

# **North Somerset Council**

## **Report to the Council**

**Date of Meeting: 21 September 2021**

**Subject of Report: Corporate Parenting Responsibilities**

**Town or Parish: N/A**

**Officer/Member Presenting: Executive Member for Children's Services and Lifelong Learning**

**Key Decision: No**

### **Reason:**

Not an Executive Decision.

### **Recommendations**

Members are asked to note the report.

## **1. Summary of the report**

1.1 The report provides members with an update on the Independent Review of Children's Social Care, specifically the letter that the Chair of the Review sent to the Government following their request for the Review's early findings to inform the Spending Review.

## **2. Policy**

2.1 Whilst the concept of members viewing themselves as the parents of all children who are looked after came from the Quality Protects initiative launched in 1998 by Frank Dobson, the then Secretary of State for Health, the Children and Social Work Act 2017 defined for the first time in law the responsibility of corporate parents to ensure, as far as possible, secure, nurturing and positive experiences for 'our' children. This means that they should:

- act in their best interests, and promote their physical and mental health and wellbeing;
- encourage them to express their views, wishes and feelings, and take them into account, while promoting high aspirations and trying to secure the best outcomes for them;
- make sure they have access to services;
- make sure that they are safe, with stable home lives, relationships and education or work;
- prepare them for adulthood and independent living.

## **3. Details**

3.1 The Independent Review of Children's Social Care was launched by the government on January 15 2021 and a previous report to Council in April 2021 outlined its focus. In addition members were advised to keep updated on its progress and the opportunity to

contribute. The Director of Children's Services has been part of several director level discussions with the Chair and members of the Review are due to consult with South West directors next month.

3.2 The letter is reproduced below:

*Dear Secretary of State and Chief Secretary,*

***'Early findings' for the Spending Review***

*When I was appointed to lead the independent review of children's social care, you asked that "early findings of the review must be shared with the Department for Education ahead of Spending Review 2021", to inform its Spending Review bid. Given that a Spending Review is likely to take place in the coming months and on the basis that earlier input would be most useful, I am writing now to share these 'early findings'.*

*As you'll be aware, I only began work on the independent review in March and so I am not in a position to provide findings or recommendations at this stage. I will submit my final report next year with a full set of recommendations in the expectation that a future fiscal event will provide the investment needed for implementation. As I set out in the Case for Change document, there is no situation in the current system where we will not need to spend more to make it sustainable. The choice is whether this investment is spent on reform which achieves better outcomes and long term sustainability, or props up an increasingly expensive and inadequate system.*

*In the first four months of the review we have worked at pace to hear from over 1,000 people with personal or professional experience of children's social care and we have considered a wide range of evidence. Therefore, the detail in the Case for Change should be read alongside this letter.*

*To accompany the Case for Change, I have set out below three areas where I believe there is a need for urgent investment that should be prioritised by Government in this Spending Review. These are not recommendations or conclusions from the review but they should provide you with the early input you requested from the review that I hope will inform government decision making as part of the Spending Review. These areas are also not intended to be an indication of the review's overall priorities, but rather the areas where the most urgent investment is needed.*

***Family help***

*There are serious shortcomings in how we support families who are struggling to parent their children in conditions of adversity. Local government spending is increasingly skewed towards acute services and away from effective help. Local Authorities are trapped in a cycle of crisis intervention and spending on acute services and additional funding is urgently needed to rebalance this and make a greater investment in support for families.*

*Significant additional funding for effective family help that makes a difference to the lives of children and families and reduces demand for acute services is needed. Help should be available to any family that is facing significant challenges that could pose a threat to providing their child with a loving, stable, safe family life. It will be important that additional investment reaches families directly rather than being subsumed by increased complexity or overheads in the system. This investment should also include parents of children with disabilities and support for kinship care arrangements to ensure that wherever possible*

children are able to grow up in loving homes with friends or family members, instead of entering care.

*In deciding how to invest in this area, I would urge a cross government approach so as to avoid adding new programmes or additional pots of funding into the system. This investment should also be taken as an opportunity for Central Government to play a more active role in setting direction for family help services. Joining up with the Ministry for Housing Communities and Local Government is especially important given their responsibility for the Supporting Families Programme. A Spending Review bid should also coordinate with any other Departments planning to channel support for families through Local Authorities, including replacing support currently provided by Department for Work and Pensions' Covid Local Grant (which is expected to end soon), that could provide direct help to families parenting in conditions of adversity. It is important that this resource can be accessed by social workers and other professionals to help families. It is also important that Government engages widely in developing any family help proposals, including with the Association of Directors of Children's Services, Local Government Association, Early Intervention Foundation and crucially, with families that would be benefiting from this help.*

### **Homes for children in care**

*Our current approach to finding homes for children in care is leading to the unnecessary severing of important relationships. A broad re-think of the current system is needed and the review is considering all options for our final recommendations. However, the current system is extremely fragile, with pressures on secure accommodation, issues with children being sent many miles from their families and communities – including English children being placed in Scotland – and a severe lack of homes that can meet the needs of teenagers. Given these issues are affecting children today, the Department for Education should invest additional money to stabilise and address urgent areas of need ahead of any significant reform.*

*In making this investment, it is important that the Government ensures it is made according to the principles that the system should be working towards – keeping children as close to their community and family networks as possible and providing genuine stability. This could include looking at new approaches to secure accommodation and exploring models of 'shared care' with much greater involvement of birth families, and considering methods which allow foster carers and kinship carers to create additional rooms in their own homes to care for siblings and keep those children who could thrive in a family environment out of residential care. New investment should be used to rebalance away from 'for profit' provision towards public and not for profit options and should incentivise quality, building upon existing best practice and ensuring provision exists where it is most needed. It must also pay particular attention to children who are most likely to be failed by the current system – including children with complex needs, teenagers and unaccompanied asylum seeking children.*

### **Mental health of children in care**

*The NHS Long Term Plan includes a commitment to expand mental health services for children. However, I have been told time and again since I began the review that many children in care are suffering from extremely poor mental health and struggling to get meaningful support. Whilst the review will make recommendations about mental health support, this Spending Review and Government's broader focus on Covid-19 recovery planning and investment is an opportunity to do something sooner to help this uniquely vulnerable group of children who are disproportionately likely to have experienced abuse and neglect. We have heard throughout the early part of the review that this support might not always be best met through CAMHS services, which continue to face high demand, but*

*instead by investing across health, education and social care to better train practitioners and carers in therapeutic responses to supporting children.*

*I hope you find this input useful in your considerations for the Spending Review. I am happy to discuss in more detail and my team is happy to work with your teams as they develop their work for the Spending Review. To reiterate again, this letter does not constitute the review's recommendations or definitive findings, but is intended to outline some of the areas from the early work of the review which have the most urgent need for investment through the Spending Review. In the coming months the review will continue to speak to children, families and others to understand the problems facing the system in more depth and ultimately to develop our recommendations.*

*I am copying this letter to the Prime Minister, Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. In the interests of transparency, I will also be making a copy of this letter available on the review's website.*

*Best regards,*

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Josh MacAlister', with a stylized, cursive script.

*Josh MacAlister  
Chair of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care*

#### **4. Consultation**

None, this is for information.

#### **5. Financial Implications**

None.

#### **Costs**

None.

#### **Funding**

None.

#### **6. Legal Powers and Implications**

None.

#### **7. Climate Change and Environmental Implications**

None.

#### **8. Risk Management**

None.

#### **9. Equality Implications**

Have you undertaken an Equality Impact Assessment? No.

## **10. Corporate Implications**

None.

## **11. Options Considered**

None.

### **Author:**

Sheila Smith, Director of Children's Services

### **Appendices:**

None.

### **Background papers:**

The Review's website:

<https://childrensocialcare.independent-review.uk/>