

# Speaking to stakeholders about research priorities

## *Children at Risk of Poor Outcomes Community Catalyst Stakeholder Consultation Report*

January 2025



 **Foundations**

What Works Centre for Children & Families



Economic and Social Research Council



The ADR England Research Community Catalyst: Children at Risk of Poor Outcomes project has built a community of researchers and analysts focused on children and young people supported by early intervention services or children's social care in the UK. This community serves as a vital point of connection, information sharing, and coaching, and provide national strategic leadership for administrative data and research in this field.

The project is co-funded by ADR England and Foundations – What Works Centre for Children and Families and is a collaboration between Swansea University, Lancaster University, Imperial College London, University College London, and the University of Sussex. The project is also supported by Barnardo's, Data to Insight, Children's Commissioner's Office and the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory.

This stakeholder consultation report summarises findings from our wide-ranging consultation with key stakeholders across the UK, spanning children's social care practice, policy, and academia.

The report describes and discusses a number of priority topics in relation to children and young people at risk of poor outcomes, as identified by stakeholders. It also summarises perspectives on access and use of administrative datasets relevant to children and young people, briefly exploring how these align with current legislation and policy.

*Recommended citation:*

Tranter, K., Broadhurst, K., Holmes, L., Bailey, G., Harron, K., Hargreaves, D., Woodman, J., Luna, E., Griffiths, L.J. (2025) Speaking to stakeholders about research priorities. A consultation report for the ADR England Community Catalyst: children at risk of poor outcomes. London: Administrative Data Research UK.

## Overview

Children in contact with early intervention services or children's social care are typically at greater risk of poor social, health and educational outcomes. National and local organisations supporting these children produce a wealth of administrative data as they carry out their services. This data can be used to understand how to reduce these risks and ultimately improve children's lives. However, not enough researchers are using this data, nor are they consistently addressing the issues most important to policymakers, practitioners, or families. Knowledge is fragmented; there is no clear sense of research gaps or priorities and where evidence exists, it often underused. Given this context, ADR England (part of ADR UK, Administrative Data Research UK) has funded a Community Catalyst to accelerate the use of administrative data and strengthen relationships between researchers undertaking, or aspiring to undertake, research about children involved with children's social care and partner agencies.

This report has been produced as part of work of the ADR England Community Catalyst: Children at Risk of Poor Outcomes. The research team consulted with a range of key stakeholders to explore their perspectives on current priority topics for children's social care research. Key findings are shared from the consultation completed between February and November 2024. The research team interviewed thirty-seven policy, practice and academic leads across sectors of health, social care, education and justice. This report has informed and is published [alongside a new national research agenda](#), which sets out research priorities regarding children's social care research.

# Methodology

## Consultation aims

The main aims of the consultation were as follows:

- to enable the research team to engage closely with current policy, practice and academic expertise, to understand priority concerns about children and families
- to gain a better understanding of stakeholder views on knowledge gaps
- to probe awareness of ADR UK flagship datasets
- to identify local and regional innovation regarding data-sharing and dataset development

## Recruitment

The team invited individuals with policy and practice leadership responsibilities to interview, from national and local government departments, local authorities, charities, advocacy organisations and research intermediaries. Individuals who held business intelligence or sector improvement roles were also consulted, as well as academics using administrative data. By interviewing colleagues in positions of senior strategic and operational leadership, we were able to draw on extensive experience and expertise. It was also critical to interview advocacy organisations representing children and families. Stakeholders were recruited purposively via the research team’s networks, with additional support from the ADR UK Senior Public Engagement Manager. We also used snowball sampling to connect with individuals recommended by our stakeholders. The final sample of interviewees was thirty-seven.



## Questions and interview structure

The following six questions were adapted, contingent on stakeholder roles and experience. Interviews were conducted online and ranged from 30-70 minutes in duration. Interviews were semi-structured enabling stakeholders to share knowledge and insights according to their expertise.

1. What do you consider the most pressing needs of children and young people?
2. How are services responding to these needs?
3. Do you have the necessary data and information you need to understand these needs and responses?
4. Are there any glaring gaps in current knowledge regarding children at risk of poor outcomes?
5. Are you aware of any innovation at a local or regional level regarding data sharing?
6. Is your organisation able to make effective use of national children's data produced by ADR UK, or other national statistics?

The interview schedule was shared with the Project Steering Group prior to data collection.

## Ethics and consent, data protection

Ethical clearance was obtained from Lancaster University Ethics Committee (project ID 4382). Following preliminary agreement to participate, individuals were provided with relevant project information, to enable informed consent (Bryman, 2016; ESRC, 2022; Magnusson & Maracek, 2015). Additionally, a copy of the interview topic guide was sent prior to interview. Interviews were scheduled to take place online via the Microsoft Teams platform and were recorded. Participants were asked to consent to the use of extracts from their interviews and given the opportunity to approve their selected extracts if they wished. Interview participants were asked *not* to share sensitive or personal information during the interview. In the presentation of data extracts, we do not name specific organisations; however, we do indicate participant roles.

## **How we analysed data**

Given the resources available to the team, half of the interviews were transcribed in full, anonymised and systematically coded. The second half of the recordings were not transcribed. Instead, the researchers listened to the recordings, playing back sections for clarity and accuracy where needed. Researchers made notes during this process, identifying where the recorded interviews confirmed or expanded the original codes derived from the transcripts. The researchers followed methods of thematic analysis, assigning and then condensing codes to arrive at a set of ten core themes (Bazeley, 2021; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Two researchers were involved in the process of data analysis (KT and KB). The team used the software tool NVivo to enable data storage, organisation and coding.

## **Roundtable consultation**

Participants taking part in interviews, together with the wider research team, ADR England representatives and members of the steering group were invited to a roundtable in September 2024 to consider the main findings from the consultation. Roundtable participants were invited to discuss findings from the stakeholder consultation and related research review, and to consider the team's draft research agenda underpinned by both. The roundtable proved an important sense-checking and confirmatory exercise.

Two delayed interviews were conducted following the roundtable. Feedback from the roundtable, alongside any additional insights from the outstanding interviews, have been incorporated into the overall findings and helped to shape our summary of research priorities.

## Main findings

A number of core concerns about children and families were prominent across the stakeholder interviews. Here we refer to concerns that were *consistently* and *frequently* raised across the participant sample. Thematic analysis and coding (as above) enabled stakeholder core concerns to be readily differentiated from the broader range of concerns about children and families. Core concerns included the following: i) family poverty, overstretched services, ii) workforce capacity, iii) stability and spend, iv) insufficiency of early intervention, v) family mental health, vi) special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), vii) school disengagement and viii) children in care/care leavers. A minority of stakeholders also described concerns about (ix) domestic abuse and (x) extra-familial harms.

In reporting the findings, we have grouped together the first four core themes (family poverty workforce issues and insufficiency of early intervention) as they capture the **current context** of family need and service provision (Section A). Second, we consider in more detail the **interrelated key concerns of mental health, SEND and school disengagement** (Section B), before considering stakeholder concerns about **children in care/care leavers** (Section C). Finally, we turn to the topics of **domestic abuse and extrafamilial harms**, which although less prominent (frequent) across our different stakeholder groups, were nevertheless identified as important themes (Section D).

### Section A: Context of family life and service provision

A striking observation from the consultation was the consistency of concerns among different stakeholders regarding **poverty and family hardship**. Hardship at the level of the individual family was also described as compounded by the insufficiency of services. Services across sectors were described as severely overstretched and insufficient to meet increases in child and family needs. Shortfalls in early intervention were repeatedly described by stakeholders, resulting in escalation of family difficulties and crisis responses from service providers. **This combination of family and service factors creates a very difficult context for families and practitioners**, with considerable instability in the workforce.

## ***Family poverty***

Increasing family poverty was consistently described by stakeholders. Increased hardship at the household level was attributed to inflationary pressures, driving up the costs of food, energy and housing. Stakeholders stated that family poverty is “**getting much worse**”. Families were described as struggling with the basics of even providing food. Financial stress and housing precarity were described as key precipitating factors in family stress and breakdown.

**Stakeholders stated that they wanted better evidence about the scale and particular combinations of these hardships**, to make a stronger case for national investment. A clearer understanding of the precise nature of regional hardship would also inform local service developments and commissioning. **Practitioners welcome evidence to substantiate their practice observations** and draw comparisons with regions. They wanted to better evidence of the level of need they felt they were witnessing, and reasons behind increasing hardship:

*“Poverty... I mean, it feels like the single biggest issue affecting children's services, at the moment. And in terms of where we lack understanding and insight...I think we lack an ability to genuinely delineate, disaggregate where increased need is...it is absolutely the case that there is increased need ... but what that need really is... you know, the causal factors behind, what are they?”*  
(Public Sector Improvement Lead)

*“How do I set my team targets? How do I say, ‘look guys, we're way out of kilter on this’. This is where we need to be... We volunteered to give up our data to put into a regional data set, but there's a challenge for me in that because we do not sit well regionally in line with any other local authority, [this local authority] is an outlier. It's an outlier because we're very small with intense deprivation, so our indices of multiple deprivation are way above [other local authorities in the region]. So, this (data-share) is the regional one, but it's not that helpful for me. What I'm interested in is looking at the whole the country...”* (Director of Children's Services)

## ***Over-stretched services and difficulties in providing timely help***

In addition to a focus on poverty as a major societal challenge, stakeholders described greatly reduced cross-sector service capacity as severely hampering their ability to meet the escalating needs of children and young people at risk of poor outcomes. Stakeholders went as far as to describe “**a gulf between needs and resources**” across health, children’s social care, justice and education, with stakeholders viewing these insufficiencies as the result of austerity and more than a decade of underfunding of services.

Diminished service resilience as a consequence of austerity, was described as compounded by the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent inflationary pressures. The majority of stakeholders were especially concerned about the combined effect of shortfalls in children’s social care provision and essential child and adolescent mental health services. Stakeholders shared multiple examples of creative ways services were trying to bridge this gap, and the considerable value of voluntary and informal sectors. However, overall, stakeholders felt that many children were not receiving the help they needed at a timely point, leading to an escalation of their difficulties.

Stakeholders made it clear they want to be able to better evidence **the combined impact of cross sector service insufficiencies** upon children and families. **They wanted better quantification of need and interaction between need and service provision.** They emphasised the importance of knowing where to invest rationed resources and an understanding of the effectiveness of investment. They argued that both ‘business as usual’ and specialist interventions needed to be designed to maximise their potential in improving outcomes for children and their families.

*“I think councils and local government have often been portrayed in a negative light, but the reality is there is significantly less money in the system and that's not getting any better. And it's got worse, but yet the pressures and the demands have gone up. So, I think if I have to say what my overarching biggest challenge is, it's got to start there.”* (Director of Children’s Services)

*“We don't know whether business as usual works, is effective.... Like... is going into care good for you or bad for you? And we don't know...I mean, that's the big unanswered question, I suppose.”* (Central Government Research Lead)

*“And I think one of the problems with a lot of the data that we've got [is that] they're outputs, not outcomes, and I was very interested to see what the DfE did with this when they did the Stable Homes piece of work. And if you look at what they're calling an outcomes framework and*

*what the data sets are that they want within it, I don't think they are outcomes, I think they're outputs.” (Director of Children’s Services)*

### ***Workforce capacity, stability and spend***

We repeatedly heard from stakeholders about the challenges facing service providers due to staff recruitment and retention difficulties leading to inexperience and instability in the workforce. **Stakeholders argued that more than ever, difficulties within a single sector regarding workforce, were multiplied across sectors.** From primary care appointments, nursery places specialist provision for SEND, to social work, health visitors, mental health practitioners and housing providers, **services were all experiencing workforce challenges in a context of declining family well-being.**

Stakeholders provided examples of sector specific challenges. For example, long-standing difficulties in recruiting enough in-house foster carers are thought to have been exacerbated by the pandemic, and now compounded by financial hardship at the household level. This means that children in care are less likely to be matched to carers who can meet their needs.

**Stakeholders want to know more about workforce profiles and capacity across services. They want data to be compiled to create a more holistic understanding of the eco-system of preventative and protective services.**

*“So, when we work with those schools, it's really very difficult, they kind of ..they'll be pushing work our way (children's social care) and we will say 'no, I think that's the kind of work that you could or should be doing'. But they really haven't got the time of capacity to do it.” (Director of Children’s Services)*

*“...you're facing a broken public services sector. And...you're facing retention issues across, you know, all of these key people, teachers, social workers you know...You've got decimated youth services...there's a lot of things!” (Research Intermediary Lead)*

*“...a lot of councils are also very concerned about their workforce and...there's a link there to Looked After Children, in that the number of foster carers is a concern, number of skilled social workers is also a big concern and how we pay for them...So... lots of conversations about workforce being an issue in terms of when we know children and families need help, have we even got their resources in place, the capability to actually deliver that help at a statutory level?” (Public Sector Improvement Lead)*

## *Where is early intervention?*

Across interviews, stakeholders were in complete agreement that effective early intervention can really make a difference to children's lives and reduce or prevent poor outcomes, including family breakdown. **However, they were also in agreement that there is currently insufficient investment in timely help and support to prevent problems escalating.** Stakeholders stated that to avoid reactive and crisis driven practice, insufficiencies in early intervention need to be addressed at a national level. Some stakeholders referred to plans for 'Family Help' now being piloted following the former Government's response to *Stable Homes Built on Love* (MacAlister, 2022) but felt that there is a long way to go to deliver co-ordinated timely support to prevent family breakdown. Other stakeholders continued to use the language of 'early help' and 'children in need' but made the same point regarding service insufficiencies and lack of clarity regarding thresholds and service delivery.

*"It's kind of described interchangeably in different contexts, and that is a lack of early intervention across both social care and health, which is... is affecting the outcomes of vulnerable and disadvantaged children."* (National Children's Charity, Senior Policy Advisor)

Stakeholders argued that the capacity of Local Authorities to evenly and predictably fund and commission early intervention is a major national issue, and that funding continues to be patchy and short-term. Across interviews, stakeholders argued that a greater shift is needed, to better align preventative capacity at a local and regional level, with policy messaging. **Stakeholders would welcome a stronger evidence base around the scope and effectiveness of early intervention, which would require the limitations of current data to be addressed.** There was a sense of a considerable gap between the aspirational language of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care (2022), and funding available to ensure timely, co-ordinated help to prevent family breakdown.

Questions about what constitutes early intervention and where the boundaries lie between help provided by universal services, and the mix of targeted services offered as part of a local authority's 'family help' offer, were repeatedly raised by stakeholders. A confusing picture was depicted, with correspondingly poor data collection:

*"I mean the other thing is you know, the whole question of early help and... and, you know, what goes on there, it's just a very broad church and there's a lot of variety and... what's delivered and the relationship between that and you know how and when people do or don't go on to social care involvement is a bit vague." (Research Intermediary Lead)*

*"...the other big thing is early intervention... catching needs early, helping people before they need statutory services with regard to safeguarding. Understanding what's even going on in that space and what kinds of support are actually useful and what... what works in that space... Typically, local authorities don't record in a standard format, in a data accessible format, machine readable format...who was managing that early help activity or what form it took. And so we don't get that understanding of which services are useful or which services are picking up the ones that need statutory service support and so on and so forth, or how long was it going on." (Public Sector Data Lead)*

Stakeholders stated that historically, the operation of thresholds regarding early help and child in need have varied widely by locality or region; and were not confident that the reforms arising from Stable Homes Built on Love would resolve threshold issues (through the merging of early help and child in need provision).

## **Section B: Key concerns: family mental health, SEND, school disengagement and children in care**

Increases in the prevalence of family mental health need, special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and school disengagement were consistently raised by stakeholders. Stakeholders felt that **these needs were overlapping or interrelated and stated that they would welcome more precise information that might illuminate patterns of co-occurrence.**

### ***Family mental health***

Consistent across interviews was a concern about children and young people's mental health. Stakeholders were also worried about how mental health needs of parents and children might interrelate. Hence, this consultation report refers to 'family mental health'.

*"I think the biggest issue for us in the last couple of years since the pandemic, it's the growth in mental health referrals for both children and their parents... A lot of referrals from schools... we are seeing that it's, you know, it's both parents and children's mental health."* (Children's Social Care, Service Lead)

**Stakeholders want more systematic capture of family mental health data to ascertain the full burden of mental health need within families and inform policy and practice developments.**

Again, stakeholders described declining family wellbeing, as a result of more than a decade of under-resourcing of services, resulting in far greater mental health need within families and across generations, but without the provision to meet these needs.

*"...you've got mental health services really decimated. You've also got a care system really decimated... because there's so much focus on like, where can we put these children? And there's such scarcity of places. I just think that they're not working well together those systems."* (National Children's Charity Lead)

*"So clearly the kind of mental health support that's out there is not meeting the quite high needs of this group of children."* (Research Intermediary Lead)

Across interviews, our participants argued that despite best efforts, children with mental health

needs can be caught between services, due to **capacity issues, service boundaries and rationing, and insufficient co-ordination or joined up mental health provision across sectors**. This results in cohorts of highly vulnerable young people struggling to access the most relevant form of support at a timely point. Consistent across interviews, were concerns about **long waiting lists for mental health assessments and treatment for many children at risk of poor outcomes** in addition to a scarcity of specialist provision were described as longstanding issues, requiring urgent attention.

**Stakeholders were enthusiastic about effective data sharing practices at local or regional levels, as they could offer the potential for developing deeper understandings about the characteristics and experiences of children and young people experiencing mental health symptoms in combination with other risk factors.** Examples were provided of a number of data sharing and data set developments at a local or regional level.

### ***Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)***

Stakeholders reported very significant concerns about rising levels of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). **There was a sense of escalation of speech, communication and language issues in particular, and that consideration should be given to whether these are intergenerational in nature, or a product of school disengagement as a consequence of the pandemic. Stakeholders were unclear about the causal factors or dynamics of an increasing number of children presenting with SEND.**

Children and young people with diagnoses of, or waiting for assessments for neurodiversity, were repeatedly discussed as cohorts for whom cross sector provision does not meet increasing demand. Children were described as frequently waiting for considerable periods of time for diagnosis and then experiencing sporadic access to specialist services to support them post diagnosis.

Across interviews, stakeholders argued that more clarity is needed in relation to the scale, characteristics and experiences of children and young people with SEND, including neurodiversity diagnoses. Stakeholders stated that the lines are blurred between SEND and mental health needs. **Achieving a better understanding of the relationship between childhood neurodiversity relates to childhood mental health, and additionally, to patterns of school disengagement was raised repeatedly within interviews.**

Regarding funding, stakeholders argued that recent local authority increases in SEND provision to try and meet emerging demands, are placing considerable strain on local authority budgets.

*"We are now understanding particularly issues around neurodiversity a lot more than we did 10 years ago. And so, families are coming into the system and saying, 'my child, I believe my child has this situation (whatever it is, ADHD, autism and so on, or issues around their mental health, depression, anxiety and so on)'...And the system just hasn't expanded financially to be able to.... deal with that level of ...I don't like using the term demand because it sounds kind of like it's coming in from economics, but effectively it is more families banging on the door... But then you've got to have a system that's responsive to that". (Academic Researcher)*

### ***School disengagement***

A marked rise in school disengagement since the Covid-19 related lockdowns (2020 & 2021) was highlighted by most stakeholders as a persistent challenge across all services working with children at risk of poor outcomes and their families. Stakeholders felt that difficulties compounded by the pandemic regarding school engagement were still persisting.

*"...it feels like the... reach of the pandemic is long and will be very long. There's almost been kind of a break in the social contract between families and schools, and we see attendance, which was concerning pre-pandemic concentrated in certain local authority areas... are those areas that have seen less recovery in attendance rates. That overlays with poverty, worklessness and SEND to a significant degree." (Public Sector Improvement Lead)*

Stakeholders welcomed the broadening of mandatory reporting of school non-attendance across schools, to capture the scale of the matter. **Stakeholders stated that they want more granularity and detail about which mechanisms are driving school disengagement in communities and families.** Stakeholders were clear that 'school disengagement' was multi-faceted, and potentially cuts across socio-economic groups. **Stakeholders wanted a more nuanced understanding of school disengagement and interaction (or otherwise) with other family difficulties.**

Stakeholders raised questions about whether organisations are seeing **a breakdown in the social contract between families and the state, and that school disengagement may be symptomatic of a broader picture of family disengagement.** For example, stakeholders questioned whether there was a pattern of disengagement from both work and school in some families.

*"...school absence I think is a proxy of concern. You know an indicator of concern for children... that we've got to work with those schools about." (Director of Children's Services).*

Stakeholders questioned whether an escalation in school disengagement reflected delays and difficulties in accessing help for children with SEND or mental health difficulties, and made specific reference to early adolescence in this respect.

**Stakeholders wanted more robust empirical evidence about inter-related patterns of disengagement within and among families, rather than statistics which focus on a single or isolated family issue.** Stakeholders argued that statistics and analysis need to somehow capture the complexity of inter-related difficulties which now characterise families involved with children's social care (CSC) services.

*"The mental health concerns, coupled with the school attendance concerns that sort of have... have really come into sharp focus since the pandemic...makes for a pretty sort of, complex nexus for all children and young people." (Research Intermediary Lead)*

## Section C: Children in care and care leavers

Stakeholders shared concerns that children in care remain a very vulnerable group, for whom continued access to high quality cross-sector support and advocacy is of critical importance to mitigate risks of poor outcomes. Although stakeholders recognised the usefulness of Department for Education (DfE) data on children in care for understanding the local and national scale of care placements and placement changes, **they argued that there was insufficient data on particular social groups of children in care and care leavers.** In particular, stakeholders were concerned about **children from minority ethnic groups and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC).**

Stakeholders stated that more information could be captured within both local services and at a national level in relation to Black children in care or Black care leavers' experiences and outcomes following CSC involvement. Better knowledge is needed across the system regarding ethnicity, from early intervention through to out-of-home placement and adoption.

*"One of the other things we found is the under representation of Asian children in looked after data, and there's some questions...What's that about?"* (Public Sector-led Improvement Lead)

*"We are having an increasing number of, you know...asylum seeking families that our being placed within [participant's region]...but I think we could be doing more within that space clinically..."* (Regional Community Health Lead)

Similarly, how Black children and Asian children in care/care leavers and UASC access and experience mental health services and the criminal justice system, are questions that stakeholders argue should be more keenly in focus.

*"I mean there's more research needed... in the whole field of Black care experienced British people. I think that's something we've started the ball rolling with. It's like, how can we further build on that?"* (National Children's Charity, Assistant Director)

Children in care and **care leavers who require access to specialist mental health provision** are another group highlighted by stakeholders as insufficiently visible, and whom, require greater prioritisation across policy, research and cross sector practice.

**Stakeholders also want an up-to-date picture of care leavers' experiences given the current context of the cost-of-living crisis, financial security, housing access and stability, and limitations in transitional support.**

*"...it would be great to understand a bit more about what the relationship between children's services and the housing department is...there's been a disproportionate rise in care experienced young people becoming homeless, an even greater rise than young people becoming homeless, which also has been disproportionate to the overall rise. So, there's definitely something going on that more care leavers are going to their local authority as homeless now. My supposition... my guess on this would be its because children's services are under such strain... they're not doing that planning for... housing routes in the way they should." (National Children's Charity, Senior Policy Advisor)*

*"And then in terms of care leavers, I really don't think there's enough understanding at all within data of what their experiences are like." (Children's Advocacy Organisation, Policy Lead)*

## Section D: Domestic abuse and Extra-familial Harms

Additional themes raised across the stakeholder consultation included concerns relating to domestic violence and abuse (DVA) and extra-familial harms. Although both concerns were raised less frequently by our research participants – where they were raised, stakeholders indicated DVA and extra-familial harms are widespread. **Regarding both DVA and extra-familial harms, our interview participants emphasised the lack of robust quantitative research and analysis.**

Domestic violence and abuse (DVA) within the family home was described by stakeholders as a long-standing issue, which remains a common reason for referring a child to CSC. There was some concern that DVA is exacerbated by a wide range of pressures on family life, as described above.

*“I think from a safeguarding perspective... domestic abuse is, you know...probably being 2/3 at least if not 3/4 of our safeguarding conversations...when we've got families that are in that safeguarding arena for family support or into section 17, section 47...there absolutely will be an element of domestic abuse.”* (Regional Community Health Lead)

*“We do have...a significant amount of domestic abuse.”* (Regional Safeguarding Lead, Children's Health)

*“...domestic abuse is always there...But again, you know additional stresses on the family usually exacerbate the most abuse...”* (Children's Social Care, Service Lead)

Stakeholders want **more quantitative information about how domestic violence and abuse relates to patterns of CSC involvement**, and the co-occurring vulnerabilities in households where DVA is an element of, or a leading concern.

Stakeholders made direct reference to the **difficulties in accurately capturing referral, intervention and outcome information concerning children at risk of, or who are experiencing, extra-familial harms** (including criminal/sexual exploitation, radicalisation, grooming, gang activity, cyberbullying).

*“I would have said in [participants region] ...It would be more criminal exploitation, a lot of drug running... we've got quite a lot of remote small villages... that activity like that can hide in...And where you have high numbers of young people that obviously are quite isolated, you know, maybe living in housing where they do have, you know, neglect or poverty issues that are impacting on them emotionally... they're vulnerable to being groomed into that type of activity...”*

*But I think perhaps there needs to be more national understanding that actually these things don't only happen in London or Manchester or, you know, big cities.” (Regional Community Health Lead)*

*“...from a data and insight perspective it [child exploitation], it's probably one of the most consistently challenging areas...Even where there's more established understanding of risks around sexual exploitation, there are hotspot areas like, you know, bits of the centres of certain cities. So, some of the presentation to community services to the police will be concentrated in certain areas, and those children who are often... not attending [school], or they're looked after... all of those, you know, risk factors that you'd expect to see, are not the responsibility of those areas. So, the counting of all of that ...until ...you know the young person is at a point of going to a multi-agency risk of child exploitation panel, it's not really done.” (Public Sector Improvement Lead)*

## Section E: Stakeholders' general views on research, collaboration and data developments

Over and above the specific recommendations regarding research priorities as detailed above, stakeholders also made more general recommendations regarding how they wanted to see research conducted. **Our participants were emphatic about the need for research and analysis that is cross-sector, and provides a more holistic picture of the child.** They also wanted more **meaningful child outcome data** and stressed the importance of **collaborative research**, as well as opportunities for joining up regional and national dataset developments.

### *The need for a holistic view of the child*

Consistent across interviews with stakeholders was a recommendation that research should pursue a more holistic view of the child. At present, **data held about children by organisations working within, across and alongside CSC (health, education, justice) is unhelpfully fragmented.** Thus, stakeholders **welcomed national investment by ADR UK to create linked datasets that would offer new opportunities for a fuller picture of children's lives and experience across services.**

Stakeholders also suggested further sources of local data that might be fruitfully linked to national data to address questions about current family needs, for example local housing data or data on food bank usage, or local crime data. A more granular understanding of family needs was seen as important for future commissioning and preparedness among service providers.

*“And the next big wave of insight to be gained from the safeguarding data we already gather isn't really from expanding it and extrapolating it and refining it. It's from attaching it to those other sources and figuring out those linkages with...with crime...ASB [anti-social behaviour]... housing issues, support for poverty...if I was thinking aspirationally, I'll be talking about food bank usage...Those other wider, local indicators and identifiers of potential vulnerability. Those are the early warning systems.” (Public Sector Data Lead)*

*“But of course, it's a system that's designed on the child as the data point, and I think ... I think that, you know...overall that's a very big challenge. You know that you're individuating children from their families and from their communities as a data point and...that, you know, relates back to the thing about family economics, something, you know where...yeah, it gives you, it gives you a... very limited slice of intelligence about what's going on...You know children don't exist as individual data points in the world...they exist in networks of community and family.” (Research Intermediary Lead)*

## ***Meaningful outcome information***

Stakeholders felt that outcome **information is currently process-focused and want more meaningful outcome information**. Stakeholders value the national government annual or other snapshot statistics (DfE) but want more longitudinal child outcome information to help them understand service effectiveness. **They argued that performance data may be easily quantifiable, but does not provide information which is needed, over and above immediate service outcomes.**

A desire for more longitudinal information about children to better illuminate the journeys children take through systems and beyond them, was emphasised by stakeholders. Particularly welcome to stakeholders would be improved knowledge about outcomes for children with a history of CSC involvement - five, 10 & 20 years beyond intervention. At our roundtable, participants discussed the value of linking longitudinal cohort study data to other administrative data to understand longer term outcomes.

*"...it gets to the heart of one of the big problems I think we have with children's data, a lot of what we track is transactional, process focused and doesn't get us anywhere near outcomes." (Public Sector-led Improvement Lead).*

*"But one of the things [the new government] have put down... is that to fix some of these, intergenerational mobility issues will take a long time. So, we are thinking...it's giving us the ability to think beyond just immediate administrations. But... it's giving us more hope now that we can start to think longer term...Assets like LEO [Longitudinal Education Outcomes] mean that we can, at least start to think about real impact in in much longer terms than we have been able to in the past." (Central Government Research Lead)*

**Stakeholders stated that child and family perspectives on service experiences and outcomes are too marginal, to both policy and service developments.** Our participants argued that systematic mechanisms for capturing the voice of the child and parent in respect of definition of outcomes are long overdue.

*"...currently we have no user outcome, user perspective data, on this whole swathe of public sector intervention with very, very sizable consequences for families." (Academic Researcher)*

## *Stakeholders want active collaboration between academia, policy and practice*

Stakeholders want research to be relevant, current and informed by policy and practice expertise. Stakeholders welcome collaborative working. They describe the importance of having the optimum mix of skills and knowledge in research teams, and on advisory boards, so that data analysis can be undertaken in a way which retains the data's meaning and relevance for policy and practice. A collaboration of practice expertise and data analysis skills were discussed as essential for digestible practice-near research, which will be valued by those on the frontline.

*"...there's the definite case, I think, more for researchers, making sure that they're grounded with people who walk the walk to be able to you know, interpret the data that they're looking at."*  
(Academic Researcher)

## *Making use of local and regional data*

In a number of interviews, our participants emphasised the value of locally or regionally held data, to complement national datasets, but argued these data are insufficiently used for research and analysis. Stakeholders described certain pockets of localised innovation in relation to data sharing and linkage of information across different services and local authorities, for both research and service planning purposes. Such approaches to data sharing and linkage are thought of highly by stakeholders. However, our participants also recognised that region-specific arrangements and active collaboration between data owners at the local level, can be difficult to secure. **Stakeholders would welcome greater dialogue between stakeholders creating new data assets at a local or regional level, and ADR UK.**

*"...a key limitation is the link up of Local Authority data with everything else going on with linked data... within health."* (Academic Researcher)

*"...we do have a wealth of data about children, absolutely tons. It tends to be very pocketed and siloed into service areas."* (Director of Children's Services)

*"There's a lot of activity going on...at the moment, around changing systems, making systems work better, improving information flows. But a lot of it kind of misses the elephant in the room for local authorities, which is that they're not the only player in their local space, and I don't think we've got a good answer for aligning the various different services that are supporting vulnerable people in a locality"* (Public Sector Data Lead)

## ***Involving children, young people and families in research agenda setting and the shaping of recommendations***

Stakeholders acknowledge that the voices of children, young people and their families are not always incorporated into practice, policy or, indeed, research as much as they would expect, chiming with recent related reportage from The Children's Information Project, (2024). There is a wish to see more consistent inclusion and facilitation of children and family perspectives at the design stages of research, and in contributing to certain definitions, categorisation and prioritisation of research topics.

*"There are lots of systems that are built up by adults ...to support children that are designed to work for adults and to work for...computer systems, or whatever... but don't necessarily think about children's own...what's important to them all the time and the kind of... the things that would make their lives good."* (National Children's Charity, Policy and Practice Lead)

## Discussion: Stakeholder views in context and a summary of research priorities

This consultation has drawn together diverse stakeholder expertise and perspectives to understand current concerns about children at risk of poor outcomes. Consultation with national stakeholders is a critical strand of the work of the ADR England Research Community Catalyst (Children at Risk of Poor Outcomes) because it ensures that the Catalyst's research agenda is closely informed by stakeholder knowledge and priorities. As we detail below, many of the themes identified, resonate with other leading commentary and analysis. Stakeholders' aspirations for a more joined-up picture of children's needs may also be aided by government plans to develop and promote cross sector use of a Single Unique Identifier, as detailed in the recent DfE publication *Keeping Children Safe, Helping Families Thrive* (DfE, 2024b). A Single Unique Identifier aims to enable more efficient children's information sharing between agencies and regions, in turn, enabling greater insights into children's involvement and journeys across services. In the discussion which follows we draw out key research priorities, based on the view of our participants, with reference to current policy, legislative and practice developments.

**Regarding family poverty and hardship**, stakeholders' views align with recent analyses of poverty; that rapidly increasing numbers are falling into deepening poverty, with children continuing to consistently experience the highest poverty rates of all groups (Children's Society, 2024; Joseph Roundtree Foundation, 2024). In this context, stakeholders welcomed further quantitative research that would provide evidence to refute or substantiate observations regarding household level poverty, its concentration and changes over time.

Research priorities are:

- Provide better evidence about the scale and particular combinations of family hardships among families involved with CSC, and changes over time, to inform local area policy, commissioning and practice development
- Provide evidence which provides regional and national comparisons about family hardships with specific reference to children involved with CSC
- Examine the impact of poverty reduction strategies on children's CSC involvement.

The current Government announced plans in July 2024 to establish a ministerial Child Poverty Taskforce (DfE, 2024a) in response to growing evidence of escalating child and family poverty in

the UK (Hood et al., 2024; The Children’s Society, 2024; Children’s Commissioner, 2024; N8 Research Partnership, 2024; Northern Health Science Alliance, 2022). A full Child Poverty Strategy is to be published in Spring 2025. In this context, building research capacity which enables the tracking of *household level poverty* and how this intersects with other child needs is clearly a priority for the community of administrative data researchers.

**Regarding workforce and spend**, stakeholders described serious shortfalls in service provision across sectors. The Association of Directors of Children’s Services (ADCS) *Safeguarding Pressures* report series has captured several of the concerns expressed by stakeholders regarding difficulties in meeting the needs of CSC children (ADCS, 2022). Across children’s social care, education and health services there is enormous appetite for more accurately tracking and measuring service spend and workforce profiles within and across local authorities, to improve regional understanding of service (in)capacities. Here stakeholder perspectives are in sync with other national reports, recommending greater intelligence about spend and workforce profiles (NAO, 2019).

Research priorities are:

- Explore the nature of combined sector capacity/incapacity, regarding provision for CSC children and families
- Provide better evidence of spend across sectors and impact on CSC children.

**Stakeholder concerns about the scope and sufficiency of early intervention** chime with recent analysis by the Office for Children’s Commissioner (2024), highlighting the impact of an under resourced early help offer on thresholds and service provision for children in need. **There is clearly more work to do, to conceptualise early intervention for measurement purposes**, and to ascertain whether the latest policy proposals regarding ‘family help’ will improve timely delivery of help to children and families in need. The model of family help proposed in the MacAlister report (2022), which is endorsed by the current government (DfE, 2024), aims to provide a timelier and more seamless preventative offer to families. Family hubs, offering a single point of access, are currently being tested in pilot sites across England. However, in the absence of national data regarding early intervention, it will be difficult to ascertain the impact of policy and practice change at a national level.

Research priorities include:

- What data/data developments are needed to enable a robust understanding of early intervention?
- What can we learn about the nature and impact of different forms of early help to children and families, across sectors of social care, health and education?
- Are there commonalities/differences by local authority or region, in respect of the provision of early help services?
- What is the impact of new policy and legislative changes on the provision of early help?
- What are the longer-term outcomes for children who have been subject to child in need or child protection plans?

**The mental health of children, young people and their families** was consistently described as a major concern. Again, stakeholders' views resonate with a number of recent reports from leading charities, the ADCS and organisations offering policy analysis (The Children's Society, 2024; ADCS, 2024; The Kings Fund, 2024). The UK performs poorly across several indicators regarding child wellbeing (OECD, 2023, cited by The Children's Society, 2024, The Academy of Medical Sciences, 2024), despite continued government transformation agendas in recent years that have/are focused upon children, young people and adult mental health delivery. Policy developments include the *NHS Mental Health Implementation Plan*, part of the NHS Long Term Plan (NHS England, 2019; NHS, 2019), and the *Transforming Children and Young People's Mental Health Implementation Programme* (DfE, 2024; DfE & DHSC, 2018; DfE & DHSC, 2017).

Research priorities are:

- Provide better evidence about the nature and factors implicated on mental health needs at the level of the CSC family (child, siblings, parents)
- Address questions about whether mental health needs are changing in nature or frequency over time
- Explore interactions between child/family mental health needs, school disengagement and SEND needs using regional data
- Provide regional comparisons regarding mental health needs among CSC families
- Provide better evidence about the use of mental health services by CSC families.

Addressing such priorities is timely, given policy and legislative changes which include the forthcoming Children's Wellbeing Bill (Prime Minister's Office, 2024).

**Regarding SEND and school disengagement**, stakeholder concerns about a national increase in the number of children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), including neurodiversity diagnoses and communication development delays, resonates with national reports, which also document considerable growth in demand for SEND support across the UK (ADCS, 2024; DfE, 2022).

Research priorities are:

- Provide evidence about the scale, characteristics and experiences of children and young people with SEND, including neurodiversity diagnoses
- Understand the boundary/overlaps between SEND and mental health needs
- Understand how SEND and childhood neurodiversity relates to patterns of school disengagement.

**Regarding children in care and care leavers, stakeholder concerns about the position of children and young people from minority ethnic groups, or unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC), as well as mental health**, echo findings from recent national reports distinct ethnic inequalities regarding access to and the quality of service provision, across health, social care and criminal justice (Barnardo's, 2023; WWCS, 2022; The Children's Society, 2018).

Care leavers, long identified by government as a particularly at-risk group, have again been highlighted in government reports and by the office of the children's commissioner, with multiple calls for evidence about the impact of the current cost of living crisis on these young people (DfE, 2023; Children's Commissioner, 2020). In addition, the topic of housing and care leavers, and or young people on the edge of care has been repeatedly at the forefront of national policy debate (Centrepoin, 2024; Shelter, 2024)

Research priorities are:

- Provide evidence about the experiences, pathway trajectories and outcomes of Black children in care/care leavers
- Provide evidence about the scale, experiences and pathways in and out of care in relation to ethnicity
- Provide information about access, experience of and patterns of mental health support for children and young people in care/care leavers

- Provide longitudinal care leaver outcome information and better evidence about care leavers' financial and housing circumstances.

**Turning finally to DVA and extra-familial harms**, the continued high rates of domestic violence and abuse as primary reasons for referrals for family support and child protection services were raised by several stakeholders across the consultation. Attending to continued shortfalls in national data regarding both these issues would greatly aid policymakers and practitioners, in the context of continued efforts to tackle both, and in making the case for greater investment. A recent report from the Domestic Abuse Commissioner (2024), found that 1 in 5 children and young people within the UK continue to experience domestic abuse, and that only 29% of parent victims report that their child is able to access specialist support services when they have needed this. Prioritising preventative approaches to tackling DVA is a central element of the 'Family Hub' model (National Centre for Family Hubs, 2024). However, it was clear from stakeholders that their evidence needs are not yet met, in relation to the scale or changing pattern of DVA, and interaction with other family vulnerabilities. In addition, greater clarity is needed about the impact of CSC services and/or specialist services on DVA.

Research priorities are:

- Explore the scale of child victims of domestic abuse in the UK, and how this interacts with patterns of CSC involvement nationally/regionally
- Increase evidence around how domestic violence relates to other co-occurring vulnerabilities
- Provide information in relation to access, experience of and patterns of specialist domestic violence support services for child victims of domestic abuse, including detail regarding those involved with CSC.

Regarding extra-familial harms, there has been a proliferation of both conceptual analysis (Firmin et al., 2022; Firmin, 2020) and regional and national developments (Action for Children, 2024), but it is clear that stakeholder evidence needs are not yet met. Stakeholders raised concerns about the prevalence of a range of extra-familial harms impacting children and young people, notably child criminal and child sexual exploitation, but stated that there are real gaps in the systematic capture of accurate data about the scale of such harms within and across regions. The Children's Society's 'Counting Lives' report (2019), has emphasised this lack of accurate and complete information about how many and which children are victims of criminal and sexual exploitation. Leading charities have called for more robust information to build a fuller regional and national picture amid

the fast-changing context of child criminal and child sexual exploitation (Children's Society, 2019).

Research priorities are:

- Provide better evidence of the scale, characteristics and experiences of children at risk of, or experiencing, extrafamilial harm and how these interact with involvement with CSC
- Understand regional CSC referral rates where a child is identified as at risk of or experiencing extra-familial harms
- Improve information about children's pathways into, and out of, specialist intervention to support and protect against extra-familial harms
- Increase evidence regarding co-occurring vulnerabilities for young people involved with CSC experiencing extra-familial harms.

## Conclusion

This report summarises key findings from the ADR England Research Community Catalyst: Children at Risk of Poor Outcomes stakeholder consultation process. The findings describe how the current context of family poverty, service and workforce insufficiencies, coupled with a lack of effective early intervention, are failing to prevent escalation of family problems and family breakdown. Rising levels of family mental health need, SEND and school disengagement appear to reflect this context. Moreover, continued challenges in the availability of national data about DVA and extra-familial harms inhibit progress to understand and tackle these issues. That said, practitioners strive to overcome the obstacles, with multiple examples of innovative practice and regional data-sharing. The consultation has provided clear avenues for future research, with some questions readily amenable to research using ADR UK datasets, and others requiring further dataset development.

This report should be read in conjunction with a review of the [published quantitative evidence](#) and the [national research agenda](#), all produced by the Community Catalyst for Children at Risk of Poor Outcomes.

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## Acknowledgements

The Community Catalyst: Children at Risk of Poor Outcomes project is led by [Swansea University](#), [Lancaster University](#), [University College London](#), [Imperial College London](#) and the [University of Sussex](#). This work is funded by [ADR UK \(Administrative Data Research UK\)](#), an [Economic and Social Research Council](#) investment (part of [UK Research and Innovation](#)) and [Foundations: What Works Centre for Children and Families](#). Grant reference: ES/Y010566/1. Project partners include [Barnardo's](#), [Data to Insight](#), [Children's Commissioner's Office](#) and [Nuffield Family Justice Observatory](#).

The research team are also very grateful to all the stakeholders participating in our consultation who gave up their time to speak to us in the face of many competing demands. We would like to thank the following organisations:

Office of the Children's Commissioner for England	(CASCADE), Cardiff University	Barnardo's
Coram Voice	Lancaster University	Cambridge Community Services NHS Trust
University of Cambridge	National Children's Bureau	Portsmouth Council
The National Youth Advocacy Service	The Centre for Excellence for Children's Care and Protection (CELCIS), University of Strathclyde	Local Government Association
Exeter University		Data First, Ministry of Justice
NSPCC	British Association of Social Workers Northern Ireland	London Innovation and Improvement Alliance
Blackpool Council		National Audit Office
Data to Insight	North West Association for Directors of Children's Services	
Research in Practice		
Bristol University	Southwark Council	
British Association of Social Workers England	Department for Education	
Become Charity	Warrington Council	
Action for Children	Family Rights Group	
Children's Social Care Research and Development Centre	Department for Health and Social Care	



## Authors

Kat Tranter, Lancaster University

Professor Karen Broadhurst, Lancaster University

Professor Lisa Holmes, University of Sussex

Dr Grace Bailey, Swansea University

Professor Katie Harron, University College London

Dr Dougal Hargreaves, Imperial College London

Professor Jenny Woodman, University College London

Dr Eliazar Luna, University College London

Professor Lucy Griffiths, Swansea University

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