

Social care: views from the front line



A contribution to the national conversation about Social Care: what's needed now, and what must be done for the long term

Background

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Key Cities, February 2025

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The Government is committed to immediate action to stabilise the care sector and has instituted the Casey Commission to produce an interim report in 2026 and develop a solution for long-term reform of the sector with broad political support by 2028.



In the Key Cities Manifesto (March 2024)¹, we listed a series of measures we believe are necessary to relieve the crisis in social care.

In children's services, these included an injection of **£1.5 billion** to bolster provision *for young people with special educational needs and disabilities* (SEND), a renewed focus on *prevention*, and *ringfenced funding* for children's services based on need.

To address the crisis in adult social care, we called for a *short-term funding boost* and a long-term commitment to *reform*, to include *removal of the social care precept*, additional funding for authorities with an *ageing demographic*, implementation of the *Dilnot cap* and *strengthening the workforce*, with overall *sustainable funding* for councils delivering the service.

Constructive recommendations

Key Cities represents a diverse selection of local authorities that exhibit all the issues and challenges in the sector.

The measures proposed in our Manifesto remain pertinent. Now, as our contribution to the national conversation informing the new Government's approach, we have consulted with a wide range of officers across our network – including heads of service, commissioners and directors of children's and adult services – to offer an informed perspective from the front line, and an additional set of constructive recommendations and ideas, focused both on immediate need and on the longer-term solution.

These recommendations are rooted in the day-to-day experience of both providers and recipients of care services. They have been grouped into children's services and adult social care according to where they are most pressing, but many of the observations apply across the board, and the immediate recommendations where applicable should also be incorporated in the long-term solution.

¹ Available at: <https://keycities.uk/2024/03/20/key-cities-manifesto-2024/>

Recommendations

Children's services: Immediate

Councils have very limited control over the costs of safeguarding and other statutory children's services which represent a threat to financial stability and to all the other services on which Council Taxpayers depend.

- **The Government should provide adequate transitional funding to cover current pressures while new models are designed and implemented.**

Money is wasted and service quality undermined by poor co-ordination.

- **The Government should create mechanisms for improved coordination nationally and locally to deliver joined-up services between the Department for Education and Skills, the Department of Health and Care, the Department for Work and Pensions, the Ministry of Justice, and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.**

“Children’s mental health has become a big factor. Reductions in Tier 4 mental health services for children with very acute needs, for example, have had a direct impact on local authority demand and spend.”

Councils are often landed with additional unplanned and unfunded commitments arising from legislation or regulation in other areas.

- **The Government should require impact assessments on statutory local authority care services of all relevant legislative or regulatory measures (e.g. in areas such as education, disabilities, mental health and housing).**

The renewed emphasis in the Government's policy paper "Keeping children safe, helping families thrive" (November 2024) on multi-agency safeguarding child protection teams is welcome.

- **The Government must provide adequate resourcing for multi-agency safeguarding child protection teams in the forthcoming spending review.**

Inspection of facilities including children's homes is extremely important but can sometimes be contradictory and lead to poorer outcomes.

- **The Government should review the Ofsted inspection framework to ensure it contributes to and does not impede service improvement by focusing more on outcomes and less on process.**

Poor educational outcomes have lasting impact on young people's opportunities and life chances.

- **The Government should develop pathways into skills and work that start earlier.**

Delays in immigration status decisions for unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people places unnecessary financial burdens on Councils and leads to poorer outcomes for those concerned.

- **The Government should prioritise speeding up immigration status decisions for unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people.**

“We need to build more schools for children with special needs. This could be devolved to regions and local authorities, to better shape the local offer.”

Substantial cost savings can be made by cracking down on profiteering in the children’s services sector, as has been demonstrated by the Welsh Government’s ‘Eliminate’ policy.²

- **The Government should introduce a similar policy to reduce unwarranted costs in the sector and make capital available to enable local authorities to insource provision of children’s homes.**

² Welsh Government (2024). Removing profit from the care of children looked after: general briefing July 2024. Available at: <https://www.gov.wales/removing-profit-care-children-looked-after-general-briefing-july-2024.html>

Children’s services: Long Term

Quality of care in children’s services is of paramount importance with research showing distressingly poor long-term health and wellbeing outcomes for people who experienced care as children.³ To discharge their obligation to children and families, Councils must be enabled to switch their focus from managing impossible budget pressures to delivering quality care.

- **The Government must introduce long-term, sustainable funding mechanisms for Children’s Services to address increasing complexity and rising demand, including for children with special educational needs and disabilities.**

Money can be saved and services improved through better cooperation between children’s services and education.

- **The Government should explore the potential of combined funding mechanisms where appropriate, to embed and optimise such cooperation.**

Local authorities do not have sufficient powers in education to ensure the right provision is available in schools as well as for home schooling.

- **The Government should empower local authorities to ensure the safety, quality and balance of educational provision in their area.**

³ Murray, E.T., Lacey, R., Maughan, B. et al. Association of childhood out-of-home care status with all-cause mortality up to 42-years later: Office of National Statistics Longitudinal Study. BMC Public Health 20, 735 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-020-08867-3>

Adult social care: Immediate

The key priorities for adult social care are, first, to enable innovation and prevention, and second, funding the workforce. While both require long-term funding solutions, they also have short-term implications that need to be addressed.

The areas with greatest deprivation also have lowest property values and are least able to mitigate pressures through the social care precept. This issue is urgent, and Councils have little control over the rising cost of providing statutory adult social care.

- **Pending agreement on a long-term funding solution, the Government should immediately adopt a different funding formula based on need, and provide adequate transitional funding to cover current pressures while new models are designed and implemented.**

Joint commissioning with the health sector (Integrated Care Boards and NHS) can be crucial to saving money and improving outcomes.

- **As an outcome of the NHS 10-year Plan, the Government should support and put in place arrangements for a massive expansion of joint commissioning, including regional and national coordination to end the push-pull between those who fund and provide support and ensure best value for money across adult social care.**

There is substantial scope for service improvement, innovation and better value for money in improved use of data by all those responsible for service provision.

- **Government, local authorities and universities should explore development of a granular-level data partnership involving health and care to make better use of available data for evaluating policy changes, assessing unequal access to services and understanding geographic mismatches between demand and workforce.**

Adult social care: Long Term

There is a significant imbalance in the resources that are allocated to health and acute care on the one hand, and prevention and social care on the other, which must be addressed to create a sustainable national support framework for health and care.

- **The Government must introduce long-term, sustainable funding mechanisms for Adult Social Care to address chronic underfunding and rising demand. This should include replacing the Social Care Precept, which discriminates against areas with greatest deprivation and lowest property values, with a mechanism that reflects actual need and levels of deprivation experienced in local authority areas.**
- **The Government should empower local authorities to build care homes to avoid unnecessarily high costs.**
- **The Government should provide funding for pilot programmes, innovation hubs and prevention programmes, both locally and across partnership networks, to test new approaches in service delivery and new technologies, and to reduce demand for crisis care.**

“The aspiration is gloriously ordinary lives – enabling people to do what they want to do and what is important to them.”

Money can be saved and services improved through better cooperation between adult social care and health services.

- **The Government should enable closer collaboration between local NHS services and adult care services with flexibility to respond to local need, and explore the potential of combined funding mechanisms to embed and optimise the benefits of such cooperation.**

There is a brain drain to the health sector due to uncompetitive pay, low recognition and insufficient progression opportunities in adult social care.

- **The Government should develop a national workforce strategy to address recruitment and retention challenges in social care, including:**
 - **Competitive salaries aligned with NHS pay scales for comparable roles.**
 - **Training and professional development pathways to improve career prospects by raising the status of careers and opportunities for entry and for progression within the sector, e.g.:**
 - **T-levels in social care as a viable option for young people**
 - **Training pathways similar to nursing**
 - **Recognition of the unique skill sets required for social care roles.**

“There’s a perception that care work is manual, and health roles are valued far more. 69% of roles in acute hospitals come from social care.”

Unpaid carers are a resource which will remain critically important in any long-term solution.

- **To protect this resource, the Government should develop better wraparound support for carers both during and after their service.**

About Key Cities

Key Cities is a cross-party national network of 24 cities and towns across England and Wales that represents the diversity of urban living in the UK.

Our members are home to some 12% of the UK's urban population outside London, contributing over £150 billion a year to the UK economy with some of the fastest-growing local economies in the country.

We are a united voice for urban Britain, working to champion our places to unlock devolution, deliver prosperity, protect the environment and deliver innovative solutions for the challenges we face.

To contact Key Cities email secretariat@keycities.uk or find out more at www.keycities.uk