



# Children in need of help or protection



# Who are we?



National Audit Office

We are the  
**National Audit Office**



We tell people how well the government spends its money and if it keeps its promises.

We are not part of the government and we tell everyone what we find.

# About help and protection for children



**Children in need** are young people who need help from someone outside their family to make their lives better or keep them safe from harm. They might have a disability or have been neglected or abused.



There are about **390,000** children in need in England.



And about **50,000** children need extra protection to stay safe from harm.



The law says that local authorities must give these children the help or protection they need. There are 152 local authorities in England.



Anyone, including teachers, doctors, health visitors, the police and other people who work with children can ask local authorities to help or protect a child.

If children are worried about themselves or someone else they can tell the police or their local authority. Families can ask for help too.



A local authority can help children and their families by:

- giving them advice and support;
- giving them counselling; or
- sending someone to help them in their home.

# What this report is about



We looked at how many children need help or protection and if this number is changing.



We also looked at:

- the help and support children get from local authorities;
- what the government is doing to make local authority services better; and
- whether the government is doing a good job.



We talked to people who work for government and local authorities about what they do.



We spoke to some young people who have needed help or protection.

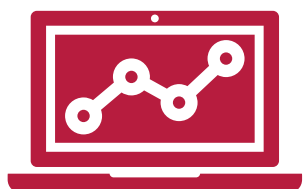


We also asked charities that work with children and young people what they think about services.



# What we found

## The number of children who need help or protection



The number of children who need help and protection is going up.

Between April 2014 and March 2015, local authorities were asked 635,000 times to help or protect children – 83,000 more times than ten years before.



Anyone, including people who work with children, such as teachers, doctors, health visitors or the police, can ask local authorities to help or protect children. Families and children can ask for help too.

The local authority should talk to these people and the child about why the child needs help or protection. The local authority will then decide what it needs to do for the child.

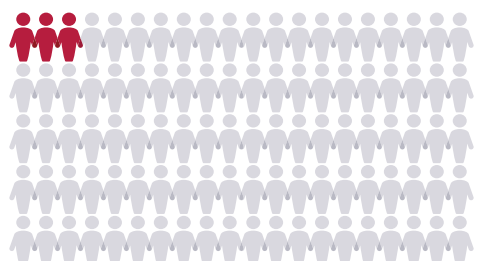


**391,000**  
Children in need



In March 2015, **391,000** children needed the help or protection of their local authority.

The number has not changed much in seven years.



**3**  
out of  
**100**



Across England, **three children in every 100** needed help or protection.



The main reason children need help or protection is because they have been abused or neglected.

Many children may need help because they live in a home where a family member threatens, bullies or hurts the child or someone else.

Other children need help because they or someone in their family has mental health problems.



When a local authority thinks it needs to do something extra to keep a child safe from harm, it will make a plan called a child protection plan.

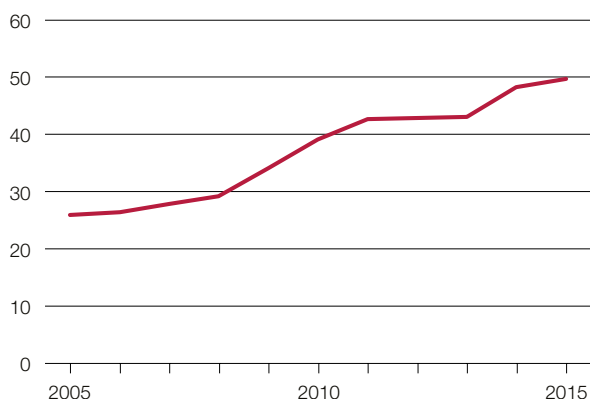
The plan says what must change to keep the child safe. It says who should make it happen.



On 31 March 2015, **49,700** children had a child protection plan.

Over the past ten years there has been a big rise in children needing to be kept safe from harm – nearly twice as many children need a plan than in 2005.

Thousands of children with a plan



## How much local authorities spend on help or protection



**£1.8bn**  
between 2014  
and 2015



Between April 2014 and March 2015, local authorities spent about **£1.8 billion** on children's social work. This includes work to protect children.



**£2,300**



We worked out how much local authorities spent on every child in need, on average.

For one year, local authorities spent about **£2,300** on each child in need. That has gone up a little bit in the last three years.



**£4,970**



**£340**



We found that some local authorities spent much more than others.

One local authority spent **£340** on each child in need. Another spent **£4,970**.

No one knows what the right amount is or why there is so much difference.



Local authorities that spent more did not always have better services.

The government does not know if these local authorities are wasting money.

## How well children are being helped and protected



The government sends inspectors to check how well local authorities help and protect children.

Between November 2013 and August 2016, the inspectors had checked **103 out of 152** local authorities.

This means that some authorities have not been checked for a long time.



The inspectors told the government that only one in four local authorities it had checked were good at helping and protecting children.

**One in five** local authorities were very poor at helping and protecting children. This means there is a risk that some children do not get the help and protection they need to keep them from being harmed.



Some parts of England have more local authorities that are good at helping and protecting children than others.

This means that children might not get good help just because of where they live.



Children need to get the right help as soon as possible. If they do not:

- a child might be harmed;
- people may have to ask the local authority to help the child again; and
- children may need to have another plan made to protect them.



There may be good reasons why a child needs help more than once during the year. But between April 2014 and March 2015, across England, local authorities were asked to help **one in four** children in need more than once.

In some areas nearly half the children needed help more than once, but in other areas most children did not need help again during the year.



Sometimes there is a good reason why a child needs another plan to protect them. But sometimes they need another plan because the first plan did not work.

**One in six** children with a plan needed another one later.

We found local authorities where four out of ten children who had had a plan needed another one later. Other local authorities hardly ever needed to make a second plan.

No one knows why there is such a big difference.



We found that people who work with children did not always understand what they should do to help or protect children. They did not always work well together or share information. This could mean children coming to harm.



But we did find examples of where local authorities, the police, family doctors, hospitals and charities were trying new ways of working together.

## What the government knows about children in need



The government collects some information from local authorities about how they help and protect children. For example, the government knows:

- how many children need help or protection;
- how quickly local authorities decide what help children need; and
- how long children need child protection plans.



But the government does not collect much information on how well children in need do as they grow up.

For example, the government does not know if they have babies when they are still teenagers themselves.

It does not know if they have mental health problems when they grow up.



The government only knows how well children who had help or protection do in school.

Some children in need do very well in school, but many do not do as well as other children.

Reading

Writing

Mathematics



When children are about 11 years old, they take tests in reading, writing and maths. In 2014-15:

- **eight out of ten** of all children in England passed these tests; but
- **five out of ten** children in need passed them.



**54**  
out of  
**100**



**15**  
out of  
**100**



When children are about 16 most sit GCSE exams. In 2014-15:

- **54 out of every 100** children in England passed five GCSEs including maths and English; but
- only **15 out of every 100** children in need did this.



A local authority collects information about what problems a child has when it first decides to help or protect them.

But afterwards the local authority does not know how well it kept the child safe or whether it had improved the child's life.



The law says that local authorities should always take children's needs and views seriously.

But the people helping them do not always see them often enough.

Children and young people say that people deciding about their lives do not always listen to them.

The people who should help them do not always ask children what they would like to happen next.

## What the government has done



**26**  
local  
authorities



The government wants better help and protection for children.

It says the people who run local authorities should use the information the government gives them to spot where their services could be better.



The government says it must wait until inspectors say that services are very bad before it can order a local authority to get better.

**26 local authorities** across England get extra help from the government, after being ordered to get better.



For a long time children have not always been helped or protected when they should have been. The government has tried to change things.

Despite lots of changes, in 2010 the government thought that services to protect children were still not good enough.

So the government asked Professor Eileen Munro, who knew about helping children, to look at what it needed to do to make things better.



Professor Munro said the rule books needed changing. She said everyone needed to put children first when making decisions about them. The government listened to Professor Munro and:

- made the rule books shorter and clearer;
- collected and shared information so local authorities could see how good they were at helping and protecting children; and
- put someone in charge of social work for children.





But in 2016 services were still not good enough.

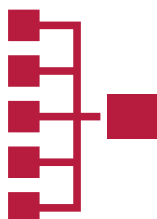
There are still too many local authorities that do not help or protect children properly.

## The government's new plan to make services better



In 2016 the government made a new plan to make services better for children who need help or protection.

By 2020 it wants good services for all children, wherever they live in England.



The government said it will fix **three problems**. It will:

- get the best people possible to be social workers and managers of children's services;
- test new ideas about what works best for children and their families, and tell social workers how to do it; and
- try different ways of running services for children who need help or protection.



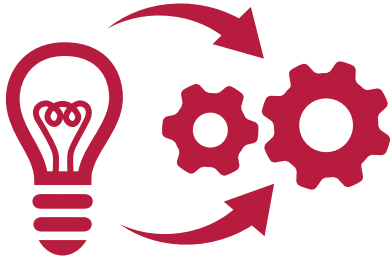
To make sure the best possible people are social workers, the government will make them sit tests. The tests will check they know how to help children.

The government will carry on training new social workers.



Having enough of the best people to be social workers is also very important.

The inspectors say services are better at local authorities where there are fewer vacancies.



The government has said it will get local authorities to test new ways of helping children in need.

It wants them to work out which ways make the biggest difference.

It wants to know which ideas will work in other local authorities.



**£200m**



Over the next four years the government plans to spend **£200 million** doing this.



Social workers say that it is not easy to find out what works best to help children and families. So the government has said it will set up a 'What Works Centre'.

The centre will list all tested ways of working with children and families.

It will make it easier for social workers to find out which ways work best.



**£20m**

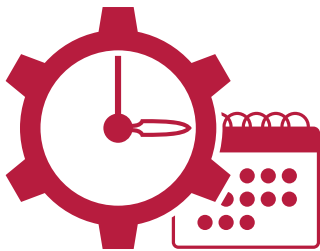


The centre will cost **£20 million** to set up and run over the next four years.

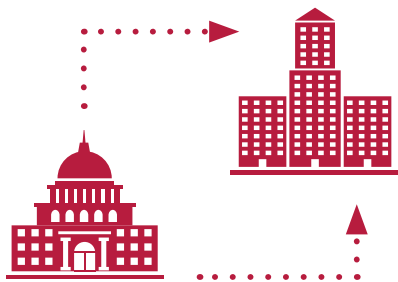
## How the government will make sure local authorities improve



The government has set out how it will make poor local authorities fix services so that children are not harmed or at risk of harm.



The government has said that if local authorities cannot make services for children better quickly, then it will get someone else to do the job.



The government might ask a good local authority to help and protect children in a poor authority instead.

It might put new people in charge of the children's services team.

Or it might ask a charity or other organisation to take over.



The government does not know yet which way will work best.



There are good examples of when government has improved services. For example, it reduced the number of young people involved in crime.

# What next

What we found in this report shows that the government needs to help and protect children better. The government needs to:



- Tell everybody how it is going to make sure that by 2020 all children get good services no matter where they live.



- Use the information it collects from local authorities to spot when things are going wrong.



- Talk to the inspectors and work out how to get up-to-date information about whether local authorities are doing a good job.



- Get better information about what happens to children who have help and protection from a local authority as they grow up.



- Get better information from local authorities about how much they spend on helping and protecting children.

## What will we do?

We will:



Check that the government changes the things we have said need changing



Look to see if things improve for children in need.



## Our other Easy Read reports

Children and young people in care and leaving care

### Where to go for help

If you are worried about yourself, another child or someone you know, you can contact one of these organisations:

#### **ChildLine: 0800 1111**

Open 24 hours a day. You can contact ChildLine about anything, anytime. No problem is too big or too small.

#### **NSPCC helpline: 0808 800 5000**

For adults worried about a child, but not sure about speaking to the local authority. If you have any concerns or suspicions, contact NSPCC's free helpline service to speak to a counsellor 24 hours a day.

**Your local authority:** This website will help you find the telephone number for your local children's services, wherever you are in England:

**[www.gov.uk/report-child-abuse-to-local-council](http://www.gov.uk/report-child-abuse-to-local-council)**

**The police:** Call 999 if a child is at immediate risk, or call the police on 101 if you think a crime has been committed.

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