

# Government Response

Short Inquiry: 'Stable Homes, Built on Love' (2023)

Department for Education July 2023

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## Introduction

- 1. The Government is committed to giving every child the opportunity to fulfil their potential, regardless of their background or the circumstances in which they grew up.** We welcome this short inquiry from the Public Services Committee<sup>1</sup> into our Implementation Strategy, “*Stable Homes, Built on Love*”<sup>2</sup>. The strategy was published earlier this year and sets out the Government’s bold and ambitious plans to reform children’s social care. We give thanks to the Committee for the vital work it does to consider public services and give specific thanks to parliamentarians who have worked within the system to support vulnerable children and families. This includes parliamentarians who have worked as social workers, and who have carried out reviews into children’s social care, safeguarding, child protection and related areas - including members of this Committee. Whilst the Government received this report outside of the consultation period for “*Stable Homes, Built on Love*” (2<sup>nd</sup> February – 11<sup>th</sup> May 2023) we will consider it alongside the views we received through consultation.
  
- 2. At the heart of the Government’s plans to reform children’s social care is an ambition that every child deserves to grow up with safety, stability, and love.** Notwithstanding the dedication of many professionals across the country, the system does not currently deliver consistently enough for vulnerable children and families. This was evidenced clearly by three reviews published in 2022. “The Independent Review into Children’s Social Care”<sup>3</sup>, led by Josh MacAlister, delivered on a 2019 manifesto commitment. It called for a reset of the system, so it provides more help to families in crisis, especially at an early stage, acts decisively in response to abuse, and ensures those in care have stability and lifelong loving relationships. “The National Panel Review into the deaths of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson”<sup>4</sup> found weaknesses in information sharing and a lack of robust critical thinking and challenge within and between agencies in child protection practice. It also found a need for sharper specialist child protection skills within the workforce and stronger leadership and management, to enable good practice. “The Competition and Markets Authority study into children’s social care placements”<sup>5</sup> identified: a lack of placements for children of the right kind, and in the right places; that the largest private providers of placements are making materially higher profits; and that some of the largest private providers are carrying very high levels of debt.

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<sup>1</sup> [Public Services Committee - Summary - Committees - UK Parliament](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Children's social care stable homes built on love consultation \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Independent review of children's social care - final report \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Child Protection in England - May 2022 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Final report \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

3. On the day of the publication of the Independent Review of Children’s Social Care, the Government made several immediate commitments<sup>6</sup>, including one to deliver an Implementation Strategy outlining plans to reform children’s social care. In February this year, the Government delivered on that commitment through the publication of “*Stable Homes, Built on Love: an implementation strategy and consultation*”<sup>7</sup> (referred to hereafter as “*Built on Love*”). It set out six pillars of action to transform the system, through which the Government will:
  - a. provide the right support at the right time, so that children thrive within their families, and families stay together through our Family Help offer.
  - b. strengthen our child protection response by getting agencies to work together in a fully integrated way, led by social workers with greater skills and knowledge.
  - c. unlock the potential of kinship care so that, wherever possible, children who cannot stay with their parents are cared for by people who know and love them already.
  - d. reform the care system, so we have the right homes for children in the right places; and ensure we are ambitious for children in care and care leavers, providing the right support to help them thrive and achieve their potential into adulthood.
  - e. provide a valued, supported and highly skilled social worker for every child who needs one.
  - f. make sure the whole system continuously learns and improves and makes better use of evidence and data.
4. On 11<sup>th</sup> May 2023, the Government closed three consultations<sup>8</sup> on: the proposals set out in “*Built on Love*”, our draft Children’s Social Care National Framework and Data Dashboard, and our plans for addressing the high use of agency social workers. We received thousands of responses across the three consultations and will publish a Government Response in September 2023 setting out what we’ve heard. We recognise that this builds on extensive engagement conducted throughout the three reviews mentioned in paragraph 2, and we give thanks to everyone that shared their views and stories, especially those with personal experience of children’s social care.
5. Through this memorandum we note and respond to each of the Committee’s recommendations, including the calls for: greater investment in reform, independent advocacy for children and young people, foster carer recruitment targets, entitlements for kinship carers, and careful design and evaluation of Regional Care Cooperatives. Below, we set out our initial response to each recommendation, in advance of publishing a formal response to our three recent consultations.

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<sup>6</sup> [Written statements - Written questions, answers and statements - UK Parliament](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Children’s social care stable homes built on love consultation \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

<sup>8</sup> [Children’s social care: stable homes, built on love - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

6. We reiterate our thanks to the Committee for its work. As we deliver the commitments set out in *"Built on Love"*, we will prioritise working with partners in the system to ensure reform leads to long-lasting positive changes for all children, young people, and their families. We also recognise that successful delivery will require alignment of reforms across multiple systems for children and families, including Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), Alternative Provision (AP) and childcare.

# Response to committee recommendations

## Chapter 1: Introduction

**Recommendation 1: We recognise it is not possible to roll-out all reforms, everywhere, immediately. However, the Government should ensure that all children’s care services see some benefits, soon.**

7. We are committed to transformational, whole-system reform, and will continue to work in partnership with those delivering frontline services, including local government, to ensure all children’s services see the benefits of reform. We also want to make sure everyone understands the expectations for their work with children and families and bring together the purpose of local authority children’s social care, principles for practice, and the outcomes that should be achieved through practice. These are set out within the Children’s Social Care National Framework, which we will publish as statutory guidance by the end of this year. Alongside this, we are consulting on a revised version of the multi-agency statutory guidance “Working Together to Safeguard Children”<sup>9</sup> (2018). This update will support new policy as part of our reform programme. It will also clarify and simplify existing requirements, to help practitioners across agencies deliver services that fulfil the local authorities’ responsibilities to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in their area. We have committed to publishing a consultation response, and updated guidance, before the end of 2023.
8. In a step towards helping all children’s services move towards the new vision for reform, the Minister for Children, Families, and Wellbeing wrote to all Directors of Children’s Services (on the 6<sup>th</sup> March 2023) to outline our ambitions for transformational whole-system change, whilst reiterating the responsibility of all partners in delivering reform. Through this letter, the Minister encouraged local authorities to take action to review their arrangements for kinship care and multi-disciplinary workforce; assess existing opportunities for children in care and care leavers to build relationships; and ensure areas are making evidence-based decisions for commissioning.

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<sup>9</sup> [Working Together to Safeguard Children 2018 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

9. As the Committee highlighted, “*Built on Love*” sets out reform activity which will benefit all local authorities. This includes investing £9 million in support and training for all kinship carers over this Spending Review period; investing in fostering recruitment and retention and increasing the National Minimum Allowance (for Foster Carers) above inflation; boosting the care leavers’ apprenticeship bursary from £1,000 to £3,000 and increasing the care leavers’ allowance from £2,000 to £3,000. The strategy investments build on those announced in the most recent Spending Review, to:
- a. introduce new national standards Ofsted registration and inspection requirements for unregulated supported accommodation (£142 million).
  - b. expand places in secure and open residential children’s homes (£259 million).
  - c. deliver our Adoption Strategy ‘Achieving excellence everywhere’ (£160 million).
  - d. support young people leaving care with housing, access to education, employment, and training; and to help them to develop social connections and networks, to avoid loneliness and isolation (over £230 million).
10. “*Built on Love*” recognises the need to balance necessary reform in children’s social care, with the need to scale evidence-based intervention safely and effectively. The £200 million funding announced alongside the strategy will be used over this Spending Review period to address urgent issues and set the path for longer-term reform. Used in this way, it will allow us to test some of the most complex reforms to ensure they meet our bold and ambitious vision for the system. In particular, we will be taking a measured approach to reform through our Families First for Children and Regional Care Cooperative Pathfinder programmes. Through the delivery of these Pathfinders, we will build in mechanisms for sharing learning between participating and non-participating local authorities.

**Recommendation 2: The successful implementation of the strategy will require substantial cross-departmental cooperation and political buy-in. The Prime Minister’s Delivery Unit should have responsibility for driving implementation and coordination between Departments. Further review and consultation should be minimised.**

11. Departments across government play critical roles in protecting vulnerable children and their families, which is why we have been working closely to agree an ambitious and detailed strategy. As we deliver the commitments set out in “*Built on Love*” we recognise that it will be key to work across government to co-design and deliver reforms which ensure integrated services. This approach builds on the Department’s record of meaningful cross-government working. For example, the Department for Education worked closely with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities on the Supporting Families programme. We successfully delivered a joint bid at the last Spending Review which resulted in a 40% cash-terms uplift for Supporting Families by 2024-25 (equivalent to £200 million), taking the total planned investment across the three years of the Spending Review to £695 million. We have also established the Civil Service care leaver internship scheme<sup>10</sup>, which has resulted in over 880 care leavers being offered posts in over 25 Government Departments.
12. Ministers will continue to set policy direction jointly through the Child Protection Ministerial Group and the Care Leavers Board, which is jointly chaired by the Secretaries of State for Education; and Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. We are pleased to share that Minister Mercer has been appointed as Cross-Government Care Leaver Lead, supporting the Department to drive the care leaver agenda across Government and with our stakeholders in the public and private sectors, in the same way he has done so successfully for war veterans and Afghani refugees.
13. We will explore the opportunities to work closely with the Prime Minister’s Delivery Unit as we deliver reform, alongside continued collaborative work between the Department’s own Delivery Unit and policy teams. We will consult as necessary on reforms, in line with Cabinet Office Consultation principles. This means that we will only undertake consultation activity where it serves a purpose, and at an appropriate stage, so it can inform decisions on the delivery and direction of reform.

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<sup>10</sup> [Civil Service Care Leavers Internship Scheme](#) | [Civil Service Careers \(civil-service-careers.gov.uk\)](#)

**Recommendation 3: An interim update on the outcomes of key discussions between the Department for Education and other Government departments should be provided in the form of a Ministerial Statement to the House ahead of the 2023 summer recess. A full update, including departmental commitments and action plans, should be provided in the same form by October 2023.**

14. We are pleased to inform the Committee that prior to the publication of this short inquiry, Government published a Written Ministerial Statement: “Children’s Social Care Reform”<sup>11</sup>. This statement provided an update to Parliament on progress made in the year since publication of the Independent Review of Children’s Social Care. We have committed to refresh “*Built on Love*” after two years, and we will keep the House updated on progress with delivery. We recognise that continued collaboration across government is critical to ensure reform works on a national and local level and delivers for the children and families it supports.

15. Additionally, the Department for Education recently made a joint statement<sup>12</sup> with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities about children’s homes planning regulations. The statement underlines the importance of ensuring children are placed in homes close to their community, and that local planning ensures there is enough accommodation to meet local needs.

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<sup>11</sup> [Written statements - Written questions, answers and statements - UK Parliament](#)

<sup>12</sup> [Written statements - Written questions, answers and statements - UK Parliament](#)



## Chapter 2: The voice of young people

**Recommendation 4: Changes to advocacy services must ensure full independence from the local authorities they will need to hold to account. The Department for Education should look again at how to ensure advocacy services can be fully independent: organising them as regional or national delivery programmes.**

16. Advocacy services should empower and listen to children and young people, including children with different communication needs, to ensure they understand their rights at pivotal transition points in their life. We recognise the Committee's point that advocacy services must be fully independent from local authorities to ensure transparency and accountability and welcome the committee's focus on this important service.
  
17. As set out in "*Built on Love*", we are considering how an opt-out model of advocacy provision could work, so these services are offered by default to children and young people. As part of this we will consider which operational delivery models are best to organise advocacy services and ensure independence from local authorities. Advocacy services for children in care will not replace the role of Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) and Regulation 44 (Reg 44) visitors. We recognise the complexities and variability of practice nationally in these services, and acknowledge concerns raised by recent reviews from the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel. We will share more detail on our approaches to improving advocacy, IRO, and Reg 44 services in due course.

## Chapter 3: Creating loving homes

**Recommendation 5: The Government should urgently examine which elements of Family Help could be rolled out nationally and provide funding to all local authorities delivering children’s social care to introduce these policies, to ensure children and families across England feel some benefit from the strategy. Funding for local authorities to make these changes should be provided at the same time as they are introduced.**

18. In “*Built on Love*” we outlined our plans to build on the strengths of current Early Help services, through the creation of Family Help. Through the £45 million Families First for Children Pathfinder programme, we will test our Family Help reforms, which will be central to how we ensure more children grow up with loving relationships and stability. The Pathfinder will feature multi-disciplinary teams which work with local partners, to meet families’ whole needs in a strengths-based way. This will build on learnings from delivering the Supporting Families Programme over the last 10 years.

19. We note the emphasis on providing funding to all local authorities at the same time. We will, in time, align our funding approach with our reforms, so we have systematic join up in how local areas are supported to deliver effective services. However, we need to ensure children’s services are sustainable and efficient in the long term. We must balance the necessary reform with the need to scale evidence-based interventions safely and effectively, which is why we will first work with up to 12 local areas, through Pathfinders, to design new models of integrated, multi-disciplinary teams. As we work through the Families First for Children Pathfinder, and towards the next Spending Review, we will assess the level and form of investment required to achieve meaningful and sustainable change system wide.

20. We will continue to routinely engage with all local authorities to understand and support the effective delivery of services for children and families, alongside our Pathfinder programme. Pathfinders will draw on existing evidence-based practice and develop this. We will support all areas to progress towards our vision for the system, for example through annual updates of “Working Together to Safeguard Children” guidance<sup>13</sup>, which will reflect findings from the early stages of reform.

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<sup>13</sup> [Working together to safeguard children - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](http://www.gov.uk)

**Recommendation 6: The existing learning from Family Hubs and the services they deliver should form an important part of the Implementation Strategy. The Department should set clear expectations for how Family Help and Family Hub services should work closely together to provide seamless transitions between Early Help and universal services.**

21. Our strategy makes clear our commitment to working across government to ensure we have more joined up support for families. This includes gathering evidence from initial Family Hubs delivery, which has invested over £300 million in 75 local authorities, to inform the implementation of Family Help. The Committee rightly recognises that both models share core principles – including co-location of services embedded in the local community - and that together they can help form an improved, integrated system which better supports families at different levels of need. Where Family Hubs are established or being established, the Families First for Children Pathfinder programme will explore and test how the Family Help system and the local Family Hub network can be fully integrated as part of the wider system of support and protection for children and families.

**Recommendation 7: The Kinship Care Strategy, when published, should ensure that sufficient financial support for those caring for their kin is provided regardless of whether the arrangement is formal or informal, and that it is consistent across England. Additional funding should be allocated to local authorities to provide this support in the immediate future.**

22. We recognise the vital role kinship carers play in providing a loving, safe, and stable homes for children, and agree with the findings of the Independent Review of Children’s Social Care that support must improve. Whilst we know that some local authorities already offer this kind of support, within “*Built on Love*” we committed to explore the case for introducing a consistent approach to financial allowances for kinship carers under formal Special Guardianship Orders and Child Arrangement Orders, across England. We will update on the commitment through the publication of a Kinship Care Strategy (by the end of 2023), where we will set out a broader long-term vision for kinship care.

23. We are pleased to update the Committee on the early progress made in delivering on the Independent Review’s ambitions, through:

- a. Investing £1 million in 2022/23 and a further £1 million in 2023/24 to establish more than 100 peer support groups for kinship carers across England. This work has been delivered in partnership with Kinship charity.
- b. Delivering a £9 million training and support package for kinship carers across England within this Spending Review period. We will announce a plan to deliver this by Spring 2024. This package builds on the positive impact from the peer-to-peer support contract has made.
- c. Launching a new pilot program in summer 2023, to test the impact of Family Network Support Packages in 7 local areas.

24. From 1<sup>st</sup> May 2023, the Ministry of Justice also extended legal aid entitlements to prospective guardians making applications for Special Guardianship Orders (SGO) in private family law proceedings – partially implementing the Independent Review’s recommendation in this area.

**Recommendation 8: Legal definitions of “kinship care” and “kinship carer” should be set out in primary legislation so that children and families in informal kinship care arrangements can access support.**

25. The Department will carefully consider the Committee’s recommendation to define “kinship care” and “kinship carer” through primary legislation, alongside responses to the *“Built on Love”* consultation. The consultation suggested defining kinship care as “any situation in which a child is being raised in the care of a friend or family member who is not their parent for a significant amount of the time. The arrangement may be temporary or longer term”. We will respond to the consultation in September 2023. As mentioned in paragraph 22, we are aiming to publish a national Kinship Care Strategy (by the end of 2023) which will outline our next steps on this recommendation further.

**Recommendation 9: The Department for Education should provide further detail on its plans to increase foster care recruitment. These must be proportionate in ensuring that only those who are fit and proper to be caring for a young person are allowed to do so, whilst also allowing foster caring to be accessible to working people.**

26. Foster families deserve to be valued and respected for what they do daily for our most vulnerable children. Whilst fostering can be hugely rewarding, we recognise that it also takes hard work, skill, and dedication. We are investing over £27 million this Spending Review to deliver a fostering recruitment and retention programme, so foster care is available for more children who need it. Of this funding, £3 million will be invested in a Pathfinder in the North East region, to test our comprehensive approach, and £24 million will be available for wider roll out of the programme. This will introduce regional support hubs to support individuals interested in applying to foster, facilitate targeted communications, and improve retention with the evidence-based model, Mockingbird. It should create improvements for carers at all stages of the process. The programme will also aim to boost approvals of foster carers in areas of specific shortage, including prospective foster carers from diverse backgrounds. We acknowledge that the Government should reduce unnecessary barriers for suitable carers to foster, but we must also balance this with the need to keep children in foster care safe. The Expression of Interest process for local authorities to apply to engage in this programme was launched in May 2023. We envisage that 50% of all local authorities in England will participate in the regional programme this Parliament.

27. In recognition of the increasing costs of living for foster carers, the National Minimum Allowance (NMA) has been raised by 12.43%. This above-inflation increase in allowance will help foster parents cover the increasing costs of caring for a child. In addition, the Spring Budget announced an increase in Qualifying Care Relief, increasing income tax relief from £10,000 to £18,140 plus £375-450 per week for each person cared for. It represents a tax cut worth approximately £450 per year on average for foster carers.

**Recommendation 10: The Department for Education should urgently set regional and national targets for foster carer recruitment and retention. These should include targets for specialist carers.**

28. We welcome the Committee's focus on foster care and acknowledge the request for regional and national targets for recruitment and retention. The Government will consider this recommendation carefully, working with regional areas to set targets, considering their needs. We want to be as ambitious as possible and we are keen to work with local areas and partners, like The Fostering Network, to recruit as many carers as possible. We must also ensure that approved carers are the right match for children coming into care, which may include carers that are able to support, for example, sibling groups, teenagers, mother and baby placements, Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children, and children who have suffered complex trauma.

**Recommendation 11: Recruitment and retention campaigns must come alongside improvements in training and support for foster carers, to ensure they can provide safe, loving homes for young people in care.**

29. It is vital that foster carers are supported to be able to care for children. We are building on our investment of over £8 million since 2014 to help embed the Mockingbird programme<sup>14</sup> – an innovative model of peer support for foster parents and the children in their care. We announced plans in our strategy to roll out this programme more widely, backed by funding. As mentioned above, we have also announced tax relief for foster carers and have increased the National Minimum Allowance above inflation.

30. The Government also continues to fund Fosterline<sup>15</sup> and Fosterline Plus<sup>16</sup>, a free-to-access helpline and support service for current and prospective foster carers. These provide high quality, independent information, and advice on a range of issues.

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<sup>14</sup> [The Mockingbird programme | The Fostering Network](#)

<sup>15</sup> [Supporting Foster Carers and those that want to Foster | Fosterline](#)

<sup>16</sup> [Fosterline Plus - Fosterline](#)

## Chapter 4: Workforce

**Recommendation 12: The Government should roll out workforce interventions nationally more rapidly. While not all interventions can be applied to England at once, steps should be taken by October 2023 to ensure all children’s social workers see some benefit from the Strategy.**

31. Social workers play a critical role in supporting the most vulnerable in society, and it is with thanks to their work that many children go on to thrive. We already invest more than £50 million every year on recruiting, training and developing child and family social workers to ensure the workforce has the capacity, skills, and knowledge to work effectively. However, we recognise the concerns the Committee raised about recruitment and retention, and that is why *“Built on Love”* includes a specific pillar (pillar 5) dedicated to providing “a valued, supported and highly skilled social worker for every child who needs one”.
32. We have already started to make good progress in implementing the key reforms set out in our strategy:
  - a. In January 2023, we launched the National Workload Action Group, which will identify and make recommendations to address unnecessary workload drivers, thereby supporting social workers to spend more direct time with children and families. We have appointed a delivery partner to deliver the Group’s recommendations and develop new resources to support local authorities with retention strategies and agency staff management.
  - b. Alongside the publication of *“Built on Love”* we published a consultation on national rules on the employment of agency child and family social workers. The Government response to these will be published in September 2023.
  - c. We are committed to launching the Child and Family Social Worker Apprenticeship Employer Support Fund, which will support local authorities to offer up to 500 child and family social worker apprenticeships. This will complement local authorities’ ‘grow your own’ approach, and diversify our pool of candidates by opening up wider routes into social work.
33. The new Early Career Framework (ECF) will also provide extra support to social workers through the steep early career learning curve and help retain social workers in frontline roles. We have appointed eight Early Adopter local authorities with experience of providing extended early career support, to help us design an effective and deliverable programme. The framework will set out the skills and knowledge that social workers should develop in their early career. We have appointed Laura Eden, an experienced Practice Leader, to lead on designing and writing the framework.

## Chapter 5: Organising and commissioning care

**Recommendation 13: Built into the evaluation plan for Regional Care Cooperatives should be an assessment of any improvement in planning and forecasting. This should distinguish between the causes for any such improvement: whether they arise from national support for forecasting; or whether they arise from collaboration between local authorities.**

34. We welcome this recommendation and agree with the Committee that the Regional Care Co-operative (RCC) Pathfinders should be properly evaluated. We will be looking for the evaluation to assess improvements in planning and forecasting as far as possible. One of the objectives of the evaluation of RCCs will be to assess the extent to which (including why and how) RCCs have contributed to the effectiveness of local planning and forecasting in helping to deliver better outcomes for looked after children within their footprint.
35. The evaluation of RCCs will aim to collect robust and reliable evidence to understand both the impact and the causes of any impact on the care placements system e.g., sufficiency needs, planning, forecasting, and commissioning of placements. We will also seek to examine the impact of national support for forecasting. This will include areas where RCC Pathfinders are not operating, to understand the contribution this has made.

**Recommendation 14: In evaluating the success of the Regional Care Cooperatives the Government must consider the experiences and voices of young people and families, alongside measuring how many are placed at a distance from their homes and communities.**

36. As we set out in *“Built on Love”*, listening to the voices of children in care is crucial to delivering our vision. We know that, currently, there can be a lack of suitable placements close to friends and family for some children so there is no choice about where children live. We believe regional commissioning models will ultimately increase the availability of care placements in the right places for children who need them, making it possible to give children more voice and choice in decision-making. The consultation period for *“Built on Love”* ended at the end of May 2023. We held 25 events, with a particular focus to ensure children and young people and their families have the opportunity to influence.
37. As Regional Care Co-operatives (RCCs) are rolled out, we will ensure that the experiences of children, young people and families are properly considered and that their voices are heard. As the RCC Pathfinder areas are selected, we will develop and refine the evaluation protocol to reflect these aspects and how best to incorporate them within our evaluation process.
38. We will agree with each Pathfinder the key success measures for their region. We expect that these will include a reduction in the proportion of children placed far from home.

**Recommendation 15: When trialling Regional Care Cooperatives, the Department for Education must review the impact of regional procurement on smaller providers. Steps should be taken to ensure that a regional approach to procurement does not result in large providers wielding disproportionate influence.**

39. There are a variety of different types of providers who operate in this sector and play a vital role in providing homes for children in care. This includes a number of smaller providers, who play a critical role alongside larger players in the market.

40. As we set out in *“Built on Love”*, we expect that, by working together, Regional Care Co-operatives (RCCs) will be able to learn and share good commissioning practice. The Department will provide national support with planning for placement sufficiency, and how best to commission and procure the right homes, in the right places. With a smaller number of commissioning teams, operating at greater scale, we expect that RCCs will be better placed to share learning about how best to commission. This includes how we hold care providers to account for quality through these commissioning contracts.

41. When setting up the Pathfinders, we will be clear about the importance of the RCC working with smaller as well as larger providers, helping them to create systems that do not give larger providers (or any one group of providers) disproportionate influence. As we test RCCs, we will be able to monitor the market over time, including the impact the introduction of RCCs has on its intended outcomes and whether there are unintended consequences in relation to the mix of providers in the market. Considerations such as these form part of our decision to take a “test and learn” approach with our most complex reforms.

**Recommendation 16: Evaluation of the Regional Care Cooperatives Pathfinder should include the number of additional care placements delivered or procured compared with past performance and other regions.**

42. As we set out in *“Built on Love”*, we expect that Regional Care Co-operatives (RCCs) will promote collaborative approaches to commissioning and opportunities for learning. We will support this work by providing national support with forecasting and procurement.

43. As part of our evaluation of the RCC Pathfinders, a full range of outcomes will be measured, including placement sufficiency. We also expect RCCs to carry out regional analyses of sufficiency and develop strategies to fill gaps in provision.



**Recommendation 17: The introduction of Regional Care Cooperatives must not result in weaker accountability and oversight. If the Government chooses to proceed with the rollout of Regional Care Cooperatives, this must come alongside a strong accountability regime, about which further information should be provided.**

44. We agree that a strong and clear accountability regime for Regional Care Cooperatives (RCCs) is needed. The Competition and Markets Authority made a similar recommendation in its market study on children’s social care, which we have accepted<sup>17</sup>. As part of our co-design process with the sector, we will work with each Pathfinder to ensure there are arrangements in place to facilitate local accountability.
45. We have set up an Expert Advisory Group on standards of care, which has now met four times. It is reviewing all legislation, regulations, and standards of care, to develop a core set of overarching standards. This will ensure all children in care receive what they need, no matter where they live. After this, we will work with Ofsted to align inspection to the new regulations and standards and develop an inspection framework for RCCs. This will be important in ensuring we hold RCCs to account in providing sufficient, quality places for children to live.
46. In due course, and when parliamentary time allows, we intend to provide legislative underpinning for RCCs. This will include providing for a clear accountability regime, drawing on our learning and experience from the Pathfinders.

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<sup>17</sup> The CMA recommended a more collective approach to engagement with the placements market, including a set of bodies to carry out collective market shaping and procurement activities, and an oversight structure to ensure each body is carrying out its functions to the appropriate level. Its report and the Government’s response are available at [Children's social care study - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](http://www.gov.uk)