



CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER

# *Family Review*

## **A positive approach to parenting**

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### **PART 2**

OF THE INDEPENDENT FAMILY REVIEW

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December 2022

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## Foreword from Dame Rachel de Souza



Family is central to all of our lives, particularly children, for whom family is the prism through which the world is experienced. That is why I was excited to be asked to undertake the Independent Family Review and am so pleased to be publishing Part 2.

At its core this Review has been a celebration of the power of families to support and sustain all of us. More than anything, I want this Review to put strong and loving families front and centre of our politics and policy making. This may sound obvious, or even trite, but actually it is a paradigm shift from our current approach to family policy. For too long, we have seen family life as beyond the realm of public policy, with the result that policy is designed for 'households' or individuals, or even 'service users', instead of families, parents, and children. Family services are seen as for those who are struggling and policymakers tend to see families for the collection of challenges they face, rather than the innate power they hold.

Instead, I have established that all families tend to want the same core things: families want to get along and love one another, they want to be able to support themselves and each other, to spend quality time together, and to be able to trust and rely on each other. Moreover, in *Family Review: Part 1* I was able to demonstrate that the presence of these factors provides a strong protective effect over family members, promoting well-being and children's outcomes as well as insulating families from hard times. This Review has provided not only a clear formulation for what constitutes a strong family, but also an inclusive one. Family comes in many forms. For nearly everyone it includes people outside our 'immediate family' and understanding this is vital to developing a concept of families which recognises that while the composition of families may change, their importance does not. The concept of family used throughout this report is one that has come from families themselves. It is broad, varied, and dynamic. And where a child cannot live with their birth parents, I want the system to provide a meaningful alternative. In the new year I will publish deep-dives into children in care, those living in the secure estate and those inpatient mental health settings. I will provide solutions to some of these acute and unique circumstances.

Understanding the way in which families help one another is vital for understanding how public services can better support them. The starting point is a recognition that most families want or need support in some form. Families give and receive support within their extended networks of family and friends. For public services to truly provide for families they should seek to support these networks and replicate their strengths when providing help. This means services which feel familial: are consistent, reliable, non-judgemental, and accessible. This report lays out how this can be done.

None of this is easy. Throughout this Review I've encountered professionals at all levels who understand what is needed but are struggling to put this into practice because of some consistent barriers within the system. To tackle these, I'm publishing three reform guides alongside the Review addressing some of the thorniest issues when it comes to reforming and integrating different public services. The guides cover: data-utilisation; local integration and outcome frameworks. In each, I have asked the question: what do families need from the system, and what is stopping professionals putting into practice? My

proposals bring a fresh perspective, and some simple recommendations, to some longstanding challenges.

If we really want to help families, so we can help children, we must look at parenting. We all know how important parents – including, of course, carers - are and the role they play to improve their children's lives. Parents know more than anyone the challenges of bringing up children. They want to do what is best for their children, to grow up happy and healthy, to do well at school and to ensure everyone in the family gets on. This Review starts to quantify just how important parents are. Our research reaffirms the strong link between key parenting behaviours and children's outcomes – whatever a family's circumstance. Whilst policymakers can sometimes see parents as beyond the realm of public policy, speaking to parents during this Review made it clear that they want their role acknowledged.

Parenting behaviours do not always match this aspiration. When we asked children what they did over the summer holidays, 79% of children who responded to The Big Summer Survey spent time reading, writing or doing art during the summer holiday, but only 30% did so with a member of their family. Yet these activities are clear examples of ways parents can support their child do well at school.

This Review has given me the opportunity to hear from parents. I have heard how much they want to support their children, but, that some are not always confident about their own abilities, and do not know where to go for advice. Professionals working with children and families are not clear what messages they should be giving to parents, or where to sign-post for information. This is not about telling parents how to parent, or whether to adopt permissive or authoritarian parenting styles. It is also not about blaming parents, many of whom face enormous challenges. It is about imparting clear information, setting clear expectations, and ensuring that support and advice is readily available. This is about parents understanding the importance of reading and counting; the role of play and how important it is to set clear boundaries. Sometimes, parents need practical advice to give them the confidence to put this into practice.

The biggest thing that needs to change is attitudes. What stops parents seeking support is the sense that to do so implies they have failed as a parent. Parenting classes empower parents to make better

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decisions, reflect on their approach and develop clear strategies to help their child. There is overwhelming evidence that shows that this helps children's wellbeing, development, and lifetime outcomes, yet many parents wouldn't know that parenting classes were an option.

One of the most important insights from the research we have undertaken with families is that all parents have some struggles, and times they will need to reach for help. Acknowledging this is a vital pre-requisite for changing the relationship between the state and families, but it starts not with Government policy, but with all of us. One contributor to this Review likened this to changing attitudes around things we are comfortable acknowledging in our lives now: *'10 years ago it was difficult to talk about mental health, to say you were struggling, or were just having a bad day. People covered it up and made excuses. Today we are in the same position with parenting. Parents do an amazing job, they're so important to their children's lives, but everyone finds it a struggle at times. To different degrees and in different ways. But admitting this is seen as an admission of failure.'* This Review hopes to be a catalyst for a new conversation about raising a family, that we can all engage in.

## Executive Summary

### **Chapter 1 - Using the protective effect to redefine the relationship between the state and families**

- Chapter 1 sets out how focusing on the protective effect of family, established in *Family Review: Part 1*, can provide the basis for a new relationship between the state and families.
- Public policymakers should use the protective effect to develop a conception of families based on the four strengths that families themselves identify. This positive vision for strong families focuses on the ability of families to support one another, rather than their composition or characteristics.
- It demonstrates why outcomes that public services are looking to achieve should be the same as the aims that families have for themselves.
- The Office of the Children's Commissioner (CCo) considers that this approach could underpin a positive focus on family life across Government and public services, and form the basis of a clear, coherent, and positive offer to families.

### **Chapter 2 - Parents need to be supported to embrace their crucial role**

- Chapter 2 focuses on the importance of parenting for children's outcomes. It outlines how most parents believe parenting to be of central importance, a challenge they relish.
- It discusses how key parenting behaviours have an impact on children's outcomes.
- Using new research conducted by the CCo, it also considers how families spend their time, noting that some groups of children spend less time with their family.

## **Chapter 3 - What parents want from the support they access**

- Parents want to help their children and to be brilliant parents. However, they often face challenges with parenting, and difficulties accessing help with it. Chapter 3 highlights what parents want from the support they need.
- There is a need to reduce the stigma surrounding accessing help with parenting, particularly the stigma surrounding parenting courses. Everyone should talk about parenting and feel able to attend parenting courses.
- The relationship between families and the state should be reset, so there are clearer expectations on what parents can do, as well as greater certainty that they will be able to get help and information when they need it.

## **Chapter 4 - Harnessing the protective effect: reforming public services to work with families**

- Chapter 4 sets out how, when families need support from services, those services should seek to replicate the way that families help their own members.
- It argues that by mirroring the protective effect of a supportive family, services will be able to deliver more effective help, which parents are more willing to receive.
- The chapter sets out four key principles that should underpin service delivery and design so that they can mirror the protective effect of family. These are that services should be: open, non-judgemental and loving; based on high quality, enduring relationships; reliable, there for parents no matter what, holistic, and support the whole family not just a part of it.

- While these will be most relevant to services providing dedicated family support services, it is important for all services to employ these principles as often services for adults will have a profound effect on family outcomes.
- The chapter calls for a core offer of universal services for families of children of all ages - including ante-natal classes, health visiting, parenting courses and relationship support - to be fully resourced and delivered through a Family Hub in every neighbourhood in the country.
- The chapter makes clear that while family support services are one crucial part of the picture, parents need to have the time and agency to care for their children for families to function well. To do this, to have the time to focus on the needs of the children beyond the urgent and essential, to support others in their community, and to spend time enjoying being a family, it requires the right financial support to be in place. This chapter therefore also sets out how families with children should be prioritised in tax and welfare decisions.

## **Chapter 5 - A new Family Framework**

- Harnessing what the *Family Review: Part 1* found about the protective force of families, Chapter 5 explores how Government should renew the family policymaking framework to maximise the power of strong family relationships.
- Currently, central Government policymakers are encouraged to use the Family Test. This is a framework for policymakers across Departments to evaluate the impact of new policies on families. While thinking about families was a welcome development, the framework is based on a conceptualisation of families around households, rather than relationships.
- Chapter 5 argues for a revived Family Framework that should:
  - support children to have healthy, safe and stable relationships within their families
  - prioritise holistic support for families, no matter their shape or size

- introduce a local service Family Framework to mirror national policymaking in commissioning
- establish a strong focus on children's outcomes, as set out in *Family Review: Outcomes Annex* and continually evaluate the success of a policy against these<sup>1</sup>

## **Annex – Utilising data to improve children's outcomes**

- Realising the recommendations made by this Review will rely significantly on wholesale improvement to how government both local and national makes best use of data. This goes beyond simply making better use of the data which already exists, to reenvisioning the entire data pipeline. This will require improvements in what data is collected, how data is shared and how it is brought together.
- The CCo has identified five priorities for change which would enable children, families, and services to truly benefit from data. These include: improving how we collect data with a family-centric view; the starting point for data-sharing should be to ensure positive outcomes for children and families; moving from sharing data on a case-by-case basis, to a system-wide approach; over-arching guidance for practitioners on how to legally access the data they need; and finally, the use of a consistent unique identifier to facilitate bringing data together around individuals.

## **Annex - Outcomes framework**

- This Annex outlines the challenges and possible solutions to creating a high-level outcomes framework which delivers the positive outcomes that children and families want for themselves.
- The CCo are proposing the creation of a high-level outcomes framework that can be adopted by all services at a national, local and individual level. This should be easily accessible with the detail

of how these outcomes might be achieved, including progress indicators and metrics, sitting below them.

- The table below outlines the proposed buckets the CCo believe should make up this high-level outcomes framework for children and families, based on what they told the CCo they want for themselves and what they wanted from the services that support them.



## Annex - Local integration of services

- This Annex lays out some of the challenges to the good integration of services for families and children at a local level, and outlines what an ideal scenario for local integration might look like.
- Public services are currently coordinated at a local level through a number of largely ad-hoc multi-agency statutory frameworks. Despite overlap in membership and responsibility, a lack of coordination at a national level often imposes siloed working on local partners.

- Both families and professionals agree on the central importance of services working in a coherent geographical footprint that is recognisable to local populations and allows effective service provision.
- The ideal scenario for families would be one where cross-sector services work within a geography that makes sense for local people and is easy for them to access. Within that area, services are co-located and have structures in place to share data and coordinate complementary services. A family hub should be the central pillar around which family services are built, in close partnership with schools, GPs, and the voluntary and community sector.
- To create the conditions for local partner-led integration, the CCo recommends focusing on a local delivery model, improving national coordination of local integration, and rationalising strategic oversight at a local level.

Note on language: Throughout this report, 'parents' and 'parenting' refers to all those taking on significant caring roles for children, including foster carers, kinship carers, single parents, step-parents, non-resident parents and others.

## Introduction

In May 2022, the Children's Commissioner for England (Children's Commissioner) was asked by Government to undertake a review into family life in Britain and the support available to families. Given the absolute primacy of family life for children in England – whatever their circumstances – the Children's Commissioner saw this as a vital opportunity to examine the lives of families today and consider how we best support them to support children. The Children's Commissioner was given full control of the remit and contents of the Review, and it has been undertaken independently of Government.

*Family and its protective effect: Part 1 of the Independent Family Review (Family Review: Part 1)* – was published in September 2022. It set out the best available evidence on the characteristics and compositions of families in Britain. It showed how the composition of families was changing over time and how some of these characteristics were correlated with lower levels of life satisfaction and worse outcomes for children. However, the CCo's research also demonstrated the limitations of this approach to describing and defining families. Using an unparalleled range of insights from families themselves, the Review established that families rarely described themselves in the terms used to categorise families. Instead of focusing on composition or characteristics, family members talked about emotions (especially love), relationships, and mutual support. They also included extended family members, pets and even close friends within their conception of family. One father who engaged with the Review at a Youth Centre said: *'Defining family depends on who I am talking to. Family varies across cultures. Family can mean blood but then can also be on a much larger scale, like the wider group of people you see regularly.'*

The CCo's engagement with families throughout *Family Review: Part 1 and 2* have identified four core elements that family members themselves told CCo were at the core of their conceptualisation of family:

1. A strong emotional connection, with an emphasis on love and joy
2. The importance of shared experiences (both the regular and the exceptional)
3. Mutual support to one another, both practical and emotional



4. The enduring nature of the relationships, and the sense this provides of unconditional support

These four elements collectively give rise to a protective effect which can insulate the family and its members from external shocks and hard times. Research shows that the presence of these elements within a family has a significant impact on long-term well-being and outcomes. Generally, these internal family dynamics are more important in this regard than either a family's material wealth or composition. These four elements can therefore be considered to be at the centre of a strong family. This definition of a strong family is not based on its externally observed characteristics, but what the family means to its members.

*Family Review: Part 2* builds on the understanding of the protective effect set out in *Family Review: Part 1* and sets out how we can work to strengthen families so that they can support their members.

Key to addressing this question is understanding how families themselves support one another. While we traditionally conceptualise families as being small units of individuals within individual households, the overwhelming message received during the course of this Review is that families are actually composed of wider networks of support, incorporating extended family and close friends who provide practical and emotional help and support.

Recognising the extent to which families help one another is vital in understanding how the state can better support families. Firstly, because it is important to acknowledge that all families need help in some form. This was the message imparted throughout the course of this Review, yet it is a message that both parents and professionals felt was often missing from the way services were configured and delivered. Repeatedly we heard about the misconception that we could divide families between those 'managing' and those 'struggling' or those needing help and doing fine. Instead, the picture encountered throughout the Review was that all families needed help in some form, but they could be in one of four situations:

1. Families able to access the help they need from within their immediate network. This usually meant families within a strong network, such as close friends or extended family. But also those

able to access additional support from universal services (GPs, schools, childcare) or with the resources to get additional help, such as paying to attend a neonatal class.

2. Families with a similar level of needs to those above, but with less resources, either social or economic, meaning they were less able to access support themselves. This was particularly the case for single parents or parents who were not able to access practical or financial support from their own family. This meant they were more likely to be struggling.
3. Families with a particular issue that needs specialist and professional support. This issue may affect one family member or the whole family but is a discrete issue for which support is required.
4. Families facing more chronic issues, again which might affect either one family member or the whole family, but because of which more intensive and long-term support may be required.

The research for *Family Review: Part 2* demonstrates that, whatever situation a family is in, the fundamentals are the same. Families consistently seek to be able to support themselves and others, and it is by acknowledging this that we can work with families to strengthen their protective effect.

The research we have undertaken to reach this conclusion has been broad and varied. It has included engagement with parents and children, large-scale surveys, work with professionals in a number of fields, and reviewing studies of longitudinal data to understand impact over time. The results of this work are shared over five core chapters which set out the changes required to the way we both understand and support families.

- **Chapter 1** sets out a positive vision for strong families and explains how this can underpin a new approach to family policy across public services.
- **Chapter 2** focuses on parenting; proving the huge influence of parenting behaviours, presenting new evidence on parents' attitudes to parenting and examining why parents' behaviours do not always match their aspirations.

- **Chapter 3** explores what parents themselves want when they access support, and some of the key barriers they face.
- **Chapter 4** looks at how we can reform services so that they resemble the support family networks themselves provide, with a focus on stable relationships, non-judgemental help and empowering families.
- **Chapter 5** explores the Family Test and how this should be revived to maximise the protective force of families on children.

The need to make these reforms was widely recognised amongst the frontline professionals who engaged with CCo throughout the Review. Yet they often encountered the same barriers to reform, which is why the Annexes to this report examine some of the thorniest issues standing in the way of a more integrated and holistic offer to families: data utilisation, outcomes frameworks and local integration.

This Review draws on all this research to make recommendations with three over-arching ambitions:

1. Make strong families an explicit and positive aim of public policy
2. Change attitudes to seeking help with parenting
3. Ensure all families can access an integrated support offer within their local community

## Methodology

This report builds upon and adds to the research conducted for the *Family Review: Part 1*.<sup>2</sup> The evidence and analysis presented are grounded in the voices and experiences of children and their families alongside novel survey and administrative data analysis. The mixed-methods approach to evidence gathering enables the Family Review to comprehensively understand families and their needs from the micro to the macro level. The *Family Review: Part 2* is informed by a Literature Review, commissioned nationally representative surveys on family services and support, *The Big Ask*, a brand-new survey of children called *The Big Summer Survey* (TBSS), analysis of existing survey and administrative data, focus groups, interviews and expert contributions through roundtables and workshops.

### Literature Review and Call for Evidence

The Literature Review was compiled by reviewing the available data and research on contemporary family life, as well as the submissions from the Call for Evidence.<sup>3</sup> The Call for Evidence received 70 submissions from parents, think tanks, charities, and researchers. Owing to the sheer volume of this field of evidence, the Literature Review provides an overview of relevant research and work. It does not include the CCo's own research.

### Nationally representative surveys

The CCo commissioned two nationally representative online panel surveys, the *Family Life Survey* (FLS, UK level) with a sample size of 3,300 parents and 2,300 children aged 8-17, and the second survey, the *Family Services Survey* (FSS, England only) with a sample size of 3,000 parents. The findings from the FLS are nationally representative for the UK by oldest child's age and gender, household region, and parental employment status, and includes additional boost samples for lone parents, parents from ethnic minority groups, and children eligible for Free School Meals (FSM). This survey also contained questions that were asked to children aged 8 to 17.<sup>4</sup> The findings from the FSS are nationally representative of the UK population by parental age, gender, employment status and household region.

The sample also includes a boost of 200 parents from an ethnic minority background.<sup>5</sup> The questions for both surveys were selected to fill gaps in the existing evidence on family life and family support services.

### ***The Big Ask***

*The Big Ask* is the largest ever survey of children, with over half a million responses. Launched by the Children's Commissioner in April 2021 the survey ran for 6 weeks and was open to any child in England aged 4-17. It was a publicly available survey, and children's participation was anonymous and voluntary.

*The Big Answer* summarises the responses from children aged 6-17<sup>6</sup>. To inform the development of a high-level outcomes framework for children, the CCo used data from *The Big Ask* to analyse the correlations between children's responses to the questions on happiness and future priorities. The CCo used clustering, a statistical technique, to identify groups based on responses to the questions on happiness and future priorities.<sup>7</sup>

### ***The Big Summer Survey (TBSS)***

During the research for the *Family Review: Part 1* the time that families were able to spend together was identified as something of key importance to children and parents alike. The six-week summer holiday is the longest block of time where children are out of school as part of the normal school year, and there is little data on what activities families do together during this time. TBSS was designed as a national consultation into children's activities during the summer holiday, who they spent time with and who they would go to for support with family life. Over 15,000 responses were collected, of which 14,600 were included in the final sample weighted by age and gender so that findings are representative of the population of children in England.<sup>8</sup>

### **Call to Action**

CCo launched two Calls to Action short free-text surveys: one to children and parents on what family means and one to parents of children under age 5 on family support. These gave children and parents across the country, who were not part of the formal research, a chance to contribute their perspective on what family means and on family services. The results are not nationally representative but key

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themes and quotes have been included in the report as themes raised were very similar to the more formal research findings.

### **Focus groups, interviews, and roundtables**

CCo conducted 23 focus groups and 35 interviews with 47 children and 120 parents and carers in a variety of family support settings, including Children's Centres, Family Hubs, Holiday Activities and Food Programmes, and voluntary-run support groups. These focus groups followed a set topic guide and discussions were usually recorded. CCo also held four roundtables to inform the *Family Review: Part 1*. These included sessions with Supporting Families keyworkers, Family Hub co-ordinators, policy analysts, and researchers, where the group discussed a series of open-ended questions.

Then, for *Family Review: Part 2*, CCo held six roundtables to inform the policy development phase of the review. These roundtables spanned a range of topics:

- First, CCo hosted a roundtable with a group of stakeholders from charities working to support children and families.
- Another was hosted with businesses and charities that support working families to discuss how the support that parents receive through parental leave policies and flexible working arrangements can be enhanced.
- A roundtable was also held with representatives from the First 1001 Days Movement Steering Group. The discussion focused on how to support families during the perinatal period and ensure that the sector is working cohesively towards shared outcomes.
- A roundtable with experts from across the parenting support sector was also hosted. This session focused starting a national conversation about parenting and changing attitudes towards asking for help.

- To understand how families and children interact with local services and how these could be better integrated at a local level, the CCo convened a roundtable of senior stakeholders from across the public sector.
- Finally, to better understand the challenges with creating and delivering an outcomes framework which all services can use to better support families, at a national, local, and individual level, the CCo held a day long workshop to fully explore these barriers and come up with potential solutions.

### **Family Information Service (FIS) audit**

Local authorities (LAs) are required to establish and maintain a Family Information Service (FIS) which provides information on the provision of childcare in the local area and any other services which may benefit parents. The CCo used Google's search API to find the top 10 links in a search for local family services for all 122 towns and cities in England as well as for all 152 upper tier LAs. The CCo then conducted user testing on a sample of 60 LAs' FIS. Testing included things such as: how straightforward it was to navigate to certain information, whether the Family Information Directory (FID) was embedded in the FIS and whether the FIS could be translated into other languages.<sup>9</sup>

### **Data sharing analysis**

To evaluate data sharing practices across family support services, the CCo undertook analysis of existing legislation, engaged directly with practitioners, and compiled results from surveys and interviews with children and families. This process included an extensive literature review of the existing legislation, statutory and advisory guidance, and recent reports on data sharing published by Government and expert stakeholders. In conjunction with the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO), the CCo ran a data-sharing workshop with practitioners and data experts to identify gaps in current data sharing provision and to hear directly from those working in children's services about their own experiences of data sharing. The office combined these insights with data gathered through *The Big Ask*, as well as interviews and focus groups across the country with children and parents. The CCo engaged directly

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with practitioners as the office wanted to learn about their own experiences of trying to work across multiple different systems. Their feedback provided unique and rarely-before seen insights into how data sharing works in practice, how different agencies are attempting to 'speak' to one another, the challenges of sharing proportionate and appropriate information with the right people at the right time, and how the data sharing system operates from end-to-end, including the impact on service users, children, and families.<sup>[10](#)</sup>



## **Chapter 1 – Using the protective effect to redefine the relationship between the state and families**

*‘Sometimes in movies or fairy tales, families are portrayed as always happy, always joyous, and everything is always good. But the reality is that it is not always good, you will have some ups and downs, as with anything in life. So, my family, like a lot of families, has its ups and downs, so I would say that it’s the same as others in that way’ - Girl, 18, youth group.*

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter follows on directly from the *Family Review: Part 1*, which established the protective effect of family and how this promotes wellbeing and positive long-term outcomes for children. This chapter explains how focusing on the protective effect of family - and the four strengths that comprise it - can provide the basis for a new relationship between the state and families in the following ways:

- How public policymakers should use the protective effect to develop a conception of families based on the strengths that families themselves identify. This positive vision for strong families focuses on the ability of families to support one another, rather than their composition or characteristics.
- Why the outcomes that public services are looking to achieve should be the same as the aims that families have for themselves.
- How such an approach can underpin a positive focus on family life across Government and public services, which can form the basis of a clear, coherent, and positive offer to families.

## **1.1. A positive approach to strong families**

The CCo's engagement with families throughout the Family Review have identified four strengths that family members themselves told us were at the core of their conceptualisation of family. Despite the wide range of support for families, the Government does not currently have the strength of families as a policy aim.

### **Four strengths:**

1. A strong emotional connection, with an emphasis on love and joy
2. The importance of shared experiences (both the regular and the exceptional)
3. Mutual support to one another, both practical and emotional
4. The enduring nature of the relationships, and the sense this provides of unconditional support

This is a conception of a strong family premised on relationships and internal dynamics. It can hold true whatever the composition or circumstance of a family. This protective effect can apply across a wider family dynamic than those we immediately live with.

Defining a strong family in this way is both a methodological and conceptual departure from public policy around families:

- Most of the data collected on families conflates family and household; this means we have good data about households, and their observable characteristics such as ethnicity and income.
- But, quite rightly, neither family composition nor characteristics are seen as outcomes for public policy. While the Government seeks to prevent unnecessary family breakdown, it does not want to dictate how people live their lives.

The result is that the way families are described and characterised within public policy does not give rise to an obvious outcome the state is seeking to achieve. In the absence of a positive outcome, public policy instead focuses on the many challenges families face including conflict and poverty. Through research for the Family Review, the CCo has identified more than 70 different Government projects supporting different aspects of family life.<sup>11</sup>

Yet strong families are about more than the absence of challenges; and families can be strong in the face of varying challenges. This is the key insight from *Family Review: Part 1*. The research presented below explains how a focus on strong families as a positive outcome can reframe the approach to family policy by seeing strong families as an end in itself, rather than seeing families through the prism of a set of separate issues they face.

## **1.2. Public policymakers should focus on strong families**

These four strengths should be the explicit aim of public policy, as they can translate to positive outcomes for families and children if they are the focus of policymakers. The section below demonstrates how the four family-level outcomes in the proposed outcomes framework mirror these four strengths.

None of these outcomes are things which are entirely dependent on the state to achieve, but they are ambitions which should be supported by public policy and public service provision.

### **1.2.1. Strength 1: A strong emotional connection, with an emphasis on love and joy**

**Public policy should define families with a strong emotional connection as families that have healthy relationships.** In the FLS children and parents across the UK told the CCo, in their own words, what family meant to them.<sup>12</sup> In their responses, the most common themes mentioned by both parents and children were that family was everything, and that family meant love, care, support and security. As one Mother told the CCo: *'Family is everything to me, to me family are people you love unconditionally,*

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*and they feel the same....family is support, love, non-judgemental and what I personally need to remain sane. I wouldn't be me without family, and I most definitely would not be happy' – Mother, FLS.*

When respondents discussed their family units and the relationships within their families, parents and children often mentioned direct family members, as well as friends and pets. As one boy told the CCo: *'My mum is autistic like me and worries. Mum has a best friend that is family too. We have a cat [...] she is family' – Boy, 8, FLS.*

Many children and parents explained that it was the relationships within their family that brought them together, rather than biological connection. For example, one child told the CCo: *'I have a blended family. I have stepfamily and half siblings, but my family is full of love' – 14 year-old, FLS.*

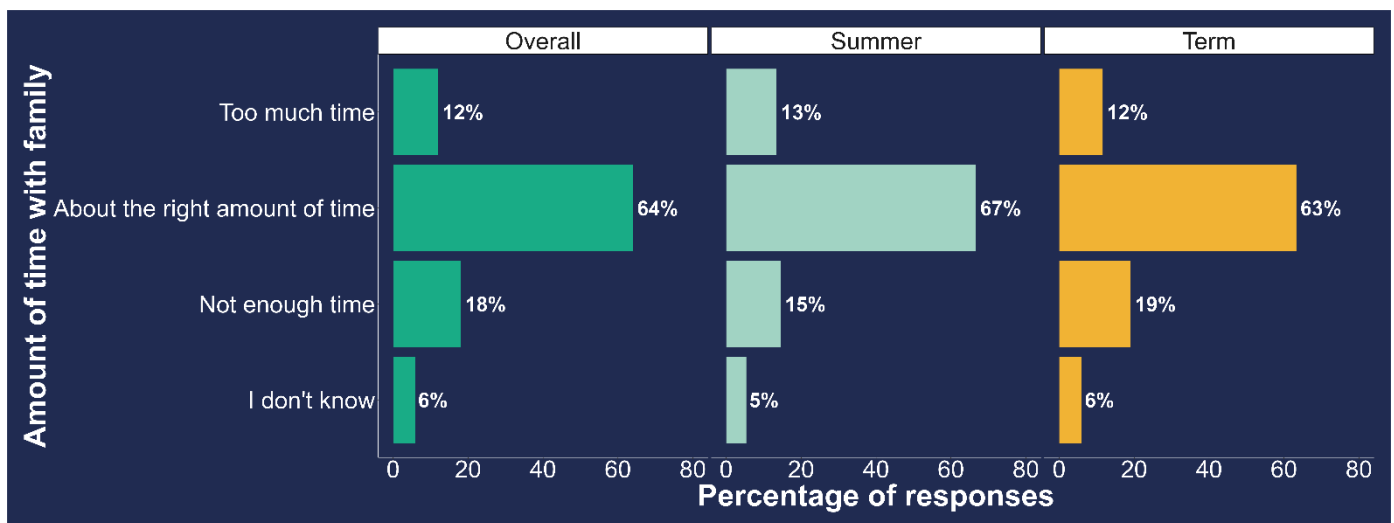
**How to support healthy relationships in families:** Family relations may begin organically, but support can help them be maintained and strengthened. Parenting programmes, systemic family therapy and the Reducing Parental Conflict programme all have strong evidence basis in supporting harmonious relationships within families. Moreover, there is also clear evidence that external strains, particularly poverty and poor housing, undermine positive family relationships.<sup>13,14</sup> Services should seek to help families remove these barriers to healthy relationships so they can create and maintain strong, enduring, and supportive relationships.

### **1.2.2. Strength 2: The importance of shared experiences (both the regular and the exceptional)**

**Public policy should recognise the importance of shared experiences.** Shared experiences and memories (such as doing fun and novel activities) often provide a strong connection between family members, friends and between members of the local community. The vast majority (89%) of children who responded to TBSS<sup>15</sup> told the CCo that they enjoyed all or most of the time they spent with their family, and a similar proportion of children (88%) said that their family members were amongst those they spent the most time with during the summer holidays. Yet, 18% of children told the CCo that they

felt they had not spent enough time with their family members in the previous four weeks (Figure 1.1. below).

**Figure 1.1. The amount of time spent with their family in the last 4 weeks, grouped by whether the date the respondent took the survey overlapped with the summer holiday or term-time only**



**How to support and encourage families to spend quality time together:** The time families can spend together is protected by working time limits, paid holiday and family leave policies, yet our research still suggests that children were more likely to say they didn't spend enough time with family during term time, compared to the summer holiday.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, a key ask from families throughout our research was to have more opportunities to have special experiences together. These particular shared experiences were seen as fundamental in developing strong bonds but are often dependent on the local offer of such experiences.

### 1.2.3. Strength 3: Mutual support to one another, both practical and emotional

Public policy should define mutually supportive families as families able to access support and able to make decisions in their best interests. In TBSS, 72% of the children aged seven to 17 across England who responded to the survey told the CCo that they would turn to their parents if they needed support with

family life, 49% of children said they would talk to friends and 41% said they would turn to other relatives, highlighting the importance of intra-familial support when coping with family issues. Furthermore, just over a quarter (26%) of children who responded to TBSS would talk to a teacher for support with family life underscoring the value of pastoral support at school for many children. Interestingly, of the 28% of children who wouldn't turn to their parents for support with family life, these children were most likely to turn to their friends (45%) but 25% didn't know who they would turn to. This indicates that when children do not have strong links to their family, a large proportion of these children may feel lost and unsupported when they need help with family life.

How to allow families to access support and be able to make decisions in their best interests: Families want to be able to support themselves and offer support to one another. This requires resources, in the broadest sense, including time and knowledge. But a basic level of financial means is a pre-requisite for this; families want the means to support themselves, make decisions in the best interests of their family and be able to offer practical support to their wider family network. When asked what family meant to them in the FLS, one told the CCo: *'I also see family as a big responsibility for the people in it [...] adults such as parents and guardians must be involved in some form of income generating ventures to earn income for supporting and sustaining the family in terms of food, shelter, bedding, schooling and even health.'*

### **Case Study: A Better Start Southend (ABSS)**

ABSS is a ten-year (2015-2025) programme to develop and test new ways to support local children and families in Southend-on-Sea, Essex, funded by the National Lottery Community Fund. ABSS is a partnership of local organisations providing support to families and children in the early years (0-4 years), focussing on key areas of a child's development as well as community resilience.

ABSS run a wide variety of programmes for parents and children, including 'stay and play', sessions for children with SEND and parent-focussed sessions to learn new skills as well as a Parent Engagement Fund, which provides parents with funding to lead the organisation of events to support other local families.

#### **1.2.4. Strength 4: The enduring nature of the relationships, and the sense this provides of unconditional support**

**Public policy should define families with enduring relationships as families feeling part of a wider network.** In the FLS<sup>17</sup>, parents were asked which services they would turn to if they needed help with any aspect of family life. Just over three quarters (78%) of all parents selected family, 51% selected friends and 20% selected health services. Far fewer parents said they would turn to social media (including social media support groups - 15%), support forums (12%), council services (11%) or local community services (10%). Only seven percent of parents said they wouldn't seek any help. These findings, particularly the reliance on family and friends, highlight the importance of strong family relationships first and foremost, but for those who may not have strong family ties, health services and online communities are also a key source of support.

The FSS<sup>18</sup>, a nationally representative survey of parents across England, similarly indicated that family and friends were important sources of information about local services, particularly antenatal courses. Across England, 26% of parents who took an antenatal course heard about it from their friend and another 24% from a family member.

**How to support families to feel part of a wider network:** Families want to be part of a community and form strong bonds within them. Throughout the engagement with families undertaken for this Review there was a repeated emphasis on the importance of social and emotional connections: *'I need somewhere to go, sit down and have a brew'*. Often social interaction can be supported or facilitated by public services, but it is not explicitly recognised as an outcome they should be seeking.

### **1.3. Why the aims of public services need to align with the aims of families**

Thousands of people have engaged with the CCo through the course of this research: children, parents, grandparents, carers, and professionals. Yet, for all, two things are consistent:

1. Public services are most effective when seen as a partnership between professional and family, with a common goal
2. The ambitions that family members articulate for themselves are positive, even for those in the most difficult circumstances

One of the major differences between the way the services tend to consider outcomes, and the ambitions family members cite, is that services often look to harm reduction, while family members express their ambitions in terms of tangible achievements or improvements in their circumstances. While this may be a simple matter of re-framing an issue, it can have a significant change in the relationship between public services and parents or children. It can also support a more positive vision of family life across Government (see below).

Using the ambitions families set out for themselves as the underpinnings for an outcomes framework exposes issues which families say are priorities but are not expressly stated as the aims of Government policy. The most obvious of these is parents feeling part of a wider network of support, with friends or wider family who they feel that they can rely on and who they feel able to support in return (the importance of reciprocity is consistently stressed). As one mother CCo met at a primary school said: *'because my family all live in the area, family means grandparents, aunties, you know, that extended network. Cousins and uncles, as well as the nuclear family.'* The importance of this is clear in all the qualitative engagement for the Family Review, but also comes out in responses to the second Call to Action where parents of children under five were asked what services they would most like to be able to access in their community.<sup>19</sup> The most popular response was a coffee morning, so that they could meet and socialise with other parents in a similar position.<sup>20</sup> For both children and parents' social networks are a huge source of strength and resilience.

We can also see the long-term benefits of clear social interactions. As demonstrated in *Family Review: Part 1*, having a close friend to rely on when things became difficult was a strong predictor of short and long-term parental well-being. Crucially, this was still true when income was controlled for. Yet no public services explicitly set out to support families in developing these connections. By explicitly expressing



what is important for families, the gaps in the public service response to supporting strong families can be highlighted.

## **1.4. Drawing on family strengths to define outcomes for public services**

### **1.4.1. Recognising the multiplicity of family ambitions**

The four-over-arching family-level strengths outlined above are drawn from engagement with thousands of family members through the course of the Family Review. Yet rarely were these expressed as discrete outcomes. Rather families see a set of inter-linking factors that support and sustain them. Again, this is where a family-centric paradigm to considering public policy differs from normal public service delivery, where public services tend to be focused on addressing specific issues, with a narrow set of overlapping outcomes.

The desire for families to be in networks of friends and wider families is a clear example of the benefits of considering family outcomes as a set of interlinked issues. The response to families wanting more social connections is not to create a new service with this as the explicit aim, but to consider how existing services can better facilitate interaction between families. It does not need to be considered a discrete issue, but part of a holistic approach to supporting families to help themselves and become more resilient to external shocks.

This is also important when considering the benefits to the family as a unit of delivering services to one family member. Mental health services are a good example of this, as help for either a child or parent will often lead to improvements in inter-familial relationships. Mental health services will benefit the whole family by supporting family relationships, but they will also be themselves helped by the support family members give one another. The CCo saw some examples of where mental health support worked well, for example when it included the whole family. A mother who was accessing mental health support sessions together with her family told CCo: *'And not just for my own and my husband's mental well-being. But for my daughters as well they work a lot on emotions and feelings with the children as well in a child friendly way.'* Therefore, it is important to consider strong families, and their assets, as part of

wider policy making. *Family Review: Outcomes Annex* explains how to integrate child and family level outcomes in practice.<sup>21</sup>

### **1.4.2. Bringing cohesion to a fragmented system**

As outlined above, there are over 70 different strands of Government work related to children or families.<sup>22</sup> These are accompanied by hundreds of different outcome and output metrics across different services, each of these tends to be specific and discrete. The result is that an individual or families can be accessing multiple different services, each pursuing specific aims. This is strongly reflected in family experiences, and in their desire for change.

An audit of FISs shows that it can be difficult for parents to find and navigate information about local services.<sup>23</sup> FISs only come up in about half of searches for family services in specific towns and cities. In 35% of LAs it is difficult to find a local toddler group using the FIS and in 78% of LAs it is difficult to find a parenting course for older children using the FIS.

Throughout the research for this Review CCo heard about the complexities of navigating different systems, and feeling that each was only partially aligned, or partially supporting the things families were trying to achieve for themselves. As one mother of a child with Special Educational Needs and/or Disability (SEND) in the early years said: *'It's very difficult to navigate the system. All of the information online is very hard to find, it's diagnosis specific and very locally specific. I might find something relevant but it's not available [here].'* This was especially true where both families and children had to access specialist support. It was also in sharp contrast to the support received from friends and extended family, which was by its very nature more holistic.

*Family Review: Part 2* makes a suite of recommendations on to how to provide a more integrated and holistic offer for families: the better sharing and utilisation of data, better integration of services at a local level, and practical guidance in developing a common outcomes framework. While all these recommendations seek to improve the system of public service delivery around families, there is something more fundamental about the need to state in plain terms what we want to achieve for

families. Multiple public services can address specific issues families are facing, but they should do so within a common framework, a common language about the basics of what families need to succeed and be informed by this at every stage of policy design.

## **1.5. How to take this forward as policymakers**

The Annex to this paper, *Family Review: Outcomes Annex*, on adopting an outcomes framework for children and families<sup>24</sup> explains how this approach can be applied in practice. It includes detailed recommendations as to how to use outcomes consistently and cohesively, such as ensuring different services use terms and concepts consistently. It also explains how to bring together established child-level outcomes, such as in education, with the family-level outcomes explained above to create a comprehensive child and family outcomes set. This Chapter is focused on setting out the outcomes that apply to families as units and explaining the benefits of using such a paradigm to focus our public sector delivery.

## **Chapter 2 – Parents need to be supported to embrace their crucial role**

*'I had a massive change, I've changed my behaviour and it's for my kids and they will benefit from it massively' - Father, parenting support service.*

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter focuses on the importance of parenting for children's outcomes. It shows that:

- parents value their role and want to be the best they can be for their child
- there are parenting behaviours, such as reading to a child, that have a substantial impact on children's development
- drawing on new research conducted by the CCo, while the majority of children report spending time with their family during the summer, only 23% reported engaging in reading, writing and art activities with their family

### **2.1. Parenting quality is important, and parents also recognise the value of their role**

The previous chapter sets out the strengths that enable a family to support one another. These strengths together give rise to the protective effect of family, as outlined in the *Family Review: Part 1*, which supports wellbeing and outcomes, as well as giving families resilience when facing challenges such as poverty. These are the foundations of strong families.

However, as this chapter will demonstrate, this does not always equate to good parenting. These foundations are important for supporting children's outcomes and can form the basis for good parenting. In addition, parents need to understand what is needed of them as parents and be able to prioritise these things in their parenting. The corollary is also true; parents in families where there are resource or instability issues can still help their children through their parenting behaviours.

Some parents told the CCo that they wanted to do things differently to how they had been parented themselves. One father, who CCo met at a parenting support service, for example, said: *'It's about getting some extra help because I realised I didn't fail. Sorry, but my mum and dad failed me. I'm not trying to excuse what I've done, but me doing some wrong doings wasn't necessarily my fault, it was how I was brought up [...] I don't want my son to be sat looking at that chair there or my daughter going through the same things that I did, thinking that my daddy failed me.'* A review of the evidence on the determinants of inequality shows that the quality of parenting substantially improves the odds of children performing better at school, particularly for disadvantaged pupils.<sup>25</sup>

The families who have contributed to the Family Review overwhelmingly acknowledge the scale of commitment required. They expect parenting to be hard and demand sustained prioritisation. One mother said: *'It is important to help families and to respect their choices as the parents are the first educators of their children, this responsibility belong to them'* - Mother, Call to Action.

Parents also recognise the importance of their role and reflect on how central parenting is to their lives. In the FLS, one father told the CCo: *'Everything, my daughter is central to everything I do.'* Parents talked about wanting to do all they could to be the best parent. This was apparent even when the office spoke to parents at services that weren't aimed at improving their parenting. For example, a mother, who attended a Holiday Activities and Food Programme (HAF) with her children, told the CCo: *'Sacrifice. Yeah, I've got 4 kids and I'll let them know that 'I'm your mother'. [T]hey can always come to me and ask me with anything. You can always talk to me. Like I brought you into this world [...].'* This also included putting some boundaries in place. As one father, who CCo met through a Youth Group, said: *'It's important for children to have boundaries so we can foresee any problems early and give them more liberty going forward.'*

Parents also recognised that difficult experiences and circumstances can impact their parenting. One mother, who CCo met at a Family Hub, said: *'Mental health is so complicated. I've had anxiety for longer than I remember, probably all my life, and it's hard with kids because it can affect your parenting, but you never want to admit it.'*

## **2.2. Key parenting behaviours have an impact on children's outcomes**

There is a wealth of evidence that the attitudes and behaviours of parents is a key determinant of a child's early development. Amongst the most economically disadvantaged families, where children had high levels of 'positive parenting' (based on a combination of parenting behaviours<sup>a</sup>), 58% of children had a good level of achievement in their first year at school. This was compared with 19% of those families with what was described as 'low-quality parenting'. The quality of parenting mattered across all income groups.<sup>26</sup>

Information on a range of parenting factors was collected in the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), a longitudinal study into children born in the year 2000, particularly at the age of three. The information collected included home learning activities, the mother-child relationship, discipline and family routine such as bedtimes and mealtimes. An analysis of this data undertaken for the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) found that of the parenting factors, reading to the child was the most influential predictor for how a child was doing cognitively at age five, and mother-child relations (such as warmth within the relationship and conflict), were the strongest predictors for children's behaviour problems.<sup>27</sup>

As shown in the tables below, there is a direct relationship between the frequency that parents read to their children and the child's vocabulary; the less the child is read to by their parent in early childhood the more likely they are to have poorer cognitive skills at age five. Additionally, the greater the extent

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<sup>a</sup> Includes information on activities undertaken to promote their child's reading and learning, their relationship and interactions with the child, aspects of the child's family organisation and nutrition and positive and negative disciplinary practices and observed interactions between the parent and the child during a cognitive assessment task

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to which the mother experienced conflict or a less warm relationship with her child<sup>b</sup> the more likely the child was to have behaviour problems at age five.

**Table 2.1. Reading frequency and child cognitive scores<sup>28</sup>**

Parenting: reading frequency per week at age 3	Naming vocabulary test: Share in lowest decile at age 5
Every day	7%
3-6 times per week	12%
1-2 times per week	18%
Occasionally or less	21%

**Table 2.2. Parental conflict and warmth and child behaviour outcomes<sup>29</sup>**

Parenting: level of conflict at age 3	Total behaviour problem score: Share in highest decile at age 5	Parenting: level of warmth at age 3	Total behaviour problem score: Share in highest decile at age 5
Low, 7-15	4%	Low, 7-29	26%
Medium low, 16-20	8%	Medium low, 30-32	13%
Medium high, 21-26	17%	Medium high, 33-34	9%
High, 27-35	41%	High, 35	5%

<sup>b</sup> Level of warmth based on aggregated responses to whether the following statements apply: "I share an affectionate, warm relationship with the Child", "Child will seek comfort from me", "Child values his/her relationship with me", "When praised Child beams with pride", "Child spontaneously shares information about himself/herself", "It is easy to be in tune with what the Child is feeling", and "Child shares his/her feelings and experiences with me".

Analysis from the Study of Early Education and Development (SEED), a longitudinal study following 6000 children born in 2010-2012, shows home environment factors strongly influence a child's cognitive, socio-emotional and educational outcomes at age 5, more so than use of early childhood education and care settings.<sup>30</sup> Of all home environment factors, how often parents set limits on their child's behaviour had the strongest association with achieving a good overall level of development on the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) assessment, parents level of warmth had the strongest association with personal, social and emotional development EYFS score, and home learning environment (which captures reading with children and doing other learning activities like drawing and painting at home) had the strongest association with EYFS numeracy.<sup>31</sup> An authoritative parenting style was not significantly associated with development outcomes and authoritarian parenting and permissive parenting had less of an influence on development outcomes than parenting behaviours.<sup>32</sup>

Regularly collected data on parenting behaviours is limited.<sup>c</sup> Data from *Understanding Society* shows that in 2020-21, 69% of parents of 3 year olds, 62% of parents of 5 year olds and 26% of parents of 8 year olds said they read to their child every day.<sup>33</sup> While the share of parents reading to younger children has been fairly stable over the past 10 years, the share of parents reading every day to their 8 year old has fallen from 35% in 2011-12 to 26% in 2020-21.<sup>34</sup>

The latest data from the EYFS in England demonstrates the need to work with parents to improve children's outcomes.<sup>d</sup> Following the pandemic, in 2021-22, 65% of children had a good level of development and 63% of children were at the expected level for all 17 early learning goals.<sup>35</sup> Children who were known to be eligible for FSM were much less likely to achieve a good level of development, only 49% achieved this compared to 69% of children not eligible for FSM.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>c</sup> The main survey of *Understanding Society* includes questions on whether a parent reads to their child, whether their child has regular bed times and whether their child has regular mealtimes.

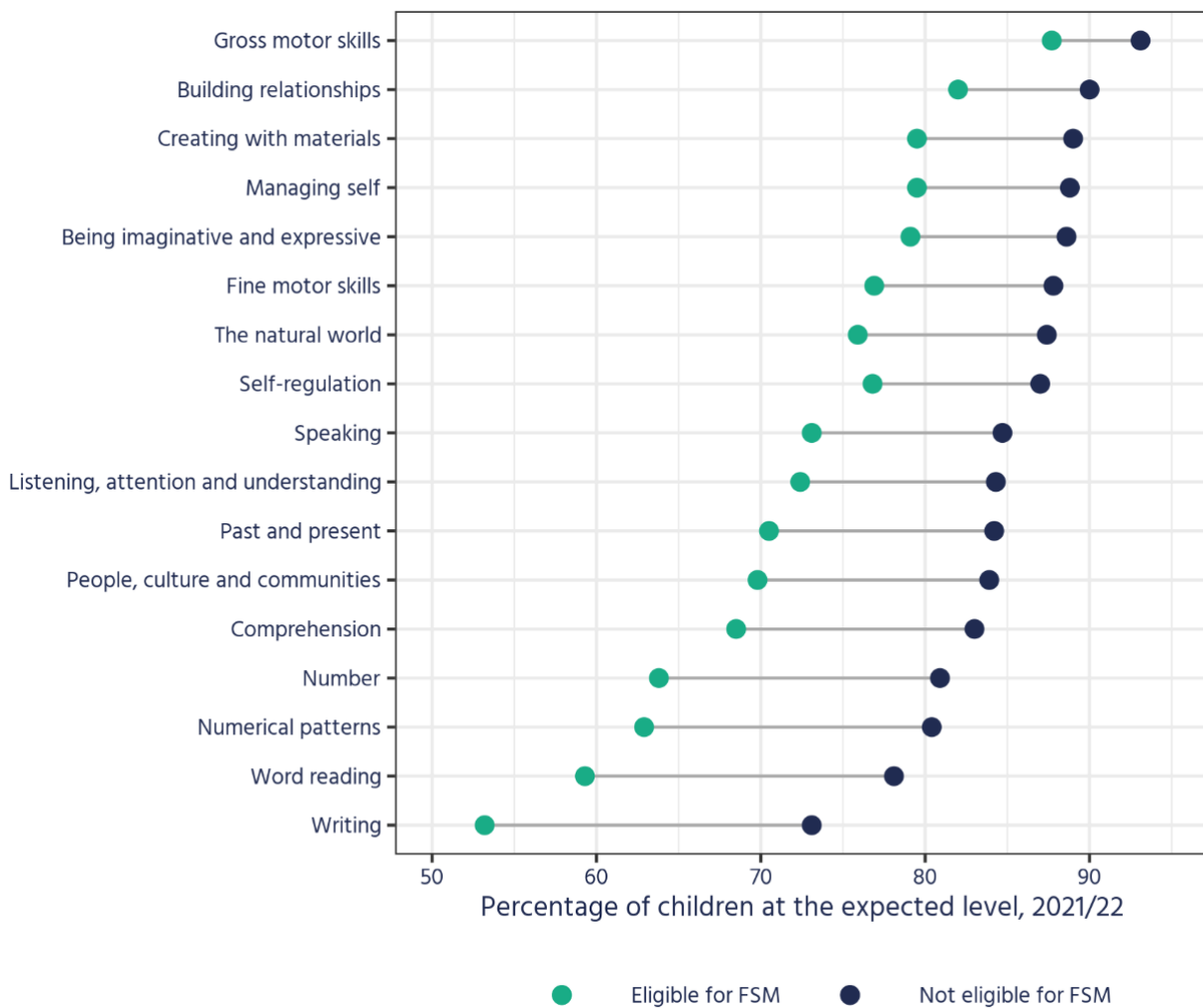
<sup>d</sup> The EYFS statistics are based on teacher assessments of children's development at the end of the EYFS, specifically the end of the academic year in which a child turns five which is typically the summer term of reception year.

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A more detailed analysis of the data by the CCo shows that development gaps are most pronounced in certain domains of development. Specifically, the data shows that there is only a small development gap in terms of gross motor skills, and building relationships, but there are significant development gaps around the use of numbers and language.<sup>37</sup> There are very practical things parents can do to help their child in these domains of parents, but parents need to know what these are and what is expected of them.

**Figure 2.1. Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) outcomes metrics for 2022, comparing children eligible for FSM to those who are not eligible for FSM.**



A range of qualitative research with parents highlights barriers to positive parenting behaviours, including resource constraints and stress.<sup>38</sup> Some parents may want to participate in learning activities with their children but cannot due to language or literacy barriers.<sup>39</sup>

## 2.3. New research shows how families spend their time

As outlined above, parents recognise their importance, but there is little evidence available as to how this translates into what families do together. For the *Family Review: Part 2*, the Children's Commissioner undertook *The Big Summer Survey*, which asked over 15,800 children how they spent their summer holidays and what activities they did with their families. The findings, outlined below, demonstrate the diversity of family life, particularly in their activities, the time they spend together and the resulting dynamics in family relationships.<sup>40</sup> Generally, the picture is a positive one, with children enjoying spending time with their family, and feeling they get to do this enough.

### **Highlight: Findings from The Big Summer Survey**

Overall, children were likely to tell CCo that they spent the most time with family members (88%) during the summer holiday, particularly parents/guardians (75%), and siblings (51%).

Yet, when asked to select all of the activities they did during the summer and who they did those activities with, it is clear that family time varies depending on the activity. The vast majority (96%) of children and young people who responded to TBSS watched TV or films during the summer holiday, of whom 73% (n=10,239) said they watched TV with their family and 51% (n=7,130) watched TV alone.

Likewise, the majority of children (79%) spent time reading, writing or doing art during the summer holiday. However, of those children, only 30% (n=3,336) did these activities with a member of their family, including 28% of 7-12 year olds and 15% of 13-17 year olds, and 83% (n=9,471) of children did these activities alone. Girls were also more likely to read with family than boys overall.

While the research above demonstrates that most children surveyed reported spending time with family members during the summer, the most common activity that families engaged in together was watching TV (73% of those who watched TV did so with their family).

The majority of children (79%) spent time reading, writing or doing art during the summer holidays. However, only 23% did these activities with a member of their family.<sup>41</sup>

These findings are unsurprising given that we know that families face barriers to spending time together, for example in the FLS, 68% of parents reported 'my work/employment' as barrier to spending time together as a family.<sup>42</sup>

Given evidence highlighted about the link between parents reading to their child and their child's cognitive development, findings that only 23% of all children who responded to TBSS reported reading, writing or doing art with a family member are concerning.

## **2.4. What this means for policymakers**

The research outlined in this chapter establishes:

1. parenting behaviours impact on children's long-term outcomes
2. parents generally recognise the pivotal role they play, want to do well by their children, and prioritise being good parents
3. despite wanting to help their children, parents often fail to do the activities that would be most beneficial to their child's development

Chapter 3 below sets out how we need to reform the way we engage with parents in order to respond to these facts.

## Chapter 3 – What parents want from the support they access

*'You find that out when you're already on that [parenting] journey so then you're all of a sudden thinking What? What do I do? Where do I go? [...] Other people [at this group] have been through that journey already and have other children they can say to you well you might struggle with this' – Mother of child with SEND, Family Hub.*

### Chapter Summary

- Parents really want to help their children and be brilliant parents. However, they often face challenges with parenting, and difficulties accessing help with it.
- Certain groups of parents report more barriers to accessing help.
- There is a need to reduce the stigma surrounding accessing help with parenting, particularly the stigma surrounding parenting courses – everyone should talk about parenting and feel able to attend parenting course.
- The relationship between families and the state should be reset, so there are clearer expectations on what parents can do, as well as greater certainty that they will be able to get help and information when they need it.
- All parents need sufficient financial resources to provide them with the agency to parent well.

### 3.1. Parents seek support in different ways

As set out above, parents play a central role in nurturing their child's development. It's clear from the parents the CCo has heard from that they know how important parenting is, and they want to do it well. For many parents the acknowledgment of the importance and centrality of their role will be enough, but some group of parents will require more support. One mother who CCo met through a parenting support service made that point clear: *'you try and do your best as a parent, and I will always advocate and fight for my daughter, but I am a parent not a professional, I can't always help her, I don't have the emotional skills to help her with some things.'*

As mentioned earlier, throughout the Review the office has observed there to be four different situations that families can find themselves in when it comes to accessing support.

Some families will be able to access support from within their immediate network, including family and friends but also universally available services. This is not to say that these families will not experience challenges and find parenting difficult at times. For example, one young mother of a seven-week-old baby said: *'I have a pretty nice life, and even with all my support, I feel full up to the brim.'*

Then there are some families that are largely able to access the support from their networks but may have less resources that can at times impact their ability to cope. Single parents can often fall into this category, as they have fewer financial resources or social networks to draw on. As one single mother who CCo met through a parenting support service said: *'I think there's a lack of knowhow in terms of how hard it can be to be a single parent. There's no additional support, you have to find your own additional support, and particularly when there is family court involved, or conflict, or local authorities etcetera.'*

There are also families that may have a particular issue that needs specialist and professional support and families that experience chronic issues such as a limiting illness that may affect the family dynamic and require long term support.

All of these different groups of families need to be able to access the right support when they feel they need it. Yet, it was clear throughout the Review that there is currently a sense from parents that if they are struggling, the support that is available isn't always right for them or they don't know how to ask for it. For example, parents often feel a threshold has to be crossed to demonstrate that things are 'bad enough' to get the help that they need, which can make them feel like a failure. For example, one mother who participated in a focus group the CCo conducted explained that she had self-referred to children's social care but had not received any help.

Families often spoke of a fear statutory services or social workers, worrying that they were simply there to take their children away. This fear could create a reluctance to show that things are 'bad enough' in case it leads to child protection interventions. As one father put it, the benefit of the support group is: *'So people know that instead of phoning social I can phone [support group]. It's about getting some extra help because I realised, I didn't fail.'*

Likewise, a charity support worker explained: *'Families often feel they are at odds with their social worker or health visitor. They often tell me they lie to their health visitor about where their baby is sleeping, for example. The difference is that we're offering something, not taking something away.'*

Another parent the office spoke to talked about high thresholds for mental health support: *'Another thing is mental health, the only support my kids get [...] is in school and there's only one lady there to help. She's lovely, but there's only one of her and 500 kids so I often think my kids probably don't deserve her help as much as other kids so maybe they shouldn't go. But maybe a service to give tips and tricks on kids' worries.'*

It was clear that there needs to be a way for parents to show that they need help, without feeling like they are inviting censure. There is a range of evidence that 'strengths-based' approaches are the most effective ways of supporting parents, and yet to get through the door of services parents feel they are required to demonstrate failure.<sup>[4344](#)</sup> This needs to be turned on its head, so that seeking help is itself seen as a strength, and there should be no threshold to be passed to get help.

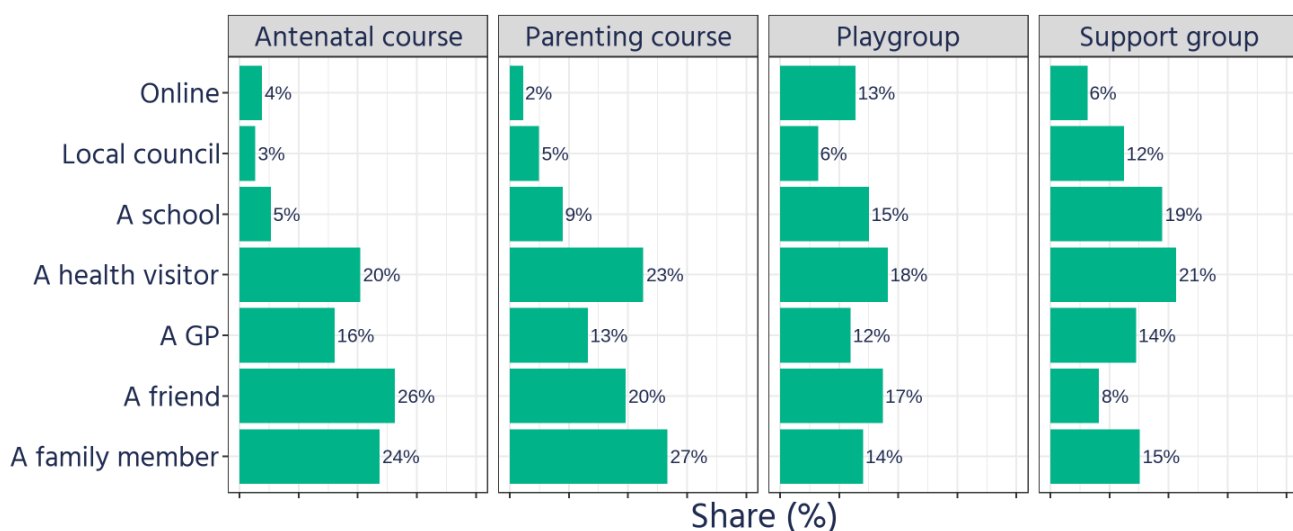
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## 3.2. Many parents do access universally available services but some report barriers

The overarching picture is that many parents do access universally available services that support them with their parenting, but some parents report barriers to accessing services. Responses to the FSS<sup>45</sup> from 3,000 parents across England indicate that parents hear about courses and groups through a number of channels. Where they most commonly hear about a certain service or group depends on the nature of the service itself.

As highlighted in Figure 3.1 below, parents reported that health visitors were a common source of information regarding all service types surveyed such as antenatal/parenting courses, playgroups and support groups.<sup>46</sup> For both playgroups and support groups, health visitors were the number one cited source at 18% and 20% respectively.<sup>47</sup> Friends and family members were also key sources of information, for example, 26% of parents who took an antenatal course heard about it from their friend and another 24% from a family member. Furthermore, 19% of parents heard about a support group and 16% heard about a playgroup through their local school.<sup>48</sup>

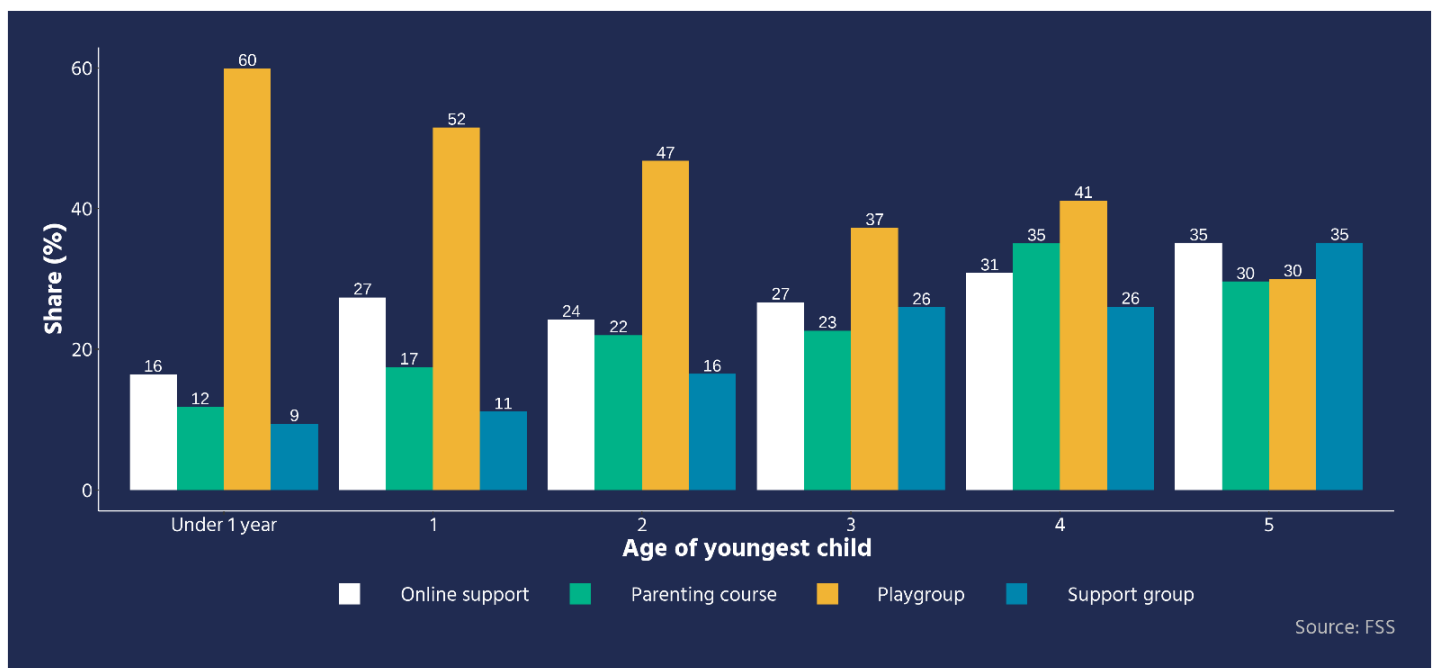
**Figure 3.1. Among parents who accessed a specific service, where did they hear about it?**





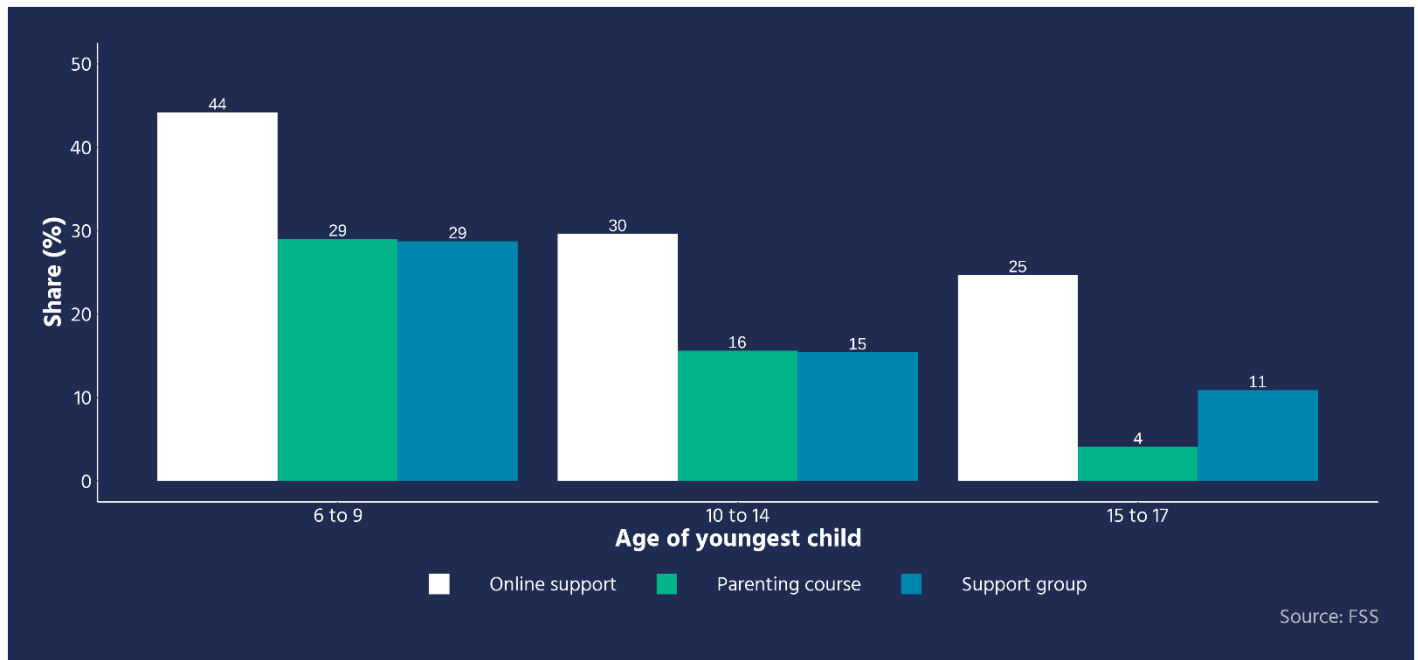
The FSS found that as children get older parents become more likely to seek out more structured support, with 30% of parents of five-year-olds accessing parenting classes, compared to 12% of parents of under ones, and 35% accessing support groups, compared to 9% of parents of under ones.<sup>49</sup>

**Figure 3.2. Share of parents with a child aged 5 and under accessing services**



The survey findings also suggest that there is a gap when it comes to older children. Once children are over five, parents are more likely to access support online rather than from courses or support groups (see figure below). This could suggest that while they are still proactively searching for help, there are not services obviously designed to provide it.

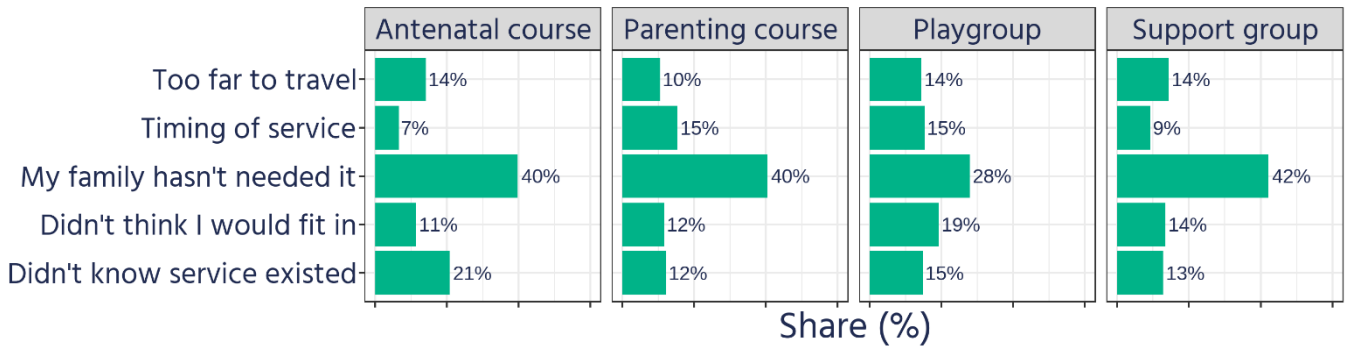
**Figure 3.3. Share of parents with a child aged 6 and over accessing services**



Parents responding to the FSS who did not access specific services were asked reasons for not doing so.<sup>50</sup> These parents were asked to select from a list of potential reasons for not accessing a service including travel distance, timing, awareness of the service and whether or not they would fit in. Across all service types, the most cited reason was not needing the service (see Figure 3.4).

While it is positive that there are relatively high reported levels of access to these services, there are still many parents who do not access this support. Many parents may indeed not feel the need for a support group or parenting course, but this in itself is perhaps the issue.

**Figure 3.4. Reasons for not accessing a specific service (parents with children of all ages)**



Another common reason for not accessing services, especially for those more social in nature like playgroups, is feeling that they would not fit in (19% of those not accessing playgroups cited this as a reason)<sup>51</sup>. This affected some parents, and some areas of the country, more than others. For example, 21% of parents in London said they didn't think they would fit in at a playgroup compared to only 5% of parents in Yorkshire and the Humber.<sup>52</sup> Instead, they were far more likely to say that their family did not need playgroup services.<sup>53</sup>

Moreover, in the focus groups and interviews the CCo conducted some parents reported feeling as though the system was geared towards women as primary carers. Many said parenting is still seen as the woman's job. One dad, who CCo met at a Baby and Toddler group said: *'I think more dads would come, it's a wider societal structure that doesn't allow dad to take childcare responsibilities.'* And a mother who CCo met at a Family Hub said: *'Things [services] need to be available after work and at weekends, especially for Dad's as they can be excluded, as most of the groups and events are during working hours, so only the Mums can go.'*

This sentiment is reflected in the findings from the FLS, a nationally representative survey of family life in the UK. When asked about the share of childcare tasks, 62% of all parents who took the survey said they were the primary provider of childcare to the children in the household, and 28% said childcare was shared between them and another parent.<sup>54</sup> Comparing results by respondent's gender, mothers

were more likely to select themselves as the primary childcare provider (75%) than male respondents (29%). Fathers were most likely to say childcare was shared equally (49%).<sup>55</sup>

The CCo has also heard from parents with children that have specific needs, such as Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). These parents need readily accessible support that understands the challenges they are facing and meets their needs. However, parents of children with SEND regularly told then office about their difficulties in navigating the local system, particularly for those who are new to the area, as SEND provision varies greatly between LAs. One parent mother that the CCo met at a family hub said: *'It's very difficult to navigate the system. All of the information online is very hard to find, it's diagnosis specific and very locally specific. I might find something relevant but it's not available in [town name].'*

Many of the barriers that these groups of parents' face reflect a fundamental challenge, namely a sense that help and support is somehow not for people 'like me', either because you don't need it, or because you won't be welcome. This is the idea that must be challenged, to show that there is help for everyone. Services must be offered universally to overcome both stigma and fear of using them and should be led as much as possible by the community, and peer groups, to show that these are services for all parents.

### **3.3. When parents access the right services, they can be transformative**

Given the importance of parenting in supporting children's development, some research has focused on understanding how to improve the quality of parent-child relationships.<sup>56</sup> One example of an approach that has been widely used across the United States, Australia, Ireland and the UK is the Triple P Positive Parenting Program. At a high level the programme aims to improve parents' capacity for self-regulation which supports them to modify their own behaviour.<sup>57</sup> In this way parents can modify their own behaviour which in turn affects their child's behaviour.

Parents themselves also recognise the impact that the right parenting support can have on their approach to parenting. It's clear that when services empower parents and alter their attitudes the results

can be transformative for the parents and the child. One dad who CCo met at a Fathers' Group said: *'this course enlightened my life.'*

Another father that the CCo spoke at a parenting support service described how learning about his own behaviour and regular mentoring has changed his attitude towards his child's behaviour. He said: *'Because with my son [...], when he was a baby, I was like, no, he's my soldier. He's a boy. He's a soldier and if he fell over, he'll stop crying. Get back up, you're a soldier like man up [...] and I've actually seen [...] [when he] hurts himself he gets nervous about crying with me. So now I actually say to him like no, no, have a cry and I actually get him to cry it out [...]. Whereas before I wasn't that I was like, well, you're a boy. You gotta be quiet like you're a man. [...] Yeah, that's made me open my eyes massively and be able to treat my kids completely different, completely different.'*

Parents also recognise the impact that parenting support can have on their confidence, one father said: *'[The] parenting course helps with your own confidence which then helps with parenting your children.'*

A mother of a child with SEND that CCo met at a family hub also reflected on accessing support that gives parents a break: *'But then you come here and [...] they can take your child for 10 minutes and just give you that break, a breather. And actually, I don't want to be his therapist. I just want to be a mum. There's their therapy and being their admin, a PA and all this stuff, it's 24/7.'*

Parents should be able to readily access the help they need and want. More information on how this could be achieved is outline in the sections below. Moreover, chapter 4 below sets out some of the overarching principles that should be adopted when designing services that can replicate the protective effect and build on families' strengths.

### **3.4. Supporting good parenting**

*'Being taught how to be a better parent can make you feel like you have a weakness'* - Father, parenting group.

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While there are a range of services and support families may require, it is important to understand the specific role of parenting support. As demonstrated above, it is wrong to equate good parenting with a families' income level. Whatever situation families are in, it is important for parents to demonstrate certain behaviours and support their children through their emotional, social and educational development.

There is a fine balance to be struck when it comes to the relationship between families and the state. The basic premise of family policy in the UK (and elsewhere) is that family life is private, and interventions should be kept to a minimum. This is the right principle, but it creates a situation where interventions are then seen as the result of a failing family, who have stepped out of line. It means that it is much harder to talk about what parents could do more of, to achieve better outcomes or prevent difficulties emerging. This leads to a situation where the parents we spoke to – who were rightly proud and protective of their vital role – were scared of intervention, even as they spoke about the challenges they faced.

The research for this Review overwhelmingly shows parents want to support their children and be great parents. Yet parenting behaviours do not always match up with this intention, and when the Children's Commissioner has explored this apparent paradox, with both parents and professionals it is clear that there is a lack of clear understanding of what is required, a lack of confidence on the part of parents as to how they can affect change and a reservation on the part of professionals as to what advice they should be giving to parents. This reflects a wider reticence on the part of public bodies to be seen to be telling parents how to parent. This reticence is understandable and well founded, but for this Review the Children's Commissioner has been working with both families and professionals to understand the balance between empowering parents and dictating how to raise children.

### **3.4.1. Providing clear information to parents**

The first step for this needs to be clear information and practical information so that parents understand the core things children require at each stage of their development and the practical things families can

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do to help achieve this aim. At present, it is not clear where either parents or professionals working with families would go to find this advice.

There have been attempts by Government to provide information to parents. In 2019 the Department for Education launched a three year campaign called 'Hungry Little Minds' to inform parents as to how they could support their child's development.<sup>58</sup> This three-year campaign was not completed, and the website now directs to the Start for Life advice from NHS England.<sup>59</sup> While this website includes lots of important and practical advice, awareness was very low amongst both the professionals and families engaged with for this Review. In an attempt to promote the service, the Department for Health and Social Care has provided funding to 75 areas to promote the website and produced locally tailored supporting materials, both digital and in print.<sup>60</sup>

In the absence of clear professional guidance, it is clear that parents turn to their own networks for advice. For example, in the FLS,<sup>61</sup> 85% of parents across the UK told us that they would turn to their friends and family when they needed support with any aspect of family life. Of those 15% who didn't turn to their friends or family, 48% said they would not seek help, 22% would turn to social media (including social media support groups), 17% to health services, 15% to council services, 15% to support forums and 9% to local community services. A balance of professional and informal advice for parents is healthy. But it is not clear the balance is correct in the UK, with both parents and professionals telling the Children's Commissioners office they would not know where to go to get information either for themselves or to impart to others.<sup>e</sup>

To demonstrate what this advice could look like, the figure below is an example taken from the Australian parenting website 'raisingchildren.net.au'. It includes basic factual information that parents

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<sup>e</sup> The Children's Commissioner convened a roundtable of professionals from multiple sectors to discuss parenting advice as part of the Family Review. For more details see the methodology section.

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should know for each stage of a child's life, practical advice as to how to support their child's development and – crucially – clear advice as to when to seek professional advice or support.

For example, the following bullet points highlight some high-level information for parents of 5-6yrs olds:

*'Even as children start school, family relationships are still the most important influence on child development.'*

- *At 5-6 years, expect tricky emotions, independence, friendships and social play, plenty of talk, improved physical coordination, and more*
- *It's good for children's development to play with you, do simple chores, practise classroom behaviour, have playdates and talk about feelings*
- *Speak with your GP if you're concerned about your child's development or you need support"<sup>62</sup>*

This is backed up by practical advice:



**Figure 3.5. Screenshot from raisingchildren.net.au**

### Helping child development at 5-6 years

Here are some simple things you can do to help your child's development at this age:

- Encourage [moving](#): play different sports and do recreational activities together or with others. These teach social skills like taking turns, cooperating, negotiating, [playing fairly](#) and [being a good sport](#).
- Include your child in simple [household chores](#): setting the table or helping you to put clean clothes away develops moving and thinking skills, while also teaching cooperation and responsibility. These skills are important for school.
- Set aside some [time for free play](#): even if your child has started school and other structured activities, play is still very important at this age. Let your child choose how to spend this free playtime.
- Play with your child each day, even if it's just for 10 minutes. Playing together gives you the chance to enter your child's world and find out about their thoughts and feelings. It also shows your child that you care about them and want to [spend time together](#).
- Practise classroom behaviour: for example, you could give your child small tasks that need attention or involve following simple rules or instructions. Have conversations about your child's favourite animal or sport and encourage your child to listen, respond and question. This all helps your child get ready for school.
- Arrange playdates: spending time with other children, especially if they go to the same school, helps with social skills and gets your child used to being apart from you.
- Talk about feelings: you can help your child work out why they're feeling something and help them put words to these feelings. This will help your child form friendships and show empathy.

### 3.4.2. Changing attitudes to parenting classes

*'I love my mum to bits but somebody should have helped her be a better mum [...] It needs to be more recognised. It needs to be more out there. So yeah, dads, mums, even kids, if they feel like they just need that bit of support they've got that number to call' - Father, support group.*

Although the research presented in this Review demonstrate how commonplace it is for parents to feel as if they are struggling, it has also shown that there remains a stigma around opening up about this and asking for help. This was particularly clear when we discussed attitudes to parenting classes. This is notable because across all the research for this Review parents have been clear that they want to help their children, particularly with their mental health and they want their family as a whole to get on.

Parenting classes have a particularly strong evidence base for achieving this, yet they still remain a rarity, and both professionals and parents often encountered the attitude these were only for families who were struggling.

While there has been a welcome focus on parenting classes within recent Government policy, including dedicated Government spending on parenting classes<sup>63</sup>, it seems that there is more to do for the general public, and for professionals working with families, to feel comfortable talking about them and recommending them as a matter of course. We need to realise that parenting classes are not prescribing a particular way to bring up a child. This is, and should, remain a parent's prerogative. But parenting courses are there to help parents understand child development and enable them to reflect on how they want to bring up their child. The aim should be for attending a parenting course to be a routine part of life.

There have been welcome attempts at opening up this conversation, most notably headed up by the Princess of Wales, through the Royal Foundation which opened up a national conversation about parenting in the early years, and there is a wealth of well-used online forums for discussion.<sup>64</sup> Mumsnet alone receives 7 million unique visitors a month.<sup>65</sup>

One contributor to a workshop the Children's Commissioner held on parenting likened this to the debate around mental health: *'10 years ago it was taboo to talk about mental health, to say you were struggling, or were just having a bad day. People covered it up and made excuses. Today we are in the same position with parenting. Lots of people do struggle, to different degrees and in different ways. But admitting this is seen as an admission of failure.'* Over the past decade, there is evidence that attempts from both Government and civil society to decrease the stigma surrounding mental ill health have been effective. For example, the Time to Change programme, designed to reduce mental health-related stigma through a social marketing campaign suggests it improved knowledge and attitudes.<sup>66</sup>

The aim should be to normalise the attendance at parenting courses, just as attendance at prenatal courses is normalised. These do not all need to be state provided, as with prenatal courses, there can be a range of state and voluntary sector provision.

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## **Chapter 4 – Harnessing the protective effect: reforming public services to work with families**

*‘More programmes and courses for parents AND children would be helpful. I am often concerned that family support runs out at 18 years old for children, especially if they have SEND. They often need support for longer, into adulthood. I don’t really look for support online though, more word of mouth, especially after COVID, it’s good to talk to people’ - Mother, Youth Group.*

### **Chapter Summary**

- This chapter sets out how, when families need support from services, those services should seek to replicate the way that families help their own members.
- It argues that by mirroring the protective effect of a supportive family, services will be able to deliver more effective help, which parents are more willing to receive.
- The chapter sets out four key principles that should underpin service delivery and design so that they can mirror the protective effect of family. These are that services should be: open, non-judgemental and loving; based on high quality, enduring relationships; reliable, there for parents no matter what and holistic, and support the whole family not just a part of it.
- The chapter calls for a core offer of universal services for families of children of all ages – including ante-natal classes, health visiting, parenting courses and relationship support – to be fully resourced and delivered through a Family Hub in every neighbourhood in the country.

- The chapter makes clear that while family support services are one crucial part of the picture, for families to function well parents need to have the time and agency to care for their children. To do this – to have the time to focus on the needs of the children beyond the urgent and essential, to support others in their community, and to spend time enjoying being a family – requires the right financial support to be in place. This chapter therefore also sets out how families with children should be prioritised in tax and welfare decisions.

## **4.1. Services mirroring the protective effect of family**

When faced with challenges to family life, parents say that the place they most want to turn is to their own family, and to friends. This ability to turn to family was in fact one of the defining features of what made a strong family – that they are always there for you, through thick and thin, ready to provide loving, unquestioning support.

While services will never be able to provide the same thing, there are important lessons for them to learn about the way in which families want to receive support, which they should seek to replicate. *Family Review: Part 1* identified four key strengths which make up the protective effects of family, and this chapter sets out how they should be mirrored in four principles for services.

**Table 4.1. Key principles for services**

Key strengths which comprise the Protective Effect of Family	Principles for services to replicate this Protective Effect
Emotional connection: love and joy	Services should be open, non-judgemental and loving
Strong, positive, and enduring relationships	Services should be based on high quality, enduring relationships
The ability to depend on one another for practical and emotional support	Services need to be reliable, there for parents no matter what
Shared experiences of family life	Services need to be holistic, and support the whole family not just a part of it

## 4.2. Services should be open, non-judgemental and loving

When parents spoke about their families, one of the most frequently used words was 'love'.<sup>67</sup> When it comes to asking for and seeking support, parents know that if they turn to their own loving family for support it will come without judgement or shame and will build them up and empower them. As Chapter 3 set out, there can be fear associated with seeking help with parenting, and services themselves can do more to overcome this and show parents that they are on their side not against them.

### **4.2.1. Services taking strengths-based approaches and working towards shared outcomes**

When parents do access services, it is vital that those services take a strengths-based approach. Currently, it is not always clear what services are working towards as opposed to working to avoid. That is why a shared outcomes framework, as described in *Family Review: Outcomes Annex*, must be developed and implemented across all family support services.<sup>68</sup> The CCo has recommended the following high-level outcomes:

- All children are safe.
- All children are happy and healthy.
- All children are learning.
- All children feel engaged in a community.
- All families have healthy relationships.
- All families can access support and are able to make decisions in their best interests.
- All families feel part of a wider network.
- All families get to spend quality time together.

### **4.3. Services need to be reliable, there for parents no matter what**

What people said they valued about their families was that no matter what, they would be there for them. This dependability is something that it is vitally important for services to be able to replicate. To build trusting, supportive relationships that can make a change, parents need to know that they will be there when they are needed.

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Part of this is about having the services in place consistently across the country. As CCo research has shown, there is significant variation across the country when it comes to take-up of services. For example, the proportion of children seen by health visitors for their development checks varies across the country.<sup>69</sup>

It is vital that all these services are available consistently in every area, so that families know what to expect and that help will be there when they look for it. One of the key reasons parents gave in the FSS for not accessing services was travel distance (14% of parents who did not access a playgroup said it was because it was too far to travel).<sup>70</sup>

However, another very common reason for not accessing services was simply because parents did not know that they existed. For parents to be empowered to proactively seek support, at the minimum they need comprehensive information about what services are out there. However, research conducted by the CCo in the *Family Review: Family Information Services Annex*, shows that there is a lack of readily available information on local websites.<sup>71</sup>

As well as services being locally available and well publicised, it is also important for them to be delivered in the way parents want. One theme that emerged was the importance of availability and persistence of support workers. One parent during a focus group explained how their support worker had provided this kind of support:

*'Kudos to [worker] as he stuck by and no matter what, he's still there every week. Message me hi? Can we reconnect? Can we do this?'* - Father, support group.

The father spoke about knowing how his worker was always there for him:

*'If I feel low or anything like that I can just message [worker] and yeah he might not message back that night, but he will the next day'* - Father, support group.

This is in part about making sure that the relationships and connections between parents are strong. But it is also about making sure that services are aware of the reality of parents' lives. Families don't give up

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on asking if you're ok and aren't only available between the hours of nine and five, and services need to mirror that. Yet a key barrier to accessing services chosen by parents in the FSS was schedule clashes; for parenting courses 20% of fathers (compared to 12% of mothers) who had not accessed a course listed the timing as a barrier.<sup>72</sup>

#### **4.3.1. A core offer of universal services**

To overcome any shame, stigma or fear associated with getting help – and to know that it will be there – it is essential that family support is universally available. Our ambition should be that every local area has free, universal services, which parents can access. The core offer should include:

- ante-natal classes
- health visiting services
- relationship support and counselling
- playgroups
- parenting classes and support groups for pre-school, primary and secondary aged children
- co-location with targeted support services

These services could be delivered through Family Hubs and should be consistently in place for children of all ages. It is therefore important that the roll out of Family Hubs across the country is prioritised, including making better use of the school estate. Each of these Family Hubs should be integrated with local schools, GPs, and health visitors in the neighbourhood in part of a local network.

#### **4.3.2. Services delivered in a truly local way**

A core offer of local, universally accessible services is fundamental, so that families know they can reliably and consistently access support. That is why it essential that Family Hubs, with a clear offer for

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families, are rolled out across the country. But it is also essential that these are truly 'local'. It is challenging to define what a 'local' area is – for families it will not align with any pre-determined government area such as a Local Authority (LA). There should therefore be flexibility for a LA to determine how many individual Family Hub areas they think are necessary, and each Family Hub area should have clear partnership arrangements with the local schools, GPs and any health visiting local teams within that footprint. These neighbourhood partners should have flexibility and autonomy within their footprint, alongside clear lines of accountability on data and outcomes for children and families. This local offer needs to be accessible and information easy to find in different forums and formats. There is more detail on how to deliver integrated services at the local level in *Family Review: Local Integration Annex*.

#### **4.3.3. Easily available information**

All LAs are required to provide families with information about the services available in their local area. As part of the Family Review, the CCo conducted an audit of these Family Information Services and has made recommendations about how they should be improved. Further information is available in the *Family Review: Family Information Services Annex*.

#### **4.3.4. Flexible design principles**

When any service is being commissioned at either the national or local level, one of the questions that must be asked is how they will provide services that are flexible to families' needs, and what provision they will be able to provide beyond the typical nine to five operating hours. Chapter 5 of this report sets out some of the ways that local commissioners should test and consider whether a service is truly designed with family in mind, through the Family Framework.

### **4.4. Services should be based on high quality, enduring relationships**

For most people, what defines family is beyond the purely biological relationships, but that family is the people who care about you the most. For children, the evidence shows that the closeness of their

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relationships with parents, and parents' relationships with one another, is utterly vital for their outcomes in later life.<sup>73</sup>

Families explained that when it comes to services, while they do not expect them to replicate the closeness of family, the quality of relationships they had with staff was the most important thing. As one mother who CCo met at a Children's Centre put it simply, because of the way staff supported her the service she visited '*felt like home.*'

Parents explained how without that key, trusted relationship they felt less comfortable accessing services. As one mother at a support group said: '*Families need to feel like they can trust people - a lot of professionals are likely to look down on you. There's also a lack of consistency in staff so you can't form relationships.*'

Workloads on professionals that are supporting families make it difficult to develop good quality relationships. The Institute of Health Visiting found that approximately a quarter of health visitors in England reported they were accountable for over 750 children as of December 2021.<sup>74</sup> The evidence from delivery of family support services suggests that the quality of those delivering the service is critical<sup>75</sup>, and that the relationship between workers and parents is one of the most important factors for engaging parents.<sup>76</sup>

#### **4.4.1. Key-worker model**

For every family that is accessing support from statutory services, non-statutory services, or both, a single key worker should be nominated to act as the advocate and liaison. This is currently the case for families on the Supporting Families programme and the impact is clear. This doesn't mean that specialist services will not still be needed, but it should be clear who the primary point of contact is, and they should be trained to deliver appropriate interventions.

For this to be successful, it will require changes to the way services are delivered. For example, if a child has a GP, regularly attends youth services in a Family Hub or elsewhere and goes to school, it will mean

that a teacher, GP and Family Support or youth worker will have to decide who is best placed to take the lead in the relationship.

It will also require joint training across different disciplines, so that professionals can have trust and confidence in interventions being delivered by partners. It is another reason that a shared outcomes framework is so essential, so that different services will be working towards the same goals. There is a welcome focus in the Family Hubs and Start for Life programme guide on a 'key contact' or lead practitioner model in the Start for Life period, but this should be embedded in practice for children of all ages. While all professionals working with children and families should be working towards a common set of outcomes, a single point of contact for children and families will make navigating a complex system more straightforward. This is particularly true for families under stress, in fragile situations, or with additional learning needs. Chapter 5 of this report sets out some of the ways that local commissioners should test and consider whether a service is truly designed with family in mind, through the Family Framework, and the key-worker approach is one thing local commissioners should consider.

#### **4.4.2. Monitoring staff consistency**

The consistency of relationships is a crucial factor in building trusting and effective support. All services delivering family support should have a clear objective of providing a consistent worker, and it should be possible to track this metric from service data. This should include being able to tell if the same health visitor delivered all checks, and if a nursery keyworker, family support worker or social worker has changed. In the *Family Review: Outcomes Annex* the CCo sets out how a set of core metrics used for assessing public-sector performance should be developed, and staff consistency should be one of these.

## **4.5. Services need to be holistic, and support the whole family not just a part of it**

As *Family Review: Part 1* showed, it is the quality of relationships within a family that are most important for children's outcomes. The research shows a significant number of pressures and challenges can affect these relationships, including financial stress and poor mental health.

Currently it is possible to see how many children are in families affected by some of these stressors, such as children living in emergency and temporary accommodation, or in families who have received a benefit sanction. However, there are some significant adversities where this data is not available, for example parents who are diagnosed with a mental health condition, admitted to hospital, who enter prison or are otherwise involved in the criminal justice system, or who arrive in the country seeking asylum. This means that it is only possible to estimate the number of children in families affected by these issues through surveys, rather than being able to identify them and offer support at the service level.

Once anyone within a family is receiving support for a particular problem, the evidence shows that taking a whole family approach is beneficial. For example, the evidence shows that children benefit from parental mental health treatment but are unlikely to benefit from parental substance misuse programmes unless they specifically include an element on parenting.<sup>77</sup>

There is a range of evidence to show that support with co-parenting relationships in turn improves relationships with children.<sup>78</sup> Families are a web of relationships, and any support needs to understand and embrace that.

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<sup>f</sup> For example, Family Foundations and Schoolchildren and their Families are co-parenting interventions with EIF level 3 or higher evidence of improving child outcomes (mental health and wellbeing and preventing crime, violence and anti-social behaviour) when offered to parents universally at key transitions during their child's development.

#### **4.5.1. Improved data collection to enable holistic working**

The *Family Review: Data Utilisation Annex*<sup>79</sup> sets out key recommendations for ensuring that services know what they need to know about families and share that information appropriately and well. This is vital to ensure that services are not operating in isolation from one another, with information on different members of the family not being joined up. These recommendations are included in Chapter 6 of this report.

#### **4.5.2. Integrated strategic leadership**

Currently, there are several strategic boards making critical decisions about children and their families, these include Children Safeguarding Partnerships, Health and Well-being Boards, Community Safety Partnerships and Integrated Care Partnerships. But these can create barriers to integrated working, with some cohorts of families being considered by all boards. This creates the risk of significant inefficiencies, due to the sheer amount of time required by members who are required to attend, but also for different boards to have different priorities and strategies, leaving families unclear and confused about the support they will receive. It also creates greater risk of siloed working, with different boards focusing on different individuals within the family. Further analysis as well as full recommendations on local integration are available in the *Family Review: Local Integration Annex*.<sup>80</sup>

#### **4.5.3. Provision of whole family services**

All services offering therapeutic support to either children or parents should be required to have a 'family' element to their provision, whether that is family therapy or parenting support. Chapter 5 sets out how services should be designed with families in mind, and the provision of whole family services should be part of this consideration.

## 4.6. Give parents the agency to parent

Having the right services in place will help to strengthen families. But it is only one part of the picture. For parents to be able to focus on their crucial role of parenting, and to be able to spend all important time enjoying family life, they need to have the right financial resources to do so. Yet throughout the research for this report, the CCo has heard from families about the practical challenges of providing for children, particularly when prices are rising rapidly. One mother who CCo met at a Holiday Activities and Food programme spoke of her frustration: *'I hate that just to have a child, costs so much to look after them.'*

Families with children are the group of the population most likely to be in poverty.<sup>[81](#)</sup> This is despite record investments in supporting households in response to the Coronavirus pandemic and rising energy costs. Yet too little of this support has been explicitly directed at families with children. Rather the Treasury has focused its response to these major challenges on households, rather than families, without acknowledging the significantly greater costs associated with supporting children.

Child Benefit and the Old Age Pension have been cornerstones of the social security system for the last 50 years, recognising that these are the life stages when society needs to offer additional support. Twenty years ago, child and pensioner poverty rates were broadly similar. However, they then began to diverge, and child poverty rates have remained consistently higher.<sup>[82](#)</sup> Recently, approaches to child benefit and the pension have differed: means testing has been introduced for the child benefit, but not pensions; there is the triple lock for pensions. While state pension expenditures have increased by £16 billion (or 18%) in real terms since 2010, child benefit expenditures have fallen by £4 billion (a 24% decline) in real terms since 2010.<sup>[83](#)</sup>

This is not about trading off the old and young; rather the old age pension shows how society can celebrate the social contribution we make to one-another. This is about recognising the benefit to all of society that families of children provide and making sure that they have the resource and agency to raise the next generation.

## Chapter 5 – A new Family Framework

*'I think family is about safety, security, love. Providing an environment where they feel like they are able to be the best version of themselves. Being people that are supportive, allowing children to become the best people they feel they can be' – Mother, Family Hub.*

### Chapter Summary

- Harnessing what we now understand from the *Family Review: Part 1* about the power of families, this Chapter discusses how Government should renew the Family Test to ensure it is fit for purpose and that it truly maximises the protective force of family relationships.
- This chapter argues that a new Family Framework should:
  - support children to have healthy, safe and stable relationships within their family networks, including with step-parents, foster and kinship carers, and corporate parents
  - prioritise offering holistic support for families, no matter their shape or size
  - introduce a local services Family Framework to mirror national policymaking in service commissioning
  - establish strong focus on children's outcomes, as set out in *Family Review: Outcomes Annex* to this report, and continually evaluate the success of a policy against these

## 5.1. The current Family Test

The main framework which Government departments use to design and evaluate the impact of policies on families, is the [Family Test](#).<sup>84</sup> Introduced in 2014 and updated in 2021, the Family Test is a framework for policymakers across Departments to systematically evaluate the impact of new policies on families. While thinking about families was a welcome development, the framework is based on a conceptualisation of families around households, rather than relationships.

The Family Test asks policymakers to consider five questions in the course of policy formulation.<sup>9</sup> The questions prompt reflection on the policy's impact on family formation, breakdowns, and key transitions as well as the impacts on adult relationship quality, and on the ability of adult family members to play a full role in parenting and caring responsibilities.

The current Family Test has a number of strengths, which should be retained when constructing a new Family Framework.

As the UK's first family-centric directive, the Family Test should be celebrated. It has established the precedent that families, in all their shapes and sizes, should be at the heart of all domestic policymaking.

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<sup>9</sup> Family Test questions in full:

What kinds of impact might the policy have on family formation?

What kind of impact will the policy have on families going through key transitions such as becoming parents, getting married, fostering or adopting, bereavement, redundancy, new caring responsibilities or the onset of a long-term health condition?

What impacts will the policy have on all family members' ability to play a full role in family life, including with respect to parenting and other caring responsibilities?

How does the policy impact families before, during and after couple separation?

How does the policy impact those families most at risk of deterioration of relationship quality and breakdown?

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However, given the fresh findings on family life which emerged from the Family Review, the Children's Commissioner believes there are a number of aspects of the Family Test which warrant re-appraisal in order to maximise the protective effect of families on children's outcomes. This is to align with what families and parents tell us they need and to recognise the dynamic nature of family life in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, which was outlined in *Family Review: Part 1*.

### **Strengths of the current Family Test, to be retained in a new Family Framework**

- For the first time, the Family Test recognised the essential role that families play in shaping communities and society as a whole. The Test articulates the value of families in clear terms to domestic policymakers across Government (i.e. beyond the immediate, more obvious impacts of policy interventions in education, children's social care, welfare etc.).
- The Family Test emphasised the importance of early application and continued assessment throughout the policymaking process, creating a blueprint for end-to-end scrutiny of a policy's effect on family life.
- The Family Test recognised that strong and healthy parental relationships are a key component of safe, supportive families.
- The Family Test engendered new funding and support for vulnerable families and families on the edge of services, including new funding targeted at services for domestic abuse, parental mental health and addiction support.
- The Family Test acknowledged the blurry concept of 'family' and the great variety of forms that families may take. The guidance explicitly recognises the experiences of lone and separated parents, fostered children, and the value of children's relationships with extended family members, especially grandparents.

## 5.2. Principles for a new Family Framework

This section discusses, at a high level, how the Family Test should be re-thought to guide policy planning at local and national levels. This includes the commissioning and implementation of services that support families, to ensure that at every level of design and application policy ‘thinks family’.

### 5.2.1. A focus on children’s relationships

While all relationships should be considered within the Family Test, the quality of adult relationships is at the centre. But the Commissioner’s Family Review found that stable, nurturing **child-adult** relationships are the key to maximising supportive, safe and – ultimately – protective families.

The Commissioner would like a new Family Framework to centre around the quality of children’s relationships with adults, both in their immediate and extended family networks. For some children, this will include relationships with step-parents, kinship or foster carers, as well as with key professionals for children in the care of the state.

Where children live in establishments, within the health, welfare, or justice systems, the Family Framework should encourage careful consideration of how these settings replicate stable, nurturing familial relationships.<sup>h</sup>

### 5.2.2. Holistic support for all families

It is important the Family Test is seen to be more than the prevention of family breakdown and separation. The *Family Review: Part 1* demonstrated that it is not the composition or shape of a family that truly matters, but the quality of relationships within it.

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<sup>h</sup> This will be explored by the Children’s Commissioner’s office in 2023 through research on children’s experiences of ‘familial relationships’ in secure mental health and custody settings.

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The Commissioner would like to see the core priorities of the Family Test re-balanced towards a focus on supporting lasting, nurturing relationships within families, whatever their shape, size or make-up. This includes strengthening the relationships within families living apart, sharing caring and financial responsibilities, within lone-parent families, as well as within kinship, fostered and adoptive families.

### **5.2.3. Services designed for families**

Chapter 4 set out the four principles that should be adopted by services to mirror the protective effect of families. These are that services should be:

- open, non-judgemental and loving
- based on high quality, enduring relationships
- reliable, there for parents no matter what and holistic
- support the whole family not just a part of it

An updated Family Framework should ensure that those commissioning services consider how these principles can be applied in practice, for example asking:

- How will services flexibly meet the need of families, including the need for support beyond working hours?
- How will services ensure they take a key-worker approach?
- How will services ensure that they provide a 'family' element in all their therapeutic support?

### **5.2.4. Local implementation**

The Family Test as it is currently designed is targeted at policymakers within central Government. While this is welcome and must be maintained, a redesigned framework should also be used by local

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government decision makers, and all those directly delivering and commissioning services. This would help to ensure that services themselves, as well as policies, are designed with families in mind. Families are best served by services that are visible, accessible and integrated within a local neighbourhood footprint. See *Family Review: Local Integration Annex* for more detail.

### **5.2.5. Communication with families**

The Commissioner's Review found that the Family Test is poorly understood at a local level. Nor do families themselves know what the Family Test is and how it may impact their lives. As one kinship carer told the Children's Commissioner:

*'We should be in a position of focusing on the kids and we're pulled in all directions, [...] you're basically left to paddle your own canoe [...] It does need to be addressed formally through a legal framework and clear policies for local authorities to follow'* – Kinship carer, CCo focus group.

Policymakers and commissioners should know the value of the new Family Framework in delivering their objectives. This should be clearly communicated to frontline professionals and families, in order that they understand how services are designed to support them to thrive.

### **5.2.6. National implementation**

Further, the Children's Commissioner and team found that the Family Test is still, nearly a decade after its introduction, poorly understood. There is limited implementation of the Family Test by policymakers across Government Departments.<sup>[85](#)</sup>

The Children's Commissioner believes that a wholesale review of the Family Test would include a consultation to understand *why* it is poorly used, and *how* it can be improved to address variation. This would include a full evaluation of the balance to be struck between broad high-level principles on the one hand, and specific, practical instruction on the other, as well as the role of transparency. The Commissioner recommends that the Cabinet Secretary reviews the Family Test's uptake across

Government and considers how to maximise it. This should include an assessment of the viability of making the new Family Framework a statutory obligation, as suggested in Parliament.<sup>i86</sup>

### **5.2.7. A recognition that all policies impact upon families**

The current Family Test offers policymakers the option to assess that a domestic policy intervention has ‘no impact’ on families. As the Family Review demonstrated, each and every domestic policy has an impact on family life and – consequently – on children. The Children’s Commissioner would like to see a new Family Framework which recognises the ubiquity of family life in policymaking. It should offer policymakers an opportunity to reflect on the direct and unintended consequences of a policy on family life, both positive and negative.

## **5.3. The importance of outcomes and evaluation**

The current Family Test provides some useful suggestions on what datasets policymakers can use to build the evidence base and assist completion of the Family Test, including the *Census*, *Understanding Society*, and the *Family Resources Survey*.<sup>87</sup> A new Family Framework could provide more signposting of the existing evidence base for different types of intervention, combining evidence from the What Work Centres and existing government and academic evaluations.

The current Family Test doesn’t require measuring outcomes of a given policy. A new Family Framework should include a high-level outcomes framework at the child and family level. As one public service can help achieve many different outcomes, stating child and family outcomes explicitly helps shape the service in a more holistic way than relying on service level outcomes.

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<sup>i</sup> Placing the new Family Framework on statutory footing should require Departments to assess impact of their policies on families at the outset of development and throughout the design and implementation process. The statutory requirement should also consider a responsibility for Departments to publish their Family Framework assessments.

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As outlined in *Family Review: Outcomes Annex*, the CCo is recommending the following high-level outcomes:<sup>88</sup>

- All children are safe.
- All children are happy and healthy.
- All children are learning.
- All children feel engaged in a community.
- All families have healthy relationships.
- All families can access support and are able to make decisions in their best interests.
- All families feel part of a wider network.
- All families get to spend quality time together.

These should be embedded in the new Family Framework, with recognition that the benefit of a policy can be different for different family members. For example:

- Parental mental health services may lead to improved school attendance.
- Parenting classes will increase the likelihood that children are happy, healthy and safe, will improve healthy relationships, and may help families to feel part of a wider network.

## **5.4. Going forward**

In this chapter, the Children's Commissioner has synthesised the lessons from the *Family Review* and set out high-level principles for a new Family Framework.

Going forward, there should be a full consultation on the creation of a new Family Framework, with two distinct and complementary frameworks for policymakers and local service commissioners, based on the principles outlined in this Chapter.

**The new Family Framework should:**

- re-centre the priorities on children’s familial relationships, ensuring that they are safe, supportive and enduring, to maximise the protective effect
- prioritise offering holistic support for families – no matter their size or composition – and recognise the benefits that policies may have on multiple family members
- set out how services can be designed with families at their heart
- be reflected in national policymaking, and local service design, commissioning and delivery
- be driven by children’s outcomes and should be held to continuous evaluation

The new Family Framework should prompt policymakers and local commissioners to understand impact of their interventions on family relationships. The questions should build on the 5 Family Test questions.<sup>j</sup>

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<sup>j</sup> A suggestive list of high-level questions for a new Family Framework:

1. *How will all family members be included in your plans, including those outside the household?*
  2. *How will you work to achieve the goals that families themselves have?*
  3. *Will the plans promote or weaken the protective effect of family relationships, as defined by the Children’s Commissioner?*
  4. *Do families say this has made a positive difference?*
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The uptake of the Family Test should be reviewed, in order to maximise use of the Family Framework across Departments. This should include a review of the viability of placing the new Family Framework on statutory footing.

The Children's Commissioner will continue to offer her full support and guidance to the Government in the construction of a new Family Framework.



## Chapter 6 - Recommendations

### Chapter Summary

This section makes recommendations as to reform public service to better reflect the nature of modern families and help support children's outcomes.

- The recommendations focus on three core objectives: making strong families an explicit and positive aim of public policy, enable a new focus on the power of parenting and ensure all families can access a holistic support offer within their local community.
- The recommendations set out a set of practical changes to reform how public policy is developed and implemented to support a more effective, efficient and integrated use of resources to support families.

### 6.1. Making strong families an explicit and positive aim of public policy

The Children's Commissioner wants all policy relating to families to focus on the good families can provide rather than correct perceived deficiencies. Policymakers should explicitly think how to maximise the value of families. Families want policy to be underpinned by a positive vision for the strengths inherent in families, and the support they can provide to one another, rather than a deficit model of support only being provided reactively.

The Family Test has the potential to be transformational in how public policy is designed and delivered but is underutilised. The research for this Review suggests this is because it is insufficiently practical in design and applies only to central Government.

### 6.1.1. Making the Family Framework a reality

It is vital that policymakers understand and recognise the needs of families and think about this when designing and creating policy. Too often families are thought of as 'households' or 'service users' and not thought of in the whole. Alongside this, sometimes the impact of policy on families can be an afterthought. The recommendations below seek to address this.

**Recommendation 1:** The Children's Commissioner wants to see more policy designed around the needs of families and to this end recommends a new Family Framework is designed and consulted on which reflects the findings of the *Family Review: Part 1 and Part 2*. This Family Framework would act as an update to the Family Test which is currently used by policymakers in Government to evaluate whether policy design is family friendly. The Commissioner would be pleased to work with Government on taking this forward, including chairing the group.

The Children's Commissioner's ambition is for all policymakers, decision takers and frontline professionals to use the Family Framework in policy design and delivery. It should be considered whether the Family Framework becomes a statutory requirement. This should include two distinct and complementary Frameworks for national policymakers and local commissioners, these should guide policymakers through the process of designing policy for families, based on the principles outlined in Chapter 5.

**Recommendation 2:** The Children's Commissioner would like to see all public bodies being explicit about who policies exist to serve, moving away from using generic terms like 'household' or 'service user', and openly referring to children, parents, and families.

Historically, the lexicon around family has focussed on the technocratic – households and service users. this should be updated to reflect the language and form in which families would think about themselves. Wherever possible this should be reflected in the data collected and statistical modelling undertaken. This needs to be prioritised by those leading public services, and as such, the Cabinet Secretary could

write to all Permanent Secretaries of Government Departments to encourage a shift towards using family centred language and take up of the Family Framework.

### **6.1.2. A Plan for Families**

There is a lot of Government policy aimed at supporting and helping families. This is welcome. However, too often policy is developed in silos and there is not enough join-up between Government Departments. The recommendation below seeks to address that.

**Recommendation 3:** To make it easier for families to understand the services available to them, the Children's Commissioner recommends the publication of a cross-Government family action plan.

This could bring together existing strands of policy relating to families into a unified and cohesive vision for families, including:

- setting out a positive vision for the role families can play in society
- bring cohesion to a currently fragmented system of different policy and implementation strands
- set out the high-level outcomes Government wants to support families to achieve

### **6.1.3. Designing and delivering a common outcomes framework**

Outcomes are a vital element of public policy implementation. However their use across services working with children and families is fragmented and inconsistent.

There has been significant progress in developing a range of metric and measurement tools which capture genuine improvements in the situation of children or other family members. However, these measures remain under-utilised, meaning the system remains overly reliant on administrative data and the measurement of system outputs rather than family outcomes. The recommendation below seeks to address this:

**Recommendation 4:** The Children's Commissioner recommends the establishment of a task-and-finish group to provide high-level guidance on the application of outcomes frameworks across the public sector. *Family Review: Outcomes Annex* published alongside this Review explains why this is needed and what it could achieve. This should be cross-Government and include the What Works Centres Network. The Commissioner would be pleased to work with Government on taking this forward, including chairing the group. The group should consider:

- A common set of definitions to make sure terms and concepts are used consistently; including outcome, output, indicator, metric and driver.
- Set-out the different reasons for using outcomes and explain why these different purposes often have different approaches.
- Be clear that an outcome should be a positive and tangible difference made to the lives of a person or group of people. All public services should be seeking to demonstrate such improvements in the lives of those they work with and should not be confused with system outputs or other performance metrics.
- Set-out a small number of high-level positive outcomes that all public services should be seeking to achieve. These should be expressed in such a way that children, families, and other members of the public understand and acknowledge as positive goods for them. Doing this is vital to bringing cohesion between public services. In this paper, the CCO has put forward our recommendation for what these high-level outcomes should be.
- Set-out a plan to improve the use of outcome metrics which can accurately capture tangible improvements in the situation of children and families. This should draw on existing work to develop metrics around child-wellbeing, domestic violence, reducing parental conflict and consider how their take-up could be encouraged in relation to the Supporting Families outcomes framework, the Start for Life outcomes framework, and children's social care outcomes.

- Consider how to pilot outcomes frameworks in some local areas to test out the development of a local, cross-agency approach to outcomes as a tool for galvanising service delivery which would include co-development with families. This would be an opportunity to use local data linking projects including longitudinal studies to test out how a shared outcomes framework could work on the ground.

#### **6.1.4. Prioritising families within tax and benefit policy**

Too often policy is developed with 'households' in mind. Ideally, there would be more of a focus on children and families, with consideration going to if policy needed to be targeted more towards those groups, particularly as they can be the ones most in need of support. The recommendation below aims to target this.

**Recommendation 5:** Families with children should be given greater priority within tax and benefit policy to address the fact that families with children are the group of the population most likely to be in poverty. In doing this, the Children's Commissioner would like to see the Government:

- clearly distinguish between families with children and other types of households within economic and social security policy
- establish a clear plan to ensure no child is growing up in destitution

### **6.2. A new focus on the power of parenting**

All those designing and implementing public policy should be confident about giving information to parents about what they need to do to help their children. This advice should be well-evidenced, simple, practical, and empowering. The Children's Commissioner wants this to be available in an accessible way to all children and families, including those with additional needs, who are fragile or have complexities.

### **6.2.1. Access to information and support**

Some families speak about a struggle to access and understand what support is already available to them. Whilst families and parents do incredible things to support themselves and each other, it is important they know where they can access support if they need it. Parents should also know how to support their child's development and education development. Lots of families turn to social networks for the information but they should be able to balance it with professional information if they desire to. The recommendation below aims to target this:

**Recommendation 6:** The Children's Commissioner recommends that The Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care work together to increase the range of materials available on the Start for Life website and extend the age-range covered. Both Departments should do more to promote the site, both directly to parents and to all professionals working with families. The aim should be that everyone working with children, whether in the state or voluntary sector, early years, schools, GPs, health visitors, etc. is aware of the site, can use it as a reference point and recommend it to parents.

The Government have been right to recognise the important role parenting classes can play in supporting families and improving children's outcomes. It is particularly welcome that funding is being directly provided for this and in particular where there is a universal, non-stigmatising offer. There are numerous well evidenced programmes out there, but more needs to be done to make families feel comfortable accessing it. The recommendation below aims to target this:

**Recommendation 7:** The Children's Commissioner recommends a new focus on making families aware of existing support. This could include:

- The launch of a public information campaign, similar to the Time to Change campaign for mental health, that aims to open up a conversation about parenting, with the aim of normalising the seeking of help and accessing information or parenting courses.

- Provide information to professionals working with children and families so that they understand parenting courses and can be confident in signposting parents they work with to help and support. This should be coordinated through a central repository, building on the Start for Life website.
- Work with the voluntary and community sector to increase the number of parenting courses available and promote access to these through Family Hubs.

### **6.3. Ensuring all families can access a holistic support offer within their local community**

Future public service reform should put more focus on delivery footprint, with the aim of designing services for delivery on a neighbourhood footprint; a geographical footprint serving a natural community that has been locally agreed. Services should be visible, accessible, and integrated within this neighbourhood footprint.

#### **6.3.1. Family Hubs**

The Children's Commissioner has referred to the importance of Family Hubs since recommendations from last year's The Big Ask which was the largest-ever survey of children. There has been important work across Government to develop the Family Hubs model. This Review wants to build upon and enhance this work, with the below recommendations suggesting ways this can be done.

**Recommendation 8:** The Children's Commissioner wants to see a Family Hub within each neighbourhood so that all children and families benefit from the support they offer. These new hubs could be built on existing community and voluntary sector provision or public services, such as school. This will require long-term investment to make it happen, with funding following the child and family. The aim should be that Family Hubs are the delivery model for existing services and utilises these funding streams. The Commissioner suggests a review of funding streams for services delivered through Family Hubs – with a particular focus on health visiting, parenting programmes, early help and Start for Life,

with the aim that Family Hub are also an access point for Reducing Parental Conflict, Supporting Families and Job Centre Plus.

**Recommendation 9:** The Children's Commissioner recommends that the Family Hubs Programme Guide is updated to increase the focus on the following five areas:

1. the role of the voluntary sector and community groups in the family hub model
2. the role of Family Hubs throughout the whole course of childhood
3. promoting awareness and access to family hubs across the whole community
4. the importance of relationships within the family hub delivery model
5. the ability of family hubs to hold and utilise data so that they can integrate services and support families locally.

### **6.3.2. Fully integrated service delivery**

There are lots of statutory structures at local and regional level to provide oversight of public services and aid integration. However, there is a risk that these structures duplicate one another, and this adds to bureaucracy and undermines efforts to focus on community-level delivery. The challenge is to move from joint strategic oversight to integrated practical delivery.

**Recommendation 10:** The Children's Commissioner recommends that the Department for Education, the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, the Home Office, and the Ministry of Justice should co-commission a pilot programme with selected trailblazer local areas to deliver integrated local services from pooled local budgets for health and wellbeing, safeguarding, and public safety. This pilot should be informed by these recommendations on removing the barriers to good local integration.



**Recommendation 11:** The Department for Education, the Department of Health and Social Care, the Home Office, and the Ministry of Justice should consider how the functions of Local Safeguarding Partnerships, Health and Wellbeing Boards, Adult Safeguarding Boards, and Community Safety Partnerships could be rationalised, and the bodies merged with consolidated duties, powers, funding, and accountability. As the CCo has previously recommended, schools should have a formal role in this rationalised partnership, which should have operational as well as strategic functions.

**Recommendation 12:** The Department for Education, the Department of Health and Social Care, the Home Office, and the Ministry of Justice should expand the range of Joint Area Targeted Inspections (JTAIs) undertaken by the relevant inspectorates and ensure that the relevant single agency inspection regimes support each agency's improvement.

**Recommendation 13:** Across a local authority, statutory partners should seek to rationalise the functions of Local Safeguarding Partnerships, Health and Wellbeing Boards, Adult Safeguarding Boards, and Community Safety Partnerships. In particular, the Children's Commissioner recommends that:

- all services should utilise and contribute to the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment produced for the Health and Wellbeing Board
- local areas should utilise the data-sharing powers assigned to the Local Safeguarding Partnership to integrate data
- areas should co-opt schools, primary care networks and some large voluntary sector providers onto their Local Safeguarding Partnership

The Family Information Service (FIS) is a statutory responsibility on local authorities to provide information to families. The research for this Review found that FIS varied in quality, but some were very good. However, awareness of the FIS is low amongst both families and professionals.

**Recommendation 14:** The Department for Education should work with local authorities to improve the quality of the Family Information Service published in each area. This should include sharing examples

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of best practice on key issues such as engaging families in service testing and promoting the FIS to families and other professionals. In the future, the ambition should be for the FIS to be available as an app and integrated with other Government services, such as the Digital Red Book.

### **6.3.3. Making sure every child and every family receives the same level and quality of care and support, everywhere**

A key challenge raised throughout the Family Review by families and professionals is differing thresholds, both between areas and between services.

**Recommendation 15:** In implementing the SEND reforms, social care reforms and Integrated Care Systems, the Children's Commissioner recommends ensuring that:

- children and families reaching the threshold for support in one element of the system also get support from other services (e.g. if a child is on a child protection plan because of mother's mental health, the mother should be receiving NHS care)
- children and families can expect to receive the same access to support in every area without a postcode lottery of access

### **6.3.4. Improving data utilisation**

To enable data to be more effectively and proportionately shared between public bodies, the data collection process needs to be improved by identifying the small amounts of key information which need to be shared and creating the facility for these to be readily extracted from wider data systems.

Better data utilisation starts with an understanding of what key pieces of information are of most use to professionals working with children and families, and when these may be required by other agencies. Identifying these pieces of information, and ensuring they can be extracted from files discretely without the over sharing of other information is vital to ensuring data is used proportionately.

**Recommendation 16:** The Children's Commissioner recommends that the national safeguarding leads across Government convene a working group to identify the key pieces of information and the existing data systems into which they could be integrated.

Families are more than just households but recording data on family groupings who live across more than one household is currently extremely challenging. This is an area where data-usage is lagging far behind public policy and cross-government methodological research is required to establish the best practice for bringing data on families together.

**Recommendation 17:** The Children's Commissioner recommends that the Cabinet Office should convene a cross-government working group, led by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) to establish the best practice for designing administrative systems to facilitate bringing together family records as well as individual records. The group should work to produce practical guidance for local authorities and system designers to improve the data recorded and the methodologies needed for bringing data together.

The 2017 Children and Social Work Act gave local safeguarding partnerships a new statutory framework for using and sharing data in the best interests of children. But the research for this Review suggested this framework for under-utilised and poorly understood.

**Recommendation 18:** The Children's Commissioner recommends the Department for Education should provide practical materials (such as guidance on the 2017 Act, draft memoranda of understanding and data protection impact assessments) to support local safeguarding partnerships utilise the partnership for the purposes of data-sharing.

**Recommendation 19:** The Children's Commissioner recommends the Department for Education update the guidance on data-sharing for safeguarding purposes to:

- reflect the updates to *Working Together to Safeguard Children* and the broader definition of safeguarding it contains

- focus as much on data-sharing across systems as in the cases of individual children
- set out the relevant legal gateways contained in safeguarding statutes which may enable system-level sharing of data under the Data Protection Act (DPA)

There are some groups of children that the Review heard were consistently hard to identify because there was no single agency with responsibility for identifying these children and deciding if partners needed to be aware of their circumstances.

**Recommendation 20:** The Children's Commissioner recommends that the Department for Education should lead a cross-Government review of how the following groups of children are identified:

- children affected by parental imprisonment
- children of a parent in inpatient mental health provision
- children in families with no recourse to public funds

### **6.3.5. Understanding data protection in practice**

The research for this Review suggested that the perceptions of data-sharing regulations were often a bigger barrier than the reality, and this was because of a lack of clarity about how legislation enabling the sharing of legislation interacted with the Data Protection Act.

**Recommendation 21:** The Children's Commissioner recommends a central depository is created where professionals using data in public services can access all relevant information and guidance on different pieces of legislation enabling data sharing (e.g. The Digital Economy Act, the Children Act 2004 etc)

**Recommendation 22:** The Children's Commissioner recommends that the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) continue their work to meet the Public Service Committee recommendation to create a clear and practical resource that helps practitioners navigate data protection law in the context of child safeguarding.<sup>89</sup> This should:

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- Help practitioners understand the interplay between data-sharing and safeguarding legislation, in particular the distinction between times when data must be shared and when it may be shared.
- Set-out the process organisations need to go through when deciding to share data for safeguarding purposes on a systematic basis, including how to assess the legal gateway.
- Provide clear and practical guidance to professionals as to when they may rely on the safeguarding exemptions included with the Data Protection Act.
- Help practitioners navigate separate terminology between systems. For example, the new guidance should explain whether the ability to share data in an emergency situation applies in all situations when the threshold of serious harm has been met.

### **6.3.6. Implementing a consistent unique identifier**

At present, different national data sets across health and education are using different unique identifiers for children. This is undermining the linking of data for purposes such as Education and Healthcare Plans, and resulting in disproportionate amounts of data being shared purely for the sake of data-linkage.

**Recommendation 23:** The Children's Commissioner wants to see the NHS number adopted as the consistent unique identifier and that this be rolled out across education and child protection services. The NHS number is the most appropriate identifier as it is assigned upon registration with the NHS, which is usually at birth and remains with an individual throughout their life. Other identifiers, such as the UPN, only cover an individual whilst they are of a limited age range and do not cover the early years, which is a crucial data gap.

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**Sanctuary Buildings, 20 Great Smith  
Street London, SW1P 3BT**

020 7783 8330

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