of you as witnesses and as people who have helped us before, but at this point we want to look initially at the Government's response to the MacAlister report so that we can make some comments and feed into their consultation.

Thank you very much for your time. Before I ask the first question, I wonder if you might introduce yourselves briefly.

Anne Longfield: I have been in the area of children and vulnerable children for about three decades. I was Children's Commissioner for England from 2015 to 2021, and for the last couple of years I have been chairing the Commission on Young Lives, which is looking at teenagers at risk—not particularly in care, but some of them are in the care system.

Josh MacAlister: I chaired the Independent Review of Children's Social Care in England, and I am now the executive chair of the What Works for Early Intervention and Children's Social Care, soon to be renamed with a snappier title.

Q2 **The Chair:** Thanks very much. It being our first meeting, we wish to declare our interests at the start of the inquiry. I have none to declare in this particular inquiry.

The range of problems across this area has been discussed for many years. There are a lot of problems, and your independent report highlighted them. To help us focus, what are the two greatest challenges that you see in this area?

Josh MacAlister: The first is that we have built a children's social care system that is trying to support something that is organic, messy and fluid, which is family life and the process of children growing up. We have tried to support that and work with families in that state through a system that is linear and rigid, and often works with families on an episodic basis. At its most basic, those two things have rubbed up against one another.

First, how we design public services so they are more human, and recognise loving relationships and family life as it is today in 2023, has shown itself to be a profound problem in children's social care. You could probably extend that argument to adult social care and other public services as well.

As a consequence, the second major challenge is that we have seen much more of the spending, activity and energy in the children's social care system shift from earlier, very helpful work with families before they hit crisis to being spent on things when they are often too late for families, which is very costly and often not as effective. So picking up the pieces of what has happened for families is the system of children's social care that we have today.

Anne Longfield: I agree with Josh's final point about the extent to which the care system has now moved from being one that supports children and families to improve their well-being and to work with them over time to the point where it is intervening really only at crisis point in too many instances. The demand has increased but the system has not changed, and the funding has not increased to the extent that it may need to in order for the system to work.

We now have intervention only at peak times when crisis has hit. That is not what anyone wants, but there are too many situations where that is the case. Of course, when you get to that stage, it costs an awful lot more. The cost of crisis is huge, which means that there is less money to spend on early intervention and working with families. The proposal that Josh put forward for a total reset of the system to get to a different place is one that I have supported for an awfully long time.

The other part of it is the rigidity of a system that is based on process. A lot of cases are closed before they should be—you talk to a lot of families and they say they are passed from pillar to post—and the system has not been able to keep up with the changing demand for some services, such as for older children.

Over the last couple of years, the biggest increase has been in older children coming into care. Almost a quarter of kids in care are 16 and 17 year-olds, and they are the ones who do not have the high-quality provision to support them. That is an immediate problem. It should not drive the overarching response for everything around the care system, but it is a huge risk at the moment. It is a symptom of a system that cannot adapt and is unable to get on the front foot in too many cases.

The Chair: To what extent do you think that is a consequence of the way government organises itself into departments? You have talked about flexibility and linear problems, and I take the point about money. Both of you must have spent an awful lot of time working with government departments throughout your career. Given that children's problems and family problems tend to be more complex, will the structure of government ever be able to address it in the way you suggested?

Josh MacAlister: There probably is. I am yet to meet somebody who tells me there was a period of time where central government was set up in the optimum way to deliver good services for children and families, or any group that is sort of cross-cutting.

In the review, I saw Ministers and senior officials over the years pushing, sometimes very successfully, for programmes of activity and pots of money to work at a particular issue or problem. In a way, it is to their credit that they have seen a problem, identified a solution and managed to secure the money through a comprehensive spending review process.

If you are at the sharp end of delivering services for families, you are now left with a whole background of buckets of money that you are having to draw down from, which in itself is a laborious process. You have local authorities trying to make sense of this web of different pots, and that is not working as well as it needs to. One of the things the review recommended was bringing together—mainstreaming—those programmes, and in particular I point to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities merging the Supporting Families programme with the Family Help programme which the review recommended, as well as the DWP's Reducing Parental Conflict programme.

You could quite easily bring some of these things together. They need really clear accountability and a Secretary of State who is on the hook for this overall strategy. Multi-agency, multi-departmental working should not come at the cost of really sharp accountability. That is a part of the balancing act that is sometimes needed.

Anne Longfield: I have spent most of my working career joining dots around government or around local areas, and I do not think you can get

to the root causes of the difficulties unless you do it across different departments. The machinery of government is not set up to do that, and there are not the mechanisms in place to mitigate against those.

You have councils in the north-east that say children are coming to care because their families are poor; that clearly is a bigger issue than the care system. At the other end of it where you just have one department taking a lead in this way, the funding for it starts to get reduced down, to reduce down, to reduce down, whereas it is essentially about vulnerable children and how we as a country respond to vulnerable children. That in itself needs policy space and a mechanism that goes across government departments and which needs to be firmly lodged at senior level within government.

Lord Carter of Coles: In your experience—you must go to international conferences and things—do other places do it better? Is there any way to solve the problem of joined-up government?

Anne Longfield: Nothing is ever perfect, but there are countries that define themselves by how they put children at the forefront. In Norway, for instance, in a conversation with someone who has something to do with the Government in Norway it is not long before they tell you, 'Actually, this is the way we do things as a country. We put children high on our list. We make sure that when policy decisions are being taken, we consider what they mean for children'.

One of the things that would benefit our societal response to vulnerable children would be the sense that it is a mission. That goes to the heart of the way we are as a country. People would take to that, and you would then be able to step out of these endless responses to symptoms. At one point, I think in 2018, there was a particular concern about knife crime. I counted 11 different responses from different parts of government, probably about £30 million or £40 million in all. Everyone thought, 'Oh well, that's happened. Has it not got better?' But, actually, they were all going to be limited by the fact that they were tiny and targeted a very small group of people. Imagine if they were put together: you would be talking about a sizeable pot that could have strategic purpose and impact. That is the step that is waiting to happen.

Josh MacAlister: The Supporting Families programme in DLUHC is the one example in government at the moment that has shown what can be done. It has tried to get different departments signed up to a cross-government set of objectives and outcomes and has been quite successful at convincing the Treasury to put more and more money in, year after year. Baroness Casey's leadership of that programme when it was the Troubled Families programme was probably key in brokering those relationships and helping other departments to feel confident enough to put their own money into it. There might be something similar to that in the future if we have a bigger mission around a cross-cutting issue.

Anne Longfield: It needs to be agile, so that when government decides that something is a problem over here, it can respond in a way. But certainly it has lots of promise there.

Baroness Stedman-Scott: When I was the Minister at the Department for Work and Pensions, until December, I was responsible for the Reducing Parental Conflict programme—the RPC. I tried every which way to get the family hubs and the RPC and the Supporting Families budgets all merged to do exactly what Anne has done. I think I made some progress, and it is something that we should push for, because it will be better.

Lord Prentis of Leeds: I have no financial interest to declare. What you were saying earlier about the shift in spending is quite interesting. You referred to it moving from the early, preventive work that can be done to crisis management. In a nutshell, why did that shift occur?

Josh MacAlister: What happens is that a cycle gets formed and it becomes very difficult to break out of it. In the last 10 to 15 years, not in all but in many local authorities, the demands for care, families reaching real crisis point, and local authorities and social workers deciding which children we might take into care have grown.

At the moment, if local authorities decide to go for care application and the courts decide that that child needs to enter care, that child is entering a system where fostering costs about £70,000 a year and residential care usually costs about £250,000 a year or more. When that happens, it consumes a share of the spending that is there for earlier help for families. As that spiral starts to gather momentum, as you start to pull money out of earlier help for families into the later-stage crisis costs, you need to do that more and more, which means that you are left with less and less to help families earlier on.

What is urgently needed now is a level of intervention, reform and investment that will break that spiral so that it can be reversed, because if we do not take the scale of action that is needed, we will just see that spiral gather pace even more in the years ahead. It can be reversed, because there are pockets of local authorities across England that have shown that it is possible.

Anne Longfield: I do not want to put everything on money, but it is a fact that there has been a 70% reduction in early intervention money over the decade—this committee in its report, which came out last year and which I advised on, said that very clearly—for the kind of support that was there to work with families locally, and indeed for early intervention in the form of food support and the like. Of course, when that happens, you just do not have the people or the places there to be able to offer that support early on. Organisations such as schools do their best to mop up and help, but they feel very much that they are the only ones left on the front line.

As the demand increases—we have seen an increase in the numbers of children going into care—the statutory responsibilities mean that local authorities have nowhere else to go than, of course, meeting those needs. However, where the cost of some provision and placements are £250,000 a year—eye-watering amounts—local authorities are haemorrhaging on high costs and are then stuck in that place, as Josh said.

I have always talked about the potential for a transition fund to allow people that breather to start focusing on early intervention and dealing with the statutory responsibilities. Then, over time, you get to the point where you can bring that down—a gradual move. We are where we are in that, and it is absolutely unsustainable. They are just haemorrhaging money.

Lord Porter of Spalding: I probably should declare interests in that I am a Non-Executive Director of DLUHC, the Local Government Association national lead peer and leader of a council, although we do not do children's services directly.

From what you are saying, there seems to be a fair bit of consensus that central government is just not very good at this stuff. Is there anywhere where you think there could be scope for collecting all the individual pots of money that were involved in a local area and maybe sticking it underneath an upper tier account or a combined authority area, just so that there was some way of piloting what it could look like if it was free from the centre?

Josh MacAlister: An interesting thing that we found in the review was that the DfE has previously funded local areas to shift some of this balance. In the last few years, there has been a programme called strengthening families, protecting children. The Hertfordshire family safeguarding model is really about funding multidisciplinary teams—not just social workers, but a wider group of practitioners to work more intensively and earlier with families.

There were some interesting findings. Even when the DfE did that with the savings it had made, local authorities still did not bake those savings back into permanently higher spending on earlier help. That is interesting, because it speaks to something about the pressures of local government spending in an annual cycle, where you have to compete with highways, bin collection and all the rest of the stuff that local government is doing.

My argument, the argument the review makes, is that we should, for a number of years, invest about £2 billion more in intensive family help in order to build back up the ability to do more early intensive and successful work with families within a framework that prioritises evidence-based interventions—not just any old work, but really good-quality, well-evidenced, interventions for families. When that has been done, it leaves a legacy behind of integrated funding streams from different departments so that we do not have lots of different pots of

money, and it is ring-fenced permanently as a family help grant to local authorities so that when there is short-term pressure, it takes the temptation away from local government to dip into that pot rather than into others first. That is part of the behaviour shift that we need to see over the next five years.

Lord Shipley: I am vice-president of the Local Government Association. Could I just take up Anne Longfield's comment and ask whether you can quantify it in any way to help us? I live in Newcastle upon Tyne, and you commented that there was some evidence in the north-east of children coming into care because their parents do not have the resources, and things like that. Can that statement be quantified in any way? It is the north-east of England, but is it anywhere else? What else can you add to that?

Anne Longfield: A group of local council leaders came together to submit a report to—

Josh MacAlister: It was to my review.

Anne Longfield: —there you go—and that was their submission. There is also the North East Child Poverty Commission work in and around the university, but it was Josh's review that they submitted to, and they were explicit about that.

Josh MacAlister: Yes, they were, and there are some academics who have done really great work. The Child Welfare Inequalities Project has done some great work on this, and other academics have tried to come up with a formula for rises in poverty resulting in increasing numbers of children in care, so the analysis has been done on that.

Lord Shipley: Do I understand you right that the north-east is mentioned because the work has been done, and the situation may apply elsewhere but the work has not been done? Can you quantify it anywhere else?

Josh MacAlister: The problem is a national one. There is a contributory causal link between poverty and the demand for children's social care services, and one of the problems culturally in our politics and policy space is that we have been really reluctant to accept that that relationship does exist. We all accept that there is a relationship between poverty and educational inequality; whether you are a Labour or a Conservative politician, everybody accepts that that link exists. What we have been too slow to accept is the relationship between poverty and whether your family ends up reaching crisis point and your child enters care. That is a fundamental truth that requires cross-party acceptance so that we can figure out what the solution should be.

Anne Longfield: I reference it, because they were very explicit and they have done the work.

The Chair: They provided the evidence.

Anne Longfield: Exactly.

Q3 **Lord Shipley:** That is very helpful. I am glad for that clarification which we might look further at.

Can I move to asking you to imagine that I am a member of the workforce with young people and there is a new strategy. What is the impact on me? What will change as a consequence of a new strategy for me as an employee?

Anne Longfield: I would say that one of the limitations of the response is that it focuses very much on the 15 Pathfinder areas. If you are in one of the 15 Pathfinder areas, you will be testing out a number of different approaches to the things that we have been talking about—earlier intervention, putting children first, working with families and the like—and in those 15 areas there will be a plan and changes that you can expect.

If you are not in one of those 15 areas, it will be less clear to see quite how immediately this will impact on you. You can see that there are a lot of consultations and aspirations in the response, some of which are quite vague, and you may see that there will be greater support for the workforce and the like. As a worker not in one of those 15 areas, you will not feel that immediate impact, which is an opportunity lost.

Josh MacAlister: I agree with Anne on that.

Lord Shipley: What might the Government do about it then? Might you expect a short-term intervention from the Government that would alleviate that problem?

Josh MacAlister: I agree with Anne that the substance of the Government's response is about the Pathfinder areas. Some national changes will come into effect, I hope, if the consultation goes the right way. One is working together. The statutory guidance that explains how these services work together to support this group of children and families will allow not just social workers but other practitioners to do this work with families. At the moment, child-in-need work is done just by social workers, even though there are other practitioners already working with those families that are adding value. If you are a social worker, you should start to see your teams including other professionals in your direct peer group fairly soon.

The other changes are about the early career framework, so more training and support for social workers, but, again, that is not being rolled out everywhere. The Government should roll out the Pathfinder programme everywhere faster.

The review did some really robust analysis of the costs and benefits of funding these changes. We mapped out the costs of doing family help services everywhere all at once together, and we took only half of the benefits of other equivalent programmes in rolling them out. The review already took into account the fact that when you roll out large-scale

change at speed everywhere, you will not get the full effect that you might have had in a pilot area. We already did that, and with the economic forecasting we showed that these reforms break even within five years. If we do not spend the money, if we do not put that kind of energy into these reforms sooner, we will see the costs go up and up.

My conclusion on the Government's response is that it is good that they bought the argument. It is the right direction, but it is not of the scale of investment or change that will see a tipping point in the system for some time. As Anne said, that is a missed opportunity.

Anne Longfield: What it does not show is the determination to make it happen. We have the 15 areas, and that is fine, but actually it is very clear that what has been presented is a public reform plan, and the urgency and the scale of crisis in the system, in my view, demand that it is tackled head-on. That does not mean that every area has to be in phase one—you can have phase two and phase three areas—but that there is a plan and people know this is happening everywhere and this is the direction of travel. Obviously, that will take more money, and there is an issue about getting out of the Treasury Spending Review cycle mindset there to make this happen.

The other part of it is for the national development rollout to be very clear and very visible. I checked the size of teams in the department earlier, and I think they are bigger than they were, but which team is going out to help people make these changes? How will that be reflected in what Ofsted is looking for? Those are the things that make change happen. You look very clearly: there is a starting point here, we want to get to there and we are going to do it in five years, or three years, but we are going to do it.

Lord Prentis of Leeds: Going back to the overall plan that you are talking about and the need for a multidisciplinary approach—support is probably the word that I would use—many social workers feel as if they cannot get through the day with the pressures they are under. The plan is really attractive—the idea that we can pull our way out of what we are going through at the moment—but there is one sticking point, from what you are saying, which is that the Government are not funding it. You talk about £2 billion in your note, but you have only been offered £200 million. Where does that leave the plan?

Josh MacAlister: The review said—I said—that this scale of reform programme needs £2.6 billion over the period, £1 billion over the first two years, and the Government have announced £200 million. The gap there is because the Government are saying that they will roll out the changes in 15 places first. They have said in the strategy, which is positive, that they then intend to roll it out everywhere. They have said to the system, 'We're going to a few places first and then we will roll it out everywhere'. I think they managed to get away with saying in their response to the report that that will need to come with additional resources.

The problem, if I can use the analogy of a rocket, is that to get the rocket into space you need enough fuel to get the momentum to break into orbit. If you do not have enough and are even a bit short, the whole thing will come crashing back down. That is the fear here, really: that we have the right diagnosis. The Government now have the right prescription, but if they do not give the right dose, we will not see the benefits. That is what we need to see.

At the moment, we are on track to have many thousands more children unable to live with their families who instead grow up in an overwhelmed care system. We have parents, some of whom grew up in care themselves, struggling to raise their children successfully because of a whole series of pressures in their lives, and we have interventions out there that we know will make a difference.

We know that when we do not get this right, the costs are enormous. The societal costs are huge, but the financial costs for public spending are enormous as well. The argument is so clear that I cannot understand why we would not go faster on this and go sooner. I understand that comprehensive spending review envelopes put pressure on government departments to look at the options they have in front of them, but this is an area that absolutely needs departments to break out of that spending review straitjacket and seize the moment, and now is the moment to seize. The Government are going in the right direction. They have internalised the arguments the review made, but central government needs to give permission to say, 'Look, let's spend what's needed to fix this problem'. Otherwise, we will spend more later on trying to pick up the pieces.

Baroness Bertin: My question has been answered, but I want to interrogate something. I hear what you are saying, by the way, about the rocket analogy and that 15 Pathfinders is perhaps not enough, but do you think that the plans set out for those Pathfinders are on the right track? Could you to reiterate that?

Josh MacAlister: I absolutely do. If you read the detail of the Government's proposals for those 15 areas, they have gone to quite some lengths to work up a comprehensive plan, not just for how services should be reorganised but for the statutory and inspection frameworks that need to sit around them, the data that central government should be collecting to monitor it, and some of the interventions that practitioners should be using. They have done a lot of work on the substance to make those 15 local areas successful. I genuinely think that this is the right direction and that the Government made some very positive announcements. It just will not reach the tipping point at the pace we need it to.

Anne Longfield: I agree. Essentially, we are talking here about resetting services towards families, earlier intervention and a system that is led by families rather than a rigid process system. We have 15 areas out of 150; it will never have the impact needed to get that level of change.

The care system has really suffered from having a lot of reviews over many years. All of them have had great merit somewhere, but they have been a sticking plaster or an incremental addition. What you have here is a catalogue of reviews that show how overarching change is needed, and a grasp of the amount of money that that will take. Again, the savings are immeasurable in every sense, for individuals and the public purse.

Q4 Baroness Bertin: I completely agree with you. I am always beating the drum for putting the money ahead of the crisis.

How convinced are you that the local authorities and the agencies on the ground will have that agility to be able to change the way they are working? We have talked about this for a long time, but it obviously is not that easy to do; otherwise, we would be doing it.

In addition to the workforce issues, family help is music to my ears, but it relies on domestic abuse specialists and specialist police officers, who do not grow on trees. How big a shortfall do we have on that front?

Anne Longfield: There are some huge deficits. I am sure Josh has all those numbers, but the gap in the workforce alone and without agency staff is nearly 7,000 social workers, for a start. At the moment, without additional funds, a lot of local authorities cannot get on the front foot to be able to make those changes and to start working with families in a different way when skyrocketing amounts of money are being spent on care places and crises. There is a huge job to be done in every reset of the system, but that is why there needs to be a development programme with people helping local authorities to make that change before they get into crisis.

Josh MacAlister: There is a lot of really positive energy in the children's social care system at the moment to see big change happen, and if you speak to senior leaders in local government, by and large the appetite and energy is there. I would not want people to walk away from this session thinking that we are holding our heads in despair and filled with doom. People can see that we have the ingredients in the English children's social care system that are the answers for fixing a lot of these problems. It is about bringing them together and giving the system a proper chance to reset as a whole.

Local government is ready for this. They have been calling out for it for a long time, and this is the moment to seize. When it comes to the workforce challenges, we need to open up who can do child-in-need work so that it is multidisciplinary. Other changes that might reduce bureaucracy also give us a chance to put some of the workforce back into front-line practice roles. Of the 30,000 social workers in children's social care, 10,000 are not doing any direct work with children and families. They are quality assuring, leading, and managing the other 20,000. That is because of the rules and the processes we have built up around the system, which goes back to my very first point about having a rigid, linear, risk-averse system working with the messy world of family life.

Lord Bach: I was a Police and Crime Commissioner for five years and

could see from that job just how serious the crisis, if I can call it that, was, and is. I really want to make sure that I understand what you are both saying. Are you saying that if the Government's response, which I understand is sympathetic, is with much less funding than you require, particularly in the 15 out of 150 Pathfinder areas, is it, frankly, at risk of ensuring that what you intend in your report will not happen?

Josh MacAlister: No. The review ran with the baton, and the baton is the argument that we need to shift spending in the system. To change the things that we measure and inspect, we need to change the focus to building lifelong loving relationships around these children, first and foremost in their families. Then, if they do need the care system, that system is rebuilt and redesigned to do that same task. The Government have got a hold of the baton, but those of us who are arguing for a full system reset cannot let go of our end just yet. They have not fully grasped it, because of the spending review period, and because, as Anne said, of the overall level of ambition for this reform programme.

Nothing that they are announcing is taking us in the wrong direction. The problem is that it will slightly slow the ongoing drift towards a more crisis-driven system, where we have more children in total in care. It will slow but not reverse it. We can reverse it, and to do that we need the scale of investment and reform set out in my review. I think this is inevitable. We will have to do this work. It might be described slightly differently, it might be done slightly later, but we will have to do it. Doing it now is cheaper and better for outcomes than waiting another three, four or five years to roll it out.

If you want the example of adult social care, it is 10 years since the Dilnot review was published, and we are still talking about it. It has not been implemented, and the costs are visible for us all to see in A&E. Let us recognise the problem, fully grip it and make these scaled-up changes now.

Anne Longfield: If there was no further funding, or no further upgrading of the amount of money coming into this—obviously there is the potential to do this in another two years, or whenever—it would not achieve what the review set out to achieve. It just would not have the power to do it, or the right amount of energy behind it. Although it may slow the process towards crisis, it might set a context that is starting to have a more sympathetic language. It is not yet in a place where it can even start to give confidence that it will meet the scale of the problem. For the children who are in care now, or even those not in care, who do not have the kind of support that they deserve, it will be cold comfort to them that they have to wait, or the system has to wait, another three years until people decide.

From my point of view, the report that was put forward was very clear, had very clear outcomes and a very clear way forward. In my view, it really just needs the confidence and the backing to really go for it.

Lord Willis of Knaresborough: Can I return you to Lord Shipley's initial

question here? It coincides with what Josh said in his opening remarks about changes that were needed. The workforce worries me enormously, and the point he made about the 10,000 child social workers who are not directly involved with children really emphasises this. I saw nothing in the report, or indeed in the Government's response, which clearly looked at the radical changes to workforce that are needed. We have seen those radical changes occur to some extent in education and to some extent in the health and care sector, but this is an area, particularly with regard to social work, where we are constantly saying that we do not have enough of this particular brand of people in order to carry out the sort of revolution that is required.

Do you have anything up your sleeve that would in fact indicate a change in the way in which we create a workforce that is fit for the 21st century, which recognises the radical social changes that have occurred over the last 10 years, never mind the last 20 or 30?

Josh MacAlister: When Anne was the Children's Commissioner, her office produced a report on education and healthcare plans, rather than child social care, but the story was the same, which was that, as Anne saw it, we were spending a lot of money in this system gate-keeping families and children away. We were preoccupied with assessing, referring and holding people at bay, and when we did that there was no money left to help people.

I would characterise parts of our children's social care system in a similar way today, in that we have lots of really good practitioners working in social work who came in with absolutely the right intent. They find themselves visiting families to complete a visit so that they can document it, and then they find themselves in the hours they have left referring the family on to another service that may not exist anymore. They are basically brokering other services to do the work that they themselves came into the system to do.

When we take a step back from that—this is where the review makes some really radical recommendations for a new approach to family help—we should have locally based teams with a really clear outcomes framework set around them. The Government have done a good job in publishing a national children's social care framework that sets out that those teams should be multidisciplinary so that they do not need to refer on to another service and can bring in the domestic abuse practitioner or mental health support, the drug and alcohol worker or the family therapist. Those people should be sat in the same team providing direct services. They should not be a commissioned external third party for which you have to go through another assessment and another referral.

Essentially, the review recommends trying to locate clear responsibility for doing this longer-term intensive change work with families within a family help service, and funding that to do it. That allows us to put the talents of the workforce in front of families who need that help. That should reduce bureaucracy and people spending their time doing things that they do not enjoy or they often feel adds no value.

Anne Longfield: Relationships, being able to stick with families and with children, are at the heart of what we are talking about here. When you have staff teams with large turnovers, where there are agency staff or very young staff that may not have the confidence and are being sent out alone without back-up, all those things eat away at that. There is a need for stability of the workforce, being able to get support for the workforce and giving it the agency to build relationships within the security of having good systems around it that work for those relationships and judgments rather than the other way around.

Lord Prentis of Leeds: Just to follow up on what you are saying about the workforce, in your response to the implementation strategy, Josh, you said that social workers do not have the time and that there are too many children and families to deal with. Now that you have £200 million and 15 pilots, do you have the resources to do what you are saying we need to do, which is to get those pilots off the ground very quickly?

Josh MacAlister: Yes. They are funded to make the scale of changes that the review set out with the money that has been announced by government for the Pathfinder areas, and there are some national changes that will come into effect that will be helpful. Allowing a range of different practitioners to do work with children who are on a child-in-need plan will really help. We have councils at the moment who cannot do that. They are not allowed to have non-social workers hold those cases, for want of a better phrase.

Across the board, no, it is not the shift that we need to see for the workforce. The review set out a case for national pay scales linked to career progression, and a really good training and development programme that gives people a route to stay in practice, working with families and getting promotion and recognition through pay. There are some positive announcements in the Government's response, but my fear is that the infrastructure needed for that to be the case everywhere is not yet in place, although they have agreed to roll out a five-year early career programme for social workers, which is positive.

Q5 Baroness Campbell: I would like to explore your focus on supporting families to prevent children going into care, and I could not agree more with you when you say this must be a whole systems approach. What are the specific family-focused interventions that you think will work, and what can they go further on? What is missing? When I read it, I was thinking very much more about support from kinship, which is often talked about. If we support and enable kinship care to be empowered to help, that has an enormous effect and is very cost-effective.

I was also a bit disappointed to see the lack of whole systems training and attention to disabled children. It seems to me that disabled children often end up in care because the family could not get their house adapted properly. That has nothing to do with their ability to care for their children, but because the social care and the housing adaptation support was not working well and nobody was engaging in joined up thinking. It was all in silos.

What do you think about homing in on the family and the idea of supporting others, in other areas of local government and national government, to support that family care? Often it is nothing to do with the family's ability.

I have no formal interests to declare with regard to disabled children, but I am obviously very interested in disabled people and their access to services.

Anne Longfield: Thank you for that. We have talked a lot about the move towards supporting families, and early intervention would be one way of doing that, but kinship care has come into its own in these discussions in a way it has not before. I think it is a very positive thing. In other countries, the majority of care is delivered in this way, but it has not been the same in this country. Josh talked about how it can sometimes feel messy for those who are managing the system, but actually that is how families are. There is also an emphasis on and introduction of the notion of family group conferences, and the entitlement that families can have to be part of that solution. That is something that I have seen over the last two decades, and I have always been very impressed by how that can really help families to create some of their own solutions.

On the issue of older children, a lot of older children who come into care do not have the appropriate or high-quality placements that they need, some of which are in unregulated provision, so there is an urgent need to look at how you support families to keep some of those children at home. Certainly, as Police and Crime Commissioner, you have seen some of those, but often those delivering services do not have the confidence to do that. There are less high-risk ways of doing that, but, again, there needs to be backing from senior leadership, and those approaches. Love

Family group conferencing has a huge role to play, but I know that those who are keen to see much more kinship care are pleased with where it is going. It is not there yet, but it is certainly showing promise.

Josh MacAlister: Yes. I think people feel quite hopeful that we might be on the cusp of a big cultural change in how we support kinship carers, and, as Anne says, everything from more power sharing within the system with families, who might have a better answer than professionals to how to look after and raise their kin, to giving practitioners more confidence to put financial support behind answers that families might have. If a family can come up with a solution for their grandson or granddaughter that costs £20,000 a year for 10 years, that may make more sense than a care option that might cost £70,000 or more a year for much longer.

The system finds it very risky to think about spending that amount of money on a family rather a system, which goes back to the earlier points I was making. With kinship care, a whole raft of changes are needed, and some of that will require legislative time and changes to primary legislation. The clock is ticking. The Government's response sets out

some Pathfinders that will help us to test how to do it well, but, again, it will need to be underpinned by changes to the law.

Children with disabilities are a group who have been overlooked because of how Section 17 of the Children's Act 1989 has been turned into a way of assessing risk and gate-keeping rather than its original intention, which was a broad and general duty on local authorities to provide flexible support to families. One of the groups of families that are specifically mentioned are families where there is a child with a disability. The family help recommendations should start to make a big difference in reducing the stigma that parents of children with disabilities feel and some of the issues with eligibility and getting access to support and help, and in having that range of multidisciplinary practitioners, because unfortunately sometimes social workers do not have the knowledge to respond to the particular disabilities that children have. There is a piece on the early career framework, for example, including more detail on autism and teaching social workers more about autism. It requires solutions across a range of different fronts.

Q6 Lord Bach: Our Committee has a comparatively limited amount of time to review the Government's implementation strategy and make recommendations. Putting you on the spot, where would both of you suggest we focus our attention in the few weeks ahead, and where is there most room to manoeuvre? Where is there most likely to be some kind of response from government that would assist?

Josh MacAlister: First, on kinship care, the Government have said that they will publish a kinship strategy at the end of this year. So there is a very clear goal to work to there, putting some pressure and energy into further announcements on kinship care. I would recommend that. The Pathfinder programme is comprehensive, and I think it is the right direction. I would be interested to know how true the department is being to what is in its implementation plan once the rollout starts, and it will start very soon. Those are some of the fidelity questions about holding true to the spirit of it.

We have not talked about it much here, but I would look at some of the changes that are needed for children in care and care-experienced adults. When we are looking at a system and how to calm it down and refocus it on earlier support for families, it can sometimes be easy to forget the importance of that incredibly big and important group of young people who have been in care. There are some fantastic leaders amongst them. I live up in Cumbria, and the new Cumberland authority is launching next month. The lead member has care experience, the lead member for education was a head teacher, and the leader of the council is absolutely committed to this.

There are some interesting things happening in local government where services are taking their corporate parenting duties seriously. The Government have said that they want to extend corporate parenting duties to a wider range of public services. That might be an interesting area on which to focus some of your questions.

Anne Longfield: We cannot get away from scale and the amount of fuel that this has behind it. If there is a sign up to this and sympathy towards it, what is the plan, and what will come after these 15 areas? How is the scale going to meet that challenge?

Secondly, what is the development rollout going to look like from the centre? There must be a plan for that.

Thirdly, arising from the earlier question, how will this feel for the rest of the workforce and the rest of the area? How will this be translated into a change programme for every area in the country so that all children and all families, and indeed workers, will start to feel that this is a programme that has a positive future rather than a collection of different interventions, which are relatively short term?

Q7 The Lord Bishop of Southwell and Nottingham: Thank you, Chair, for permitting me to sit in on this Committee today. I should say first—I am not sure whether this is an interest to declare—that I have been a local authority foster carer for 10 years, both in London and now in Nottinghamshire. I welcome the integrated approach, and I think the new strategy is really energising, both at the level of foster care engagement and the feeling that this is beginning to address some of the issues, looking at how to move towards greater intervention at the earlier stage, before children come into care.

I would welcome hearing your views on the extent to which you think the strategy, as it is set out, will also address the issues for foster carers and social workers where placements are constantly disrupted by circumstance and situations for children in care, where they are not able to access emotional well-being therapy and CAMHS therapy early enough. As a consequence, the placements of course break down and they move to other placements that also break down. The consequent effect of that is to exacerbate their mental health issues.

Are you confident that the new strategy will be able to address that so that early intervention avoids children coming into care, but also that once they are in care we are able to give them the very best possible chance of addressing those issues?

Josh MacAlister: The review set out a way of reversing some of the pressures that are piling up, particularly in residential care. I mentioned the new Cumberland authority a moment ago. There are three children in that local authority who will cost the council £3 million a year.

The Chair: Gosh.

Josh MacAlister: So you can imagine that if you are running that local authority, you are thinking, 'What are we going to do to provide the support that we need for these children, because we cannot sustain that level of spending when we have all sorts of other budget pressures?' In the review, we tried to look at why we have so many pressures in residential care. One reason is that we do not have enough foster carers. One of the projections is that a third of children in residential care in

England should be in foster care. It says on their care plan that they should be in a foster home environment.

England has a much higher use of residential care than Scotland, for example. We need far more foster carers. If we did, we would be able to better match which children can live with which family in the fostering system, closer to home, close to school, without needing to change school, being able to live with their brother and sister if that is right for them—it will be for most children—and reducing the pressure on the fostering system by making sure that we make much better use of kinship care. All of this needs to be done on every front at once in order to achieve the change that is needed.

Sometimes, when we just zoom in on one bit of the system—the family courts, for example, where there are huge pressures—we can miss the bigger picture of how to get out of the rut that we are in. We need to have much more ambition about how we recruit foster carers and bring fantastic families and potential carers like you into that very precious thing that we have created called fostering. Last year, from a standing start, this country created a way of finding homes for 100,000 Ukrainian families. In the same year, we approved only 2,000 new foster carers. Something is wrong with how we are regulating foster care, how we are recruiting foster carers, how we are supporting foster carers, if that is the situation we have ended up with, and that requires some quite bold thinking.

Anne Longfield: Yes. When you have children who are experiencing trauma and that trauma is not being addressed, it translates into the situation they are in. Instability makes that worse. Inappropriate placements, again, make it worse. It all snowballs. At the heart of this is helping children to improve their well-being, and then you can start to change that cycle. We need to get to the point where we have more foster carers, and specialist foster carers, who are better supported so there is not this constant churn or instability of placements. You only get that if you do it in a very holistic way, and I would say, urgently, not just in 15 areas.

Josh MacAlister: For every child, the foundation of the healing process that care should provide are people who love you. We do not build a system that puts those people around children often enough. Foster carers would be the first to say that. I have spoken to many foster carers who feel like they have been pushed to the side of the system. They do not get updated on what is going on for the child. They do not know what the permanency plan is for the child. Actually, the foster carer often knows that kid best and could be an important part in that child's life for ever. The system struggles to know what to do with that. Some of this is really deep cultural stuff, but the answers are out there.

Anne Longfield: And it is doable.

Josh MacAlister: It is doable.

The Chair: The statistics are worrying but the mood is optimistic. Can I just ask one question for clarification? I had always thought of Pathfinders as finding a new path, being innovators and perhaps evaluating the work. What I got from what you have said is that you are pretty sure that there is enough evidence, proven good practice, for the Pathfinders to be successful. In your report, or in this field, where is the innovation going on, or are you saying—I know you are not saying it in this way—that there is so much good practice that we can call upon that it is a lesser thing to have to do at the moment? I picked up from your answer that the Pathfinders are not innovating, so you could roll them out nationally. We do not have to wait until we see how they go on. Have I got that right?

Josh MacAlister: It is a bit of both. The Pathfinders include some ingredients that have been rolled out already in parts of the English children's social care system and have good evidence. My day job at the moment at the What Works Centre is partly to find those out, and we have some really interesting reports coming out in the near future, including a big, randomised control trial of family group conferencing, which Anne mentioned.

The Pathfinders include some of these ingredients, but the way in which those ingredients are being brought together, and some of the national changes in inspection and statutory guidance that enables those ingredients to be brought together more fully, will be different. There is a case for evaluating this, but the review has argued that we have been through a period of experimentation since 2010. The department had its social care innovation programme and spent lots of money on trialling different approaches in fostering.

One of the things that we rolled out in England was Mockingbird, which has been evaluated and has some good evidence behind it. Now there is a case to bring that together, to change the national framework at a fundamental level and to set a direction. Within that, there will be more innovation to come. It will never stop, but it is moving the horizon of that innovation from where we have been, to look even further afield. One of the areas where we could be doing much more experimentation and innovation is in some of the specialist fostering recruitment and support that Anne mentioned. In the meantime, we have some models for supporting foster carers that we should really be rolling out.

The Chair: It is because the evidence is there.

Josh MacAlister: It is because we have got some of the evidence.

Anne Longfield: I think the core knowledge and evidence is there, and the authorities that are positively changing their practice are following a model that is now increasingly established. The knowledge is there, the practice is there. It needs to be consolidated, but it needs to be put into a vehicle for change, and that is the part that will make the difference.

The Chair: We need to get going on it. That brings our first session to a

conclusion. I want to thank both Anne Longfield and Josh MacAlister very much for their time and expertise. We could not have had a better start to our short inquiry. It has been fascinating. Thank you for what you have done to get the report and the body of knowledge to this state. We are very much depending on you to get this better, and we will do our bit as well as we can, so thank you very much.