🏛️ Department
for Education

Policy paper

Children's social care data and digital strategy

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Applies to England

Contents

About the strategy

The data we collect about children and families, and the information recorded about their lives and interactions with children's social care and related services, is sensitive, unique and deeply personal.

Data is collected to provide support and services for children, families, and communities and to deliver vital safeguarding activity. However, because data is held across different systems and organisations, bringing it together can be difficult.

It is our shared responsibility with local authorities, safeguarding partners, and other agencies to use it appropriately and with care. The children's social care data and digital strategy aims to set out the foundations for a long-term plan to use data and digital services to their full potential.

This strategy uses evidence and insights from:

- other government data strategies
- research conducted to understand the needs of those that use children's social care systems and data
- other developing data work in the Department for Education (DfE)
- emerging findings from projects funded by DfE's data and digital solutions fund

We worked with colleagues from across the children's social care sector, in all regions, to help test and develop our findings and strategic vision.

Children's social care reviews

The [Independent review of children's social care](#), the [National review into the murders of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson](#), and many other local and national reviews have set out the impact of poor data and systems on the safety of individual children and the provision of services for children, families, and communities.

The [Independent review of children's social care](#) identified 3 issues that needed to be addressed as a priority.

1. Poor case management systems significantly reduce the time social workers can spend with families – they need to be more user-friendly and enable information to be retrieved more effectively.
2. Technology is a significant barrier to the wider challenge of sharing information between safeguarding partners and other agencies.
3. Not enough is done at any level of the system to analyse and gain insight from the large amount of data gathered about the children's social care system. This problem is made worse by the long time-lag associated with much of the nationally reported children's social care data.

Stable homes, built on love

[Stable homes, built on love](#) is the government's plan for how we rebalance the children's social care system away from costly crisis intervention, towards meaningful and effective help for families, to deliver better outcomes for children. The strategy sets out 6 pillars of reform:

1. Family help provides the right support at the right time so that children can thrive with their families.
2. A decisive multi-agency child protection system.
3. Unlocking the potential of family networks.
4. Putting love, relationships, and a stable home at the heart of being a child in care.
5. A valued, supported and highly skilled social worker for every child who needs one.
6. A system that continuously learns and improves and makes better use of evidence and data.

This strategy supports reforms across these pillars.

Our work so far

Our work to address the barriers to transforming data and digital services in children's social care includes:

- supporting local authorities to deliver and test innovative solutions for case management systems, data collections, and information sharing through the data and digital solutions fund
- highlighting potential areas for future development on the dashboard to support the new children's social care national framework through the Children's social care national framework and dashboard: consultation response
- producing the Improving multi-agency information sharing report by working closely with the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) and the Home Office (HO)
- working with the children's social care sector to understand how we can adopt technical and data standards that support information sharing
- helping local authorities to forecast the demand for and supply of children's social care placements in response to the Competition and Market Authority (CMA) recommendations into the Children's social care market study final report

Working collaboratively

We are codesigning and delivering reformed services, as set out in stable homes, built on love by:

- working closely with local authorities, safeguarding partners and others
- listening to the view of workforce, families and children

This will help us to gather insight and understand how reformed services are operating, including the experiences of those involved. This will:

- support effective delivery
- help us understand where data and digital can help, or hinder activity
- support decisions on future investment and roll out

This work, along with conversations and workshops with those who work daily with children's social care data, has shaped this strategy's long-term vision, and the activity we plan to take between now and 2025.

Identifying the challenges to delivering children's social care

We wanted to identify the most pressing digital and data related challenges for those working in and with children's social care. To do this we asked for input from a range of stakeholders that use children's social care data every day.

This process confirmed the findings of the [Independent review of children's social care](#), deepening our understanding of some complicated issues. We must, iteratively and over time, find solutions to the challenges set out below.

Culture and leadership

We heard that gaps in the knowledge, skills and understanding of data and digital services leaders could make improvement more difficult. Having a strong culture and leadership is an important factor in getting the most from data and digital services.

Having the capacity to make the most of the data that they hold can often be a challenge for local authorities, and capacity varies between local authorities. A data maturity model developed by the Local Government Association suggests that where culture and capacity is limited, decisions can become reactive and opportunities for reflection and improvement are reduced.

Systems and technology

Systems and technology that do not meet the needs of social workers and practitioners reduce the time they can spend supporting families and building strong relationships with them.

Existing systems and technology mean that it's difficult for practitioners to:

- use and retrieve information
- have a holistic view of a child, therefore delaying decisions, action and the support that children and families need

In each of these cases the technology that practitioners use can have a negative impact on the experiences of children, young people, and families.

Information sharing

Too often poor information sharing is identified in serious case reviews following the death or serious injury of a child. The review into the murders of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson reflects how "critical information from multiple sources becomes rapidly fragmented leading to a partial and siloed understanding of children's experiences and lives."

Barriers to sharing information also:

- negatively impact the identification of lower-level need, potentially resulting in worse outcomes for children, young people, and families
- impact the transition between services, for example from children's to adult social care

We heard from those working with and in children's social care services that there continues to be uncertainty and reluctance to share information.

Data collection, insights, and analysis

While activity that takes place in children's social care services is frequently recorded, data does not adequately capture the outcomes or experiences of children, young people, and families.

We heard frequently from local authorities and others, that barriers to improving the analysis and insights available about children's social care were:

- the relevance of recorded data
- the processes for working with recorded data

The process of data collection by central government was often considered complicated and time consuming. Data lags, particularly at the national level, limited analysts' ability to turn information in to insights.

Supporting children, young people, and families to tell their story

Some people with experience of children's social care found that when they tried to access their own records, they had difficulties getting hold of information, with significant amounts being redacted.

Those working in local authorities recognised that a core purpose of the information recorded about children, young people and families should help them understand and tell their own story.

Trust and confidence in the use of children's social care data

We recognise that it is critical to maintain the trust of children, young people, families, and the wider public about how the sensitive data that is held about them across the public sector is used.

Being mindful and open about this will be critical to successfully transforming the use of children's social care data.

Addressing the challenges

To address these challenges, we set out 6 foundations as a guide to improving children's social care. A focus on these areas will be important to for improving services for children, young people, and families.

Foundations 1 to 4 focus on what needs to change to support the transformation of data and digital services in children's social care. Foundations 5 and 6 are principles for how we approach change.

1. Culture and Leadership

Building a strong, confident culture across local authorities, with the backing of senior leaders, will enable the best use of data and digital tools. A strong culture around data and digital services and effective collaboration between technical and practitioner teams helps create services that best meet the needs of a local authority.

2. Systems and Technology

Ensuring systems and technologies meet the needs of practitioners can support them to make a bigger positive impact in the lives of children, young people, and families. More effective systems and technology can maximise the time practitioners can spend with families and make it easier to get the information they need.

3. Information sharing

Tackling the knowledge-based, cultural, perceived legislative, regulatory, and technological barriers to easier information sharing can help to ensure that decisions are made with the whole picture of the child and family. This will help reduce the worst consequences of the fragmentation of information across agencies and systems highlighted in serious case reviews.

4. Data collection, insights, and analysis

Improving the process around data collection will help to:

- tackle the burden on local authorities
- address the data lags that currently hamper the information available across the country about the children's social care system

Data that is more relevant to the lived experience of children young people and families can inform decision-making that better meets their needs.

5. Supporting children, young people, and families to tell their story

Across all our work we must be mindful that the systems and data used by practitioners provide a record of a child or young person's experiences. By improving systems, technology, and information sharing, we can improve the experiences of children, young people, and families for example, by reducing the need to repeatedly provide the same information to different practitioners.

6. Trust and confidence in the use of children's social care data

Trust that the data and information generated about children, young and families when they interact with children's social care services is being used appropriately and with care, will be critical for maintaining support for the transformation of the use of data and digital services. We will seek to be transparent and clear about how data is being used.

Our strategic objectives

Our strategic objectives set out the 3 areas where we will work with the sector between now and 2025 to begin building the foundations for transforming data and digital services. Achieving this transformation will be a long-term plan requiring action far beyond 2025.

Our objectives reflect the need to do ongoing research with the sector to ensure our longer-term approach supports sustainable change through:

1. Supporting strong data culture and leadership.
2. Supporting systems and technology to meet sector need.
3. Improving the data we collect, share, and use.

1. Supporting strong data culture and leadership

The workforce will be equipped and effective, where leaders promote effective practice, and use data to its full potential. They will be supported by appropriate tools and systems, shared analysis, benchmarking, and greater use of insights at the right level. Confidence, care, and transparency will support public trust in how sensitive data and information about children, young people and families is used.

We'll do this by:

- supporting a data empowered and enabled workforce and leadership teams that are confident and consistent in how they share and use data
- increasing workforce access to necessary tools, skills, and support to unlock the potential of data in their role
- ensuring the value of data is understood at each level including leadership
- appreciating and using insights to drive innovation and inform decision making, at

an individual, cohort and service level as well as inform national policy and practice

Between 2023 and 2025

So far we have funded:

- the creation of information and data sharing agreement templates to support local partnerships to strengthen governance arrangements to enable more effective data sharing
- a local authority to develop and test solutions to overcome the cultural and behavioural barriers to multi-agency information-sharing

We will:

- improve and update information sharing advice for safeguarding practitioners, supported by the statutory guidance [Working together to safeguard children](#)
- support local safeguarding partnerships to use data-sharing agreement templates and develop well-functioning governance arrangements to share information and data for safeguarding
- further improve practice and culture around information sharing through evaluation and continuous improvement of existing tools, advice and training products that support practitioners
- conduct an assessment to understand the sector's data and digital capacity, capability, and skills to inform how we can best support the sector to grow its capabilities
- explore the long-term development of local authority data and digital capability and capacity by understanding how support, expertise, forums, and training, including provisions for local authority leadership could be provided

2. Supporting systems and technology to meet sector need

We aim to better understand and advocate for the needs of the sector so that we can support the improvement of the systems that process and provide services for children's social care data. Improved information sharing will strengthen our insights and enable safeguarding partners to better prevent issues from escalating through:

- early help and family help services
- identification of trends that enable us to provide necessary support and resources

Children, young people, and families will be better able to share their stories through improved technology, which can capture their voice. Improved data and case management systems will reduce the need for them to repeatedly tell their story, and ease their transition between services, for example from children's to adult social care.

We'll do this by:

- establishing standards and principles, aligned with relevant existing cross-government standards, to enable successful and timely information sharing by creating consistency between systems, data and sharing processes
- improving information sharing practice through standards, guidance, and tools, allowing practitioners to effectively access the right information at the right time, supporting earlier prevention and improved safeguarding
- working to introduce advanced technologies and automation that drives innovation and improvements in the sector through enabling more timely and efficient data flows

Between 2023 to 2025

So far we have funded:

- the evaluation of data analytics tools available to those working to safeguard children
- the testing of how open data and technology standards can be developed for children's social care to make it easier to publish, access, share, and use better quality data that encourages the development of new tools and services

We have also produced the [Improving multi-agency information sharing](#) report to parliament, highlighting the barriers practitioners working with children and families face when sharing information and investigating potential solutions to this.

We will:

- publish guidance developed with the Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation on the responsible use of data analytics, to assist teams across the sector to use data effectively and safely, and understand the potential for the use of advanced data techniques
- build our understanding of digital systems and products that use children's social care data and case management products, to inform work identifying improvements in systems across the sector
- work with local authorities to understand and agree what they need from their

children's social care case management systems and map the existing market products against these needs

- support further sector innovation in digital approaches to case management
- explore and work with the sector to develop and maintain data and technology open standards and develop a solution on standard implementation that is aligned with existing standards across government
- work to understand the value and potential of automated data collections to reduce administrative burden and increase frequency and timeliness of data
- evaluate and test improved information sharing using technology, including systems developed by local authorities, the use of the NHS (National Health Service) Spine (which includes testing the NHS number as a consistent identifier) and potential improvements to the Child Protection - Information Sharing (CP-IS) service

3. Improving the data we collect, share, and use

We will improve and build increased confidence in the department's evidence base, ensuring we collect the right data. This will enable appropriate, accurate and more timely insights and analysis for the department and local authorities to support evidence-based decision making.

The purpose of departmental data collections will be clear, as will their use to understand and improve children's social care services. Drawing on principles of the single data list, we will avoid duplication and ensure consistency of measures in the collection of data. For example, where appropriate, the Office for Local Government (Oflog) will draw on existing indicators and data collections including those used in the children's social care dashboard when selecting metrics for children's social care.

This will enable stronger learning across the sector and government, leading to timely, trusted decisions, and policy analysis.

We'll do this by:

- reviewing and ensuring the data we collect, and record provides us with an appropriate view of the child, and system, at the right level
- creating more valuable insights, from the right data to support decisions and understanding of outcomes

- collecting meaningful, timely data to create a shared understanding of the local, regional, and national picture of children's social care

Between 2023 to 2025

So far we have funded local authorities to:

- create a standard children's social care dataset that will enable local authorities to collaborate on the analysis of a wider range of data
- explore improvements to pre-proceedings, children's social care finance, and voice of the child data
- conduct user research into how social workers and others working in local authorities value data

We have also consulted on the contents of a children's social care dashboard to support the new children's social care national framework.

We will:

- build on work conducted by local authorities through our data and digital solutions fund, to create a better understanding of data needs from those working with, or in local authority's children's social care
- build our understanding of how local authorities and safeguarding partners use and value children's social care data, supporting us to prioritise the development of improved data across early help and children's social care services
- undertake research with local areas to explore the limitations of current national data in relation to children that experience harm outside the home and how we may strengthen this data in the future
- pilot a resource linking the DfE and Ministry of Justice's family courts data to better understand the national picture of permanent kinship care arrangements – we will evaluate how to make this data available to local authorities to allow them to have a greater understanding of who in their area has a special guardianship or child arrangement order
- when Parliamentary time allows, and subject to the Information Commissioner's agreement, work with Social Work England to develop its ability to share information and data – this will allow us to better identify social work recruitment, retention, and development initiatives

Children's social care dashboard

We will:

- publish a [children's social care dashboard](#) which will bring children's social care data together in one place to help understand whole system progress towards the outcomes of the [national framework](#)
- evolve the indicators in the children's social care dashboard to help better measure children's social care outcomes – we will review data gaps across children's social care and scope out ways in which these can be addressed
- continually improve the children's social care dashboard to ensure appropriate, timely insights and analysis, including easier, faster ways to move data from local authorities to DfE and reduce data collection burdens
- seek opportunities to share more insights from our own analysis with those working in and with local authority's children's social care, including by supporting learning loops around the new national framework and dashboard and from the [Families first for children (FFC) pathfinder programme](#)

As a result of our strategy

In the long-term, we aim to improve the design, planning, and delivery of services that lead to better experiences and outcomes for children, young people, and families.

We will:

- reduce the technological and administrative burden around data, as well as increase the potential of data insights and analysis, to allow data to drive innovation at each level
- have a data empowered and enabled workforce and leadership teams, who are able to make confident, informed decisions with data, supported by appropriate tools and technology
- improve the guidance, and systems for information sharing, to enable stronger multi-agency safeguarding
- use a better understanding of data, trends and outcomes to support the planning and delivery of services including early prevention and help

Local authority analytical teams will be able to:

- learn more from the data, connecting it where appropriate to wider education data
- have a greater understanding of the children, young people and families in their area who have histories or connections across local authority borders

* better support individuals and communities

As a department, we will be transparent about the work we deliver, and how we are working towards our aim of improving outcomes. This will build confidence in our data use. We will work in partnership with those who work with and in local authority children's social care, to ensure the work we deliver creates meaningful, long-term change.

Next steps

We will continue to develop our strategy with the sector, iteratively developing our data improvement work and delivering the commitments set out here.

While we know this change is long term and needs a focused, planned period of transformation, there are some challenges that can be tackled in the short-term, as identified in our research.

We hear the need to be more transparent in our data improvement work, provide consistency in our approach, and make our data collections and usage more open with the sector.

We will use the progress and foundations from our strategic objectives to invest in the future of children's social care data and digital.

We will work with the sector and seek wider input, to agree how best to deliver this, following publication of this strategy.

↑ Back to top

Services and information

Benefits

Births, death, marriages and care

Business and self-employed

Childcare and parenting

Citizenship and living in the UK

Crime, justice and the law

Disabled people

Driving and transport

Education and learning

Employing people

Environment and countryside

Housing and local services

Money and tax

Passports, travel and living abroad

Visas and immigration

Working, jobs and pensions

Government activity

Departments

News

Guidance and regulation

Research and statistics

Policy papers and consultations

Transparency

How government works

Get involved

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