

## Vulnerable children: Time for action

4th July 2019

Speech by Anne Longfield

I'm here today to introduce our third report on childhood vulnerability. It's an attempt to gather all the information we can about childhood risk and fragility in one place and to estimate the levels of real need around the country. My Director of Evidence Leon Feinstein and his brilliant team have produced incredible work and I'm delighted that Leon is now working with the Office for National Statistics and others to turn this into a permanent, ongoing Data for Children centre, producing live data and analysis about our most vulnerable kids.

Our national political leaders need to take this seriously and rebuild services for vulnerable children.

It isn't good enough to throw things at a problem only when it hits the headlines and threatens the children of the middle classes, as we've seen recently in the government response to knife crime – suddenly lots of money, multiple strategies, task forces . . . but hundreds of children are already dead.

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What we're showing through our childhood data work is that you can predict levels of need around the country.

And you must.

'Can't see won't see' is no way to construct a good policy, good society or a good childhood.

So, for instance, the rate of permanent exclusions from school increased by over 50% in 4 years and the proportion of children in custody who have committed a violent offence has roughly doubled at the same time.

We now know that one in five children grows up at risk, in families with complex problems – that's six in every classroom.

Of these, four will live in households where there is domestic violence, addiction, or the adults have mental illnesses.

Four children in a typical classroom will have a special educational need; and 4 will have poor mental health.

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But predicting numbers is only the start: you need the will to do something about it. So, what we've also undertaken this year is to tackle the issue of what the country is *doing* to help these kids. We're all familiar with the pleas from councils about the crisis in children's services funding. There is growing consensus that an additional £3 billion is needed by 2025 just for councils to provide the level of service they're providing today – what I call, filling the potholes.

This is nowhere near enough, and without a plan and a properly evidence-based strategy to meet the needs of children, we could see the problem worsen further: it could sustain and perpetuate a system that is broken.

A system that simply manages failure, a system that waits until children hit crisis before intervening, a system trying to hold off chaos until a young person reaches an adulthood which itself won't be easy. It's financially wasteful, pouring money into acute late intervention services when earlier help would produce better outcomes and would have been cheaper. And it's morally wrong – creating a lifetime's disadvantage for the children.

So what's going on? Where does the money go?

My team went back to basics and asked local authorities to share detailed spending data with us from the bottom up, to identify which groups of children they were helping, with what. Nobody has ever collected such detailed financial data across all areas of spend in children's services before.

I'm incredibly grateful to Martin Lennon and Max Stanford in my Office for finding a way to do this. You can find all the details in the technical report, and they are stark:

Nearly half of the money is now spent on children in acute need, while 7% of the money is spent on just 0.1% of children.

These are the children in 'acute high cost' placements such as secure children's homes or in residential special schools, at an average cost of £192,000 per child per year. Councils spend as much on this as they do on all pre-statutory services, despite those being accessed by over a hundred times the number of children. In one local authority, 10 children cost a fifth of the entire children's services budget.

These are children, often teenagers, with complex emotional and behavioural difficulties, self-harming and running away; under threat from sexual or criminal exploitation; or with acute special educational needs; and often with overlap between these needs.

Advances in healthcare can keep babies alive from a much younger age, who grow up with multiple complex needs.

And because services haven't been planned around this cohort of children, local authorities seeking placements for them are at the whim of a market increasingly dominated by private providers and venture capital companies.

I am not ideologically opposed to profit or private markets, but taxpayers and councils might like to consider where the profits for caring for the most vulnerable children are ending up. And government – central and local – ought to be asking themselves why if the market is so profitable, they aren't planning and providing their own services.

The analysis in this report shows how poor planning - locally and nationally – is creating high cost, crisis-led provision.

Our work with councils also shows the other end of the scale – the one which Government normally ignores – that in every local authority there are tens of thousands of children accessing non-statutory help. Help like parenting classes or speech and language therapy.

Against the backdrop of more and more high cost, high needs services, it isn't any surprise that funding for these services has shrunk and could be eliminated in 3 years. This is the reality we have to face.

And this is why I argue – and I think the analysis in this spending report shows – that throwing more money at a broken system is not, on its own, the answer.

We can see from this work who is getting support – but we can't see the children who are not. This is where the childhood vulnerability data fills the gap.

Our estimate this year is there are 2.3 million children at risk, with family backgrounds that show significant vulnerabilities. No wonder they struggle at school.

Let's look at the life of a vulnerable child.

You see here Ben, aged 2, already living in temporary accommodation.

At 5, his father is drinking heavily and he starts reception already behind his classmates and having trouble controlling his temper.

Expelled from school at 12 he joins a gang, is taken into care and placed in a children's home miles away from home.

After running away and being involved in serious violence at 16, he ends up in custody with no qualifications and no contact with his family.

He's now the father of his own baby and the cycle begins again.

There are many more Bens in England.

Last year over 80,000 children started school having missed their early years benchmarks.

90,000 children are not in mainstream education. 30,000 are believed to be in gangs.

Nearly 50,000 children with special educational needs failed to get any GCSE level qualifications by 19.

Think of the 120,000 children we know are technically homeless - living in unsuitable temporary accommodation, cramped and dangerous. The numbers have increased by a third in the past 4 years.

They are living in cramped rooms, in B and Bs and shipping containers, alongside adults with serious mental health or drug misuse problems. It's squalid and it's dangerous would anyone of us be able to focus on schoolwork in a situation like that?

The Department for Education's "Review of Children in Need" reported last month that an astonishing 1.6m children (that's one in 10 of all children), has needed a social worker over the past 6 years.

Fewer than a fifth of these kids even passes Maths and English GCSEs. What's also shocking is that that is the only outcome for these children we can measure, because we haven't tried to capture better data.

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Of these 2.3m vulnerable children, we should recognise that some children are getting support:

128,000 get intensive statutory support;

a further 269,000 are recognised as 'children in need' but it isn't clear what support they actually get.

On top of that, another 271,000 are currently being helped in the Troubled Families Programme.

Troubled Families is now the main source of funding for lower level help for families. It is popular with councils and has proven effective. But funding expires in March next year and the Government has not been able to pledge any continuation.

I believe this Programme should immediately be expanded and extended, and focused on outcomes for children. Government needs to confirm this now, before local authorities begin to lay off the staff.

This expansion could reach the 761,000 children who are known to services in some way, but their level of support is unclear. Even if they did all that, there are still 829,000 children who the data tells us need help and are missing out on it altogether.

We describe them as 'invisible' children, because they are invisible to the system. That's children like Ben who are not getting any help from the state.

So how do we find them, the Bens of this world?

This year we've tried to turn the childhood vulnerability data into useful information at local area level, to show how councils and the new multi-agency safeguarding partnerships could use it to plan services.

These maps shows our best estimates of the percentage of children in each local area who live in households where the so-called 'toxic trio' exists. That is where children are living with a parent addicted to drugs or alcohol, severely mentally ill, or violent.

The maps are interactive - you can zoom in, click on a constituency or council, and find more information. Some superb work by our senior analyst, Tom Clarke.

This is what I mean about getting hold of the best data, and then using it properly.

Instead of expanding services to the needs of children, broader services are contracting. We've seen a 60% cut in youth services and children's centres. But children's social care spending has risen by 21% over the same period. In essence, more money for expensive late interventions, less money for everyone else.

And that's because as a country we've never captured which services are being provided or what benefits they deliver.

This situation could get even worse. Hundreds of thousands of children who receive some kind of help at the lower end today risk losing that as well, if the extra billions we spend are only thrown at the sharp end of statutory services.

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Now, I want to address the argument we get from Government, that there isn't any 'proof' that early help services 'work'.

It's simply rubbish.

Early help – interventions which support families before they fall into crisis, and which also helps them step down from statutory intervention, does work. The reason it's so hard to 'prove' is that we as a country are so bad at collecting data on children's outcomes.

There has been a woeful lack of ambition in central government to find ways to measure the efficacy of children's services.

As the NAO said earlier this year: "*The [DfE]'s ... understanding in this area is limited.*" At a time when at least 1 in 10 children is assessed as needing a social worker at some point in their childhood, this lack of understanding is astonishing. If we carry on like this, with the £3 billion extra, spending on children's social

care will have increased by 52% in real terms over 15 years by 2024/25. With absolutely no *demonstrable* positive impact for children.

Analysis by the IFS published last month showed that children's centres cut hospitalisation among children of primary school age, and benefited those in disadvantaged areas most. The poorest 30% of areas saw the probability of any hospitalisation fall by 19% at age 11. It took a long time to show up in the data, because health outcomes do take a long time to show – but there it is, undeniably.

Need.

Help.

Outcomes.

We've shown how to improve measurement of the first two.

There are plenty of ways to measure the third, if government has the will to do it. These reports are a starting point for understanding the pressures facing local authority children's services, but they don't provide the answers.

We know enough about the devastating impact on childhood and on lifetime prospects of a poor start. We have to help these kids better. We are seeing exclusions soar and an epidemic of knife crime threatening kids and adults on the streets. With a spending review imminent – we hope – and Troubled Families funding under review, now is the time for our political leaders to act.

Tackling the scale of the problem will require strong leadership from central government and a 10-20 year plan of family and child support. This needs to fill the potholes in existing services but also rebuild the network of support around vulnerable children and their families.

It will need:

commitments and targets to identify and support children's needs and those of their parents.

schools to operate as wrap-around services,

youth services to be rebuilt,

children's centres especially in deprived areas to use the two and a half year health check more rigorously and respond to needs it reveals

It needs a hard push to get children school-ready by 5 – not just able to count to 10, but with secure parental support, decent housing and good health.

I want to challenge the two contenders for Prime Minister to tell us what they intend to do about this.

I've heard them talk about runways, immigration, Islamophobia, even model buses - but not about children.

They should.

Because this isn't a marginal issue, something affecting 'other people's kids', or only deprived areas.

Anybody's child can need a social worker; or some mental health support; or speech and language therapy.

And anybody's child can meet, on the streets or in the park, a marginalised, angry, excluded teenager carrying a knife.

It isn't just about children either. It's about society. You get the society you choose.

Are we, as a country, willing to carry on allowing millions of children to struggle on, achieving way below their potential, because we lack the will to help?

Or are we, as a country, going to do what we are showing you today is possible – assess the level of need and design services to meet it.

Are we going to do what it takes to get children back on their feet?

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I think it might cost in the region of £10 billion per year to fix this broken system. It might be more, it might be less. But what I do believe is it'll save money in the long term. The cost of social chaos is immense.

So I want to challenge whoever is the next Prime Minister, and the Opposition parties as they prepare general election manifestos and ask: what are you going to do about this?

The Conservative leadership contenders have already pledged:

corporation tax cuts amounting to £13 billion;

higher National Insurance thresholds costing £11 billion;

a raised threshold for the higher income tax rate which would cost £9 billion.

But what about children? Not a whisper.

And what about Labour? Labour's promise to abolish tuition fees will cost around £8 billion – but where is the promise to the children who might hope that one day they too will go to university? Without the kind of help I am proposing today, millions of them have very little chance of getting there.

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All of this is money that could be spent on getting millions of children back on their feet and boosting their life chances.

These reports that we are publishing today highlight the scale of the challenge.

They throw down the gauntlet to government and to the next Prime Minister, and to all political parties, and ask simply: what are you going to do about this?

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