



Royal College of Nursing
Shaping nursing since 1916

Royal College of Nursing briefing ahead of second reading of the Children and Social Work Bill in the House of Lords

The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) is a professional association and trade union representing over 430,000 nurses, health care support workers, midwives and nursing students. The RCN is the voice of nursing across the UK.

Summary

- The number of looked after children is currently at the highest than at any point since 1985.¹ The health and wellbeing of looked after children has been consistently found to be poorer than that of children and young people who have never been in care. The bill presents an opportunity for the Government to put this right, and ensure the health and wellbeing of looked after children is given the priority it deserves and to ensure the state delivers on its promise to looked after children.
- The RCN is warning that provisions to enable local authorities to apply for exemptions from any aspect of the Children's Act, in order to pilot new ways of working, may have the unintended consequence of eroding the rights of the child. The RCN is calling for clarity around the proposals and a commitment from the Government that safeguards will be put in place to prevent further unacceptable variations in care for looked after children.
- Looked after children Specialist, 'Named' and 'Designated' Nurses make a significant difference to the health and wellbeing of children in care. The RCN is aware of cuts to these posts and services in many areas as local authorities respond to the challenge of delivering public services within the current funding settlement from central Government. The RCN is clear that inadequate service provision will worsen health outcomes for looked after children.
- Any changes to the way children's services are designed and delivered must take a child-centred approach and be rooted in evidence about improved outcomes in the first instance, rather than a need for cash-strapped local authorities to save costs.
- Health Visitors play a key role in supporting the health and safeguarding of children and young people in the crucial first five years of life, especially looked after children who often have more complex needs. Since local authorities took over commissioning of health visiting services in October

² <https://www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-004735>

2015, the RCN has learnt of unacceptable cuts and paring back of services. This bill presents an opportunity for the Government to rectify this and ensure that children and young people get the access to the looked after children nursing and Health Visiting services that they need.

Looked after children nurses

‘Designated Nurses’, ‘Named Nurses’ and specialist nurses for looked after children provide vital expertise in supporting children in care, including bringing together key partners to commission and deliver strong, integrated support for those in the care system. Worryingly, an RCN survey of nurses working with looked after children found that a lack of service capacity, role clarity and understanding of the importance of health care received by looked after children, are significant barriers to these nurses effectively carrying out their roles.² The RCN believes that any changes to the way that children’s services are delivered must address the health needs of looked after children, and take a child-centred approach. The RCN has recently issued a position statement to clearly articulate the role of Designated and Named Nurses for looked after children, in light of a lack of understanding by Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs).³

Pilots of new ways of working

The bill seeks to enable local authorities to trial new ways of working, by allowing them to apply for exemption from aspects of the Children’s Act, which exists to ensure that local authorities promote the wellbeing and welfare of children and young people. The RCN supports new and innovative ways of working that are rooted in evidence that supports improvements in patient care and hold the wellbeing of children and young people at their heart. However, in the current context of chronic underfunding for local authorities and social care, and the financial difficulties many councils find themselves in, there is a risk that looked after children may suffer the consequences of these experiments. The RCN is calling for clarity around the proposals and a commitment from the Government that safeguards will be put in place to prevent the unintended consequence of eroding the rights of the child. We are also seeking assurances that introducing unacceptable variation in standards of care for the most vulnerable in our society.

There is already startling variation in outcomes for children in the first five years in relation to obesity, tooth decay, injury and school-readiness outcomes, depending on where they live and the levels of deprivation in their local authority area. The RCN is concerned that provisions in this bill which seek to encourage new ways of working may have the unintended consequence of perpetuating these inequalities. The RCN is concerned that a shift from nationally agreed “gold standard” rights of the child, as set out in the Children’s Act, to a ‘local offer’ from local authorities may see these rights watered down and eroded. There is a clear risk that variation in local offers may serve to worsen child health inequalities and lead to further unacceptable variation in outcomes.

² <https://www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-004735>

³ <https://www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-005399>

Health Visiting and School Nursing Services

The RCN warmly welcomed the Government's drive to increase Health Visitor numbers as part of the *Health Visitor Implementation Plan 2011-15*⁴. We are therefore extremely concerned to learn that since local authorities took over responsibility for commissioning Health Visiting services in October 2015, some councils have responded by decommissioning, redesigning or paring back these services.⁵ Feedback from RCN members on the ground suggests that the current funding settlement for local authorities is inadequate. RCN members have raised concerns that councils will be unable to deliver these services to the level that is required, and in some cases, unable to fulfil their statutory responsibility. This a retrograde step that will undo the progress made by the Government's *Health Visitor Implementation Plan 2011-15*. It is therefore of the utmost importance that any changes to the way children's services are designed and delivered take into account the key role that Health Visitors play in safeguarding children and young people, and that services continued to be commissioned by local authorities.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)

Approximately one in ten children and young people in the general population has a diagnosable mental health disorder.⁶ Looked after children have been found to have much higher rates of mental health and emotional wellbeing issues, with almost fifty per cent demonstrating symptoms of a mental health disorder such as anxiety and depression, hyperactivity and autistic spectrum disorders.⁷

CAMHS have borne the brunt of funding cuts since 2010 and the RCN has continually raised concerns about the impact of this is having on the emotional health of children and young people. The RCN believes the Government must afford due priority to the mental health of looked after children as part of its package of reforms to social work by ensuring dedicated children and young people's mental health staff as part of looked-after children teams. Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education supports children and young people to develop emotional resilience and gives them vital lifestyle tools. The RCN is calling for PSHE to be mandatory and included in the national curriculum for all schools.

About the Royal College of Nursing:

With a membership of around 435,000 registered nurses, midwives, health visitors, nursing students, health care assistants and nurse cadets. RCN members work in a variety of hospital and community settings in the NHS and the independent sector. The RCN promotes patient and nursing interests on a wide range of issues by working closely with the Government, the UK parliaments and other national and European political institutions, trade unions, professional bodies and voluntary organisations.

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/health-visitor-implementation-plan-2011-to-2015>

⁵ <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/may/17/nhs-trust-no-to-osborne-nightmare-cuts-barnsley-walk-awy-from-contract>

⁶ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/improving-mental-health-services-for-young-people>

⁷ <http://www.nspcc.org.uk/services-and-resources/research-and-resources/what-works-preventing-treating-mental-health-looked-after-children/>

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