



## Public Services Committee

### Oral evidence: The role of public services in addressing child vulnerability

Wednesday 23 June 2021

4 pm

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Members present: Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top (The Chair); Lord Bichard; Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth; Lord Davies of Gower; Lord Filkin; Lord Hogan-Howe; Lord Hunt of Kings Heath; Baroness Pitkeathley; Baroness Tyler of Enfield; Baroness Wyld; Lord Young of Cookham.

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Questions 99- 112

### Witnesses

**I:** Josh MacAlister, Chair, Independent Review of Children's Social Care; Simon Parker, Director for Transformation and Policy Capability, Policy Lab, Department for Education.

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## Examination of witnesses

Josh MacAlister and Simon Parker.

**The Chair:** Welcome to the second half of our session today. We are very pleased to be able to welcome Josh MacAlister, chair of the independent review of children's social care, and Simon Parker, the director for transformation and policy capability at Policy Lab in the Department for Education. Welcome to both of you. The first question in this session comes from Lord Hogan-Howe.

Q99 **Lord Hogan-Howe:** Thank you, Chair. Good afternoon to both of the participants. I remind them that if they would introduce themselves when they first answer it is helpful for members of the public who might be watching the committee.

The first question is aimed particularly at Josh MacAlister. In *The Case for Change*, you set out how the children's social care system is weighted against early intervention and family support, which has resulted in a greater number of children entering the care system and an increase in expenditure on statutory services. For you, what are the most significant barriers at central and local government levels to the provision of adequate early intervention support for families?

**Josh MacAlister:** Thank you, Bernard and Hilary, and thank you for the invitation to speak to you today.

We published *The Case for Change* document last week, so this is one of the first opportunities to explore it in more detail with people. The thinking behind publishing something so soon in the review, because I am only three months into the review process, was to set out some of the issues and the scale of some of the challenges, and pose a number of questions that open up discussion about how we might go forward and create recommendations for the review's conclusion, which is due in spring 2022. I want, at the beginning of this session, to give the heavy caveat that we are nowhere near the point of coming up with recommendations.

The work we have done so far has involved hundreds of conversations with people who have lived experience of children's social care, as parents, kinship carers or children and young people themselves, as well as gathering a huge amount of evidence. One of the big themes that we picked out from that is the shift in children's social care over time to become increasingly focused on assessing and investigating families. Alongside that has come a shift away from practical and meaningful help for families.

One of the barriers in the way of rebalancing that, in a sense, is that the dynamic of the shift from spending on non-statutory family help services, which has decreased by about 35% since 2012-13—a significant reduction—has come at the same time as there has been increasing spend on statutory, high-need crisis intervention, about 26% over the

same period. Within the amount of money that children's social care spends, there has been a significant shift towards crisis intervention.

Once a local authority is in that loop or spiral, it becomes increasingly difficult to get out of it, because the more that money is spent on crisis intervention, the harder it is for a local authority to put resources into the help that might mean families can stay together safely and that children can get the support they need in their family network. The dynamic itself is a barrier. Once local authorities get into that loop, it becomes increasingly difficult for them to escape it.

The second thing is about wider services that might not be seen as core children's social care work but have a significant knock-on effect for the adults who are parents. The work that has been done by Dame Carol Black in the independent drugs review highlights the significant reduction in spending, for example, on substance misuse treatment. There has been a fall of about 14% since 2014-15, with some local authorities actually reducing that spend by about 40%.

If a parent is struggling with an addiction, among a whole load of other pressures, I think lots of people can imagine how difficult that would be. Getting help for the substance misuse issue and connecting that service to the parent, in a way that they will access and make use of, has become increasingly challenging. Instead, services have ended up doing more assessing, investigating and holding parents to account in a system where support is not there to help them to change.

In a way, that links to another of the barriers, which is the experience for parents who often want stigma-free or low stigma help—very practical help—from the system. Lots of parents told me in the review work that we have done so far that they have to battle to get access to help, and that when it comes, if it comes, it is too late in the day, often when the family has tipped into a more acute crisis situation. That is a reflection of the fact that energy in the system is disproportionately spent on assessing and investigating families rather than on providing support.

In the document that we published last week, we highlight the rising number of what are called Section 47 investigations. It is a rise of about 129% over the last 10 years, which is very significant. There is an increase in the number of initial child protection conferences of 80%. You see the system becoming more adversarial with parents, which is worrying.

A final barrier is the enormous variation across the country at the moment. This is just one example. The amount of money spent on support for parents and children who are on a child in need plan varies from about £500 per child to about £5,000 per child. When you have that degree of variation in the spending, and therefore the services and help that are being offered, it makes it incredibly difficult to get a sense of what is going on out there, what help is being offered and what we think, as a country, our response and obligation should be towards helping

families in those circumstances. Those are just a few of the barriers that we have in this space.

Q100 **Lord Hogan-Howe:** That was very helpful. In fact, you managed to cover one of my other questions, so that is particularly helpful.

You also remarked in your report that certain groups of children, of white working-class, Caribbean and mixed backgrounds, seem to be at higher risk of going into care, while British Asians are underrepresented. Do you know why that is? Is it because they are less vulnerable, or because their vulnerability is not being noticed?

**Josh MacAlister:** Racial disparity in children's social care is significantly underresearched. There has been some great work by some academics recently who have started to open up some of the findings. Where research, data and evidence are available, they show significant variation in the intervention of the state with families from different ethnic-minority backgrounds.

Layering on top of that, we can see an intersection between race and, for example, income and other factors. An example in the report that we published is from the work of Professor Paul Bywaters and some of his colleagues. Black Caribbean children from some mixed ethnic groups are overrepresented in care, and children of south Asian heritage are underrepresented, which is the point you made. Even greater inequalities are apparent when comparing rates at different levels of deprivation. Rates of black African children in care outnumbered white British children by four to one in low deprivation neighbourhoods, but white British children in care rates outnumbered black African rates by nearly three to one in high deprivation neighbourhoods. It is a really complex picture. Looking at rates alone does not give the full story when we factor in other features such as income. It gets very complex.

One thing I would say in direct response to your question is that there are a number of possible hypotheses for why that variation exists. It may be that services are not reaching those communities as effectively as they might reach others. It may also be the case, and we should come at this with real curiosity, that some communities are more effective at offering wider community and family help in raising children. The answer to your question is that I do not know, but I think we need to go into it with our minds very open.

**Lord Hogan-Howe:** The data suggests that this is something to be further researched to try to find a cause, rather than to try to explain it at this stage.

**Josh MacAlister:** Absolutely.

Q101 **Lord Hogan-Howe:** One thing that came out of your research that particularly interested me was looking at young people or children who are either in county lines or in some other way at risk of getting involved in criminality. Despite the fact that they are apparently at a higher level of vulnerability, they seem to get a lower level of attention from the

system.

Could you say something about that? If the system was to notice them more, which part of the system needs to do more, and perhaps what?

**Josh MacAlister:** That theme around teenagers in particular was significant in the work that we have done so far. What often see parents on the same page as police officers and social workers in saying, "Look, we are really worried about these young people". It is often parents saying that about their own children.

Alan Wood made the point a short while ago that incredibly sophisticated exploiters are grooming children and bringing them into county lines and other activities. Our approach was not built for responding to that level of exploitation in the community. Social workers and the approaches they have are more often used to support children with their families and what is going on inside the home. There are lots of examples where services have tried to fill the gap between the response of the police and the response of children's social care. There is a zone between the two of them when it comes to adolescents who are facing these risks in the community. Services have tried to fill the gap with an often really complicated set of multiagency meetings, information-sharing arrangements, specialist teams and task forces. We see this area to area to area.

I have seen some of it myself, where there are three, four or five sets of meetings about the same teenagers, with people sharing information and trying to fill in the gaps. What is missing is clear accountability. Who is the professional responsible for keeping this teenager safe and taking to task those who are abusing or exploiting these young people? It is a major issue that we have to address.

Going back to the end of your earlier discussion, it is really about having an approach that looks at the problem first and then builds a response, rather than looking at the services we have and then trying to cobble them together in a slightly different way. We need something that will more firmly address this massive issue, where there are significant rises of teenagers, particularly 16 and 17 year-olds, who are on child protection plans at that late stage and coming into care. It has been rising over the last 10 years.

**Lord Hogan-Howe:** Thank you for that. It chimes with my own experience, not only on the accountability point but knowing what works in intervention. I think Lord Davies might want to ask a question.

Q102 **Lord Davies of Gower:** Josh, in answer to one of the questions that Lord Hogan-Howe put to you earlier, would you like to comment on the House of Commons Education Committee report, which accused the Government of a lack of targeted support for disadvantaged white pupils? Have you any comments to make on that?

**Josh MacAlister:** I have not been looking specifically at education. The care review has been focused very much on the big question that we are

asking, which is how we guarantee better safety, stability and love for children growing up in their family and, where that is not possible, how care can provide the same foundations.

The approach that we are taking, as I hope you can see in the document we have produced, starts with the evidence and data and goes from there. There is a temptation to bring some hyperbole to this. I would be keen to avoid doing the same.

**The Chair:** Thank you. It is time we moved on. Our next questioner is Lord Hunt.

Q103 **Lord Hunt of Kings Heath:** Thank you, Chair. Simon Parker, welcome to the Select Committee. You have just heard Josh MacAlister talk about some of the barriers, as he described them, to early intervention and support. Do you agree with his analysis? In your role of encouraging transformation and innovation, how do you think such barriers can be overcome?

**Simon Parker:** Perhaps I should give a quick introduction because I think a lot of people might not know what my job actually means. I do transformation work with the Department for Education, but possibly more relevant for this appearance I work with Policy Lab, which is a team of about 20 people from a very wide variety of different backgrounds who support policy teams in government to innovate. That means I am not a policy expert in this area. I will leave Josh to handle the policy and the independent review bit. I am probably here because I very much take the view that co-design and co-production are critical to how we solve these sorts of problems. A huge part of what Policy Lab has rather successfully done within government is to embed those sorts of user-centred techniques.

One thing we are doing with Josh and his team is to bring real lived experience into the review. We are doing that by video ethnography. Essentially, we spend a lot of time talking to about 15 participants, families with children who are pre-care or on the edge of care. What we want to do, in a very in-depth, rigorous way, is bring in evidence and lived experience about their experience of using social care services and the extent to which those social care services have helped to strengthen their family and keep children out of care.

That is a very visible example of the work that we do. That sort of approach, bringing in that kind of knowledge and experience as evidence, as well as using those voices to shape independent reviews, the like of which Josh is doing, is incredibly valuable.

**Lord Hunt of Kings Heath:** Thank you. Could you expand on that? Clearly, using real lived experience to influence the shape of future services makes eminent sense. How far have you got? Can you give the committee examples of where you have been able to translate that into practice in the field?

**Simon Parker:** Yes, I certainly can. I think you have already heard from Andrea Cooper, who was the former director of Policy Lab, about the work they did after Grenfell, which engaged people who lived in social housing, and particularly surfaced the issue of stigma. Lots of people really liked their social housing but felt that they were being stigmatised by wider society for where they lived. That became an important part of the policy debate.

If you look at the variety of the work that Lab has done, bringing this kind of user experience into policy-making, we have some great examples. At the moment, I am looking at the example of the Windrush lessons learned review, where the team worked very closely with individuals who had been affected and made films. That was both a way to inform policy post Windrush and provide a very clear way to show that government was listening to, and taking seriously, the voices of people who had been engaged.

We have done things with our ageing population and used speculative design to help older people to think about their own future. We did lots of sessions where people were turning up wanting to talk about present issues. That was not very helpful for the work we were doing, so we used speculative design, and produced documents and materials to help them to imagine the future. That really helped to encourage a different conversation.

Q104 **Lord Hunt of Kings Heath:** Josh, can I bring you in? You gave us a very cogent analysis of some of the real challenges that are faced in the field. You have heard from Simon about the use to which their approach to lived experience can be put. What is your view of that? How could we take that and translate it into everyday practice, and impact on some of the barriers you have talked about?

**Josh MacAlister:** Yes, absolutely. Can I flag with Claire that I think Parliament TV might have lost audio? I have a few colleagues contacting me saying that people cannot hear any more, but I will carry on.

**Lord Hunt of Kings Heath:** Thank you for that.

**Josh MacAlister:** Particularly when it comes to these services, and thinking about the families who are accessing them, it can be really hard for people to imagine how stigmatising some of this work can be. Imagine if you are a parent and a social worker knocks on the door because they have a concern. Think about where your mind would go: the neighbours who might be looking; the conversations you need to have with your kid when the social worker has left about why they needed to look at your bedroom and sit down and have a conversation privately with you; why background checks were run; and why they spoke to the schoolteacher.

Simultaneously, it can be really important for those responsible for running the services to have a very good understanding of how they interact with the public. Those interaction points can be so sensitive, and

they need to be done so skilfully. Simultaneously, the people who might end up with those services are those least likely to want to come forward and talk about things.

It makes having those conversations and involving people with lived experience in identifying the issues in future design all the more important. The work that we are, hopefully, going to do in the coming few weeks with Policy Lab will help to build on that. It will take an ethnographic approach with work alongside local authorities and community groups that have already done the very hard work of building trust and confidence with parents who have experience of children's social care and have been given support, so that they can come forward and talk about that experience.

It is one of those areas where it is hugely important that we do that because so many people in positions of power do not understand what is going on in that area. Getting people to come forward and share their experience in a way that is honest and supported is very difficult to do.

**Lord Hunt of Kings Heath:** Thank you, Josh. Can I pick up on one thing? Earlier, you talked about the development of more adversarial relationships. My assumption is that adopting the approach we have just heard about might lead to a lessening of that. Am I on the right lines?

**Josh MacAlister:** Absolutely. There are lots of examples of local authorities and social workers taking an approach that builds partnership with families. That was one of the original principles of the Children Act. We spoke to Lady Hale in the course of the review. One of the things that she highlighted was that the original intention of the Act was to establish, in the field of help for families, partnership between social workers and parents.

The vast majority of the time parents want the very best for their kids. Raising kids is tough. Raising kids in the circumstances where we find lots of families with children in social care is even more difficult. Things like family group conferencing can bring down some of the barriers. The social worker and the service take the position of facilitating a conversation and intervention alongside a family and their network, so that the state is doing less service delivery and more facilitation of bringing out the innate assets and strengths of the family in the community. That is a subtle but very significant shift in how these services will work in the future.

Q105 **Lord Hunt of Kings Heath:** Thank you. Simon, how far do we have to go in the take-up of your approach? What do we need to do to ensure that both central government and local authorities in general use the work that you have been doing?

**Simon Parker:** It is important to recognise how far we have come. Policy Lab was set up in 2014, and over seven years it has been hugely successful. This is a team that has no core funding. It has to get commissions from the rest of government. The fact that it has grown and



is still here, having done hundreds of projects, is real testament to the level of interest in the system. I think it has worked with about 7,000 civil servants over that period, which I find extraordinary.

One of the ways in which I think you can judge the success the team has had is by the extent to which the Policy Lab model has scaled across government. It is quite hard to define what is and is not a lab, but if we take a generous view, I think there are anything up to 10 or 12 units across government that now take up this sort of work.

All that said, there is still further to go. The very fact that we are still calling these things labs tells us that these techniques are still seen as experimental. It is right there in the name. We have to start pushing this stuff into the mainstream. User-centred thinking is no longer untried and untested. It is ready to go into the core of policy-making skills. I think there is still a push to go.

One of the challenges is that we tend to train civil servants to think that evidence is a thing that comes in spreadsheets with charts. Of course, analysis and data is an extraordinarily important form of evidence, but it sometimes leads civil servants to feel that narrative and lived experience is anecdotal and not quite as valuable.

Anyone who has been involved with user-centred design will know that it is an extraordinarily rigorous way of understanding lived experience. Definitely one of the things that I hope to do in my role is to create a much richer sense of the understanding that, yes, spreadsheets and data really matter, but so does that level of rigour in understanding of how people live their lives. We need to combine those two things and see them as a partnership of equals in the way that civil servants think.

**Lord Hunt of Kings Heath:** Thank you.

Q106 **Lord Bichard:** This is a question for Simon. Nice to see you again. I can ask you this question because I know you have experience both in local government and now in central government.

People working in local authorities on the front line, under the kind of pressure they are in this area and on this issue, are not necessarily going to take very kindly to someone from the department, as I seem to remember, saying, "Now go out and practise co-production and co-design", because it looks like it is a centrally imposed way of approaching a job. How are you ensuring that there is ownership within local government and within police and health on the front line for the kind of things you are doing, which I absolutely support?

**Simon Parker:** Thank you, Michael. Let us be clear, if I went back to Redbridge Council now and told my former colleagues in children's social work that they were not being user-centred, I can imagine the sorts of things they might say to me. In many ways, it is a core part of the way social workers operate.

I absolutely agree with you that central government should not try to tell people at the front line how to do their jobs in that sense. We should work alongside them to get better results. There is a long way to go on that agenda. One of the tools we have found most promising is systems mapping—effectively, getting all the people in the system in one room and starting to map how they relate to each other. What is powerful about that is that it provides you with a really good way to understand how different people see what is going on.

Central policymakers inherently see the world very differently from a front-line children's social worker. If we can have a conversation about what is getting in the way and where the barriers are, and hear quite a diverse range of perspectives in the same room, we can start to make a real difference. I have seen that work quite powerfully both in Policy Lab's work and in some of the transformation work we have done in DfE to try to co-design, with some of the front-line services, to understand what they need from us.

**The Chair:** Thank you very much. I will move now to Baroness Tyler.

Q107 **Baroness Tyler of Enfield:** I think this question is primarily for Josh. I looked with great interest at your *Case for Change* document when it came out last week. One of the big themes you identified was the fact that insufficient national co-ordination and strategic direction were translating into inconsistency and a very complicated picture locally.

Against that backdrop, you warned that policies for children in contact with social care, picking out two groups particularly—babies in a vulnerable family and older teenagers facing harm outside the home—mean that there is a real danger of those groups falling through the gaps at local level. Why are those the two groups that you deem to be at particular risk, and what happens to children when they fall through the gaps? Are there any examples of how local services have been integrating better to ensure that this does not happen? That is rather a lot. Sorry.

**Josh MacAlister:** No, that is fine. The group that we particularly highlight in regard to this issue are teenagers rather than babies. There are lots of issues, particularly for very young infants, in the system. Cathy Ashley spoke previously about the very significant issue around care proceedings for infants and how that has risen.

The issue around national lack of co-ordination filtering down into a lack of local co-ordination and accountability for particular groups applies most keenly to teenagers where, through very positive progress in society, we are identifying rising concern about exploitation in the community. There is a shift in some of our own understanding of what makes teenagers vulnerable in the community.

There is also a rise, for example, in some of the illegal drugs market, as Dame Carol Black has highlighted. That has meant a significant increase in the number of teenagers identified as being on a child protection plan. Child protection plans for 16 and 17 year-olds increased by 210%

between 2010 and 2020. It is hugely significant. For 16 and 17 year-olds in care, that number has risen by 39% over the same decade.

We have seen a ballooning of the child protection and care system involved with teenagers. As I explained to Bernard in answer to his question, the space between particularly the police and children's social care, but also to some extent health services, has been filled by very dedicated and very well-intentioned public servants and parents trying their best to pull together a response across agencies that addresses the complexity of these young people being, sometimes, both a victim and a perpetrator. They are being exploited by adults and roped into grooming and recruiting other young people who might be starting secondary school and at risk of being excluded from school, for example.

We lack super-clear accountability. Who is actually going out and dealing with this particular issue, where a young person is identified as being on a child protection plan, mainly for reasons of what is going on outside the home? An example that brought this to life for me was the serious case review for Jacob in Oxfordshire. He was 16 years old. It was a few years ago. His mum, Carla, has spoken very reflectively and hugely movingly about the parcel-passing back and forth between children's social care and the police. The police did not want to charge Jacob because they knew he was vulnerable. They were picking him up in different parts of the country. Social care was saying, "This is more of a police issue". The police were saying, "This is more of a social care issue". I think there were something like 26 police reports.

What we need is not to leave siloed services filling the gap, as at the moment. We need to do something more foundational to say, "These are complex challenges for teenagers. They are being exploited and we need to take some direct action to address it". It will be an area of focus for the review.

As an example of effective interventions, there is growing work on contextual safeguarding. Carlene Firmin at the University of Bedfordshire has done a huge amount of work on that. Some examples are being implemented effectively locally. Thames Valley Police has taken what it describes as a public health approach to responding to some of these issues. On the children's social care side, in Hertfordshire they have a family safeguarding model. It is less specifically about teenagers, but they are building multidisciplinary teams to do some of this work with families. It is moving away from the notion that agencies just co-ordinate and work together to having professionals from different disciplines in a team together to do the direct work, so that they can cut through the time and friction between services that might end up being wasted. Between those examples and others, we can probably start to see some potential recommendations for really getting a grip on the issue.

**Q108 Baroness Tyler of Enfield:** Thank you. I have a follow-up, if I may, on a specific example. Sir Alan, who we were talking to in the previous session, found in his recent review that schools often have quite poor working relationships with other agencies when it comes to exclusions.

Obviously, some excluded young people are the ones getting involved in all the criminal and harmful activity. Do you have any thoughts yet about what could be done at local level to improve integration between schools, social services and the police?

**Josh MacAlister:** I recognise what Alan describes in his report. We have heard similar themes in the work that we have done so far. Because we are only three months into the review, I do not have an answer for you as to what the response might be. During Covid, there has been a lot of work done more intensively between some schools and children's services. I have heard very much anecdotally from schools that I know that, because lots of children were at home and the more vulnerable children were still coming into school, the sorts of conversations that some head teachers and deputy head teachers were having with their contact in children's social care became very rich. They were very frequent, there was a lot more co-ordination going on, and schools had a much better sense of who they were really worried about in their classes. There might be something to build on there, but we are going to carry on engaging with schools and educators to respond to the very point that you have raised.

**Baroness Tyler of Enfield:** Thank you. Simon, is there anything you would like to add?

**Simon Parker:** I leave that with Josh.

**Baroness Tyler of Enfield:** Thank you very much indeed.

**The Chair:** I do not think that anybody wants to come in at this stage, so I move to Baroness Pitkeathley.

Q109 **Baroness Pitkeathley:** Thank you, Chair. Thanks to our panellists for their very thoughtful responses. I want to put the same question to both of you, initially, and then I want to come back with some specific ones.

The committee was a bit taken aback when we heard the Department for Education tell us that there was no integrated government strategy on vulnerable children, although in our previous panel I think we heard some disillusion from our contributors that maybe such a strategy would not be very much used in the first place. If there were to be such a strategy, what would be your priorities for the national and local level? In your answer, I would like you to comment on the issue of family hubs that we heard about in the Andrea Leadsom recent review. Do you want to start, Simon?

**Simon Parker:** On the policy substance, you will probably hear more from Josh. On setting a strategy, as some of your previous witnesses referred to, strategies are all well and good, but the key thing with an issue like this is that it is grounded in real experience. I hope that whatever work is done is done in real partnership with the families and the children affected, and with public service professionals. From where I am sitting, if I were dreaming of a Policy Lab commission from such a strategy, it would be to empower us to go out and work with civil

servants, with professionals and families themselves to draw out some really rich stories about how collaboration can be made to work most effectively.

**Baroness Pitkeathley:** Do you think family hubs would have a role in that?

**Simon Parker:** I am not sure that I am qualified to answer that question, I am afraid.

**Baroness Pitkeathley:** I will come to you, Josh.

**Josh MacAlister:** On the question of a strategy for vulnerable children, there are a few things missing. One of them is that, when it comes to understanding how we try to work with these children and young people, services, from central government down, too often think that the theory of change—pardon my use of a grand title or phrase—is that we deliver services to children and young people, and bypass the most important part of making that change effective and making it stick, which is parents and families.

I think that there is too often a lack of a really thought-through theory of change, which is that we have a group of children that we are worried about for a set of vulnerabilities, so how can we get onside with parents and families to support those children and young people? It may sound like a really simple point, but far too often initiatives that various government departments are running, whether it is the Department of Health, the Ministry of Justice, the Department for Education or MHCLG, bypass the parents and the families who are around these children all the time in the home environments where they are growing up. Any approach to cross-government working needs some shared principles about how that work is done and what would make it effective.

Another issue is that the pursuit of a strategy is often limited by government spending review periods. I completely agree with the point that Leon made in the previous session about the cycle of conversations that happen during spending review periods. I have described the system as a tower of Jenga held together by Sellotape, simultaneously really shaky and precarious but actually quite difficult to adjust. It is quite fixed. That means that when we are looking at a particular problem or set of vulnerabilities, quite naturally, to make it feel and seem manageable, we zoom in and look at the bricks in the tower and how they might fit together, and whether removing or changing them might affect the nearby bricks.

Over the last three decades, since the foundations of that tower, which is the Children Act, were put in place, that mindset has left us really limited in our imagination and thinking about what we can do with the service. We are taking bricks off and discarding them, putting new ones on and then picking up old ones and adding them. We are putting a bit of glue in place, rather than thinking down to the foundations. What are the services we need to provide for these families? What help needs to be

offered and what is making children growing up in Britain today vulnerable to the forces around them? Getting to some more fundamental questions would be very helpful. Government creating the space and climate to do that thinking and policy work would be hugely helpful.

The final thing I would say about priorities is that children's social care is one of those areas where the most significant obligation we have, especially to children who come into care, is to make sure that we nurture and grow the lifelong loving relationships that they need in their life. We are failing in meeting that obligation at the moment.

There is a comfort zone for those of us who are public servants, policymakers and lawmakers in running towards services. "What is the service that we can offer? What is the thing we can do?" Instead of that instinct kicking in, I think we need to pause and take a different approach, which is to ask who the people are who love this kid. Who are the people this kid loves and cares about? How do we help support and bring those relationships together around those people so that they have the dignity, care and warmth that we all know that we need, especially coming out of the pandemic? That is the really unusual policy space that we need people to get into for children's social care.

That would be my priority. How do we build an entire system that is obsessed with strengthening those relationships? Some of that might be about services, but instead we are obsessed with what service we need to deliver to meet a very narrow, specific need. That takes you right back to precariously stacking more bricks on top of the tower. We need to get back to the foundations.

**Baroness Pitkeathley:** Given that the foundation for such an approach exists in the Children Act, as you point out, what has moved us so far away? Is it the urge to do something? Is it money? Why have we moved so far away from those fundamentals?

**Josh MacAlister:** That is the question that the review is trying to answer in some way. We get into some of it in the final chapter of the document that we published last week.

Some of it goes back to my answer to the first question about the barriers for services, and shifting the work back towards help and away from crisis intervention. There is a spiral; the more money we spend on crisis work, the less money is available for help, which means that you end up needing to spend more on crisis work. It is very hard to break out of that.

The relationship that some services have ended up getting themselves into with parents has, in many places, become far too adversarial. You end up in a bind where families and parents who need and want help, in order to help their children and maybe protect their children, are reluctant to come forward and make use of the help because they feel they are going to be judged or investigated and might be at risk of their children being taken into care. Whether it is real or not, that is the feeling

that too many parents have. Specifically, care-experienced adults who themselves become parents and the way in which services respond to that is an issue that we highlight in the document.

There are some cycles of behaviour in the system that reinforce the things that we are seeing. Actually, that analysis was made by Eileen Munro—

**Baroness Pitkeathley:** That was a long time ago.

**Josh MacAlister:** Exactly—10 years ago. We have seen some top-down response to that, where government has issued new guidance or new legislation in which, as I say in the report we have published, there is far too much confidence that that lever-pulling results in change on the ground.

The other approach that has been taken has been to identify the best practice that is out there and scale and spread it. That has been positive in a number of areas, but it is limited and it has not gone far or fast enough. We are left asking why, despite the Munro review, Herbert Laming's review and other important pieces of work by Alan Wood, Martin Narey and others, we have not been able to reach the tipping point where we have a system and a service that, first, kicks in to help and gets alongside parents and families to offer the low-stigma, practical support they need; is decisive and effective when a child is at risk of abuse; and, for children in care, first and foremost, supports and builds those relationships. That is the important work we now have to do on the review over the next nine months.

Q110 **Baroness Pitkeathley:** I am sure that we all wish you luck with that, Josh. Thank you very much for a very comprehensive answer.

Simon, can I ask you about the work that you have done on co-production? You gave us some examples. Could you give us a specific example where co-production and the involvement of children and families in policy-making has changed not only the thinking but the practice?

**Simon Parker:** Policy Lab has not done loads of work with young people, but I can give you a couple of examples of where we have changed practice working with particular vulnerable groups.

A good example would be the work that the team did with DCMS in 2019. They were supporting the Office for Civil Society to engage more young people in consultations. Working with young people, we designed an online service that effectively created a panel of about 1,000 young people. It meant that DCMS could have a much richer conversation with them.

Another example, where we are currently rolling out prototypes, was work that we did with the Department for Work and Pensions over three years. We wanted to make sure that people with disabilities could access the JC Plus services. Using ethnography to understand the experience of

disabled customers as they came into the jobcentre, we were able to make recommendations on how we could change the layout and change the way that staff engaged with them. That is now being prototyped across the country in jobcentres.

**Baroness Pitkeathley:** Thank you. Josh, you did not mention family hubs. Is there anything you want to say on that?

**Josh MacAlister:** The notion or the principle of family hubs is to bring services together in an area so that they are easier to access and where signposting between services can be more free flowing. It clearly has benefits, and there are some great examples at the moment of family hubs being effective.

We are only three months into the review process at the moment, so I do not want to give any indication that there is a particular answer that we are drawn to. The principle of low-stigma, easy-access help being delivered from institutions that people recognise and trust locally, and done in a skilled and evidence-based way, is a feature of the kind of help that we have included in our *Case for Change* document. We have shared in that document a draft definition of what family help, sometimes referred to as early intervention or early help, might be. We would very much welcome people's thoughts and feedback on that definition.

**Baroness Pitkeathley:** Thank you very much. I know other people want to come in.

Q111 **Baroness Wyld:** This is still on family hubs. Simon, I promise it is not a trick question. I was quite surprised to hear you say that you did not feel qualified to comment on family hubs. I believe they are a manifesto commitment. I am on the record as a champion of them, and the Minister says she agrees. If they were a priority of DfE, presumably your team would be pulled in to help, and you would have all hands on board. Am I missing something very obvious?

**Simon Parker:** I am here primarily in my capacity as director of Policy Lab, which is a cross-government unit. It is not involved in that particular piece of work. I am not really in a position where I can talk too much about the policy. I am here to talk about the methods that we use today.

**The Chair:** I think what he is saying, Laura, is that you need to make sure there is a bid for them to work on it.

Q112 **Lord Hogan-Howe:** Josh made a comment about the Jacob case that made me half remember something. I wonder if either Simon or Josh could help. When I retired in 2017, there was to be a pilot that I believe was to start in London. The origins were in Iceland or Scandinavia. The idea in principle was that, instead of having a court process by which you co-ordinated help for a child or a family, there was another hybrid process that was not about applying the law in a criminal sense but was about making sure that the young person was helped. Josh was emphasising that. Am I misremembering that? Did it ever happen? Was there any good outcome from it? If you do not know, that is fine. It just



seemed that you two might be able to help with that.

**Josh MacAlister:** I am not aware of that, I am afraid. I cannot comment.

**Simon Parker:** I am afraid I am not either.

**Lord Hogan-Howe:** Thanks, Chair. I shall make other inquiries. I have tried online, but I cannot find it. I will go back to it because I think it fills a lacuna that I think Sir Alan identified as well.

**Josh MacAlister:** Do you mind if I make a short comment?

**The Chair:** Sure, Josh.

**Josh MacAlister:** It is picking up the point that Bernard was trying to highlight there about the potential work in 2017. In the work that we have set out in *The Case for Change*, there are examples where services at the interaction points between one and the other really struggle to make transitions work. This picks up on an inspection report that tracked 50 young people coming out of young offender institutions or other secure settings and going back home to their community, and the really messy, inconsistent and often very poor-quality work being done to make sure that those children and young people were going back to homes and neighbourhoods where they would not fall back into the same very powerful relationships and patterns that meant they ended up going into secure settings in the first place.

We see these examples time and again throughout the systems that we have, whether it is child and adolescent mental health services, the police response, the children's social care response or the school response. We should take a moment to reflect on whether it is a symptom of having overcomplicated the system with quite narrow activity that has led to lots of movements between professionals who are doing overlapping work where accountability has been narrowed down. Inevitably, gaps emerge between those things. Public services and how they respond to vulnerability among children and teenagers is a huge issue.

**Lord Hogan-Howe:** Thank you.

**The Chair:** Does anyone else want to raise anything? I have lots of things, but I am sure that indulging me is not what this is all about.

Josh, you have a huge challenge. I hope that Simon and his colleagues are able to help in actually working with the families and children you contact to come up with some ways forward that simplify, but which also make a real difference to those families.

Thank you, both. We have had two fascinating sessions. We are really grateful to you. I am sure that we will be in contact again at some stage. If there is anything you think we should have asked that you have not had the chance to talk about, or if you want to send us any information, we are always happy to have that, so please get in touch.

Next week, we are talking to users of a range of services, and much more to children and young people. I am sure that both of you will be interested in what comes out of that and what we learn from it. Thank you very much. We now formally end the session.