



Department
for Education

Child & Family Principal Social Worker conference

10th March 2026

February 2026

The Opportunity Mission is focused on **breaking the link between young people's backgrounds and their success**

We will deliver this through our mission pillars:



Best start in life

Opportunity starts with children's crucial early years, where families build strong relationships and children develop speaking and motor skills



Every child achieving and thriving

Every child and young person, regardless of their background, must be able to achieve at school and develop the knowledge and skills they need for life



Skills for opportunity and growth

As young people move into adult life, they must have pathways through further and higher education and into employment, including technical training



Family security

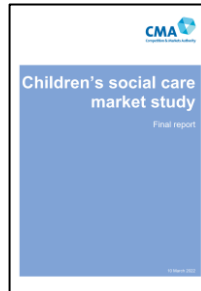
Removing the barriers that mean too many people struggle to have even their most basic needs met

Child poverty **Keeping children safe**

Best place to grow up for all groups in society

Working across government, this Mission will **remove the underlying barriers to opportunity** by promoting **family security**. That means **keeping children safe and tackling child poverty** – both root causes of disadvantage. This will relieve pressure across the system and set children free – to learn, to thrive, and to live happy lives.

The case for reform



The Competition and Markets Authority study into Children's Social Care Placements

March 2022



National Review into the murders of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson

May 2022



Safeguarding Children with Complex Health Needs in residential Settings.

April 2023



The Independent Review of Children's Social Care

May 2022



The Report of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse

October 2022

Prevent.

1

Children should remain with their families and supported to thrive and be safely prevented from entering the care system wherever possible.

Support.

2

Where children cannot remain at home, we should support children to live with kinship carers or in fostering families. We will also improve support for care leavers.

Fix the market.

3

Placements for children in care should be first and foremost, homes for young people to live in and we must bring a swift end to excessive profit making.

Key enablers.

4

Investing in key enablers which underpin the system – workforce, better data & information sharing, evidence-based programmes and the National Framework.

Children's Social Care: Summary

OFFICIAL-SENSITIVE

We must improve outcomes for children and families

- Around five children in every classroom will need support from a social worker at some point during their school years. Despite committed support from social workers, these children are more likely to be persistently absent, less likely to go on to university, and less likely to earn a decent living.
- Families report that local support can be stigmatising and that they are passed from pillar to post. We need to ensure that family help is welcoming and joined up across local partners. We must also improve local information sharing and prevent children from falling through the gaps.

We must address rising costs and fix the broken care market

- Spending on children's social care has increased significantly - LA gross expenditure on children and young people's services rose to £16.0 billion in 2024-25, an 8% increase from 2023-24. However, spending is focused on statutory and acute services and needs to be rebalanced towards early support and prevention.
- A shortage of foster carers and homes in the right places means children in care are often moved many miles away from their support network and loved ones. And the increasing number of very high-cost placements is putting enormous pressure on local authority (LA) budgets.

Some of our key actions include

- The **Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill**, improves multi-agency working, introduces a single unique identifier, embeds family group decision making, strengthens support for care leavers, improves the regulation of children's homes and tackles excessive profiteering.
- National rollout of the **Families First Partnership Programme**, supporting and investing in reform in all local areas.
- New investment through the Spending Review - We have secured over **£2.4 billion over the multi-year Settlement** to reform Children's Social Care.

This includes:

- Continuing the **£523 million** invested in 2025-26 over the next three years, **£319 million** over 2026-27 and 2027-28 from the Transformation Fund, and additional investment of **£547 million** that we announced on 20 November all for the Families First Partnership Programme.
- We are also investing **£560 million** of additional funding to refurbish and expand children's homes and provide more foster care placements.
- We have announced **£44m** investment to support children in kinship care and foster care. This includes trialling a new kinship allowance in up to 10 local authorities and ensuring that every local authority has access to a regional recruitment hub, demonstrating the government's commitment to children's social care to make sure every child, irrespective of background, has the best start in life.

Through the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill, we have set out measures to support long-term system change and clarify existing frameworks where needed.

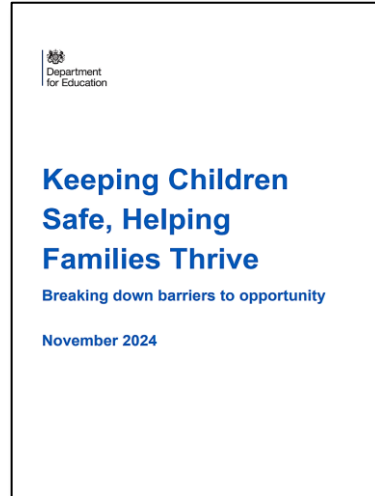
CSC measures in the Bill

The Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill is an opportunity to:

- Put children and their wellbeing at the centre of the children’s social care systems.
- Help deliver manifesto commitments to ensure that all children can thrive in safe, loving homes.
- Update the legislative landscape so it reflects the structures and standards we want to see in the future system.

Keep families together and children safe	Require all LAs to offer ‘family group decision making’ at pre-proceedings
	Improve information sharing between agencies through an information sharing duty and single unique identifier
	Strengthen the role of education in local multi-agency safeguarding arrangements
	Require LAs to establish multi-agency child protection teams
	Give SoS the power to make child employment regulations
Remove barriers to opportunity	Require LA consent to home educate any child subject to a s47 enquiry, or on a child protection plan
	Require LAs to publish a kinship local offer
	Make the virtual school head role statutory for all cohorts
	Require LAs to offer Staying Close to care leavers, to help and find accommodation and services
	Require LAs to publish their offer to care leavers for a planned and supportive transition between care and independent living.
	Disapplication of the intentional homelessness test for care leavers by LAs
Make the care system child-centred	Extending and strengthening corporate parenting responsibilities to all Government Departments and relevant public bodies, excluding Home Office functions of police, immigration and asylum
	A framework to place children with complex needs in community provision , where deprivation of liberty orders can be applied
	A provider oversight regime to strengthen Ofsted’s regulatory power of children’s homes at a group level
	Expand Ofsted’s powers in unregistered children’s homes
	Resolve a gap in legislation around prosecuting perpetrators of wilful neglect directed against 16 and 17 year olds in care settings
Tackle profiteering	A regulation making power to govern the use of agency workers in LA children’s social care
	Financial oversight regime for ‘difficult to replace’ care providers
	Regional Care Cooperatives to harness the collective buying power of local authorities
	Legislative framework that allows for a future profit cap for private children’s homes if other changes aren’t effective

Progress towards whole system reform



Our policy statement, **Keeping Children Safe, Helping Families Thrive**, published on 18 November 2024, outlines our vision for the future children’s social care system and our core legislative proposals.

The vision set out in the policy paper is built around creating a system which:

- **works with the whole family** so more children and young people can thrive in their family
- **prioritises kinship care** for children who cannot live safely with their parents
- **supports children in care and care leavers** to live healthy and happy lives
- **provides a high quality of care**, which all children deserve
- **takes action to end excessive profit-making** by care providers
- **works effectively across agencies** and **empowers professionals** working within it

There’s been a lot of activity towards whole system reform over the last 18 months. This government has:

- Started to embed the first **Children’s Social Care National Framework** as well as an updated version of **Working Together to Safeguard Children**
- Launched the national rollout of the **Families First Partnership Programme** across the whole of England to transform our offer of help and protection
- Launched a consultation on establishing a **Child Protection Authority** to drive improvement and accountability in the child protection system, as well as launching a consultation on ensuring **Adoption Support** works for all
- Launched **Kinship Zones** where we will be providing local areas with financial allowances for kinship carers and giving local areas resources to support children in kinship arrangements
- Set out our plans to **renew fostering** with a national ambition to grow the number of places in local authority and third sector foster homes by 10,000
- Launched the first **Regional Care Cooperatives** in Greater Manchester and the South East
- Continued to help care leavers maintain safe and stable accommodation through **Staying Put and Staying Close**.
- Invested in **Social Worker Induction Programmes** to support early career social workers and published new **Early Career Standards**.

National professional development for social workers in the context of a reforming system

The social work national professional development offer is a key enabler of the children's social care (CSC) reform programme, underpinning the sector's shift towards consistent, high-quality practice and stronger system leadership. It is fully aligned with the national framework for children's social care, supporting its ambition to strengthen practice, build workforce capability, and improve outcomes for children and families.

The social work national professional development offer will consist of five key strands:



Child Sexual Abuse & Exploitation Training

The early career standards will underpin the new Early Career Development Programme

Builds and maintains impactful relationships and communicates effectively with children, parents and families	Undertakes effective assessments to develop a purposeful plan, adapting approach as needed	Delivers interventions to support children and families to make positive change, build resilience and support effective life transitions	Explores identity to deliver anti discriminatory practice	Works collaboratively and effectively with other professionals	Reflects on and develops professional practice
Build and maintain impactful relationships with children	Identify and elicit all pertinent information about the child and family's history and lived experience in more complex situations	Deliver and facilitate interventions in collaboration with the family to create positive change	Gain insight into a child and family's sense of self by consistently applying an intersectional understanding of identity	Work collaboratively and effectively with multi-agency practitioners, providing constructive challenge, where appropriate	Develop their practice through evidence-informed reflective practice and professional learning to ensure work with families is impactful
Build and maintain impactful relationships with parents	Analyse and apply professional knowledge and evidence base of harm to inform decision-making in more complex situations	Deliver and facilitate interventions to sustain change and build family resilience	Reflect on own identity and prejudices, valuing difference and using this to shape approaches with families	Recognise boundaries of own professional scope and responsibility and seek support/escalate to others, where appropriate	Demonstrate self-awareness, emotional intelligence, adaptability and professionalism under pressure
Build and maintain impactful relationships with family, networks, and carers	Autonomously and collaboratively lead the development of a purposeful plan to manage increasing complexity	Deliver and facilitate interventions to provide safe alternative care, collaborating and maintaining the relationship with the family where possible	Integrate professional knowledge of anti-discriminatory practice to effectively manage more complex situations	Represent the social work perspective confidently within multi-agency partnerships	
Communicate complex and difficult information clearly, always placing children and families as the focus of any interaction	Re-evaluate existing hypotheses and adapt plan as necessary	Review efficacy of interventions and progress towards intended outcomes		Advocate for social justice and equity across multi-agency partners by promoting anti-racist and anti-discriminatory practices and behaviours	

We are also developing new Lead Child Protection Standards, and will consider the benefits of developing further standards to underpin development programmes

Example from the early career standards (ECS)

Standard 1 – Builds and maintains impactful relationships and communicates effectively with children, parents and families

Building on the knowledge and skills acquired through pre-qualifying training, by the end of the programme, social workers can consistently:

- build and maintain impactful relationships with:
 - children
 - parents
 - family, networks and carers
- communicate complex and difficult information clearly, always placing children and families as the focus of any interaction

To be able to do this, newly qualified social workers need to learn that:

- children are best looked after and protected by a network of enduring and caring family relationships. Where these relationships are disrupted, rebuilding or creating new relationships is the best protective factor for children
- impactful professional relationships with families which successfully balance empathy with authority are built on:

To be able to do this, newly qualified social workers need to learn how to:

- use adaptive techniques which demonstrate:
 - active, non-selective listening
 - empathy
 - responsiveness to expressions of emotion
 - use of language
 - repeated checking that information is understood
- use open questions within a structure of elicit-provide-elicite to draw out and explore the person's experiences, perspectives and ideas to motivate and promote

Standard

The ECS is divided into six standards that reflect key aspects of social work with children and families.

Outcome statement

Defines at a high level what a new social worker should demonstrate across each of the six standards by the end of the 2-year programme of support.

'Learn that' statement

Outline the key knowledge that a social worker needs to understand to practice effectively and achieve the outcomes.

'Learn how' statement

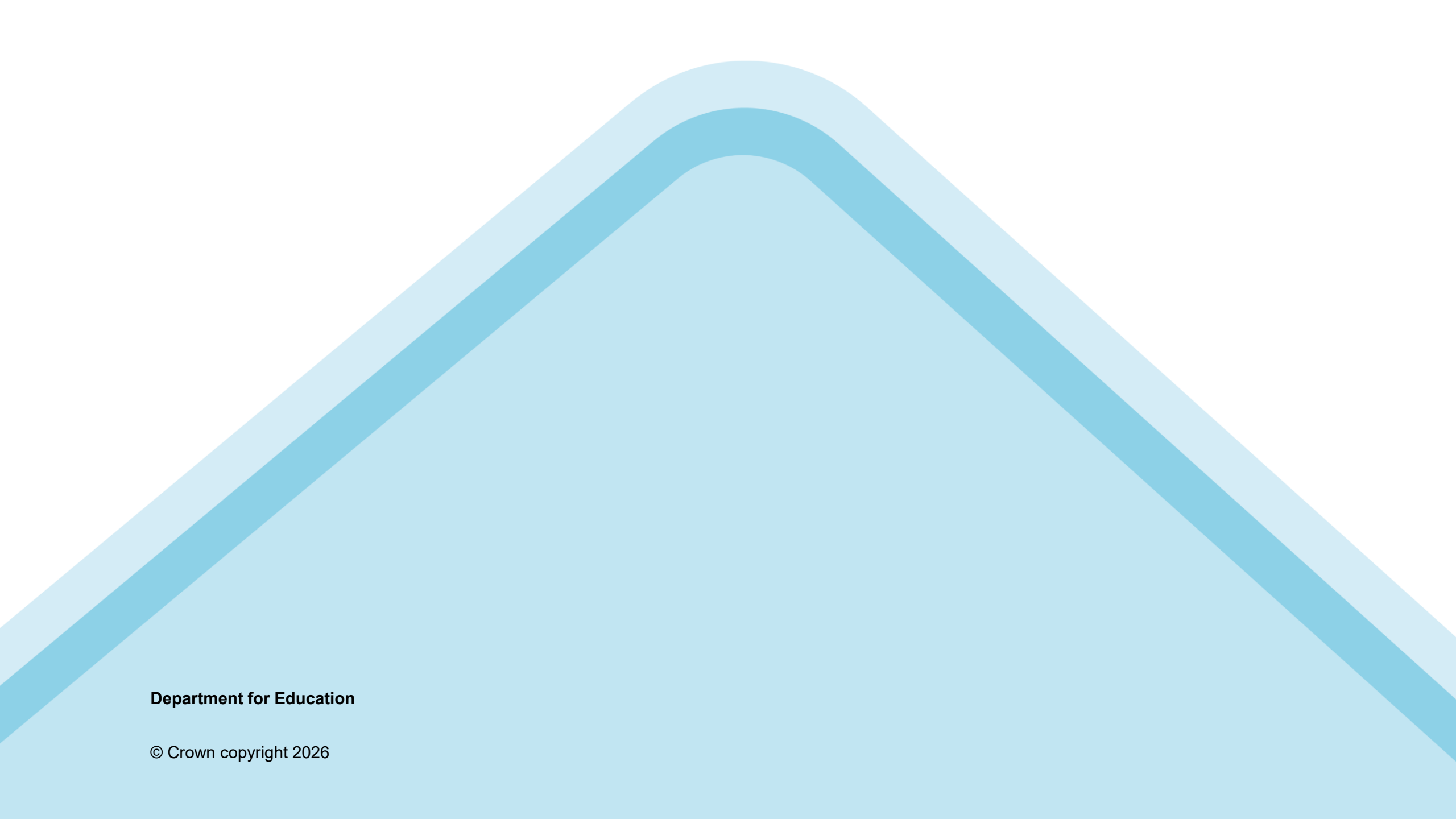
Outlines the key skills that new social workers should demonstrate.

Questions

1. What can you, as PSWs, do to take the lessons learnt from national reports & reform priorities to generate change in your local authority?

2. How can you maximise the benefits of this PSW network to consistently respond to and implement CSC reform priorities?

3. What more do you need from the DfE to help you and your colleagues successfully embed reform while continuing to deliver for children and families?



Department for Education

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