

Independent Review of Children's Social Care

1.45pm Thursday 24 November 2022

Hansard Report

[Rachael Maskell](#)
[\(York Central\) \(Lab/Co-op\)](#)

I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Independent Review of Children's Social Care.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this important and timely debate on children in the care system.

It is imperative that we see investment in a new approach to keep young people safe and supported, and to rebuild services and skills around their needs. In this debate, we must be mindful that millions of parents have excelled in nurturing their children in loving, secure homes—but sadly that is not everyone's story. Good parenting takes skill, time and patience. That is why parents, foster carers, kinship carers and adoptive parents are simply amazing. No matter the relationship, when there is a cry for help, it must be heeded.

Asylum-seeking children, disabled children and those with learning disabilities or from minoritised groups need excellence and care; they need safe, secure and loving homes. That is what we want for every child. Tragically, for too many, that is not their experience. We worry, and we have to act. Serious case reviews shake us, they are aired in this place and then they are filed, until we are reminded by the next report, and then the next.

The story is familiar: invisible children, overstretched services, social workers drowning in demands, warning signs—and then it is all too late. Children disappear between agencies, between the multitude of social workers who are never given the chance to excel as they are squeezed by demand. Parents are let down, children are let down. Parents endure the pain of separation from their children, just because life failed them—life went wrong. If only the system had time to break in and break the intergenerational cycles to provide the very best early interventions.

There are half a million children in need of support, 82,170 of them residing in the caring system. If we do not pivot, it will be 100,000 in a decade. But they are not numbers: they are our future, they are our now, they are our children. Like all of us, they want to know they are safe. They want love. They want family.

We get it. Life is hard. Parenting is really tough, and where there is little support and stress presses in, something breaks. However, when children's social services are under-resourced and overwhelmed, reparation is harder. Take Ava, who was placed in foster care when family hardship meant she was not provided with the care she needed. She moved far away, separated from her brother and sister. On the cusp of turning 18, she was told to move out and is now living alone in an unfamiliar town, all because her family struggled. That is not care.

I think of the young mum desperate to do the right thing, but not supported to parent before the painful adoption order is granted. The trauma never leaves her. I think of parents not coping with complex needs and complex relationships, coercion and control, violence in the home, poverty knocking on the door, isolation and poor mental health. I think of the children left lonely, afraid, neglected, in need of care, and sadly, for some, in need of safety. I think of those sucked into slavery: from county lines to sexual exploitation, they disappear, lured by the promise and the hope of better, then destroyed. Sometimes, things just go wrong.

We all know the stories, because these are our constituents. That is why we are here—not to make another speech but to leverage change. The Minister has the power to make that happen. There is a blueprint on the Minister's desk: to cut the number of children in care by 30,000 in a decade and to make countless more families thrive. If Government really grasp the urgency and importance of this, they will find the money, too, not least as they will see the return quickly.

Last May, Josh MacAlister published his independent review of children's social care. We are waiting for the Minister's response. We need the reforms and the funding in full. For children in and around the care system, time is not on their side. Key parts of the workforce are contemplating their future. Families are under ever-growing stress, as are services, and children need to be kept safe. The power of the report is in its echoing of the voices of people with care experience. Their aspirations must turn into Government ambitions. From the outset, it would be unethical for Government to speak of pilots for implementation. Clearly, every authority has its differences—some have better leadership, some better funding, and some are already on the path of reform—but to leave an authority behind would be to leave a child behind.

Secondly, on funding, may I remind the Minister that the total package would cost just £2.6 billion? The cost of children's social care is £10 billion a year right now, and the current cost of adverse outcomes is £23 billion a year. Not to act will cost £15 billion in 10 years' time and have a higher social tariff, too. The Minister cannot afford not to implement now. Any delay will cost her and cost families.

Investing in families is the most pressing reform, by bringing together multidisciplinary teams from across agencies together to input into, support and transform families, with health, mental health, education, social services and families working together. It is about building families, investing in families, and getting the right support to families in the right time. We need family help delivered by brilliant practitioners through family hubs and schools, with skilled and intensive support from the first 1,001 critical days through to childhood and adolescence, and into young adulthood—one team around one family, one assessment process and one plan; radical help, bringing radical resolution.

Rachel de Souza's report, "Family Matters", encourages the wider involvement of family, recognising their role in raising a child and, if the child is entering care, the interventions they can make, including through kinship care, which is today homing 162,000 young people. Having a family network plan will unlock the potential of the wider family role in supporting parents and caring for children, not least when a new placement is sought. The Mockingbird project provides networks of support around foster carers, but could be extended to recognise wider community networks. Supporting families in the context of society builds more sustainable, resilient families.

For some, adoption is the path forward, but this must change, too. I chair the all-party parliamentary group for adoption and permanence. Our report, “Strengthening Families”, highlights the cracks in the system. There is inequality, with some children taking longer to place—sibling groups, minoritised children, disabled children, and older children too. We need better matching, and they need better support, but adoption is more than family matching. We need excellence in family building and trauma therapy, too.

In the social media age, children are finding birth parents, and birth parents are finding children. Instead of being well prepared, they are doing that on their phones, alone in their bedrooms. The trauma from the intrigue can be devastating, not least as life’s journey of questions may not produce the hoped-for answers. At worst, it can destroy both families and the child. More open processes can be safer.

Strong leadership leads to strong services. We need the very best leaders heading up services—one controlling mind driving through this once-in-a-generation reform. From here, we need confident and competent key workers. Social workers are too often thrown into the deep end before learning to swim, or are drowning in paperwork when families need their skills. Sixty-five per cent. of children have more than one social worker in a year, and 27% more than three. It is not acceptable. Building an early careers framework will grow the skills of graduates, so that they gain experience, make a positive difference and work with a safe case load, with the mentors, learning and supervision necessary to make them excel as professionals. After five years, practitioners can then seek posts that demand higher levels of expertise and clear, focused, decision making, such as in child protection. They need that experience.

There is a proposal for a national pay scale, which is right. I look at what Agenda for Change did for the NHS. It built workforce stability and pay transparency, and it helped people to build their careers. The pay market, fuelled by the spike in agency workers, is like a magnet. Areas that pay less are often where the greatest needs are, escalating workforce churn and leading to disruption for families. The use of agencies must end. Not only are costs out of control, but it is in the interests of neither the practitioner, the service, nor, especially, the child. Everything must relentlessly focus on young people, improving their futures, opportunities and safety. Service improvement commissioners must challenge and improve services, not just assess them, so that excellence is achieved in all areas at all times.

But even when taken into the arms of the state, into residential care, as 16% of children in care are, they face multiple placements, of which 20% are neither good nor outstanding. Thirty-seven per cent. of placements are more than 20 miles away, some in unregulated, unsuitable settings, as I found out from children in my own constituency. These are places profiteering out of the most fragile of children. Seventy-eight per cent. of residential care places are provided in the private, for-profit sector. This failure on availability, quality and costs demands reform, as set out in the Competition and Markets Authority report. On average, profit margins rose by 22.6% from 2016 to 2020, an average of 3.5% a year above inflation, with total costs of £1.33 billion to these organisations, but for a child with complex needs the costs are limitless. So why are people profiting out of children?

As for quality, these services are rated more poorly, violate more requirements and are rated more negatively. The CMA’s “Children’s social care market study” also outlines fears of market disruption, as private equity firms have overreached and carry substantial debt. A closure would be disruptive. Even the Minister, Baroness Barran, said

“it sticks in my throat to have private equity investors”—[\[Official Report, House of Lords, 7 November 2022; Vol. 825, c. 449\]](#)

in this role.

The chair of a Government review of private children’s home providers found that children are being failed as the largest providers make millions in profit. New regional care co-operatives need to sort that out. As partners of local authorities, they can provide the scale and focus to oversee fostering—particularly when 9,000 new foster carers need recruiting, training and supporting—and residential care. We must rid the market of such responsibilities and rebuild outstanding therapeutic and homely facilities, with the very best of staff.

The ambition of the review must be fulfilled, so that every child is loved, healthy and happy, excels in school and then work, and is safe and secure. Being care-experienced will never leave a person, but adopting this as a protected characteristic will help with navigating life. Above all, the child must always have a strong voice. The independent reviewing officer has been that voice and changes to the role, while questioned, have pointed to the conclusion that every child needs a competent practitioner the child trusts who will advocate for them. Of course prevention is vital. Understanding the intersections between poverty, life’s challenges and family must guide wider policy choices, but starting with the reforms we are debating today will secure a necessary workforce reset and provide every child with the care, love and safety they need. We must not let these young people down; they have ambition and so must we.

1.59pm

[Edward Timpson](#)
[\(Eddisbury\) \(Con\)](#)

I thank the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) for securing this important debate. Those of us who see this issue as one of the priorities of any Government, whatever that Government’s hue, always struggle to get a collective sense of responsibility in this House, let alone more widely across the country. That is why regularly bringing the issue to the Floor of the House is such a crucial part of ensuring that the good work that does go on is properly scrutinised, and ensuring that the support we give the most vulnerable children in our society is the best it possibly can be for their futures.

Like the hon. Member for York Central, I start by thanking all those who work in the child protection system and more widely in children’s social care. In some ways, relative to other services and agencies that work in the public sector, often in partnership with the private sector—such as the police and the education system—our child protection system is one of the least mature. We are still learning; we are still understanding how best to provide the services that those families and children need, at the right time and in the right way. However, relative to the international child protection systems that exist, we are actually quite mature, and many countries around the world look to us when trying to understand what a child protection system looks like—we have to remember that many countries do not even have one. When thanking those who work within the child protection system and children’s social care, it is worth remembering that in many ways they are at the vanguard of what we know works, while always looking to improve.

That is why this report from Josh MacAlister and all those who worked with him—which is analytically strong, well-evidenced, and ambitiously couched in terms of deliverable, whole-system change—gives those of us who want to see further improvement a really ambitious programme of work that needs a full, comprehensive and long-term commitment from the Government, not just the Department for Education. I know that the Minister—I welcome her to her place—cares passionately about these issues, but other Government Departments right across Whitehall will themselves have a part to play, and will benefit should these reforms be put in place in their entirety and taken to their conclusion.

It is also worth saying that this report is not the first part of the journey. Many Governments with the right intentions have managed to get cross-party agreement about the importance of vulnerable children and families, and how we can provide them with what they need; we may have a different view about what that looks like, but the aim and intention remain the same, irrespective of who is making those decisions.

When I look back on my time as Minister for Children and Families between 2012 and 2017, I think we made some really important changes during that period, not least through the Children and Families Act 2014 and the Children and Social Work Act 2017. Quite unbelievably, no amendments to either Bill were pushed to a vote on Report, as I remember—perhaps the Bill in 2017 had one or two, although not in my area of policy, of course. That shows that there is a consensus on much of what those two important pieces of legislation were trying to achieve, and what this independent review and report are trying to achieve.

The hon. Member for York Central rightly talked about blueprints. The report provides a strong and comprehensive blueprint for how we reform, revive and renew children's services right across the country, but when the Minister is looking at how it can be implemented, I ask her to learn from what we have tried before and what has been found difficult to achieve. I take as an example, in an unashamedly self-promoting way, the "Putting children first" strategy that we published in July 2016, during my time at the Department for Education. That was a vision for children's social care and services based on three pillars: people and leadership, practice and systems, and governance and accountability. In many ways, the strategy reflected a lot of what we see in Josh MacAlister's report, which leads me to the conclusion that much of this is about having the ongoing will, determination and commitment to implement many of those reforms and the vision behind them.

We can look at examples of where we have managed to make some of those changes happen and assess the impact they have had on children's lives, such as the pupil premium plus, which provided additional money for children in care. That policy has been expanded to cover those who are under special guardianship orders and those who are adopted. Since that policy was introduced, over £350 million has been spent on providing those children with support through virtual school heads—a not insubstantial amount of money, but also a recognition that there needs to be additional support at the time those children would otherwise fall further behind. We can also look at the change to the law regarding the age at which children leave foster care—the staying-put arrangements. From the report, pleasingly, those changes have led to a doubling of the time that children who stay in foster care beyond the age of 18 remain in full-time education.

Those changes in themselves are not going to solve the myriad issues that this very well-evidenced report raises, but they demonstrate what can be achieved if we look carefully at

where we are falling short, and how we can put in place a strategy, a plan, and a practical, deliverable outcome that can be measured to see what works. That is what sat behind the children's social care innovation programme that I also set up during my time as Minister.

[Mrs Flick Drummond](#)
[\(Meon Valley\) \(Con\)](#)

My hon. and learned Friend speaks with such knowledge and experience. Does he agree that there is often a cliff edge at age 18 when children in care are sent out into the big wide world? They really need to have that care and support all the way up to 25.

[Edward Timpson](#)

My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is what was behind the staying-put reforms, as well as the introduction of "staying close" for those who are not in foster care—they have perhaps been in residential care—but need to maintain a relationship and a network of support close to where they live.

North Yorkshire County Council, in particular, started the No Wrong Door project through the innovation programme, which has morphed into what I think is called Always Here. In our own families, where we are lucky enough to be able to do so, we will still be bouncing back at times of need. We have that rock; that stability. As my hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond) knows, my parents fostered for many years. We still have children who came to live with us through their childhood—sometimes just for a few weeks, sometimes for many months, and sometimes for a long time—and are now in their 20s, or sometimes in their 30s, who come back to us for reassurance at a time when they may be at a low ebb and do not know where else to turn. That is where the cliff edge for those who do not have that stability becomes so drastic, and poor outcomes will inevitably follow.

We know what those outcomes are for care leavers. About one quarter of the prison population are care leavers, as are, I think, 26% of those who are street homeless. Those are hugely disproportionate numbers compared with the rest of the population, which is all the more reason why Josh MacAlister's independent review, particularly the five missions for those leaving care—I will talk about those later—is so crucial when it comes to turning the progress that has been made into a greater and more extrapolated offer to the 13,000 or 14,000 children who leave the care system every year.

Through the innovation programme, about £200 million was ultimately invested in new approaches, with about 50 evidence-based projects across the country to understand new ways of delivering children's services better, more effectively and often more efficiently. The MacAlister review gives the example of the Hertfordshire family safeguarding model, which was built around the idea of having multidisciplinary teams around a child and their family—it is actually very similar to the reclaiming social work model that was used in Hackney over a decade ago and was led by Isabelle Trowler, who is now the chief social worker.

The programme has been evaluated and shown to bring significant improvements to outcomes and reductions in the use of care and the time children spend in care. Not only is it good for children and families, because it keeps bonds close and improves outcomes, but in its first year it meant savings for the council alone of more than £2.6 million, which it could reinvest in services, perhaps at an earlier stage when intervention is needed.

The innovation programme did not come about through making technical fixes. To go back to the point that the hon. Member for York Central made about leadership, it came about because there was a real sense of ownership across the multidisciplinary teams and a passionate belief in the reforms that they sought to carry out. I could give other examples from the programme that now form the basis of how we do children's social better across our country.

I know that Ofsted judgments are only one way of looking at children's social care services, but I remember that when I first became Minister for Children and Families, only one council—I think it may have been the tri-borough—was rated as outstanding. We had far too many inadequate councils, for many reasons that unfortunately still exist: pressures of work, caseloads, poor interactions between services and opaque ways of understanding what works, leading to the same mistakes being repeated over and over. We do not want any inadequate councils—we want them all to be outstanding—but although I accept that there is still a huge amount of work to do, the good news is that there has been a really good trajectory. I think about 20 councils are now rated as outstanding and about 60 as good, although we still have 17 inadequate councils, which is 17 too many.

Part of the solution, which has already started and which the MacAlister review wants to turbocharge, is in how we intervene on councils that are failing vulnerable children and families in their area. We began that process by being more interventionist and more creative in how we go about breaking the cycle of failure in children's services. Some are small, such as Doncaster; others are much bigger, such as Birmingham, which was a perennial problem for many years. Sometimes the answer was to work closely with them, put a commissioner in, change the practice, change the leadership and change the culture. On other occasions, the answer was to take the direct running of services away from the council and create a children's trust focused solely on improving the lives and outcomes of children in and around the care system.

In most cases, although not all, that approach has led to real and occasionally dramatic improvement. Sunderland went from inadequate to outstanding in three years. Having been inadequate in 2013, the Isle of Wight, which was partnered with Hampshire, an excellent council, was good by 2019 and getting close to outstanding. There are ways for the Government to be more directly involved in ensuring that we understand at an earlier stage where things are going wrong and try to fix them.

I want to take a moment to draw out some of the key aspects of the MacAlister review, which builds on much of the work done since 2012, or arguably since the Munro review in 2010 and 2011 showed us where we needed to improve. It is worth taking into account other policies across Government, such as the Start for Life programme and the introduction of family hubs, which complement the MacAlister report's recommendations.

Family help is key. We have had many debates about how intervention is often too late or too un-co-ordinated and how we often put people through a statutory process but nothing

happens directly with families to improve the situation on the ground. The principle of family help, which I support, is to address that issue by bringing in a multidisciplinary team at an earlier stage when there are signs of difficulty. School is a good place to find out where the problems may be. So is the community, one would hope: communities are perhaps not as close as they were a few years ago, but they can be a really good source of information that enables us to understand where family help can work.

Fundamental to successful intervention is having an expert child protection practitioner who can co-ordinate the multidisciplinary team. When I worked on family law cases before I came to Parliament, one of my frustrations was that in many cases the social worker was very new and was not that experienced. Those who were experienced had been floated off into management, where they were far away from families and were doing no direct work whatever.

I am not saying that it has not already happened anywhere—the reclaiming social work model was based around the same idea—but moving towards a family help approach in which someone with real expertise is at the heart of decision making day by day, with families and with a multidisciplinary team structure, seems a sensible way to go. When I chaired the national Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, we could see even then, from the child exploitation cases that came to us and from our thematic review, that that was one of the failings that often led to children spiralling into county lines and other forms of exploitation.

That is why the changes that we have made to safeguarding partnerships are so vital. At the moment, statutorily, they get the local authority, the police and the health team working together at a senior level on strategies to create a good child safeguarding system in their area. However, it has now come to the point where schools also need to come on board; Sir Alan Wood, who has done an updated report after his original review, has made the same recommendation. More work needs to be done on how to make that happen and what it will look like, but schools are so fundamental to the effectiveness of safeguarding partnerships and family help. As the first point of contact with children and families, schools can often spot something that is not right, such as the child's attendance or appearance or their parents' interaction with the school. I urge the Minister to ensure that Government look positively at that in their response.

I also urge the Government to look at family networks. As I said, communities may not be as robust or as involved as they once were. Unfortunately, most of our community life now tends to happen online, like the dreaded neighbourhood WhatsApp or Facebook groups that tell us a lot about lost cats or about other things that are not quite so interesting. Reconnecting children with uncles, aunts, grandparents and wider family is a way of ensuring that they have a greater network to fall back on in times of crisis, rather than having to rely on the state.

I remember once doing a case in Chester county court. The judge was on the cusp of making a care order to take a child permanently into the care of the local authority with a plan for adoption, but at the last minute, the guardian representing the child asked—perhaps in hindsight—the rather obvious question: “Have you asked any of the wider family whether they would be willing, either individually or collectively, to help to look after this child?” The answer came back, “No”. The case was adjourned, some work was done with the family, and a few months later, we came back to court and the plan had been changed: the child was

going to live with their aunt, and other family members would be involved as well. That type of work with children who may be going through a period of crisis in their own home, and the involvement of families, has to happen at an earlier stage and has to happen everywhere. The recommendation on family group conferences, or family-led alternative plans for care, should be taken seriously.

On residential care, I think it worth recognising that in England, about 14% of children in care are now in residential care. In Scotland, that figure stands at only 7%, which begs the question: why? For me, it falls back to the important point raised by the hon. Member for York Central about the use and understanding of foster care. We know—Ofsted have shown this—that there is a worrying increase in the number of children whose care plan is for fostering but who end up in residential care. Why do they end up in residential care? Because they cannot find a placement in foster care—or cannot find the right placement. It also means that we are losing foster carers who have a particular specialism, perhaps in teenagers or—like my parents—in babies born addicted to heroin, for whom particular skills are needed. That placement is lost because they are the only carers available for another child who could be in a different type of foster placement.

We need a real recruitment drive for foster carers. We have seen, through the Ukrainian refugee scheme, that there is a huge amount of will out there—people want to reach out—but there needs to be some greater voice coming from Government about how we find the 9,000 carers whom we need and about the range and spread of where foster carers are. Otherwise, we will put more pressure on residential care and prices will go up exponentially. It just does not make sense to keep putting more children into residential care when that is not even their plan and there are financial consequences to doing so.

[Mr Robin Walker](#)
[\(Worcester\) \(Con\)](#)

I have been listening with great interest to my hon. and learned Friend, who speaks with enormous experience and knowledge in this space. On the point he has just made about foster care, and the related point about family carers, does he agree that investing in the right support packages for foster and kinship carers is a good investment if it prevents more children from going into much more expensive residential care?

[Edward Timpson](#)

My hon. Friend the Chair of the Education Committee is absolutely right. The Mockingbird project, which was mentioned by the hon. Member for York Central, is a good example of that—again, the innovation programme helps to fund it. The project has a network of foster families who offer different levels of skill between them, but collectively provide a great resource and ensure that children can stay in foster care when it is the right placement for them, as opposed to going into residential care homes that cost tens of thousands of pounds and often do not bring stability or the right type of surrounding care that the child or young person needs.

On workforce development, we have done a lot of work in the last decade to improve the quality of what we want social workers in the very specialist world of children's social care to be able to demonstrate. There was far too much emphasis on theory and not enough on the practice, particularly real-life experience of a child-protection event, which a children's social worker will inevitably experience. The "Step up to social work" programme and Frontline, which were introduced to try to improve and grow the social workforce, have been really important innovations, but 70% to 80% of social workers coming into children's social work are still qualifying through the traditional route, costing about £80 million a year.

There has not really been any change or re-evaluation of how that money is spent and of what comes through the system. I think there is a question about how we can level up some of those conventional routes, better support people through that experience as well, and ensure that, when they are working on the frontline, they have all the skills and the resilience they need to stay with children's social work, because retention, as ever, remains an issue. I agree that the early career framework will be a good way of mapping out a clear pathway to a career in children's social work.

On the duties that are placed upon the key agencies, we introduced the corporate parent principles in the Children and Social Work Act 2017, but they are limited in some respects. I agree with Josh MacAlister that we can do more to widen those principles out and bring them more to life. That brings me to the five missions on care leavers: loving relationships, quality education, a decent home, fulfilling work, and good physical and mental health. I do not think any of us would disagree with those missions, but how do we hold those with responsibility to account for achieving them? The local offer that goes with the corporate parenting principles is one way of doing so, but we have to go back to inspection and look again at how we measure success for care leavers and how we target the role performed not just by local authorities as the lead for children and families, but by other agencies.

On care leavers specifically, if I were to ask the Minister to take away one thing that could be done very quickly and make a huge difference, it is action on the universal credit limit for under-25s. At the moment, care leavers fall into that category, so they have the reduced rate. Of course, we heard earlier about the cliff edge and what happens to care leavers not just from the ages of 18 to 21, but from 21 to 25, which is a vulnerable time for them. This would be an easy opt-out. I know—from conversations I had when I was a Minister—that the DWP does not like exceptions, but it can be done, so I ask for that to be looked at. Let us find reasons to do it, not reasons not to.

There is much, much more in the review, and I think it is something that has to happen. I know that the Government were committed to publishing a response by the end of the year, but we are getting close to it—the Christmas music has started in the shops—so we do not have long left. Will the Minister commit today to publishing the Government's response in full as soon as possible? If the response slips beyond January of next year, it is in real danger of putting at risk the timetable for delivery, particularly in relation to spending reviews—the consequence being that it would end up costing a lot more for the Government in the future.

We spend £136 billion a year on the NHS and £51 billion a year on education—I do not quibble with that—so when looking for this £2.1 billion, we must remember that it is a one-off payment that will, over the next four years, give children in the system now and in future a much better opportunity to have a fulfilling life. Yes, look at the underspends in the Department for Education, but look right across Whitehall, too, because every Department

will benefit from these changes. The money is there if the measures are prioritised, and I hope that that is exactly what happens.

2.29pm

[Wera Hobhouse](#)
[\(Bath\) \(LD\)](#)

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. and learned Member for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson) who, as a former Children's Minister, speaks with great sincerity and expertise on the subject. I congratulate the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) on securing this important, timely debate.

Our children are falling through the cracks. The pandemic has left a lasting mark on children up and down the country. As such, the timing and outcomes of this debate could not be more important. I welcome the support for kinship carers in this report. We have already heard some support for the idea. Thousands of grandparents, aunts, uncles and siblings are stepping in to support children in crisis, yet the Government treat them as if they are invisible. These carers receive only a fraction of the financial support they need for the care they provide. I thank them for their incredible work. However, they need more than just a pat on the back; they need material support from our Government.

I hope that the Government will support the Kinship Care Bill in the name of my hon. Friend the Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson). The Bill would introduce weekly allowances for kinship carers, just as foster carers get. It would implement proper parental leave when kinship carers first welcome in a child and provide extra funding to help children in kinship care thrive in school. Unfortunately, kinship carers are just one group being overlooked by our Government. In 2019, it was estimated that 140,000 children on the fringes of social care in England were not receiving any support. The Local Government Association suggests that social workers are seeing record numbers of children with mental health problems. Social workers say they have no time to give the children on their case loads the support they need.

Social workers are the backbone of our society, helping future generations to thrive. Unfortunately, the Government have treated them with utter contempt, asking more and more of them. No wonder we are seeing staff shortages. Who would want to work in an industry where people feel overlooked and undervalued? The Government must make the social care profession attractive to enter and stay in, so that we have enough care workers with enough time to help the children under their care. One of the most important things that the Government must do is make it the valued profession it deserves to be.

Adverse childhood experiences, also known as ACEs, are the biggest drivers of poor mental health in children. They can be anything that threatens to overwhelm the child, including abuse and neglect. When a child is unable to process prolonged stress, it can alter normal brain function. This is what we call trauma. I know that the hon. and learned Member for Eddisbury is also working hard on childhood trauma, although he is not currently listening. A child's brain helps them to survive in the moment, but assumes that that persistent stress or danger is normal. They adapt to constant adrenaline. Because of that, those who experience childhood trauma are twice as likely to develop depression and three times more likely to develop anxiety disorders.

Many children carry their traumatic experience into later life. Someone's chances of dropping out of school, being obese and even developing diseases such as strokes and chronic bronchitis are higher the more ACEs they have experienced. Those with six or more ACEs have life expectancy 20 years lower than peers with none. There is no limit to the reach of ACEs. Unnoticed and unaddressed, adverse childhood experiences are a potential lifelong sentence. The Government must look at how they can prevent adverse childhood experiences from happening.

The number of ACEs a child suffers has a clear link to the likelihood of that child engaging in social care, as well. Meanwhile, research by the WAVE Trust suggests that the adverse childhood experiences of abuse and neglect alone cost the UK more than £15 billion a year. What a no-brainer it is to do something about it. It is clear that the cost of acting to prevent adverse childhood experiences is less than the cost of inaction. Just focusing on the fallout from trauma is not enough; we must prevent every form of adverse childhood experience.

One factor that helps to prevent childhood trauma is whether the child can feel capable and deserving. Supportive, reliable adult presences are key, and we have already heard quite a lot about that this afternoon. Trauma-informed services across the board would be transformative. They allow social workers to recognise the effect of ACEs early in children's lives. Early years practitioners can spot signs of trauma at the age where they are most easily resolved.

I became a member of the all-party parliamentary group for the prevention of childhood trauma, and serving on that APPG was the most informative and transformative experience I have had. I am currently its chair. Preventing childhood trauma could be the foundation of how we transform our society, because childhood trauma does not end with the child; it gets transferred into the next generation. If childhood trauma is not addressed, those who become parents will carry their adverse childhood experiences into the next generation, and their children might suffer, too, so doing something about it should be at the heart of what Government are looking into.

When we look at how trauma affects minds, we gain an enriched understanding of behaviour. Better insights and changes in approach lead to better care for children. As it stands, the Government are failing to even consider many of the problems that cause childhood trauma, such as sibling sexual abuse. Shockingly, that is the most common form of child sexual abuse in our homes. Estimates suggest that a child is three to five times more likely to be abused by their sibling than by a parent or adult living in their home environment. Its impact on the entire family is lifelong and devastating. Parents are often faced with a double dilemma of supporting both children involved in dealing with the relevant authorities.

Local and national safeguarding policies and strategies do not name, measure or prioritise sibling sexual abuse. The Home Office's "Tackling Child Sexual Abuse Strategy" does not even acknowledge the existence of sibling sexual abuse. Even the report we are discussing today does not mention it. I had a Westminster Hall debate on the subject, which is riddled with taboo. It is so shocking that we do not want to contemplate it, but it is widespread and it is important that we name it. It is a significant oversight that must be addressed. The Government must acknowledge the problem before it can be tackled. Their blindness to sibling sexual abuse means that social care professionals are not properly equipped to offer the support needed. I hope that, in future strategies, the Government can at least investigate this terrible problem, which is beset by taboo and silence.

The Government's failure to support the social care system leaves children as the victims. We must safeguard children from adverse childhood experiences and support those who go through them. The solutions involve more Government spending, yes, but we need to acknowledge the problems that children are facing. Where would we be if we did not invest in children and future generations? We need to work for a better future for our children. It will be a better future for us.

2.37pm

[Mrs Flick Drummond](#)
[\(Meon Valley\) \(Con\)](#)

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) and the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) on securing this debate, but I also thank Josh MacAlister for the work he has done to produce this report. The Department for Education says that this is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reform children's social care. I certainly mean no criticism of Mr MacAlister or the hard-working people in children's social care, but it is not good enough that we have to conduct strategic-levels of this topic. As Mr MacAlister says, he has tried to echo the message from other reviews over the last 30 years. We debate the issue regularly in the House, and we have all kinds of reports and reviews, including the one I worked on with my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham in 2007 called "No more blame game: the future for children's social workers", which pointed out much that is in this report. That was 15 years ago.

There is an unacceptable recurrence of tragic cases of neglect and agency failure that generate great emotion, press coverage and the political will to change, with reports published—Baby P, Damilola Taylor, Victoria Climbié, Star Hobson, Arthur Labinjo-Hughes, all the way to the tragic death of Awaab Ishak. Children are all too often still becoming victims because their circumstances are not identified or followed up. While some of the cases become high-profile nationally, many others emerge all the time across the country without getting more than local coverage in the media.

I want to concentrate on a few points where we need change in this big and complex area. The first relates to expert practitioners, which is mentioned in the report. One of the recommendations in the report is that any case of significant harm should be overseen by an expert practitioner alongside the family help team. The suggestion in the report is that those should be initially recruited on the basis that they can demonstrate skills from their time in practice, with a future standard of completing a five-year early career framework.

I welcome the establishment of a standard for expert practitioners and the early career framework. We have to keep more social workers in the profession, to form the core of our expert practitioners. The picture for early career social workers is similar to that for teachers: many leave within five years of beginning their career and others move from local authority posts into agency roles. Another persistent feature is that our most experienced and able social workers are taken out of practising with children and families and moved into management roles. We asked for a career path at the frontline in the 2007 report. I am not decrying the need for good management of social care—I would argue that it needs to be improved, if anything, given the record of failures in child protection—but it would benefit everyone if more senior workers were practising and passing on their skills and experience to

others in a direct way. It would improve the management of services to have experienced eyes and ears able to feed back where things are going badly and where they are going well.

The next point is advocacy. The report highlights the potential for confusion for young people about who should be speaking up for them. Independent reviewing officers are often not engaged enough with children to be effective advocates. We need a clear plan for replacing IROs, and the recommendations of the report are clear about that. I look forward to seeing the Government's full response, but I would welcome any thoughts from the Minister, who I welcome to her place, on when the Department intends to consult on a framework for advocacy. That includes advocacy for parents and for other family members acting in that role. The report finds that parents are too often viewers of child protection conferences, rather than participants. Although the report is less prescriptive on this aspect, I hope Ministers will consider a formal framework for it.

Too many children are disappearing off the radar when their parents tell local authorities that they are home-schooling their children. I know that many parents can arrange a good education for their child, but it is still important that the development and safety of children who are not in school can be monitored. I appreciate the concerns that some parents have about being registered. However, the evidence shows that we must act to look after the needs of children who are currently not being educated and cared for properly.

I am concerned that the Government might be slipping back from the long-held position that there should be registration of children being home-schooled. In a written answer on part 4 of the Schools Bill on 7 November, Baroness Barran said:

“The department's position on the Schools Bill will be confirmed in due course.”

On Monday, the Schools Minister said in a written answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris) that the Department is satisfied that the existing powers local authorities have are sufficient. Can the Minister tell me whether this means that registration of home-schooled children is not now being proceeded with? If the register is being scrapped, what has prompted the change of mind on the part of Government from their long-held view, which I share, that this is important for the welfare of children?

Local authorities do great work to support children across a range of educational settings. I pay tribute to the work being done by Hampshire County Council, its leader, Councillor Rob Humby, the deputy leader and former executive member for children, Councillor Roz Chadd, and in particular, the director of children's services, Steve Crocker. Hampshire's children's services are outstanding—not excellent, but outstanding. Families in Meon Valley have a great team looking after them, but I am concerned after my recent meeting here in Parliament with Rob Humby and Roz Chadd that the funding pressures they face risk the delivery of statutory and core services. I am conscious that we are talking today about how services can be improved, but they have to be funded, and I will write to Ministers about this shortly to support the work that Hampshire is doing.

Another aspect of local authority work in Hampshire that I want to highlight and praise is fostering. I recently visited a meeting of foster carers from across the county in Hampshire's Hive pilot scheme, led by Amy Alexander and Kat Roberts, which is similar to the Mockingbird scheme that the hon. Member for York Central mentioned. The Hive model creates local groups of foster carers that are led by carer support workers, who are themselves

foster carers. This helps to develop support networks for carers and encourages the development of a sense of community.

There are currently 12 hives in the pilot scheme across Hampshire and I am delighted that one is working in Waterlooville in my constituency. I look forward to meeting with Johnny Creighton and his team of families soon. The Hive model is part of a wider package of support for fostering, and I hope that it will encourage more families to look at getting involved. It can be so rewarding for foster families, as we heard from my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson), as well as for the children who become part of those families.

We should also look at what charitable and social organisations can do to help young people get a sense of what is possible in life and to build their resilience. I am thinking particularly of organisations such as Plan B in Gosport, Hampshire, where John Gillard has been working for many years with young people, including some from my constituency, who have lost contact with mainstream education. John uses his skills as a sailor to involve young people in maritime-based skills and activities, as well as education. That includes boatbuilding, carpentry, sailing and all kinds of practical skills that deliver real vocational training for young people. That kind of alternative provision is a perfect opportunity for many young people from troubled backgrounds to find a sense of direction. John has helped to turn many young lives around; he is an extraordinary man.

I could not finish without mentioning this issue to the Department for Education. One reason that I am keen to have a reformed assessment at 18 is that many children have a false start in education and our current assessment methods fail them. Many children find something like Plan B, or some other vocational setting that really inspires them, quite late in their childhood. They deserve the chance to have an assessment framework that recognises their needs and sets them on course for a career and an independent life. Education and social care have to work together and work in the same direction to improve the life chances of young people from troubled or disadvantaged backgrounds.

2.46pm

[Jim Shannon](#)
[\(Strangford\) \(DUP\)](#)

I thank the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) for setting the scene so well and for giving us an opportunity to speak on the issue. I thank the hon. and learned Member for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson) for his knowledge, focus and experience in this matter, which have been helpful for the debate. I also thank all the other hon. Members who have made and will make contributions.

As with many issues discussed in the House, Northern Ireland has different rules and laws on social care, and alternative social care guidelines, but the premise of what we do is the same. The 2019 Conservative manifesto said:

“We will review the care system to make sure that all care placements and settings are providing children and young adults with the support they need.”

That is therefore the shared goal of all hon. Members for our social care system, so it is great to be here to see how we can strengthen that further.

The Department of Health in Northern Ireland is responsible for child protection and social care. The Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland co-ordinates and ensures the effectiveness of work to protect and promote the welfare of children. The most recent statistics for child social care in Northern Ireland were released in 2021. They showed that 32,070 children were in need of referrals, almost 3,000 children were on the child protection register, and 3,500 children were in care. Some £277 million is spent on family and childcare within social services in Northern Ireland, which is a significant sum. In the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, where my constituency lies, there are 471 children in need.

To undertake potential reviews of child social care, we must accept and understand the four main factors behind the need for it: neglect, physical abuse, emotional abuse and sexual abuse. I am sure that all hon. Members have heard—regularly, unfortunately—horror stories surrounding child cruelty that make them feel uneasy and queasy. The very thought of some of the things that happen in this world—this normal world that we are supposed to live in—makes us flinch, and it is unimaginable how perpetrators try to justify that type of behaviour.

Some 681 such offences were reported in 2021-22 in Northern Ireland, which is an average of two a day and is up from 506 in 2020-21—an increase that unfortunately shows the direction that society is heading in. Child support registers are seeing an increase of reports due to substance and emotional abuse by parents, which ultimately creates an environment where children are unable to develop, are frightened and could potentially be socialised to go down a similar path to their parents.

The children's social care report stated that by 2032

“there will be approaching 100,000 children in care (up from 80,000 today) and a flawed system will cost over £15 billion per year (up from £10 billion now).”

Despite this being separate from Northern Ireland, there will ultimately be a knock-on effect and impact on the devolved Administrations, as their funding will not have the potential to increase. So we must do more to support our care givers, workers and support staff by ensuring vastly improved training, mental health support, sufficient pay and enough staff.

The report in question also highlighted a need to identify and remove the barriers that needlessly divert social workers from spending time with children and their families. We have heard that children in the social care system often have no concept of friendship, love or, indeed, companionship. How very sad it is that, in the society in which we live, they do not have those three things that our families, children and friends have. There is an imperative for social workers to play an important role in a young child's life as they grow up and learn how to form relationships, and it also needs love, friendship and companionship to make that happen.

As others have mentioned, particularly the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse), we must not forget the impact that the covid pandemic has had on social care, too. The increase in referrals in childcare throughout this period shows that parents have been potentially struggling to cope. We are still very much dealing with the impact of this, and there is a backlog of referrals that have not been dealt with, putting more children at risk. I thank the

local social services team in James Street in Newtownards in my constituency of Strangford, who go above and beyond to provide safe and secure services for children. Some excellent work has been done, and I want to thank in particular those who do that work in my constituency.

Prior to this debate, I was in contact with the National Youth Advocacy Service, which made me aware that three out of 10 children in care did not know how to get an advocate to speak on their behalf while they are in care, despite its being an entitlement for them. On that particular point, can the Minister give me some indication of what has been done to address the issue for such children, so they can have access to impartial support when they discuss their situation and their next steps as they move forward in their lives?

To conclude, there is certainly potential for change and a review of children's social care. With the increasing number of referrals, the social care system must be able to cope, and proper funding for that is necessary. I believe that better emotional support is very clearly at the heart of this debate and that we must support, first, the parents; secondly, the children; and, thirdly, the social workers, who are bending over backwards to support the families. I really urge the Department of Health and Social Care—and the Department for Education as well, because I think they have to go hand in hand—to engage with the devolved Administrations in tackling the increased number of referrals, the volume of social work staff and the subsequent mental health of all those who will be directly impacted.

2.52pm

[Dr Kieran Mullan](#)
[\(Crewe and Nantwich\) \(Con\)](#)

It is a pleasure, as always, to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who has again shown the breadth and depth of his knowledge of all the issues we cover in this House. I thank the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) and my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) for securing this debate.

I associate myself with the remarks of the hon. Member for York Central about acknowledging that there are very many families who do an absolutely fantastic job of caring for their children, without underestimating how difficult that is. We are talking in this Chamber about families who are struggling, and I do not by any means underestimate that. As someone who does not have children myself, I give words of advice with caution and I understand that the challenge is really enormous, but surely the size of that challenge puts a bigger onus on us to support people to do it effectively.

I thank Josh MacAlister and all of the team who helped him deliver such an authoritative and important report. In particular, I thank not just the people who wrote the report, but the very large number of people, including very many people in care or who have left care, who contributed to the report. I think that that is what has given it its strength and authority, because he has done such a good job of giving people who have experienced the system a voice.

For me, child welfare is or should be the biggest priority for everyone in society. It is a really good example of an issue where it is not just the state that has a role to play, but families,

society and individuals. All of us have to do something to make sure that children in our country get a good start in life. One of the main reasons why I got involved in politics was that I want everyone to benefit from the secure, warm, loving environment that I experienced as a young person growing up. We know what an important foundation that is for young people because we understand the different outcomes that people get if they do not receive that warm, loving start in life. Poor attachment to care gives leads to higher rates of delinquency, crime, offending, poor mental health and wellbeing, and unemployment.

Similarly, if we look at not just attachment but adverse events, which the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) spoke about, from all those things early on in life we can predict someone's future outcomes, and their outcomes are much worse than those of their peers. As we have heard, that is not just a moral failure but a financial failure for the state because all these things cost money across the breadth and depth of Government spending. Those costs skyrocket when young people cross the threshold to care involvement, where the gap in outcomes compared with peers gets even bigger. Sadly, their outcomes are still distant from those who have benefited from a loving start in life.

We have 80,000 children in care and many more subject to some kind of intervention. If we do not get better at supporting people, those markers and failures will get worse. The report talks about how we are heading towards 100,000 children being in care and, for each of those additional children in care, there will be an even bigger number unfortunately likely to be subject to some kind of proceedings or intervention and not getting the start in life that we would want for them.

The report lays out authoritatively what we can do. I pay tribute to my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson), who did a fantastic job of going through all the elements of the report, including what we could do better. I will not seek to replicate that as I am sure that I could not do as good a job. The report makes it clear that we need short-term funding to deliver the £2 billion that it identifies. The Minister will not need convincing that we cannot look at the costs in a narrow way—there is short-term additional spending on extra children we might see in care as well as spending across all areas of Government that pile up but which the Department itself does not see—but we must ensure that the Treasury understands the full breadth and depth of that expense when it comes to weighing up what we should be investing in children's social care.

[Wera Hobhouse](#)

Does the hon. Member agree that this really affects everything—we have prisons full of people with mental health disorders, who often carry childhood traumas with them—so investing at the beginning will help us save so much money in the end?

[Dr Mullan](#)

I completely agree. It would probably be fair to say that there is not an area of Government spending in which we could not make a saving if we did better at getting children a warm,

stable start in life. As I said, I hope that the Department is clear about the breadth in spending.

I turn to one short-term area. Again, I pay tribute to my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Eddisbury and the work that his family did, as well as that done by many families who choose to be foster carers. Fostering and adopting are probably among the most powerful, special and important things that someone in our society can do for another person. Taking on that responsibility of caring for someone else's children in the short term—not permanently—is the most noble thing that anybody can do, and I pay enormous tribute to every single person who does that.

Every child who ends up in a loving home instead of a care setting—of course, care settings can produce good outcomes—is being given the best shot at life. Again, that saves a financial cost, and the wellbeing of that young person is enormously improved. Sadly, we could do better. It is a good example of the fact that, no matter how good the Government get at doing things, individuals must step up and be willing to do it. It is not just about the state fixing the problem; we all have a role to play.

My understanding is that, of the 160,000 people who registered an interest in fostering last year, just 2,000 were registered to be foster carers. That is an absolute tragedy. Given the process of becoming a foster carer, we should expect a big drop-off once people come to realise everything involved, but that kind of drop-off is very sad. It says to me that at least tens of thousands of people who could and wanted to be foster carers did not become them. What does the Minister think we can do in the short term to get to the target of 3,000? Can we not be more ambitious than that, get to at least 10,000 and convert that huge moral willingness to help our fellow man in society and see the money that comes in savings from that?

[Jim Shannon](#)

I have a number of friends who are foster carers and I understand the work they undertake. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that those who take on foster caring—caring not just for their biological families, but for other families who are challenged—are special people? That is my impression of them.

[Dr Mullan](#)

People who foster and adopt are the best of our society; there is no two ways about it.

Similarly, on kinship carers, the report does a great job of explaining how a wider family network can help. As a Conservative, the idea of giving more financial support for kinship carers causes me questions. I believe in families and normal family structures. I think it is the natural thing for family members to take care of each other potentially outside the immediate family. But when it comes to the very, very difficult financial decisions that grandparents on pensions, in particular, have to make, we have to be practical and recognise that, yes, I would want people to do that for their family members regardless of the support available to them. If

that is a genuine practical barrier, it could make a huge difference for the children and the state, and we should be doing more. I support the idea that the model of support should match that of foster carers.

[Mr Robin Walker](#)

My hon. Friend makes a fair point on kinship care. I note that the report also calls for greater recognition of kinship carers. Not all the support they need is financial. I have been approached by a local kinship care group in my constituency with concerns about the challenges that grandparents sometimes face in accessing healthcare. He knows a lot about that. Does he agree that it would be good to see the Department for Education working with colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care to ensure that we have greater support and recognition for kinship carers, so that they do not face those challenges?

[Dr Mullan](#)

My hon. Friend is absolutely right to identify that it is not just about money; it is about recognition in Government agencies and society of the role that kinship carers play. I pay tribute to kinship carers in my constituency, who I have been supporting to access financial support from the local authority, and to some great charities that support kinship carers. They deserve to be on the same footing as those who foster and adopt.

I want to finish by paying tribute to a couple of charities working in my constituency on areas similar to some of the work recommended by the MacAlister review. One of the many things that the Motherwell Cheshire charity for young women and girls, founded by Kate Blakemore, does in my constituency is the Believe project, which provides support, mentoring and counselling to any mother, young or not so young, who has a child who is, or is at risk of being, subject to some kind of child protection plan. What the charity has learnt is that, rightly, the authorities and those involved in child protection are focused on the child. They need to do that, but support for the parent can also make a huge difference. I have spoken to mentors, such as Donna, who support people in my constituency and they have made a difference. The latest figures are that they have saved something like £1.6 million in our local area, helped five children to return home from care and helped to prevent 21 children from going into care. If that sort of model can be rolled out, there could be huge moral and financial savings.

Another charity, Pure Insight, provides mentors, counselling and psychological support for care leavers. The mentors and support workers help them to close the gap with their peers who have not experienced care. It is largely volunteer-driven and they make a huge difference. Similarly, the charity also provides support to help parents become the best possible parents they can be. Ultimately, the ideal scenario is that we can keep families together. Of course, sometimes families cannot stay together and it is right that we intervene, but if we can keep families together, we know the outcomes are much better for the children concerned. I want to put my thanks on the record to the local Helvellyn Foundation for providing a grant to Pure Insight to support a family I was in contact with who did not quite fit the normal criteria but who were a fantastic candidate for that type of support. There are so

many other charities, such as the Wishing Well charity and My Cheshire Without Abuse, that are playing their role, supported by volunteers.

For all those reasons, I hope that the Government will grip this issue, take on board the fantastic work that has been done in the MacAlister review and make a difference to these children's lives. That is the right thing for us to do not just as moral individuals, but as taxpayers. There is always a great case to be made for what the Government can do, too, when we are talking about doing the right thing for the right reasons.

3.04pm

[David Simmonds](#)
[\(Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner\) \(Con\)](#)

I add my thanks to those expressed by a good many Members to all who have been involved in securing the debate. It has been rich and insightful, and it is extremely timely. As my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Dr Mullan) said, when we get this right, it improves more or less everything in our country: we have a more productive workforce, people who are healthier—with better physical and mental health—a more stable society, and a society in which people are more able and willing to look after one another. All those things are incredibly important for our country's future.

Josh MacAlister's report is one in a long line of reports that give us some helpful steers about how we can improve the system. The challenges faced by children growing up in the UK change over the generations. When the Children Act 1989 was introduced, the internet did not exist as something in our daily lives. The growth of online harms and the risk they pose to children in this country are a new challenge that we have to address, and on which there are a lot of things that our social workers, police and all those who care about the effective nurturing of children in our country need to consider.

If we look at recent history, we recognise that quality protects. The Climbié inquiry, the Munro review, the Wood review and the MacAlister review all describe a system that remains based on the 1989 Act and various pieces of legislation that have come along since, including the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 and various Education Acts. They identify that what works best is always early intervention, so when the system spots that a problem is developing and it intervenes early, the outcomes for a child are transformed for the better.

Every single one of those reviews describes a system that is too under-resourced to carry out that early intervention effectively. It is important to be clear that being under-resourced is not just about money, for most local authorities. Certainly from my experience as a councillor and lead member for children's services for more than 20 years, recruiting qualified and experienced social workers, recruiting foster carers and finding families willing to adopt was not just a matter of budgets. We had money to pay foster carers, but finding the individuals willing to take on that challenge remains enormously difficult.

If debates such as this are going to serve us well, one thing that they can do is illuminate the challenges and remind our colleagues in local authorities who are trying to do this work that Parliament and national Government are really interested in it. Hopefully, to some degree, we

can at least raise awareness of the continuing need to invest the time and find the people who are interested in engaging with this work to support our most vulnerable children.

We know that our care system works well. Care is often criticised. Colleagues in the House sometimes say that we should try to keep children away from the care system, but the evidence shows that the earlier a child comes into the care system and the longer they spend in it, the better their outcome. The best illustration of that is probably that a child who is adopted at birth will enjoy outcomes in life that are pretty much the same as their peer group; whereas the most challenged children are those who come to the attention of the care system towards their 16th birthday. Those children find themselves in a situation where most of the damage has already been done, and the effective intervention of brilliant foster carers, potentially even adopters and social workers cannot mitigate that damage.

Our safeguarding services are among the best in the world. The few international studies that provide effective comparisons demonstrate that the UK is seen as an exemplar for effective safeguarding in pretty much every aspect of providing effective child protection. When the MacAlister review set out its case for change, it was helpful that it acknowledged some of this history, enabling us to learn from the successes of past policies while putting them in the context we face today.

There are some very striking statistics in the case for change. For example, over the last decade there has been a 7% rise in the number of referrals to children's social care from the police, from schools, from the general public and from the health service, and from places like that, but over the same period the number of section 47 inquiries—child protection inquiries where there is evidence that a child is directly at risk—has risen by 129%; the number of child protection plans has risen by 32%; and the number of children brought into the care system, where the local authority has gone to court, as my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson) described, to seek a court order to take them from their birth family and bring them into the care of the state as the only way to keep them safe, has risen by 24%. Something is certainly changing in how our local authorities and child protection services respond to the evidence they see of what is happening in a child's life.

It is important to recognise that, in a system that is under pressure, we risk raising the threshold at which local authorities, the police and other agencies take action. We see that in the NHS, for example, and we see some evidence of it in the police service. When resources are tight, agencies simply say the point at which they respond will be when things have gone more wrong than would have been the case previously. We need to ensure that we do not get into a situation where tight resources mean there is less and less early intervention and, therefore, a cohort of children going through our system for whom life will be much more challenging, whose cost to the taxpayer will be higher, and whose ability to contribute to and thrive in our society will be reduced.

There are some worrying signs, because the case for change in the MacAlister review identifies that, behind these stats, we have seen a rise in statutory spend—the money local authorities put into the things they must do in respect of risks to children—from £6.6 billion to £8.2 billion, and a drop in non-statutory spend, mainly on early-intervention services, from £3.5 billion to £2.3 billion. It is important that we never have an auction of spending promises, and over that period we have seen a significant rise in this country's child population, so we would have expected to see some rises, but it suggests there has been a slightly worrying shift of spending in a less productive direction.

It is important to recognise that this is pretty much the only area of local government spend in England that has grown over this period, and it has grown not as a result of additional Government funding but because local authorities have reduced their spending on things such as libraries, planning services, the environment, and sport and leisure, in order to prioritise the urgent needs of children who may be at risk.

The main driver of this spend remains neglect. Although important issues such as familial sexual abuse and, indeed, stranger sexual abuse, physical abuse, family alcohol abuse and mental health issues remain significant, neglect is overwhelmingly the reason why a child comes to the attention of statutory authorities in England today. This is where there are some promising signs.

The family hub model, which was piloted by local authorities in advance of being picked up by this House, recognises that, rather than imposing strict periods, such as ages zero to five, when the state will intervene and provide support, we need to recognise that every family and every child is different and that we need to provide a broad range of support at local level, exactly as North Yorkshire County Council's No Wrong Door project identified, so that families can find and access the support they need, rather than being passed from agency to agency. That will be absolutely critical.

The way in which those family hubs operate needs to reflect the growing evidence base from the What Works centres about how interventions can be tailored to really make a difference in the lives of children. One criticism, borne out by the research, about the Sure Start programme was that although a good many users enjoyed it, found it useful and gave good feedback about it, it did not bring about the difference in children's lives that it was intended to. I know from my time as a trustee of the Early Intervention Foundation, and having used the work of a number of the other What Works centres in my time before coming to Westminster, that using evidence about what actually makes the difference in a child's life will be crucial in ensuring that the money available in the system is spent in the most efficient and effective way in the interests of those children.

We recognise that our care system has some great strengths, with one being that looked-after children have the highest school attendance of any group of children in our education system. That is largely thanks to the efforts of virtual headteachers and local authorities, and their determination to make sure that those children get the best possible education. Of course the context for most children is that they are growing up in a community, where early intervention is not always going to be about statutory services. Even family hubs, which we know from the outset are designed to identify families that may be getting into difficulty, will often come a little further down the line for a child when life has gone a bit wrong.

I cannot praise enough the work I saw being done through services such as libraries, sports and leisure centres, and the early years centres during my time at the London Borough of Hillingdon. Simple projects such as story time in libraries, to which new parents can bring young children, in an informal setting, free of charge, were incredibly valuable, and can both provide the reassurance for families and parents who might be struggling, and signpost them on to statutory services that could help with issues such as breastfeeding, toileting and care of infants, and the emerging concerns that they might be beginning to have about children with special educational needs or disabilities. Making sure that we have a system that sees the child in the round and is there to make sure that whichever direction a family needs to go to,

they can access that care and support is crucial to ensuring that the mission of making sure every child is nurtured is delivered.

Let me move towards a conclusion. The MacAlister report identifies, in particular, that the big driver of these referrals is children who are being parented in difficult circumstances. We all recognise in this country that while life for most of our people is existing at a stable level—we have a good stable level of employment; good access to work; a strong economy; good schools, on the whole; and good access to crucial public services—a significant number of families remain at risk of falling through the cracks. So I hope that the principles the Department will use as it begins to craft its set of policies will, first, include making the best possible use of that evidence to design the interventions. We need to ensure that those family hubs are picking the programmes where there is the best evidence on things such as parental alcohol misuse and dealing with health issues in children, that those are the programmes we are offering consistently and that we are measuring the impact, so that we can see and test the benefit they bring.

I appreciate that this responsibility sits to some degree with the Department for Education and to some degree with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, but it seems particularly important that we breathe new life into youth work, especially for those young people whose lives are going wrong in their teenage years. Youth work has historically been a great opportunity to get them back on track. I have seen some brilliant evidence in my constituency of uniformed organisations such as the police cadets and the Royal Air Force cadets, organisations such as the Scouts and the Guides, and much less formal youth club community-level organisations providing that extra bit of help and support when parents and extended family have perhaps not been able to do it.

I am aware that, as a Government, we have allocated a significant amount of money towards that agenda, but that money has not yet been spent in a way that is constructive or that has made a difference in terms of enriching those children's lives and making sure that local authorities and other organisations help support those young people, particularly in their difficult teenage years, to enjoy a transformed set of opportunities. Indeed, there are many philanthropists who are willing to support and fund this activity. I call on the Department, working with colleagues across Government, to have a new strategy for youth work—to think about what that means and how we deploy those resources to support the volunteers and community organisations in a more constructive way.

There is a real opportunity now to look at our focus on the early years. There have been many debates in this House about the cost of, and access to, childcare, but it remains the case that we spend pretty much the least on the early years in our education system. Research evidence shows, however, that the early years has the biggest impact on a child's life. Leon Feinstein, who went to the Office of the Children's Commissioner from the Early Intervention Foundation, highlighted that, from a child's early years foundation stage results, their A-level results later on in life could be predicted. We know that there is a good evidence base that shows the impact that effective early years work has on opportunities for children. Again, it is not just about money, but about making sure that we focus in exactly the right way.

Finally, I call on the Department to think about the regulatory environment around children's social care. My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson) spoke powerfully about the numbers of local authorities enjoying different grades from Ofsted. Many years ago, when he chaired the all-party group for looked-after children, he had an

event here in Parliament. What I found striking was the wide group of young people who fed back about their experiences as children in care. As a witness to it, I would not have known from their description of their experience whether their local authority was outstanding or inadequate. We heard very negative experiences from young people who had grown up in outstanding authority areas and vice-versa. It seems to me that we need to focus not just on the institutional outcomes, as important as they are, but on the outcomes for children.

We often hear the Government talk about how great it is that there are many more children now in outstanding schools than was the case previously. There has, of course, been a big rise in the population of children in this country, and schools were not allowed to have any Government capital funding to provide additional places unless they were already outstanding. But recent Ofsted inspections on many of those institutions that had not been inspected for more than a decade has resulted in a lot of downgrading. What that tells us is that, although it is great to be able to be proud of how good schools and local authorities are at getting good or outstanding Ofsted ratings, we need to recognise that that does not always reflect the experience of the children who are going through that system. I have seen a good body of evidence in my time as a councillor, of schools that partly achieved an outstanding rating by denying the opportunity of education in their institution to children whose results they thought would not flatter their position in the league table. That was in the form of things such as the informal exclusion of children with special educational needs or disabilities, and refusal to engage with the local authority about taking looked-after children who they thought would not do so well. I can see a number of Members indicating that, perhaps, they have had the same experience.

We need to ensure that our regulatory environment is not one that is about saying, “Look at how many schools and local authorities are good or outstanding”, although that is important, but, “Look at the outcomes that children for whom we are the corporate parent, for whom the state has chosen to take this action, are achieving.” We should remember that those outcomes at 16 or 18 may not equate to those of their peers, but we need to recognise that we are giving them the chance that a good family would, so that by their early 20s perhaps they will have caught up.

Mr MacAlister’s review is enormously helpful and I think today’s debate has reflected on that. I hope that the wide variety of views that have been expressed by Members will be found to be useful by the Department. There is a great deal of experience in this Chamber, drawn from local government and central Government, which, hopefully will enable us to ensure that the additional resources, the money and the commitment that we see in Government will be spent in a way that will continue to deliver positive, transformational change for the most vulnerable children in our society.

3.24pm

[Tim Loughton](#)
[\(East Worthing and Shoreham\) \(Con\)](#)

First, I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing this debate and congratulate those who secured it—the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) and me. I also declare an interest as the chair of the safeguarding board for an independent children’s company.

Although we have not had a huge number of speakers in this debate, the quality of the contributors has been very high. We heard from a former Children's Minister, my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson), from the former head of the Children and Young People Board at the Local Government Association, my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds), from my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), the new Chairman of the Education Committee, whom I have not yet had time to congratulate, and from my hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond), who was involved with children's issues, as she mentioned, well before she became a Member of this House.

We also heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Dr Mullan), who has great experience in this area, as well as the hon. Members for York Central, for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon). It has certainly been a debate of quality.

It is difficult to follow the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner, because of his experience in local government of the real experiences of children in the care system at the sharp end, for which he did so much and has been such an advocate for so many years. However, it is good to be debating children's issues again in this Chamber, which we have not done for a while. We often talk about, and the news headlines are often about, social care—but adult social care. Of course adult social is a huge priority and a big challenge facing central and local government, but we should not be focusing on adult social care to the neglect of children's social care.

If we do not get it right in those early years, as we have heard from many contributions, then I am afraid we are condemning children to a lifetime of disadvantage and catch-up. Those early years, from conception to age two in particular, when the child is forming an attachment with his or her parents, are absolutely crucial. As we have said for many years, not to invest in or focus on the area is a false economy. We have heard that in so many different respects in this debate.

I am also delighted that we have a new Minister, who I know shares great enthusiasm for the subject. Her job is the best in Government—two of us contributing to this debate from the Back Benches have done it—and I am sure she will throw her all into it. It is such an important area, which affects every constituency in this country and so many of our constituents.

I welcome the independent review of children's social care. It is certainly a weighty tome and an extensive report. A lot of hard work went into it, and I congratulate Josh MacAlister on what he has achieved in its publication. However, the tragedy is that it could have been written 10 years ago. There is frankly nothing new in this report; it is largely a revisiting of many truths and deficiencies that those of us who have had the privilege of being on the Front Bench dealing with children's issues have known about and tried to tackle, with some success, over many years.

Many of the problems described in this report this year were put forward and described in previous reports. I just have a selection, having gone through my bookcase. We have "No more blame game: the future for children's social workers", from the commission on children's social care that I chaired in 2007, ably helped by my hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley. From 2009, we have the Conservative party commission on social workers' response to the Lord Laming inquiry; from 2010, the Conservative party review of adoption;

from February 2010, “Child Protection: Back to the Front Line”, ahead of the election; from 2011, the first report commissioned by the new Conservative Government, the Munro review of child protection; and from 2012, Positive for Youth.

I could go on. Everything mentioned in this report was mentioned in any one of those reports, and more, going back 10 years, a limited amount of which has been enacted, but too much of which has not. Over the last decade, I am afraid we have failed too many children by not taking up the challenge that those reports presented, putting in the resources and delivering the outcomes that some of our most vulnerable members of society desperately needed. There have been many successes, and I do not want to underplay them, but too many children have been left behind. That is the problem that we face today, and it is no less urgent than it was 10, 12 or 15 years ago.

Much progress was achieved 10 to 12 years ago, particularly on adoptions, which several hon. Members and hon. Friends have mentioned. We managed to just about double the number of adoptions in the early years of the coalition Government. The baton was picked up by my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Eddisbury, and there was a real initiative to improve not just the numbers of adoptions, but particularly outcomes for the more challenging children in the care system, who just failed to get considered for adoption. It was not all about adopting shiny new babies that everybody wanted; it was about those black teenage boys whose chances of getting adopted were so disadvantaged.

We introduced things such as adoption scorecards, whereby local authorities were judged not on the number of new, additional adoptions, but by how many adoptions of challenging children in particular they were able to succeed with and how many new adoptive parents they brought forward. This was a sector that was completely racked by prejudice, where adoption was an absolute last resort, even though many people knew that these parents were sadly incapable of bringing up their children, so the sooner we could take a child into an alternative long-term care arrangement with new adoptive parents, the more that would be in the best interests of that child. It was a sector where political correctness meant that a child of mixed heritage had to be matched with an identical adoptive family of mixed heritage, which held children back so much from being given a second chance in a stable, happy upbringing with loving adoptive parents.

We made a lot of progress in those early years. Alas, the adoption numbers have halved since the peak, some seven or eight years ago, and adoption seems to now be less of a priority. That is a great pity because adoption is one of the great successes in how children can be given a second chance at a happy, loving family childhood, which in many cases they cannot get themselves.

[Edward Timpson](#)

I thank my hon. Friend again, and also for the work he did on adoption as Children’s Minister. Another area that we have addressed, which has made a significant difference to families who have already adopted or are thinking about adopting, is the adoption support fund and the therapeutic interventions that are necessary, often long after an adoption has taken place. Does he agree that that is exactly the type of policy change that we need to

remain committed to, so that we can start to bring adoption back into the lives of children again, where that is the right permanent option for their future?

[Tim Loughton](#)

My hon. and learned Friend is so right. The adoption support fund was such an important part of the complex programme of getting adoption back on the front foot again. Too often, where adoptive placement was deemed to be best for a child, I am afraid there was too much, “Here’s the child, dump them with the family,” and then the local authority disappeared in the dust. Children who are going into adoption, in many cases with complex and traumatic problems underlying that decision, need a lot of support in the early years.

If we are to make an adoption work and prevent an adoption disruption, we need to put in the groundwork and do the leg work right at the beginning, to make sure that child gets the extra professional therapeutic work that might be required to make sure that family placement can work. The adoption support fund was a really important way of ensuring the resources to provide that professional expertise, so that the adoption stood a better chance. It is a false economy not to do that, because the amount of money the local authority saves is considerable if we can make an adoption work, so why not put in the resource at the beginning to make sure that the adoption is likely to work and that child can stay in a stable, loving family environment?

[Wera Hobhouse](#)

I know that I am blowing the trumpet for trauma-informed services, but does the hon. Member not agree that they are at the bottom of understanding most traumatised and difficult young people?

[Tim Loughton](#)

Yes, and we must understand that, too often, we are too keen to show the statistics that prove the underachievement of children who have been in the care system, be that in education or other outcomes. Why should we expect somebody who has been taken from their birth family, who has been deprived of the loving care of their birth parents because they are not able to give them that loving care, who has been abused as a child—who has perhaps been sexually abused as a child, as so many children are—and who has gone through such a traumatic upbringing, to be able to achieve as much as other children without getting that extra support? Whatever form those trauma services take, it is a no-brainer that we should provide them if we are serious about wanting those placements to work, be that a long-term foster care placement, a long-term home placement or, ultimately, an adoptive placement if that is the right place to go. It has to be horses for courses.

What we also did those 10 or 12 years ago is reduce the bureaucracy in the children’s social care system. When I took over as Children’s Minister, the manual for children’s social care,

“Working together”, consisted of 756 pages, or something of that order. For the previous 10 years or so, since the death of Victoria Climbié, every time a high-profile safeguarding scandal happened and another child lost his or her life—often at the hands of his or her parents or carers—the Government rushed to legislate. It was a Labour Government at the time, but frankly, we were all guilty of going along with it: “The solution must surely be more legislation and more rules.” Ten years later, we had reached a stage where social workers were so saddled with regulations and rules that they were constantly looking over their shoulder, constantly referring to page 642 in the rulebook to see what they should be doing, rather than using the professional judgment and instincts that we train them for. Being a social worker is not an easy profession: one has to be a combination of a detective, a psychoanalyst, a forensic scientist and whatever else, because people who abuse their children are usually quite smart at covering it up.

The most important thing I said to social workers was, “I want to give you the confidence to make a mistake for genuine reasons”—hopefully not too often, but by using their professional judgment, rather than covering their back by saying, “Well, that’s how it said I was supposed to act in this case on page 602 of the manual.” That was the problem. We tore apart that manual—it was reduced to something like 70 pages—and said to social workers, “You’ve been trained as a social worker. We trust you: you have the nous. You need to go out and get the experience. You need to judge something on having face-to-face time with a vulnerable child or that child’s parents and to make a value judgment on whether you think that child needs to be taken into care, to have some support while staying with the birth family, or whatever. You make that judgment— occasionally, you will make it wrong, but you will make the wrong judgment for the right reasons. That will give you more experience to make sure you make it right the next time.”

[David Simmonds](#)

I commend my hon. Friend for the work he did on slimming down “Working together”, which had a huge impact on boosting the confidence of social workers. Does he agree that this is a good example that illustrates the point about focusing on a child’s outcomes, rather than on the system?

Historically, for example, local authorities were measured on the regularity with which a child in the care system or a child at risk had a meeting with a social worker, not on whether that was the same social worker—the person who knew the child’s case, understood their circumstances and could progress things. We could tick a box to say that the child had met a social worker, but that meeting had not done anything to improve that child’s life. That shift in focus, saying that what is to be measured is the quality of the relationship the child has with the social worker and those caring for them and the progress it enables them to make, should be at the heart of our regulation.

[Tim Loughton](#)

My hon. Friend is so right. I fear I am in danger of making a long speech; I rarely do so, but we do have some time this afternoon, and such good interventions are being made that I will

indulge them—if you will indulge me, Madam Deputy Speaker. This is such an important subject, and my hon. Friend is right that too often in the past, we have measured things not on the quality of the outcomes, but on the way we can measure them and tick the appropriate box.

At the end of the day, what matters is not whether all the processes and procedures set out in the rulebook have been followed. The only thing that matters is whether the intervention of the state through the medium of the social worker, the local authority children's social care department, the foster carer, or whoever has had a meaningful and beneficial outcome for the welfare of that child. That is what section 1 of the Children Act 1989—which is still so relevant today, 33 years on—says is how we should judge whether we should be making those interventions, and how we should measure their impacts. I am afraid that it was too much about whether we complied with certain pages in the manual and whether we could tick all the boxes, regardless of the impact or the outcomes for the child.

The problem 10, 12 or 15 years ago was that too many people were studying social work at university because it was an easy degree to get into. A third of them dropped out during the degree, another third dropped out after a year in the social profession, and only a third went on to be social workers. We spent a lot of money on training people, two thirds of whom did not end up in that important profession, which I call the fourth emergency service.

“No more blame game” was appropriately titled, because social workers were always the butt of everybody's criticism. Social workers do not kill babies and vulnerable children; it is evil carers or parents who do that. For social workers, it is a question of how and when they can intervene, hopefully to lessen the chances of adults doing cruel things to children, which they will always do. All we can hope to do is minimise the opportunities and try to detect them before they manifest themselves.

[Rachael Maskell](#)

The hon. Member is making an excellent speech. One of the things that has constantly dogged the profession has been the pressure, the extent of the case loads and the circumstances that social workers and other professionals work under. Those pressures are not abating at the moment, as local authorities are facing significant pressures as well. Is it not crucial that we build a proper multidisciplinary workforce plan to ensure that every child gets the time and the professional support that is needed to do the things that the hon. Member is talking about?

[Tim Loughton](#)

The hon. Lady is absolutely right, and I will come on to case loads in a minute.

It is about getting highly motivated and qualified students to go into studying social work. It is about getting better training for those students to become professional social workers and then holding on to them, because we have a real problem with retention at the moment.

We raised the status of the profession by bringing in principal child and family social workers, who were senior social workers with great experience. They were not just put behind a desk and given managerial responsibility when they were promoted. They also had frontline casework, so we did not lose their valuable experience; they were able to pass it on by mentoring newly qualified social workers.

Step Up to Social Work was a fantastic programme, like Teach First, with well-qualified, motivated and energetic people making a change in direction and going into social work. In many cases they were the shock troops, going into really challenging areas and bringing a fresh approach. That approach was carried on by Frontline, to an extent, but its origin was in Step Up to Social Work, and I have to say that it did it in a rather more cost-effective manner.

We created the role of chief social worker. My hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley will remember well our conversations in 2007 with the chief social worker for New Zealand, which was the inspiration for our recommendation. Of course we should have one—we have a chief medical officer and a chief veterinary officer, so why would we not have a chief social worker to look after the interests of children? That was one of our key recommendations in 2007, and the chief social worker was appointed some five years later.

The new report mirrors the plea that the Munro report made in 2011 for early help—all we have done is rename it family help. As hon. Friends have said, we can be so much more effective by intervening early than by responding retrospectively and firefighting the problem when a child may have been irreparably damaged. We need to ensure that we have vulnerable families on the radar, getting intervention and support services early on, if possible to keep the child with their birth family by giving them the support they need, rather than have the social worker knock on the door when the child is about to be taken into care. It is such a false economy to react rather than intervene proactively. We have lost too much of that proactiveness, I fear.

We find ourselves coming almost full circle to high vacancy rates in the social work profession. Too many experienced, grey-haired social workers are burnt out and leaving the profession early, and are unable to pass on their great wisdom, experience and mentoring skills to new social workers coming into the profession. We find ourselves with case loads that are, again, too heavy. I remember one former, very distinguished director of children's services, Dave Hill, who very sadly died just a year or two ago. He started part of his career in Essex and later became president of the Association of the Directors of Children's Services. When he took over the Essex children's services department after it had been failed and was going through a rough period, he got all the social workers in front of him and said to some of them, "Right, list your cases." Several social workers went through their cases, and when they got to No. 16 or 17, they started struggling to remember them. Mr Hill's response was: "That's probably the limit of the case load you can manage, isn't it?"

It is not rocket science. If a social worker is struggling even to remember the names of the vulnerable families they are looking after, they probably have too many families. That approach was not rocket science but common sense. Too often, social workers' case loads are too heavy and they are chasing their tails from one case to the next. That is when things get missed. In their complex and challenging profession, social workers have to notice things, and they can do that only when they cross the door threshold, look in the fridge to see why the kids are not being fed properly, inspect their wardrobe and eyeball the mother who they suspect is not looking after the kids properly. It is not all done on a computer, and it cannot

be done if social workers have to rush to their next appointment because they have so many cases to get through within an eight-hour working day.

[David Simmonds](#)

Does my hon. Friend agree this is another good example of where the regulatory environment and the use of data at a local level are important? I say that because during the course of a peer-review visit to a local authority that was exceptionally challenged, we discovered that there were two vacant social worker posts on the system that held 174 child protection cases between them. It was clear that because there were no staff to do that work, nobody was working on those 174 cases, and that had the effect of reducing the caseload across the workforce. It is important that the expectations that the Department places on lead members and directors of children's services are not just about chasing numbers to make the institution look good, but about ensuring proper engagement with the lives of the children.

[Tim Loughton](#)

My hon. Friend is, again, absolutely right. It is a false economy to look after too many cases but do them moderately well or badly rather than concentrating on a small number of cases and doing them effectively, which offers a better chance of meaningful interventions before things reach crisis point.

It is, in many cases, depressing that despite all the energies spent and all the legislation, changes and regulations that have gone through, we still find ourselves, 10 years on, facing many of the problems outlined in the MacAlister report, to which the solution are, frankly, no different from what they were 10 or so years ago. We now have 82,170 children in the care system in England and Wales, a 23% increase over the last 10 years. Barnardo's estimates that currently, 80% of all local authority spending on children and young people currently goes on late intervention services, up from 58% in 2010-11. That means that rather less is going towards early intervention services, which stand a better chance of getting a better bang for the buck and achieving a better social outcome by preventing families from getting to crisis point. That is the most depressing and alarming statistic to have come out in the last 10 years, and it is such a false economy.

In 2021-22, 10% of all children in the care system were moved three or more times. Almost a third of all children in care were moved two or more times in the space of a year. At least 16,970 children in the care system were placed more than 20 miles away from home in the last year, often away from friends, family and the communities that matter most to them. In 2022, 43% of all children in care were placed outside their local authority area. For some children that is appropriate—some children need to be taken well away from an environment where they were subject to abuse and where there are still safeguarding issues. However, for many it represents a serious disruption. Having had the biggest disruption a child can probably have in their childhood by being taken away from their parents, then to be taken away from any other anchors of continuity, whether extended family members, friends, schoolmates or their school, is doubly disorientating. Although there will be children for whom it is more appropriate that they are out of that environment, or put in specialist services

if they have particular problems that need to be addressed, we need to do better to try to keep some degree of continuity for children who cannot have the continuity of their own parents bringing them up through their childhood.

Again, these problems are not new, but they have not been solved. It makes it even harder for children to make friends and to succeed at school when they are going from one school to another, say if their foster placement at one end of the county breaks down and then they are at another end of the county. Some 11% of children in care have experienced a mid-year school move in the space of the last year. That is hugely disruptive. Bright Spots research from 2020 suggested that only 35% of children in care reported having the same social worker for 12 months. Some 27% of children reported having had three or more social workers in the last year. When someone does not have their parents to confide in, trust in and be their rock and their point of contact, having a different social worker turn up every few months—when they do turn up—is hugely disruptive. We have still not addressed that problem. That cannot be in the best interests of continuity for those children.

What happens? Not surprisingly, the outcomes for those children are well below the outcomes for those lucky enough to be brought up with their own parents. In 2022, 38% of care leavers aged 19 to 21 were not in education, employment or training, compared with just 11% of all young people aged 19 to 21. There are long-term consequences from not getting this right. They were there in 2010, they are still there in the MacAlister report in 2020, and it is such a false economy not to be doing more about it.

I have a few more comments, if I may, because there are still huge differentials in outcomes and intervention levels for children across different parts of the United Kingdom. We did a lot of work on that in the all-party parliamentary group for children. This is a couple of years out of date now, but a child in Blackpool is something like eight times more likely to be in the care system than a child in Richmond. Now, there are reasons why we see a differential between Blackpool and the rather more leafy, affluent Richmond in the suburbs of London, but eight times more likely? How can we justify such huge differentials, if we are giving each vulnerable child who needs the care and attention of the state as good care and attention as we can? Something is not working properly there.

All of this is a false economy financially, as I mentioned. Much of it is down to preventive support that could be given to parents. I chair the all-party parliamentary group for the first 1,001 days, which is concerned with perinatal mental health. One in six mothers at least—it has got worse since the pandemic—will suffer from some form of perinatal mental illness, making attachment with their child far less easy at a time when that child's brain is developing exponentially, and when attachment to a parent or carer is so essential.

One of the most alarming statistics in the research we have done in that group is that for a 15 or 16-year-old teenager suffering from some form of depression or low-level mental illness, there is a 99% likelihood that his or her mother had some form of depression or mental illness during pregnancy. It is as stark as that. Perinatal mental illness costs this country in excess of £8 billion a year. My right hon. Friend the Member for South Northamptonshire (Dame Andrea Leadsom) is working on the Best Start for Life programme, which the Government, to their credit, are rolling out, but we need more urgent roll-out. That is so essential in ensuring that children have a better chance of bonding with their parents in the early years and that parents are given all the support they need when facing the challenges of perinatal

mental illness—that means mum and dad; we need a two-partner solution, where that is possible.

In addition, child neglect costs this country in excess of £15 billion every year, so we are spending more than £23 billion—the budget of a small Government Department —on funding failure by not intervening early and appropriately for some of the most vulnerable people in society. It is a false economy financially, and it is a hugely false economy socially not to do this for our future, which happens to be our children.

Josh MacAlister—slightly depressingly, I thought—described in his report the social care system as a

“30-year-old tower of Jenga held together with Sellotape”.

I do not think it is as bad as that and, frankly, I do not think that such a description properly respects the huge amount of hard work, dedication and professionalism of the many thousands of social workers, foster carers, care home managers, IROs, youth workers and others whose lives are dedicated to looking after some of the most vulnerable children in society. They have dedicated their careers to looking after vulnerable children, and we need to do better to support them. The problem is that we are still losing too many experienced social workers by overloading them. We need a better workforce retention and recruitment strategy, as the hon. Member for York Central said.

I have some criticisms of the report. The review takes an unnecessarily antagonistic view of the independent sector, and I disclose my interest here. If we did not have the independent sector, the whole children’s social care sector would collapse. If we looked at the relative costs, we would find that there is better value to be offered in the independent care sector, which often ends up with the most damaged and most challenging children passed on by local authorities. Frankly, I do not care whether a child is being looked after by a local authority, a third sector organisation or an independent provider. All I care about is whether we are getting the best outcomes for that child in the care system, so that the child will come out of the system in a better shape than they went into it. We need to work in partnership with whoever has the expertise, the capacity, the resource and the dedication to provide that. We need a partnership of those different sectors to ensure that we are doing the best by that child.

There is a shortage of places in this country, which too often means that we have a costly spot purchasing system, which is most expensive to local authorities and too often based on where there is a vacancy and a gap in the system to fit that child, rather than the system being fitted around the child based on what they most need at that point in time. They may need a foster carer, a specialist foster carer, a residential home or an educational residential home placement. The only consideration should be what is best for that child at that particular time, not what is actually available. Too often on a Friday night, when a social worker is desperately ringing round, it is about what is available, rather than what is most appropriate for a child who has just come into the care system through a local authority. We need—I fear that the MacAlister report does not highlight this enough—better, smarter, more long-term partnership planning, with smarter commissioning and long-term agreements between all those different sectors to achieve a better outcome for children. We need a system that is centred on the needs of the child; that is the be-all and end-all.

I want to mention a couple of other things, and then I will finish, although we have left plenty of time for those on the Front Benches to make their important speeches. I am really pleased with the John Lewis advert this year. It is one of those heart-tugging adverts, better than the usual dross we often get from the supermarkets at Christmas, but it is not just an advert; it is a cause and a mission.

By flagging up children in care in its Christmas advert, John Lewis is not just trying to sell more crackers and turkey; it has actually invested in children in the care system. I believe it has taken on 17 young people who have been in the care system and it is giving preference to care-experienced young people in apprenticeships and work. It has been working on the issue for the last 18 months. In partnership with Action for Children and the Who Cares? charity, it supports young people moving from care to independent living. It is raising awareness of the disadvantages and inequalities that children in the care system face. I say three cheers for John Lewis for that, and I hope it continues. I also hope that it will raise awareness among its customers and that other people will follow its example.

The foster care organisations that I work with have already seen an increase in the number of people interested in becoming foster carers. If the new Minister has not already, I am sure that she and the Government will want to work with John Lewis and other employers to have a national recruitment campaign for foster carers. Goodness knows that we desperately need them, given the increasing number of kids who are coming into the care sector.

I take issue with the MacAlister report's recommendation to abolish independent reviewing officers, which the hon. Member for York Central mentioned. IROs are not perfect, but they do an important job. When I was at the Department, I spent a lot of time going out with IROs, particularly in Leeds, which doubled the number of IROs it employed 10 years ago. IROs are the confidantes of young people in the care system, who often have nowhere else to go. When they work well, they are the advocates, ambassadors, representatives and shoulders to cry on for young people—they make sure that children get a better deal and they are a trusted voice. As in many professions, they are of mixed quality, but the principle is right. I take issue with that recommendation, although I understand why the review made it.

I absolutely agree with the review on kinship care. One of my great disappointments is that we could not do more about that. Some 180,000 children in this country are raised in kinship care, often by grandparents who have other caring responsibilities and have to give up work to take on a child whose mother or father is unable to look after them, frequently because of substance misuse. The grandparents take on the child as an alternative to them being adopted in the hope that one day, as often happens, they can be reunited with their birth parent when those problems have been solved.

In other countries, kinship care is the primary way that children are looked after. In New Zealand, two thirds of children in the care system are raised with kinship carers. Not all kinship carers are brilliant, but in most cases they are doing it for the right reasons—the love of the child. We have never properly given them the recognition that they deserve. I pay tribute to the grandparent charities that I have been involved with while in this House and beyond, which support those who simply want to look after their grandchildren when the parents cannot, but who need a bit of help in many cases. We need to have a proper, new legal definition of kinship care and to look at financial allowances for kinship carers, because they are too often seen as a cheap alternative to having to pay foster carers or for other placements.

[David Simmonds](#)

Kinship care is an area where the Department could do some productive work. Does my hon. Friend agree that, given that the typical cost of a child in the care system to council tax payers is £54,000 a year, and the cost of a child with higher needs is, on average, in excess of £130,000 a year, kinship care offers not only a better and more familiar experience for the child, but potentially significant savings for the taxpayer?

[Tim Loughton](#)

It is a no-brainer. It is much cheaper to do it that way and people are much more likely to do it for the right reasons. Social workers looking for a placement can either place a child with a foster carer who has been properly vetted, is on their books and has a vacancy, or they can do a lot of new work to assess whether a kinship carer relative is appropriate. The easier and the more expensive option—and, again, not necessarily the best option for the child—is to go with the foster carer.

We should be placing far more children with kinship carers, but with ancillary support from the social workers; not just dumping the child with their grandparents and running, but making sure that that sort of support is available, as with the adoption support fund, so that the child is suitably resourced and cared for, with all the stuff that needs to go with it. I think we need to look at a new kinship care leave entitlement as well, particularly where we have kinship carers who have given up employment opportunities to take on the role.

We still have a particular problem with separated siblings. Nearly 12,000 children in the care system in this country are not living with at least one of their siblings. I had four groups of young people who used to come to visit me in the Department for Education every three months: a group of kids who were adopted, a group of kids who were in foster care, a group of kids who were in residential homes, and a group of kids who had recently left care. They would all come, without any adults in the room apart from me and a couple of officials from the Department, and we would give them lots of crisps and sandwiches. They would just talk and tell us what was going on, and I got my best information from those children. Why would I not? They are our customers, they are at the frontline, and they are the ones who are experiencing day in, day out the results of the decisions that Ministers, local authority directors of children's services and social workers make for them.

One of the most common stories I heard was, "I haven't seen my sister for the last year." When children have been taken away from their parents, away from the stability and anchor of growing up in a happy childhood—which I guess most of us here take for granted—if they cannot have that continuing link with their parents, they want something close to that, which is another relation. In some cases they are separated from siblings for good reason: the sibling may present a problem for their welfare, but that is in a minority of cases. In most cases, however, surely it would be better to keep those children together, but it does not happen simply because the resource is not there. We can do smart things, as I have seen local authorities do, such as pay for a house extension to provide an extra bedroom so that a sibling group of three can be taken together, rather than split up. That has to be in the best interests

of those children. Kinship carers, if given that support, which may include financial support, are more likely to be able to keep a family together, and surely that is what we want.

I have two other points. Staying Put and Staying Close were great schemes that my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Eddisbury—he is not here at the moment—progressed and that we brought in some years ago. I do not think we are ambitious enough in just wanting to extend Staying Put and Staying Close from age 21 to 23. It should be 25, and I think we should be doing more of this. My youngest child is about to be 25, and her brother and sister are slightly older. They still come home quite a lot, particularly when they want something. Children do not get cut off from their family just when they hit the age of 21 or 23, and that is the end of it; kids need to have that ongoing support, love, care and somebody watching out for them. Those schemes do that so brilliantly, with really dedicated foster carers or people who have worked in residential homes who have a vested lifetime interest in the life of that child. We need to do better.

Another point on which I take issue with the hon. Member for York Central is the regional care co-operatives proposal, which has been put forward before. Too much of what has happened in children's social care over the last 15 years has been about processes and changing structures. We need smarter commissioning. We do not need to set up yet more structures. I want every local authority to be working closely with other good-quality providers of children's social care from whatever sector they come. The more regionalisation of this that we bring in, the further we take it away from the needs and the voices of the children on the ground whom we are there to serve. Frankly, I think that is a non-starter.

My apologies for speaking for so long, Madam Deputy Speaker. In conclusion, children's social care is still not working properly despite the best intentions and best policies—and, in some cases, legislation—over the last 20 years. I am not trying to make a partisan point. I said earlier that we have too much legislation, which has crowded out best practice and the most effective use of resources in too many areas.

I support most of the things in the report; I just want them to happen. The revolution in family help identified in the Munro report 11 years ago is all about investing to save and getting those children before crisis impacts. The MacAlister report recommends:

“A just and decisive child protection system”

and the appointment of an “Expert Child Protection Practitioner” among social workers. That is fine—I have no problem with that—but that is the job of every social worker. Every social worker should have the training, the nous and the professionalism to want to sniff out another potential Star Hobson or Arthur Labinjo-Hughes—the more recent successors to Victoria Climbié, Baby P, Daniel Pelka and the litany of other children who lost their lives in such tragic and cruel circumstances.

The report goes on to refer to:

“Unlocking the potential of family networks”,

along with kinship care, better, smarter foster recruitment, and

“fixing the broken care market”.

I do not regard it as a market; I regard it as using all the talents and resources that we have, from whatever sector, to ensure that we have the best possible support available and placements for those children who most need them.

The report then covers the five missions for care-experienced people, which Josh MacAlister calls

“the civil rights issue of our time.”

It should be. They are the most vulnerable people in our society: children who do not have a voice. They are those who are too young to have a voice and those who, through no fault of their own, happen to be growing up with parents incapable of looking after them properly or, at worst, wanting to do them harm. It is a national scandal. Of course, we need to solve the adult social care crisis, but we cannot do that at the exclusion of remembering the children’s social care crisis that is still ongoing.

The review continues to

“realising the potential of the workforce”.

We need to remove the barriers that are diverting social workers from spending time with families. We tried to do that 12 years ago, but there are still too many barriers and too much bureaucracy. As its last point mentions, we need to be

“relentlessly focused on children and families”.

That needs a multi-agency safeguarding approach, but still the different interested parties are not working together. There is nothing new in every safeguarding report that comes out; there is just a different set of characters, players and circumstances. Basically, it comes down to somebody not picking up the ball when it stopped with them. People did not share information and did not know when to intervene, or did not have the confidence to do so, when that intervention needed to happen.

I ask the Children’s Minister: are the things in the MacAlister report going to be implemented? When will the panel get on with its work? When will we see the Government’s response and the implementation plan? What will the timetable be? Will there be resources to go with that? Resources will be required to do that. It is a huge challenge for the new Minister, who I know will rise to that challenge no less than her predecessors did beforehand. But we need to rail against the system, because these are the most vulnerable people in our society, and if we cannot make it work for them, they cannot make it work for themselves.

[Madam Deputy Speaker](#)
[\(Dame Eleanor Laing\)](#)

I call the shadow Minister.

4.13pm

[Helen Hayes](#)
[\(Dulwich and West Norwood\) \(Lab\)](#)

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) and the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) on securing this important debate, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it.

Set against the enormity of the challenges facing the children's social care sector, the vital importance of the sector in seeking to support families and keep the most vulnerable children safe, and the urgency of the need for reform, far too little attention has been paid in this Chamber to children's social care in recent months. In particular, it has been six months since the independent review of children's social care was published. Aside from a short oral statement during publication, there has been no opportunity for detailed consideration and discussion of its contents. This debate is long overdue.

I would like to thank all hon. Members who contributed today. We have heard—at great length, if I may say—from Members with very significant experience of children's social care. My hon. Friend the Member for York Central made a powerful opening speech, setting out clearly the pressures crowding in on families and the urgency of the need for change. She also highlighted the costs of doing nothing.

The hon. and learned Member for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson), a former Minister well-respected for his time in Government, evidenced by the fact that he managed to remain in post for five years—that makes him a real veteran by contemporary standards, since the Minister's post has been something of a revolving chair in recent months—spoke of some of the innovations that can help to drive improvement in children's social care and the importance of improving support for care leavers. I certainly agree on both points. The hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) spoke of the need for support for kinship carers and the importance of work to address childhood trauma.

The hon. Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond) mentioned some of the charities in her constituency that do important work with vulnerable children and young people. She spoke of the lack of progress in response to previous reviews. She also mentioned the death of Damilola Taylor. Madam Deputy Speaker, I feel I must correct the record on that point. She mentioned Damilola Taylor in a list of children who died due to safeguarding failings at the hands of parents and carers. Damilola Taylor was murdered by strangers on his way home from school. It happened very close to my constituency and I just feel I must, for his family, set the record straight on that point.

[Mrs Drummond](#)

indicated assent.

[Helen Hayes](#)

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) referenced the importance of training and support for professionals working with vulnerable children and young people, and the importance of independent advocacy. The hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Dr Mullan), who is not in his place, mentioned the importance of recruiting foster carers and highlighted the very poor conversion rate from people who express an interest in foster care to those who eventually become foster carers.

The hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds) spoke from his experience as a local authority lead member for children's social care over many years and was right to highlight the transformative impact of high-quality youth work, as well as early help. Finally, another former Minister, the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham, made many points in his speech, but again highlighted the catalogue of reports and reviews produced over 10 years and the lack of progress in taking up the challenge of really delivering for children.

There is, as we have seen in the debate, a high level of consensus on children's social care and the need for change is indeed urgent. The independent review's "Case for Change" document, published in 2021, is unequivocal. The number of children, particularly the number of older children, in the care system is increasing and the outcomes for people with care experience are getting worse. Care-experienced people are 70% more likely to die prematurely than those who have not been in the care system. Care-experienced people are overrepresented in the prison system. Their educational attainment and levels of employment are lower, and they are far more likely to be homeless.

The appalling tragedies that have made the headlines in recent months, of children murdered by people who should have loved and nurtured them, remind us of the grave responsibilities that children's social workers carry. Their decisions about the welfare of the most vulnerable children can literally be a matter of life or death. I pay tribute to social workers across the country who are working every day to support families, to keep children safe, and to provide stability and security for looked-after children, but they are all too often working in incredibly difficult circumstances. The most recent survey of social workers by the British Association of Social Workers revealed that more than a third reported that their caseload had increased since the start of the covid-19 pandemic. The Department for Education's own analysis shows that the number of children's social workers quitting children's services altogether rose more than a fifth during 2021.

As many hon. Members have highlighted, the situation is very challenging for kinship carers—people who step in to care for a child who is a family member or close friend when their birth parents cannot do so. Kinship carers do an incredible job, maintaining family links that might be lost if the child was taken into the care of the local authority, providing love and stability. However, according to the most recently published survey by the charity Kinship, more than two thirds of kinship carers feel that they are not getting the support they need. That is surely not acceptable.

The past 12 years of Conservative Government have seen early help and support services for families decimated across much of the country. As many councils have lost more than 50% of the funding they receive from central Government, they have been forced to focus increasingly stretched resources on statutory services, including child protection. Over the 10 years from 2010-11 to 2020-21, investment in early intervention support fell by a staggering 50%, while spending on crisis and late intervention services has increased by more than a

third. That loss of capacity is a disaster for child protection services. Without early help and support, more and more families struggle to provide appropriate care for their children. By failing to invest in early support, the Government are allowing families to fall into crisis, picking up the pieces only when it is often too late.

The independent review of children's social care cites parenting in a context of adversity as the reason that the majority of families become involved with children's social care. Many of the issues that cause families, and particularly children, to fall into a situation of vulnerability or danger have their roots in the poverty and inequality in our country that have deepened and widened on the Government's watch. As we debate children's social care and the interventions that exist to provide the safety net for children, we must not lose sight of the wider context, which has such a significant impact on the lives of children across our country.

While the policies of the Conservatives have fuelled the growing crisis in children's social care, they have been complacent in responding to it. Across England, 50% of local authority children's services departments are rated "inadequate" or "requires improvement" by Ofsted. That will be for a variety of reasons, including a lack of resources, but resources are clearly not the whole picture.

I want to take this opportunity to congratulate Southwark Council, one of my local authorities, on its "good" Ofsted rating for children's services, which was published last week. The political and officer leadership team in Southwark have managed to continue to deliver good, child-centred services, despite the council as a whole experiencing among the highest level of cuts in the country.

The reasons for poor performance in some local authorities will vary, and I do not seek to lay the blame at the feet of hard-working frontline social workers. However, the lack of grip on the situation from the Government is inexcusable. The Government have been content to preside over a shocking level of failure in children's services departments and that is simply not good enough.

[Edward Timpson](#)

I was hoping not to have to intervene on the hon. Member. She started off by talking about how much consensus there was on children's social care, but I think she has to be a bit careful about suggesting that we somehow sat back and let this all happen with no care in the world. We have been one of the Governments who have intervened most in failing children's services. I gave examples of when we had to take control of services off authorities and put them in a trust to try to bring about an improvement in performance. Labour-run Birmingham City Council is probably the best example.

[Helen Hayes](#)

I thank the hon. and learned Member for his intervention. If he thinks that 50% of children's services departments across the country being rated as "inadequate" or "requires improvement" is an acceptable situation, I fear that he somewhat misses the point. The

Government have, of course, intervened in some local authorities, and local authorities of all political hues experience challenges and are not performing as well as they should be. However, I see no evidence of a real grip from the Government. Where is the support and challenge programme? Where is the sharing of good practice? Where is the drive, every single day, to make sure that no local authorities children services departments are failing children?

[David Simmonds](#)

The children's improvement board, which was set up as a partnership between the Department for Education, the Local Government Association and Ofsted, was the main vehicle that provided the drive. It is important to recognise, in respect of local authority judgments, that Ofsted has been clear that "requires improvement to be good" is an above-the-line judgment—that is, an authority that is performing "adequately", in the old parlance, but which needs to be on the journey to be "good" to make improvements. We need to be clear that it is only authorities that are "inadequate" that can be considered to be performing less well than they need to be to serve the interests of children in that area.

[Helen Hayes](#)

We need to have a higher aspiration for children across the country to be supported by the best possible services. I welcome the Minister's comments on the ongoing work to achieve that, but I believe much more can be done. That requires political will, and greater attention in this place, to drive improvements in performance.

[Wera Hobhouse](#)

Councils are struggling financially, although good and outstanding services are not all about finances. Does the hon. Lady agree that councils with the flexibility to spend a bit more money, such as Bath and North East Somerset Council, are in a much better position than those that are already in a difficult financial situation, usually in deprived areas?

[Helen Hayes](#)

It is indeed the case that local authorities with the flexibility to divert more resources into this area have that benefit, which can be significant.

The independent review of children's social care was published six months ago. It called for a "total reset" of children's social care and made a wide range of recommendations for reform. There is a high degree of consensus on many of those recommendations, such as the need to restore early help services, to provide better support for kinship carers, to end private

profiteering in residential care and private foster care services, and to end the placement of children in unregulated settings. These things should be happening right now.

It is also essential that, as the reform of children's social care is taken forward, the professionals working with children and families, care-experienced people, and the children and families themselves are placed at the heart of the process. None of this will happen unless and until the Government prioritise children and move this agenda forward. The previous Prime Minister, during her first Prime Minister's questions, made a commitment in response to my question that the Government's response to the independent review and an implementation plan will be published by the end of the year. There are just three full sitting weeks left before Christmas. I therefore ask the Minister to confirm the publication date of the Government's response to the independent review, and to confirm that it will be before Christmas, as promised.

While Conservative Members have been arguing among themselves in recent months, taking an ideological sledgehammer to our economy and scrambling to reinvent themselves as a completely new Government with no connection to the last one, of which they were all a part, it is the most vulnerable children and young people, and those who care for them, who are being let down. Childhood is short, but its experiences last a lifetime. When will this Government stop letting children down?

4.27pm

[The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education](#)
[\(Claire Coutinho\)](#)

I have been asked to keep my comments relatively brief, so I hope I can do justice to this tremendous debate and set out some of the Government's vision.

I start by thanking the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) for a moving and passionate speech, which I am becoming used to hearing from her, and my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton), who has been generous to me with his time and experience, for securing this important debate. I also thank all Members for their contributions. I look around the Chamber and see former Ministers, former care workers, former councillors and the newly elected Chair of the Education Committee. They have a huge amount of experience and compassion, and we heard the very best of the House today. I look forward to working with all of them, and I am overjoyed to see the wealth of enthusiasm for these changes.

I also thank all those who led and contributed to the vital reviews this year, and many Members listed some of them, including Josh MacAlister, Annie Hudson, the rest of the national panel and the Competition and Markets Authority team, as well as the children and young people in care and their families, who contributed and made these reports so powerful. I particularly thank Josh, who many Members mentioned today. He has been rightly praised, and he has worked closely with us since the publication of his review to encourage the depth and breadth of our ambition.

There is a lot that is good about children's social care, as all the reports have set out this year and, indeed, over a decade, and as Members have shown today. The dedication of social

workers, family support workers, directors of children's services, foster carers, kinship carers and others up and down the country who work determinedly to improve children's lives deserve our fullest praise. Many children who have been supported by children's social care go on to lead happy and fulfilling lives. That is a testament not only to their resilience, but to the quality of the help and support they have received when they have needed it.

However, the message from these reports and from the many excellent contributions made today is clear: the system is not delivering well enough, or consistently for the children and families it supports. Less than one month ago, I was given what I believe is the most important job in Government—it is excellent to hear that people who have held it previously agree. No other role provides such a huge opportunity to change children's lives for the better. That is why, when my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince), the then Minister for children and families, came to this House six months ago, this Government committed to taking action from day one, and I am pleased to update the House today on some of our progress.

We have already established a national implementation board and I chaired a meeting of the board last week. Hearing the experiences of the people who are care-experienced on it, as well as the wealth of experience of Josh, our Children's Commissioner and others, has given me huge confidence in its ability to help us to achieve the full extent of our ambitions for children.

We have also set up a new child protection ministerial group, and launched a data and digital solutions fund. I know that many Members talked about the importance of sharing data to encourage joined-up working. We are working to increase the number of foster care placements. My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Edward Timpson) has excellent real-world experience in this area and is pushing us to be ambitious. I want to be ambitious in this area too. That is what we are getting on with already.

Many Members have also rightly pressed me on the contents and timing of the delivery of the implementation strategy. I want to assure them that this is the thing that is keeping me up at night. It is a huge priority. I committed to publishing our implementation strategy early in the new year and I look forward to returning to this House to set out our plans in full. I am sure I will see many Members return to scrutinise them.

Today, I can share some of our vision and ambitions for the future system. The Government believe in the power of opportunity, which is why levelling up was at the core of our manifesto in 2019, and it is our belief that the roots of opportunity start with the power and importance of family. With the right support, families are the best means of protecting, nurturing and promoting the interests of children, now and forever. As the care review said:

“We all have a part to play and it starts with love.”

Our ambitions for reform will reaffirm the central role of families in the care system, and put love and stable relationships at the heart of what children's social care does. Children should grow up in loving, safe and stable families. That is where they can achieve their best. Where that is not possible, it is right that the care system should take swift and decisive action to protect them. But care should also provide that same foundation of love, stability and safety. That is what all children and indeed what all of us need to thrive.

[Jim Shannon](#)

I asked about the advocates. The figures I have from back home show that only three in 10 children have an advocate. I asked whether it would be possible to look at that process to ensure that every young child has an advocate so that they can plan their way forward in a structured fashion.

[Claire Coutinho](#)

I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and I will be looking at that carefully. The heart of what we want to do is to make sure that all people have these powerful relationships in their lives. As he ably pointed out, that is what we expect for our friends and families and actually everyone deserves to have those people who will go the extra mile for them.

On our ambitions for this area, first, I come to our ambition for families. Many Members spoke eloquently about the importance of families. They are at the heart of what makes us happy and well, so when families are struggling we should provide rapid and intensive multidisciplinary support at the right time to help to fix the issues. Lots of Members talked about early intervention and I completely agree that that is the core issue here. We want to make sure that our programmes improve early help services from birth to adulthood. We want to build a strong evidence base on what works to support families to turn around difficult situations, and I would particularly like to thank the Children's Commissioner for part 1 of her recent excellent review of family life. There was a comment from the shadow Minister about our lack of ambition in this area. I gently point her towards our ambitious reforms on domestic abuse and on drug and alcohol addiction, reducing parental conflict. We talk about prevention to make sure that people are not suffering from the kind of trauma that the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) set out movingly. These programmes are both important and exactly the right place to start.

[Rachael Maskell](#)

What keeps me awake at night is knowing that poverty levels are rising sharply. It is those pressures on families that often lead children into the care system. Given that the report did not have the remit to look into the intersection between poverty and the challenges that families face, will the Minister ensure that she puts more pressure on her Government to put the protection around families so we do not see children having to go into the care sector?

[Claire Coutinho](#)

As someone who has been working on the cost of living challenge for the past 18 months, I can say that it has been a priority of this Government, during the pandemic and into the

energy crisis, to support the most vulnerable households. That has exactly been our impetus in these times.

Our second ambition is for child protection. The murders of Arthur and Star have sickened us all. The recommendations of the national panel aim to ensure that such terrible incidents are as rare as possible and, when children are at risk of harm, to ensure that we intervene quickly and decisively through a more expert and multi-agency child protection response. The hon. Member for Bath had a question about developing our understanding of sibling sexual abuse. Nothing in this area should be taboo. We are looking at the evidence base via our child sex abuse centre. I am happy to discuss these things further with her.

Local authorities, police and health services are under statutory duties to work together to safeguard children. We will use the recommendations of all the reviews to support them.

Thirdly, on foster care and kinship care, I agree that the John Lewis advert was touching, providing an exciting opportunity for us to talk more about this area. Where children cannot be looked after safely by their parents, we should properly support wider family networks to step up and family-like environments. At the moment, there are practical, financial and cultural barriers to some of this, particularly some of the ethnic disparities that have been mentioned today. But moving in with a relative or people from one's own community provides a strong chance of achieving the kind of lifelong stability that children need. We need to encourage the system always to look to wider family before care outside the family and to help to equip families to do this where that is in the child's best interests. Many Members also mentioned adoption. We set out a strategy last year and that will also be an important part of our solution here.

Our fourth ambition is for the care system. Where family is not an option, the care system should provide stable and loving homes. Again, I echo the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who said that it was very sad that some people do not have what other people have: a loving family home. The care review found that supporting children in the care system also needs to be focused on outcomes. That has been widely discussed today and it is absolutely right. My hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley (Mrs Drummond) movingly set that out, saying that we must focus on the outcomes. I also pay tribute to John from Plan B who sounds like a thoroughly brilliant man in all the work that he is doing to help people in this regard.

The number of times that children move homes was mentioned in a couple of speeches. Care-experienced people whom I have spoken to in the past couple of weeks talked about children moving 21 times. That is not the kind of situation that we need to set up the relationship that we think are so important for people.

While we are considering all the recommendations to support young people and to get those outcomes that we have been talking about, we have also been working in close partnership with Departments across Government and with Ofsted. What is clear is that the continuing status is not an option, although I gently say to the shadow Minister that the trajectory has been positive and that there has been a huge amount of work from dedicated teams to try to get that good and outstanding level from 36% to 55%, and to reduce the number of local authorities that have been judged to be inadequate. I pay tribute to them for their work. Of course, we must continue. We must not accept any failure in this area, but they have done exceptional work so far.

Our fifth ambition relates to the workforce, which the hon. Member for York Central, who I know has great experience in this area, my hon. Friend the Member for Meon Valley and my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds), who is always so interesting on this issue, all talked about. We must equip the children's social care system with the people and tools it needs to do a good job of supporting all those who need its help. That means a skilled and empowered workforce, better data and transparency and clear system direction.

We have committed to a national framework for children's social care and are working to publish a draft of that alongside the implementation strategy. We will also continue to work closely with Ofsted, which plays an important role in the intervention and improvement programme.

Finally, by far the most important factor in achieving success will be the people delivering the vision. I am sure this House will join me in paying tribute to every social worker and all those supporting children, such as workers in children's homes and foster carers. They are there tirelessly, day in, day out, providing support to children and their families. We will bring forward proposals to support the workforce and foster carers to ensure they have the right skills and strong leadership.

I am proud to be responsible for a system that has been shown to help children to recover from traumatic experiences and often to succeed against the odds, but the children's social care system cannot do it all. A young person's success is driven by many different factors and actors. I want other parts of the local council system, the school system, the health service and many others within and outside Government to do all they can to give our children the best possible start in life. Children's social care cannot do it alone and we cannot do anything at once, but this is a programme for a long-term, once in a generation reform. We will start by laying the foundations for a system that is built on love and the importance of family.

4.41pm

[Rachael Maskell](#)

This has been an incredibly powerful debate and the quality has been of the highest standards of this place. I thank all hon. Members for their contributions, including my hon. Friend the shadow Minister, and the Minister for setting out her proposals.

It is disappointing to hear that we will have to wait until the new year to hear about the Government's implementation plan, but I trust it will come with strength and fortitude when it comes. Certainly we look forward to seeing that, scrutinising it and pushing the Minister further to make sure that it goes the furthest that it can.

We are indebted to Josh MacAlister for the careful consideration he has given to the future of children within the care system. We are also indebted to all those who step up, day in, day out, to care for children—be they social workers and other professional staff, charities and local authorities, parents, adoptive parents, foster carers or kinship carers. For the children who are dependent on us, we cannot let them down. We cannot give them second best. I trust the Minister will do her utmost to make sure we see the real transformation that those children deserve.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the Independent Review of Children's Social Care.