Mind the gap

Creating a seamless system of support for vulnerable children and families

The human, social and economic costs for children, parents and society of vulnerability and crisis are devastating but despite this, there is not yet an adequate system in place to prevent breakdown occurring.

That the UK spends around a huge 60 per cent of its overall spend on children's services, accounting for £2.2 billion annually on the care system[1] and with approximately 60,000 children in local authority care at any given time, exemplifies this well. But most children will not arrive at being in extreme need overnight – many children move in and out of greater and lesser vulnerability over time and many could be prevented from becoming more at risk if we helped them sooner.

Newspaper headlines provide a constant reminder of what happens when things go wrong for children and young people, with ongoing debates about why those concerned did not receive the help they needed to get their lives back on track at an earlier stage. At the same time, we know from research that it is often the children and families who need support the most who miss out. 4Children believes that action is needed now to ensure that we do all we can to support vulnerable children, young people and families at the onset of difficulties.

Coming at a crucial time in the development of preventative services, 4Children's starting point is the wide range of interventions that are currently operating coupled with the major potential of the development of universal integrated services through children's centres, extended schools and youth strategies. The report sets out how early intervention can be achieved as part of the wider Every Child Matters reform process and the system and practice changes needed to take this forward.

4Children is recommending five key actions to support vulnerable children and young people:

1. Fund and develop new coordinated intervention services

2. Create new Parent Advocates to advise and broker local support

3. Support families to create their own solutions through Family Group Conferencing

4. Train all those working with children and young people to offer more support for vulnerable families

5. Reward prevention rather than 'cure'

It is crucial to build on children's centres, extended schools and youth support, to offer a new layer of intervention to support vulnerable children and families

A plethora of Government initiatives over the last ten years have helped develop and grow services for children and families. These changes are rooted in the idea of 'progressive universalism', the importance of universally accessible services for all children and parents, with emphasis on targeting additional support at the most disadvantaged and vulnerable families who may have additional needs.

The most recent and wide ranging activity of this systemic reform stems from the Every Child Matters Green Paper, published in 2003. The paper laid out a vision for services, aiming to keep children safe and protect them from harm but also to help all children to achieve their full potential.

The four key themes identified to help build this system were:

- Increasing the focus on supporting families and carers
- Ensuring necessary intervention takes place before children reach crisis point and protecting children from falling through the net
- Addressing weak accountability and poor integration
- Ensuring that the people working with children are valued, rewarded and trained.

The reforms also intended to reduce the numbers of children who do not achieve their potential through intervening early and by improving the way agencies work together at a strategic, commissioning and frontline service level.

Identifying who is being failed, and why

It is clear that there are still a number of children who experience profound disadvantage and diminished life chances. These are the 2.5 per cent of every generation caught in a cycle of disadvantage referred to by the Social Exclusion Taskforce report; they are the 10 per cent of 16–18 year olds not in education, employment or training, which has remained doggedly static for over 10 years. They are the 7,500 families with complex needs identified by the Respect Task Force and the 60,000 children in local authority care at any given time. The system has failed them because they have not got the right help at the right time.

Recent research increases our confidence in being able to predict those at risk using early childhood information about family context and child development. And, although cautioning that risk does not always lead to poor outcomes, the authors do conclude "it would be irresponsible and socially and economically inefficient to ignore this very high level of capacity to identify early on those at risk of high cost, high harm outcomes".[4]

These risk factors can include: low educational attainment or employment; poor social and emotional skills; poor parental mental health; and living in a deprived neighbourhood. Multiple sets of these risks mean an increased likelihood of experiencing poor outcomes. Thus a child born into the most disadvantaged 5 per cent of families is 100 times more likely to have multiple problems at the age of 15, than a child from the 50 per cent best-off families.[5]

Many of the risk factors identified mirror those identified as increasing the risk of engaging in criminal or anti social behaviour.

"There are many numerous replicable predictors of delinquency over time and place, including impulsivity, attention problems, low school attainment, poor parental supervision, parental conflict, an antisocial parent, a young mother, large family size, low family income, and coming from a broken family".[6]

The need to intervene effectively where these risk factors are seen reaches beyond simply arguments for social justice and into the crime prevention agenda.

A number of groups emerge from the research as being at higher risk of experiencing poor life outcomes. Despite considerable variation between different ethnic groups, factors of educational attainment, low income, employment and living in disadvantaged areas mean that people from Black and Minority Ethnic communities are at greater risk of multiple disadvantage than their white counterparts. Research undertaken by the Youth Justice Board highlighted that a fifth of Anti Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) are issued to children and young people from Black or Asian communities.[7]

Disability and special educational needs also act as multipliers of risk. According to the Every Disabled Child Matters campaign there are 777,000 disabled children in the UK, with over half of families with a disabled child living in or on the margins of poverty. The additional needs of disabled children mean that it can cost up to three times more than average to raise a disabled child, forcing many families into debt or poverty.[8] Many disabled children face life-long disadvantage because of lack of integration, appropriate education or integrated support.[9]

The risk of criminalising children with additional needs is also a very real risk without adequate preventative support in place. Recent research by the British Institute for Brain Injured Children found that a third of children aged under 17 who had been issued with an ASBO had been diagnosed with a mental health disorder.[10]

For many of the 60,000 children who are in care at any one time, their childhood and adolescence are often characterised by insecurity, ill health and lack of fulfilment. In addition, the long term outcomes of children in care are devastating. Girls who have been in care are three times more likely to become a teenage parent themselves compared with all girls,[11] and 27 per cent of all prisoners have spent time in care.[12] A more explicit understanding needs to be articulated on the links between deprivation, vulnerability and early engagement in criminal activity. Vulnerable children are more likely to become criminalised, and the risk factors for predicting criminal activity are mirrors of the risk factors predicting vulnerability.

Policy making and service delivery on the ground needs to adequately respond to what the evidence is telling us. Poor life outcomes, however, should not be seen as the destiny of children who experience these risk factors. As our understanding grows about the factors which increase risk and the ways in which these can be offset, we should be able to intervene to reduce this inequity and improve life chances.
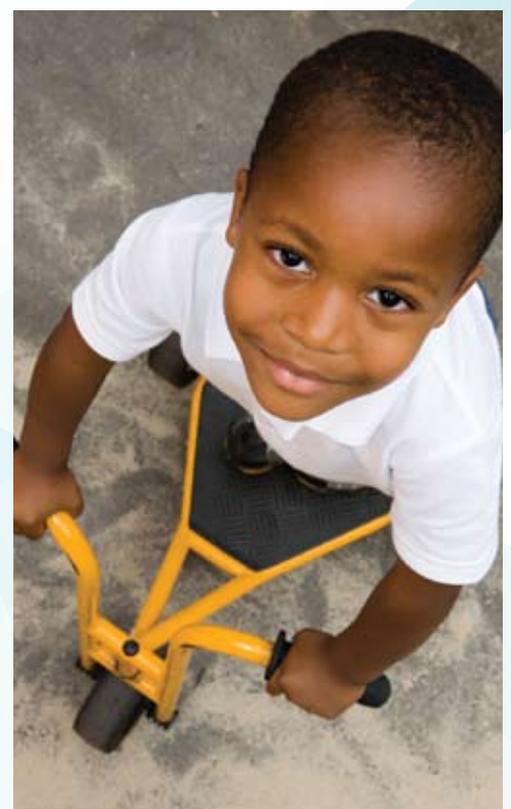
The delivery mechanisms of this new system are rapidly being put into place with Children's Trust arrangements to help shape governance and delivery and, by 2010, 3,500 Sure Start Children's Centres to be in place, bringing together a number of previously disparate services, and every school to offer a set of extended services.

The Common Assessment Framework will help bring improved coherence to professional assessments and less repetition for parents whilst better workforce planning will help ensure that gaps will be filled and appropriate training is provided. And as this new landscape is being put in place, our knowledge becomes more sophisticated with research by Feinstein and Sabates[2] and others outlining the high level of predictability in the extent to which we can identify those at risk using early childhood information about family context and child development.

However, even with this knowledge and the levers of change being put in place, it is important not to underestimate the scale of the challenge of change needed, as the current "fierce system of rationing" means that over 60 per cent of social services' expenditure is on placements for looked after children – at the top end of the needs spectrum.[3]

Consistent evidence continues to highlight that families with complex problems are not accessing the help they need and that it is only in a crisis that systems of support are put in place, with all the costs that this delay entails in human, social and economic terms.

Understanding why the system fails

Over £2.2 billion is spent on looked after children each year. But this large expenditure serves only to skew the system further – such high expenses mean stringent gatekeeping of resources, providing only for those in the greatest need whilst those who do not meet these criteria are denied access to services, thus keeping them off the balance sheet.

For those who do not reach the threshold for selective intervention, universal services must be the backstop that they can rely on. However, recent evidence has highlighted that new integrated services are not yet benefiting vulnerable families as much as they should.

In order to prevent families from simply falling into the abyss between universal and high need services, the system needs to value low and medium level intervention for families who do not meet statutory thresholds and improve the link-up of interventions across the spectrum of need. But before getting to the solutions, we need to understand better the failings of the current system. Although wide ranging, a number of common themes emerge.

"We can't help everyone" – thresholds for help are too high

Increasingly high thresholds must be crossed before families are able to get help from social care agencies – e.g. being allocated a social worker. There is currently too much reliance on intervention only in crisis point – with one of the spectres this raises being young people entering the criminal justice system without having been offered any other help and support.

Research has shown that even where parents ask for help early on, they can be turned away if their needs are not sufficiently high. Feedback from parents, children and professionals all identified the need for help at an earlier stage to improve children's lives.[13]

The challenges of the system are exacerbated by the need to manage the risk involved in working with very complex and difficult individual and family circumstances. Therefore in addition to money being spent on families most in need, large amounts of resources are also spent on assessments and monitoring to determine who is needy enough for help.

The high levels of need which families have to demonstrate before they are able to get help acts as a barrier to accessing support early, in direct contradiction to the importance placed on this by policy frameworks such as Every Child Matters and the empirical evidence as to the effectiveness of early intervention.

Services meant for all don't reach those in most need

Sure Start Children's Centres and extended schools, along with the developing integrated youth offer, represent the prongs of government strategy to create hubs of support for children, young people and families within community settings. However, research has found that only around a third of children's centres were actively targeting hard to reach groups and that families lacked awareness of the range of services available and details of what was on offer.[14]

Similarly, evaluation of extended schools concluded that schools needed to find new ways of engaging with the vulnerable and hard to reach.[15] This goes beyond simply finances but needs concerted efforts in outreach work. Further concerns cited were that schools sometimes identified problems only when they impacted on the learning environment,[16] illustrating that even in this new world of multi-agency working, traditional barriers can and still do limit the way in which we identify concerns.

The Social Exclusion Action Report also identified the 'inverse care principle' – those who need help the most are least likely to get it. "Those with the highest incomes are more likely to get support from health visitors than lower income groups".[17] More advantaged families are able to articulate their needs and to challenge services to deliver for them, while those with more complex problems may not know that help is available or may even actively decline it.

"We just don't know what to do about it"

Even when children and families who are vulnerable are using universal services, services can and do miss opportunities to identify and intervene. This manifests itself in the inability of services to identify children and families who may need additional help or not knowing where to refer on to.

The Treasury/DfES Review also revealed that concerns about a lack of confidence in working across professional boundaries act as a barrier to the sort of integrated working which the system needs to move towards. It also identified "wider workforce issues" such as the lack of a professional ethos which encourages professionals to see this sort of work as part of their role and weak incentives to engage the most challenging families.[18]

The introduction of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) goes some way towards developing a common understanding about the needs of children and families. However, there remain challenges in implementing this; the recent evaluations of pilots showed that "anxiety and frustration was generated by lack of clarity about how the work was to be done, lack of support, threshold differences and lack of join up between agencies and sectors".[19]

All local areas should be implementing the CAF from 2006 with a view to embedding it across the full range of relevant services by 2008. The impact this will have is still unclear but emphasis must be placed on ensuring that all professionals dealing with children in universal setting should be adequately trained in the use of the CAF and in some of the skills needed to outreach with vulnerable families more broadly.

It is also important to note that however well the CAF is implemented, it will not remove the system-wide challenges of ensuring that services are there for onward referral and the need to reframe the way in which we view the fit between universal and targeted services.

These three themes draw together some of the main challenges which still remain in making the ambition of prevention and early intervention a reality across the piece.

Delivering a system genuinely grounded in p

Prevention and early intervention are fundamental planks of the Every Child Matters agenda, an approach recently reaffirmed by the Social Exclusion Taskforce Report. "The key is to ensure children receive services at the first onset of problems and to prevent any children slipping through the net".[20]

The importance of prevention and early intervention cannot be underestimated. Stopping problems from developing and intervening early where there are difficulties are vital to prevent the human, social and economic costs of dealing with families in crisis.

For example, in complex family situations, the longer term impact of failing to deal with problems effectively and early on can be a child taken into care, with all the negative outcomes which accompany this. Whilst this must be an acceptable lever to pull when necessary for the protection of a child, there is no doubt that the short term social and emotional impacts of this as well as the long term outcomes for children in care are devastating. Children in care are over represented in a range of vulnerable groups including those children not in education, employment or training, teenage parents, young offenders, drug users and prisoners.

Making it happen – key changes needed

A number of key changes need to take place to deliver the new system of support.

Make universal services work for vulnerable children

Universal services are vital because there is no threshold to gain access to the help and support on offer. Therefore making these services work better for vulnerable children and families must remain a key plank in any strategy.

By 2010 Sure Start Children's Centres and extended schools will act as a network of support hubs for children and families. The key will be to ensure that this goes beyond a numbers game and that these centres are actively reaching out to vulnerable groups and are able to identify and refer on families who need help.

These services also offer a support network which is available to all families, offering an opportunity to build links and foster relationships which last longer than a set of particular circumstances. Given that few children spend their whole childhood in care – 40 per cent stay for under six months, and only 13 per cent stay for five years or more – it also allows a support system to be built which can help manage a successful return home and successful stay at home.

Developing the capacity of staff working in universal services must also be a part of delivering this change. They need to understand the importance of their role in identifying children and parents who may need extra help and value this as a key part of the contribution they make. They need to be able to work more effectively with targeted services, developing better understanding of what they can do in the first instance; what they can do with other agencies in the universal setting; and when to refer families on. Fundamentally, they need to gain confidence that doing their job well includes working in this way. This cultural change will require better training and development but also should be explicitly rewarded and valued by the system.

Work with families to create solutions

Evidence shows that the involvement of families in creating solutions and in offering ongoing support is key. However we also know that they are often the last to be involved. 4Children is proposing that structures are put in place to ensure that all efforts are made to support families at the earliest stages through the introduction of Family Group Conferencing (FGC). Already with proven success rates internationally and locally in the UK, 4Children is proposing that this approach is embraced within legislation as a central mechanism to support children and young people.

However, FGC initiatives are often marginalized by limited understanding, funding and staffing, and the decision to use FGC is almost entirely at the discretion of local authorities. All this serves to deny many families who would benefit, with only a few having the opportunity to participate in FGC. Its role and value has not received significant attention as a preventative tool, although there are some very good practice examples being rolled out in local authorities throughout the country. It should become a statutory requirement here as in Ireland and New Zealand, as it has such strong benefits in supporting vulnerable children and their families across a wide spectrum of need.

In addition, it should become a tool in the hands of families rather than professionals. Instead of families awaiting an invitation to participate in FCG from a social worker, they would have the opportunity to self-refer. Similarly, some families who will have a mistrust of statutory services may well be working with the voluntary or community sector and therefore referrals and participation should be able to come from these agencies also.

Provide support from birth to adulthood and beyond

Investment in the under-4s through the Sure Start programme is welcome but it is not an inoculation for life. Risk factors can enter children's lives at different points in time. Key risk periods for children can be at major transition points in their lives, for example when they leave the security of the family and enter primary school, when they move on to secondary school, or when parents separate.[22] Government policy needs to build on the current foundations of a preventative approach but make this a reality for children beyond this age range rather than relying on early work as an inoculation against risk for life.

Some of the excellent work of the Children's Fund helped to develop preventative services for 5–13 year olds. However, the progress made with a much neglected age range may well be at risk of simply disappearing now that this focus and funding has ended. Furthermore, youth services are unable to focus on 11 and 12 year olds despite the vulnerability of this age range and the links with school transition, because performance indicators relate to ages 13+. Yet we know that risks around the transition for young people into secondary school and beyond are well identified.

4Children is calling for a programme of new style youth centres and hubs which would bring together traditional youth services, health, out of school activities, advice services and parental support. With a hub in every community, teenagers would be able to take part in activities, chill out and socialise with friends, with skilled adults on hand. Parents too would benefit, as centres would open for teenagers at times parents are working. Centres would also offer advice and specialist programmes for those parents who need more help with their teenagers.

The *Policy Review of Children and Young People* identifies the two key approaches to make the system more preventative. First, intervening to promote positive outcomes for all children and second, intervening early in a more targeted way to address potential poorer outcomes of more at-risk children.[21]

Prevention and early intervention need to begin long before children and families have reached the threshold where social care agencies are required to be involved. Help and support should be flexible in order to deal with the evolving needs of the families involved; offer the level of support and help the families require; offer more tailor-made packages of support; and knit together universal services with services for those with the highest levels of need – to create a seamless system of support for children and families.

When mapping services against the familiar pyramid framework for children, the paucity of coordinated and strategic responses in the low to medium stages of need is striking. In order to intervene earlier, more time, policy and resources need to be dedicated to families before they reach the cusp of risk and more emphasis needs to be placed on universal services reaching families before they enter the layers above.

Create a seamless system of support

A seamless system needs to provide the right services for families who need more than universal services can provide, but who are not yet crossing the threshold into high impact crisis support.

The lack of capacity in this tier of services was highlighted as a barrier to success in the Treasury/DfES Review,[23] with concerns raised that even where children and families were identified as in need of additional support, professionals had nowhere to refer them on to. Whilst there are a variety of positive interventions which can be made, these are not being implemented in a comprehensive way.

Developing the right sort of service is also vital. The same Review identified that the range of difficulties faced by families can be incredibly varied – and hence it is almost impossible for any public service to be expert in all of these areas.[24]

The importance of having support for parents and families would offset some of the structural barriers to getting help at the right time. For families in difficulty, getting help – even when they ask for it – can be an arduous task and the system hard to navigate. Family Advocates to help them find their way through the bureaucracy and to argue on their behalf may be the answer for some.

The wide range of needs families may have is also part of the reason why good practice has developed in a piecemeal fashion. Plugging this gap will therefore require a programme which codifies 'what works' in a systematic way and provides authorities with a framework to use in assessing what their local area needs and how to implement this.

Although Every Child Matters has helped to refocus all services on common themes, further work needs to be carried out on the lower tier of intervention. A new emphasis on this layer would need to set out a range of outcomes and processes focusing on this middle tier and would involve a nationwide programme of identifying and sharing best practice and meeting the needs of children and families via integrated services.

Shropshire Council

Shropshire Council has won Beacon Status for its work on early intervention and prevention. The Council's work includes the development of an 'impressive infrastructure' which gives the partnership the ability to identify needs and intervene early in support of children and young people.
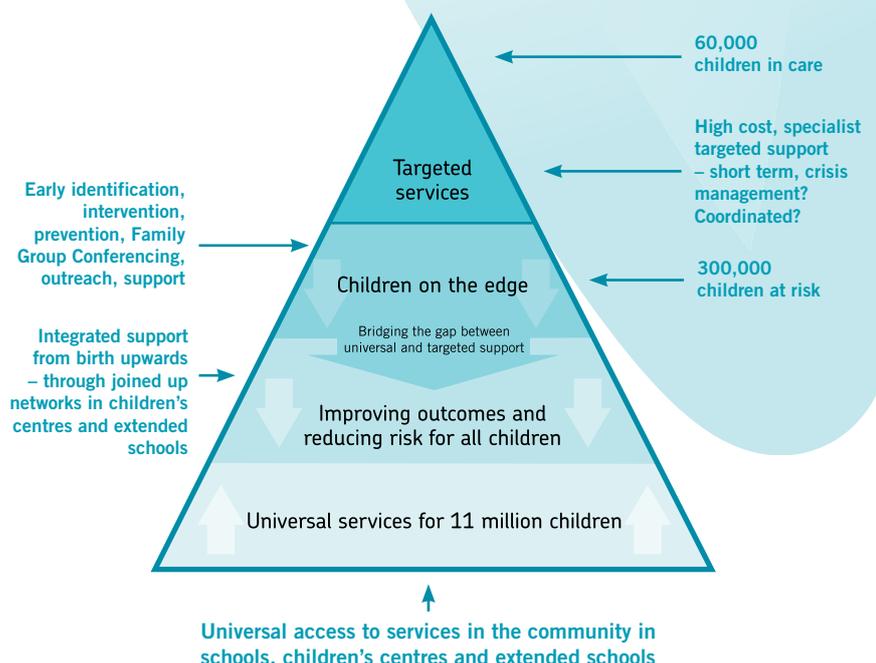
Shropshire also has 12 Sure Start Children's Centres planned, which will all be linked in to the multi-agency teams. Two are already up and running and, over the next two years, Shropshire will have another nine plus a mobile one to work in the more isolated, rural areas.

Key components of Shropshire's infrastructure include:

- An information and assessment system
- Multi-agency teams
- 'Team around the child' meetings – this involves the individual child, his or her parents, together with representatives from a range all relevant partner agencies.

Bridging the gaps - the pyramid model of care and support

Early identification, intervention, prevention, Family Group Conferencing, outreach, support

Integrated support from birth upwards – through joined up networks in children's centres and extended schools

60,000 children in care

High cost, specialist targeted support – short term, crisis management? Coordinated?

300,000 children at risk

Targeted services

Children on the edge

Bridging the gap between universal and targeted support

Improving outcomes and reducing risk for all children

Universal services for 11 million children

Universal access to services in the community in schools, children's centres and extended schools

If we are to fundamentally reorient the system, focusing it away from crisis to early intervention, it will require a shift in thinking from policy makers at the top, to those on the frontline delivering individual interventions each day.

Making it happen – action points for delivery

Making universal services work better must include:

✓ Improving coordination of services for vulnerable children and families by having a named Liaison Officer who works with social care professionals to ensure children have access to services that meet their needs

✓ Basing health and social workers on site to maximise coordination and response

✓ Improving outreach work and community engagement skills, specifically improving the take up of the services aimed at those communities who are most in need or deemed 'hard to reach' and improving the communication skills of professionals in working with vulnerable families, particularly in improving their listening and responding skills.

✓ Specific strategic responsibility for prevention and early intervention in children's centres allocated to a senior staff member, mirroring the accountability argument for Directors of Children's Services

✓ Incentivising professionals to successfully engage 'hard to reach' families and increasing the understanding, confidence and knowledge of staff via a large scale training programme, and including these attainments in a core children's workforce skill set

✓ Creating more flexibility in the system to define individualised packages of support for children and families, to more effectively respond to their needs.

In order to work more effectively with families to create solutions:

✓ FGC should be set within legislation as a standard tool used across the country

✓ Families should be able to request FGC and self-refer rather this being the sole domain of professionals

✓ All agencies should be able to understand, explain and refer families for a FGCs

✓ FGC should include voluntary and community sector agencies who are working with families

✓ FGC should become a legal construct as is the case in New Zealand and the Republic of Ireland, thus codifying its use as a preventative tool.

In order to ensure that support is consistent throughout the age range, 4Children is calling for:

✓ A national programme of funding and support for children at transition times when they are vulnerable to risk

✓ Enhanced support for extended schools to ensure they are able to offer comprehensive services for vulnerable children

✓ A programme of youth hubs which would bring together traditional youth services, health, out of school activities, advice services and parental support

✓ A review system of performance indicators to include vulnerable transition points across the age range.

Creating a seamless system of support would need:

✓ A programme which codifies 'what works' in a systematic way and provides authorities with a framework to use in assessing what their local area needs and how to implement this

✓ A commissioning framework which can be used to guide which services should exist and how these can be used to add value to what already exists in a local area

✓ A network of parent advocates and brokers to help parents understand the system and identify and articulate the needs of the family and get additional support.

Families in Focus

Families in Focus in Camden combines the best of universal and targeted provision in one. The scheme is open access and hence non-stigmatising and accessible to all. Families facing difficulty can also be 'referred', for example, where a child has been exhibiting anti-social behaviour.

The model shows how families with multiple problems can benefit from a 'broker' to help coordinate intervention and offers practical services including helping parents to find out about education or training; supporting families suffering domestic violence or racial harassment; in addition to learning and recreational activities for young people.

Research and evaluation has shown that the combination of whole family, local, non-stigmatised services offered by Families in Focus is effective in early intervention to prevent further family crises.

Making the whole system work strategically

The importance of work with vulnerable children and families not being carried out in isolation is vital to improving outcomes. The Social Exclusion Task Force Report concluded that relatively little is spent on preventative work compared to the spending aimed at tackling problems once they exist.[25] The report promised to reverse this focus, but 4Children believes that in the shorter term it may be a twin track approach rather than a reversal which is needed.

This is very much in line with the conclusions of the DfES commissioned report on outcomes in social care[26] which argues that: "In the short term the findings suggest that it is highly unlikely that the services not provided by social services would reduce social services costs or change their pattern of operation. Current expenditure on social care services is heavily concentrated on those who are already in very serious difficulty. Indeed such services may well have the effect of increasing awareness of risk, and hence increasing pressures on the care system."

The good news – that whilst in the long run preventive intervention may well lead to improvements in the life chances of children – is counterbalanced by the challenge that it may well not lead to financial savings at a local level in the short term. For this reason a shift towards these preventive services must come from 'new money' rather than depend on economies in current services. Learning from experience, however, it is clear that successful refocusing of the system will need more than just a cash injection. The evaluation of the Children's Fund[27] highlighted that the one-off nature of the investment meant there was little evidence of change in mainstream services and agencies. Similarly, the excellent work and the "new and useful" knowledge generated by Children's Fund activity was seen to remain in practice rather than shared with others, or used to develop a more strategic approach. Refocusing the system will need

us to identify and value the benefits of a preventive approach and to encourage local level priorities to be focused on preventative services rather than solely focused on crisis intervention.

There is also a need to have a clear and coherent system, which removes the sometimes mixed messages that can come from local and centrally set targets. Views from the frontline highlight the contradiction in short term performance indicators, which do not value the time and effort required to develop relationships with families who may shy away from any involvement with agencies associated with authority. Nor do these indicators value how attendance targets can pressure workers to default to parents who they know will come rather than those who may be more difficult to attract.

In order to rebalance the system, therefore, we need to:

✓ Recognise the intrinsic value of preventative work and fund it independently of the need to find savings in high need services, at least in the short term

✓ Use central levers to prioritise prevention by setting new targets for Children's Trusts that reflect this shift in thinking

✓ Set out a strategic vision of how local authorities and Children's Trusts can meet the needs of their population in this seamless system

✓ Pilot this vision with a small group of local authorities and roll out key principles and learning points.

Family Group Conferencing

Family Group Conferencing (FGC) is a decision making and planning process whereby the wider family group makes plans and decisions for children and young people who have been identified as benefiting from a plan.[28] It aims to empower families to devise plans to protect their own welfare, by providing them with the necessary information, tools and support.

Over the last ten years or so family group conferencing has grown in international popularity and is evidenced in a number of countries throughout the world. It is a process which involves all family members, friends and other adults who the family feels can contribute to making helpful plans for them and their children. It has proven to have wide ranging benefits for vulnerable children and their families across a broad spectrum of situations including children potentially coming into the care system, youth justice and school exclusions. FGC is attended by a broader range of people compared to Child Protection Case Conferences; the FGC conferences are seen as a preventative welfare support tool that often have longer term gains.

New Zealand is often cited as the 'poster child' of FGC. The Children, Young Persons and Their Families Act passed in New Zealand in November 1989 (The Republic of Ireland has more recently enshrined FGC in law through its Children Act 2001), and emphasises that court proceedings, both civil and criminal, are a last resort. It encourages community-based solutions whereby families take prime responsibility for their own children. Under the act, no court can make a decision on the disposition of a case unless a FGC has been held.

Five key actions

The themes discussed here cover a wide range of areas of priority for development which are needed to reorient the system of support and intervention to work with families and children at an earlier stage.

However in the short term 4Children believes that five key actions are needed to kick start the system in this new direction:

1. Fund and develop new coordinated intervention services

Invest to save by creating new coordinated support for the 300,000 children who are 'at risk' of vulnerability in order to prevent the difficulties they face escalating even further. These new outreach services will be delivered through children's centres and schools – in partnership with health, social workers and the police.

2. Create new Parent Advocates to advise and broker local support

Support families to get the help they need by ensuring they have access to Parent Advocates to champion their cause.

3. Support families to create their own solutions

Ensure families are genuinely involved with decisions made about their lives by legislating to introduce Family Group Conferencing as a tool used consistently and regularly in resolving difficulty and enabling families to self refer.

4. Train all those working with children and young people to offer more support for vulnerable families

Ensure that all those who work with children and families have the skills and training to identify families in difficulty and the confidence and knowledge to offer the help when it is needed.

5. Reward prevention rather than 'cure'

Set performance targets focusing on preventative outcomes for Children's Trusts and incentivise professionals to persist in reaching out to families they have been unable to contact.

4Children is the national charity dedicated to creating opportunities and building futures for all children. 4Children has been a leading advocate for integrated services for children and young people and a fundamental shift from crisis intervention to prevention.

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