

Education Committee

Oral evidence: [Children's Homes](#), HC 83

Tuesday 20 July 2021

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Members present: Robert Halfon (Chair); Tom Hunt; Dr Caroline Johnson; Kim Johnson; David Johnston; Ian Mearns; Kate Osborne; David Simmonds.

Questions 1 - 52

Witnesses

I: Anne Longfield, Former Children's Commissioner; Rt Hon Lord Adonis; Josh MacAlister, Independent Review of Children's Social Care.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Anne Longfield, Rt Hon Lord Adonis and Josh MacAlister.

Q1 **Chair:** Good morning, everyone, and welcome to our Committee session this morning on children in care and children's care homes. We have a very distinguished panel today. For the benefit of the tape and those watching on Parliament TV, I will ask the witnesses to introduce themselves with their titles.

Anne Longfield: I am Anne Longfield. I was formerly the Children's Commissioner for England, until February this year.

Josh MacAlister: I am Josh MacAlister, and I am the Chair of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care in England.

Lord Adonis: Andrew Adonis, and I am a former Education Minister.

Q2 **Chair:** Thank you. As a general first question, could I ask all of you how you see the state of play—the state of children's care homes—for children in care? Could I start with you, Josh, please, and then Anne, and then Andrew?

Josh MacAlister: Thanks to the Committee for having this inquiry on a most important topic that ties in very closely with the work that the independent review is doing over the next 12 months or so.

I have seen some excellent work in children's homes over the last four months since starting the review and also in some independent accommodation, but it is not all great. The major themes that we have highlighted already in the review in relation to children's homes are about the purpose of residential care within the system. This is not a new question or issue. The data that we do have available suggests that over half of children in residential care are there for less than three months and in those circumstances, given the Committee's particular interest in education, that poses a number of challenges for children in those homes about how much learning they can do and the relationships that they can form with educators either in the home or in nearby schools. Ofsted has highlighted issues about the access to good and outstanding education for children in residential care. I know you have received that information through evidence. There are some important points there, given the priority that should be given to these children to access the very best education available.

There are also some important links to our broader theme within the care review on the foundational importance of lifelong loving relationships for children in care. When those lifelong loving relationships are compromised or are not strong enough, it affects education. The Rees Centre at Oxford and the What Works Centre have done some very good work building on the evidence base from EEF, looking at the quality of relationships around children and whether interventions for education should be working to support the parents and carers around them.



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In many respects, to put it briefly, what we see in the issues in residential care, whether about education or broader issues, are reflections of broader issues further upstream within the children's social care system.

Anne Longfield: I agree with what Josh has just said, and of course we would all say that there are some fantastic children's homes with kids getting good experiences. The system overall, however, has not progressed at the pace that it has needed. It remains fragmented, uncoordinated and there has not been the necessary planning and coordination to deliver on the purpose that Josh talks about. In many ways, the system that has developed is quite an irrational system. It has been under intense pressure because there has been a huge increase in the number of older children coming into the care system who have been put into children's homes. The market has not been able to respond—some people do not like referring to the system as a market—but the system has not been able to foresee this coming and respond accordingly. We now have a chronic shortage of places for children and of course that has been filled not by local children's homes, as we might hope, but by a set of private providers who are located disproportionately in some areas around the country, which means that children are increasingly out of area from where they are living and increasingly pinged around the system between different homes. Again, that will often increase the levels of the complex needs the children display. People are finding it hard to place the most vulnerable children and they are being pinged around the system as a result.

Q3 **Chair:** Andrew, obviously you have some significant personal experience of this. It would be very helpful to get your view and your personal experience.

Lord Adonis: Thank you. It is a pleasure to appear before you today and in such distinguished company. Both Josh and Anne have made huge contributions to improving outcomes for children in care. I was very privileged to work with Josh on Frontline, which Michael Gove agreed to set up 10 years ago. Josh was the founding chief executive and I was his Chair. That got me involved in the social work arena again for the first time since I was in care myself, and also in visiting children in care and speaking to them and visiting children's homes again. It was the first time I had done that since I had left one myself.

I have two headline reflections for the Committee, and there are some other things I might say in a more fine-grained way later on. The first big reflection is that of course a far smaller proportion of children in care are now in children's homes—far smaller. Josh just gave the figure of children being in residential homes on average for only three months. I spent eight years in a children's home and could have spent the entirety of my childhood in a children's home but for the fact I was sent to a boarding school at the age of 11. There has been a very big change in practice, which I think is broadly favourable. I say broadly, because it very much depends, of course, upon the alternative locations for the children, which means good foster placements or working arrangements in their homes



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which are not dangerous for them, and that is an issue. But probably, on balance, it is a positive development.

The thing that has not changed—I was very struck by this when I was chairing Frontline and when I looked at the data as I was preparing to appear before you—is the extraordinary turbulence in the social work profession, which is deplorable. If I had to say one thing, Chair, to your Committee today, it is that until we have much more stability, much less turnover and much less agency working in the social work profession, so that children get stable social workers in terms of contact with a single professional who has an ongoing relationship with them and their families, I think we are going to face continuing crises in this area.

The figures, just looking at the most recent ones, are really worrying. There are turnover rates of 16% in social work, compared to 9% for teachers, 8% for nurses, and 6% for police officers. According to Anne Longfield's own data, I think in her last report as Children's Commissioner, three in five children had a change of social worker in the previous year, and one in four had two or more social workers in that year. You just need to stop and consider what that means. That means that children who are in a state of extreme vulnerability do not have a professional responsible for them who is stable or who they could even rely on being responsible for them from month to month.

Anne's conclusion, and she can obviously speak about it more, is that changes of social worker are the number one source of disruption in the life of a child in care. I think that is an issue of acute concern and it may be of greater impact—negative impact—on the life of children in care than their precise location, whether it is a children's home, a foster placement or a care plan based around them still having contact with their parents. The lack of serious, ongoing professional support for them is a serious problem.

To cut to the chase, this is a failure of the state because it is the state that puts in place the regime for children's workers. By definition, children in care are in the care of the state, and if the state cannot even make decent professional continuous arrangements for their care, it is failing fundamentally. I think what we are dealing with here is a fundamental state failure, which needs to be put right. From my own personal experience—I am happy to talk more about it in due course—changes of social worker were the single biggest problem of my time in care and the times when I came closest to almost vanishing without trace in the system. It is when you have a stable, serious, ongoing professional who is in charge that things start to look up.

Q4 Chair: Thank you. We are going to come on to that a bit later and would be very happy if you could talk about it more.

I want to turn now to education, if I may. We know that figure after figure shows that children in residential care homes have lower academic outcomes and do worse at all stages of the education system. Just 37% of looked-after children reached expected standards compared with 65%



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of non-looked-after children. Just 7.2% of looked-after children achieved grade 5 in English and maths compared with 40.1% of non-looked-after children. Nuffield Foundation research with the Universities of Bristol and Oxford says that young people living in residential care at age 16 scored over six grades lower at GCSE compared with those in kinship or foster care. What are the factors behind this and what more should be done to ensure that children in residential care have equal access to the education ladder of opportunity? Why, given that we know about these very poor educational outcomes, does Ofsted judge 80% of providers good or outstanding?

Lord Adonis: I don't think educational provision is nearly high enough a priority for social workers in the care plans that they put in place for children. It ought to be very high. I was very fortunate that at an absolutely crucial moment for me, when I was 11, I had a social worker and the lady who managed my care home, who made it their business to get me into a boarding school. They had to persuade Camden Council to allow me to take up a boarding placement, because Camden did not even have boarding school placements on the menu of options for their children in care, even though it was obviously, in the particular circumstances I was in, the right thing to do. It involved a huge and very difficult issue, as I only now realise from looking at my case papers.

The issue went up to the leader of the council, as to whether this was going to be allowed. There was an ideological issue—it was a private boarding school and this was a Labour-run council that was not prepared to send anyone to private schools, even though my school by background was a charitable school—but also it was not accepted social work practice then and it still is very hard. When I was a Minister, we engaged in pilots of boarding school placements for children in care and it was very counter-cultural to the social work profession. It still is not widely accepted as a placement option. I also sought to significantly expand the number of state boarding schools—there were about 35 state boarding schools in England—and we did expand them, and I think they should be expanded further and should be making available a much wider range of opportunities for children in care.

The other change we made, which the Committee will be familiar with, was giving children in care an absolute priority in admissions to schools, including schools that in other respects had selective intakes, provided, in the case of grammar schools, that they met the selection criteria. I think social workers should be making much, much more use of that absolute priority to place children in very good schools because, by definition, children in care start off with massive disadvantages. There is a lot that can be done. There are options available, and good social workers who have the interests of their children at heart and have an ongoing relationship with them will of course seek to take advantage of those options, but it is far too hit and miss at the moment.

Chair: Thank you. Anne, I have already quoted some statistics on the poor educational attainment and outcomes for children in care, and there are so many more statistics, I could quote them for the next couple of



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hours. How is it that establishments are reported as good or outstanding when children are having these very poor outcomes?

Anne Longfield: You have a system that measures the process rather than outcomes for children, and I think that needs to change. Clearly, one of the outcomes that I would want to be measured would be the educational outcomes for those children. It is not difficult to see why kids will not progress as we would hope. There is that great turnover of social workers. Lord Adonis is right that those figures are shockingly high. When I used to talk to children in care about some of these things, they would tell me they would give up on a social worker being there. Sometimes social workers would come into post and leave before they even met the children.

Another thing is that there is sometimes a bit of a tick-box mentality. For education, it is getting a bit of tutoring here and there, and that really doesn't do it; it doesn't cut it. Also, you have virtual school heads, who I think do help, but overall what you are talking about here is the state being the parent. I think the state needs to become much more of a pushy parent when it comes to children in care and their education. That means having their radar out, understanding how each and every one of those children could progress and being there to help them, and also not accepting anything in the way of a delay or a second-best option, which might be just a bit of tutoring here and there to fill a gap. When children are being moved three times over two years, which we know happens to a significant number of them, there will be a delay every time in getting education back up and running. That just cannot in any way be good for any kind of educational progress. A lot of this comes back to the way that the system is run and that huge turnover in every way, that instability, but also I think there needs to be much more emphasis on providers being there and advocating for those children to get the best education possible and helping them to do so.

Q5 **Chair:** Josh, do you agree with what Anne says, that Ofsted should look at outcomes, not just process? What is your view of how to improve educational outcomes for these children? I am talking about everything, including university. There are some awful statistics. I think just 13% of children in care have gone on to higher education, compared with 43% of all other pupils; and just 2% of 16 to 18-year-olds take up an apprenticeship, which is even more depressing, given that we know what apprenticeships can do for disadvantaged people. What is the answer to this? Is your review going to focus on the lack of educational attainment? I know you have done a speech on private providers—all well and good, and all very important—but surely this is possibly one of the most pressing issues facing children in residential homes.

Josh MacAlister: Yes. The review will be looking at it.

Last week, at an event hosted by the Nuffield Foundation, I spoke on the long-term health impacts of being in care. To broaden the view on that, UCL has done some ground-breaking work looking at the lifelong impact of a period of time in care and the impact on mortality rates among care-



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experienced people, differentiating between the types of care that young people have been in and how long they live. There are some very concerning features. Whether it is education or health, employment prospects, quality of life—

Q6 **Chair:** What is the solution, in your view?

Josh MacAlister: Children in residential care homes have already had significant turbulence in their lives before reaching the point of being in a residential care setting. Most of them have been in many different foster homes. Local authorities have tried, and often exhausted, other placements for those children and then have put them in a residential care home. Nearly half the children have an education, health and care plan compared with about 3% of the general population. There are huge disparities for the children that the homes are working with. Then, when you add to that the issues around stability in those homes and where children are, how long children are going to be there—many of them are there for very short stints—you have this question of whether residential care is providing a bridging space to permanence for children, so they can have a home to grow up in and a great childhood, or whether those homes are providing a long term, three-year or two-year intervention where they work on some of the underlying trauma that these children have faced. Each of those options leads to different answers about what education should be provided in those settings.

I should say that the review is only four months in and we are not yet at the point of making recommendations, but here are a few thoughts just on education that maybe open up the space for solutions. ADCS has flagged, I think quite rightly, same-site education, where children are in living children's homes and being taught there. We should look much more closely at the impact of that in terms of children being isolated and not being able to form friendships and have a normal childhood where they go to a school. When Anne was the Children's Commissioner, her work flagged the issue of tutoring being used to fill gaps between the time when a child arrives in a children's home and when they have their proper education set-up up and running. That is a concern.

With regard to where some of the evidence might point to effectiveness in the future—this is not just about education; it is about the whole children's social care system—the lack of work done with the people who are in these children's lives and who matter to them is a concern. That might be birth parents, it might be siblings, it might be extended family or it might be a teacher in the school that they used to go to. Not involving those people who love and care about these kids in conversations about their education is both a problem at the moment and probably where the answers in the future lie. There is a great quote in one of the Rees Centre studies from a child who said that their education needed to matter to other people before it could matter to them. I have spoken to many of these children. A lot of them have been bounced around the system for their whole childhood and when they are in a residential home, people talking to them about the importance of their education sometimes feels like a completely alien language.



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Chair: Thank you. I am going to pass now to Ian Mearns, but before I do that, could I just ask you all to be as concise as you can be with your answers? I know there is so much to say, but we have limited time because of broadcasting restrictions.

Q7 **Ian Mearns:** It has been seven years since a previous iteration of this Committee, on which I sat, published its report on residential care homes, and five years since the publication of the Narey Review of residential care. How have the Government reacted to those reports and their recommendations? Have they done anything worthwhile to improve things for children in care homes in response to those reports, or were we all just wasting our time?

Anne Longfield: The Narey Review made lots of practical and commonsensical recommendations—30-odd of them. Some of them have been progressed, certainly on the recommendations around staying close. There have been some pilots. There has been a bit of money. There has been some work about commissioning. We have also had reports from the National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee going alongside this, saying there needs to be intensive work by the DfE and local authorities to work things out.

Despite all of those pieces of activity, I don't think there has been the progress needed—self-evidently there has not been—to meet the scale of the challenge. There has been some slight tinkering around the edges, but really there has not been the work to grasp this and to get a hold, through data, on understanding what is coming down the track, the children who need help, and the planning, co-ordination and delivery. I think it is a system that Government cannot control at the moment. They cannot manage it because it is outside their grip. There needs to be a huge change in that. Now we have the independent care review, which of course is the way forward on much of this but, no, I do not think there has been the progress that anyone would have wished for and, as a result, children have just been surviving in the care system over the last few years.

Lord Adonis: I am not really competent to say what the Government have done over the last few years—that is for Anne and Josh—but could I add one thing to the last answer, in relation to schools, which I think is quite important for the Committee. It is about the issue of exclusions.

One of the biggest problems in the education system in respect of children in care and children with emotional difficulties is exclusion. As I look back on my time as Minister—there are always a few things that one looks back on and regrets—the thing I most regret that I did not tackle is the issue of temporary exclusions. I sought to tackle it at the time, but we were just not bold enough and I am afraid no Minister has been bold enough since. When it comes to permanent exclusion, the issue is more difficult because particularly in respect of violence in schools, there often may be no alternative—managing it within the school is better, and having exclusion within schools is better still—but I think that the time for temporary exclusion is well and truly past.



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Low-level misbehaviour in the school often affects children in care because of their emotional difficulties, the fact that they are constantly changing schools, they don't fit in, and so on. The idea that a sanction for low-level misbehaviour in school should be not going to school is really an idea whose time has passed. It is my view that temporary exclusion should now be banned. It should not take place in schools. Temporary exclusion is a fundamental misconception of the nature of sanctions and their relationship to the education system. There may be a case for permanent exclusion in certain circumstances, but they need to be well handled. Temporary exclusion, however, escalates misbehaviour. Temporary exclusions become longer temporary exclusions, and almost all permanent exclusions come from them. If you want an education reform that could particularly help children in care, as well as dealing with the stability of placements and so on, tackling the issue of exclusion is important.

Chair: Thank you. We did do a previous report, when 40 children were being excluded every day from our classrooms. That is a valid point.

Josh MacAlister: There have been some—a few—points of encouragement. One is that since the Committee's last look at residential care there has been a reduction in the criminalisation of children in care. The DfE has piloted Staying Close, following Martin Narey's report and there have been some examples of extensions of services, things such as personal assistance up to the age of 25 for children leaving care.

The Case for Change report that we published a few weeks ago, highlighted that some of these improvements are attempts to fix and bolt on top of an already complicated system: sticking plasters and Jenga blocks to mend what are very shaky foundations.

In answer to Ian Mearns's question, I think things have become increasingly concerning over the last few years. We see a residential children's home system that can provide less stability for children. It is in itself quite a fragile system. It has become much more expensive to run. Local authorities are spending north of £1.6 billion on these homes. It is not a cheap system. There has been a huge boom, an enormous boom, in unregulated homes that teenagers are being placed in, which I am sure we will come on to, and a lot of concern about what that means for the children and young people.

This is a lens into one part of the system that really opens up people's eyes to all the complex problems within children's social care that need to be addressed.

Q8 Ian Mearns: One of the things that struck me back then was that we found that a lot of children's homes—not all, but some—were located in places primarily based on property values. We visited Margate, for instance, where loads and loads of youngsters from London were placed. London boroughs were placing their children down in Kent. We also discovered that Margate wasn't a seaside-town idyll; it was a place with myriad other social problems, layers and layers of them, so it was not a



safe location for those kids to be out in the community on occasions. What can we do about that?

Chair: I will put that question to Josh. Briefly, please, Josh.

Josh MacAlister: I have seen that one of the MPs for Blackpool has written to the Committee highlighting these particular issues. Blackpool is one of the areas where there are huge challenges in this regard. For a child in London in residential care, the average distance of a home is 60 miles away from where they live. That is the average. There are huge issues, particularly for children in the south-east, and to some extent in the south-west, of England being moved very far. Part of the answer lies in asking ourselves whether we are going to get a solution by doing more tinkering to commissioning arrangements, which is what a lot of reports have suggested, or whether we need to do something more radical to shape how homes are planned for, where they are going to be and on what basis they are commissioned. That is definitely something we are looking at in the review. I am very sceptical. I think the evidence threshold needs to be very high for any recommendations that just point to more tweaking and tinkering.

Ian Mearns: Chair, what struck me was that because so much of the location was based on property value, the social context quite often was a secondary or third concern. I have always believed we have a responsibility as a corporate parent. I was a local authority councillor for many years and I do think that is an important thing that we should take seriously. We should not be putting youngsters in neighbourhoods where we would not want our kids to live.

Q9 **David Johnston:** My question to Andrew—if you can hear me all right over this alarm—is: what is your alternative to temporary exclusion? I don't disagree with you about the knock-on effects of that impact, but what would you do instead? Is it internal exclusion within the school?

Lord Adonis: There are a whole load of other ways of managing behaviour in schools at that low level of misbehaviour or infringements: internal exclusions, detentions, additional work, additional activities, more intensive mentoring—a whole range of things. I think the education professionals in the schools need, school by school, to work out their strategy for this on the basis of no temporary exclusions.

I am very struck that many of the best schools that I visit do virtually no exclusions, either temporary or permanent. I was visiting an academy recently where the principal told me he does no temporary exclusions as a matter of policy. I think he had had two permanent exclusions in the previous three years, in both cases for violence against teachers—things that could not be avoided. This is a matter of practice; it is not a matter of impossibility. I think it now needs to be a matter of state practice.

Just as a generation ago we abolished corporal punishment in schools, I think we should abolish temporary exclusions in schools for a reason of overriding national policy, which will then oblige schools—quite properly and in line with accepted modern standards of behaviour management—



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to find alternatives that are in fact better, not only for the pupils themselves but ultimately for the schools and for society.

Chair: Interestingly, Michael Wilshaw said that the schools should have proper learning to stop these kinds of exclusions, and they should have properly staffed learning support units in all schools to try to deal with this problem.

Q10 **David Simmonds:** Thank you very much, Chairman. I am going to ask you a question about commissioning, which many will be very familiar with. There is good evidence that the commissioning system is not really working at the moment in the interests of children who are placed in residential care settings, or indeed in the interests of the taxpayer. In your view, what system reforms are required to change that? Do you think the Department for Education is ready to make those reforms? As a rider to that question in respect of the finances: are you, and Josh in particular, in a position to present some costed recommendations about this? Would you agree with the view that at the moment we are simply too much at the mercy of the market when it comes to sourcing the placements that we need?

Josh MacAlister: Yes, I think we are too much at the mercy of the market at the moment. Commissioning is a hugely important part of how we make the placements market work. This language doesn't lend itself particularly naturally to talking about children and where they are living, but unfortunately it is where we are. I think the review will make recommendations on it. If they involve investment, I will make the case for that and we will do the full cost-benefit and include all the rationale for that in our final report next spring.

I think the Government are open-minded about this. The reason why they have launched the full care review, looking at the whole system and not just one part of it, is because I think there is an understanding now that so many of these issues are interconnected. How we support foster carers and the availability of good foster homes is intricately connected to the residential care system, as is the use of kinship care and how we support grandparents raising their grandchildren, which is very much linked with the family justice system. Looking at the whole piece together gives us an opportunity to find solutions that cut across what have previously been more focused reviews.

Of course the Committee will be interested in, and I am sure will be speaking to, the Competition and Markets Authority. Myself and others, including the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee and Anne, have previously asked it to do a study into this area. I think it will be able to bring a level of expertise and understanding about how markets work that just hasn't been focused on this area before. I am hopeful that we will come up with much more than tweaks.

Q11 **David Simmonds:** Anne Longfield in particular might want to comment on this point, but just on that point about market, some have argued that private equity should be banned from the children's residential care



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market. I am not convinced that that is a solution, of itself, but would you agree that local authorities need to be able to work more effectively together to make sure they have their own in-house provision so that they are not at the mercy of what is often, frankly, price gouging by some providers?

Anne Longfield: Yes, it certainly is a providers' market. You will know, David, that local authorities ring around to get places and then usually have to compromise after sometimes hundreds of calls. It is a system that is dominated by a few providers and they are located in the parts of the country where the costs of accommodation are often lower. There is also this sense that it is kind of an off-the-shelf package. If it suits that child, then it is fine. If it is a specialist response, that starts to get trickier. There are also examples of where providers withdraw that place at short notice because someone else comes along and they need that—well, not that they need that place more, but often they are offered more from it.

The costs are eye-watering, and you will see there has been a real increase now to £200,000 or £250,000 a year as standard. The irony with that, of course, is that we have already established that it is not based on progress and outcomes, so it is additionally worrying. I would like to see more children, especially teenagers, given the support they need before it gets to crisis so it can be managed within the family. I would like to see more specialist foster carers that can provide the support, guidance and protection that teenagers need, but I would really like to see a growth, and a flurry of growth at that, of local authorities working with local health partners and the voluntary sector—who are now only 5% of providers; they used to be more—to build those local collaborations of small children's homes nearer to home. It can be done on a regional basis, but it needs that level of creative endeavour.

I think that will disrupt what is essentially a market, and it will provide better tailor-made options that do help children develop and achieve in the way we would want. That is the way that we will get a system that is better balanced towards outcomes. Whether other providers respond or not, that is up to them, but I think those options need to be there.

Q12 **David Simmonds:** If I may, I will very briefly press Josh and Anne on the point about what system reforms are needed, as the behaviour around unregulated children's homes at 16-plus is largely driven by the Children Act 1989, which underpins much of our care system. We do know that the longer a child spends in care and the earlier they go into care, the better their outcomes are compared to their peers. Do you have a view about what legal, management or structural reforms would be required in order to address some of these things?

Chair: If you could both do it in a nutshell, that would be very helpful. Josh first.

Josh MacAlister: I am only four months in and the review is already on a tight timescale, David, so I will resist jumping to answers just yet. But I do think there are some good examples in England at the moment.



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Unfortunately they are outliers rather than mainstream, but there are some good examples of work that is being done to shake up the system and make sure that children have that stability. Particularly in residential care, it is initiatives like North Yorkshire's No Wrong Door programme, where they cluster support around a residential care home and they have a very clear purpose behind it. Thinking about a whole system encourages that kind of behaviour from social workers and commissioners, and that is certainly part of what the review is looking at the moment.

Chair: Anne, in a nutshell.

Anne Longfield: I would like there to be a legal requirement to intervene before crisis. That would make an immense difference, but in terms of wider development, I think it is about embedding the importance of leadership from the centre and the DfE's responsibility to own the system and support it.

Q13 **Kim Johnson:** Good morning, panel members. I want to pick up on David's question about looking at system change, given the significant amount of public funding going into the private sector to not provide adequate services for our most vulnerable children. I wanted to know from both Anne and Josh whether any consideration had been given to insourcing these services back into local authority control, with the funding being adequate for local authorities to deliver the service adequately.

Josh MacAlister: As Rob highlighted, I gave a speech to the Independent Children's Homes Association a couple of weeks ago highlighting my concerns about the level of profit-making within residential care and—given many of the poor outcomes that we have talked about already in this session—that being intolerable. The rate of increasing costs and therefore the corresponding increase in profits over recent years I find indefensible, especially when stacked up against the pressures on local authority budgets.

We are in a position where about 80% of residential care is provided by the private sector; that is the world in which we currently live. We need to think about the long-term destination that we want to get to in the future; the mix of people and providing very good quality homes for these children; but also the urgent issues right now within the system for children in those homes. It is balancing those two things—the immediate fixes that are needed to stabilise the system and making sure that the homes are there, and also longer-term shifts so that we have a more sustainable, less profit-driven system.

Anne Longfield: I think everyone will be shocked, and it is totally unacceptable, that billions are made in profit out of children's homes. I have been told that where a place costs £250,000 a year, the profit can be £100,000 now. I understand that it is important to pay proper prices for these, but what we are seeing is that it is fuelled by the equity



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fundings and the money literally leaves the country. I want the money to be plucked back into the system for children.

In answer to Kim's question, yes, I do want local collaborations of providers for children's homes and different forms of support and care. I think that needs to be pump-primed initially by a huge injection of capital funds from Government.

Chair: Thank you. I am going to bring in Kate, please. This is a question to Lord Adonis.

Q14 **Kate Osborne:** Thank you, Chair. Lord Adonis, first of all, thank you so much for agreeing to share your personal and lived experiences with us today. It is undoubtedly invaluable to hear it first-hand from you.

In your experience, what difference does good quality care and support make to the lives of children in residential care? You touched earlier on the importance of a good relationship and an ongoing relationship with social workers, but what difference does good quality care and support make to the lives of children in residential care?

Lord Adonis: I think it makes all the difference, because these are children who are in the care of the state by virtue of the fact that there is no one else who has competence and responsibility for them. Even where they have an ongoing relationship with a parent, that isn't a competent relationship because of the reasons why they are in care in the first place. Therefore, if bad decisions are made, of course it is catastrophic for them because there is almost always no parental backstop to correct those decisions.

There are three lots of decisions that really matter, from my own personal experience and from what I have seen of other children in care. The first is to do with placements. The placement should be suitable and, in particular—I cannot stress this enough—non-violent. The thing to understand when you have gone through care is that your life is in constant danger of violence. You feel constantly on the edge of violent relationships with people that you meet, including the other children in care. This is much underestimated, particularly—if I can put it bluntly—by professionals who don't have this experience themselves. It is a bit like "Lord of the Flies" and you are constantly seeking to create a protected space, which means that you are not going to be subjected to violence and have your life invaded. The social workers and the managers of the care homes are absolutely vital in ensuring that there is a non-violent space where you are able to do your own thing and be your own person. That is the first thing that matters.

The second thing that matters is relationships with those people who do have some residual responsibility for you, whether it be parents or foster carers, if you are in foster care, in a meaningful way. These relationships can be very difficult. I think as a matter of practice, it is a very good idea, wherever possible, to maintain relationships with birth parents. Though it may not be particularly meaningful at the time, it will be hugely meaningful to children as they grow up and develop later on to have



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ongoing relationships with their birth parents. All relationships in life change and if you can possibly sustain those relationships, even if they are nominal, it should be done. That is a very important role that social workers play.

The third thing is decisions that are made in respect of education and educational placements, which are pretty well unilaterally made by social workers, because there is no way that a child in care has the faintest clue what the difference is between different types of schools and where they should be placed; and of course also the ongoing relationship with the school where that relationship breaks down, as it often does with children in care, who get excluded or temporarily excluded and so on. The relationship between social worker and child in care is an absolutely fundamental one.

Coming again to Anne's reports, there is obviously a quality issue. From the social workers I have met, I know that this is an enormously hardworking profession, and most of those who go through it do mean well and are highly trained. Innovations like Frontline have helped to improve the quality of people coming into care, but seeing that there are stable, ongoing relationships is something that the system needs to enable. As Anne's statistics show, by and large it doesn't do so at the moment.

Q15 **Kate Osborne:** Thank you very much. What needs to happen to ensure that children in residential care receive good educational outcomes and high quality full-time education, employment or training? That is a question to all of you.

Chair: Can I just add to that? Do you all agree that there has not been enough focus on the incredibly poor educational attainment and outcomes for children in care, and that it is not more of a national conversation? I will bring in Andrew again. I know you have talked about the importance of proper social workers helping children, but is there anything else you want to add?

Lord Adonis: I do think that the issue of boarding placements should be looked at more, because children in care have very unstable residential arrangements, almost by definition. It is a sign of this country that we live in that the very well-off, particularly where they are moving around a lot, regard boarding schools as one of the standard options that they consider. We have a large boarding school sector. Almost all of it is for the very rich and privileged. Around the corner from my office, from where I am speaking to you at the moment, is Westminster School, where the fees are £49,000 a year. Wouldn't it be a good idea if we thought about spending £49,000 on boarding school placements for children in care?

I think a much higher premium is being paid; after all, look at the costs to society and indeed the immediate costs. I find the figures that Anne was just quoting incredible. I had no idea that local authorities were paying £250,000 a year for a child. This is absolutely unbelievable. This



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makes Eton, Westminster and Winchester look cut-price. I think we should be looking much more at these options.

I would like to make a comment on the policy issue, which I was very alive to when I was a Minister. Because I am very New Labour and open to very radical new thinking, we had a big debate when we were developing the academies programme about whether we were going to allow for-profit academies. It may surprise colleagues to know that I was, on balance, strongly against it, but not because I was against it as a concept. I am not necessarily against it. If very high quality providers could come in and make a big difference, I would have been prepared to pilot it, but it was very clear to me that we had a very large and underdeveloped voluntary sector in this area.

Before we went to people making profits in this area, who by definition are less likely in their values to be concerned first and foremost for the children, I thought we should develop as strongly as possible the voluntary and not-for-profit sector, independent of existing state providers and local authorities, but encouraging charities, existing private schools or charitable organisations to come forward. Indeed, that has been the mainstay of the academies movement, the not-for-profit sector.

It is a slight mystery to me. I think it may have been because of the sort of Thatcherite ideology in 1989 to 1990 that they moved directly from local authority provision, which often wasn't adequate, to private provision, and they did not stop properly to look at the potential for not-for-profit and voluntary providers. Just as we don't allow for-profit state-funded schools, I think there is a good case for saying in the case of children's homes that we should encourage a diversity of provision, including not-for-profit and voluntary providers, who of course have a big history as care providers.

The lady who managed my care home was ex-Barnardo's. Barnardo's was the main provider of children's homes before the Second World War. Just as we did that in schools, I think maybe there is a case for putting much more emphasis on voluntary and not-for-profit providers in the care home sector.

Josh MacAlister: On this question about whether we are focusing on education enough, clearly, I don't believe we are, and we need to have much more ambition for these children, who are after all in the care of the state. We need to be pushy parents on their behalf and we need a much greater focus on all aspects of these children's lives in improving them and their families' as well. When we think about what can be done to improve their education, it takes you very quickly into what can be done to improve the quality of life for these children in a meaningful way as they grow up and as they grow old.

One of the big things that the review that I am leading has already highlighted is that too often we think about care—the system—of providing a relationship as a service. I think there is something flawed about that concept, because the idea that young people have all the



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important relationships in their life filled by transient professionals who come and go, and where those relationships end on certain birthdays, wouldn't set any of you up for life. It wouldn't set me up for life.

The system we need to build in the future needs to be one that provides a service of nurturing and growing lifelong loving connections and relationships for these children. If we can do that, if that is one of the big things we can get out of the review and implementation that follows it, then I do believe that that will address issues for these children—educational inequality, long-term housing problems and where they are going to live, the financial instability and the huge underlying physical and mental problems that they face—because at the centre of all of those things are identity, purpose and sense of self. That comes from having a group of people around you, a tribe who love and care about you. That is what the care system needs to deliver.

Anne Longfield: We need to realise that a lot of children in care have particular needs, special educational needs and social and emotional needs. They are 18 times more likely to be in a PRU. There is that need, as Josh has just said, in terms of the therapeutic support, those loving relationships and that constant nature. But I want us to be so much more ambitious in terms of educational outcomes for these kids. I think there is an acceptance of the idea that it's a bit of tutoring here, a bit of education here and we'll do the best we can, but really it is a difficult task. I don't accept that. I am not trying to put additional people into people's lives, but we have personal advisers, we have social workers, we have independent reviewing officers and virtual heads—who in there is going to take care of this care plan or this education plan?

The other thing is that kids live their lives with plans can keep whole building structures upright. They go around with them and they can quote the ins and outs of the process, which I find very dispiriting, but a plan is only worth anything if someone is going to help make it happen. I don't think that we should be looking at any assessment or judgment of outstanding for somewhere that cannot demonstrate that they are being that pushy parent, and that they are providing that loving all-round therapeutic support that kids need to be able to flourish. That has to be a mindset that changes. Plans are good, but they are a means to an end and they need to be actioned to be able to get what we are all after.

Chair: Thank you. Kate, have you finished your questions? Thank you. Ian, before I bring you in, I want to bring in Tom Hunt first, please.

Q16 **Tom Hunt:** Thank you, Chair. I want to pick up on one of the points Anne made earlier; I think was in relation to schools and Ofsted and how often it is about process and not outcomes for children, but it should be about outcomes for children. We see this with regard to special educational needs so often, where teachers feel the framework by which they are assessed doesn't put the right incentives in place. To what extent do you think that there is a problem in terms of the framework and the system not encouraging schools to view children who are in care positively and to engage with them positively? Maybe that might be



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similar to the extent they might be seen as problematic in the same way sometimes as children with learning disabilities are. What practically do you think could be done to change that? We hear a lot about this framework and it never seems to get better to the extent that it needs to to make sure that we look after the most vulnerable in society. What do you think could be done?

Secondly, in terms of the point about apprenticeships and what might be done, a pretty hard-on financial incentive for companies to take on children in care on apprenticeships—to what extent do you think something like that would work?

Anne Longfield: I think that there has been some movement in people's mindset towards how problematic children who are in care are, whatever the setting is. I do think opinions have changed a little and that—I am talking about schools and the criminal system—there is now a bit of movement. There is in no way the amount of movement that is needed, but I think there is a little bit of adjustment in attitudes. I do think we need to see quite radical change. The kind of issue that children in care get in trouble with the law is still disproportionately more than it would be if there were parents advocating for them.

Children will still be excluded from school, as Lord Adonis says, where the first move should be to keep them in a much more inclusive system within the school. I would back Lord Adonis's proposals that you shouldn't have temporary exclusions in school, certainly for children in care, because that is what we are talking about today.

In terms of apprenticeships and progression destinations, again, part of that pushiness of the corporate parent should be about aiming high; not seeing what you can do to get them into some kind of job or training, but aiming high, whatever that takes. If that takes a heavy incentive in terms of apprenticeships, I think that is what we need to do, and certainly in the beginning I think that is right. I would also like a duty for all children in care to be offered an apprenticeship. It is part of what the state wishes to progress with children and for children we look after, it should be the deal we offer.

Lord Adonis: Anne has made two excellent policy proposals to you. The idea that there should be a ban on temporary exclusions for children in care is a very manageable proposition because that is a small proportion of the temporary exclusions. That is absolutely on the money and something you will get the professionals and schools to accept, and possibly even the Department and Ministers who, I know, are slightly nervous about middle England on this issue in respect of children in care.

If I can say this so bluntly politically, if Conservative members of your Committee, in particular, are prepared to back that strongly—this tends to be a much more Tory issue—then I think it could be a policy that sticks. I also like Anne's idea of a duty to offer an apprenticeship to a child in care at school-leaving age. That is an excellent idea and could be made operational.



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As time is running out, could I raise another issue that has not been raised at all, and that I am very conscious of from having been in care? There is a very high overlap between children in care and children who have parents in prison, and this is not properly discussed in society. I know from conversations I have had recently, because I have had some cases brought to me just as MPs will have had cases brought to their surgeries, that this is particularly a crisis issue now with Covid-19 because prison visiting almost stopped and for a long time there was virtually none. IT was not working in prisons and this still has not been resolved.

We have a big set of catch-up issues after Covid-19. One of the biggest is the relationship between children and parents who are in jail, and unless something can be done to foster those relationships—this needs to be a particular issue for children’s social workers at the moment—a lot of children will have their emotional attachments absolutely wrecked in the generations ahead because they have had almost no contact with their parents in jail over the last 16 months. Chair, if you felt able to make some proposals on that, I think that would be very welcome.

Q17 Tom Hunt: Thank you for those responses. I am trying to get a sense of: if there was a particular school or college that had a good reputation for doing the right thing by children in care and admitted a large number, do we have the confidence to say that that school, with the framework we are offering at the moment, would be properly rewarded and held up for what it has done? Do we have that confidence, as it stands?

Anne Longfield: I do not have that confidence as it stands. I think they would have to be creative in how they pull together the funding to be able to support that child. It is possible, but it could be made much easier and be much more explicit. In terms of measures of success, I think outcomes for children in care should be part of the dialogue of discussion from the regulator, both in terms of local authorities and their broad services, but also schools.

Q18 David Johnston: I have a quick question on the practicalities. I completely understand why we do not want to exclude children in care, but it strikes me as difficult for a school to apply what other pupils and parents would see as an inconsistency if they had an exclusion policy for other types of children. I wonder how possible you think that is or whether we are back to needing to drive all schools to not reach for temporary exclusion?

Lord Adonis: It would be perfectly possible, because schools use a range of behaviour management tools in respect of temporary exclusions anyway. I agree with you that the direction of travel of policy needs to be towards eliminating temporary exclusions anyway, but I think this differential system would be possible to manage.

Q19 Ian Mearns: One thing that strikes me, and this brings back a lot of memories for me when I was chair of the education committee in Gateshead and we had non-attendance panels for youngsters in care and



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the social workers would not turn up. It all changed when I wrote to the chief executive and suggested I make a recommendation that we should take the Director of Social Services to court because the children in his care were not going to school and the social workers were not turning up to the non-attendance panels. It took me writing to the chief executive to get a sea change in that behaviour, but that is 30 years ago.

Josh, you talked earlier on about children coming into care homes who already had significant learning difficulties, and many have education, health and care plans. That will have an impact on the differential results that youngsters get. What can we do? We have to do something to make education outcomes for children in our care homes better. Given the initial difficulty that the youngsters are going into care homes with an education, health and care plan already, we have to invest in this in a big way, have we not?

Josh MacAlister: I agree, and this takes us back to the earlier questions about where the answer might lie. I do not have the answers yet, and that is why the review is being undertaken. Key to this is getting to a place where we are clear why children are in a residential home instead of a foster home, a kinship arrangement or still with their birth families. The reason why that is crucial is that so many of the children in residential children's homes are there for a very short time.

For the people running children's homes, for social workers and for the children's social care system making decisions about where these children live, the question has to be: what are you trying to achieve? If it is about containing children and safeguarding children alone, or just reducing professional anxiety, that is not a good enough reason. That is not a plan for children's childhoods. That is about the professionals involved and not about the children.

I have spoken to Mulberry Bush School, who do some brilliant work and have a very clear plan about which children they are working with, why they are working with them, what they hope to achieve, what the outcomes should be, and they are now starting to do some brilliant work with shared care models where they do more work with those children's wider family networks.

I think we need that to be really clear first and then build out from that what we are hoping to achieve in terms of educational attainment while children are in these settings. That sets us up for solutions that will inevitably come to workforce, which has been raised already, in terms of social workers but also who is running these homes and the qualifications of the staff involved.

I have already heard mixed feedback about the level 3 qualification that is required, and Ofsted has flagged that at any one time 10% of children's homes do not have a registered manager in post. There are huge issues about how we get enough of the right qualified, skilled people into these homes who are making decisions about what education should be provided, how we get these kinds into the best local schools and who is building relationships with these schools.



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Q20 Ian Mearns: When we are talking about the right level of skills, is enough being done in terms of training of social workers and care home staff about the importance and continuity of education for the children in their care? Is that built into the system in a robust enough way?

Josh MacAlister: I don't believe it is, no. When we are talking about other possible recommendations, one thing I would flag is that there is a systematic problem within children's social care of a gap between policy intention and action on the ground. You see lots of guidance and lots of requirements placed on social workers and services, and Anne will have seen this repeatedly during her time as Children's Commissioner.

I have already heard far too many examples where local authorities have been told to do something—Staying Put arrangements for 18-year-old children to stay in foster homes up to their 20s not being followed, and grants for care leavers to set up their own homes being completely distorted in practice on the ground. We need to pay attention not only to giving new entitlements and instructions to people doing the work, but to thinking carefully about why there is too often a yawning gap between the sorts of things we are describing here and the experiences children end up receiving.

Q21 Tom Hunt: With regard to the point Lord Adonis made about the link with prison—a large number of parents of children in care are in prison—we know from the report we are doing that 35% of those in prison have learning disabilities. We think it is probably far higher, because we are not properly assessing everyone who goes into the system. What proportion of children in care have learning disabilities? Do we know that?

Anne Longfield: We know that a large proportion—perhaps Josh can help me out here; yes, it is around 52%—have special education needs and a quarter have social and emotional health needs and very high needs around mental health as well. That is why support for therapeutic support alongside education support is very important and why packages are important around schools.

There are more than 200,000 children with parents in prison and when I last looked at it, the form people fill in when someone goes to prison does not ask if there are any children in the family. There are some basic things where we can start to acknowledge the link between parents in prison and children. The other part is that if schools know—and there are difficulties around that with some families—and if they can provide packages of support, children will really benefit.

Q22 Kim Johnson: My question is for Anne. The "Pass the parcel" report highlighted significant numbers of children waiting long periods to be allocated a school place after moving homes. Would you say this has worsened over the last 11 years due to austerity and the lack of early intervention and preventative support that you have just mentioned? Can you explain how key agencies move away from working in silos to being far more collaborative to meet the challenges in this sector?



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Anne Longfield: There is a lot in there. Statistics show there has been an increase in numbers of children placed out of area; 41% are placed out of area, some over 100 miles away. Josh said earlier that the average is 60. That is a direct result of where the provision is. There has been this wholesale change towards almost completely private providers, and they are where they are. That is often in areas of the country where the accommodation is cheapest, not where the need is greatest.

For instance, I was talking to colleagues in Manchester who told me they had good levels of children's home provision in Manchester but could only get access to 20% of it because it was needed for others elsewhere in the country. In London we have seen a huge growth in the number of teenagers, with 37% of the number coming into care being older children—by that I mean 15, 16 and 17-year-olds—but less than 5% of the places being there.

It is a consequence of the providers that are there, which is why the whole system needs disrupting, taking to pieces and rebuilding. Part of that—I hope that Josh will look at this as well— is not only excellent provision for those children who need it here and now, but also good preventative care and preventative support for families who are struggling. That would include children of prisoner families. Those compound, but the public purse pays for the £250,000 a year, and I was quite shocked by that. When I first heard that the cost of looking after an adolescent for four years was £1 million, the really shocking part was that the commissioning authority could not say those children were in a better place at the end of it than the beginning. All those combined means, for me, a system that is not working.

Chair: Kim, do you have a follow-up?

Kim Johnson: I wanted to say that is a sad indictment on the state in terms of how those children have been failed, sadly, because these organisations put profit before people.

Q23

David Simmonds: This links back to the earlier question about how we get commissioning right. I am interested in what things we should be doing differently. Should it be commissioning on the basis of the outcomes we seek to achieve—picking up on Anne Longfield's point about a system that, at the moment, measures process—or is there an alternative methodology that you have identified with your wide range of experience in your different roles?

Lord Adonis: It is good that you have Anne and Josh here, and that Josh is doing this review, because they will look at best practice in terms of commissioning, and I do not have anything to add to what he said on that on the regime. I share the concerns Anne raised about the scale of profits that are being made. To be blunt, it seems obscene to me that you could look at £250,000 a year being paid when you consider the relationship with outcomes.

In terms of the overall approach we should take to these issues, Michael Barber—a great friend of mine and a very wise guy on these issues—used



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to have a mantra in education, when we worked together in the Blair years, that no school can be better than its teachers. It is very hard, and we all know this, for pupils to outperform their teachers. That is why it is important that you should always have a group of high academically performing teachers in every school. It is very hard for a child to get to a top university if no teacher in their school has themselves been to a top university, because the quality of the teaching and level of aspiration that is set is not there.

It is also my view that no child will have the capacity to do better than the attention they get from their social worker. I suspect that the quality of the workforce is much more important than the contracting arrangements, whether the people providing the service are public, private or voluntary, or what the legal arrangements are. My experience in care is that the two transformational things that happened to me were having a phenomenal lady who was in charge of my children's home for most of the time I was there, and having one really good social worker who navigated all the problems in Camden Council to get me sent to a boarding school. It is the quality of the people that matters.

While you have to get the plumbing right—the contracting and all that is the plumbing—and you certainly should not pay too much for the plumbing and you need value for money, the people who deal with the children in care, and their families and foster families and so on, are probably the most important thing there.

Q24 David Simmonds: I would be interested in what Anne and Josh have to say about that question. I appreciate that you do not have the same experience of being in the care system, but what are the reforms that would drive that behaviour?

Anne Longfield: I think we should simplify it. There has been this idea that a market has been created with lots of commissioning hoops and things that do not seem to drive the end product, which is that we want loving places that are stable for kids. I think we should keep it local, make it about relationships and fill it with good people who can sit with kids through thick and thin and help them recover, because they will have had trauma in their lives, and help them grow relentlessly.

There is part of the system where there are children in particularly precarious situations—the older kids in unregulated—that need to be factored in. We need to become much less tolerant of making do. We know that the number of children who are sent there has immensely grown over recent years. It is a last resort placement for a lot of areas, and I have heard about some that are charging £20,000 a week. There are particular issues about that section of providers who are not regulated and are often open to abuse of the system.

Q25 David Simmonds: On the advocacy point—the person who is the champion, or the sharp-elbowed parents—we are conscious that if you are a social worker, you will have a catch-up call with the case every so often. Do you have a view about a more effective advocacy model,



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perhaps expanding what virtual schools do, to be relentless in pushing forward the interests and opportunities for this group of children?

Anne Longfield: I think there is a role there, and whatever we call it, you have the makings of that with the personal advice for care leavers, and you have the independent reviewing officer to advocate on behalf of the child. You could look at a role that combines personal advice and working alongside the social worker—someone who is there to, as you say, relentlessly advocate and stick with them wherever they are. One of the downsides is that if the child is out of the area, 60 miles from home, the social worker will not be able to get there very often. They might do screen stuff now, but it is very difficult to maintain those relationships, or relationships with friends, family and community. I think there is a need for a new role here that could work alongside or extend the virtual head role to make sure that kids in care are getting a good deal—in several arenas, but certainly with education and also, I would say, with health.

Q26 **Kim Johnson:** My next question is to Josh. The Case for Change has been described as an independent review. However, your appointment has been criticised by the sector for not being wholly independent because Frontline was funded and has been championed by the DfE. How would you respond to this criticism?

Josh MacAlister: As Andrew will also know, Frontline was set up by myself and Andrew who pitched it to Government, and we managed to persuade them to back it. I hope I can use the same influencing skills to encourage the Government to back the recommendations coming out of this review. Frontline was a cross-party backed initiative, and when it launched it appeared in multiple Labour manifestos and was also championed by the Government. Like some of the most successful initiatives in public sector reform, it managed to garner cross-party support.

I am taking the same approach to this review, to hold up a mirror to the children's social care system, to Government and to local authorities—some of which are Labour, and some Conservative—and to ask some of the big and, at times, uncomfortable questions about how we need to improve the system for children and families. I am also happy to come back on some of David's questions if there is time later.

Q27 **Kim Johnson:** Thank you for that, Josh. You also said we should not casually accept such poor life experience for care-experienced children; that educational attainment is far lower for those children; and that 39% of care leavers aged 19 to 21 were not in education, training or employment. While all children will be affected by this, what is your understanding about how black children in the sector are impacted?

Josh MacAlister: The issue of racial disparities within the system is hugely important. We touch on it in the Case for Change. It is an area, unfortunately, where there is very poor research and not enough evidence of those experiences. We know about particular experiences within the children's social care system for black children, particularly in the adoption system. We have a better understanding of delays there in



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adoption processes. When it comes to residential children's homes, there are some indications that costs for placing black children in residential care are higher. What is going on there is concerning.

Looking back to the earliest part of the children's social care system—how we help and support families—we know so little about which families and communities we are able to provide that help and support to, and which communities are making good use of it and are feeling like they are not being judged or stigmatised. I have committed from the beginning of the review to making racial disparities a focus for our work, and we are making sure that across the range of issues we are giving due regard and attention to it.

Q28 Kim Johnson: I am picking up on that point, given that there is limited research. Can I ask if the civil servants you have working on this report are diverse? Do you have diverse representation in that, and does the expert panel you set up have representatives that are black and can bring some information to the inquiry?

Josh MacAlister: That is a very important question. I am pleased that the immediate team of civil servants working on the review represent a very diverse range of backgrounds and are ethnically diverse as well. The Experts by Experience board also has, as you can see on our website, a broad range of people and experiences on it. Although that is only one part of it, I think we are doing a good job of hearing from as broad a range as possible. We are working at the moment with an organisation called the Black Care Experience to host a number of open roundtable discussions with people with lived experience who are black about their experiences of children's social care.

Kim Johnson: Thank you, Josh. Those were all my questions.

Q29 Kate Osborne: My question is to Lord Adonis. How might improved support and training for social workers and lead professionals in children's homes lead to improved outcomes for children? Can you share with us any particular positive or negative experiences or practice you have experienced as well, please?

Lord Adonis: The two things I place a very high premium on are the quality of recruits and seeing a steady stream of able younger people coming into the profession each year. It is important to have a steady stream of younger professionals in this area because in my experience they find it much easier to relate often to children they are dealing with.

Recruitment is hugely important and looking at the latest data, the turnover and vacancy rate are very concerning. There are a number of things done to seek to improve that, but I think there needs to be a much stronger national focus on this. If I was the Minister in charge at the moment, I would be seeking to get a grip on recruitment practices and what it takes to improve recruitment, including bursaries, recruitment incentives and so on, to see that we are up to the level in recruitment.



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I defer to Anne and Josh in this, because they are closer to it than I am, but why is it that, despite all the initiatives we have been taking over recent years, we still have such a high turnover rate among social workers? When I looked at the data, I found that the most surprising thing. It has been a big priority to try to reduce that turnover rate over recent years, but we still have a turnover rate in children's social work that is three times the level for nurses and nearly twice the level for teachers. Why is that? I think we need to get to the heart of that, because that is a critical issue.

The turnover rate directly impacts on the discontinuity in relation to children. There are other factors too, to do with contracting and case management and so on, but where you have very high turnover rates, because people are leaving the profession at such a rapid rate, children will be subjected to more frequent changes. I would be trying to get to grips with that turnover rate.

Q30 **Chair:** How would you do it, in a nutshell, Andrew?

Lord Adonis: I wanted to pass that particular parcel to Anne and Josh. I am not quite sure why the turnover rate is so high.

Anne Longfield: I am sure Josh is looking at this in more depth than I am going to give you, but I would say the turnover is so high because people in those roles feel that that they are administering a system that is about managing crisis, rather than about growing children as individuals. They are also administering very high thresholds of care that, and, as most know, too high. Process and the system are working against what they know is needed. I will defer to Josh to sort that out, but I will also say that I think there is a role around family workers, and a for much closer relationship with the Supporting Families Programme, which I think should be bigger, to work with families alongside social workers so they can have confidence they are working with trusted adults around whom they do not have all the baggage of feeling judged.

Q31 **Chair:** In a couple of sentences, Josh, how can we overturn this problem?

Josh MacAlister: In a couple of sentences, part of it is about the agency rate we have within children's social care and social work, alongside the turnover rate being a big problem, a bit like Andrew said, and remaining stubbornly high. I think the turnover rate is double what it is in adult social care, where it is already high. It is about 15%. It is also very expensive. It costs about £100 million per year, on top of salaries, to have that agency premium, which is not money well spent.

There are a couple of issues. One is linked to Anne's point about whether professionals are being freed up to do the work that they came into the profession to do, and whether the system is setting them up to spend time with children and families and have the professional freedom and responsibility to intervene and help families have the best chances in life.

Despite the fact that we are 10 years on from the Munro review that highlighted some of these same issues, we have 30,000 social workers,



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10,000 of whom are not working directly with families. They are managing and quality assuring those who are; they are essentially watching and leading the system, not doing the work. That is one third of our social workers. For the remaining two thirds, only one third of their time is actually spent working directly with children and families. When you compare that to any other public service, it is a catastrophic misuse of the most valuable resource in the children's social care system, which is social workers. Part of what we have to do is to free up this amazing group of people, who are incredibly hardworking, so they can get back to doing what they came into social work to do in the first place—to transform children's lives and work with families.

Chair: Thank you. I am going to bring in David Johnston now. If we have time towards the end, I will try to bring in a couple of others who want to ask some questions.

Q32 **David Johnston:** A question to all of you: under Staying Put, children can stay with their foster families after they turn 18 and the Department now has Staying Close—it is piloting that in eight areas—where you can stay in your residential care after 18. Would you support a rollout of Staying Close to all areas, and what difference do you think it would make if we did that?

Chair: I will get Josh to answer that one, again, as concisely as you can— I know it is difficult.

Josh MacAlister: Sure. I think Staying Close should absolutely be rolled out more widely. It is worth saying that Staying Close is not one thing. It is being piloted in different areas with a lot of variation in how it is being interpreted. There are some benefits to doing that, because it is a pilot. The evaluation does show some encouraging signs in terms of the quality of tenancies for care leavers, and reductions in rates of care experience, people not being in education, employment or training. There are some positive signs there. As for a broader commitment for those care-experienced young adults being able to stay in their home, there is some interesting learning from the pandemic. DfE's guidance to children's homes to keep hold of children and discourage them from moving children around has taught us something, I would hope, about what is possible with children not being moved on immediately once they hit a birthday. I am very open-minded on a lot of these questions and keen to learn more.

Q33 **David Johnston:** You say it is being done differently in different areas. Is there a particular area that you think has a stronger model than some of the others?

Josh MacAlister: I want to see more of the evaluation results. The areas really have taken very, very different approaches. Some are pinning a lot on the children's home staff remaining in touch and doing a lot of the direct work. I know that some campaigners worked very closely with Martin Narey on the original conception for this. It would be worth speaking to them about their reflections from the intention back in 2016 to where it is now.



Q34 David Johnston: You may have touched on this when I had to leave for the fire alarm test, but what has the pandemic done to the demand for places in children's homes and to the quality of education, support and welfare that is provided in those homes? Anne, do you want to go first?

Anne Longfield: I think that children's homes fared and coped better than some feared. There was not a staffing crisis to the extent that there could have been. That gives some comfort about resilience in some of those homes, although when you are looking at bubbles, you have very small teams there that could have been wiped out. Like all children, they could not go to school as normal, but vulnerable children could go. I have not seen the read-out on how many did, although we know overall there were not the numbers that we would normally wish.

I did see very good examples of some local authorities working very closely with providers to provide packages of education support, following those children up and giving those levels of support throughout the crisis. There are some good examples there of how it could work. When it comes to how widespread that was, I doubt it was commonplace. As in so many things, it exposed the weaknesses. Many children were a long way from home and they were relying on screen contact with families, which could have been terribly upsetting for them and an added trauma.

Chair: I will bring in Caroline Johnson, who has not had a question yet, and then I will go to Ian, and if we have time we will pick up on a couple of other colleagues.

Q35 Dr Caroline Johnson: I want to come back to what was just said about the use of time. Those statistics were quite shocking. I believe you said that one third of social workers are in direct care. I am interested to know whether you think the ratio of supervisory roles to more junior roles is correct, and what the direct, frontline social workers are spending two thirds of their time on instead of direct care for children. Is it too much paperwork? Are we counting too many things? Are there too many pieces of information that they have to collate? What is this time being spent doing?

Josh MacAlister: Caroline, you have highlighted the main issues. The importance of supervision is crucial. There are some things that social workers are doing in that two thirds of the time that are crucial and should continue to be done into the future, like good quality supervision, where more experienced and qualified staff are able to sit down with social workers and talk through how they are doing at work, what is changing for the children and what is being done with the families, and provide some proper reflective space. Even in the current system, the frequency and quality of supervision is a problem, despite the fact that two thirds of time is not being spent directly with children and families. We have to think about why we have ended up with not only so much social work time being taken away from direct practice, but this proliferation of other roles within the system, which leaves children with lots of professionals doing more focused, narrow parts of work but less of



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a sense of overall responsibility and accountability for those children's outcomes.

Q36 Dr Caroline Johnson: If you are saying that one third of social workers are in supervisory roles, that is one supervisor for every two other staff. How can those other staff not be well supervised? That is quite a high ratio.

Josh MacAlister: Part of it is that a lot of social workers—and obviously this varies—are not given a high degree of autonomy in their work, so decisions are often run up and down the management chain, often because of concerns about inconsistency or quality of judgment. Also, there are a number of roles that are not directly supervisory that are included in that third, such as independent chairs of child protection conferences, independent reviewing officers and quality assurance managers. Those are people who are outside the immediate line management role but are nevertheless experienced and often very good social workers, who have been put into roles where they no longer spend the majority of their time doing direct children and family social work.

Q37 Ian Mearns: Was the Department's decision only to ban regulated provision for children under 16 the right one, and to what extent are children living in unregulated provision falling under the radar when it comes to missing out on education and support? Are there any figures available? Why do we expect, in some places, some of the most vulnerable children in our society to somehow magically thrive or survive in unregulated and unsupported circumstances once they turn 16?

Chair: Surely there should be no unregulated provision, per se. Andrew, do you want to answer that?

Lord Adonis: The answer is that I agree. Josh was looking at this. Apologies, Chair, I have a question in the Lords in 15 minutes, so I am going to have to bow out.

Chair: Thank you hugely for your experience, your knowledge and the way you have given evidence today. It has been an honour to have you here. Thank you.

Lord Adonis: Not at all. I have a very high degree of confidence in Josh's view of the profession and the problems that are being faced, and I think his report is going to be very important in charting a way forward on this.

Q38 Chair: Thank you, and every good wish to you. Josh, you have spoken a lot recently, so I am going to go to Anne first. Anne, do you want to answer the question please?

Anne Longfield: Yes. I don't think any children should be in unregulated provision. The under 16s were obviously desperately overdue in terms of putting anyone there, but the most vulnerable children remain there. When I looked back at the Narey report, he said almost as an aside that there were 1,000 children living in what were then referred to as hostels, which seems very old fashioned. Now we know that there are near on 12,000 children a year—one in eight—living in unregulated provision. You



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have seen how it has grown. It has largely been fuelled by the number of 16 and 17-year-olds coming into care. Let us remember, they come into care because they are usually at huge risk of harm from exploitation, gangs and sexual exploitation. Their parents cannot protect them; that is why they are coming into care. Then they are being placed in unregulated provision where we do not know who is running it, we do not know what level of education they are getting—they should still be at school—and some of the circumstances are extremely, extremely worrying and dangerous.

Q39 Ian Mearns: The concept that they are coming into care is a misnomer, is it not?

Anne Longfield: Yes, I would agree. I said that at the time and continue to say that. I don't think that any of us who have kids who have gone past the age of 16 would feel comfortable, especially if they were going through a bad time in their life, putting them somewhere with no care or even support. I think this is the wrong way of going about it. It is too much of a compromise. I know that a lot of local authorities are putting children there because they think there is no other option, but it cannot be acceptable. The police have told me that they even thought there were criminal gangs running some of these places. No one knows, of course, because they are not regulated. These kids should be in school, and they move on average five times.

Q40 Chair: Josh—yes or no—should there be such a thing as unregulated provision? Should we stop that once and for all?

Josh MacAlister: We should stop it once and for all, absolutely.

Q41 Tom Hunt: Back to this point about special educational needs, I can think of some reasons why such a high proportion of those in care have special educational needs, but I was wondering what your views are as to why that is. Secondly, do you see there being a link between parents not having their learning needs met, potentially ending up in prison, being alienated from society, having children who also have learning disabilities and not being able to cope with them, and then they can end up in care? Do you think some of this is to do with not getting SEND right?

Anne Longfield: What we know is that children who are brought up in poverty and disadvantage are much more likely to have special educational needs. We know that if families are struggling with domestic violence, addiction and severe mental health difficulties themselves, that will have an impact on children. I definitely see a really strong link between supporting families and enabling families to flourish, and being able to want the best for children who are ending up in the care system. That is why I link it back to the Supporting Families Programme and why I talk about family support on early intervention alongside the option—if it gets to that point—of care, be that either permanent care or care for a period of time.

Q42 Tom Hunt: Is some of the reason why such a high proportion of those in care have special education needs to do with the fact that they might be



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difficult to deal with? Their parents might struggle to deal with them, so that is why they end up in care?

Anne Longfield: Yes, of course. You have children with particular needs and some parents will struggle. They will need additional support as they grow up. Of course, that will be a challenge for any family, but for a family struggling in the first place, it will possibly be the thing that tips them over the edge. Also, if there are services and support there for those children, that will help, but they are not always consistent.

Q43 **Tom Hunt:** If we had a special educational needs system that was working as it should, potentially there might be a lot less children in care or needing to go into care.

Anne Longfield: Yes. If you had proper support for families that have vulnerabilities to look at how they can strengthen their families and support their parenting role, and you had a proper, working special educational needs system to support children, you would have a fighting chance.

Chair: In our previous report, as you know, we suggested that every family should have a neutral advocate to help them all the way through the system. Kim, you had a question.

Q44 **Kim Johnson:** It goes back to what the panel mentioned before about staffing, the inconsistent approach and the fact that young people have a steady flow of social workers to deal with them. My concern is that newly qualified social workers have such a high case load and a lack of supervision and management. I want to know whether the panel has anything to say about training of social workers, and whether the agencies and universities need to do something about that. I also want to pick up the point Lord Adonis made about young people being in a good position to relate with young people in the social care sector. I have an opinion that people with life experience would be in a much stronger position to deal with young people with multiple, complex needs. I want to know whether the panel agrees with that.

Chair: I am going to refer this one to you, Josh, please.

Josh MacAlister: Yes. People in children's social care have such a range of lived experience. Trying to select people to come into the profession on the basis of having a similar or shared experience would be very limiting to the breadth of people we might be able to bring in. I think it is absolutely essential that people doing social work have a mix of personal qualities, particularly empathy—to understand what life might be like for people who have a very different background to your own—but also those who are intellectually curious, and able to write brilliantly and make a strong case in a court arena on behalf of a child. In a way, the mix of things that are required of social workers are what make the job so demanding and challenging, but also rewarding and important.

As for social work education, this is an area I have some views on, having set up and run Frontline for a number of years. Frontline is responsible for about one in 10 social workers who now qualify. There is only one



route in but I think there has been a widespread improvement in the content of what social workers are learning. Over the last 10 years the Government have certainly become clearer about the knowledge and skills that social workers should have. The reintroduction of a specialist regulator is a positive move, with the opportunity for them to push further on education providers of social workers and do more to properly assess and check that the curriculum is in the right place. That is positive.

There is this ongoing, stubborn issue around supervision for social workers, with too many social workers only being supervised formerly once every six weeks, which is far too infrequent. That supervision sometimes takes the form of a checklist, figuring out whether assessments have been done within a particular timeframe, rather than some of the richer, more important discussions about what is going on for this child and this family. Supervision is a huge area where improvements are needed.

Q45 Chair: Thank you. Finally, I will go back to Ofsted. After everything we have heard today and all the problems you have set out, I go back to the incredibly poor educational attainment and outcomes, and I reiterate that I think it is quite astonishing that there is not more of a national conversation about this and why it is allowed to happen. Narey said in his review that the most dependable guide to the quality of care flows from Ofsted inspection results. I am not saying that this is the fault of Ofsted; they are under a particular inspection regime. Given what we have heard today, that inspection regime is not fit for purpose and needs to be overhauled. A school would not be given a good Ofsted rating if all the pupils who came out of it were doing incredibly badly, and yet that seems to be allowed in care homes. I want to see how you both respond to that. I will start with you, Anne.

Anne Longfield: You will not be surprised to hear me say that I agree completely. What is measured in children's homes and care more broadly needs to swing firmly behind outcomes for children. I would say outcomes in terms of wellbeing, but also in terms of education, and I would add in there the destination for children, too. Those have to be the core components of what we are here for as parents, and that is what Ofsted need to now measure as their primary function.

Josh MacAlister: Some of the best leaders within children's social care—whether it is people running homes or the whole local authority children's services—do what is needed regardless of the Ofsted measurements, and it just so happens that they end up getting "outstanding" at the end of it. It is unfortunate if the system is wholly dependent on Ofsted criteria for improvement and direction, but I accept that in some areas that is where we are. With children's homes, the caveat to add is that, given the position that a lot of children are in by the time they reach residential care, it is worth being really clear about what we expect children's homes to achieve in educational progress during the time they have those children. It should absolutely be a focus for Ofsted to have a clearer set of expectations for providers on the educational and learning progress



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that these children should make during their time in the homes, particularly in English and maths.

- Q46 **Chair:** Should it not be the primary duty? Without an independent education, and without at least having basic maths and English, those children will not succeed in life. Therefore, should it not be made—whether by Government, by local authorities or in updated guidance—the primary duty of looking after children in care to at least give them a basic education, particularly in maths and English?

Josh MacAlister: I think it should be a primary objective. I don't think it should be the primary objective.

- Q47 **Chair:** No, but one of the primary objectives. It does not seem to be at the moment. Is that correct?

Josh MacAlister: Yes, I think that is right. For lots of these children, you could line it up alongside mental health and the trauma that they have experienced earlier in their life. Also—I have made this point already to Ofsted directly—judgments are made about relationships between staff in these homes and children, but judgments are not made about the much more important relationships that are going to last with these children for the rest of their lives. Who is paying attention to those relationships? Who has brought together the teacher that the child had the best relationship with, and the former social worker, and their aunt who they have not seen for two years, and their brother, and done the work that was needed with that group? We should be making Ofsted judgments about that, really.

- Q48 **Chair:** When these children go into care homes, who decides what kind of education they are going to have and what schools they go to? What happens? Is it the local authority that decides?

Josh MacAlister: A lot of it is covered by the personal education plan for the child. I believe that there are negotiations that take place between the children's home, children's social care and schools about getting those children into the right provision. A lot of these children are in special schools, not mainstream schools, and some of the providers do onsite residential schooling as well.

- Q49 **Chair:** How much linkage is there if children are moved about a fair bit? If they have been in London and come to Essex, how much interaction is there between the different educational establishments? If the child is going to a new college in Essex, what interaction will there be with his or her previous school?

Josh MacAlister: I think a lot of the time that is missing. I was in a secure children's home a few weeks ago where a child had arrived and the local authority had ended the EHCP for the child at the point at which they turned up in the secure children's home, which makes absolutely no sense. That plan had probably been fought for over a number of months, to get it and get the resources that had come with it, and it had been almost abandoned by the service in having the child go to the children's home. There is an issue about the system being quite brittle; we have



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lots of different professionals in these children's lives, but children often end up falling between the gaps that have been created through quite siloed structures.

Q50 **Chair:** Anne, would it be feasible to have something like a child in care education passport, so when they move from place to place, the plan, the credits, the marks, and the development would continue, so you would almost have a seamless move to the next educational establishment. Is that practical?

Anne Longfield: I would think it is very practical and very necessary, as are enhanced protocols about providing that information. I know that children are sent places, information does not arrive and then often it is back to square one. Of those children who move area when they are out of placement, 62% go to another out-of-area placement as well. Every time they move, the system—be it education, mental health support or other support—often has to start from scratch. For any child, that is hugely disruptive and limiting in what they can achieve.

Q51 **Chair:** Thank you very, very much, all of you. This has been really invaluable. When is your review finalising and coming out, Josh?

Josh MacAlister: It will be spring 2022, so spring next year.

Q52 **Chair:** I hope our work helps to feed into that review.

Josh MacAlister: Absolutely.

Chair: Anne, it is incredibly good to see you again. You are always there to help. Thank you so much for agreeing to do this today. Your expertise is always, always appreciated by us. Thank you. I wish you all well.