
Children's Social Care Outcomes Framework Consultation

September 2023

The Children's Commissioner believes that having a strong outcomes framework is an essential element of driving improvement in children's social care. It is only with a genuine outcomes framework that it is possible to understand whether children's social care is achieving the objectives that it should be, learn how to do better, and hold local and national Government to account for delivering for children.

Therefore this outcomes framework is an essential and welcome first step, as it provides an opportunity to set out what children's social care is aiming to achieve. However, the Children's Commissioner believes there are several ways the framework could be improved. This response includes answers to the specific questions in the consultation.

How could the National Framework strengthen the expectations for multi-agency working? (200 words)

The indicators are very narrowly focused on children's social care processes. The framework acknowledges that many agencies will be involved in achieving the longer-term outcomes for these children which are needed, but these longer-term outcomes are only briefly discussed and the list included is simply a suggestion of what should be included. This list does not align with other existing outcomes frameworks, such as that in the Supporting Families programme.

The starting point should be to develop an over-arching, shared outcomes framework such as the one set out in the Children's Commissioner's Independent Family Review. These should be shared across Government. Individual programmes and departments could then create their own metrics to show how they are achieving those outcomes, with clarity that they are aiming towards the same goals as their partner agencies. Without this, there is a risk that different partners will have different goals and pull in different directions.

This should be ambitious. The long-term outcomes referencing 'good' child development, education and health should be framed relative to other children:

vulnerable children's development *at least as good as* the general population, on an upward trajectory.

This feels like a missed opportunity to create a genuinely shared, stretching framework.

The Dashboard is being created to support learning and bring transparency to the system so that the impact of what happens in practice can be understood. It will contain a series of indicators providing information on what is happening in practice and how the outcomes and enablers described in the National Framework are being achieved.

Are there additional ways that we can ensure the Dashboard supports continuous learning and improvement? (200 words)

Rather than genuine outcomes, the proposed indicators are instead a collection of metrics of children's social care processes. It is essential that it includes measures of genuine outcomes – what has been achieved for the child and their family? We need to be able to understand whether a child's plan achieved its goals, and whether a child's life has improved. Some measures are closer to this – such as the school attendance of Children in Need – but most are simply a collection of process measures. Some indicators are not clear on whether an increase or decrease would represent an improvement. There are many different ways to change the number of section 47 enquiries, some of which will be beneficial to children and some which will not. These type of metrics can be useful, but only if they sit beneath genuine outcome measures.

The Supporting Families Framework provides a model of looking at genuine outcomes and how to evidence them.

The metrics that are included are for the most part already used and carefully examined, which means that there is limited new ambition here. However, some metrics, though available, have been omitted, such as whether children are attending schools rated at least 'good'.

Outcome 1: children, young people and families stay together and get the help they need

The questions on this page refer to Outcome 1 in the National Framework. We are looking for your views on the outcome and indicators, details of which are available below.

There is too little focus on children's social care duties to promote the welfare of children, as well as to safeguard them from significant harm. The outcomes cover keeping children together with their families, or in kinship care, safeguarding them from significant harm, and supporting care leavers. There is little mention, and few indicators, which measure how well children in need are supported to thrive. Outcome 1 is too deficit focused -it should be reframed, with a focus on giving children the support they need to achieve a good level of development, in line with duties under section 17 of the Children Act.

There should be clear outcomes about improving family functioning, improving relationships, tackling neglect and so on. As with the whole framework, there needs to be a focus on measuring actual outcomes rather than process metrics. However, even considering the metrics included it is notable that there are very few directly relating to children in need. It is essential for any metric to have value for evaluation or accountability purposes, that children on child in need plans must be distinguished in reporting from children being assessed.

Outcome 2: Children and young people are supported by their family network

For some children, it would not be safe or possible for them to live with their family network or parents, the focus of these proposed measures. Children should feel supported whoever looks after them, and it is whether they feel supported that matters. Their views and experiences, rather than household composition or placement type, should be the focus of measurement.

Outcome 3: children and young people are safe in and outside of their homes

Outcome three suffers from similar problems, in that the indicators are all process based and there are no genuine outcomes measure. There are also no high level outcomes of what children's social care wants to achieve for children at risk of suffering harm, and the positive change it should be aiming for. Without a consistent child ID shared across areas, it will not be meaningful to follow up children to find out whether they present again within two years.

Outcome 4: children in care and care leavers have stable, loving homes

There are particular groups of children who appear to be missing from any outcomes or indicators - those children in custody, in inpatient mental health settings or other hospitals, or in residential special schools. These children are most in need of a genuine multi-agency approach but it is unclear how any outcomes for them will be captured.

Adding these groups will enable benchmarking of groups of vulnerable children against each other and other children – Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire scores and Key Stage progress and attainment should be measured relative to the general population.

The office believes that any measure of the suitability of care leaver accommodation should be based on the judgement of care leavers themselves, rather than service perceptions.

Enabler 1

All metrics included on these should be more child centred. So instead of looking at social worker turnover it should be about how many changes in social worker a child has.