

# COMMISSION YOUNG LIVES

**THEMATIC REPORT 2**

## A NEW PARTNERSHIP WITH FAMILIES

Supporting families to keep teenagers safe from gangs, exploitation and abuse

**MARCH 2022**

## THE COMMISSION ON YOUNG LIVES

The Commission on Young Lives, launched in September 2021, will propose a new settlement to prevent marginalised children and young people from falling into violence, exploitation and the criminal justice system, and to support them to thrive. Its national action plan will include ambitious practical, affordable proposals that government, councils, police, social services and communities can put into place. We are engaging with those in government and system leaders who have the power to create change, making the case for them to do so. Taking a public health approach focused on prevention, inclusion and supportive relationships, its work is steered by its commissioners, alongside panels of young people and practitioners.

The Commission is supported and hosted by Oasis Charitable Trust, a national charity that has been pioneering models of sustainable and holistic community development for 35 years, and now works in over 40 neighbourhoods in England, delivering schools, housing, health and a wide range of other projects with young people and their families. The Commission is also funded by the Passion Project Foundation, a charitable social impact aggregator and investor, which brings scaled investment to tackle perennial social problems.

Given the subject of this second thematic report is the relationship between family resilience and support and the risks of exploitation, we inevitably focus on the system failures and shortcomings and how these are being tackled. But we also want to champion the excellent work being done and the Commission is grateful to the individuals and organisations who provided examples of existing practice and emerging projects included in this report. We would particularly like to thank those parents and young people who agreed to speak to us and/or share their expertise and – often very difficult – experiences. Names and some details have been changed to protect people's identity.

The authors would also like to thank our practitioners' panel, Young Lives Panel, our expert witnesses, and everyone who responded to our call for evidence. We have had 75 detailed responses to date and have drawn on these in this paper and will continue to use these insights in our future reports.

Our first thematic report, *Out of Harm's Way*, focused on teenagers at risk of exploitation, harm, and criminalisation within the care system and on the 'edge of care', making a series of recommendations, including a new framework for supporting families of vulnerable teenagers. Our next report will focus on education, exploring key issues highlighted already, including the experiences of children with special educational needs and the risks facing many who, for one reason or another are not in school (the number of which has risen during the pandemic).

The Commission's final action plan, to be published towards the end of the year, will bring all of our themes together, setting out the policy framework and investment needed to support these children and their families. This process will build our case for change – including 'invest to save' approaches – and will present ambitious practical proposals for what this could look like and how it could be achieved.

— More information about our work and commissioners is available on our website:

<https://thecommissiononyounglives.co.uk>

— *Out of Harm's Way: A new care system to protect vulnerable teenagers at risk of exploitation and crime* can be found here: <https://thecommissiononyounglives.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/OUT-OF-HARMS-WAY-CYL-DEC-29-2021-1-4.pdf>

# FOREWORD

## ANNE LONGFIELD CBE, CHAIR OF THE COMMISSION ON YOUNG LIVES

This is the second report to be published by the Commission on Young Lives. Our first report, *Out of Harm's Way*, focused on teenagers at risk of exploitation, harm and criminalisation within the care system and on the 'edge of care'.<sup>1</sup> Citing evidence around adverse childhood experiences, we showed that many problems could have been contained or avoided. This report further explores some of the kinds of interventions that are needed very early on. Some of the parents and young people we spoke to talked powerfully about the impact of lack of support in the early years. Others identified the need for more targeted help when children started school, particularly when they had special educational needs and/or were at risk of dropping out of school or being excluded.

For most teenagers, including those taken into care, their family and extended family is going to be an important ongoing aspect of their lives. It is something that could, with better help, provide the stability and support needed to progress. That is why our first report argued for new and creative models of long-term wrap around support for teenagers and their families – including shared care with families, kinship care and wider community support – to prevent problems escalating but also for intense interventions that respond when things reach crisis point. These specific offers for teenagers and their families need to be at the heart of a reformed care system.

As we acknowledged in *Out of Harm's Way*, there has been innovation in this area, including the creation of Violence Reduction Units (VRUs), first developed in Scotland in 2005, and the greater use of contextual safeguarding, an approach to understanding and responding to young people's experiences of significant harm beyond their families.<sup>2</sup> Despite this, we showed that trends around these issues are going in the wrong direction.

Criminal justice-led interventions and budgets – however important – home in on crime reduction, while what is needed are consistent and integrated welfare-led approaches to teenagers at risk, including far more local authorities embedding contextual safeguarding approaches in their leadership and operational models.

We heard how parents are struggling to get the help they need when things begin to get out of hand and/or when things reach crisis point: when they find that burner phone, or unexplained amounts of money, or knives in their children's bedrooms. Some teenagers suddenly start behaving very differently, spending a lot of time with an unknown group of friends, or long and unpredictable periods of time away from home. Some go missing. The NSPCC reported that more children were being groomed online during lockdown.<sup>3</sup> While many parents remain unaware that their child is being targeted, some may notice changes in their mood, friendship group and in device use, including more time being spent online.

We heard how sometimes parents call the police and social services desperate for help, only to be told that this does not exist or to be given ineffective responses and/or contradictory advice. If children are excluded or out of school things can often get much worse, as they lose access to support from teachers and spend more time without structure and supervision. *Out of Harm's Way* showed that referrals to children's social care services – often made by teachers – had reduced since the arrival of school lockdowns, while the drivers of risk were increasing.

Some parents described having to become 'instant experts', trying to navigate issues around grooming, exploitation and county lines and access services new to them. For families already struggling, this is more difficult; many have fewer resources and lower levels of confidence and trust in statutory services.

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<sup>1</sup> Commission on Young Lives (2021) *Out of Harm's Way: A new care system to protect vulnerable teenagers at risk of exploitation and crime*.

<sup>2</sup> This approach developed and championed by Dr Carlene Fermin (<https://www.beds.ac.uk/iasr/about/staff/carlene-firmin/>)

See also the Contextual Safeguarding Network <https://contextualsafeguarding.org.uk>

<sup>3</sup> NSPCC (24 August 2021). "Record high number of recorded grooming crimes lead to calls for stronger online safety legislation."

For most of the parents we spoke to it was evident that services are either not geared up to, or have the capacity to, respond when problems develop. That is why – amongst other proposals – our first report recommended the establishment of a specialist helpline to provide a guaranteed response to families where there are concerns about extrafamilial harm.

Sadly, we found that for too many parents, the situation gets worse and that, while there are examples of good practice, there remains a dearth of effective joined up family-focused support for teenagers at risk of extrafamilial harm. This can leave parents at a loss to know what to do, clutching for fragments of help where it exists, whilst often feeling powerless as bad situations become increasingly out of control. Where there is contact with services, this can be sporadic and functional, with each agency seeing the child through a different lens: involving the police if children are missing or where there are concerns about crime; the school if there are behaviour concerns; or social services if there is a referral.

As we showed in our previous report, many of these stresses are felt particularly acutely by Black, Brown and Minority Ethnic children. However, we recognise that the experiences already described by families in this introduction can affect those from many different backgrounds. Since launching the Commission, we have been contacted by a number of middle-class families who have experienced the same fears and the same lack of meaningful early intervention or support when their child has become involved in county lines or serious violence.

In this report we highlight some of the brilliant programmes that are making a difference at the grassroots level to support families and to divert young people away from crime, including our Commission host, Oasis.

We welcome the Government's pledge to spend £492m on early help services over the next three years. Our initial proposals included recommendations for new requirements for coordinated support for teenagers at risk through the Supporting Families Programme and a new offer for families with teenagers with the Family Hubs roll out. We re-emphasise the importance of early intervention and the long-term damage done by reduced public spending in these areas, combined with a rise in child poverty and a continued lack of affordable housing; factors, which put strains on many families.

As the House of Lords Public Services Committee set out in its report into childhood vulnerability last year,<sup>4</sup> spending on early intervention support in areas of England with the highest levels of child poverty fell by 53% (£766 million) between 2010 and 2019, including a drop of 81% in Walsall, 83% in Sunderland and 65% in Liverpool. The Committee stressed how underinvestment has created worse outcomes for children and higher costs for the public purse: "Between 2010 and 2020, local government spending on early intervention fell 48% to £1.8 billion, while money spent on later, costlier and higher-intensity interventions – such as youth justice, looked after children's services and safeguarding – increased by 34% to £7.6 billion."<sup>5</sup>

The massive reduction in funding for Sure Start centres, which provided family support, was a huge historic mistake; one that not only resulted in many children and families paying a heavy price, but which also proved to be a false economy. The current plans for Family Hubs are nowhere near ambitious enough to reverse this trend and the Government needs to take a determined and ambitious approach to funding if it is to reverse this.

This report shows why that long-term – sometimes intense – support is vital and that this is being delivered successfully in some areas. It makes recommendations around early intervention and family support for children of all ages, focusing on what is needed by families when the problems that place teenagers at risk of extrafamilial harm emerge, as well as interventions at crisis point. Together, these services could provide the much-needed comprehensive support for families as their children grow up, from birth through to their late teens. This would not just reduce the number of children at risk and families devastated by the impacts of this but – as the Lords' report showed – is also more cost-effective.<sup>6</sup>

As the Independent Review of Children's Social Care identified, there is often confusion between services for teenagers and a lack of clarity about roles or responsibilities.<sup>7</sup> We heard repeatedly from families who feel they are passed from service to service, over-assessed and offered no practical help, other than short-term interventions that lead to a case closing. This contributes to distrust of statutory services. For some families this can be a catastrophe and results in the kinds of tragedies to be found in serious case review after review.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> House of Lords Public Services Committee, First Report of Session 2021/22 (November 2021). *Children in Crisis: the role of public services in overcoming childhood vulnerabilities*.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>7</sup> Independent Review of Children's Social Care (2021). *Case for Change*. <https://childrensocialcare.independent-review.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/0-0-change.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (2020). *It Was Hard to Escape: safeguarding children at risk from criminal exploitation*.

The conveyor belt of vulnerable children available to county lines, gangs, and abusers will continue to roll on for as long as there is a fractured, piecemeal and variable support, where families don't know where to turn for help and/or are seen as the problem. Our ambition must be for a new approach that provides statutory services, early help providers and voluntary and charitable groups with the armoury they need to fight back. As Nigel Richardson, the former Director of Children's Services for Leeds told us: "The key ingredient towards making change like this happen is having a willingness to see 'family' as probably the most important but most forgotten, ignored, underfunded, unrecognised and underused utility of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and then working to change that."

Restoring and improving family support that helps divert vulnerable children away from exploitation or the criminal justice system is urgent. We need to stop making it so easy for those who seek to recruit and exploit vulnerable children and if we are to succeed in doing so, we need to take a new approach based on partnership with families, engaging them in the design of solutions and providing them with the help they need. Providing parents with the right information, building their confidence and family resilience, and giving them the support they need, creates protective factors that make it harder for children to be groomed, coerced, exploited and harmed. Those who seek to exploit children know it and policymakers and services need to catch up fast.

Anne Longfield CBE  
March 2022

## **JACK**

*Jack finds it easy to talk to people, has a great smile and can be charming and lovely. But he can also be destructive and is abusive towards his mother, Sian, and often puts himself at risk. Now 17 and living in residential care, Jack's additional needs were identified when he was at primary school. His parents sought out a parenting class hoping this would help them meet his needs. Although the school supported him and his family, Jack – one of the youngest in his year – suffered early on from low self-esteem. Despite this and being diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and oppositional defiance disorder (ODD), Jack's parents battled for two years before they managed to secure an Education and Health Care Plan (EHCP). By this time Jack was in Year 6 and was coming home from school saying that he was stupid and was being rejected by his peers.*

*When Jack moved to secondary school, he became more difficult and refused to engage with help offered by his parents and the school. Jack was assigned a social worker, but Sian says the assumption was that her and Jack's father and her were "bad parents" and that the social worker said as much in front of Jack. She feels this empowered Jack without providing the support they needed to deal with his behaviour, which was escalating and impacting on the whole family. They pleaded with social workers – Jack has had five – to provide the family with a break but, despite offering respite foster care, this never happened. Jack was referred to CAMHS who promised visits but again this did not happen. Nor did the promise of "daily interventions" or transport to school (to try and improve Jack's attendance).*

*Jack started smoking cannabis at about 13 and Sian believes that this has made things much worse for him. By this time, his parents had split up and Jack had become increasingly abusive towards his mother. He continued to live with Sian until he was 14. "I found a large stash of weed in his room and when I challenged him, he was very distressed and said he would be 'hurt'. I disposed of it and tried to educate Jack on the whole drug thing."*

*Jack went to live with his dad. But things went from bad to worse and he returned to Sian aged 15. For a few months things went OK. Jack was referred to a drugs intervention programme but his behaviour deteriorated and he became destructive. While he could be violent, mostly he was verbally abusive, would kick in doors and punch walls and would not engage in support. The social worker just seemed to pacify him and was desperate to try and keep the status quo. Meanwhile CAMHS said they could not support Jack as he was using cannabis.*

*Unable to get the support needed, Sian had to make the hugely difficult decision to make Jack homeless as this was the only way she felt he would get help. He was placed in a hostel for 16 to 30-year-olds that Sian says was totally inappropriate. He was evicted after an altercation with an older resident and was then moved a few times, including to one private care home that went into liquidation and another which was miles away from Jack's friendship group. He would go missing most nights. Sian does not know whether the different homes were regulated or not. In one placement, Sian discovered that Jack's allowance would be paid in arrears, so he was suddenly being handed £200/£300 in one go, a disaster given his drug habit which had escalated. By now Jack was 16 and had not attended school for a year. Sian became increasingly concerned that he was involved in dealing, confirmed when she found a burner phone in his room at the home. The support staff said that social services knew Jack was involved in selling drugs for a young girl and this has been reported to the police but there was no follow up. "He was also turning up with new things such as jewellery and clothing which I knew he didn't have money for and which he could not really explain. He was also pressurising us for a moped at this time but obviously we would not support that."*

*Jack is now in another children's home and has a key worker who Sian feels is really helping. She helps him to manage his budget, staggering payments and is able to get support from the police when Jack disappears. Sian keeps in touch with Jack but he continues to reject her and be "incredibly abusive". She hopes that he will settle and change his behaviour. Sian feels guilty about "giving up too soon" but also believes that things could have been different if the family had been able to get the support they needed earlier. "We are supportive parents and our other children have done well. The interventions we were promised just did not materialise. We have had a very poor relationship with social services and the social workers did not seem particularly capable and are extremely judgemental and prejudiced. All apart from one used their own parenting experiences to tell us how we should manage Jack, including one who told me as I had breast fed him, I should hold him to my breast and to allow him to smoke weed outside. It has been hell and so incredibly damaging to our family."*

# | A NEW PARTNERSHIP WITH FAMILIES: OVERVIEW

This is the second thematic report to be published by the Commission on Young Lives. It sits alongside our first report, *Out of Harm's Way*, which was published in December last year and which argued for a new approach to social care for teenagers, the fastest group of children entering care. With 16 and 17-year-olds now making up 23% of the care population and the average costs of care for many of these children at £200,000 per year, the care system is under severe financial pressure. A focus on dealing with crisis has also meant less funding for early intervention.<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, there has been an over-reliance on a limited number of residential places where demand significantly outstrips supply, inadequate early identification of those children at risk of exploitation, cuts to funding for early intervention programmes, outdated fostering models, a broken children's home 'market' and the frequent criminalisation of children in the care system. A model that was largely designed for small children is struggling to adapt to the needs of older children, including operating inflexible hours and work practices that are not suited to the often-chaotic lives of vulnerable teenagers.

Our first report makes recommendations to central and local government, aimed at improving the children's social care system and keeping teenagers safe from county lines, drug gangs and criminal exploitation. This includes urgent action to protect and support older children in care by rapidly improving access to good local care homes and new specialist 'youth' foster carers. It is clear that much greater attention needs to be paid to working with families to help them deal with the challenges they are facing and to increase their ability to protect and support their teenage children. This includes the under-utilisation of communities in supporting families to avoid crisis that emerged in the findings of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care. We welcome the recognition in the review's *Case for Change* report that parents' frustration about their thwarted attempts to secure support is compounded by a confused multi-agency response to teenagers.<sup>10</sup>

We echo the review's conclusion that: "Community is the first line of defence but we do not utilise its full potential to help families enough. There is a role for all of us to play in helping children grow up in happy and healthy homes, and not all families will require or want state intervention."<sup>11</sup> The pandemic demonstrated that sometimes state-run services can have a limited impact, and that community organisations are often well-placed to step-up and deliver for neighbours in need. Research by Ipsos MORI found that, overall, communities are felt to have become more supportive during the pandemic (although this feeling was lower in deprived areas).<sup>12</sup> The public's response to the pandemic was also characterised by a greater level of empathy for families who were struggling.

Whilst we must acknowledge that the community can be a source of harm for some children (which we return to later in this report), we need to recognise that strong community and family ties go hand-in-hand. Increasing the strength of communities could play a key role in supporting families, in some cases removing the need for blunt and at times undignified statutory interventions. In Northern Ireland, strong family and community ties seem to play a role in rates of foster and residential care by strangers being lower than you may expect given the levels of social disadvantage. In particular, extended family and strong community bonds have been referenced as increasing capacity to care for children, alongside greater awareness of and access to community services.<sup>13</sup> Research in the US found that wider neighbourhood social cohesion is associated with lower levels of neglect (while levels of abuse remained the same).<sup>14</sup> Another study found that people with stronger social relationships show a dramatic reduction in their risk of mortality beyond reductions seen through quitting smoking; the evidence suggests that socially connected individuals have a 50% increased likelihood of survival from cardiovascular disease compared to those with weaker social networks.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *Op cit.* Commission on Young Lives (2021).

<sup>10</sup> *Op cit.* Independent Review of Children's Social Care (2021).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Ipsos MORI (2021). *Impact Evaluation of the Coronavirus Community Support Fund: Final Report.*

<sup>13</sup> Bywater P. et al (2020). *The Child Welfare Inequality Project: Final Report.* University of Huddersfield.

<sup>14</sup> Maguire-Jack K, Showalter K. "The protective effect of neighbourhood social cohesion in child abuse and neglect". *Child*

*Abuse Negl.* 2016 Feb;52:29-37. doi: 10.1016/j.chiabu.2015.12.011. Epub 2016 Jan 11. PMID: 26774530.

<sup>15</sup> Holt-Lunstad, J., & Smith, T. B. (2016). Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for CVD: implications for evidence-based patient care and scientific inquiry. *Heart (British Cardiac Society)*, 102(13), 987–989. <https://doi.org/10.1136/heartjnl-2015-309242>

Our places and communities can positively affect our health through services and resources, as well as through the development of 'social capital', the networks and social trust that facilitate cooperation for mutual benefit,<sup>16</sup> cohesion and feelings of safety, all of which are associated with lower stress and better physical and mental health.<sup>17</sup> Many of these notions are features of the Government's Levelling Up agenda.

This report explores the potential for a 'New Partnership with Families' approach, focusing solutions to these problems in three broad areas. Firstly, a wholesale shift to early intervention services; spotting problems quickly and intervening swiftly to resolve them for all families. Secondly, the development or expansion of models of long-term support for families, including help to develop parenting strategies, which support and protect teenagers who are vulnerable to harm. Thirdly, the provision of intensive high-level support for families to protect, support and safeguard their teenage children if they are involved in violence, gangs, are being exploited or are at risk of becoming involved in the criminal justice system. Presently, there are too few examples of long-term, intensive support a solution to high-risk and complex situations of exploitation and threats of violence.

In *Out of Harm's Way*, we underlined how, although teenagers from a range of backgrounds can be exploited outside the home, these risks fall unevenly. We showed how an increasing number of Black boys – already disproportionately affected by criminal exploitation and criminalisation – are entering care as teenagers and that, for some, the risks they face are increased, partly because they are less likely to be seen as vulnerable. Indeed, the issue of the disproportionate numbers of Black, Brown and Minority Ethnic children, not just in the justice system but in every part of the social care landscape, was raised throughout our evidence sessions, suggesting systemic racial bias in the system.<sup>18</sup> This included evidence of services that were mistrusted and/or unaware of the specific range of issues facing teenagers and their families. This suggests a far greater need for culturally competent interventions such as the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead Innovation Pilot Project, designed to work directly with families, with a particular focus on ensuring help is culturally attuned.

In our first report we included evidence that suggests that more girls are involved in gangs than previously thought and that the relationship between sex and different types of exploitation, such as sexual exploitation or county lines, are more complex than often assumed (the Commission will further explore these issues later in its programme). An investigation by the *Times* also found that almost all local authorities who had children in their care who arrived in the UK as refugees have had some gone missing.<sup>19</sup>

## THE WIDER LANDSCAPE

It is important to note that of the thousands of children in England growing up in contexts that leave them particularly vulnerable, most are not in care, do not receive adequate support or are not being helped at all.<sup>20</sup> As we stated in our first report, many of the problems that make children vulnerable do not appear overnight and there will often have been a series of contributing factors over time. For example, we know that growing up in a household where parents have addictions or suffer severe mental health conditions, or where there is domestic violence (or combinations of these factors), can be very damaging and expose children to additional risks, including extrafamilial abuse and criminalisation.<sup>21</sup>

As some of the testimonies included here and the wider evidence shows, teenagers who have special education needs – particularly when these are identified late and/or not met – can be particularly vulnerable.<sup>22</sup> The prevalence of special educational needs amongst teenagers at risk was raised repeatedly in our discussions with parents and practitioners in preparation of this report.

Without effective support, life for many vulnerable teenagers can become increasingly precarious and every year hundreds are falling through the gaps in the education and social services systems and facing exploitation, violence and criminalisation. A few months into the pandemic, the Children's Commissioner for England found these risks being heightened by lockdown with 120,000 – one in 25 – teenagers in England already slipping out of sight.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Putnam R (2000). *Bowling Alone. The Collapse and Revival of American Community*.

<sup>17</sup> Marmot m. et al (2020). *Health Inequality in England: The Marmot Review 10 years On*.

<sup>18</sup> Lammy D. (2017) *Lammy Review: final report*. GOV.UK

<sup>19</sup> "Trafficked, exploited and abused: hundreds of child refugees go missing in Britain". *The Times* (22 October 2021). <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/trafficked-exploited-and-abused-hundreds-of-child-refugees-go-missing-in-britain-zq83mx8v8>

<sup>20</sup> OCC (4 July 2019). *Childhood vulnerability in England*. <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/report/childhood-vulnerability-in-england-2019/>

<sup>21</sup> *Op cit*. OCC (4 July 2019).

<sup>22</sup> Franklin A. et al (2015). *Unprotected, overprotected: meeting the needs of young people with learning disabilities who experience, or are at risk of, sexual exploitation*. Barnardo's.

<sup>23</sup> OCC (7 July 2020). *Teenagers falling through the gaps 2017/18*, <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/report/teenagers-falling-through-the-gaps/>

Poverty, disadvantage and discrimination can both drive and compound these issues. Risks fall disproportionately on families struggling to make ends meet, children living in areas of deprivation and children of Black, Brown and Minority Ethnic backgrounds who are twice as likely to live in poorer areas on low incomes and who also face racism and discrimination.<sup>24</sup> This highlights the need for structural change to reduce inequality and discrimination as well as urgent action to stem the increase in numbers of teenagers at risk, let alone reduce the numbers.

This requires a deeper shared understanding about teenagers' contexts. Most children want to spend more time out of the home as they grow older; this is part of growing up and is rarely without risk. However, some spend time away from home due to neglect or violence and, as a result, may be more vulnerable to offending behaviour or exploitation.<sup>25</sup> Effective responses are those capable of dealing with the range of contexts that do not ignore what is happening at home, or assume that risk is being driven by familial abuse or neglect. This may include domestic abuse between partners or, as some parents we spoke to describe, abusive or violent behaviour towards parents by their children, highlighting the need for projects like Blue Door that take a 'whole family' approach to domestic abuse and parental control.<sup>26</sup>

As the contextual safeguarding literature shows, "young people's engagement in extrafamilial contexts can also inform, and be informed by, what is happening in their homes. Therefore, when young people are exposed to violence or exploitation in their school, community or peer group this may fracture their family relationships and undermine the capacity of their parents/carers to keep them safe. Likewise, if young people are exposed to harm within their families, such as domestic or physical abuse, this can impact their behaviour in extra-familial settings."<sup>27</sup> As a report by Ofsted and others concluded, this can mean sequencing a combination of emergency and longer-term intervention: "Dealing with the most immediate presenting risks first may be the correct response initially, for example by protecting the child from sexual exploitation. However, supporting and protecting older children is about addressing the risks both inside and outside the home."<sup>28</sup>

This approach is being piloted in a number of areas, including in the London Borough of Hackney, which is redesigning its safeguarding systems to address extrafamilial harms.

We know that with the right help, many families can improve their situation and there are programmes that help parents to overcome addictions and domestic abuse as well as interventions to support them with their mental health.<sup>29</sup> However, for many teenagers it is not these issues, familial abuse or neglect that leads to them being placed at risk or in care but factors outside the home. A much better option would be to, where possible, provide more effective support to help parents to reduce risks and for children to stay safely at home.

At the heart of this report are questions about how well we are doing this and how those services that are showing promising outcomes can be scaled and/or used to inform comprehensive, inclusive coverage. These questions land within a harsh landscape. As levels of need rise, there is strong evidence around the complexity of needs and the potential consequences of these not being met due to a combination of high thresholds for accessing (rationed) support, gaps in services and lack of integration. Once more, even before things reach crisis point, there is a marked difference between the blizzard of advice and support available for parents with new-born and very young children to that for older children, even though many find parenting becomes harder as children grow up.

The evidence shows that there are peak points of risk, beyond infancy and including the transition from primary to secondary school. For example, the move from a small, community-based primary school that knows and involves families, to a large secondary school with an increased expectation of independent learning, can be a huge change, especially for children with special educational needs. We have heard consistently how some children fall through the gaps in the secondary school environment, an issue we will explore further in our next report on education. For some children it is during their pre-teen and teenage years when difficulties became very serious, putting them at risk of harm.

<sup>24</sup> Labour Party analysis of DWP statistics released to the *Guardian* (2 January 2022). "More than half of black children live in poverty, analysis shows."

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/02/more-than-half-of-blacks-black-children-live-in-poverty-analysis-shows>

<sup>25</sup> Allnock, D. (2016) *What is the relationship between neglect and adult-perpetrated intra-familial abuse? An evidence scope*. Totnes: Research in Practice.

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.thebluedoor.org>

<sup>27</sup> Fermin C. (November 2017), *Contextual Safeguarding: An overview of the operational, strategic and conceptual framework*. University of Bedford and the Context Safeguarding Network.

<sup>28</sup> Ofsted, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation, the Care Quality Commission and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services (HMICFRS) (2018). *Growing up neglected: a multi-agency response to older children*.

<sup>29</sup> Department for Education (2 November 2020), *Children's Social Care Innovation Programme: insights and evaluation: Evaluation and summary reports for the Children's Social Care Innovation Programme (CSCIP) grouped by theme*.

In the course of putting together this report, we spoke to parents who have gone through – or are still going through – the devastating process that follows discovering that their teenager was being groomed and/or was involved in activity that was placing them at risk. They report struggling to access effective help when things began to go wrong and this continuing even after they have clear evidence of exploitation and/or county lines activity.

Families talked of not knowing who to turn to and finding that, even when they did get support once it was clear that their child was in danger, that this often fell short of what was needed to stop problems escalating. Where there were pre-existing low levels of trust in statutory services, some parents were hesitant to ask for help for fear of being seen to be the cause of the problem and losing their teenagers into the care system.

Others describe encountering parts of the system but finding a lack of focus on support for the family; several recounted how they had to repeatedly go through a long information collecting process every time they reported their child was missing, which for some could be a daily occurrence. One parent told us how the child and family was left without support as the teenager suffered greater and greater harm, only getting a referral to a St Giles programme when the boy was admitted to hospital with multiple and life-threatening stab wounds.

These issues impact on the whole family and some need support for siblings, as they struggle to strike a balance the needs of young children with those of vulnerable teenagers and/or when there are risks of other children in the household being groomed and being exploited. Parents talked about the stark choices they face. For example, knowing that the only way that they can protect their older child is to accompany them to and from school and supervise the rest of their time at home but knowing that this would mean not only giving up their job – risking financial hardship – but also reducing the amount of time available for other children.

Parents talked of the deeply negative impact that teenagers at risk can have on sibling relationships and – in the absence of consistent clear advice and support – some parents ended up in conflict as they second-guessed what to do. One couple highlighted the conflicting advice given on whether they should let their son back in the family home if he missed his curfew; this led to them blaming each other and additional guilt.

## **A NEW PARTNERSHIP WITH FAMILIES**

This report outlines some examples of really good practice, including past projects such as FASH in Enfield, which took a whole family approach to keeping young people out of the care system, and Kirklees' STAR model that takes a restorative 'whole family' approach to extrafamilial harm – including exploitation and radicalisation – where families are seen as partners in the process.

We also include emerging practice, including VRUs, which are placing more emphasis on working with the parents and families of young people at risk of violence while also trying to address some of the longer-term issues that these teenagers face, including exclusion from the labour market. For example, the London VRU approach to violence reduction means putting communities, young people and their families at the heart of tackling the issue; and particularly in those parts of London most affected, often taking a place-based approach to violence reduction. Focusing its interventions in neighbourhoods that have experienced sustained and high levels of violence, the VRU provides positive examples of partnership working at an early stage.

This 'New Partnership with Families' approach should be at the heart of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care and national public health approach, and – backed by new duties for co-ordinated support for families and their teenagers – applied across every element of services and support nationally and locally including schools, GPs, police, social services, youth offending teams and local safeguarding and community safeguarding boards. Within this framework, Family Hubs and the Supporting Families Programme should be central to funding and delivering these duties and to developing a new local infrastructure that protects teenagers with a distinct offer for those at risk and their families.

Our immediate additional recommendations, which build on those set out in our first report include:

- Government makes a 'New Partnership with Families' a strategic priority across all departments and statutory agencies, reintroducing the Family Test promised by David Cameron in 2014 as a requirement to assess impact of all national policy.
- The Government reaffirms the aspirations of the Children Act 1989 to work with families by introducing a legal duty for local agencies to deliver early intervention.

- Government Spending Reviews should set out sufficient multi-year financial settlements to local government, with investment in early intervention returned to 2010 levels.
- Government's short-term ambition should be to roll out Family Hubs in every disadvantaged area as a first step, with a longer-term ambition to extend Family Hub coverage to the 3,000 communities that formerly had a Sure Start centre.
- Local authorities should establish a coherent and joined up 'teenager at risk' offer as a requirement in every Family Hub, explaining clearly to parents and teenagers what services and help they are entitled to and how they can access them.
- The Supporting Families Programme should be funded to develop a five-year extended programme of family support for older children at risk as a specialist programme to be run with every local authority and in conjunction with the Youth Endowment Fund and Violence Reduction Units.
- A new 'entitlement' for families to be involved in decision-making about their support through a Family Group Conference when they are referred to statutory services for help.
- The Department for Education should work at speed with local authorities and other partners to develop and trial new models of intense family support for families with teenagers at risk, including specific strategies to support Black, Brown and Minority Ethnic families.
- The development and piloting of new shared care models of social care that involve and build the strength and capacity of families as part of residential care.
- A national support programme to extend kinship care for teenagers at risk.
- Charities and community groups should be embedded as a core partner in delivering support for children and families.
- A proportion of the Government's unspent tutoring funding should be reallocated to recruit 2000 Attendance Practitioners and 2000 Family Workers in schools.

- Government should recreate its disbanded Child Poverty Unit with an initial target to publish a cross-departmental poverty reduction plan by April 2023.

If we continue to leave families without interventions to help their teenagers stay safe and progress, systems will continue to fail in their responsibilities to protect many teenagers at risk. While responding to risk within the family setting is critical, we need to ensure that our default position is not to ignore, side-line or blame parents and families, often our most important assets in protecting children. Those that are seeking to exploit teenagers need a steady flow of vulnerable young people to support their business models and know that involved parents and families can make it harder for them to get to and groom children. That is why they work so hard to drive them apart with a constant drip feed of doubt, secrecy and criticism, where parents are cast as a problem and hindrance.

Parents told us not just about their fears of their child being seriously harmed or killed but also about the sense of 'losing' their child as others were taking increasing control of their actions and behaviour. And where teenagers are taken into care because they are at such high risk, families, including members of the extended family who could offer support to the young person, often struggle to have any role as they are seen to be part of – or the cause of – the problem, even when this is not the case. Here lies the central message to those that want to protect children from gangs: those who seek to exploit children know it and policymakers and services need to catch up fast.

## **MICHELLE**

Michelle, aged 15, was referred to Catch 22 when she was deemed to be at risk of exploitation, with particular concerns about extremism, radicalisation and grooming. It was believed that she had been speaking with multiple unknown males online who had influenced her extremist views. She was subject to a child protection plan due to concerns around her mum's long-term mental health problems. This resulted in Michelle spending long periods with extended family, during which Michelle's mother would often meet potential partners online and travel out of the country to visit them. Her most recent partner has a criminal history and is an active member of a known radicalised group. These experiences significantly impacted on Michelle's cognitive development and mental health, resulting in her self-harming and running away. She lacked motivation and was withdrawn. Michelle holds White extremist views and is under investigation due to terrorist offences. Due to this and the live investigation, the only agencies involved at this stage were social care, CAMHS and Catch22.

The decision was for Catch22 to focus on work on self-esteem, relationships, and to raise grooming when the timing was right. Due to Michelle's mental health issues, weekly sessions were planned to encourage a good working relationship and ensure consistent professional input. Adhering to strict bail conditions, including no access to the internet, Michelle was living with her mum. The pandemic and restrictions made it difficult to communicate with her and required creative approaches that avoided digital resources where possible.

Initially, Michelle did not trust the professionals. Following consistent contact either face-to-face or through her mother, she began to talk about her situation. It became clear that Michelle felt more comfortable on a one-to-one basis rather than in her mother's company. This was difficult as her mother was struggling with her own mental health and wanted support. A referral for a family support worker was made to support Michelle's mother and this enabled the caseworker to focus on Michelle's needs. As the rapport with her caseworker strengthened, Michelle began to open up about things she had struggled to talk about. This included how the poor relationship with her mother had shaped Michelle's vulnerability to validation by adult males online. Michelle showed a good understanding of relationships and grooming and began to identify that she had been groomed. She spoke of the impact that her offences had on her and her family and began to show great remorse. This was a huge breakthrough for Michelle and for the police investigation. A National Referral Mechanism (NRM) was submitted, and all evidence gathered through sessions were documented and updated on a regular basis.

Michelle's bail restrictions meant that she had a lot of time on her own or with her mother, as school could not keep her safe and advised she should work from home. Catch22 provided Michelle with vouchers through the Covid hardship fund to buy books and art supplies to stimulate her mind. The relationship between Michelle and her mum – who was struggling to keep Michelle safe – was breaking down. Michelle took a large amount of her mother's medication, resulting in a hospital admission and referral to a CAMHS worker. At home three days later, Michelle climbed out of the window at night and was later found by police. She had broken her bail conditions and all agencies involved were concerned about her mother's ability to protect Michelle. She appeared at court and was remanded into the care of the local authority. Michelle was placed out of Catch22's catchment area but it was agreed that the sessions would continue until the trial date.

Michelle realised that living with her mum was not healthy and her new placement enabled her to reflect on what had led to her actions and how to move forward. With continued support from Catch22, her social worker and support workers, Michelle began to flourish. As her mental health improved, she could now talk about her time online and see that she was groomed into joining chat rooms she would never have previously visited. She stated on numerous occasions that she no longer held extremist views and was willing to help prosecute her groomers. Michelle's risk of exploitation remained at medium due to the nature of the case, and bail restrictions also remained in place to enable services to continue to support her. Michelle continues to flourish and has been producing some astounding art and craft work with her personal tutor. Through the multi-agency support and evidence provided by Catch22, social care, police and CAMHS, Michelle's trial has been discontinued and all proceedings have been ceased due to the lack of evidence to prosecute. The NRM had provided more than enough evidence to suggest that Michelle was a victim of modern-day slavery and trafficking.

## 2 WHAT FAMILIES TELL US

It is no wonder that so many parents bringing up a family are confused. For years they were courted and encouraged to ask for help as children's centres opened up across the country. Over recent years they watched as the help moved out of their local area and became more and more specialised and difficult to access. For some of those we talked to, the pandemic and move to online services put the lid on their expectation that local informal support from their local authority was something they could count on when things got tough. Whilst not all families will want or need support as their children grow up, many will and there has been less and less available. The children entering secondary school this year will be a new generation of those who have grown up without a local children's centre, many of which started to dwindle as budget cuts hit from 2011 onwards.

There are notable exceptions to this gloomy picture as some dedicated local authorities, great charities and – most recently – many schools, deliver excellent support to help families get by and flourish. The Troubled Families Programme, now called Supporting Families Programme, has run throughout. But many projects remain small scale and short term. It feels alike an age since David Cameron's introduction of the Family Test in 2014 set out to: "ensure that potential impacts on family relationships and functioning are made explicit and recognised in the process of developing new policy." Government has not felt confident or made the investment to put family policy to the front of its ambitions for some time.

This needs to change. Well supported parents and families are more resilient to crisis and have more assets to draw on if things go wrong. We are encouraged by new commitments to the Supporting Families Programme and Family Hubs, whilst recognising that neither of these programmes are of the scale that many families say is needed. We hope that this will be the start of a much more ambitious phase of support for families, from early intervention to family-focused support at times of crisis.

Families of teenagers have told us repeatedly how vital this support could have been. The conversations we have had with parents suggest that reality for most is that they feel ignored and abandoned and find a paucity of support until problems become more acute. The experience of parents included in this report tell a consistent tale of missed opportunities, unmet need and a confused tangle of services.

When there is contact with services, families say that they are too often met with a conveyor belt of assessments, churn of professionals and early closure of cases. Large gaps in service provision compound the fact that some groups are particularly poorly served, including children at risk of grooming, exploitation and criminalisation. Similarly, high thresholds for support, fuelled by a lack of adequate funding and a lack of knowledge of what services are available, compound the problem. The result is that the patchwork of services that do exist are over-subscribed and lack coherence. Families repeatedly described meeting a brick wall when they asked for help. When help was forthcoming, however welcome, this often took the form of a short-term intervention that did not tackle underlying problems.

Being passed from pillar to post with the hope of a short-term fix offered little hope to the families we talked to who are facing deep-seated challenges. In fact, for some, this only deepened their existing distrust of statutory services. There is a strong sense in many communities that statutory services and government programmes are neither available nor relevant to them. In fact, many did not know of any statutory or local authority help in their area. For so many families struggling to get by, the intervention of the state seemed to only symbolise more problems rather than less. This includes a sense of being judged as inadequate, being investigated, assessed and – ultimately – having the prospect of having their children taken away. Where positive family-focused programmes are in place, we found these factors are significantly reduced.

When families did talk about getting 'real' and lasting help it was very often from local community or specialist charities. What emerges is the vital importance of building lasting relationships capable of understanding families and their situations, providing long-term support rather than closing cases, and of approaches that worked in partnership *with* families to find solutions rather than 'doing to' them. Sharon Lines of the Oasis Hub in Grimsby, who sits on our practitioner panel, said: "Families come to the Hub for a range of issues and we deal with whatever problem arises, whether this is domestic abuse, substance misuse, behaviour or just the stresses of life. Families who are struggling told us it is long-term relationship-based support that makes a difference." We explore some of these initiatives later in this report.

## PARENTS LEADING CHANGE

**Action Isleworth Mothers (AIM)** was set up by 'A', a local London parent after her teenage son was coerced into local road dealing. The service supports and advises mothers who are going through the same thing or fear their child might be being locally exploited. Like much of the research, A has found that there is a high correlation between teenagers becoming involved in missing episodes from home, CCE and domestic abuse. Having experienced this herself she understands the isolation and overwhelm a parent can feel particularly when a child will often act out learned behaviour from having witnessed verbal or physical violence within the home. Her son, who was engaged with youth offending services and is now successfully working and supporting himself, he has since shared with A that part of his motivation was to secure money so that as a single parent 'she would no longer be the only one earning or have to worry.'

'A' explains: "With my work I help the parent re-establish boundaries that have broken down in the home. It is important for all children, particularly those 'on road', that whatever is happening outside of the house they know that home is a safe space. If a child has experienced adverse childhood trauma in the home, such as DV or family upheaval, they are used to being in a constant state of flight or fight mode and that becomes normal to them. It is very hard for them to regulate their emotions and they are prone to vulnerability. I work to create trust, build more positive relationships, break down the choices and include the parents and the child's voice."

AIM works with mothers when their child is ultimately at risk, helping to reduce the stigma they feel. Most children are males between 14 and 16 of lone parents when referred to AIM. This support involves being there to listen and is committed fully sometimes over long periods of time. "My partner was very verbally abusive, said 'A'. "We also experienced the loss of two close family members, divorce and I was working fulltime. I can see how this all affected my son to be coerced into his 'road family' and I had lost my authority in the home. I learned that I needed to take that back." 'A' also worked informally with some of her son's younger contemporaries who were excluded from mainstream schools and also 'on road', getting three of them off road and back into college. She did this by encouraging them to come to the house, but with clear boundaries and rules set. Via this structure trust was built which enabled these young people to feel included, not judged and to turn their life around.

AIM really took off when 'A' attended a community meeting after there had been retaliation attacks in response to a fatal and tragic local stabbing. "Someone at the meeting said it was all the mothers' fault. I spoke out and shared my story inviting mothers to come and find me after the meeting. I was inundated! I was then approached by the leader of YOS as to how they could collaborate and since then I have been doing this alongside my day job. I get referrals from a range of services, including family services as well word of mouth. I work at pavement level. It is essentially just me. And my point is that this can happen to anyone. It is no one's fault."

While AIM has received small amounts of funding, 'A' does most of her work voluntarily. She is applying for more funding and her goal is to expand the network by training up and supporting other mothers to do what she does. This is just starting to happen, and 'A' is collaborating/referring with local projects including Project Turnover and No Shame in Running. As a result of her work, the local authority set up an adolescent services ops group to address a more wraparound public health approach which 'A' sits on, and her work has been cited by the Home Office and had support from MPs. What 'A's' amazing journey highlights is the power of working at the 'pavement' level and bringing lived experience into the mix. It also underlines the challenge of scaling the model while ensuring it retains the flexibility and hyper local nature. For us, it speaks to the question of how larger organisations – whether statutory or voluntary – can support people with lived experience to be involved in provision without being crushed by bureaucracy, as well as the importance of engaging parents and teenagers who have been through this experience in co-designing interventions, including Family Hubs. 'A' is very aware of these issues and is working on how she can evaluate her work so that others can build on her experience in other areas. Through AIM, she campaigns for those voices of lived experience to be heard.

**SPACE** is a self-funded organisation founded in response to the national prevalence of child criminal exploitation and the county lines phenomenon. The SPACE spokesperson who gave evidence to the Commission argues for parents to be given a far greater role in safeguarding: "Parents are given the least credibility when they are your biggest partner in keeping children safe. They have the intelligence, they know everything about that child and when they flag concerns and say: 'I do not recognise them', they need to be listened to." SPACE, like many other witnesses, stressed the need for all agencies to take a welfare approach to child exploitation and to have a much more sophisticated understanding around issues of consent, not just in relation to child sexual exploitation but county lines and wider criminal exploitation. Like many other witnesses, she also stressed the prevalence of mental health issues and special educational needs and believes there is a critical role for those with lived experience to advocate on behalf of other parents around issues such as school exclusions.

Any strategy that seeks to make a long-term impact on the number of children being exploited, harmed and criminalised through extrafamilial harm needs to understand and respond to how these factors are shaped by family vulnerability and resilience. Our witness from SPACE argued that whereas 10 years ago county lines almost entirely involved children who were in care or whose parents were vulnerable, it now involves children from a range of backgrounds.

Listening to parents' experiences, you get a sense of the powerless they often feel. They describe long periods of 'waiting to hear' – for good or bad news or their teenager returning home – interspersed with frenetic activity as they rapidly try to work out what can be done, trying to communicate with their child, the police, and other services, while experiencing disrupted sleep, high levels of anxiety and negative impacts on relationships. Some have people they can talk to but, for others, their sense of shame and guilt, sometimes exacerbated by professional assumptions about their adequacy as a parent, means they do not reach out to others for fear of further judgement.

These experiences are horrendous for all families. However, some have more internal resources (for example, self-confidence) and external resources (for example, money) than others. We spoke to one mother who – when the county lines operation that her son was involved in found out where he lived – could afford to pay off his 'debts'. 'A' from Action Isleworth Mothers said that some of the mothers she works with – particularly victims of domestic abuse – suffered from low self-esteem making it harder to feel they had agency in protecting their children. Income and asset poverty as well as parental vulnerabilities can drive risk and add pressures on families.

Many children who end up in the criminal justice system can identify specific moments when things started to go wrong, or a time when they were desperate for some help but did not receive it. Some feel it is all inevitable; once on the conveyor belt, they could not get off, even though services could have intervened effectively. Levels of need are higher among children in the criminal justice system, with 72% of children who are sentenced having an identified mental health need and 71% having speech and language needs.<sup>30</sup> In 2019 the Ministry of Justice found that children in custody were twice as likely to have special education needs as the national average.<sup>31</sup>

Evidence submitted to the Commission by Camden Youth Taskforce, included a study of the 43 young people in Camden who received a caution or conviction between October 2015 and September 2016, and who reoffended in the subsequent 12 months. It found that 77% had experienced signs of deprivation, a significant proportion had experienced sustained family dysfunction, and over half had experienced parental or care-giver neglect.<sup>32</sup>

Between April and June 2021, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation undertook a review of the experiences of Black and Mixed Heritage boys in the justice system.<sup>33</sup> Practitioners reported that a large majority experienced multiple adverse childhood experiences and had high levels of unmet need before contact with justice services. Throughout their lives, opportunities to intervene to support children to succeed had been missed. The Inspectorate's review found that almost a third had been victims of child criminal exploitation and that the majority had one or no previous convictions.<sup>34</sup> The report also suggested that Black and Mixed Heritage boys in the youth justice system experiencing racism may have become 'normalised', not only to the boys themselves, but also to those working with them. Most of the boys grew up in the poorest areas and had often been exposed to violence and family breakdown.

## FAMILY VULNERABILITY

In 2019, 2.3m children were growing up in families where a parent had addiction, severe mental health conditions or there was domestic violence.<sup>35</sup> This included around 100,000 children where domestic abuse, parental drug and alcohol dependency, and severe mental health problems, were all present. Prior to the pandemic nearly 50,000 children (17% were over 16) were taken into care because of abuse or neglect at home and across a typical class of 30, six children are growing up at risk due to family circumstances. Whilst four children will have an identified special educational need, only one of them will have a special educational need statement or Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP).<sup>36</sup> Similarly, four children will have a mental health issue but only one of them will be accessing mental health services (an issue that we will further explore in a later report).

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<sup>30</sup> YJB (January 2021) *Assessing the Needs of Sentenced Children in the Youth Justice System 2019/20*.

<sup>31</sup> "Children in Prison Twice as Likely to Have Special Needs, Figures Show (*Independent* 4 August 2019)."

<sup>32</sup> Camden Council Youth Offending Service, *Risk of Reoffending Cohort Strategic Analysis* (April 2017).

<sup>33</sup> HM Inspectorate of Probation (October 2021). *The experiences of black and mixed heritage boys in the youth justice system: A thematic inspection*.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>35</sup> Office of the Children's Commissioner (July 2019). *Childhood vulnerability in England 2019*.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*.

The number of vulnerable children was increasing before the pandemic. However, since March 2020, the crisis has accelerated many of the factors that can make children particularly vulnerable, and over one million children are now growing up with reduced life chances. Analysis by the Office of the Children's Commissioner for England published in July 2020 highlighted the heightened impact of lockdown on the 120,000 – one in 25 – teenagers in England already slipping out of sight before the pandemic.<sup>37</sup>

In 2021 the House of Lords Public Services Committee also concluded that the number of vulnerable children “invisible” to services was likely to have increased during the pandemic.



Percentage of organisations reported an increase in the numbers of children and families requesting their services during the pandemic because of domestic violence between parents.<sup>38</sup>



Percentage of services reporting a “large” increase in the number of children and families requesting their services due to serious parental mental health problems.<sup>39</sup>



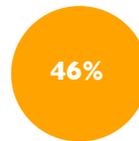
Percentage of services reporting that of the families receiving support from their organisations, there had been increased severity of problems associated with parental addiction.<sup>40</sup>

It is these families that the Commission on Young Lives is focusing on and, as the evidence in our first report shows, there is an increasing number of teenagers experiencing a conveyor belt of familial vulnerability, conflict, exclusion, exploitation, care and custody.

It is important to understand the contexts in which the children are growing up, what makes them and their families more vulnerable, and how we can work to build resilience and reduce risk. This includes the precarious balance a lot of families face in relation to employment and income, housing, and health.

## POVERTY, UNSTABLE EMPLOYMENT AND RACISM

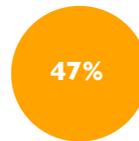
There were 4.3 million children living in poverty in the UK in 2019/20. The evidence is clear that growing up in poverty can have negative consequences for children’s wellbeing and future life prospects.<sup>41</sup> The Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) has estimated that almost half of these children (49%) were children living in lone parent families.



Percentage of children living in Black, Brown and Minority Ethnic families are living in poverty.<sup>42</sup>



Percentage of children growing up in poverty living in a household where at least one person works.<sup>43</sup>



Percentage of children living in families with three or more children living in poverty.<sup>44</sup>

Child poverty has a disproportionate impact on certain ethnic communities in the UK.<sup>45</sup> One reason for this is the consistent denial about the existence of structural racism and the impacts it has from cradle till grave. A study published in the first week of 2022 found that more than half of Black children in the UK are now growing up in poverty; rising from 42% in 2010/11 to 53% in 2019/20.<sup>46</sup> While this data is the most recently available, pre-pandemic, suggest this will have become worse since March 2020.

During the pandemic, there was a decrease in the employment rate and increases in the economic inactivity and unemployment of those on zero-hours contracts, in insecure employment and sectors such as retail were more heavily impacted than others. Our discussions with families in Oldham showed how these changes have had a severe impact on many families’ ability to find work. For example, the number of people claiming Universal Credit in the UK more than doubled since the beginning of the pandemic with around 620,000 families with children having started claiming the benefit since the start of the pandemic, marking a 51% increase.

<sup>37</sup> OCC (July 2020) Teenagers Falling Through the Gaps.

<sup>38</sup> *Op cit.* House of Lords Public Services Committee reporting on a survey by the National Children’s Bureau and Children England. G

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>41</sup> HM Government (June 2014) Child Poverty Strategy 2014-17

<sup>42</sup> CPAG (updated March 2021) Child Poverty Facts and Figures.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>45</sup> ONS (February 2020). *Child poverty and education outcomes by ethnicity.*

<sup>46</sup> “More than half of UK’s black children live in poverty analysis shows”. *The Guardian*. 2 January 2022.

Two-thirds of the families now receiving Universal Credit are single-parent families.<sup>47</sup> Whilst the increase in Universal Credit by £20 per week during the pandemic was welcome, its withdrawal has been a blow to families despite a more generous taper rate being introduced. In November 2021, 3.6m children were in families relying on Universal Credit.

Falling behind financially increases strain on the whole family and replacing lost income during the pandemic has been a constant struggle as families try to cope with increased costs. Practitioners reported seeing growing concerns around the cost of living. One told us: “The ‘heat or eat’ question has never been as prominent as it is now. About half of the families we see are working, including those using the foodbank.”

## POOR HOUSING

There were long-standing inequalities in housing long before the onset of the pandemic and these have a direct impact on a range of drivers of wellbeing such as physical and mental health, and relationships. The practitioners we spoke to in preparing our last report highlighted how lockdown exacerbated the pressures for families living in cramped or overcrowded conditions, particularly where both younger children and teenagers were at home. For some teenagers, this was driving both tensions with parents to explosive levels and also their desire to be away from home.



1 in 5

*The proportion of children that need a new home in the UK, two thirds of these are in social housing.<sup>48</sup>*



2 m

*The number of children who are living in overcrowded, unaffordable or unsuitable accommodation.<sup>49</sup>*

There were 96,600 households in temporary accommodation at the end of June 2021, around 63% of these included dependent children.<sup>50</sup> There were 1,400 families with dependent children placed in B&B-style accommodation at the end of June 2021.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>47</sup> “Number of universal credit claimants doubles since start of pandemic to 6 million, figures show” (23 February 2021). *Independent*.

<sup>48</sup> National Housing Federation (December 2021). *People in Housing Need*.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>50</sup> Department of Levelling Up and Communities (October 2021). *Statutory Homelessness Statistics April to June 2021: England*.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>52</sup> Shelter (November 2020). *The impact of homelessness on a child's education*.

The link between poor housing and the adverse impacts on children and family life are well established and was powerfully highlighted by the evidence we heard. For example, one family with four children we talked to had spent the whole of lockdown in a one-bedroom flat – the children sleeping in the bed and the parents in the living room – taking it in turns to work and sleep. Children on one particularly poor housing estate in south London had been scared to go out since a neighbour had been found threatening passers-by with a knife. A man on the same estate had ended his life by jumping from the roof of the flats, landing in the children's play area.

These are not exaggerated cases but the day-to-day reality of some children and families in England. Poor housing often leads to deteriorating mental health, stifles development and can lead to problems with behaviour. According to a Shelter study, homeless children are two to three times more likely to be absent from school than other children due to the disruption caused by moving into and between temporary accommodation.<sup>52</sup> The analysis also showed the direct impact that bad housing has on children's health, including greater risk of respiratory problems, tuberculosis and meningitis.<sup>53</sup>

## PRESSURES ON MENTAL HEALTH

These factors compound our concerns about an increasing prevalence of poor mental health in children and their families. One in six children are now likely to have a mental health condition, with consistent evidence showing that mental health has deteriorated during the pandemic.<sup>54</sup> The increase was evident in both boys and girls. Previous research has shown that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are two to three times more likely to develop mental health problems than their peers from more socioeconomically advantaged.<sup>55</sup>

The Youth Justice Board estimated that in 2018, 70% of young people in custody had a mental health condition.<sup>56</sup> As Lucy Sheppard of Our Time said in her submission to the Commission, children of parents with a mental illness face a unique set of challenges yet receive little or no targeted support.

<sup>53</sup> Shelter (October 2021). *Health of one in five renters harmed by their home*.

<sup>54</sup> NHS Digital (September 2020). *Mental Health of Children and Young People in England 2021*.

<sup>55</sup> Reiss, F., Meyrose, A. K., Otto, C., Lampert, T., Klasen, F., & Ravens-Sieberer, U. (2019). Socioeconomic status, stressful life situations and mental health problems in children and adolescents: Results of the German BELLA cohort-study. *PLoS one*, 14(3), e0213700. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0213700>

<sup>56</sup> YJB and MoJ (May 2020). *Assessing the needs of sentenced children in the youth justice system 2018/19*

An under-reported impact of the pandemic is the bereavement experienced by children and their loss(es) of primary care givers. Between March 2020 and April 2021 more than 12,000 children in the UK were orphaned or lost their primary care giver.<sup>57</sup> Over 50,000 children also had a parent, guardian or carer die from other causes over the last 20 months.<sup>58</sup> ONS analysis shows that rate of death involving Covid-19 was highest for the Black African group (3.7 times greater than for the White British group for males, and 2.6 greater for females), followed by Bangladeshi (3.0 for males, 1.9 for females), Black Caribbean (2.7 for males, 1.8 for females) and Pakistani (2.2 for males, 2.0 for females) ethnic groups.<sup>59</sup>

The loss of such central figures in the lives of children is unsettling at the best of times and these deaths are another example of how the pandemic has increased child vulnerability. The disproportionately high figures for many Black, Brown and minority ethnic groups are again structurally patterned with these groups more likely to be working in frontline roles, on zero-hours contracts, in key worker jobs and in employment outside of the home, making self-isolation harder and leaving them over-exposed and under-protected.<sup>60</sup>

The Commission aims to explore these issues around young people's mental health – and that of their parents – in more detail later in our programme. The focus of this will be looking at the potential for providing earlier, lighter touch mental health support services, which provide more services in the community, taking some of the pressures off acute services that are over-stretched.

## FAMILY STRUCTURES

All the evidence shows that a key foundation for life is a secure attachment to at least one stable relationship with an adult, and that children benefit from the active engagement and involvement of both their parents.

There are around 1.8m single parents, making up a quarter of families with dependent children, and there has been a long and raging debate about the impact on children of single parenthood, and more particularly, the benefits of having active, involved fathers during childhood and adolescence.



The number of lone parent families, with London having the highest proportion (19%).<sup>61</sup>



Percentage of lone parent families are headed by mothers.<sup>62</sup>

Although the absence of fathers is not an isolated risk factor – for example, single parents are more likely to face poverty – there is evidence that positive relationships with their birth fathers brings benefits to children. It is worth emphasising that having an absent father or indeed mother does not in itself lead to increased vulnerability.

A recent literature review for the Government's Equalities Office found that father's involvement in children's lives improves children's emotional well-being, cognitive development and academic achievement, and is good for fathers themselves.<sup>63</sup> A father's involvement in a child's care can help reduce a number of negative outcomes for children in terms of emotional and behavioural problems and can also help improve children's cognitive development. Father's involvement in care has also been linked to positive emotional and well-being outcomes in children.

In the US, the Fatherhood Project<sup>64</sup> researched the specific impacts of father engagement at different stages of child development and its findings provide strong evidence of the range of benefits of children having active and engaged fathers. The research showed that when both are parents involved with the child, infants are attached to both from the beginning of life and that positive father involvement relates to better outcomes in relation to children's emotional, academic, social, and behavioural development. A 2013 study, which reviewed a range of research, including some from the UK, using rigorous designs, did find negative effects of father absence on children's wellbeing, particularly in relation to continued education, children's social-emotional adjustment and adult mental health.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>57</sup> ([Pembrokeshire bereavement charity supports Child Grief Awareness Week | Western Telegraph](#)).

<sup>58</sup> ([Charities call for a renewed focus on children who have lost a parent during Covid-19 | Nursery World](#)).

<sup>59</sup> ONS Updating ethnic contrasts in deaths involving the coronavirus (COVID-19), England: 24 January 2020 to 31 March 2021

<sup>60</sup> The Runnymede Trust (2020). Over-exposed and Under-protected, The Devastating Impact of COVID-19 on Black and Minority Ethnic Communities in Great Britain.

<sup>61</sup> Families and households in the UK - Office for National Statistics (ons.gov.uk).

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>63</sup> Shared care and well-being outcomes: Literature review.

<sup>64</sup> <https://www.thefatherhoodproject.org>

<sup>65</sup> McLanahan S. et al (2013). The Causal Effects of Father Absence. *Annual Review of Sociology* Vol. 39:399-427 (Volume publication date July 2013) <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-071312-145704>

Caution is however needed in relation to some literature on father absence, which is frequently criticised for not taking into account variables and reverse causality. What we can say with far more confidence and certainty is that this is more of a single parent issue linked to a range of wider issues including poverty, childcare, wrap-around support, job precarity and other key metrics. All of which make children more vulnerable.

There have been numerous studies that show children growing up in same-sex parent couples do not suffer from any adverse effects. Research has shown that children who grow up in same-sex families do just as well emotionally, socially and educationally as other children.<sup>66</sup> A study from 2017 by the *Medical Journal of Australia* pointed to the importance of family processes – parenting quality, parental wellbeing, the quality of and satisfaction with relationships in the family – rather than family structures making a more meaningful difference to children's wellbeing and positive development.<sup>67</sup> This again then reinforces the argument that it is single parents that struggle more than individual mothers or fathers.

One debate that emanates from 'absent fatherhood' is the role of Black fathers. In its review of research, the Fatherhood Institute found that Black and Black British fathers were twice as likely as white British fathers to live apart from their children.<sup>68</sup> It found substantial social class differences, and that the main reasons for non-resident fatherhood in Black and Mixed Heritage families are the same as those found in white families, including low socio-economic status, unemployment and low education. The research showed that living apart from children did not mean fathers were 'absent' and that many mothers were in a close relationship with their babies' fathers.

The Fatherhood Institute concluded: "Stereotypes of Black men as irresponsible or uninvolved abound, largely due to researchers' building on the 'absence' demographic, drawing their samples from among inner-city socially excluded communities; failing to take age and social disadvantage into account, failing to acknowledge high levels of involvement by Black fathers who do not live with their children full-time and ignoring substantial involvement with children by uncles, grandfathers and other male family members. Practitioners, too, tend to hold highly stereotyped views of Black fathers."

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<sup>66</sup> Short, E. Et al (2007). *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Parented Families*. The Australian Psychological Society.

<sup>67</sup> Nageh, A (2018). All evidence shows that children of gay parents do just as well as their peers.

<sup>68</sup> The Fatherhood Institute (2010). <http://www.fatherhoodinstitute.org/2010/fatherhood-institute-research-summary-african-caribbean-fathers/>

Indeed, a range of research points to the 'myth' of absent Black fatherhood,<sup>69</sup> again showing that factors surrounding socioeconomic status, unemployment and low education have a more important role to play than either absent fathers or absent Black fathers. This evidence is important given many of the inaccurate and racial stereotypes that are attached to this group.

This does not mean that there is not a strong *correlation* between teenagers at risk and absent parents, but that claims of *causal* links need to be seen in the wider context. The Croydon Safeguarding Children Board's Vulnerable Adolescents Thematic Review considered cases involving 60 children either with poor outcomes or of considerable concern, found that 72% of the children had absent fathers although the review found some fathers continued to have an influence in the child's life.<sup>70</sup> It concluded: "A significant proportion of fathers were absent from the family home, which meant they had limited parental control or influence on their child's behaviour, with the remaining parent finding it increasingly more difficult to curtail risky, or troublesome behaviours." However, the report also drew attention to the complexity involved: "Domestic abuse or child to parent abuse, absent fathers or absence of both parents, compounded by the implications of the poor mental health of the remaining parent undoubtedly had a significant impact on the child's behaviour and relationship with figures of authority."<sup>71</sup>

The community group 'Dope Black Dads' aims to widen the conversation around Black fatherhood, offering a safe space and support for fathers to discuss issues they face.<sup>72</sup> Projects such as Father to Father and Lads Need Dads have been established to support fathers' involvement. Father 2 Father is a Black-led project providing advice, guidance and mentoring to support involvement. Essex based Lads Need Dads works with 11 to 15-year-old boys with absent fathers or limited access to a male role model, supporting them to be motivated, responsible, capable, resilient and emotionally competent. They aim to prevent them becoming at risk of under achieving, offending, exclusion or dropping out of school.

<sup>69</sup> Coles, R (2009). *The myth of the missing Black father*.

<sup>70</sup> Croydon Safeguarding Children Board (February 2019). *Vulnerable Adolescents Thematic Review*.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>72</sup> Dope Black Dads (2018) [Dope Black Dads • Dope Black](#)

## THE CLARKE CHILDREN

The Clarke children are four girls who are growing up in a household where there have been persistent problems of neglect, vulnerability, low attainment, homelessness, obesity, poor physical and mental health, low esteem, as well as the risk of child sexual exploitation. The girls' parents are not together, and they have spent time staying with different family or community members, often in different places from day to day. Their dad is very difficult to deal with, often verbally abusive to support workers. Their mother has mental health problems and has often disappeared for prolonged periods. Care in the home is sporadic and inconsistent.

The eldest girl, Keira, now 19, had repeated social care referrals for neglect and emotional abuse. She has significant emotional and mental health needs, including self-harming, inappropriate relationships and struggling to regulate her behaviour. Each time the referral went to an early help team, and each time the family refused intervention. Any help offered to their father would not be received well and would never be enough. This included purchasing school uniform, food and practical items, including furniture. Their father has always refused to engage with any financial support offered, despite struggling with debts, low income, and needing financial support for housing. Keira left school at 16 after GCSEs and is currently homeless. She has struggled to hold down work and her mental health has become worse. Oasis family support teams have tried to offer help around housing and finances, but she often withdraws from support. Despite a huge amount of care and support from the wider family and community, this cycle that has left her trapped and it is a pattern that is being repeated by the younger children.

In 2021, there were again issues with neglect with the youngest two children after they became seriously obese during the Covid lockdowns. They were unkempt, uncared for, and had no beds to sleep on. They were doing all the cooking and housework, and often different men were staying at the flat with their dad. The offer of help from a social worker was refused by their dad. During the pandemic, their attitudes towards community members and support workers changed for the worse. The children would often be sat in a car outside school from 3pm until 7pm. Their cases were escalated to social care, with all involved pushing hard for a social care intervention to prevent this continued abuse. There was a Child in Need conference, attended by their parents, who were agreeable in the meeting. However, Dad subsequently refused any other support and social care deescalated to 'early help'.

The girls feel they have been repeatedly let down by a system that has meant that the parents lack of engagement, willingness and neglect will dictate much of their future, drawing them deeper into a very toxic and co-dependent environment.

### 3 SUPPORTING FAMILIES THROUGHOUT CHILDHOOD

In the last section we presented an overview of just some of the contexts and different pressures that some families are facing. We do not pretend that this gives a full picture of the myriad of factors that can make families more vulnerable but new and continued added pressures linked to poverty, austerity, unemployment, insecure and precarious work, childcare costs and access, flexible working all mean that some families struggle more than others. Of course, every family is different and some are more resilient than others. However, what is clear is that millions of families were struggling without help before the pandemic, which has had a detrimental impact on some of the most vulnerable families and children.

Not all teenagers who are exploited or involved in the criminal justice system will have grown up with disadvantage, but the statistics speak for themselves. Over half (56%) of children sentenced are currently or have previously been a Child in Need and seven in 10 have identified mental health needs.<sup>73</sup> 86% of boys in young offender institutions have previously been excluded from school.<sup>74</sup> When compared to their peers, children in residential care are at least 13 times more likely to be criminalised.<sup>75</sup>

We know how and why some of these teenagers end up in crisis. They will often tell us themselves: early signs of a parent's addiction, severe mental health conditions or domestic violence were left to worsen; parents were struggling to cope and provide the care and stability that their young children needed; problems in school led to exclusion; bereavement and loss at a young age, without any support. Far too frequently, these serious problems are being missed and go unidentified, with difficulties being left to escalate and children going without the help or protection they need until a crisis occurs.

This can end in tragedy. As we have stated, examination of the 60 most serious case reviews in Croydon, published in 2019, found these children experienced multiple adversities.<sup>76</sup>

As well as the hardships that the children were experiencing at least 41 had received fixed term exclusions in secondary school, and 28% had faced homelessness and multiple moves between temporary accommodation.<sup>77</sup>

Identifying these different needs and providing early support, and then continued support throughout their school years, is an essential part of diverting young people away from offending. We know too how children with these types of additional needs are more likely to be excluded from school, a known trigger point for increased risk. It is astonishing – but perhaps not surprising – that 85% of boys in young offenders' institutes had been excluded from school before coming into custody.

Most families need support at some time, but for those who face acute challenges and disadvantages in their life, long-term support from professionals, family members and communities can often be essential. Too often, vulnerable children and families are slipping from view. Our systems of support have to do more to identify and respond to vulnerability early if we were to improve the life chances of our most disadvantaged children. If vulnerable families do not receive help, and – in some cases – intensive intervention, then problems can get worse. So many of the teenagers this Commission is designed to support and divert from crisis entered their teens facing harm, exploitation, and serious violence because interventions were not made earlier in their lives.

In its 2019 *Childhood Vulnerability Report*, the OCC used a fictional example of a two-year-old child called Ben, whose parents are homeless, living in a B&B. Both parents have poor mental health, and this home life affects Ben's development.<sup>78</sup> The family does not receive any help and by the age of five, Ben's father is drinking too much. Ben starts school already behind his classmates and not meeting more than half of his developmental benchmarks.

<sup>73</sup> Youth Justice board/Ministry of Justice (2020). *Assessing the needs of sentenced children in the Youth Justice System 2018/19*

<sup>74</sup> Transforming Youth Custody (2014). *Impact Assessment – Ministry of Justice*

<sup>75</sup> Children's Commissioner (2020). *Injustice or In Justice*

<sup>76</sup> *Op cit.* Croydon Safeguarding Children Board (February 2019).

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>78</sup> *Op cit* OCC 2019.

Ben finds it hard to communicate and manage how he feels, has difficulty understanding things, and loses his temper when he is confused. By the time Ben is 12, he has been expelled from school. He never received help for his emotional and communication problems, which led to violent behaviour in the home and the classroom. By the age of 14, Ben is spending a lot of time out of the house and is in a gang, running drugs. His family want him out of the house because he is aggressive. After a fight where he is stabbed, Ben is taken into care. No foster family will take him in, and he is placed in a children's home 100 miles from home. By the age of 16, Ben has already been in three different children's homes. He frequently runs away. He is caught up in a fight and ends up in custody. He also has a six-month-old daughter. When he leaves prison, he doesn't know where he will live, he has no contact with his family and no qualifications.

Although Ben's trajectory is fictional, these experiences are the reality for many thousands of children in England. Children like 'Ben' need the right help at the right time to flourish. Early intervention tackles problems but also builds a protective scaffolding around the child and family to build resilience and support them to succeed. Many parents who have had the support of a trusted children's centre or Family Hub, say how they have been able to get through periods of despair, build their confidence and friendships, and tackle their long-term problems of addiction, poor housing or domestic abuse, whilst their children have got the help and support they need.

## THE EARLY YEARS

Pregnancy, birth and the first 24 months can be tough for every parent and some may find it hard to provide the care and attention their baby needs. But it can also be a chance to affect great change, as pregnancy and the birth of a baby is a critical 'window of opportunity' when parents are especially receptive to offers of advice and support.

From birth to 18 months, connections in the brain are created at a rate of one million per second. Poor attachment and early exposure to trauma and high levels of anxiety affect the developing brain, particularly in those areas involved in emotions and learning. Such overwhelming stress can hard wire a fight or flight mechanism which can have long lasting consequences throughout life, effecting physical and mental health, relationships and ability to regulate emotions. A foetus or baby exposed to toxic stress can have their responses to stress (cortisol) distorted in later life.

## ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES

*'Adverse Childhood Experiences' (ACEs) include being the victim of child abuse or neglect, and living with parental mental ill health, parental substance abuse or domestic abuse. These are not only traumatic and dangerous for a child at the time, but also predict poor outcomes in adulthood, particularly poor mental health, violent behaviour and problematic substance use.*

*It is important to acknowledge the impact of these experiences and to address how we can mitigate these ACEs in childhood, as well as reduce their onward transmission by supporting parents who themselves experienced ACEs. But as a recent review by the Early Intervention Foundation pointed out, it is important not to focus on ACEs to the exclusion of everything else. Many other early childhood experiences – such as experiencing bullying, discrimination, or parental conflict – can increase children's chances of experiencing depression, anxiety and conduct problems. A home free from adversity and stress must also mean a home free from poverty, which not only increases children's chances of experiencing ACEs but also is in itself one of the main drivers of poor outcomes for children.*

This early stress can come from the mother suffering from depression or anxiety, having a bad relationship with her partner, or a trauma such as bereavement. International studies show that when a baby's development falls behind the norm during the first year of life, they are then much more likely to fall even further behind in subsequent years, than to catch up with those who have had a better start.<sup>79</sup> For babies and toddlers, good, loving relationships with caregivers underpin everything. Without care from parents that is nurturing and responsive to their needs and feelings, whatever else that we want for children will be much harder to achieve. Children who grow up with a secure attachment to a caregiver have been shown to have better outcomes than non-securely attached children in social and emotional development, educational achievement and mental health.

There is a strong body of research to show that children who are speaking and communicating well, who are curious and exploring the world and making sense of numbers do better later in life. We also know that the educational attainment gaps between richer and poorer teenagers are already present at a very young age, with low-income children on average over a year behind their peers at school entry.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Gov.UK (25 March 2021) *The best start for life: a vision for the first 1001 critical days.*

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

Only 57% of children from deprived backgrounds achieve all their learning goals at five compared to 74% of other children.<sup>81</sup> Research has shown that children with poor vocabulary skills are twice as likely to be unemployed when they grow up,<sup>82</sup> and over 60% of children in Young Offender Institutions have communication difficulties.

We know that children who at an early age can manage their own emotions and behaviour go on to have much better outcomes later in life. Babies and very young children cannot regulate their emotions alone, and so need help from parents and carers to do so, which in turn helps them learn to regulate their emotions independently. Evidence shows that children who are less able to control their feelings and behaviour in the early years are more likely to have worse long-term outcomes, for example they are more likely to struggle in education.

Children with poorer socio-emotional skills at age 10 are more likely to experience unemployment and to have a criminal conviction by the time they are adults.<sup>83</sup> Long-term health outcomes have also been connected to these early skills, with children's socio-emotional skills at five years of age often predictive of a likelihood of smoking and obesity in adolescence.<sup>84</sup>

Although much of the research focuses on the 'skills' of managing emotions, deferring gratification and showing an ability to concentrate, there is also evidence that early childhood wellbeing more broadly is closely related to later outcomes with significant effects on income, wages, employment, social mobility and relationship choices. 13% of children beginning school have failed to meet half of their expected development indicators on the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile.<sup>85</sup> On average, 40% of the overall development gap between disadvantaged 16-year-olds and their peers has already emerged by age five.<sup>86</sup>

More than one in five of all children in our most deprived communities start school so far behind that they will struggle to ever catch up. Children who are this far behind in the early years are also more likely to be excluded from school or have involvement from social services by the time they are 11.<sup>87</sup>

## CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS



Percentage of people identified as having a learning disability or difficulty following assessment on entry to prison in 2017–18.<sup>88</sup>



Percentage of children who offend that have communication difficulties. Of this group, around half have poor or very poor communication skills.<sup>89</sup>

Children with special education needs are more likely to be excluded from school. In 2018/19 they accounted for 44% of permanent exclusions overall, as well as 82% of permanent exclusions from primary schools.<sup>90</sup> This is twice the rate for children with an EHCP. Children with special education needs have markedly worse educational attainment than their peers across all headline measures; those with additional vulnerabilities struggle even more.



Percentage of children receiving special education needs support eligible for free school meals.<sup>91</sup>



Percentage of children receiving special education needs support and who have a social worker.<sup>92</sup>



Proportion of children receiving SEN support eligible for free school meals and have a social worker.<sup>93</sup>

This highlights the importance of work around education, such as the charity School-Home Support, which works with children and the entire family in a holistic manner, to help improve a child's education and life chances, based on the understanding that problems beyond the classroom affect a child's ability to be in school and ready to learn.

<sup>81</sup> UK Parliament (2021). Giving Every Baby the Best Start in Life - Hansard

<sup>82</sup> ICan – Help Children Communicate (2021). *Understanding Developmental Language Disorder*.

<sup>83</sup> Early Intervention Foundation 920150. *Social And Emotional Skills In Childhood and their Long- Term Effects On Adult Life: A review for the Early Intervention Foundation*.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>85</sup> Education Policy Institute (July 2019). *Education in England: Annual Report 2019*.

<sup>86</sup> Education Policy Institute (2016). *Divergent Pathway: the disadvantage gap, accountability and the pupil premium*.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>88</sup> Prison Reform Trust Bromley Briefing 2021

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>90</sup> DfE (30 July 2020)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/permanent-and-fixed-period-exclusions-in-england-2018-to-2019>

<sup>91</sup> Key stage 4 performance 2019 (revised) - GOV.UK ([www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk))

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid*.

## SUPPORT THROUGH TRANSITION AND TOWARDS ADULTHOOD

Young people and parents often say how the move from primary to secondary school was the time when problems escalated. Moving from the small, intimate primary school, where there are strong links to families and the community, to a larger secondary and growing independence can be overwhelming. The size and scale of the new school can increase pressure as children struggle to find their own identity, develop social skills and make friends. Children talk of the pressure to be popular and fit in. This is often amplified by social media and its own sense of success. Some children, especially those with special education needs, struggle with the growing requirement for independence and the busy school timetable.

"It was OK at primary school," a 13-year-old boy who had been taken off the school roll to be educated at home told us. "It was small, and people knew me and how I was. I knew who to go to for help and they talked to my mum. It's not like that at the new school. No one knows me and when things go wrong, they think I am doing it deliberately and then I get punished. I don't know other kids and they just laugh at me."



Percentage of women in prison expelled or permanently excluded (13% for men in prison), compared to 1% of the national population.<sup>94</sup>

We will look at how schools are supporting children who are vulnerable and what more needs to be done in our next report, but it is clear that the transition to secondary school can often escalate difficulties and be a trigger to greater risks. Without the protective factor of school in their lives, parents often describe how they can see their children decline. They talk about the feeling of rejection their children feel, spending long periods at home, unable to learn or be with friends. Restricted timetables leave hours each day unfilled with limited opportunities to build relationships with trusted adults. None of this goes unnoticed by those that are looking for vulnerable children to exploit. Many parents told us how they worked tirelessly to find ways of keeping their children safe and in school.

Parents of children with special education needs talk of becoming experts in assessment criteria, processes and entitlements to secure support. Some struggle to get that support for their children and can find a combination of daily phone calls of concern from the school and their child's growing level of distress means that taking their children out of school to be educated at home is the only option.

Navigating the system of support for children can be overwhelming for any family and for those already struggling, it can feel almost impossible. Supporting families to find the formal and informal support they need to help their children stay safe and build their own resilience is as vital as children approach adolescence as it is when they are first born.

### GRACE AND TERI

*Teri and her daughter Grace have struggled to find secure housing for years and have been living in temporary accommodation. As Grace became a teenager, their living arrangements became too cramped, and they lacked basic facilities. Grace moved in with her Nan, who had mental health problems and was unable to properly look after her. Grace started to truant from school and her behaviour was becoming unmanageable. Interventions are being made to keep her in school and she is now on a Child Protection Plan. The police have become involved after antisocial behaviour incidents and there are fears that she is becoming exposed to grooming and exploitation as her whereabouts are often unknown outside school. Grace had a managed move three times unsuccessfully and the school is looking at whether she needs to be referred to a PRU.*

*Teri was referred to the Oasis family support team and a support worker has been able to meet some of her practical needs, including providing a fridge and cooker and grants for a phone and data. They have built a trusting relationship with Teri, are acting as an advocate for her. She has started some counselling.*

*Temporary accommodation remains the biggest issue for Teri and Grace. Children's social care have tried to help but there has been no progress. Even senior social care and department leads have had no success in securing better housing for the family, despite the family's vulnerability. This lack of joined up support is leaving the family in limbo, costing them their future, and the state more money. Oasis is continuing to put pressure on the housing department, while continuing to work with Teri to keep her engaged with what is happening with Grace's school and her social worker. But relationships with statutory services remain fractious. Each time social care reviews come around, Teri struggles, often disengages and feels patronised. The social worker has good intentions but has lost the trust of the family. Teri still feels children's social care have been unable to create any positive pathways to enable the family to have a more stable home.*

<sup>94</sup> Prison Reform Trust Bromley Briefing 2021

## 4 DELIVERING SUPPORT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE AND THEIR FAMILIES

It is clear from our conversations and the statistics that there are many families in crisis and on the edge of crisis who are not getting the help they need. Many are failing through the gaps in services, and many are passed from pillar to post with occasional short-term interventions that have little long-term impact. As we set out in the last chapter, the Commission understands the need for early intervention as children grow up. However, our focus is on reducing the risks of harm to teenagers and we have therefore examined programmes that are working with children largely over the age of 11 and their families.

Our conversations with parents show both the paucity of support available and the lack of co-ordination and coherence of what is on offer. Both the Safeguarding National Review Panel and the Independent Review into Children's Social Care have raised concerns about serious failures in multi-agency working to protect teenagers at risk of exploitation. The Lords Public Services Committee has also highlighted this as a major weakness in the report of their recent inquiry into vulnerable children and public services.

Some children are falling into crisis that would not do so if their families had received help. Justice Keehan, a High Court judge in the Family Division, was asked by the president of the family court to review the family justice system for those in care proceedings. He estimated that about a third of cases that come to court should have been dealt with through properly resourced social work, rather than a legal case. This is nearly 27,000 in the care system who, with the right support, may not have needed to be there.<sup>95</sup>

Behind all of this lies the reality of a decade of reduction in funding for early intervention. Whilst there have been a few encouraging signs of a growing understanding of the importance of early intervention, as the Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS) has said, the UK could be headed for a new era of austerity<sup>96</sup> and the Government's commitment to primary prevention and early intervention needs to hold if we are to make a significant step change early intervention services, including effective partnerships with families.

As outlined earlier in this report, the parents that we have spoken to have gone through – or are still going through – the devastating process that follows discovering that their teenager was being groomed and/or was involved in activity that was placing them at risk, often without help and support.

However, there are signs of an emerging renewed interest in family support nationally. Whilst still in their infancy, the development of Family Hubs is encouraging. The extension of funding for the Supporting Families Programme is also a positive step. Yet this is a low bar. There is no getting away from the reduction in funding for early intervention over the last decade and, with local authorities strapped for cash, many are the first to say that Supporting Families is now their main and sometimes only way of offering early support.

New commitments, while welcome are also not of the scale to be transformative and are certainly not of the scale of family interventions a decade ago. While some good programmes are being developed, most remain short term or in their pilot phase. The scale of crisis facing many teenagers and families demands much, much more.

### **FAMILY SUPPORT PROGRAMMES**

There are some signs of good intentions and some progress in some areas as local authorities and their partners take on new approaches to joined up working with families. The Family Safeguarding work pioneered in Hertfordshire and extended across a number of local authorities has resulted in statistically significant reductions in looked after children and/or Child Protection Plans following its introduction. Police call-outs have reduced by up to two-thirds and there are signs that the approach is reducing the frequency of unplanned, reactive mental health contacts amongst the adults it supports. The data available to the evaluation suggests that the financial case for Family Safeguarding is strong.<sup>97</sup>

<sup>95</sup> Polly Curtis: *Behind Closed Doors*. (Little Brown Group 2022).

<sup>96</sup> "Britain heading for new era of austerity think tank warns". *Guardian* (18 March 2022).

<sup>97</sup> Marmot M. et al (2020) *Health Equity in England: The Marmot Review 10 years on*. The Health Foundation.

The Leeds Family Valued programme has similarly been taken up by several authorities, supported by DfE funding with widely recognised positive results. This family focused approach, utilising the potential support from extended families through family group conferences has seen positive results from the number of children going into care to youth justice.

Other family focused programmes, funded through the DfE Innovation Programme over recent years have also shown promise. We highlighted the Catch 22 programme to reduce the number of children going into care in our last report. The 'Bradford B Positive Pathways Project' has incorporated the well-respected North Yorkshire 'No Wrong Door' approach with the Mockingbird model of fostering support to make support available to children in care or on the edge of care, and to foster families. The aim is to, where possible, return children safely back home and to prevent entry into care in the first place.

The Right Home Project in Calderdale sought to support vulnerable adolescents and their families to prevent family breakdown and its consequences for young people, such as homelessness and entering care. It aims to divert adolescents into the right home, at the right time with the right care and support around them and their families. In Windsor and Maidenhead, a partnership is offering culturally attuned family support and early help for families within the context of two community 'hubs' based in areas where there is perceived to be a higher incidence of children coming into care and or with a child protection plan. We find other examples of good practice, including WalkWithMeUK, a peer-led support service that focuses on building family resilience and giving parents and carers the tools that they need to best engage with their older children.

Mel Meggs, Strategic Director of Children's Services in Kirklees told us about three programmes designed to support young people and families to stay safe:

**Working with children and families to reduce exploitation.** Youth Endowment Fund-ed multi-systemic therapy focused on working with children and families around exploitation. A restorative, evidenced-based intervention working intensively with the families of young people aged 11-17 where families are seen as partners and not as the problem.

**Support through transition.** STARS (School Transition and Reach Service) is a structured intensive family and community-based intervention.

The project was developed to support those children and their families who are likely to struggle with transitions, and where there has been early identification of risk. Programmes focus on risk factors that could increase the potential of child exploitation including sexual, criminal, gang affiliation and radicalisation, and the impact and risks of domestic abuse. The aim is to increase protective factors that support children and young people and make them resilient, such as positive engagement in community and education, high self-esteem, ability to manage emotions, supportive family and peer relationships.

**Long term support for young people.** A new youth plan developed with the young person. The aim is to make the system child focused while ensuring that families are not excluded from the process.

These are all positive programmes with the potential of wider dissemination into mainstream practice.

## CONTEXTUAL SAFEGUARDING, HACKNEY

*A joined-up multi-agency approach is fundamental to the project, which aims to redesign the safeguarding system to address risk or harm experienced by adolescents outside the family home, including child sexual and criminal exploitation, peer-on-peer abuse, serious youth violence, and gang affiliation. Drawing on Contextual Safeguarding Theory, the project has worked to create systems that can effectively address these risks, recognising that to do so effectively requires overcoming more siloed traditions of working in different agencies, as well as 'significant cultural shifts towards a more welfare-oriented response to young people, some of whom commit offences, across interagency systems', including criminal justice, the police, health and education. The project also works to build partnerships with community stakeholders including transport providers, retailers, residents' associations, recreation services and youth workers.*

*A key change introduced by the project is that agencies can now make single referrals for peer groups, as well as schools or neighbourhood locations where it is believed that they facilitate extra-familial risk. A multi-agency panel and 'Context Safeguarding Conferences' can now also agree to take action in relation to these groups and places, as well as individual young people.*

## THE JACKSON FAMILY

The Jackson family includes four children who all went to the same primary school. The eldest, Mark, was a talented musician when he was a child. His dad at home – who is disabled and is cared for by Mark's mum – isn't his birth father but is the father of two of his younger siblings. Mark had to help out at home, including looking after the younger children and the family received some help from Oasis community projects with their finances, childcare and with visits to Mark to see check he was doing OK.

In Year 8, Mark was excluded from his secondary school. He began attending a PRU, which had significant problems with gangs and drugs, and became friends with a group of boys that his mother did not feel were a good influence. Mark's mum was already struggling; she didn't trust the statutory authorities who were involved and felt social services and others had not supported the family earlier and had not helped to prevent Mark from being excluded from school.

Mark was stabbed on public transport and attended A&E. While he was there, he was referred to the Oasis youth workers based at the hospital. To begin with he didn't engage, but the youth worker was persistent and consistent in keeping in contact with him and his family. Mark was by now disappearing for nights and then days at a time and his mum had no idea where he was and felt helpless. By now Mark was known to the police and becoming involved in petty theft and fraud.

When he was 15, Mark's mother decided to move him overseas as she felt this was the only way to keep him safe. Within a year Mark was back after social services and police agreed he could return, despite this being against his mum's wishes. Within a few months, he was arrested in possession of a firearm, and was remanded in custody awaiting trial. The Oasis family support team supported Mark's mum, acting as an advocate, ensuring she understood what was happening and the legal process, being there for her during the hearing and sentencing, and visiting Mark with her after his conviction. Oasis also provided family support for the younger siblings who are much more likely to be at risk of becoming involved with gangs and crime because of their elder sibling's involvement. When the family's second eldest child, James, transitioned to an Oasis secondary school, the Oasis family support team were able to build on their existing relationship with the family to continue to offer support to him and check on how he was settling in.

James was hanging around the streets after school until late, and family support workers worked with his mother to put a curfew in place, so he was home by 5.30pm. This worked well. During the school holidays, Oasis family support workers encouraged the family to get involved with holiday clubs, trips and activities, music programmes and fun experiences, the children attending with their mum and on their own. They created a network of people around the family who they trusted and felt safe with. This gave the children confidence that there are people who know, love and care about them across the community, who they can talk to, who are looking out for them, who have high expectations of them and who will encourage them with learning to reach their potential.

After a year in custody, Mark was released with a tag and curfew and went back to live with his family. Within a year, he had been arrested for possession of a weapon and was back in custody. Although his siblings were older now and able to understand what was happening, and despite being on a Child Protection Plan, there was still little support from or trust in social care, particularly for Mark's mum. Mark was released again but broke his curfew and was rearrested, this time, as he was now 18, he was placed in adult custody. His mum did not want him in the family home on release and Mark was housed outside the borough to keep him away from the gang he had become involved with.

Oasis family support workers are continuing to support and advocate for Mark's mother and they have helped her build a trusting relationship with a new social worker, who has developed a strong rapport with the family. Mark is still not allowed to visit the home whenever he likes but is receiving positive visits from his siblings and they had a good Christmas together. Family support workers are continuing to help Mark's mother access support around employability, confidence and participation in activities, community and parenting opportunities. All three of her children are receiving support from Oasis and their youth and family support team will continue to work with the family and the children's school as they grow up.

## **LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIP- AND COMMUNITY-BASED HELP**

These programmes and interventions are offering important support for young people and their families but until they become part and parcel of the local infrastructure, most families will continue to go without the help they need. But it is not only the availability of support that is failing to meet the level of need but also the nature of that support and the conveyor belt of assessments as families are passed between agencies before help is given. Once support is agreed it will often be a short-term, one-off intervention and too often the case is closed without much effect. Some Directors of Children's Services highlighted an over-focus on clunky assessment forms at the expense of building relationships between statutory services and families.

Sadly, too many of the families we have spoken to have little time for statutory agencies: dismissive of their ability to offer real meaningful help and suspicious of their motives, worried about feeling judged and about the power to take their children away. The impression of many was of services that are inflexible and rigid, and about process rather than people. This was a view shared by some practitioners. One senior practitioner in a London authority told us how too often 'teachable moments' are lost because children are simply waiting too long for anything to happen, and that too many children are missing out on support when they first need it. By the time they receive any help, they are already in crisis. She described the assessment system for support as being bureaucratic, slow, tick-box and matrix-driven.

The support and programmes we have been impressed with are those taking a very different approach. In addition to those highlighted, below are three that we visited, which are providing the long-term, bespoke and relationship-based care families tell us they would like:

**ShiftUK in Greenwich** is working closely with 20 young people at risk of becoming involved in the criminal justice system, and their families. Shift 'Guides' are selected because of their ability – rather than their professional title – to work empathetically with young people. The team includes social workers, residential care home workers, youth workers and those with lived experience. The Guide works closely with the young person and their family for around 18 months, helping to build relationships and skills, to navigate local services and support teenagers to build confidence, attend and progress in school and develop relationships.

The emphasis is on hope and aspiration; doing whatever it takes to help families progress and support themselves. Relationship-building is at the core of their model. This means 'going with the flow' with the family, being flexible and informal. As a result, families are more relaxed and accepting of support.

**The Hertfordshire Transforming Care Keyworker Programme** works with young people with a learning disability, autism or both with the most complex needs. The designated keyworker scheme is part of the wider Hertfordshire Safeguarding Families partnership with the County Council. The 0 – 25 partnership also includes the Transitional Safeguarding Programme from Research in Practice, the Children's Society and Bedfordshire University. The Transforming Care Programme brings together the professionals working with a family as one team. It provides long-term support for vulnerable teenagers and their families over an 18-month period via a children's keyworker who works with a small number of young people over the period.

The emphasis, once again, is on understanding the individual, building relationships and skills and working intensely over time to build the capacity of the family. Keyworkers work at the pace of the young person and family, following their lead. The families we spoke to could not speak highly enough of the support and the difference it made. The key-working model has been developed through extensive consultation with young people, parents, carers and other stakeholders, including co-producing with the national parent carer participation forum.

**Oasis Community Hubs** work alongside the Oasis schools to build a strong, safe and resilient community. They work holistically with schools, partners and residents. Programmes enable young people and families to develop the skills and character to be more independent and actively involve community members in designing, delivering and leading activities. Activities include youth clubs, NEET interventions, mentoring and vulnerable family support, as well as holiday activities, community kitchen, farm and growing projects and a financial inclusion project. For a community hard hit by loss of earnings during the pandemic, an essential focus for families has been on employment skills and confidence. We visited the Oasis community hub in Oldham and saw how positive relationships and trusted workers are at the heart of all they do; this means that families feel able to reach out for help when problems occur, and youth workers are able to work with young people to help keep them safe.

We also visited Oasis Hub Hadley in Enfield, where a team of community workers and volunteers run a variety of services including food parcels, one-to-one mentoring and parenting support. Oasis Academy Hadley is part of Oasis Hub Hadley, with the community centre situated just over the road from the main school building. It caters to the needs of the whole community and is clearly a trusted asset for many families and young people who are often deeply distrustful of statutory services. Its whole approach is based on building trust and sticking with families, and it supports families to engage with those statutory services they may otherwise not engage with.

## **SUPPORTING FAMILIES PROGRAMME AND FAMILY HUBS**

Now in its second decade, the Supporting Families Programme remains the largest national intervention to support families with multiple disadvantages through a whole family, keyworker approach. The Youth Endowment Fund is working with the Supporting Families team to gain insight into how interventions are delivered by local areas and their partners. This should provide important insights to the work of the Supporting Families Programme and local authorities and their partners more generally.

The Supporting Families Programme (previously called the Troubled Families Programme) takes a whole family approach and is delivered through a trusted key worker, allowing locally available services and specialist support to be drawn together for the family in a coordinated way. It works with families with multiple disadvantages. The most recent 2015-2020 evaluation of its work showed the programme was successful in reducing the proportion of children in care, with 2.5% of the comparison group having children in care compared to 1.5% of the programme group; a 32% difference for this cohort at 19-24 months after joining the programme.<sup>98</sup> Adults receiving custodial sentences fell from 1.6% to 1.2% (25% decrease); young people receiving custodial sentences fell from 0.8% to 0.5% (38% decrease) and adults claiming Jobseeker's Allowance fell by 11%. Over 80% said their key worker was helpful, with this increasing to 91% for those who saw their key worker every week.

A cost benefit analysis showed the programme provides £2.28 of savings for every pound invested. The Government announced in the last spending review that it is to invest an additional £200 million over the next three years to expand the Supporting Families Programme.<sup>99</sup>

In evidence given to the Commission, the Local Government Association (LGA) said councils support the cross-cutting approach of the Supporting Families Programme and would like to see this integrated, preventative approach to understanding and addressing disadvantage embedded more widely across government.

We spoke to the Supporting Families Programme, and whilst it plays an important role in delivering support for families, it remains a relatively small amount of funding compared to other resources spent by children's services. For example, in one London authority Supporting Families spends about £1 million, whereas in total they spend around £9 million on children's services. However, Supporting Families does make up a sizeable portion of total preventative and early help spend.

## **SAFER OPTIONS**

*Safer Options is Bristol's multi-agency partnership response to youth violence, county lines, drug dealing, and children and young people exploited for criminal activities. It is supported by Supporting Families, with local data sharing accelerated by national funding and a whole family key working approach linked to community safety initiatives in a public health approach to violence prevention.*

*The team identifies children and young people at risk using intelligence from the community, police, statutory partners and predictive risk analysis of known vulnerabilities. The team ensure joined up working across Bristol's services, including early help teams, children's social care, and youth offending teams. Families with multiple needs in Bristol are allocated a keyworker who takes a whole family approach. 2019 saw these Safer Options mechanisms respond rapidly to a sudden rise in serious violent youth crime incidents.*

*The systems in place worked swiftly to identify those involved and implemented preventative tactics to bring the situation under control. At its heart, Safer Options enables the local system to respond to risks yet goes further. Its principles are intelligence led, evidence based and focused on prevention and whole family working.*

<sup>98</sup> Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 2019

<sup>99</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/supporting-families-programme-funding-allocations-by-local-authority-area-2022-2023>

With local discretion, the programme does not stipulate what work should be undertaken with the group of young people this Commission is focusing on. We were told that the default is around early intervention with younger children, an area that has had an increasing focus. However, there is still the potential to work with the most challenging families and around 10% have already committed a crime or have an anti-social behaviour order.

The key issue is the group of children who are involved in violence and harm and involved in the criminal justice system, which has already been the focus of Supporting Families interventions in local areas. The level of interest in funds for these purposes is high, suggesting that there is the scope for an extended focus on these young people and their families in some parts of the country.

## PRIORITIES FOR REFORM

In the meantime, our evidence sessions suggest key priority areas for delivering family support for young people at risk of violence, exploitation and becoming involved in the criminal justice system:

- **Changing the culture of support.** We have learned through Supporting Families that it is essential to not address a young person's issue (for example, persistent low attendance) in isolation. A whole-family approach is needed to ensure the family is worked with and supported as a unit, given issues impact a family as a collective. The whole-family approach ensures that practitioners can understand the root cause of behaviour and find out what family factors could be driving it. This promotes a culture of not treating the symptoms of an issue but addressing the underlying cause to stop the issue re-emerging. Adopting a whole-family approach to support in local areas will help practitioners dig deeper into the drivers that lead children to be vulnerable to gangs, crime and exploitation. Additional to this, young people often need an independent relationship with a skilled and trusted professional focused on their needs within the context of a whole family, systemic approach. This is essential to maintain sight of issues affecting both child and parent(s).
- **Strengthening youth support.** The role of the community is integral in ensuring young people are deterred from crime. Considering the role of contextual safeguarding and creating safe spaces for children outside of school is essential to tackling routes into crime.

The £82m Family Hubs investment announced at the Budget in 2021 will aid in creating more safe spaces in high-risk areas but there needs to be coherency and join up between these community-based services if they are to work effectively. We should consider how to best utilise existing services to strengthen the coordination and cohesion of youth support on the ground.

- **Trauma-informed working.** Schools and services working with young people would benefit from an increased awareness of trauma-informed working and how this can be embedded in practice to better support young people and their families. Trauma-informed working recognises families where they may be vulnerable as both victims or preparators of crime and ensures that support is given with an enhanced awareness and understanding of the impacts of trauma on behaviour, communication and mental health.

Access to evidence-based trauma recovery and family therapeutic services is essential for families whose issues are entrenched and complex. While tight budgets may be a barrier to local areas investing in trauma-informed training for practitioners, we should aim to promote an awareness of the benefits of moving towards this bespoke style of support, particularly in cases of youth crime/violence. This should be part of an overall practice framework in a local area, bringing together the tools and strategies practitioners across the multi-agency workforce use to support young people and families.

- **Multi-agency working.** Services that work around families in need – particularly education, social care, crime/police, housing and welfare – all need to be working more closely together to aid in recognising and supporting children at risk. The more public services can share data on families in need, the more we can prevent children falling through the gaps. This will be particularly important for the role of schools in monitoring attendance, as lowered attendance rates and exclusion are often warning signs of deeper issues, such as a child being involved in crime. We need to go further to ensure relevant services can spot red flags early, before issues escalate.

In considering how services are integrated, it will be important to align youth offending and other services for young people and families. Often, separate systems/pathways and disjointedness means that children who interact with the justice system, and their families, are not connected proactively with other support services to address whole family needs.

At a local level, services need to be integrated with relevant services around them (for example, through family hubs) to ensure children who are vulnerable to crime/exploitation can access support. Co-location, flexible working and integrated assessment and case management systems play an essential role in this.

## **FAMILY HUBS**

A Family Hub is a system-wide model of providing whole-family, joined up, family support services. They deliver these family support services from pregnancy, through the child's early years and later childhood, and into early adulthood until they reach the age of 19 (or up to 25 for young people with special educational needs and disabilities).

Family Hubs aim to make a positive difference to parents, carers and their children, through providing a mix of physical and virtual spaces, as well as home visits for families to easily access non-judgemental support for the challenges they may be facing. They should be there to provide a universal 'front door' to families, offering a one-stop shop of services to meet their social care, education, mental health and physical health needs.

As highlighted above, new investment in Family Hubs offers an opportunity to both provide specialist services and support for vulnerable teenagers and their families and co-ordinate the work of local partners and agencies for this group of children. The 0 – 19 model has been delivered by some charities and local authorities from the outset of children's centres, but it is only now that it is being incentivised as core business. This is a new development for the majority of centres.

For many local areas, the move towards Family Hubs is one that is built on their experience in delivering children's centres. Local authorities such as Doncaster moved to a Family Hub model over recent years. More recently, local authorities have been invited to bid for one-off transformation funds to establish a Family Hub approach across their locality. 12 local authorities will share this £34m fund with a further £82 million committed in the last spending review to establish Family Hubs in 75 local authorities over the next three years. This is a far cry from the £1.8bn per year investment in Sure Start children's centres at their peak, though these commitments present a welcome opportunity and have the potential to play an important role in developing and delivering better joined up support for older children.

The early stage of development of Family Hubs services for older children was reflected in our discussion with our witnesses. David Holmes, CEO of Family Action and Jon Brown at Barnardo's are both established providers of children's centres and proponents of Family Hubs. They said that whilst their experience showed that there was a strong demand for models of Family Hubs that could work with older children, both in doing preventative work and crisis intervention, developments and models were very much in their infancy. The potential for strong bespoke programmes of support for teenagers at risk and their families is real but they are not yet in place. Developing these models alongside local communities with the backing of funding is now a priority.

Both Bristol and Enfield are proposing to establish a teenage at-risk focus to Family Hubs, which will provide both access to preventative support and targeted support for teenagers at risk. This would build close links with existing youth provision and schools. Bradford has developed a Family Hub approach over recent years, but the emphasis has been on support for young children and their families. The authority is now extending the reach to older children and teenagers. This includes linking with the Bradford Break the Cycle scheme, Youth Justice Service and YMCA for vulnerable young people at risk of crime. Bradford is looking to provide family support workers in schools and extending family hub training and activities to secondary schools in target areas of need across the city.

These are positive developments which have the potential to begin to put a sharper focus on meeting the needs of older children to prevent risk and harm. However, the form that this will take is far from clear and will therefore differ between areas. Unlike the Family Hub start for life offer, there is no set requirement for a teenage and family package in Family Hubs. This is something that our evidence suggests needs to change.

When researching family focused programmes, the Youth Endowment Fund found that interventions of family focused support for older children are less evidenced than with younger children', particularly in relation to return on investment assessments. They explored two groups of family interventions. The first, programmes based on parenting and clinical therapies, were well evidenced and scalable. In relation to the second, based on domestic abuse and parental conflict, a lack of knowledge could be seen as a barrier to scaling best practice.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Forthcoming Youth Endowment Fund.

## LEARNING FROM SURE START CHILDREN'S CENTRES

*Early evidence from the Sure Start children's centre programme showed a positive improvement in parent and child relationships and an improvement in children's early self-regulation – two aspects that are central to the positive outcomes for teenagers and their families. An evaluation by the Institute of Fiscal Studies showed a significant reduction in hospitalisations of children attending persisting into the teenage years with an 8% reduction in hospitalisation of 11 to 15-year-olds each year.*

*The model combining universal services with an area-based focus on disadvantaged neighbourhoods was seen by the IFS as providing "important lessons for existing services (such as Family Hubs) and should inform the government's approach to the recommendations in the recent Leadsom Report on the first 1,001 days of life.*

## KINSHIP CARE

The Commission's first report highlighted how the children's social care system too often breaks, rather than builds, relationships for children in or on the edge of care. The charity-led, Care Inquiry in 2013, came to very similar conclusions and research shows that stability and support from their family and community are the most important ingredients in young people making a successful transition to adulthood.<sup>101</sup>

Sometimes this is not possible but is more likely to happen if children are placed in kinship care arrangements, which in themselves can offer some of the protective factors that reduce risk to children. In 2017, the Family Rights Group and Nuffield led Care Crisis Review concluded that family and friends were a significant untapped resource for some children in, and on the edge of care.<sup>102</sup> Greater focus on exploring and supporting this resource could, they said, safely avert many children from being moved into care, or could help them thrive in the care system.

Kinship care can happen when children whose parents are unable to look after them on a short or long-term basis and they are cared for by other relatives, like grandparents, uncles or siblings, or by other adults who have a connection to the child, such as neighbours or a close friend of the family.

Most kinship carers are grandparents raising grandchildren. Some are brothers and sisters who are raising their younger siblings. Kinship carers can also be aunts, uncles, cousins, stepparents, close family friends and others. Some children go to live with a kinship carer on a temporary basis. This may be because a parent is struggling and needs time or support to address their difficulties. Or it may be because of a crisis that will quickly resolve. But for some children, kinship care will be a long-term or permanent plan.

In our evidence session, Cathy Ashley, of the Family Rights Group acknowledged that some things have improved since 2013. For example, more children's services are using family group conferencing. In our first report, we outlined the example in the London Borough of Camden. Cathy highlighted that a third of children living in kinship care were in unregulated care previously, raising the question of why this move did not happen earlier, particularly given the risks associated with unregulated care.

The Family Rights Group supports local authorities to implement a Lifelong Links programme, bringing a network of family and friends together in a family group conference to make a plan with and for the child, which the local authority supports to ensure these relationships continue to grow. By offering Lifelong Links soon after a young person enters care, the aim is to ensure those social networks can be available for them in care, providing stability during their childhood and support as they become adults. The charity is now developing the model in prison.

Cathy wants to see a radical change to how we view kinship care in the UK. In Australia and New Zealand kinship care is the norm. Family group conferences, increasingly used in the UK, originated in New Zealand as a response to the high levels of children from indigenous communities being taken into (white) institutional care. Legislation in 1989 changed this and decisions about where children go could no longer be made without first having a family group conference that brought together all of those who care about the child to make a plan, which the state would support as long it was deemed safe and appropriate to the child's needs. The process draws on families' networks that bring wider knowledge about the familial and community context of the child, identifying potential friends or family carers and putting contingency plans in place. This process also allowed for more shared care arrangements.

<sup>101</sup> Nuffield Foundation (2013) *Making not Breaking: Building Relationships with Our Most Vulnerable Children*.

<sup>102</sup> Ryan M. and Tunnard J. *Care Crisis Review: Options for Change*, on behalf of the Family Rights Group review team (June 2018). <https://frg.org.uk/product/the-care-crisis-review-options-for-change/>

Cathy welcomes the increased focus on contextual safeguarding in the UK that is leading more local authorities to raise these questions more often. "There is currently a huge variety in how it is approached. For example, 8% of children in Durham are placed in care with wider extended family or friends, whereas in Leeds this is 29%."<sup>103</sup> While the Family Rights Group have developed good practice standards, there is no minimum standard for local authorities to proactively consider kinship arrangements. This can, according to Cathy, often leave wider families "completely at sea" and without any involvement leading to emergency decisions being made that can have long-term consequences for all. While Cathy's organisation offers legal advice, many families are unaware of this and can end up in court unrepresented and/or in debt due to costs.

Yet we know that if you ask parents who they would want to look after their children if things went wrong or if they died, 91% say it would be with family or friends.<sup>104</sup> In addition, according to the 2011 Census, around 180,000 children and young people are living with friends and family but without the support that would be entitled to if these carers were recognised officially. This includes a higher proportion of Black children living in families where they are more likely than the white population to be living in poverty.

Cathy would like to see in legislation a clear definition of kinship care and alongside this a passport to entitlement, including, for example, their additional responsibilities being recognised financially (about half of kinship carers face poverty and hardship) bereavement support where needed and/or therapeutic support available to both the kinship carer and child if needed. This is not, argued Cathy, an argument for these children to enter the 'care system' but to acknowledge that there are a lot of friends and family that are looking after children without any additional or patchy support.

When it comes to children at risk of exploitation, Cathy wants to see far more focus on identifying whether a child could voluntarily be accommodated by a friend or relative but with support available to understand the risks. Her view is that this does not happen as either the 'whole family' is seen to be in some ways culpable or – if the teenager at risk is already with friends or family – that they are seen as part of the problem.

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<sup>103</sup> Response to a Parliamentary Question tabled by Helen Hayes UIN 83443 on 29 November 2021 and answered by Will Quince MP on 2 December 2021 PQ, referring to DfE's Children looked after at 31 March 2021, who were placed with a relative or friend by local authority.

## **FAMILY DECISION MAKING – FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCES**

*By adopting an approach centred on the value and importance of Family Group Decision Making (also referred to as Family Group Conferencing) it has been shown that current patterns of entry into the care system can safely and appropriately be changed dramatically, with more children and young people being helped to be safely and appropriately looked after in their own 'family' networks.*

*Central to this is the skill in bringing family, friends and connected others together (anyone who cares enough to want to be involved in supporting the child/young person's family to stay together) to help them understand the professionals concerns and then support the family group to come up with a supported response to those concerns – always allowing the family group to have private family time (without professionals present) to work out a plan that is then presented and (in the majority of cases) signed off by the social worker as workable.*

*In Leeds the evidence suggested that 90%+ of plans drawn up by a family group were considered as good as if not better than anything a social worker could have come up with.*

The Commission agrees that kinship care should form part of the wider shift that local authority children's services need to make in relation to adjusting to the greater numbers of older children in the care system. In *Out of Harm's Way*, we argued for transitional funding including wider training and use of family group conferencing. There is a need for more research in this area, particularly in relation to Black, Brown and Minority Ethnic families, ensuring changes in practice and policy are informed by the experiences of the disproportionate number of Black families providing and using kinship care and the impacts on family life and household income.

Cathy concluded: "Alongside giving kinship carers the right to some statutory support, we need families to be involved in shaping the system, locally and nationally." She argues that better understanding of the value of kinship care and of the child's broader context early on would reduce statutory costs in the long term with less children entering the care system.

<sup>104</sup> Family Rights Group (January 2022) <https://frg.org.uk/news-blogs-and-vlogs/news/91-say-kinship-care-would-be-their-number-one-option-if-they-couldnt-care-for-their-child/>

## **BEN AND HIS FAMILY**

Ben was about 11 when he was caught dealing weed in school. While Ben has refused to be assessed and so is not diagnosed, his parents now think he has Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and, as his mother, Julie, said: "While this means he finds it difficult to focus on some things, it can also mean that when he does engage, he gets hyper interested. Ben will not discuss his diagnoses, including, the extent to which he has used – still uses – drugs to self-medicate."

Initially, Ben was picking up and dropping drugs for older kids and was paid in weed. "As far as I could work out," said Julie, "this was part of a type of pyramid selling. The older kids were getting the drugs from someone else and would then pass this; Ben struggled with academic achievement, but this seemed to give him status and access to 'grown up' things. We did wonder whether he was being groomed but having discussed it with the school, thought it was a one off." Ben did well in his SATs and when he moved to secondary school, things seemed fine. But at parents' evening at the end of year 9, Ben's parents heard from teachers that his behaviour was aggressive, that he was not working but was hanging out with older boys.

Julie recalls that when Ben was 12, she was helping him with homework when he got a call and then suddenly needed to go out. "I began to understand what was happening and it turned out it had been going on for a year. He had established a high status amongst groups of kids in the area, including older kids. Although he does not immediately present as vulnerable, he is willing and has no fear." By this time Ben had abandoned his schoolwork and, when his parents challenged him, he would tell them they were 'fucking mad' and swore blind that he was not dealing. At 13 he was beaten up and had his phone and watch taken. He had been doing a deal but had smoked some of the weed he was meant to deliver. One time, when Ben was 14, one of the dealers threw a brick through the window, contributing to the family moving.

Despite the promises he made, Ben was still smoking weed and would lose his temper when Julie threw it away. At the same time, he was a child and would sometimes ask if he could sleep on a mattress in Julie's room. By this time, she and Ben's father had split (they have since reconciled): "Things were not great but the strain of what was happening did not help and we disagreed about what we should do." Ben decided he wanted to move schools but although he had a good first term again things escalated. "Soon he was dealing at lunchtime, then after school and then before school," said Julie. "His mate had been expelled and started at a PRU and they were now dealing together. It became clear that he was involved in county lines. There was a lot of police activity and increasing chaos at home. Ben was stealing, dodging fares and smashing windows at home. When he was 15 there was a day when it really kicked off as he had taken £150 out of my account. I confronted him and he got very aggressive. A neighbour drove him around to his dad's. They got into a massive row and the police were called."

A few days later Ben disappeared again. Julie accessed his computer and found that he had been making deals, traveling around the country, sleeping in crack dens with the money underneath his body. "By now we knew the name of some of the adults involved; we told the police but he is still out there." The YOT escalated the case and the family were assigned a social worker, who alongside Ben's dad, decided that a curfew should be set for Ben and that, if he broke this, he should not be allowed back into the family home. "We registered him again with [missing persons] and the grooming register with the idea that the more triggers around Ben's name the less useful he would be to the county lines operators." Ben was picked up on his way to make a delivery. The train conductor sensed that something was wrong and contacted a police officer who found all the 'flags' against Ben's name. He begged her to arrest him as he wanted to prove why he did not get to do the drop off. "He went off again and arrived back two days later crying. Saying they would never let him go. That there was an exit fee of £500. We rang the YOT for advice and, unusually, they advised paying this."

For Julie, one of the breakthroughs was being referred to Keeping Families Together by the YOT. They met with the family once a week for over a year. "The advice they gave – which went against everything we had been told – was to always keep the door open, let him come home. He needed to still be part of the family, who are the frontline of defence. This was a massive relief. That does not mean everything is alright. Ben is always on something and we work on that. It has been exhausting and devastating. His brother is really angry and at one stage wanted Ben to go into care."

## 5 A NEW PARTNERSHIP WITH FAMILIES: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

If we continue to leave families without interventions to help their teenagers stay safe and progress, systems will continue to fail in their responsibilities to protect many teenagers at risk. We need to ensure that our default position is not to ignore, side-line or blame parents and families, often our most important assets in protecting children. Those seeking to exploit teenagers need a steady flow of vulnerable children to support their business models and they know that involved parents and families make it far harder for them to get to and groom children. That is why they work so hard to drive them apart, with a constant drip feed of doubt, secrecy and criticism, where parents are cast as a problem and hindrance. Supporting families to tackle these challenges head on and to provide the protection and support, particularly for the most vulnerable, should be at the heart of a public health approach to wellbeing and safety.

This report has shown how families in crisis are failing to get the help they need, putting their teenagers at risk of harm and violence and in some cases leading to the removal of their children into the care system. Our first report *Out of Harm's Way* has shown how teenagers are placed in a care system that is ill-equipped to support older children and that, too often, this increases the risk of exploitation and harm. A generation of vulnerable teenagers are growing up without the protection they need with some experiencing extreme violence and diminished life opportunities as a result. Sadly, some are losing their life. The growing pressure on family life – increasing levels of poverty, poor housing and mental health and prevalence of domestic violence – create a mix that is fuelling vulnerability and increasing harm.

Yet despite these problems, this report has shown how families – so often our greatest asset in supporting children and young people to thrive – are being systematically ignored by a system that is too obsessed with assessments and process. The closure of early intervention programmes like Sure Start, the decimation in funding and provision of youth services, together with the loss of adequate funding and services at a local level, means many local partnerships are no longer able to adequately respond to the majority of cases raised until crisis hits. This goes against the basic aspirations of the Children Act 1989 and leaves many parents with nowhere to go.

The result is a bleak picture of dwindling support for vulnerable families across the country as the notion of working in long-term partnership with families to build capacity gets lost to a process of statutory assessment of risk of harm. What was envisaged as a system of identifying and responding to families' needs is now a system of judgements being 'done to' families with the majority of interventions being at the point of crisis. As one of our witnesses said, this is like having a health service with just ambulances and hospitals.

Where support does exist it is often uncoordinated, inconsistent, and highly variable between localities. The notable exceptions are the charity and community support networks and programmes which are trying to fill some of the gaps; working with families to avert disaster and ploughing support into helping young people and their families to flourish. Many do so outside the statutory system with little money and little capacity to scale up. However, they hold the key to how the system could change, and with it the chances of so many young people.

We have highlighted programmes which work in this way, including the potential of Supporting Families Programme and Family Hubs. Their focus must be on working alongside the whole family, understanding their experience and context and on bringing together the support and resources of local agencies to help families succeed, including close working with charities and communities. Critically, they must also have funding to this end. In its evidence submission to the Commission, the LGA called for a multi-year financial settlement that gives local government certainty and recognises the benefits of investment. The current plans for Family Hubs are welcome but fall a very long way short of what is required.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Commission on Young Lives is proposing a 'New Partnership with Families' approach with a new high-profile strategic intent across statutory agencies, backed by a significant investment and resources. This would be at the heart of a new Teenager in Need programme and – backed by new duties for co-ordinated support for families and their teenagers – it would be applied across every element of services and support nationally and locally including schools, GPs, police, social services, youth offending teams and local safeguarding and community safeguarding boards.

Within this new framework, Family Hubs and the Supporting Families Programme would be central to funding and delivering on these duties, developing a new local infrastructure that protects teenagers with a distinct offer for those at risk. We will make our full recommendations in our final October report but our immediate additional recommendations are:

- The Independent Review of Children's Social Care puts a 'New Partnership with Families' at the heart of its approach, with support for families with teenagers at risk a priority as part of their proposals for a reformed social care system.
- The Government makes a 'New Partnership with Families' a strategic priority across all Government Departments and statutory agencies, reintroducing the Family Test promised by David Cameron in 2014 as a requirement to assess impact of all government policies.
- The Government should reaffirm the aspirations of the Children Act 1989 to work with families by introducing a legal duty for local agencies to deliver early intervention, backed by data-led early identification, to support children and families as a central aspect of a new strategic approach to support throughout childhood. This should include a specific strategy for supporting Black, Brown and Minority Ethnic families.
- Spending Reviews should set out sufficient multi-year financial settlements to local areas. This would provide greater funding certainty for councils and grassroots organisations, assist with planning and forward-thinking, and enable more long-term investment in prevention and early intervention. Government investment in early intervention should be returned to 2010 levels.
- The Government's short-term ambition should be to roll out Family Hubs in every disadvantaged area as a first step, with a longer-term ambition to extend coverage to the 3,000 communities who formerly had a Sure Start centre.
- Local authorities should establish the coherent and joined up 'teenager at risk' offer as a requirement in every Family Hub, explaining clearly to parents and teenagers what services they are entitled to and how they can access them. The Family Hub would be proactive in identifying teenagers at risk in their area, linking with safeguarding and wider statutory services, youth programmes and wider family wellbeing programmes for families with teenagers.
- The Supporting Families Programme is funded to develop a five-year extended programme of family support for older children at risk as a specialist programme to be run with every local authority and in conjunction with the Youth Endowment Fund and Violence Reduction Units.
- At the heart of the new approach would be a new 'entitlement' for families to be involved in decision making about their support through a Family Group Conference when they are referred to statutory services for help. This would bake in a partnership with families.
- The Department for Education should work at speed with local authorities and other partners to develop and trial new models of intense family support for families with teenagers at risk as part of a Teenager in Need programme. These would provide intensive interventions for teenagers on the edge of care to enable them to remain safe and with their families and must be culturally attuned to support families from Black, Brown and Minority Ethnic communities.
- The development and piloting of new shared care models of social care, which involve and build the strength and capacity of families as part of residential care.
- A national support programme to extend kinship care for teenagers at risk, including the replication of programmes such as Family Rights Group Lifelong Links programme.
- Charities and community groups should be embedded as a core partner in delivering support for children and families, including the provision of Family Hubs, with a requirement for partnership working throughout. Building strong communities to support families need to be prioritised as a key aspect of levelling up for the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.
- A proportion of the Government's unspent tutoring funding is reallocated to recruit 2000 Attendance Practitioners and 2000 Family Workers to support absent children to return to school after the pandemic.
- The Government should recreate its disbanded Child Poverty Unit with an initial target to publish a cross government poverty reduction plan by April 2023.

