

Growing challenge

AUGUST 2020

Children's welfare
after Covid-19



This is the 11th in a series of *PF Perspectives*, produced by CIPFA and *Public Finance*, designed to stimulate discussion on key public finance and policy issues. These essays, by leading public sector practitioners and experts, explore the impact of Covid-19 on the delivery of services aimed at improving the welfare of children and young people

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FOREWORD



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It has been a challenging few months to say the least. Covid-19 has decimated already-stretched budgets, leaving many local authorities to manage the fallout without adequate support from central government.

Even after a decade of austerity, the current monumental uncertainty is like nothing we could have ever foreseen. But, despite the pressing and seemingly confounding challenges, the opportunity for reform is ripe.

Amid ongoing uncertainty, frontline healthcare workers have risen to the challenge of Covid-19 heroically. They have been supported throughout by public finance professionals dedicated to preserving the financial sustainability of public services, needed now more than ever by the most vulnerable members of their communities.

In this edition of *Public Finance Perspectives*, we examine the unique challenges facing young people's services in 2020. We are now halfway through the year, designated by government as the start of a "decade of renewal" marking the end of the austerity measures of the past. Now the pandemic has sidelined these plans, we must find new ways to move forward for the benefit of the communities we serve.

How can we repair the UK's social care system in the face of the crisis and ensure its sustainability for coming years? Adult social care has been at the forefront of the discussion – but what about children in need? In a featured article, Mark Gray and Rosie Thomas from PeopleToo explore how children's care services are likely to be impacted, and how early intervention will play a key role in delivering better outcomes.

We also examine the state of public education in Britain. Badly bruised from the impact of the coronavirus, will our schools be able to recuperate and come out stronger than before? An article by Kriss Baird from the EdTech Demonstrators Programme examines how technological change in education could benefit all students.

Lack of affordable housing is another issue at the forefront of the fight against Covid-19 impacting vulnerable young people and families. While the scale of the housing crisis in the UK is well known, we are only beginning to understand the impact that this virus will have on homeless populations and families in need. The lack of affordable housing not only impacts public health, but also has a lasting impact on the emotional wellbeing of a large part of our population.

In this edition of *PF Perspectives*, we are proud to showcase some insightful commentary on these pressing issues and more. There has never been a more important time to take stock of the current state of public services and look for opportunities for innovation and reform.

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A NEW
ENVIRONMENT

Opportunity from adversity

ESSAY



BY KATHY EVANS

Three decades after the Children Act was introduced, the Covid-19 pandemic presents the chance to properly fulfil its aims

IN NOVEMBER 2019 the Children Act 1989 turned 30. A raft of events, papers and celebrations were lined up to celebrate the anniversary. However, most of these had to be postponed after the declaration of a general election and the official start of campaigning and purdah. Nonetheless, the fact so many birthday parties were planned is testament to the remarkable fact that a single piece of legislation still holds an important place in the minds and hearts of today's children's sector.

The Act was certainly a visionary piece of legislation, but in practice, three decades on, it is hard to claim that its ambitions and philosophy have been realised. The late Rupert Hughes, the civil servant widely revered as the architect of the Act, wrote a piece for Children England when the Act was just 10 years old, reflecting on the successes and barriers encountered in its implementation.

Hughes reflected: "Another reason sometimes advanced [for trouble in implementing the Act in practice] is the simultaneous implementation of community care... I think there is a modicum of truth in this, at least in the sense that managers may have found it easier to grapple with the concept of the purchaser/provider split than with the Act's definition of children in need!"

The original intention of the general duty under Section 17 of the Act – to provide support to all children and families "in need" – was to promise all children that they and their family would be positively supported to live, love and grow together. It offered a whole range of community services and supportive social care practices, only resorting, in extremis, to the child protection powers instituted under Section 47 in the rare circumstances when a child really needed to go into care. Section 17 was, in effect and intention, an early intervention duty. Today, however, with steadily rising numbers of children coming into care, it is hard to see it having had that effect.

The past decade of relentless cuts to benefits, councils, legal aid and more, have torn new holes in the safety net. Too many families have been left to fend for themselves without sufficient income, food, homes or practical help, until their descent into family crisis triggers care proceedings. The decade has also seen a long-lasting impact from the case of Baby P, which triggered a tendency towards greater caution and risk aversion, combining with cuts to family and community support and contributing to rising care numbers. All these factors have risked turning the Act into a "blue light" emergency intervention by the state – the diametric opposite of its intended role as supporting all families to thrive and avert crises wherever possible.

Earlier in 2019 we saw Parliament's cross-party Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee produce a damning report on the "perfect storm" of underfunding and rising crisis-demand in local authority children's services. The committee called for urgent action to add at least £3.1bn in unrestricted grant funding to councils to meet their children's services obligations – a recommendation still ignored by central government.

The MPs also thoroughly examined the "dysfunctional" commissioning and procurement of care services – the very problem first highlighted by Hughes in



Kathy Evans is chief executive of Children England

his reference to community care and the purchaser/provider split becoming a diversion from the Act's intentions. It called for an urgent national review of the care "marketplace" by the Department for Education. This call was followed, in February 2020, by a shocking Local Government Association report on the levels of profit-making, private equity ownership, debt and risk among the largest children's services providers. The report disappeared from the headlines as soon as it was glimpsed, but really should have been a clarion call for urgent and deep-rooted rethinking of the state of the care system in which our nation's most vulnerable children are being looked after.

As yet, neither the select committee's nor the LGA's call for national government to take action over the state of the care "market" have led to any response. All of the sector's calls to address the children's services crisis became focussed on the Department for Education's promised care review – a commitment made in the Conservative Party's 2019 general election manifesto.

Enthusiastic sector-wide support for this review was tempered by concern that it could be too narrow in scope. There were worries it could be conducted as a technocratic desktop policy exercise without meaningful involvement from all the children, young people, families and practitioners with the real lived expertise of the how the care system works, where and how it is failing, and what a better approach should look like. The Scottish Care Review, launched in February 2020, set an inspiring high bar for England to follow, and efforts to secure a comparably inclusive and visionary review of the care system in England were galvanised.

By early March an announcement of the English review was expected imminently. Then, of course, along came Covid-19, and the long-built momentum of unified voices on the urgency of action needed to tackle the crisis in children's social care became, perhaps inevitably, diverted towards collective efforts to quickly adapt to the lockdown.

One of the features of those rapid adaptations has been the widespread dropping of rigid procurement and contracting practices in favour of more adaptable, flexible, and fleet-of-foot collaboration. Many councils seem to have realised their interdependence with the charities and community organisations in their area and, in turn, how inflexible and damaging competitive, transactional approaches towards them have been in the past. It is certainly to be hoped that councils can retain that insight and the courage to abandon transactional marketplace approaches in the long-term, rather than returning to pre-Covid "business as usual" in the commissioning of care services.

The evidence recently shared by public, charity and private sector experts with the Lords Public Services Committee certainly appears to reflect a growing consensus that competitive market approaches, and the "purchaser/provider split" of which Rupert spoke 20 years ago, should become a thing of the past. It can only be positive if we can emerge from the pandemic with new learning and collaboration from it, but we cannot for one moment imagine that the dire problems of council underfunding, rising poverty, increasing family needs and crises have gone away. Nor indeed that they will be solved by greater collaboration alone. ►

‘Many councils seem to have realised their interdependence with the charities and community organisations in their area’

Children were bearing the terrible brunt of austerity already, and now face the potential to pay another heavy price on top as we emerge from lockdown and the associated challenges to our emotional, physical and economic recovery.

Children's experiences of the pandemic, and the lasting impacts it could have on their entire lives, have not featured as significantly as many feel they should within the public discourse, perhaps because of this group's lower risk of death from Covid-19. However, all of us who know and care about children surely know their experience with coronavirus will have been life-changing. There will have been loss, grief and relationship strains, mental health impacts and, for so many families, a worsening of the inequalities, poverty, hunger and housing problems that should already shame our generation.

That is why a huge gathering of children's charities and experts have come together to call for children to be at the heart of national plans for recovery. We need a cross-government approach taking into consideration the needs of children, young people and their families in the round, from conception to age 25. The voices of children, young people and families must be at the heart of the recovery process, and renewed investment in the services and workforce they rely on is vital. Such an approach must:

- Be integrated and holistic;
- Protect and promote children's rights and entitlements;
- Treat children, young people and their families as partners;
- Have an explicit focus on reducing inequalities – including addressing the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on BAME groups, and on children in poverty;
- Invest in children's and young people's futures through a comprehensive, long-term funding settlement;
- Understand how needs have changed and respond;
- Value and invest in the workforce;
- Value strong relationships and take a person-centred approach to new models of service delivery.

The promised care review, so essential to the future of care and the children who rely on it, is delayed – but apparently not scrapped. There is growing concern, however, that it could focus on reviewing the Children Act itself, rather than the huge, multi-functional (and widely dysfunctional) “ecosystem” of people, professional disciplines, services and kinds of care that create the lived reality of the care system for the children and families who pass through it.

I know of nobody who seriously thinks the law is the source of the problem. Indeed, when a sector celebrates the 30th birthday of a piece of legislation with parties it can surely be taken as a sign of love and appreciation, like any other birthday party! The question for a care review must be nothing more, and nothing less, about how we can create and invest in services and practices to make children who need them feel loved, important, safe and cared for. The answer lies not in our law, but in our practice.

Councils have always been in the lead when it comes to children's services, and Children England, with our charity members, has always viewed them as our symbiotic partners in supporting and protecting children. That understanding of the crucial importance of councils is rooted in the Children Act itself, and in our sector's proud history of collaborating with governments, locally and nationally, both to create the Act and to live up to its vision for children in practice.

Recent reports suggest that as many as eight in 10 councils face serious risks to their financial sustainability. This is a devastating prospect, and one that Children England is committed to campaigning to prevent. If councils run out of money, the Children Act, and all its promises to children and families, also becomes bankrupt.

And no child in the country can afford to pay that price. ●

‘All of us who know and care about children know their experience with coronavirus will have been life-changing’

False economy

ESSAY



BY ANNA EDMUNDSON

The impact of the pandemic will only escalate the long-overdue need for a change in approach to funding children's services



Anna Edmundson is head of policy and public affairs at the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children

THE UK HAS been in some form of lockdown for much of 2020, a unique situation requiring every family to make massive changes to their normal lives to help limit the spread of Covid-19. The scale and duration of this disruption has left many families facing new pressures and having to manage tensions within the home.

While the causes of abuse and neglect are complex, research tells us that when caregivers feel overburdened the risk of child maltreatment can increase. Since lockdown, the NSPCC helpline has seen a rise in contacts from members of the public concerned about children, a greater proportion of which have merited referrals to statutory bodies. Our anonymous counselling service Childline has also seen an uplift in the average number of sessions it gives to children in which they mention abuse.

Lockdown has also meant significantly reduced contact between children and the professionals and community members who play an important role in safeguarding. Services for children provided by local authorities and charities have been forced to adapt how they work and in some cases have suspended services altogether. Schools have been almost empty, as, while children with a social worker have been able to attend education settings, only 5-15% of them have been in school on any day over the period of lockdown.

There is some evidence to suggest child protection referrals decreased by more than 50% in some parts of England in April. We know a large proportion of these kinds of referrals originate within schools – in England in 2018-19, they were second only to the police as a source. Although attendance figures have begun to climb with the easing of lockdown, many children will not experience the support and stability a school offers, nor see their teachers in person, until September. Once regular contact between teachers and pupils resumes in the autumn, we may see a significant increase in referrals.

We also know that while the pandemic has transformed all children's lives there has been a disproportionate impact on BAME communities and single parent families, and the lowest earners have taken a disproportionately large hit to their finances. As we continue to manage the lifting of lockdown restrictions, it is likely the hidden harm children have experienced during the pandemic will begin to emerge. Responding to these needs will require a wide range of support from parenting programmes in children's centres, local safeguarding teams that step in and protect children, to therapeutic services helping children process and recover from their experiences.

However, our current system may not be prepared to do this. Both the most recent triennial analysis of serious case reviews and the recent sector-led Care Crisis Review reported that limited resources are one of the main challenges facing services trying to keep children safe, and that increasing child poverty and decreasing resources are placing the system under increasing and unsustainable strain.

A decade of funding cuts to children's services

Our report, *Under Pressure: Children's and young people's services 2010-11 to 2018-19*, which we produced with Action for Children, The Children's Society, the National Children's Bureau and Barnardo's, analyses the latest funding and spending figures for children's

‘With stretched budgets, the money available for investment in non-statutory early intervention work continues to decrease’

services. It shows that, even before Covid-19, local authorities were struggling to manage increasing demand for statutory children’s services, while absorbing a decade-long reduction in funding, which equals a loss of £2.2bn a year.

Determining the amount of money available for children is complex, as funding for children’s services is patched together from multiple different streams. Some is ring-fenced, some earmarked and some taken directly from each local authority’s central pot, comprised of council tax, business rates and central government grants.

Our report takes 2010-11 as our baseline year and, by assuming that the proportion of overall local authority spending has been consistent, extrapolates the changes in funding and spending on children’s services. Under this model, funding for children’s services has fallen by 23% since 2010-11 – while spending has only fallen by 6%. In the most deprived local authorities, funding for children’s services has fallen more than twice as fast as in the least deprived areas.

In addition to the overall change, there has been a distinct shift in what the money is spent on: expenditure on early intervention services (which aim to intercede before situations reach a crisis) fell from £3.5bn to £1.9bn during the decade, while spending on late intervention services increased from £5.6bn to £7.2bn. The cost of late intervention rose due to a combination of increased demand, as 22% more children have become subject to child protection plans. On top of this, spending-per-head for looked-after children has increased by 19% since 2010-11.

Local authorities are legally obliged to ensure statutory services, which predominately fall under late intervention, are delivered and funded. But with stretched budgets across the system, the money available for investment in non-statutory early intervention work continues to decrease.

What this means for local authorities

While the figures are stark, we wanted to understand how they translated into reality for those making decisions about providing children’s services in an exceptionally challenging financial context. We conducted 20 research interviews with the staff making these decisions within three different local authorities in England, one local authority being one of the least deprived, and another one of the most deprived.

All three were facing financial constraints. All were seeing an increase in demand for children’s services and all were overspending and drawing from other budgets and reserves to bridge funding shortfalls. But the impact of funding restrictions was being felt most by non-statutory services.

Participants in the survey particularly highlighted reductions in early-years services, and in targeted support for those whose needs had not reached a critical stage. This was especially true where the local authorities had cut their early intervention spending significantly but seen smaller reductions or even increases in late intervention spending and increases in the number of looked-after children.

One told us: “We are saying early help is most important in the lives of these children and young people. And that juxtaposition of having to say this is really important but

this is where we're going to take the money from, I think, is the real challenge of where we're at in this point in time."

All the participants accepted that the legal protection for statutory services meant these areas were less likely to experience cuts, while cutting non-statutory services was an easy or "quick win". However, there was also universal understanding that stripping back early intervention services would cause difficulties in the future, connecting a lack of preventative work with an upsurge in the number of children taken into care.

Another authority said: "We are seeing children becoming looked-after because we are struggling to get traction on the level of demand and to turn the curve of that level of demand."

The cost of this care provision is expensive – increasing by £10,000 per child since 2010-11 to £61,805. Many participants worried about the mounting cost of intensive support within this potentially growing group of young people. One local authority highlighted concerns about the limited numbers of residential care and fostering placements, which could not match the high level of demand.

Participants believed this limited availability was driving up costs, as some authorities felt they had no choice but to commission very expensive placements from independent agencies. The result was an ever-increasing share of the available pot being spent on a small number of the most vulnerable children and young people.

What next?

Greater investment in children's services was already desperately needed before the onset of the pandemic. While welcome, the additional £1bn investment in the 2019 Spending Round and Budget 2020 was split between adults' and children's social services and only a small initial step to redressing the funding crisis facing local authority children services. In the wake of the pandemic the government must rebuild children's services, with a focus on the early intervention services that can respond to children's needs quickly before they need more intense intervention.

We know these services can make a difference. At the NSPCC we have invested in developing, piloting and evaluating our services to see if they can truly make changes for children. We believe that these service models, and others, can be effective at preventing escalation of need, but they must operate within a system that is sufficiently funded.

The government must also ensure that local authorities have the resources they need to support their children according to the likely level of need and address the imbalance of funding allocation that has seen local authorities with the most deprived communities experience the greatest reductions in spending power over the last decade. Well-funded, evidence-based services and skilled and dedicated staff can play an important role in levelling-up the country and ensuring Britain is the best place for children to grow up, in every community. ●

Contributor: Maggie Bradford, NSPCC policy and public affairs assistant

'An ever-increasing share of available funding is being spent on a small number of the most vulnerable children and young people'

Investing in the future

ESSAY



BY LOUISA MCGEEHAN

Rebuilding a sustainable post-coronavirus economy requires an increase in spending on improving the health of our poorest children



Louisa McGeehan is director of policy, rights and advocacy at the Child Poverty Action Group

AMONG THE GRIM statistics surrounding Covid-19, some figures have been slightly less depressing than others. One of these is that only a handful of children under 19 years of age in the UK have died as a result of the virus since the start of the pandemic.

All Covid-19 deaths are, of course, devastating to its victims' families, never more so than when it is the loss of a child. However, the risk presented by the pandemic to children's health is tiny, according to Professor Sir David Spiegelhalter of Cambridge University's Centre for Risk. In general, children are not generally vulnerable to the virus that has tragically killed more than 40,000 adults but, nonetheless, many will face life-long effects on their health and wellbeing as a result of Covid-19.

Firstly, children have missed out on many weeks of early years learning and schooling. They have had to stay at home, away from grandparents and other extended family members. Their playgrounds have been shut and they have been deprived of social opportunities to mix with other children. Sports and leisure facilities – including the libraries many families depend on for access to books and educational materials – have closed their doors to limit infection.

Although all are in the same storm, however, not all are in the same boat. Staying at home did not always mean quality time with mum and dad, taking part in online exercise classes, doing schoolwork on their own computer or taking up new hobbies. For far too many it meant going without access to the internet or even a device to get online to do schoolwork. For some it meant being trapped indoors in overcrowded, damp or unhealthy temporary accommodation.

School closures meant the lack of access to learning, positive relationships with teachers and the loss of what is for some children their one hot meal of the day. Maintaining the provision of alternatives to statutory free school meals during the pandemic – in term time and the “holidays” – was the only part of the government's emergency Covid-19 response to boost family incomes that was targeted specifically at children, despite these households facing significant extra costs. By the end of March, the Trussell Trust had pointed to an 81% increase in people needing support from food banks compared with the same time last year, and a 122% rise in parcels given to children.

The harshest impact of the pandemic has fallen on the 4.2 million children already growing up in poverty in the UK. The majority of these are in working families and in poverty because of low-paid, or insecure work, zero hour contracts or working hours inadequate to bring home a wage high enough to cover the family's needs. While better-off people in secure employment were reportedly able to save money during lockdown, families already struggling were being pulled deeper into poverty.

With the economy shrinking nine times faster than ever before and unemployment set to reach its highest point in 25 years, they will soon be joined by a proportion of the more than six million people furloughed from their jobs and facing uncertain futures. The OECD estimates one in 10 workers will be left unemployed due to the pandemic.

Like Covid-19, child poverty isn't colour blind – while 26% of white British children are growing up in poverty, for black British children the proportion is 47%. In Pakistani

families it is 54% and in Bangladeshi families the figure rises to 60%. Many of these families include the low-paid workers who are keeping the UK going by working in our hospitals, keeping transport moving, emptying our bins and delivering our parcels – while also bearing a higher risk of dying as a result of contracting the virus.

A Public Health England analysis of survival among people with Covid-19 found that people of Bangladeshi ethnicity had twice the risk of death when compared with white British people. People of Chinese, Indian, Pakistani, other Asian, Caribbean and other black ethnicity had between 10% and 50% higher risk when compared to white British people. We certainly are not all in it together when it comes to health outcomes.

As Covid-19 struck the UK, we already had a child poverty crisis – the number of children living below the poverty line rose from 3.6 million in 2010 to 4.2 million in 2018-19, according to the government's own data.

Health inequalities have their origins in childhood and poverty is a major driver of poor child health. Child poverty is toxic for children – its effects can be seen through the impact of poor housing, inadequate nutrition and the lack of fresh air and opportunities to play safely. There is a strong link between child injuries and social deprivation – children from the most disadvantaged families are far more likely to be killed or seriously injured due to accidents at home. Compared to the relatively low number of child deaths as a result of Covid-19, 60 children under the age of five die every year from injuries in and around the home.

From infancy onwards, poverty is bad for your health – the gap between life expectancy at birth between the least and the most deprived areas was 9.4 years for men and 7.4 years for females between 2015 and 2017. The gap in relation to healthy life expectancy was 19.1 years and 18.8 years respectively.

At Prime Minister's Questions on 17 June, Boris Johnson denied the growth in child poverty in a way that undermined his otherwise widely-welcomed measures in other areas. These included the U-turn on free school meal replacements continuing over the summer holidays and other income protection measures in response to the pandemic – most notably the Job Retention Scheme and the Self-Employed Income Support Scheme. There was even an additional £20 per week added to the adult standard allowance on Universal Credit and tax credits. That has compensated some for the years when benefits were frozen, but it is understood to be only a temporary measure lasting only 12 months.

Now, more than ever, as we pull out of the immediate impact of Covid-19 and start to rebuild the economy, we need a strategic approach to tackling child poverty that recognises the complexity and scale of the problem. If we don't understand the issue, we cannot even begin to put in place a plan to address it – and this plan is as necessary now as the plans that helped limit the impact of the pandemic.

We urgently need to pump-prime support for all children to make sure none are falling between the gaps. The most efficient way of doing this is through increased investment in child benefit to reach every child. Over the decade from 2010 to 2020, child benefit – paid to 12.7 million children and a vital lifeline for families ►

‘Health inequalities have their origins in childhood and poverty is a major driver of poor child health’

struggling to make ends meet – will have lost almost a quarter of its value simply because it has not been updated as prices have risen. Adding an extra £10 per week per child now would reduce child poverty by 5%. This would also benefit families above the poverty line whose finances have been shocked by Covid-19 by providing a small income platform and helping prevent them from falling into poverty.

To ensure all children gain, the government must also remove the punitive social security measures that are aimed at families with children. These include the benefit cap – the rationale for which has become obsolete and immoral as the jobs market has shrunk – and the cruel two-child limit that targets cuts on babies and toddlers, ignoring the needs of third and subsequent children.

Many have spoken about building better for the future when the UK emerges from the Covid-19 pandemic. There can be no better way of doing this than investing in the health and well-being of the nation's children. ●

‘Over the decade from 2010 to 2020, child benefit will have lost almost a quarter of its value’



WHAT
WORKS?

Strength in numbers

ESSAY



BY EWAN KING

As more service users are brought into the process of designing services, funding decisions must be devolved to the local level



Ewan King is deputy chief executive at the Social Care Institute for Excellence

WHILE CHILD DEATHS have declined over time in the UK and are comparatively low compared with other similar nations, the number of children in care rose 15% between 2010-11 and 2017-18, reaching a 30-year high last year. Child poverty - a commonly used measure for the overall conditions faced by children - is on the rise again, after falling during the 2000s.

There are myriad reasons for this lack of progress. Reductions to funding have certainly played a significant role - local authorities have seen their overall real spending power reduce by 28.6% since 2010. However, there are other factors, including:

- **Fragmented services:** Despite repeated attempts to bring health, social care, criminal justice and schools together, many services - separated as they are by different professional cultures, regulations and performance frameworks - continue to operate in silos;
- **Risk aversion:** As the government-commissioned Munro Review in 2011 rightly articulated, risk is an inherent feature of protecting vulnerable children and young people. But the worry for many is that over time we have created an unstoppable "risk monster", inhibiting free thinking and creativity while reducing the amount of time practitioners spend with children and families;
- **Output-focused commissioning:** Instead of focusing on the well-being of the child, commissioning has increasingly become transactional and focused on the delivery of narrow outputs, such as the number of hours of support a family receives or the number of days a child receives respite care, rather than the achievement of outcomes. Funding cuts have also driven a "race-to-the-bottom" to find the cheapest providers;
- **Focus on process and compliance:** Fear of failure and the adoption of rigid national targets has led to practitioners becoming overly focused on completing processes, hitting targets and measuring timescales rather than on the needs and aspirations of the children and families they are supporting.

Principles for building a better children's services system

The Covid-19 crisis has tested children's services to their limits, but many children's services rose to the challenge, providing excellent services to children and families in difficult circumstances. In the Doncaster Children's Trust, for example, young advisors - young people recruited by the trust to advise on policy and practice - have been working closely with the local authority to ensure that no child is left on their own. Shared Lives, a scheme for young people with disabilities making the transition to adulthood, has used technology to match isolated children to families who want to help.

These changes give us cause to be optimistic, but a fundamentally new approach to service design, commissioning and delivery of children's social care is required. Building better systems should be based on three closely-linked principles:

Strengths-based approaches

The Social Care Institute for Excellence defines strengths-based approaches as those focusing on “what individuals and communities have and how they can work together, rather than on what individuals don’t have or cannot do”. They are about shifting services away from a paternalistic approach targeted at “fixing” people’s problems, towards a collaborative approach aiming to build on their strengths.

Implemented thoroughly, strengths-based approaches can enhance well-being and resilience, reduce long-term pressures on higher-cost services and enable people to participate in community activities. In children’s services, it is an approach associated with some of the most successful innovations in children’s social care and many of the local authority children’s social care services rated outstanding by Ofsted. Authorities such as Leeds City Council and the London Borough of Bexley have used strengths-based approaches as the driving force behind a rapid and sustained improvement in their social care services.

In Leeds for example, the introduction of the “restorative practice” model – a form of strengths-based approach focusing on repairing relationships in families – across the whole council, contributed to the council progressing from being rated inadequate in 2009 to becoming an outstanding authority last year. Also rated outstanding in 2018, Bexley’s children’s services department adopted Signs of Safety – a strengths-based practice model focusing on building trusting relationships with families. Embracing the approach enabled it to become one of the UK’s leading children’s social care departments.

Co-production

Co-production is another approach linked to strengths-based methods, but one with its own distinct philosophy and set of associated approaches. My organisation, the Social Care Institute for Excellence, defines co-production as about providers working in equal partnership with those using their services – carers, families and citizens. It is possible to trace the history of co-production back to the independent living movement in the 1970s, but it has risen in prominence in recent years as citizens demand a greater say in how services are run.

One example of this approach is Camden Conversations, pioneered by the London Borough of Camden to try to improve relationships between the council and parents with children in the child protection system. Camden Conversations is based on the idea that children’s social practice will improve by co-producing plans with the families of the children we are working with, tapping into the skills and knowledge they hold. The aim is to identify opportunities to connect groups such as families and social workers who are often perceived as being in opposition.

The programme was created in order to help parents who find the child protection process difficult. In developing and delivering preventative approaches, parents are encouraged to contribute to designing care and support based around the achievement of their goals. ►

‘Strengths-based approaches can enhance well-being and resilience, reduce long-term pressures on higher-cost services and enable people to participate in community activities’

Place-based integrated teams

The third principle underpinning the creation of a more successful children's services is the creation of local, integrated, multi-disciplinary teams. For too long children's services have felt distant, and fragmented, with families passed from pillar to post in order to access even the most basic of services. Instead, we need to start developing services that bring different professionals together within local "places" that people recognise, and put the child and family at the centre of decision-making.

Called "hubs", or "neighbourhood teams", these integrated teams feel seamless to families, as cases are well understood by the key worker responsible for coordinating all the support that a child or family receives, supported by good IT and information sharing.

The Stockport Family model is one such approach. It has involved Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council setting up three locality-based, multi-disciplinary teams, working closely with local families and helping them solve their own problems. Within their traditional disciplinary teams, mainstream services such as social care, health visiting, school nursing, early years and early help are organised by each locality.

Specialist teams, such as youth offending and drug and alcohol services, work across the borough and are called in as required to reduce "hand-offs" – where care responsibilities are transferred between providers. There has been a strong emphasis on openness and engagement in the service, with regular communication between colleagues, partners and families. This includes weekly sharing of good practice via email, informal coffee mornings with senior managers and, very recently, a focus on serious success reviews examining why support for a given family went well.

Since Stockport Family was implemented, the number of children in care has fallen, as has the number on child protection plans. In 2017 Ofsted graded Stockport children's social care as "good with outstanding features".

A different approach to finance

These changes to the way we deliver services will require a different approach to financial leadership and the day to day management of finances. As we shift decisions closer to local people – in "places" that make sense to local communities – we will need to see more funding decisions devolved to a local level. As a result of this shift, finance leaders will have to work much more closely with local commissioners and practitioners to work out which outcomes, and thus the services that support their achievement, need to be prioritised for funding.

Better evidence of what works will also be needed if finance leaders are to trust that investments will bring about longer-term returns. While there is a steadily growing evidence-base on the impact of strengths-based models, this needs to become more accessible and useful to commissioners and funders. One example is Think Local Act Personal's *Directory of Innovations in Community-led Support*, designed to give commissioners the information they need to invest in proven innovations.

Finally, we will need to see a more rapid and ambitious shift towards the pooling of funding at the local level, so we can direct the totality of resources held within a local area to where it is most needed.

Let's stay optimistic

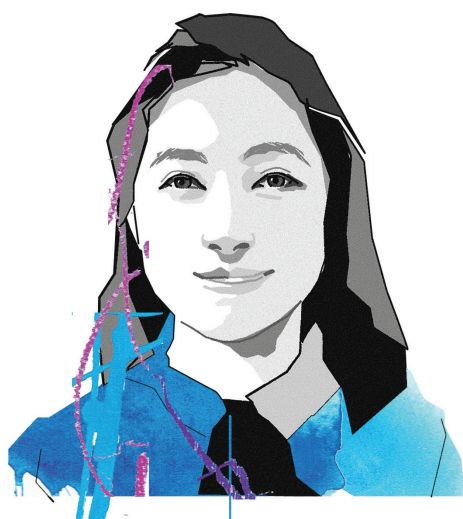
While we have seen ground-breaking legislation in the 30 years since the adoption of the Children Act, progress in changing the lives of children for the better has been slow. Child poverty, for so long a key indicator of our success in improving children's lives, has crept upwards in recent years, as has the number of children in care. We have to reverse these trends. This is why a different approach is required.

As we emerge from Covid-19, we need to resist a return to overly-bureaucratic, fragmented and risk-averse ways of working. A new approach will have to be found – one that is based on the principles of collaboration with communities, putting relationships at the heart of our interactions with families, and on working across agencies to bring people seamless services. If we can bring about change on this basis, the future for children is bright. ●

'As we emerge from Covid-19 we need to resist a return to overly-bureaucratic, fragmented and risk-averse ways of working'

Sharing the rewards

ESSAY



BY PAWDA TJOA

Councils across the UK are reaping the rewards from collaborating with children and families in designing service provision

BY THE GOVERNMENT'S own measure, we are now seven months into a "decade of renewal" for public services, as heralded by former chancellor Sajid Javid in January. While we could not expect prime minister Boris Johnson to have predicted Covid-19, the pandemic nevertheless represents the further battering of services already hurting from years of cuts.

So far, there is no renewal in sight for either the people who deliver or those who use our most crucial services. These include services aimed at protecting our most vulnerable children. While the government has committed £20.5bn to the NHS by 2023-24, children's social care is still left with a gaping £3.1bn funding gap by 2025. The government's decision in 2019 to extend funding for the Troubled Families Programme, while a positive step, was far from sufficient in reversing the impact of austerity.

Local councils must now confront the challenges of meeting ever-rising demand and an increase in complex cases, due to years of underinvestment in early help. Added to these challenges is the unprecedented extra demand that will likely result from the Covid-19 outbreak. The pandemic may have largely spared children, but the services that protect them will face untold damage from the combined consequences of the containment measures and school closures, which come on top of a decade of cuts.

Some councils are reporting more than a 50% reduction in the number of referrals since the lockdown began, meaning tens of thousands of children at risk may be hidden inside their homes, missing out on early intervention opportunities. Without the right response to mitigate this, our research suggests we could see a 24% increase in children being looked after further down the line, which could translate to an additional £1.4bn burden on councils over the next 12 months.

More funding is needed to support councils to meet needs sufficiently in the immediate term. But in addition, councils will need to take a decisive shift towards prevention to tackle these challenges in the longer term.

If the Covid-19 crisis has shown us anything, it is the ability of local communities to self-coordinate, step up and provide necessary support when a need arises. Evidence suggests that community-led models, where needs are identified by the community members, not only improve outcomes but also enhance a sense of community cohesion. This agility is critical to any effective response to local needs.

The cost of late intervention

As funding has been cut, many councils have focused on statutory services, while cutting spending on early help. Between 2010-11 and 2017-18, the proportion of council spending on early help fell by 49%, while the share dedicated to looked-after children and children in need increased by 12% from £5.9bn to £6.7bn.

However, this approach has led to rising demand and costs, alongside a worrying shift in the nature of demand, with the proportion of older children in new care cases steadily increasing. Failure to help children and their families early enough has huge emotional, developmental and financial ramifications. ►



Pawda Tjoe is senior policy researcher at the New Local Government Network

The Early Intervention Foundation has estimated the annual cost of late intervention in children's social care at nearly £6.2bn in England and Wales, of which £5.3bn is spent on looked-after children. This suggests children who do not receive the right support at the right time require more costly intervention. Without a response to mitigate this, a generation of children and young people will experience poor outcomes, putting additional pressure on local services and adding extra costs on councils.

A community-led alternative

In this bleak context, a growing number of councils are doing things differently and yielding significant results. They have adopted a community-led preventative approach to their work, grounded in a better understanding of local needs and genuine collaboration with the children and families who use their services.

Community-led commissioning is empowering to communities and has been shown to generate wider benefits such as community cohesion and well-being, as well as policy decisions that work, thus contributing substantially to better results. This approach could offer some pathways to a more effective – and financially sustainable – model for the future of children's welfare.

Community-led models have demonstrated positive results because they fundamentally address the disconnect between need and outcomes. This issue largely occurs from a lack of understanding of local needs and a resulting failure to accurately respond at the right time. Putting children and families at the heart of these services and relying on the most local intelligence and relationships, a community-led model allows help to be offered at the earliest opportunity, before things reach a point of crisis requiring costly intervention.

In local government, partnership working can be tainted by difficult past relationships and risk aversion. A community-led approach can help challenge the damaging and costly culture of risk-aversion within the sector. While risk is an inevitable part of protecting vulnerable children and families, there are concerns we have created an unstoppable “risk monster”, which has contributed to increasing demand for care. This has been exacerbated by the risk-averse national narrative and its preoccupation with auditing often at the expense of providing practical support.

For the community-led approach to work, there needs to be a genuine sharing of power between the community and councils, involving:

- Building trusting relationships in which children and families feel they are listened to and respected;
- Investing in community-led partnerships where local partners work in an equal partnership with the community to co-produce solutions to local needs;
- Handing over key funding decisions to the community to commission universal services that best meet local needs.

A community-led approach to supporting children and family has been shown to lead to earlier intervention, and subsequently, the de-escalation of need, with many children being diverted from care. By investing more in early help, Liverpool City Council was able to support families more effectively before they reached a point of crisis through partnerships with community organisations like Safe Families. These partnerships have led to significant reduction in need, with 88% of families demonstrating improved outcomes. A similar approach adopted by Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council has led to similar positive outcomes, with more children diverted from care, generating substantial savings to the council.

In the London Borough of Camden, an effort to develop genuine partnership working led to a family-led child protection initiative known as Camden Conversations. This programme was set up with the recognition that many parents found the child protection process difficult and intimidating because it felt very “official” and “blaming”. Through the initiative, parents are listened to and respected, and their expertise and skills acknowledged and valued. Importantly, parents contribute to designing care and support by sharing their own experience and knowledge of the child protection process.

Camden's Early Help Team has applied a “family group conferencing” approach, which encourages practitioners to work in genuine partnership with families, who lead discussions on what support they need. This offer is voluntary and supports productive conversations by providing a safe space for families to interact. Camden's analysis in 2018 found that 80% of families who had an early family group conference remained free from additional intervention within 12 months of case closure.

‘A community-led approach can help challenge the damaging and costly culture of risk-aversion within the sector’

Social workers' passion to build personal relationships with children and families is often overwhelmed by the significant caseloads and paperwork required by the system. However, in practice, only about 20% of their time is spent in direct contact with children and families. This minimal contact time significantly undermines their ability to identify needs early and accurately.

Some authorities like Westminster City Council have tried to address this by redesigning their services around a family hub model. Through the family hub, families have access to a wide range of services that have been co-located to improve accessibility for families and to maximise their reach within the community. By taking a whole-systems approach to family support, the Westminster family hubs create an environment focusing on building positive relationships, allowing the early and accurate identification of need.

In Scotland, frontline workers at Fife Council were given autonomy and funds were specifically set aside to help them support families before they reach crisis point. This radical approach contributed to a 70% reduction in the number of children in care in just three years.

The genuine sharing of power between the council and community is not complete without the sharing of decision-making on issues like commissioning and budget setting. Community-led commissioning is empowering to communities and has been shown to generate wider benefits such as community cohesion and well-being, as well as policy decisions that work, thus contributing substantially to better outcomes.

This was demonstrated in places like Leeds where, as part of its council-wide vision to make the city the most child-friendly in the UK, the city council has devolved some funding to the community. The authority's Child Friendly Leeds vision rallies local partners to work closely together to achieve the shared goal of improving outcomes for children, including reducing the number of looked-after children and NEETs (young people not in education, employment or training). A key part of this is the 10 community teams set up to determine and commission the most appropriate universal services to support needs in their local areas.

A glimpse of the future

Councils advocating a more community-led approach have radically changed their working culture, giving frontline workers the autonomy to assess the continuing impact of their decisions on children and families. In some cases, this involves enabling frontline staff to exercise a reasonable degree of autonomy in the field, and helping them focus on building trusting relationships with children and families and working with them to achieve the best outcomes.

The examples above, and the mutual aid movement we have witnessed during the pandemic, offer a glimpse of what councils and the community can achieve if they work in a genuine partnership. If the government is serious about starting a new decade of renewal for public services, they must recognise and support the contributions of local communities beyond the pandemic.

Without the government's support and a significant culture change within the sector, this community power is at risk of dissipating altogether. The shock to the social care system as a result of the Covid-19 crisis over the last few months has underlined the need to repair the cracks in our system.

The full scale of the impact of austerity combined with the current crisis remains to be seen. In the meantime, we can no longer see children and families as mere passive users of services to be "processed", but as equal participants in the efforts to build a better future for themselves and for their children. Widespread adoption of community-led approaches will be the real public service renewal that so many have hoped for. ●

'The mutual aid movement we have witnessed during the pandemic offers a glimpse of what councils and the community can achieve if they work in a genuine partnership'

Home improvements

ESSAY



BY LINDSEY WISHART

A raft of evidence shows the importance of tackling poor housing conditions in preventing children needing support from local authority care services



Lindsey Wishart holds treasurer roles for charity KeyRing, charity coalition the Social Interest Group, and Camphill Village Trust. She is also lay member at Brent Clinical Commissioning Group

“DANNY” SPENT MOST of his adult life going in and out of prison with an undiagnosed learning disability. However, with support, he has not been back to prison and was able to gain custody of his son to prevent him going into care. The cost of this support was a tiny fraction of the cost of the alternatives for both father and son. The pair were helped by KeyRing, a registered charity providing housing-related support services, of which I am treasurer. KeyRing’s model uses asset-based approaches, focussing on what people can do rather than what they can’t do, and features co-production (where all parties are equal partners), the use of volunteers and peer support.

Peer support from those with similar experiences has the potential to create a powerful virtuous circle, with the person giving the support also gaining the benefit of gaining confidence and reinforcing the messages. People who have been marginalised find it easier to relate to and trust a peer associated with a user-led charity than an official from a statutory body. There is a moral imperative here, but also a potential for better value for money in public services over the longer term.

This example is not the only area where housing solutions may be able to prevent or reduce children’s time in the care system. Young people leaving care are over-represented in the prison population and under-represented at university. They are clearly a group that experiences a variety of inequalities. We should therefore be seeking all opportunities to ensure joined-up policy making aimed at preventative support.

There are four areas of housing policy that can have beneficial impact on children at risk of becoming looked-after:

- The bricks and mortar of suitably affordable housing supply;
- The welfare benefits system;
- Homelessness;
- Supported housing and housing-related support services.

Affordable housing supply

The government has indicated that a large-scale housebuilding programme will be part of its plan to revive the UK economy in the aftermath of Covid-19. The Local Government Association, among others, is calling for more social rented homes to be built, a move I fully support.

Suitable, secure and genuinely affordable housing can only benefit disadvantaged families and reduce the stress created by its absence. To me, this also makes economic sense as the homes are assets with a reliable rental income stream for the provider. Furthermore, there will be a reduction in the cost of the housing element of Universal Credit as a result of claimants moving from high-cost private rented accommodation into social housing, particularly in areas of high housing demand. This reduction in costs should be taken into account in the allocation of government subsidies for the construction of new social housing.

Welfare

Changes in the welfare benefits system such as the benefits cap, reductions to Local Housing Allowance and the long wait for the first Universal Credit payment have all adversely impacted the ability of families on low incomes to secure and retain private rented accommodation.

While discretionary housing payments are available from local housing authorities, these may be over-subscribed in areas of high housing need. The fact that the housing element of Universal Credit can only be paid direct to the landlord in limited circumstances also contributes to an increasing reluctance among private landlords to rent properties to benefit claimants.

Issues around housing need are inextricably linked with poverty and require joined-up responses involving the wider welfare benefits system and the availability of secure and adequately-paid work.

Homelessness

Unitary authorities and district councils have a duty to provide housing advice and assess homeless applicants. Rights to housing advice have been strengthened by the Homelessness Reduction Act. This is welcome, as such advice can be an effective preventative option, providing better value for money and outcomes by helping people to retain their existing housing.

Those accepted as being in “priority need”, typically households with children, may be provided with temporary accommodation, and will receive support to access private rented housing or join the waiting list for permanent social housing. Where a household is regarded as having made themselves intentionally homeless, there may be no housing duty but there would still be a duty towards the children under the Children Act for the social services authority. The same applies to families without recourse to public funds.

These are examples of circumstances where there may be a saving to the public purse by meeting the household’s housing need rather than taking their children into care. Some corporate leadership may be required to achieve this as both housing and social care budget holders seek to manage their own demand-led budgets.

In unitary authorities, which have responsibility for both areas, it is possible to create incentives to take a decision that gets the best value for money for the council as well as best outcome for the family. In two-tier areas, doing so is more of a challenge and might involve some form of budget pooling to share both the investment in prevention and the reward for preventing greater costs elsewhere.

The Domestic Abuse Report 2020: The Hidden Housing Crisis, published by campaigning charity Women’s Aid, identifies concerns about housing as a significant barrier to leaving an abusive partner. Having been homeless as a teenager, a dear friend of mine chose to stay in an abusive relationship rather than become homeless again. The Women’s Aid report points out that domestic abuse, homelessness and supported housing are interlinked and require a joined-up policy response. ►

‘Issues around housing need are inextricably linked with poverty and require joined-up responses’

Homelessness charity Crisis cites evidence that housing-led solutions offer the best way of ending homelessness, and asks for ring-fenced funding for the use of a model called Housing First. Housing First is an evidence-based approach involving the provision of independent stable housing along with intensive holistic person-centred support. It supports recovery for people with multiple and complex social care needs and can offer greater value for money than alternative options for these individuals.

An Ofsted report from 2011, *Edging away from Care*, called for a similar approach, with a key worker, a multi-agency approach and working with the whole family, as being effective in preventing children being taken into care. These children were living in families with various challenges including domestic violence, substance misuse, mental ill-health and poor housing conditions.

Supported housing

Supported housing and housing-related support services provide support to tenants over and above standard landlord functions but which do not constitute social care. These services help vulnerable people maintain their tenancies and achieve independence. The client groups they support include homeless families, survivors of domestic abuse and people with mental health problems.

From 2003, the government's Supporting People programme provided ring-fenced funding for such services. There was plenty of evidence that they could provide good value for money, especially for people who would qualify for social care support in their absence. However, a combination of the removal of the ringfence and 10 years of austerity have seen significant reductions in these services.

There is still a route for certain intensive housing management costs to qualify for enhanced housing benefit and for tenants to be exempt from certain aspects of the Welfare Reform Act. However, these are limited to "exempt" or "specified" forms of accommodation only.

Coming back to the need for more genuinely affordable housing, there is also a shortage of "move on" accommodation for people ready to leave short-term supported housing. My plea to commissioners is to look beyond the hourly rate of these services and seek ways to recognise the contribution they make to saving greater costs elsewhere, again perhaps through creative use of budget pooling. My suggestion to providers is to gather evidence and join the dots for increasingly-stretched generalist commissioners.

New horizons

As I approach my final term as treasurer of KeyRing, I find myself reflecting on how the Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing inequalities. People living in overcrowded housing who are economically insecure and obliged to travel to work on public transport are more likely to catch the virus. BAME communities have higher death rates from Covid-19, and are more likely to experience poor housing conditions and homelessness. BAME children are over-represented in the care system.

In 63% of cases, the primary reason for being looked-after is the risk of abuse or neglect. Children living in these conditions have had a particularly difficult time during lockdown and greater disruption to their education. Pressure has increased on families who were already struggling. Domestic abuse has risen and the need for foster carers has increased.

I am painfully aware of the extremely adverse financial impact that the pandemic has had on councils and the voluntary sector, with increasing demand for services coupled with reduced income. Nonetheless, it is incumbent upon public sector organisations to prioritise the reduction in these inequalities in their post-pandemic planning. ●

‘Children a risk of abuse or neglect have had a particularly difficult time during lockdown’



RECOVERY
THROUGH
INNOVATION

Learning to change

ESSAY



BY KRISS BAIRD

The Covid-19 lockdown has propelled technology-enabled learning to the forefront of discussions on school education methods

THE EDTECH DEMONSTRATORS Programme launched in late April with a mission to provide peer support and training to support the effective use of technology in England's schools and colleges. The initiative is funded by the Department for Education and coordinated by London Grid for Learning, The Education Foundation and Sheffield Hallam University. Its aim is to connect state-funded schools, multi-academy trusts and colleges with primary and secondary schools and further education providers committed to highlighting the benefits of education technology.

Most of these educational institutions have faced steep challenges in adapting to new norms exacerbated by the Covid-19 crisis. In some instances, primary and secondary education has been in near-stasis where some learners lack access to devices at home. Home schooling has become widespread, placing significant pressures on parents to co-operate more with schools and provide a viable educational experience for children.

At a recent conference, it was noted that technology-enabled learning (EdTech) has now leapt into mainstream consciousness. The pandemic has accelerated the "technology adoption curve" by perhaps five to 10 years in as many weeks, as a result of the recent lockdown and education institution closures. This massive change sits against a backdrop in which many teachers cite a lack of confidence and knowledge as inhibiting their ability to use technology effectively. In addition, the UK risks losing its international lead in the use of technology due to a year-on-year decline in spend by schools on education services, resources and in particular technology and digital products.

By no stretch has innovation in education ever been an easy pitch to teachers and school leadership teams. All too often the rhetoric has reinforced the idea that Edtech cannot and will not replace teachers. Too often, the debate has concluded that Edtech has not been proven to be effective compared to traditional classroom teaching and learning.

The latter point is largely due to the many variables at play that can skew data, meaning correlation and causation are nigh on impossible to evidence robustly. These variables include socio-economic factors, limited access to devices, and even how well users are supported by EdTech providers when they adopt new technologies. These factors can lead to a spectrum of experiences, often poor, when first trying, and often failing, to use technology in a live teaching scenario. "Unless it is fast to set up, super-simple to use, and works every single time it will be banished to the store cupboard," is perhaps my favourite assessment – from a mathematics teacher friend of mine on their attempt to use educational technology over more traditional methods.

We all know the feeling you can get at education exhibitions, wandering the aisles like deer caught in headlights, overwhelmed by the flashy sales offers and seemingly undifferentiated choices on offer. Such a bewildering array of options can make it difficult to answer the question: "What would be best for my school?" As in many parts of the public sector, the procurement policy is often to spend as little as possible. Perhaps it is unsurprising we are used to accepting nothing more than incremental improvements.

I am one of a team of regional leads working on this national programme. It is our task to firstly understand the objectives of schools and colleges that would like to tap into this



Kriss Baird is London's regional lead for the EdTech Demonstrators Programme

free support. We then find a match with one of the demonstrators and empower them to create plans of action. Examples include programmes to address and close teachers' digital skills gaps or assist the school or college to establish a more strategic approach to better engage with parents and students in remote learning scenarios.

In London, my patch, we currently have four demonstrator schools helping teachers answer these tough questions: Cheam Common (part of LEO Academy Trust), Shacklewell Primary (part of New Wave Teaching School Alliance), Reach Academy in Feltham and Heronsgate Primary in south east London. Each of the demonstrator schools and colleges share a wealth of experience, enthusiasm and motivation to help senior leaders and teachers overcome nuanced challenges. All four have different expertise and platforms for helping others make their own Edtech decisions.

EdTech demonstrators work closely with school leaders to unpack, define, and help implement their school's digital strategy for teaching and learning both in and out of the classroom. Our approach is one of empathy. We understand that, while there may be uniform challenges faced by all education institutions, each has its own nuanced needs and faculty profile, with a range of skills levels and appetites for new, disruptive ways to deliver teaching and learning.

During this initial onboarding process it is vital for schools and colleges receiving the support to first consider: "What has our EdTech journey been to date?" and then: "How does Edtech currently fit with our teaching and learning strategy?", so that the demonstrator school begins with a baseline of knowledge. Digital strategy comes first and the minutiae of tech functionality second. Or, perhaps, "pedagogy before tools" is a more appropriate mantra.

Technology will not replace human-to-human teaching and learning altogether, yet during these uncertain times it is an enabler to help achieve or exceed the expectations of all stakeholders involved, most crucially the expectations of learners. Importantly, the teachers from these demonstrators are making use of cloud-based infrastructure to help foster strong working practices between colleagues and deliver high quality education.

First and foremost, the demonstrators programme is about providing practical support to upskill teachers and staff so they are equipped and confident to adapt to the immediate changes to status quo happening in education right now. On the London Grid for Learning Edtech Demonstrators website, many of our demonstrators are publishing helpful resources to help others.

An example is Cheam Common's great advice on hosting remote assemblies with the whole school in attendance. At a time of school budget pressures, it is welcome that the government and the sector can work together to identify how to support schools and understand how technology budgets and professional learning can be maximized to deliver teaching and learning outcomes.

There is also a major role for regional local authorities to play. In the boroughs of London, conversations with council's heads of professional learning are happening. These officers need to be responsive to the pressures that schools in their areas face, ►

'Technology will not replace human-to-human teaching but, in these uncertain times, is an enabler to exceed the expectations of learners'

and to provide practical advice and guidance beyond the Department for Education's evolving policy.

I am beginning to work closely with borough councils such as Enfield, which has established an Edtech Action Group, constituting around a dozen or so senior leaders from schools in the local area. These primary and secondary school leaders are helping pave the way for nearly 100 learning providers in the borough by developing thought leadership and strategic plans to introduce an updated offer for teacher-centric continued professional development.

In this instance, intra-borough collaboration is vital. Local education authorities are responsible for education in their jurisdiction, so should play a part in helping to demonstrate the art of the possible. Their role can be to interpret government guidance and translate it into a more practical understanding. They can provide a suite of services for educators going beyond the remit of the EdTech demonstrators programme, such as illustrating modes of practice seen to work elsewhere. LEAs must put the context of these new modes for teaching and learning into language teachers understand today. Otherwise, at best it won't be accepted or at worst won't be understood.

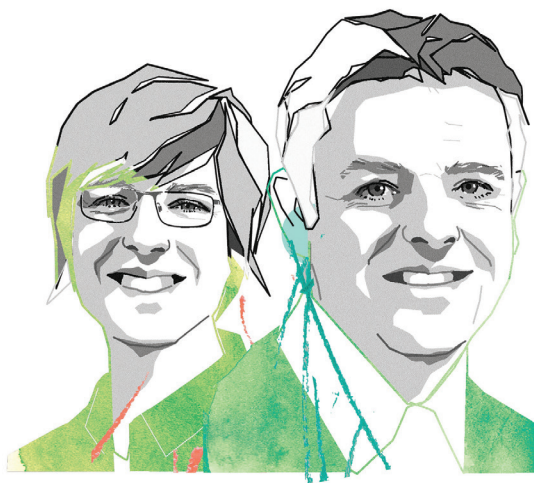
The Edtech Demonstrators Programme also has a raft of webinars for schools and educators to tap into. London-based demonstrators are covering practical teaching and learning topics such as top tips for storytelling using digital tools, making short and engaging instructional videos, and creating accessible digital content for special educational needs learning. Webinars are available for anyone to join and hopefully contribute to a change in perception and leadership mindset that a digital strategy is now more than just a nice-to-have, and is helping to mark an important step-change in England's education system.

Innovators and the early adopters of technology-enabled-learning are no longer seen as hobbyist enthusiasts. They are trailblazers in their profession, helping empower colleagues. We should celebrate their success in helping others. Teachers and leadership teams in schools and colleges up and down the country are making vitally important tech-enabled strides that will impact millions of students and strengthen the foundations for the next generation of teaching and learning. ●

‘Innovators and the early adopters of technology-enabled learning are no longer seen as hobbyist enthusiasts’

Holistic medicine

ESSAY



BY MARK GRAY AND ROSIE THOMAS

A tiered, whole-system approach is required to make the most of scarce resources in the face of acute service pressures

THE UK'S DEMOGRAPHY is changing, and austerity continues to impact the availability of resources to meet demand. These pressures are likely to be exacerbated by Covid-19, meaning there has never been a more important time to consider the approach to demand and cost management in the children's care sector. Public bodies and providers can take a range of approaches to meet this challenge to create better outcomes for children and their families, and ensure a more cost-effective use of public funds.

Disfunction in one part of the system can impact significantly on the effectiveness of another. Conversely, when these elements are aligned, professionals, families and communities can access the right support, in the right way, and at the right time. A number of local authorities are building target operating models, which show these relationships and interdependencies in action.

There are a number of initiatives and approaches across what many will understand as the "continuum of need". This is a tiered approach to managing need, implying different interventions according to complexity. Whole-system approaches, however, do not come to life through diagrams that imply a linear progression up and down a continuum. They do so through relationships – between communities and public bodies, and between public bodies themselves.

Tiers 1 and 2 – Universal services and early help and prevention

Universal services – schools, family centres, health services and a variety of local community organisations – help families create strong relationships, a core foundation on which families can build their strength and resilience. These services play a significant role in fostering a culture of belonging, aspiration and self-reliance in families.

When built around community organisations – such as schools or any other strong community or neighbourhood assets – this sense of belonging gives families a connection that not only builds confidence in themselves but also encourages them to help others. A place-based target operating model, with a strong focus on early help and prevention, can support the collaboration of these services. It can facilitate these networks to connect different parts of the system, and share local intelligence to target resources better.

Universal services should be underpinned by practices enabling families to build their own solutions. The "team around the family" approach, wrapping the support of a range of professionals around the family, works well here, with elements of family group conferencing, which identifies strengths to draw in from the wider family.

Critical to the success of families becoming the architects of their own health and well-being is the approach to information, advice and guidance. Co-designing these in partnership with service users, including children and young people, is crucial in ensuring people within local communities can access the information in the most accessible way.

As part of a preventative approach, councils cannot underestimate the importance of the voluntary and community sector. However, these services do not come for free. ►



Mark Gray is service director and Rosie Thomas is service manager at service design firm Peopletoo

To feel a valued and equal member of the partnership, some form of investment in the VCS is required by councils to both ensure its sustainability and show a tangible acknowledgment of its contribution.

There are several innovative approaches to commissioning with the voluntary sector. Local authorities can review their tendering processes to provide equal opportunity for smaller organisations to win larger and more long-term contracts. Some can promote collaboration across organisations reducing competition and duplication in the market. Some can also establish well-being funds and grants to encourage VCS organisations. Others can play community catalyst roles, providing support to VCS organisations and enthused members of local communities in making grant applications, business management and development and sustainable cost modelling.

The best partnership models also involve services not traditionally seen as contributing to children's outcomes. There are many excellent examples of this across public bodies, where leisure services and the business community all understand their interdependency and contribution to social value. Where universal services cannot meet need, families can be offered more focussed support at "Tier 2" of the continuum of need.

However, it is important to remember here the concept of "permeability" between tiers - families' needs may ebb and flow, requiring the protective factor of the established relationships, not lose them as they go up and down the continuum.

An emerging factor in many referrals, particularly of older children, is in managing behaviours stemming from social, emotional and mental health difficulties. Often, where such needs do not meet the threshold required for child and adolescent mental health services, they end up being managed via social care or special educational needs and disability (SEND) services if not addressed early on. However, there is often a lack of services in this field.

Many authorities have adopted a partnership-driven emotional and mental health offer. Such an offer should not just focus on challenging behaviour but also where a child is affected by anxiety or other emotional health issues that, if unaddressed, can have significant long-term effects. Supporting this, we cannot ignore research showing the impact the needs of the adult can have on the child. Collaboration with adults' services via a trauma-informed approach is critical in cases involving domestic violence, parental mental health or parental substance misuse.

Tier 3 – Intensive support

Cases requiring more intensive support are often referred to as "Tier 3" on the continuum. We see many effective interventions, including the "community connector" role, based on the social prescribing model. This involves seeking sources of support within the local community to "connect" a family to community-based support.

Similarly, community mentors can identify individuals within the community who can offer support to families. Some areas take this further with intergenerational programmes, bringing enormous benefits to people who have a lot to give but no outlet to do so. "Edge of care" services, at a slightly higher level, acknowledge a family may be at risk of breakdown and offer a particularly intensive intervention.

Some areas offer respite services which work in same way as the short breaks approach for children with special educational needs – this can give families the breathing space they need to help them remain together longer term. Many authorities are now exploring how respite services are offered and developing commissioning models to make this a more positive and meaningful option for families.

A number of areas are working with their local hospitality networks, generating schemes, often referred to as "respite schemes". These promote creative approaches to respite while adding value to local hospitality sectors that sign up to contribute short breaks, family activities and reward schemes.

Tier 4 – Statutory Services

Services at "Tier 4" are generally described as those needing a more statutory intervention. There will always be some families needing this level of intervention. However, as well as having a strong, partnership-based target operating model focussed on early help and prevention, local authorities can take some measures to both mitigate growing demand and the costs arising from it.

This includes demand modelling, where an authority takes measures to understand changes to its demography and what impact they may have on future demand, and

‘The best partnership models involve services not traditionally seen as contributing to children's outcomes’

hence what emphasis needs to be placed within its model to address them.

Linked to this, many local authorities are now looking to take a “trauma informed partnership” approach to addressing the key drivers of demand. As described earlier, domestic abuse, parental mental health and parental substance misuse are often the key drivers of this. Focussing partnership efforts on these key priorities, especially in families of younger children, where research shows that these can have a particular impact, could have a dramatic effect on reducing demand.

Effective commissioning for outcomes can also ensure that, where placements are needed, they are sourced cost-effectively and well-managed, promoting flexibility and more meaningful service delivery based on individual needs. Linked to this, a planned approach to placement management (where the need for a placement is flagged up early through effective communication between social work teams and commissioners) is important in reducing the risk of emergency placements, which are often more costly and risk being a poorer match. Aligned to this, an effective foster carer offer is imperative to reduce the risk of placement breakdown.

An effective approach to the recruitment and retention of sufficient numbers of in-house foster carers is important here, but also a more collaborative relationship with the independent foster care market, so the pools of expertise across both sectors can be maximised. To prevent the unnecessary use of residential provision where a child or young person would otherwise be able to live within a family environment, some authorities have developed a higher tier of foster care, often described as a “wrap-around” offer with specialist services “wrapped around” the placement in order to offer a required higher level of support.

Where possible, a focus on the re-integration of children in care with their families is also critical to keeping the number of looked-after children down, particularly in the early stages of care. Becoming looked-after should never be seen as an end in itself – families must always be given the opportunity to re-unite where possible. For some older children, reintegration into their family is not in their best interests. In such cases, effective commissioning is vital in providing older young people with progressive semi-independent accommodation to meaningfully prepare them for living independently.

Commissioners need to work proactively with providers to ensure these young people have access to the right level of support within safe, stable and appropriate accommodation to reduce re-referrals into children’s services. Services promoting well-being, access to paid work and lifelong learning at the earliest possible stage in young adulthood have a positive impact on the demand for adult services later on.

Integrated approaches critical to success

In summary, while operating in an extremely challenging environment, there are many initiatives and approaches that can help public bodies manage both demand and cost in children’s social care. Critical to their success however, is to see them not in isolation but moreover as part of a whole system approach, from bringing communities together to help themselves, effective targeted early help and edge-of-care approaches, collaboration with partners as part of a place-based approach, to commissioning processes for looked-after children placements.

Taken together, all of the above can have an impact not only on outcomes for children, young people and their families in the short to longer term, but also future-proof councils against the increasing intensity in the challenges they face. ●

‘Services promoting wellbeing at the earliest possible stage in young adulthood have a positive impact on the demand for adult services later on’

Gazing into the crystal ball

ESSAY



BY OLLY SWANN

Commissioners of children's services need to anticipate future demand to ensure ongoing resilience

NOW, MORE THAN ever, the need for children's services to effectively manage demand is at the forefront of councils' minds. Despite the concept of demand management in this space being well-established, it is still a divisive issue for some. Should local authorities simply be sufficiently-resourced to meet the breadth and depth of work at the front door and within the system, or are there effective ways to intervene?

Even before the pandemic, consistent calls from the Association of Directors of Children's Services for more sustainable levels of base funding appeared to be falling on deaf ears and there have been no signs this will change.

The stumbling block is clearly one of impact and evidence. When the Treasury (quite rightly) asks the sector as a whole: "What do you currently spend on children's services, and what impact and outcomes does it achieve?", consistent and compelling answers are in short supply. Given that narrative, would you hand over more funding?

However, demand and cost can be managed within children's services, through system-wide approaches to early intervention and value. We have delivered a series of demand and value-focussed projects with over 30 councils across the country. Working with social workers and early help professionals to conduct case reviews of children and young people who had become looked-after, we have co-produced a way of triangulating their needs with costs and outcomes.

Sampling around a quarter of the looked-after children in each authority, we found, in 44% of the cases reviewed, children could have possibly or definitely been prevented from becoming looked-after. The scale of missed opportunity to intervene earlier is indisputable – as is the inability to track needs and outcomes – making commissioning decisions difficult or uninformed.

Driven by austerity, the shrinking of "non-statutory" early intervention resources has resulted in a system characterised by later interventions that actually cost more. The statistics speak for themselves. For every £1 spent on prevention, more than £4 is spent on child protection. The system is clearly unsustainable and must change.

It is disheartening that it takes financial pressures to unsettle the system and force authorities (and government) to look at things in a new light. However, there is a real danger in letting the demand discussion be financially-led. Not only does such an approach fail to engage the hearts and minds of people who can make a difference, it can also undermine the approaches we need to adopt.

I have seen councils lose faith in the early intervention and prevention agenda when unrealistic financial targets cannot be met – because they have been based on unachievable demand reduction goals. Notwithstanding the need for wisely-allocated and well-managed resources, if you focus on achievement of outcomes in a safe and sustainable way, the money will follow.

Councils we have worked with have sometimes suggested they adopt assumptions about the level of avoidable demand based on evidence we have gathered from other local authorities. Although these results are largely consistent, it is important that each council goes through the process themselves.



Olly Swann is director of public services improvement consultancy IMPOWER

Undertaking activities such as case reviews builds vital buy-in and the case for change, because it reflects the reality of children and young people's lives, rather than the chasing of a financial target. Importantly, case reviews bring to light not just the role of children's services, but the impact of whole-system-working and where, despite best intentions, partner relations might be strained.

Supporting vulnerable children and their families must be everyone's business. This is a systems issue, and the learning from real children and families helps us illustrate this. Lived experiences tell us more about the real issues that we need to be dealing with as a sector, and provides us with much more information than primary needs data alone. Case reviews and the mapping of prevention spending can enable the identification of specific gaps regarding, for example, bereavement, domestic abuse, parental criminality, and to build the ability of professionals to engage and build relationships with families.

This learning also helps guide authorities towards addressing the drivers of demand and evidencing value from every decision made. Conversations we have had with a number of directors of children's services recently have highlighted the fact that we simply cannot go on as we are.

The next step of the journey is to move on from realising we need to sustainably shift the system, and to think about how that can be done. This raises a fundamental question: are commissioning functions equipped with the right knowledge, skills and insights to operate as local authorities now need them to? For many councils, commissioning functions took a hit during austerity. At best, what remains is of limited capacity and at worst no more than a glorified contract management function.

The systems that exist to deliver services to children and families are complex rather than complicated. Complex problems cannot be solved, but can be systematically managed, whereas complicated problems can be solved by following the same blueprint for a solution each time. The complexity that children's services commissioners are now working in makes for a challenging environment – and one that invites innovation.

Commissioners in local authorities must work with their counterparts in other organisations (such as the NHS or the police), as well as providers and residents, to design and deliver sustainable new provision and services that manage demand across the whole system. Working effectively across systems requires a significant level of behaviour change by local authorities, partners, providers, service users and their families.

In our experience, there are three key areas to consider:

● **Setting inclusive ambition**

Commissioning cannot take place in silos. Commissioners must influence a range of different system interfaces (for example health, social care, education) and stakeholders (for example council staff, providers) in order to create the right markets and maximise their impact and value. This requires focussing on behaviour and culture to create a shared ambition for services and catalyse real transformation; ►

‘Working effectively across systems requires a significant level of behaviour change by local authorities, partners, providers, service-users and their families’

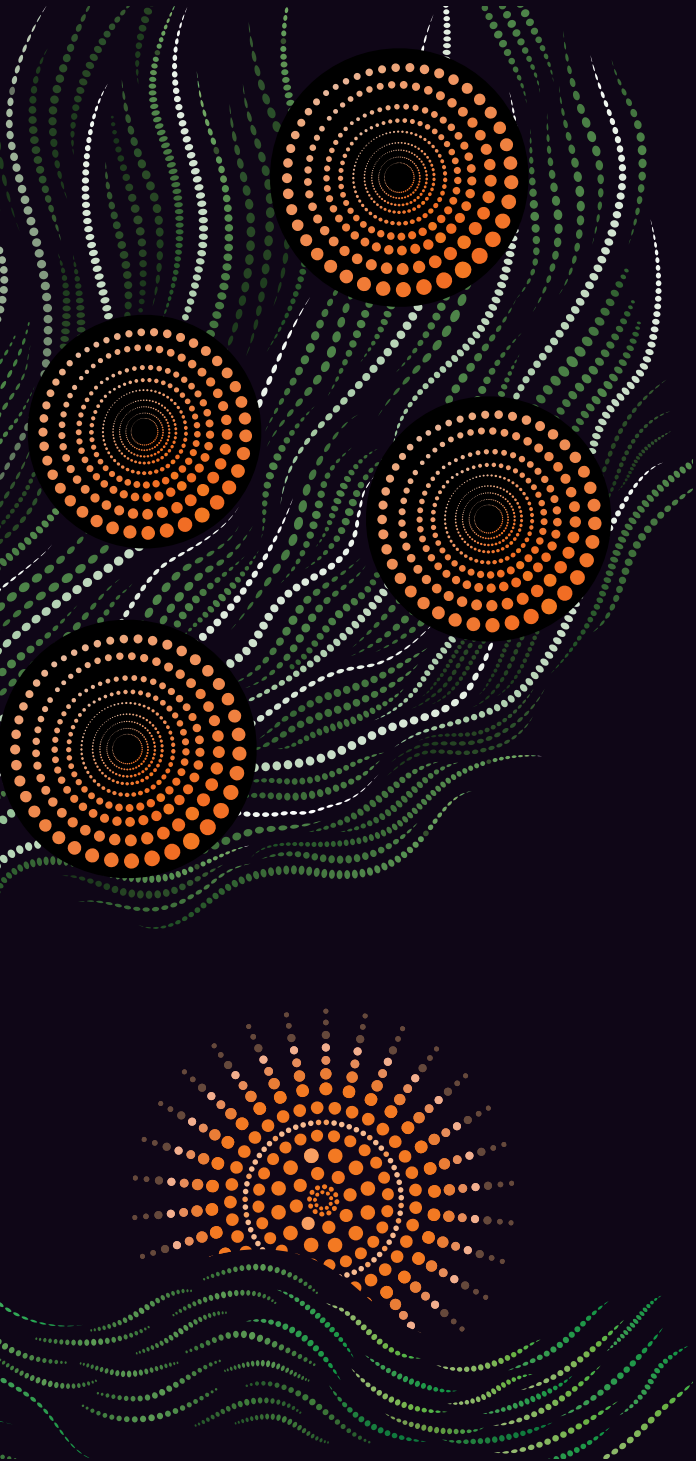
● **Influencing and innovating.** Successful commissioning in a complex environment requires an understanding that public services cannot be completely controlled and managed. Instead, commissioners need to widen their lens and look beyond what they directly control to what they can influence. This requires co-producing solutions with residents, providers and partners, and sharing responsibility outside of the local authority;

● **Focussing on value and impact.** Public services exist to support people, and the impact of services on people's lives needs to be at the centre of any discussions around commissioning. Working within a complex system means that there is a need for different ways to demonstrate and measure value or success. That might entail the removal of all formal performance indicators from a contract, or the introduction of a more mature measurement process, moving away from solely looking at activity (for example the number of visits made) to measuring impact (such as reducing needs or helping a young person remain at home).

Commissioning is a key enabler to support and deliver sustainable change and deliver more effective children's services. To do this, commissioners need to successfully navigate complexity to maximise their impact and support local transformation agendas. As this period of national uncertainty continues, it is vital that local authorities apply the rapid-response thinking that has characterised their handling of the pandemic to adapt to the needs of children, young people and families.

Rather than responding to each crisis as it arises, looking ahead to anticipate demand will provide a clear direction and ultimately support the development of longer-term resilience, both within local authorities and the families and communities they work with. Demand for children's services is inevitable – it is the predicting and managing of it that needs to become the sector's "new normal". ●

‘Commissioners need to successfully navigate complexity to maximise their impact and support local transformation agendas’



Growing challenge

This is the 11th in a series of *PF Perspectives*, produced by CIPFA and *Public Finance*. They are designed to stimulate discussion on key public finance and policy issues. These essays, by leading public sector practitioners and experts, examine people and place in a new age, and the implications for the financial management and delivery of public services

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