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Transcript for: Children in need of help and protection

Description: Audio interview by NAO Internal Communications Manager Suzanne Goldberg with Ashley McDougall, NAO Director Cross-departmental Work on Local Government, Education and Health.

Related NAO study: HC 723, 2016-17: Children in need of help or protection

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[Suzanne Goldberg] Hello and welcome to the National Audit Office podcast. In the year to March 2015, over 630,000 children were referred to local authorities because of child protection concerns. Child protection is a key priority for government. In 2015 the Prime Minister at the time, David Cameron, announced the setting up of a Child Protection taskforce. Since then, the Department for Education has announced wider plans to reform children’s services, including taking a stronger intervention role when local authorities’ services are failing. The department’s policy is to help protect the most vulnerable children in our society, and give them the opportunity to succeed.

Our study, Children in need of help or protection, focused on the role of the department in overseeing and improving the child protection system, including the reforms it’s leading. We’re joined today by Ashley McDougall, a Director in our Value for Money team, who worked on the report. Ashley, thank you very much for joining us. Let’s start by finding out who we are talking about for child protection services.

[Ashley McDougall] These are children about whom an adult has some concern about their welfare. It could be a parent, could be a partner, could be a GP or even school teacher, and they have a duty to refer to their local authority if they have a concern. Now last year there were 2.3 million contacts with local authorities, of people saying: “There’s something we’re concerned about here – might be something, might be nothing, but we think you should know about it.” Of those, local authorities accepted 630,000 referrals and that’s where they pass a threshold and they say: “Yes, there is something worth looking at here.” And all of those children might have varying needs; different local circumstances, different family circumstances, and the authorities are saying “This needs some help and support.”

[Suzanne Goldberg] And what’s the background to this policy?

[Ashley McDougall] Well, the Department for Education has the policy and it wants to have all children supported and cared for in the way that they need, so no neglect. One of the main problems is around domestic violence impacting on children or children with mental health needs that are not met. So the department wants to see where that’s happening, what can be done about it and if those children receive the support that they need.

[Suzanne Goldberg] So what did your report show?

[Ashley McDougall] Well, the department has been doing this since 2010. It realised then that services were not good enough and it wanted to improve those services. We found that, disappointingly, the services are still not good enough. Two out of every ten local authority children services have been judged by Ofsted as being Good. Now to put that in context, Ofsted say that nine out of ten schools are Good or better. So there is a big gap in the quality of services. There is also a lot of variability around the country, and we found that a lot of children are actually are having severe needs that they need to have assessed. There was a doubling of the investigations of cases where they had serious concerns in the last ten years.

[Suzanne Goldberg] And why does this quality vary? Is it linked to austerity or?

[Ashley McDougall] We looked quite carefully at that, because that’s a reasonable hypothesis. We found that it wasn’t. We found that there was no correlation between the spend from local authorities per child in need and the actual quality of services as assessed by Ofsted. The spend can range from £350 per child in need to nearly £5,000 per child in need, but the quality doesn’t change for those variables. So it’s not the case that the more you spend the better you get or the less you spend the worse you get, which I think is quite important because it tells us that it’s how you spend the money. It means it’s really important to know what you’re spending the money on and that’s the right thing, that it will make a difference. The department has agreed to set up a What Works Centre, just to identify what works, how much do you need to spend on it and what difference will that make.

[Suzanne Goldberg] Great. So what actually needs to change to improve this situation?

[Ashley McDougall] Well, we highlighted three big things, as the auditors. So one is getting better information more quickly on what’s happening with the quality of practice. So you need lead indicators where you can say: “That indicator looks like it’s going wrong, there are too many cases being referred back to local authorities that they thought they had addressed, and that’s a bad indicator of problem quality. We also think you need better information on what works cost-effectively. And everyone needs to know that – that needs to be spread far and wide. Finally, you need to reduce the variability between local authorities. There are different practices and different access for children in different places and that looks like it’s a problem.

[Suzanne Goldberg] There’s a lot to take in there, Ashley, and it sounds like there’s still quite a lot of work to do. Thank you very much for your time. If you’d like to find out more about this report, the full report and an executive summary are available on our website, [www.nao.org.uk](http://www.nao.org.uk). Or you can follow us on Twitter @NAOorguk or on Facebook [www.facebook.com/NAOorguk](http://www.facebook.com/NAOorguk). Thank you for listening.