

Ofsted: Concerns over damaging impact of staff shortages on children's social care

Ofsted has today published a report on the ongoing impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children's social care, drawing on evidence from inspections, focus groups and interviews with inspectors.

The report finds that the pandemic has exacerbated long-standing staffing challenges in children's social care, which has serious consequences on the number of suitable children's home places available and the different needs staff are able to support. As a result, some children are living in places where their needs are not being met, and in some cases are being placed in unregistered homes, without regulatory oversight. High numbers of agency social workers and high caseloads are also preventing purposeful work with children and families.

Pre-existing gaps in in-patient and community-based provision for children with mental health needs have grown, and children's needs have become more complex. This leaves some children without the right care, or placed too far from their families and communities. In some places, services for children and their families have not been fully reinstated or are running at a lower capacity than pre-pandemic levels. Ofsted is concerned this could lead to delays in identifying vulnerable children and their needs, and families may have fewer opportunities to ask for help. Access to therapeutic and respite services for disabled children also continue to be limited, leaving many children and families without the support they need.

The report also highlights the limits of home-based working for peer support and for learning and development opportunities for social workers and other staff. Face-to-face interaction with colleagues is particularly important for newly qualified social workers, who have mainly operated in pandemic conditions and have had limited opportunities to interact with, and learn from, experienced colleagues. Staff training continues to be mostly online, despite concerns that it is less engaging for staff and reduces retained learning.

The report also raises concern over the escalating cost of living for families, which is already having an impact on children's services. Local authorities suggest that that greater financial strain on families may lead to higher numbers of children in need and child protection cases, which would further exacerbate existing sufficiency and workforce issues.

Ofsted Chief Inspector, Amanda Spielman, said:

Children's social care has been plagued by workforce challenges for some time. But we have seen these issues accelerate in recent

years, with more social workers moving to agency contracts, and residential workers leaving the sector entirely.

As a result, too many children, with increasingly complex needs, are not getting the help they need. A workforce strategy and improved support for disabled children and those with mental health needs, and their families are more urgent than ever.