

Public Services Committee

Corrected oral evidence: Implementation strategy for children's social care

Wednesday 22 March 2023

4.10 pm

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Members present: Baroness Morris of Yardley (The Chair); Lord Bach; Baroness Campbell of Surbiton; Lord Carter of Coles; Lord Porter of Spalding; Lord Prentis of Leeds; Lord Shipley; Lord Willis of Knaresborough.

Evidence Session No. 3

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Questions 12 - 17

Witnesses

I: Sally Burlington, Director of Policy (People), Local Government Association (LGA); John Pearce, Vice President, Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) and Corporate Director, Children and Young People, Durham County Council.

Examination of witnesses

Sally Burlington and John Pearce.

Q12 The Chair: Welcome to the third evidence session of the Public Services Committee's inquiry into the implementation of the children's social care strategy. To begin with, I ask our two witnesses to introduce themselves.

Sally Burlington: I am the director of policy for people issues at the Local Government Association.

John Pearce: Good afternoon. I am director of children's services in Durham County Council and vice-president of the Association of Directors of Children's Services.

The Chair: Thanks to both of you for joining us.

Lord Porter of Spalding: May I for the avoidance of any doubt declare my interest as the national lead Peer for the Conservative Group at the LGA? I used to be the chairman, and Sally used to work very closely with me.

Lord Shipley: I should add that I am a vice-president of the LGA.

Q13 **The Chair:** That is duly noted, but do feel you can still ask questions. I am grateful for that.

The first question is about the regional care co-operatives, which seem to be an interesting part of the proposals. We are very keen to learn what local authorities think about that. Perhaps you will comment on the impact that the introduction of the regional care co-operatives would have on the autonomy of local leaders and experts.

Sally Burlington: We understand that the proposal is that the regional care co-operatives would be council-owned bodies that take on the sufficiency duty for the area they cover. If we assume that is a region, the concerns we would have about autonomy would be in losing the ability for councils to make the direct decisions with the child at the very centre of each of those decisions because of a need to think on a more regional footprint.

That said, we can see some advantages for working at a regional level, and, indeed, some councils do so already and co-ordinate work across their patch in that way. Some of the more strategic elements of commissioning—forecasting and sufficiency planning—could be well managed at that level, but we are worried that there is a lot of detail that is yet to be resolved, and a lot of pressure being put on the expectation for what those regional care co-operatives might deliver. We would be worried about the voice of children being lost in those arrangements.

John Pearce: From an ADCS perspective, we have quite significant concerns about the proposal as it stands at the moment, not least because the plan is that the regional care co-operative would plan, commission and deliver all forms of care—residential, fostering and secure—and that would create some significant structural change. We are aware that there is a long history of structural change creating challenge, with the issues that may come with it in the short term. At a local authority level, it potentially removes some of the local autonomy in the placements for individual children.

There is a broader question around the sufficiency duty and how it would operate within this environment. We think that there is some scope for a broader vision of regional care co-operatives, and the ADCS has been working on what we believe would be a broader vision of a regional care co-operative where that was grounded in place but layered up so that the positive opportunities from working at a subregional and regional level could enhance what is done at a local area place rather than replace it.

For a local authority, it potentially brings in a bit of a democratic deficit in the local authority's responsibilities and how they would be delegated up to a regional body rather than being held at local level.

We think that there is a range of practical challenges. We do not necessarily think it would resolve some of the issues that it sets out to resolve in placement sufficiency, and it potentially creates some issues in

local accountability and local democratic control over decision-making that sits with us currently in terms of our corporate parenting responsibilities.

The Chair: Is that scepticism or lack of enthusiasm about the initiative quite widespread across local authorities, no matter their structure, size or position within a region?

John Pearce: I can talk on behalf of the directors of children's services from an ADCS perspective. Yes, that is a widespread view across our membership. We think that there is a range of options. We believe the review that was undertaken clearly set out the placement sufficiency issues, but the regional care co-operatives will not answer the challenges that are set out in that way. From our membership, there are very strong views that are aligned on that.

Sally Burlington: From the Local Government Association perspective, all the commentary we have made on this issue is clear to our cross-party process, so it definitely reflects the views of our political leadership on a cross-party basis.

The Chair: I will play devil's advocate a bit. My feeling is that you know that there is a problem but you do not think this is the solution. It makes me think about what efforts have been made to solve the problem before this came forward as a solution. What I am hearing a bit, but I may be wrong, is, 'We don't think this is the solution. Now, we'll try to solve the problem', whereas had you solved the problem beforehand, this solution would not have come forward. Ms Burlington, as long as you understood that, do you want to comment on it?

Sally Burlington: You are right that we are sceptical about this being the right solution. You are also right that there have been attempts to join up across regions to think about where we can drive economies of scale to procure more effectively on a larger basis. You are also right that that has not solved the core problem because we are still seeing a great shortage of placements and rapidly increasing prices that are very difficult to stop.

Some of the things that might help are if we could have appropriate long-term funding that would give us certainty to plan and work with providers on that basis.

Some of the other measures that are being developed in the strategy could be helpful but we do not see how they are going to address the placement challenge quickly enough. The increased allowance for foster carers is welcome and could help to increase the availability of foster carers, but the funding for it is not new; it is coming from within existing funding arrangements. Some of this comes back to funding.

The Chair: Mr Pearce, do you want to add anything?

John Pearce: I would add that there have been efforts to try to address this. In my region in the north-east, we have a regional procurement

framework that operates across residential and fostering. Unfortunately, the reality is that the sufficiency issue is so extensive that providers do not engage with those sorts of mechanisms. We would argue that this is not a commissioning or procurement issue; it is a broader system issue.

As I said, the ADCS has been doing quite a lot of work looking at what an alternative vision could be and how some of the barriers could be addressed. The Competition and Markets Authority report last year set out clearly some of the flaws in the way in which particularly residential care provision operates at the moment and the challenges that are created by that.

We would like to see a set of national conditions applied much the same as the work that is being done in workforce and in the agency consultation that sits alongside the implementation consultation, looking at each tier to see where the activity is best placed to sit—what needs to sit at a local level, what could be best done at a subregional and regional level, and what needs to come in through a national level. We think there is a range of things that could be done, and it needs a more subtle, wide-ranging response than the current proposals.

Lord Bach: May I ask what might be a controversial question around levelling up? Lord Shipley in particular has played a really big role in the Bill that is being gone through at great length in the Lords at the present time. All of us have been involved. Do you see any connection between the Government's local government reform plans—I think that is what you can call what is being proposed at the present time—and this particular scheme for this really sensitive and important area of policy, or are they both quite separate? Perhaps I could ask you first, Mr Pearce.

Lord Porter of Spalding: Now that we have widened the scope of where we are going, may I also declare I am a non-executive director of DLUHC and a council leader who will or will not be affected by any large-scale reorganisation?

The Chair: Duly noted, thank you. Who is going to answer that first?

Lord Bach: Can I ask Mr Pearce to do that first from his ADCS role?

John Pearce: In terms of some of the devolution elements and the work that is being done looking at things on a combined authority and bigger footprint, there may be some crossover there. That would not necessarily align, given the range of different types of combined authority that exist and the arrangements that are being put in place, but it takes us to a place where authorities are working closely together, and this may well be an area where that closer alignment and closer working may be beneficial.

Lord Bach: What is the LGA view?

Sally Burlington: I agree with John's comment. I do not think we have a formal position on this question, but I can take that away. There are some potential links between any workforce development and the

development of skills and training arrangements that interact with labour markets and might affect our skills shortages and the shortage of the workforce for this sector as well as for other sectors. I can see some potential advantages in thinking across those agendas, but we do not have a formal view on your absolute question, I am afraid.

Lord Willis of Knaresborough: May I say I am really quite disappointed with the responses we have had from both our witnesses so far this afternoon?

When you go back to the MacAlister review, you see a huge criticism of the way in which local authorities have argued the case for taking control of the childcare market and the way in which they have operated. The MacAlister review recommended the regional care co-operatives as a genuine response to that problem, yet the enthusiasm that you appear to show today—I am probably misreading you—seems to be incredibly muted. If this is not the answer, what is?

John Pearce: I am quite happy to start on that. We have been clear, and we were clear with our submissions to the review as it was taking place, that, ultimately, we do not believe that this is a commissioning problem, and, in effect, the solution that is being put forward is that by scaling up the commissioning activity from a local authority footprint to a regional footprint it will address and give us greater control over the market. The CMA report is very clear that that is not the issue.

With about 80% of the residential care provision currently sitting with independent providers, many of which are backed by private equity, the suggestion that in the north-east the 12 authorities coming together are going to have more influence over a substantial provider backed by a state investment fund than an individual local authority, and that that is going to change the dynamic, is flawed.

It is the systemic issues that sit beneath that are the problem. We are saying that we do not believe that this solution addresses the systemic problem. It may well be a part of the answer and it may well assist as part of the answer, but we have been very clear that there is a range of other things that can be done, and as ADCS we have put those things forward and would be happy to share our documentation with the committee, which we have shared with the Department for Education, setting out a broad range of interventions that are going to address this issue. The lack of enthusiasm is that we do not believe it is going to work, certainly not in isolation.

Lord Willis of Knaresborough: We are now having a proper conversation. We would very much like you, if the Chair agrees, to let us have those alternatives to what is being proposed, because this looks like a proposal that has some gravitas at the moment and some movement. Why have you not done things before as a group of authorities? Why have you not come together and provided some of this control of care rather than waiting for the private sector to come in and try to make money out of it?

The Chair: Do you want to speak on that, Ms Burlington?

Sally Burlington: John may have direct experience of making those efforts. There have been quite a lot of attempts to try to commission on a wider footprint and to exert collective power over these problems. It is a wicked problem.

Going back to your initial disappointment, if I may, there is a great deal that we welcome—

Lord Willis of Knaresborough: I am always disappointed, by the way.

Sally Burlington: We welcome a lot of what is in the MacAlister review and what is in the Government's strategy. This is one element that will take place on a pilot basis in two areas to address one of the very big sets of problems. We will, of course, support those pilot arrangements and do our very best to try to draw out the learning from them. You are right to be a little bit doubtful that structural change is necessarily going to solve the problem. We think it is deeper rooted than that.

Q14 **Baroness Campbell of Surbiton:** I am quite interested in your staff—your workforce. You work directly with children and families. How far do you think the Government's strategy will improve the experiences of your staff, children and families who daily need a great deal of support and services? Do you think the strategy is enough to improve that experience? As you rightly said, the workforce is leaving in droves and feels burnt out. There needs to be something to inspire them and to help them to improve that relationship?

The Chair: Who is going first? Ms Burlington.

Sally Burlington: I can, although John may have more to say than me on this.

There are some elements of the strategy that we think could have a really helpful impact. The work to improve case management systems and to identify and address unnecessary workload drivers and another set of initiatives set out in the strategy will be really helpful.

We are worried that it does not go far enough to address the shortage of social workers and other parts of the public sector workforce. More than eight in 10 councils currently say they are struggling to recruit children's social workers, and we are not sure how the strategy is going to address that fundamental problem.

There is a wider question about the services that need to be available for people working directly with children and families to refer to. If staff are able to find the right support for children and families and refer in, that will be a positive benefit for those staff as well as for the families. If there is a shortage of those support services in the NHS or elsewhere, that could be challenging. Ideally, we would like the strategy to go further to develop a fundamental, long-term workforce strategy in this area.

Baroness Campbell of Surbiton: Does that include the services that are provided by the voluntary sector and the not-for-profit sector? We have heard quite a great deal this morning from that sector, which said that they are in a great position to provide a lot of services that local authority social workers are simply too busy to provide. What is that relationship like, and does the strategy actually help you to improve those relationships and work together?

The Chair: Do you want to add anything before we go to Mr Pearce for his initial answer?

Sally Burlington: I would completely agree that the voluntary and community sector has a huge amount to offer in this space. It is dependent on the funding being available to buy those services. One of the things we are concerned about is that there is not very much funding in the strategy to support that end of things and it will be limited to pilot areas, so we would like it to go further on that as well.

John Pearce: We really welcome the workforce elements. Going back to the previous conversation, the regional care co-operatives are probably the only area of the strategy that we have any significant concerns with.

There is a range of things in there. As I said previously, we very much welcome the separate consultation that sits alongside the implementation strategy looking particularly at the agency workforce, which we think will have a substantial impact on the stability of the permanent workforce and will try to address some of the short-term issues.

There is also a range of workforce-related proposals. The move towards rebalancing family help provision—this goes partly to the question about the voluntary and community sector—gives a real opportunity to have a much greater breadth and mix in our workforce. That helps in social work sufficiency and by making sure that families have access to the right types of support with a range of workforce who are able to do that across the full family help and child-in-need continuum. There are some really strong opportunities in there.

Some local authority areas have already started to test what that looks like, under the supervision of social workers, but there is scope within the strategy to go much further, and we think that is a real positive.

Similarly, there are already elements of the early-career framework proposals for social work in high-performing authorities. There is quite a lot to do in the detail as that moves into implementation and we would need to look at the length of the early-career framework, but the principle of providing greater support to the workforce to sustain and ensure that we improve our retention, we think, is a really positive step forward.

There are some questions about the expert child protection practitioner and how that is going to play out, but, again, we would want to work with government on the detail as that moves into the next phase.

That broader rebalancing and moving towards a broader suite of family help provision for children and young people that gets help to them at an earlier stage gives much greater opportunities in the workforce for us to have that skill mix and to bring a broader range in.

That also brings into question some elements around multiagency working and interdisciplinary working and how we bring our partner agencies—health, police and schools—into that discussion as part of that broader workforce, and that is work to be done as we move into the next phase.

The Chair: Is there enough to influence the staff in the short term? Some of the things you mentioned—changing jobs, the skills and the career framework—are not going to be there within the next 12 months, yet you have a crisis in recruitment now. Is there anything in the strategy that makes you think, ‘There is some medium-term good stuff for our staff and there are also some short-term things that would give us immediate results’?

John Pearce: In terms of the immediate results, the stand-alone consultation on workforce that sits with the implementation strategy consultation is very much about some of those quick wins and trying to stabilise the workforce in the short term.

We would also see that broader case mix and working with a broader range of staff in the Section 17 child-in-need space as something that could be accelerated through the consultation in the late spring/summer on working together and through provisions on working together because that could be picked up with changes to the statutory guidance.

There is an opportunity in the relatively short term to start to work towards that. There are much longer-term sufficiency challenges across the workforce, which Sally referred to, that are going to take longer to sort out, but we are confident that there are some potential short-term gains within the proposals.

Q15 Lord Willis of Knaresborough: Another of the areas that I certainly felt very enthusiastic about was the family help models that have come through to support children and families. Ms Burlington, what are the practical challenges and opportunities of implementing family help models?

Sally Burlington: We are really pleased that these pilots are a really good opportunity to build on a lot of good work that is going on already. We already have a lot of learning about what works and lots of good practice to draw on.

We think it is a good chance to test what works in different areas, so we would like to see the pilots looking at different types of local authority, comparing urban and rural to tier areas, different levels of deprivation and so on.

We would also like them to take account of the fact that there are lots of different initiatives taking place at the moment and lots of pilots that are being initiated at the same time, not just within this strategy but also for SEN and disability and in other areas of government. We would like them to look at the impact of different initiatives taking place in the same areas and to think about the cumulative impacts and how we can best co-ordinate that work.

The interaction with family hubs is one of the questions that we need to test and build on.

There is a big question about how we will draw on the workforce from a range of areas in building a model. Some of the areas that we need to draw on such as health visiting are already very overstretched and we are struggling to recruit health visitors. We have recently called for a strategy to increase the number of health visitors as they are such important professionals in this space. We have seen a 40% fall in numbers since 2015.

There is an interaction with the different challenges that we are facing in other parts of the sector that support children, which we will need to take account of.

More generally, we have faced such significant reductions in funding in this area over time that there is a need to rebuild the capacity and capability to provide that support, and that will be a challenge particularly in the non-pilot areas but also in the pilot areas.

John Pearce: We really welcome the proposals on family help. The move to rebalancing the system back towards supporting families at the earliest point before issues and challenges start to escalate is really welcome and we have long wanted to move towards that.

The challenge has always been resourcing, for quite a considerable time, and the review recognised that and identified quite significant sums of funding that would be required to double-run the system while we rebalance it from most of the activity and spend being at the statutory end back down into family help.

We really welcome the proposals. We believe it has to be a multiagency endeavour, and it is about that broad locality focus on the multiagency endeavour.

There are some practical complications in the interface. Where the current interface is between early help and social care into Section 17 and child in need, we have the front door, we have a threshold, we have set criteria that sit there, and we need to work out how that is going to work within this model. There is a risk that we just shunt that further up the system and end up with a barrier between family help and child protection.

Actually, we need to recognise that there is a continuum of need. Children's needs are fluid and they will move up and down that system.

We want to focus our activity on building and sustaining relationships if we are going to make real change, so we need a model that is fluid enough to work with that, and, at the top end of the system, to look at the interface into the child protection system and how it is going to work and sit alongside the proposals in terms of expert child protection practitioners and how they are going to operate.

The pathfinders provide a really good opportunity to do that. I agree totally with Sally that they need to be a real mix in terms of geography, types of local authorities and interface with other pathfinders' activity.

They also need to be embedded within some of the regional networks so that we have really strong, long-standing regional improvements and innovation alliances. We would like to see those models and pathfinders testing within regions and then being able to cascade that within those regions so that we take all authorities along with us and it is not just individual authorities that happen to be pathfinders that are testing out these models.

There is a lot of really positive stuff in there. There is some practical implementation stuff and some issues that we are going to need to work through as part of the pathfinder process to get to that, but the key issue for me—and Sally referenced this—is going to be resourcing.

Lord Willis of Knaresborough: You mentioned two key things, going back to the previous question. Workforce and resources are a common thread throughout many of the responses.

You also talked about spreading good practice. We know that there is going to be a small number of models trialled. You have raised the question of how we actually spread the good practice that comes out of those trials elsewhere. During my time in local government, we were notoriously bad at spreading good practice. How is that going to change? How are we going to change and get a good rollout of excellent things if we take advantage of the huge resources that the Government are going to give you and the new workforce?

John Pearce: That is an area where certainly in children's services there has been significant progress in recent years. If you look at the innovation programmes that have been DfE-funded and a number of the relationship-based models that have been rolled out as a part of that and shared, you see that the sector-led improvement models that have been developed on regional footprints have certainly helped that.

The government response to the implementation strategy referenced the improvements across children's social care that have been supported through quite a lot of that working.

We have become much better at understanding what works and sharing and implementing that, and we would want very much to accelerate and do this. There is a real commitment and ambition across our members to

take this forward. We have all been very much wanting to get our teeth into the proposals around family help and the rebalancing of the system.

What you will see is a real commitment to sharing practice as it starts to evolve through the pathfinders. If we can do that through the existing regional networks, that gives us good infrastructure to enable it to happen effectively.

Lord Willis of Knaresborough: Now that we are on a really positive note, would you say a little bit about the corporate parenting duties? We found that quite an exciting and interesting idea that came out of the MacAlister review, and indeed there seems to be support for it as well as a fair bit of criticism of it. How far would extending corporate parenting duties to wider public services support children and families, and what are the potential costs and benefits of doing that?

John Pearce: We have seen the real benefits of corporate parenting at a local authority level and the opportunity that has brought to expand what we do into areas that traditionally might not have had a focus on children in care and children in social care. We would very much support the proposals to allow it to go into the broader public sector. You can see at a place-based level how the opportunities may arise. There are lots of really good examples out there in, for example, care leaver apprenticeships across the public sector.

There is lots of activity already happening that could be harnessed. By expanding the corporate parenting responsibility across public sector organisations, you formalise it in a way that really starts to open up doors and enables us to do things that potentially are not happening at the moment and to learn from some of the best practice that already exists within local authorities. We think that that would definitely provide an opportunity if it is expanded.

Lord Willis of Knaresborough: Would you agree, Sally?

Sally Burlington: Yes, I would. There are other things in the strategy that help to broaden out that sense of shared endeavour to other public services for looked-after children, which we would really support because it is so difficult to try to get the right support to children when there are shortages in other areas or there is a really long waiting list for mental health support or whatever. I share John's views.

I also agree with him on sharing best practice. We can do lots of that. We have really well-developed networks now. We have new tools—we call it the knowledge hub—and ways of sharing knowledge and understanding and learning together jointly online.

The LGA publishes weekly bulletins. We have lots of networks. We run webinars. We run peer review arrangements. There are all kinds of ways in which we can share best practice and joint learning as we go. It is not just about telling people what to do, is it? It is about building shared

understanding. There is so much enthusiasm for early help and family help that everybody will want to be talking about this and working on it.

Lord Prentis of Leeds: Before I ask my question on the national framework and dashboard, a previous witness giving evidence said that there is a haemorrhaging of social workers, and, Sally, you said that one of the problems was the shortage of social workers. I would have thought that was core to any improvement we intend to make.

What is being put in place to rectify that and get social workers back and being part of the initiative that both John and you, Sally, are saying will be undertaken? To me, they are the core of what is being put forward.

I have to declare an interest. I was general secretary of UNISON for 20 years, until a few months ago. For other people's benefit, I should say that we represent all social care workers.

Sally Burlington: John set out a number of the initiatives in the strategy that we think will be helpful. We think that there are additional things that we can do. Within the LGA, we are having a discussion about what councils most need to do to support this work, what the strategy will deliver, what else we might need national government to do and what else we might do at a regional level, because of the complexity of the labour markets in this area and the different pulls on people resulting from higher wage growth in other areas and so on. It is a very complex field.

We would really like, as I said, the strategy to go a bit further to look at a holistic 10-year workforce strategy for children's services. We have also in the past asked for help for things such as admin support for social workers and capacity support to support supervision and training.

The LGA has also in the past run a 'return to social work' programme that costs about £2,500 per social worker brought back into the workforce, and we would like to do more of that. It is a really significant problem, as you say. I would agree with your analysis.

John Pearce: Yes, I agree totally. We are absolutely dependent on the quality of our social workers to make many of these proposals work. In addition to what has already been said, we would very much welcome the opportunity for national recruitment campaigns and efforts to try to improve the profile of social workers.

Our social workers do an extremely complex job in very difficult circumstances, and they make a massive difference to children's lives on a daily basis, but when you look at the media coverage or the profile of social workers it tends to only be when things have gone wrong. Actually, we very much need to focus on the positive elements of social work and some of the amazing stuff that they do, and I very much want us to move in that direction.

We have a lot of focus on recruitment. We do not necessarily focus as much on retention, and that is very much about how we create the right

environment and get the support mechanisms in place for our social workers. There are some really good examples around the country of how that is working effectively. There is a case for trying to share best practice in those areas.

Improving the public profile of social workers and what they do and national attempts around recruitment campaigns would be very welcome as well.

Q16 Lord Prentis of Leeds: How will the introduction of the national framework and dashboard for children's social care affect the delivery of children's services? There is a related question, which I may as well ask now: what measures and targets should the framework include?

Sally Burlington: We think the national framework is really helpful. It sets a clear national direction for the system, which we have not had before, and that is helpful in trying to avoid different parts of the public sector and parts of the Government pulling in different directions in a way that is hard to manage locally. The fact that it applies to partner organisations as well as councils is really welcome. We would like to see government departments supporting it as well. Overall, we think the framework is very helpful.

At the LGA, we are always quite nervous about dashboards because it is very easy to prioritise activity that can be measured rather than the activity that is most important. We are very glad that there is an ongoing consultation on how to get this right and a focus on long-term outcome measures, because the closer we can measure the things that really matter to children and families the less likely we are to be driving activity that hits a target but does the wrong thing for other reasons.

There are some potential measures around process where you do not know whether going up is good or bad, and that is a difficult thing to have in a dashboard because you cannot tell whether you are getting better or worse on an objective measure. You want to know those things for management purposes, but they do not necessarily tell you whether things are improving.

The other thing that we are concerned about getting right in the dashboard is that there are a lot of these initiatives in government at the moment. We have the introduction of Oflog for local government, and it is helpful that this dashboard will seek to align with that initiative, but nevertheless these are two new initiatives.

There are also new measurements coming forward for SEND, and other parts of government are also introducing new forms of measurement. While transparency can be really helpful, having too many data items to prioritise makes it much harder to work out what the right thing to do is locally, and we would always argue that you need space for local leaders to make the right decisions and prioritisation using their professional judgments.

John Pearce: I agree absolutely with all of that. Yes, it is really good to have the framework clearly set out at a national level. For those of us who have been around for quite a long time, if I think back to the late 1990s and Quality Protects, this is something that has existed and we have operated within this framework for children's services in the past.

Moving on to the dashboard, the challenge, as Sally set out, has always been about identifying how you measure outcomes—history tells us it is really difficult to get the right measures around that—and how it is going to be used, because, ultimately, when you end up with dashboards the temptation to move them into league tables and to use them potentially out of context can be there.

Yes, I am supportive of the direction of travel. It is a direction that we have worked with constructively in the past, but the devil will be in the detail and how we manage to get those indicators that give a really good picture of the impact that we are having and the outcomes that we are making without creating a significant industry around collecting that information. There are risks there. We know that that is exceptionally challenging from our experience.

The Chair: Do you sense that there will be space for local indicators? Clearly, it is a national framework, so some of the measures and targets will be national, and that is right, but my experience of other areas that are very measure-driven is that what gets squeezed out is any opportunity for local organisations to put in local measurements that apply to them. Is it worth pursuing at this point to have that discussion before the measurements are set, or is it already incorporated into the plans? Do either of you know?

John Pearce: I can pick that up a little bit. We already have significant stats and measures. The ADCS has agreed with the Department for Education a set of 18 measures, which has just gone up to 24, that are provided on a quarterly basis by all local authorities. There is a foundation there, and that information is done quarterly.

At a local level, we all have systems and performance measures. As a director of children's services, it is a key part of how I understand what is going on across my services and the impact that my services are having. We all have that information at a local level. It is about how we use it in a manageable way while making sure that we have that local context, because local context is really critical. What is relevant and important in Durham might not be relevant and important in another part of the country.

The Chair: That is exactly the point I was trying to stress. I absolutely know that you have the local measurements, but sometimes the Government do not take any notice of them because they do not own them; you own them. It would be good if you decided what needs to be measured locally, and if those criteria were valued just as much as the ones that the Government set.

Lord Prentis of Leeds: Who will have ownership of the dashboard? Will it be the LGA or central government departments?

Sally Burlington: I imagine it will be the DfE.

The Chair: That is exactly the point of this discussion.

Lord Prentis of Leeds: They use it for different purposes.

Sally Burlington: Exactly; that is our nervousness. John's worry about a league table is the experience that many councils have had where one of their data items happens to be at the bottom of a long list, and it can divert a lot of attention and energy away from things that matter.

The Chair: I would like to think that we learn from other areas where we have done targets and measurements because they bring so much to the system and there is so much to be gained by them. Equally, if we just replicate the faults of them, we are not making any progress, are we? Anyway, it is for discussion and debate.

Q17 **Lord Bach:** You have considered the Government's priorities in that response. The question was, 'Do you feel they have taken the right actions?', and you have, in your various answers, answered that question.

The second part of the question is: if you were king and queen, what areas or interventions would you have prioritised yourselves and on behalf of your organisations?

Sally Burlington: Thank you very much. The first one, I am afraid, is a bit predictable: it is funding and investment. Over the last decade or so, the core spending power of local authorities reduced by nearly a quarter between 2010 and 2023, and government funding fell more than that for councils, but councils prioritised children's social care. The political leadership of councils has said, 'This is really important', and it has been the only area of spending in local government that has gone up during that period. Spending on children's social care has gone up by 28% in the last 10 years, but in that difficult context we have also seen preventive spending fall within that slightly greater spending on children's services.

We are starting from a place where children's services have been prioritised, but it is still incredibly difficult, and the things that have had to be cut most have been the preventive, early intervention, early help-type support.

Our priority would have been to get the investment right that the review recommended and to put that in place quickly, because there is a lot of what we know works already. We do not, in our view, need to test everything that we are going to test. There is a really strong basis on which we could do some investment straightaway.

We are really worried about what happens to the areas that are not in the pilot areas and will not receive additional investment.

Our second priority would have been on placements, which we have discussed quite a lot today.

Our third priority would be to set out a cross-government strategy for children that had the buy-in and support of government departments, including those that look after the NHS, police and other agencies, because getting this right is so dependent on all those multiagency bodies playing their part at the local level. There are a lot of great things in the review and the strategy that help with that, but we would have liked to be more ambitious.

John Pearce: I absolutely agree with all that. I will not repeat them at all.

The two additional areas that we have touched on would be the correlation with child poverty. As a director in the north-east, we produced a report that was part of the submission to the original plan, which looked at the link between poverty and the disproportionate access of children and young people to children's social care, and particularly for children in care where the correlation is very strong.

That is described in the report and the strategy but not addressed, and it fits very well with Sally's point about a cross-government plan for children and how some of those underlying issues can be addressed so that we are not just putting a sticking plaster on the consequences of some of those societal challenges but are looking at some of the underlying issues.

The other area that I think is quite light is around regulation and the role of Ofsted and proportionality of inspection, which has certainly grown significantly in my time as a senior leader in children's services, and the impact that that has on the system, and, from our perspective particularly, what that means in terms of impact and outcomes for children. We are all comfortable as directors of children's services with accountability and inspection. It is part of our daily role. However, we are concerned when that starts to have a potentially negative impact on the outcomes of children, and we think that there needs to be some element of the review that is looking at that relationship.

The Chair: The session has been really helpful. It has given us a lot to think about. You have drawn out some issues that we have not addressed yet. We will be able to reflect on those in future meetings. We are very grateful for both your time and your expertise.