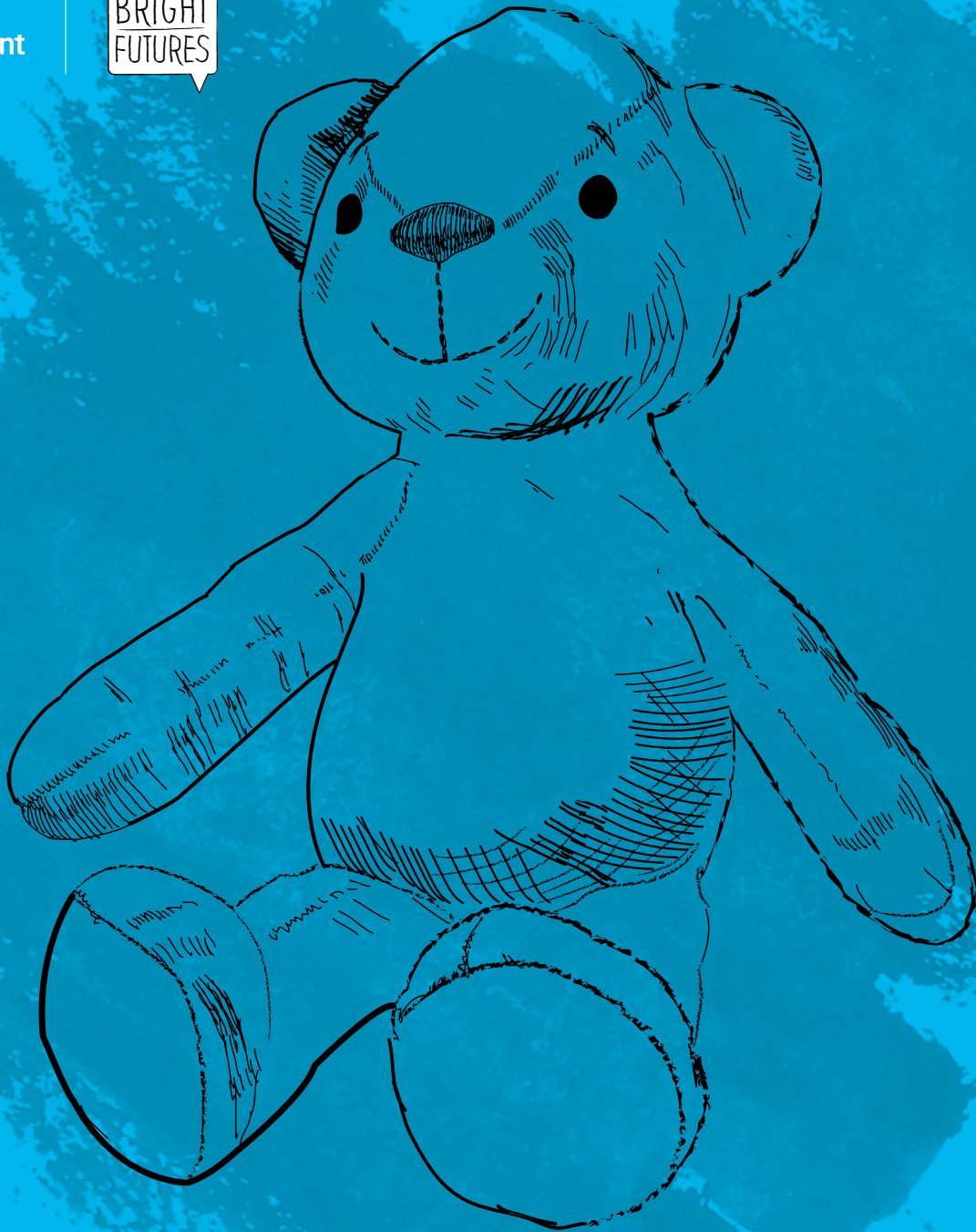


BRIGHT  
FUTURES

BRIGHT FUTURES

GETTING THE BEST  
FOR 30 YEARS





# FOREWORD

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**This year marks the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of two ground-breaking commitments to put children and young people's rights at the centre of policy-making; the Children Act 1989 and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). These key events made sure that their voices are heard, their safety guaranteed and their freedoms protected.**

This principle has helped shape children's services into what they are today. Looking back, we celebrate thirty years of lives being immeasurably improved and the role children's services and children's social care play in all children's lives.

Most people think these services exist only to keep children safe. Of course, that's a vital part of what they do but that's just a part of how much support they give and how ambitious councils are for children's futures.

We all want our children to live fulfilling lives and enjoy their childhood. For many children and young people, the support they need to thrive comes from their families and communities. Universal services, provided by councils with their partners, enhance this care through, for example, children's centre services, youth services and health visitors.

For the one in ten children<sup>1</sup> who need some extra help, that's where children's social care steps in. Often the help needed will be relatively simple – a parenting course for families to understand their child's behaviour, support with a disability, assistance with early literacy or mentoring for vulnerable young people struggling through a transition. This might be the helping hand needed to cope with a serious illness in the family or a sudden change in circumstances.

Sometimes, more intensive support will help keep everyone in a family safe and well. That might include one-to-one support work to prevent young people from joining a gang or getting involved in youth crime. There's drug and alcohol misuse programmes, mental health treatment or support around domestic violence. It could also be regular respite care for children with complex disabilities.

Of course, for a minority of children, giving them the best chance will mean taking them into the care of the council. In those cases, finding children stable, loving homes with support to overcome any earlier trauma is vital. Where this works well, children go on to live happy and successful lives.

However, children's services are not just for the most vulnerable since no family is immune from life's challenges. There are children and young people who need help in every school, every community. Councils have been trusted with the responsibility to make sure these children can have the same chances as every other child, and that is a responsibility they take very seriously.

Despite the enormous efforts of social workers, foster carers, residential care workers, youth workers, safeguarding partners, early help practitioners and countless others, things could be better. That's why, in 2017, we published 'Bright Futures: Getting the best for children, young people and families', our seven-point plan for coordinated action. This ambition was to drive the improvement necessary to consistently offer the brightest future for children and families across the public, community and voluntary sectors.

- A stronger focus on outcomes for children
- Consistently strong local leadership
- A culture of continuous improvement
- The right support for children at the right time
- Sustainable funding to help children thrive
- A better understanding of what works for children
- Strengthened morale and support for social workers

Our plan has seen wide-ranging success, from additional funding for children's services, especially for innovation, to an enhanced sector-led improvement offer. Ofsted ratings for children's services have seen a marked progress, and the profile of children's social care has been raised significantly up the political agenda.

This new plan builds on Bright Futures' successes and focusses our efforts for the coming year.

The Children Act 1989 and the UNCRC were landmarks, and we owe it to every child and young person to fulfil their visions. By delivering on these seven themes, and coming together across sectors, we can make that happen.

**Councillor Judith Blake CBE**

Chair, LGA Children and Young People Board

**Councillor Dick Madden**

Bright Futures Champion, LGA Children and Young People Board



# PUTTING CHILDREN AT THE CENTRE - A ROADMAP

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## 1889 Preventing cruelty to children

The Children's Charter (Prevention of Cruelty To, and Protection of Children Act) enabled the state to intervene, for the first time, in relations between parents and children and arrest anyone found ill-treating a child.

## 1948 Introduction of comprehensive childcare

The Children Act necessitated a children's committee and children's officer in every council and that care was provided for children in need.

## **1989 A watershed moment in the advancement of children's rights**

The UN Convention on Rights of the Child sets out the rights a child is entitled to and how adults and governments must work together to make sure children can enjoy those rights.

The Children Act reversed the assumption that parents have rights over their children, giving children their own rights, supported by families.

The Act also places a duty on councils to provide a range of local services to safeguard children and promote their welfare.

This year is the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Children Act and UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, two pieces of ground breaking legislation which for the first time made children and young people's welfare paramount and changed the culture of children's services.

## **2015**

Public health funding for 0 to 5s and health visitors transferred to local government.

## **2003 to 2005 Formalising the voice of the child**

**2003** First Children's minister

**2004** The Children Act  
All councils to appoint a children's director, lead member for children's services and form a statutory Local Safeguarding Children Board. From 2019 these have been replaced with safeguarding partner arrangements.

**2005** First children's commissioner with a legal duty to promote and protect the rights of children.

## Over the last decade, we've seen significant increases in demand for children's social care.

- There was a **139 per cent increase** in serious cases where a council believes a child may be suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm between 2009 and 2019 (Section 47 enquiries). This is an additional 117,070 cases (up to 201,170).<sup>2</sup>
- There was an **53 per cent increase** in the number of children subject to a child protection plan between 2009<sup>3</sup> and 2019.<sup>4</sup> This is an additional 18,160 children (up to 52,260).
- The total number of looked after children in England reached a new high of **75,420 in 2018**, an increase of 2,830 on 2017, and 15,920 on 2008.<sup>5</sup>
- In 2018, **64 children per 10,000** of the population were looked after, up from 62 per 10,000 in 2007 and 60 per 10,000 in 2013-16.<sup>6</sup>

The reasons for this increase in demand are varied. Following tragedies such as the death of Peter Connelly in 2007, there is more awareness of the need for everyone to look out for children's safety and report concerns. Societal expectations of child protection have similarly changed, with reduced tolerance for leaving vulnerable children at risk and a greater understanding of adolescent risk. Increasing levels of poverty and deprivation have also been cited<sup>7</sup> as a factor in rising demand as families become less able to cope, alongside increasingly strained public services and a reducing safety net.

Success elsewhere has led to additional pressures on children's services. For example, impressive medical advances mean that more children are living for longer with complex conditions. We have a responsibility to make sure they get the help they need to live rewarding lives. The proportion of young people in custody has plummeted thanks to the dedicated work of councils, the police and their partners. This is a hugely positive outcome for those young people, but to make sure they remain out of the youth justice system and make good transitions to adulthood, some will need a lot of support from their local children's services.

The profile of children coming into care is also changing. The number of teenagers (aged 13 or over) in care rose by 21 per cent between 2012/13 and 2017/18, while the number of 0-5 year olds fell by 15 per cent.<sup>8</sup> The reasons for this are varied, but feedback from councils indicates that child exploitation (both criminal and sexual) and rising numbers of unaccompanied asylum seeking children is contributing to the increase. Older children are more likely to need accommodation in children's homes, which are significantly more expensive than foster care, which in itself puts additional pressure on children's service budgets as councils strive to give young people the right care for their needs. We are also hearing that children coming into care have more complex needs than they did a decade ago, and so need more support to help them thrive.

As demand has been increasing, budgets have come under enormous pressure. Councils have suffered reductions in funding and despite concerted efforts to protect children's services budgets, increasing demand for children's social



care has meant that budgets have not been able to keep up. Councils have had to take difficult decisions about how best to use their budgets to cope with demand, and money has increasingly been diverted from early help to child protection, to protect those children at the most immediate risk of harm. Research by the National Audit Office<sup>9</sup> found that spending on preventative children's services fell from 41 per cent of children's services budgets in 2010/11 to just 25 per cent in 2017/18. There had been a corresponding rise in spend on child protection services, most notably for looked-after children.

This means that our top priority for Bright Futures will continue to be ensuring children's services are fully funded, including reinvestment in the preventative and early help services that our children and families so desperately need.

On top of this, we'll be prioritising two key areas championed by the Children Act 1989 and the UNCRC - early help and putting children at the centre of policy and decision-making.



# THE RIGHT SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN AT THE RIGHT TIME

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**Investment in early help is vital to ensure that children and families can access the support they need when they need it.**

'Early help' (including early intervention) covers a broad range of services and support that are brought in before any formal interventions to help children, young people and families achieve good outcomes. These services can be for everyone, such as health visiting, or more targeted at those at risk of poor outcomes, such as parenting support or help with speech and language. They support families from pre-birth right through to adulthood; everything from mental health care for expectant parents through to youth services.

These services are vital. We don't want families reaching a point where formal interventions are needed if it can possibly be avoided. Most families will go through tough patches at some point, and often the right support provided at the right time will be enough to get families back on their feet and able to manage and thrive on their own.

However, as outlined earlier, increasing demand for child protection services has meant that funding has increasingly been skewed towards acute services, rather than universal and early help services.

## WHY SHOULD WE INVEST IN EARLY HELP?

We often hear the argument that, to invest in early help, we need to be able to demonstrate the financial payoff; the 'invest-to-save' argument. For example, if we know that investment in family support services will result in fewer children entering care, we can argue that that will save money further down the line. This argument makes sense: public finances are under significant pressure, and we have responsibilities as public sector organisations to demonstrate the appropriate and sensible use of public money.

On the other hand, we do not believe that saving money is the **only** argument for investing in early help. Indeed, we would argue that achieving good value for money should be standard practice for councils. Instead, the driving force for investment in early help should always be about outcomes for children.

The Children Act 1989 and the UNCRC were unequivocal about this. Article 18 of the UNCRC states that 'Governments must support parents by creating support services for children and giving parents the help they need to raise their children.' Meanwhile Section 17 of the Children Act requires councils to safeguard and promote the wellbeing of children in their areas who may not, without support from the



council, achieve and maintain a reasonable standard of health or development (including social and emotional); it also states that councils should promote the upbringing of children within their families where it fits with that duty.

In its 2018 report, 'Realising the potential of early intervention',<sup>10</sup> the Early Intervention Foundation details four key domains in which providing support early can make a real difference to children's outcomes, namely physical, cognitive, behavioural, and social and emotional development. At the same time, the report highlights that 'early intervention has the potential to reduce pressure on children's social care, but this is in the long term, rather than the short term'.

We want to see investment in early help not only because it has the potential to save money and reduce demand for more intensive support – but because it's the right thing to do.

## THE EVIDENCE

There is increasing evidence about where early help can add real value – such as through preventing children and young people from experiencing adverse childhood experiences, to the value of supporting families to improve their lives. This evidence not only demonstrates better outcomes for children and young people, but potential savings across the public purse.

### TROUBLED FAMILIES

The 2019 evaluation of the Troubled Families programme<sup>11</sup> found that the programme reduced the proportion of children in care, while staff survey results showed that

90 per cent of keyworkers believed the programme helped families to avoid statutory intervention. The programme also reduced juvenile custodial sentences and convictions.

### SURE START

Research by the Institute of Fiscal Studies<sup>12</sup> found that greater coverage of Sure Start centres led to a fall in hospitalisations of children up to the age of 11, and a significant fall in injuries. Measured on a purely financial basis, the reduction in hospitalisations at ages 5–11 saved the NHS approximately £5 million per cohort of children.

### YOUTH JUSTICE

Youth Offending Teams (YOTs) are partnerships led by councils working with education, police, health, and the National Probation Service. These have a responsibility for local youth crime prevention, and their dedication to early support for young people at risk has shown impressive results.

YOTs have an excellent track record of working with young people to prevent them coming into the youth justice system. Compared with the year ending March 2008, there are now 86 per cent fewer young people who are first time entrants to the youth justice system, and there has been a 78 per cent decrease in arrests.

### ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES (ACES)

ACEs include physical, psychological or sexual abuse, and living in a household with substance or alcohol abuse, domestic violence or criminal activity. Research<sup>13</sup> has identified that exposure to ACEs increases adult health risk

behaviours and diseases. Those who had experienced four or more categories of childhood exposure, compared to those who had experienced none, had a:

- 4 to 12-fold increased risk of alcoholism, drug abuse, depression, and attempted suicide
- 2 to 4-fold increase in smoking, poor self-rated health and sexually transmitted disease
- 1.4 to 1.6-fold increase in physical inactivity and severe obesity.

## FAMILY VIOLENCE AND YOUTH OFFENDING

Research for the LGA<sup>14</sup> identified that there is a well-established link between experiences of family violence, child maltreatment and participation in youth offending. Specifically, the report found that:

- ACEs were correlated with an increase in odds of youth offending of between 23 per cent and 345 per cent, depending on the exact nature of the ACEs and of the offences
- childhood maltreatment was associated with an increased likelihood of engaging in crime ranging from 51 per cent to 166 per cent compared to children who had not been maltreated, depending on the form of child maltreatment.

## EDUCATION

Research for the DfE<sup>15</sup> identified that reducing the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers across the country to the same size as in London, there would be an overall economic benefit of around £12 billion in present value terms over the lifetimes of

those young people. As the DfE's Children in Need review<sup>16</sup> highlights, safety, stability and educational outcomes are closely linked, therefore investing in the services that support children, young people and their families can not only boost young people's lives, but have significant economic benefits too.

## THE COST OF LATE INTERVENTION

The EIF has estimated the cost of 'late intervention'<sup>17</sup> – 'acute, statutory and essential benefits and services that are required when children and young people experience significant difficulties in life, many of which might have been prevented' – as nearly £17 billion per year, equivalent to £287 per person. The largest individual costs are:

- £5.3 billion spent on looked after children
- £5.2 billion associated with cases of domestic violence
- £2.7 billion spent on benefits for young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET).

The cost of late intervention is spread across different areas of the public sector, with the largest shares borne by:

- councils (£6.4 billion)
- NHS (£3.7 billion)
- Department for Work and Pensions (£2.7 billion).

By investing in early intervention, not only can some of that money be recouped in the long-term by the public sector as a whole, but outcomes for children and young people can be significantly enhanced.

## EVIDENCE-BASED INTERVENTIONS

The EIF maintains a database of interventions<sup>18</sup> that have robust evidence to show whether they work and in what circumstances. These interventions have a range of positive outcomes including the prevention of child maltreatment, enhancing school achievement, and preventing substance abuse and criminal behaviour.

## WHAT NEEDS TO CHANGE?

Councils are clear that investing in early help makes sense. It makes lives better for children and families, it can prevent children needing more intensive support and it can save money in the long run. However, with limited funding increasingly targeted at more urgent child protection work, there is little room left in budgets for councils to make that investment. In effect, councils need enough money to 'double fund' services for a period of time – they need to fund both early help and child protection, with an ambition that over time, demand for more intensive (and therefore expensive) services is reduced.

However, we are also clear that saving money should not be the key ambition. We want to see all children having the best possible chance of a bright future, and that means investing in the right services to meet their needs – even if that doesn't ultimately lead to a fall in budgets.

With this in mind, the Early Intervention Grant must be reinstated in full. Councils must be funded properly to be able to invest in the services their residents need, and to be able to meet their duties towards children.

We also need a long-term approach to funding. Where problems within families are deeply entrenched, they take

time to turn around, and in some cases, families will need support from local services for many years. While short-term funding pots for specific issues are useful ways of focussing attention and galvanising action, they do not allow for the carefully considered, long-term strategic planning that responds to local need.

The Troubled Families programme has supported councils to focus their early help offers and make sure families are able to access the right kind of help when they most need it. We are calling on the new Government to fund this programme in the long-term. We want to help build on the more integrated and evidence-driven approach to prevention taken by the programme.

## WHERE WOULD THE NEW MONEY GO?

We firmly believe that every council knows its area best, and that every area should be free to make its own decisions on where to spend any additional funding.

Bright Futures called for a better understanding of what works for children – and that remains just as important today. The next Government must work with councils and organisations such as the What Works Centre for Children's Social Care to make sure that we are putting in place the right support for children and families at the right time, and in the right circumstances. We also need to make sure local commissioners are able to make best use of the evidence available; our recent 'Early Help' resource pack provides an introduction for councillors on using evidence, but we recognise that local capacity for developing and using evidence can be limited, and are keen to work with partners to tackle this gap.

We have designed the Children's Services Resources and Efficiency Peer Challenge to find potential opportunities to control and reduce costs, ensure efficiencies and maximise positive outcomes in children's services, including identifying invest to save opportunities.

This peer challenge has already been delivered in a number of councils, helping them and the peers involved to get a better understanding of the effective use of resources. We hope to work with the new Government to continue delivering this important offer.



# PUTTING CHILDREN AT THE CENTRE

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## **A shared approach to decision-making that puts the needs of children first**

Since 1989, children's policy has converged around one key aim – putting the child at the centre. That means making sure that they have a say in the decisions being taken about them, and taking decisions in their best interests – not the interests of those around them.

We also want to see children and young people at the centre of all decision-making, not just decisions about their direct care. Many policies that impact upon the lives and wellbeing of children fall outside of the remit of children's services or the Department for Education – everything from housing, to health, to the environment around them or the jobs waiting for them as adults.

Bright Futures is clear that improving the lives of children and young people is not just a job for children's services, but for the whole council, and shared with the wider public and voluntary sector. We have also argued that there needs to be a golden thread running through government, with all departments considering how their activities will impact on children and their families.

We will continue to push for a cross-Whitehall ambition for children and young people, with the role of each department clearly articulated, along with the introduction of 'children and young people impact assessments', to ensure that the needs of children are central to all new policies and legislation. We also want to see responsibility given to a named minister for overseeing implementation of such a strategy, working across government to improve outcomes for children.

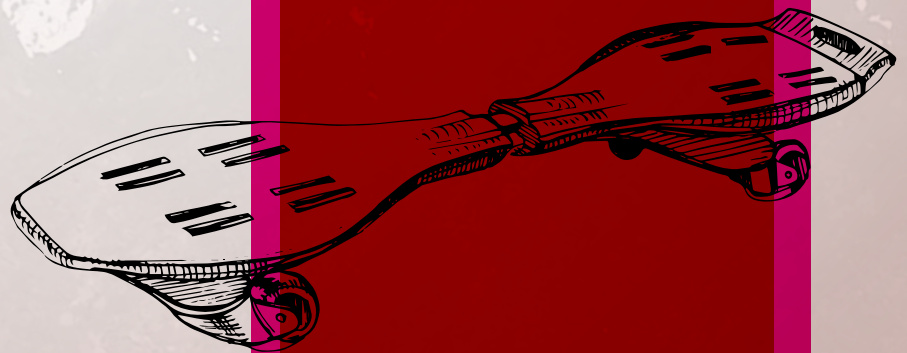
We will also look at how we can support all councils to ensure that they take a child-focussed approach in all decision-making, considering how they can use their local powers and influence to make lives better for children and their families.

Those children who are in the care of their local council deserve a good, stable home that meets their needs, and they should have a say in this placement wherever possible. A theme of recent investigations<sup>19</sup> into children's social care has been the high and increasing costs of care placements, and issues with capacity – for example, insufficient residential care in many areas of the country as provision is often now private and concentrated in areas of cheaper accommodation. We will work with the Department for Education, Ofsted, the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) and others to identify solutions to this



issue, to ensure that councils are able to find the right placements for children and young people quickly, with budgets being used effectively to achieve good outcomes for those children.

Finally, we want to make sure that the people working with children and young people have the support they need to do their job well and give children the support they need. Bright Futures wanted to boost morale and support for social workers, and this remains our ambition – along with improving things for all those involved in children's services. Part of this is included in the whole council approach, making sure business processes support efficient social work and other work with families. But we also need to make sure we are creating positive working environments to improve both recruitment and retention, and cutting down on the negative media coverage of children's services that underestimates the dedication and hard work put in by thousands of people every day.



# WHAT'S NEXT?

## OUR OFFER

- We will work with DfE, Ofsted, ADCS and others to improve the availability of placements for children in care, particularly those with complex needs, and look at issues around cost.
- We will work with partners to improve the use of evidence in local commissioning of children's services.
- We will share early intervention best practice with councils.
- We will work with government to build on the more integrated and evidence-driven approach to prevention taken by the Troubled Families programme.
- We will support councils to develop whole-council approaches to supporting children and families.
- We will challenge unreasonable negative media coverage of children's services and highlight the good work of those working with children and families.



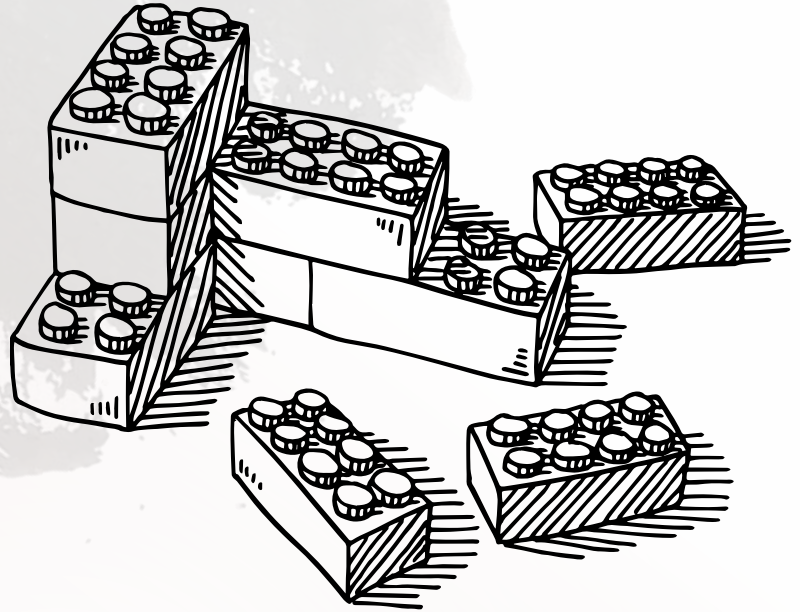
## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

### We are calling on the next Government to:

- fully fund children's services to allow councils to provide early support to children, young people and families, and to properly support children in care
- reinstate the Early Intervention Grant in full
- continue to fund the Troubled Families programme
- move towards sustainable, long-term funding rather than short-term funding pots
- ensure that the What Works Centre for Children's Social Care provides capacity to boost local learning and evaluation, and delivers clear, practical information to councils in a timely fashion
- coordinate the development of a cross-Whitehall ambition for children and young people, clearly articulating the role that all departments will play, with responsibility for overseeing the implementation of this strategy given to a named Minister
- consider developing a new 'children and young people impact assessment' for public bodies to use alongside existing equalities impact assessments, to ensure that the needs of children are central to all policy and legislative changes.

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