

## **Children's Commissioner's Proposals to Help Children by Helping Families**

*Children have told us how much they value their families, and how important their family life is. We are proposing a series of policies that support families.*

### **What children told us**

The Big Ask showed that family is of critical importance to children. The vast majority described a supportive environment at home, and many spoke warmly about the love and nurture they get from those at home. And they believe in family of all kinds – not just the nuclear family. As one child told us: 'My mum is amazing I'm so grateful for her [...] I love my family they love me I don't have any problems' – *Girl, 11*.

Yet a picture emerged of children now seeing behind the curtain of adulthood, especially during lockdown, and absorbing the stresses and strains of their parents, siblings, and carers. Parents echoed this, talking about the pile-up of pressures at home and the ripple effect this can have. We heard from a mother that: 'My parenting has definitely been affected by this lockdown. I snap a lot quicker, I shout a lot more. I've been so overwhelmed by everything that's been expected of me. I've had no break. [...] If I'm not working I've got the children' – *Mother of four children, aged between 2 and 9*.

The urgent need to support children by supporting their families was evident. Where children were unhappy at home, they were 9 times more likely to be unhappy in general, and felt that their home lives could stand in their way of their bright futures. As one child said: 'I think children like me are distracted from reaching their goals [...] as they worry about their family or if their family can afford to have a house' – *Boy, 12*.

### **What this means for policy now as we come out of lockdown**

We want to be able to support children and families, particularly the most vulnerable. As some children told us in the Big Ask, they would like their families and parents to be supported, so our policy recommendations look at how we can:

- 1) **Expand the support available to families under pressure** – by improving the community offer through Family Hubs.
- 2) **Seek reform of the wider network of services families can access** – so that these can be brought together within Family Hubs.
- 3) **Extend the existing Supporting Families programme** – in order to reach more families.

### **The policies we think will benefit children now:**

- 1) **An expansion of the Family Hubs network – to provide an access point in local communities for families to reach services they need.**

Family Hubs 'co-locate and coordinate all family services within a community' and offer early help to prevent families getting into difficulties. We have already seen investment in this area.<sup>1</sup> They should combine universal services (such as health visiting), voluntary sector support and access to state bodies such as community policing, the Supporting Families programme and elements of local authority children's services. There is an increasing body

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<sup>1</sup> £20m to provide more early help for vulnerable families, *Department for Education*, 19 August 2021, [link](#). Fully Committed?, *Centre for Social Justice*, July 2014, [link](#).

of evidence both that co-location of services increases take up by reducing stigma and that additional early help can prevent children from ending up in more vulnerable situations.<sup>2</sup>

There are currently 130 Family Hubs in England, yet there are thousands of children's centres, primary schools and other community assets which could be developed into Family Hubs. To do this, potential providers of Family Hubs need:

- a. The knowledge about how to establish a Family Hub and develop an effective partnership between organisations. The Department for Education (DfE) has established the National Centre for Family Hubs to do this and provided funding for a series of trailblazer areas to establish good practice.<sup>3</sup>
- b. The resources to establish the Hub in terms of capital to prepare buildings, and transitional costs associated with bringing together different partners. The DfE has established the 'Family Hubs Transformation Fund' but so far this is funded to support ten areas.<sup>4</sup> We think this needs to be expanded.
- c. Ongoing resources to run the centre. We believe that Family Hubs need to be used as a means of delivering existing services if they are to be sustainable in the long-term.

**The Family Hubs Transformation Fund should bring together different parts of the state and voluntary sector, and ensure Family Hubs have the right facilities to engage the community.** This requires suitable buildings, back-office integration and data-sharing. The CCO believes that:

- a. Requiring bids is the right approach, but sufficient funding should be made available so that Family Hubs could be established within every upper-tier local authority in England, were bids to be received, with funding targeted at areas of greater disadvantage.
- b. A wider range of organisations should be eligible to bid to the fund, including the voluntary sector, schools/multi-academy trusts and health bodies.

- 2) **Seek reform of the wider network of services families can access – so that these can be brought together within Family Hubs.** Using Family Hubs as a catalyst to make existing public services more accessible, integrated and efficient and re-investing in early intervention. Family Hubs should not be seen as an additional, or parallel, form of services for families, but as a means of integrating and accessing existing services. They should be a way of reforming existing services to make them more accessible to the community, and better connecting the public and voluntary sectors. This is also how to make funding sustainable.

Local authorities are the obvious bodies to fund Family Hubs, but 86% of local authorities overspent on children's services last year, despite increasing budgets.<sup>5</sup> The National Audit Office found a 24% reduction in preventative spending within children's social care in the past five years. Properly utilised, Family Hubs have the potential to reverse this trend, but to do this they must be integrated with existing services, and funded through them. Connecting these services through Family Hubs can improve their accessibility, provide efficiencies, and divert funding towards early intervention. See Annex 1 for more details.

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<sup>2</sup> Adverse childhood experiences: What we know, what we don't know, and what should happen next, *Early Intervention Foundation*, 26 February 2020, [link](#). Supporting and strengthening families through provision of early help, *National Children's Bureau, University of Cambridge and University of Kent*, June 2021, [link](#).

<sup>3</sup> The National Centre for Family Hubs, *The Anna Freud Centre*, May 2021, [link](#). £20m to provide more early help for vulnerable families, *Department for Education*, 19 August 2021, [link](#).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Eight in ten local authorities forced to overspend on children's services despite amid soaring demand, *Local Government Association*, 3 June 2021, [link](#)

3) **Doubling the Supporting Families programme to support more families facing multiple disadvantage through a keyworker.**

This reduces the burden on both parents and children, and can alleviate many of the worries and pressures otherwise facing children seeking to support their parents. Since the programme was established in 2012, it has helped hundreds of thousands of families get into employment, improve children's attendance at school and reduce the chance of children going into care.<sup>6</sup> Delivering support in this way is significantly cheaper than statutory interventions through children's social care.<sup>7</sup> Crucially, the programme operates within a clear outcomes framework, which is why we are able to evidence the benefits achieved. That's why the following would benefit children:

- a. Commitment to the Supporting Families programme, in the next Spending Review period, ideally doubling the number of families being supported by the programme. While the Supporting Families programme is a key part of our support to vulnerable families, there are still many more families where children face significant challenges (such as domestic violence in the home, or parental substance abuse) than are currently able to access the programme.
- b. Supporting Families teams should be based in Family Hubs wherever possible, and the programme's outcomes framework should be refocused to place a greater emphasis on children, and the educational progress children make, with additional outcomes measures included on children's early developmental progress and attendance in early years settings.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> National evaluation of the Troubled Families Programme 2015 to 2020, *Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government*, 19 March 2019, [link](#)

<sup>7</sup> Estimating children's services spending on vulnerable children, *Children's Commissioner for England*, 8 July 2019, [link](#)

<sup>8</sup> This could be measured through the 2 1/2yr check, the Early Years Foundation Assessment, or by a professional working with a child (such as a speech and language therapist) using developmental assessments.

**Annex 1: Five components to ensure Family Hubs support children and act as a catalyst for wider public sector reform**

1. **Achieve buy-in from the community and the voluntary sector.** The key to Family Hubs is a partnership model with local communities which families want to access.
2. **Unite multiple parts of the public sector.** As explained above, it is vital for the success and sustainability of Family Hubs that they include existing services. There are lots of services that could be located within a Family Hub. As a minimum we would like to see:
  - a. Health visiting
  - b. Local Authority Supporting Families and Early Help teams
  - c. Community policing
  - d. Access to local GP services, adult IAPTs services and CAMHS.
3. **Provide an outreach element to help attract families.** Encouraging the most vulnerable families into a Family Hub is often a challenge due to lack of confidence or their having had previous bad experiences. The model needs to include a ‘hub and spoke’ element that can proactively target the families who most need support and reach those who will not attend a centre.
4. **Share data to make Family Hubs a model for integrated and efficient public services.** This means they need to share information between partners within a hub to avoid duplication and ensure the targeting of those families with the greatest need.
5. **Track outcomes to unite the different partners working with a hub and be able to demonstrate impact (and therefore attract funding).** The Children’s Commissioner believes the starting point should be: school readiness (as measured by the Early Years Foundation Stage), school attendance, family conflict and referrals to children’s services.