



Vulnerable children in England 'falling through cracks' in social services

Charity says 140,000 youngsters considered in need of help because of neglect or abuse are not being offered any

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Monday 14 August 2017 01.00 EDT

Tens of thousands of vulnerable children in England flagged to social services because of neglect or abuse are not being offered any help by local authorities, a report warns.

Research by the charity Action for Children warned that children were only getting help when they reached “crisis point”, and that they were ending up in a “revolving door” of being re-referred to services.

It found that 140,000 children were “falling through the cracks in the system”. These are children who were highlighted as needing help but did not meet the criteria for

statutory support.

Sir Tony Hawkhead, chief executive of Action for Children, said many children were simply “falling through the cracks”.

“Social care can’t just be there for when a family is in meltdown” he said. “Every day too many children’s lives are overshadowed by drugs, alcoholism, domestic violence and neglect - a toxic recipe for all kinds of problems now and in later life.”

Responding to the report, Richard Watts, chair of the Local Government Association’s children and young people board, said it rightly highlighted increased pressures. He said in many areas services were being pushed “to breaking point”.

By law, councils must provide services for children deemed “in need” or at “risk of harm”. But setting this threshold has always been controversial. In most cases a social worker will assess whether a child needs statutory support.

When a child does not meet these criteria, he or she should be referred to other services, including parenting programmes. However, Action for Children said this wasn’t happening.

The report was based on a series of 1 of information requests to 152 councils in England. The charity found that in 2015-16 184,500 children’s needs assessments were closed as “no further action” because they did not meet the statutory criteria for help.

Of these, around one in four families received other help through services, such as being referred to children’s centres, leaving an estimated 140,000 children with no further assistance.

The charity blamed austerity measures that they say had led local authorities to “drastically shrink or abandon services”, leaving a large number on the “fringes of social care”.

Statistics show 30% of children in the UK live in poverty, and over 188,000 children are homeless or living in temporary accommodation. The LGA estimates there will be a £2bn funding gap to support vulnerable children by 2020.

A study by Ofsted in 2015 found that if children don’t get help early their problems get worse and they are often re-referred to social services.

The report found regional variations. The numbers of children who didn’t get any help was highest in the south-east (24,400) and London (19,800) and lowest in the north-east of England (7,900).

The early intervention grant, designed to help families who need support before crisis point, has been cut by £500m since 2013. The LGA said it will drop by a further £183m

by 2020.

Watts said: “Not all referrals will need a formal intervention, however, and referrals closed with no further action will not necessarily leave a child in need. It is important that local authorities and their partners work closely to help children and families to access the support they need when they need it.”

He added: “Councils are facing a £2bn funding gap for children’s services in just three years’ time. It’s more important than ever that the government commits to the life chances of children and young people by acting urgently to address the growing funding gap.”

A Department for Education spokeswoman said: “Councils will receive more than £200bn for local services up to 2020 and spent nearly £8bn last year on children’s social care, but we want to help them do even more.

“Our £200m innovation programme is helping councils develop new and better ways of delivering these services. This includes projects targeting children who have been referred and assessed multiple times without receiving support.”

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