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Councils are to trial giving social workers money to spend on practical help for families, such as a new fridge,

Frontline funds: social workers to

SOCIAL CARE

By Neil Puffett

As part of efforts to reduce record numbers of children going into care, the What Works Centre for Children's Social Care is set to hand a number of councils money that frontline social workers can spend in "creative ways" with struggling families.

Councils will be able to bid for between £400,000 and £600,000 to test the idea – with suggestions for how the money could be used including family respite breaks, redecorating the home, or covering the cost of childcare.

The centre has said it wants to start working with successful sites as soon as possible – potentially as early as December – with evaluation due to take place by March 2020.

Under the initiative social workers will be allocated a budget to spend flexibly on care prevention with families, with an emphasis on being "creative".

Professional support

In addition to paying for practical help, the money could be used to pay for bringing in professional support swiftly, perhaps in the form of specialist counselling or psychological therapy.

The number of looked-after children is rising at its fastest rate in five years, with 72,670 children in care at the end of March 2017, compared with 70,440 the year before and 69,480 in 2015.

This is placing increasing pressure on cash-strapped local authorities, with the amount spent by councils supporting children who have been taken into care set to rise by more than £370m in 2018/19, breaking the £4bn barrier for the first time.

The centre says social workers and the families they are working with "are best placed to know what might be needed to create

real change and keep children safely at home".

Social workers will be expected to work with families to develop ways of keeping children safely at home that are designed for the specific context of each family. This could include the use of family group conferences to identify the best use of resources, or other collaborative ways of involving families in developing plans to keep children safe.

Another stipulation is that the money needs to be effectively targeted at children who are genuinely at risk of entering care, and for who it could realistically prevent them coming in.

Under section 17 of the Children Act 1989 local authorities already have a general duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of children within their area who are in need; and promote the upbringing of such children by their families.

To this end, it is possible for social workers to access funds to assist families they are working with, either through a specific pot of money set aside by their local authority, or an application to a resources panel.

Budget pressures

However, Professor Donald Forrester, director of research for the What Works Centre, says that in practice, the ability to access funds varies greatly across the

"Less money ends up being spent as social workers feel a sense of responsibility to spend wisely"

Andy Elvin, chief executive, The Adolescent and Children's Trust



Social workers could pay for extra support for struggling families such as short breaks if

country and it can be difficult to get more expensive requests signed off.

"It is hard, for example, to get a new cooker, but easy to get a bus fare," he says.

"We completely understand that with children's services budgets there is often pressure against using budgets like that. We are trying to push in a different direction and see whether if we give them the resources, can we improve children's outcomes and stop children going into care."

The practice of devolving budgets to practitioners is not particularly new nor without controversy. It has been used in adult social care for a number of years, and in 2010 it was claimed that it had funded exotic holidays, subscriptions to internet dating sites and adventure breaks. Visits to sex workers and lap dancing

clubs had all been permitted under the system.

However, the concept has got support within the sector, and the idea has already been utilised by social enterprise Achieving for Children which provides children's services across the three local authority areas of Kingston upon Thames, Richmond, and Windsor and Maidenhead.

Achieving for Children's strengthening families team, which delivers the government-funded Troubled Families programme, already provides small budgets to help the lead professional support specific needs of the families; for example, providing school uniforms or home maintenance. This may be delegated to the family so they can commission support directly. The family may also access a devolved budget of up to £250 to support the outcomes.

short break or childcare. Experts say the funding will be targeted at children most at risk of care proceedings

get budgets to support families



such help could prevent care proceedings

IN NUMBERS

£4.16bn

the total projected spend by local authorities across England on children in care in 2018/19, a rise of £370.1m on the 2017/18 figure of £3.79bn

72,670

children were living in care at the end of March 2017, compared with 70,440 the year before

14,599

applications for children to be taken into care were made in 2016/17, a record amount

Source: Department for Education; Calfass

GUIDE TO WHAT WORKS CENTRE FOR CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE

Plans for the What Works Centre for Children's Social Care were first announced by then Education Secretary Nicky Morgan in January 2016 with funding of up to £20m. It had been due to open later that year, but is still in the process of being set up and is not expected to officially launch until 2020, with the centre's funding only guaranteed up to March 2020.

Alan Wood, former president of the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) was appointed as founding chair of the centre in July.

Giving social workers budgets to work with families is one of two "Change Programme" projects to be trialled over the coming months.

The centre will also be providing funding to a number of councils to test out placing social workers in schools to work with children and families.

A total of £2m has been made available to pilot the idea with councils invited to bid for funding

of between £400,000 and £600,000 to test it out.

Under the social workers in schools pilot, social workers will be based in schools and work closely alongside them, dealing with the full range of work of children's social care - from referrals of need through to care proceedings. They will be encouraged to creatively explore ways of preventing the need for children's social care involvement.

The centre said it envisages social workers practicing in small units or teams across a few schools identified as generating high levels of referrals to children's social care. Local authorities will decide whether to focus on primary schools, secondary schools or both.

A total of 10 What Works Centres have already been established spanning education, early intervention, crime reduction, local economic growth, health and social care, and wellbeing and ageing.

Andy Elvin, chief executive of The Adolescent and Children's Trust, believes frontline staff are well placed to decide how to best use resources to help struggling families.

"My experience is that less money actually ends up being spent as social workers feel a deep sense of responsibility to spend wisely," he says.

"It also saves a lot of time in accessing resources panels if social workers can make quick decisions rather than waste time with bureaucracy.

"They know the family best. It can also help in building a positive working relationship between the social worker and the family if the social worker can solve a problem quickly by spending a relatively small amount of money."

He says the money could be used to secure children's care, a

new fridge or washing machine, some couple counselling sessions, school uniform for the children or sports equipment.

"Just general household expenditure really but [it could be] something that will promote stability and reduce family stress," he explains.

"With austerity hitting hard, grinding poverty is more of an issue than ever with some families social workers are supporting."

Forrester says one of the reasons for establishing the pilot is research consistently linking deprivation with a greater likelihood of a child being taken into care.

"It is clear there is a strong correlation between deprivation and children coming into care," he says.

"Children from poor areas are much more likely to come into care. We also looked at the

psychological factors, but there is not a strong evidence base for that.

"If social factors are important for some families, can we address them? Could that be enough to make the difference?

Undoubtedly each family is unique, so we maybe need to think of different ways to help different families."

Number of families

It is not clear how much children's social workers could potentially be handed under the initiative. It will be left to local authorities bidding for the money to propose how many families they intend to work with and how much is handed to social workers. However, the What Works Centre has indicated it expects

"significant" amounts to be made available - it could be a case of councils working with a small

number of families - so could feasibly run into five figures.

"The budget is being provided to prevent children going into care - small amounts may not achieve that," Forrester says.

Researchers will also be alert to seeing how the idea works in practice and any potential for perverse incentives - for example, if families emphasise problems in order to receive financial support, or if social workers instigate care proceedings in order to access budgets for families they are working with.

"Being aware of potential issues is important, but that shouldn't prevent us from doing something potentially helpful for the way we work with families," Forrester says.

The centre says successful bidders to take part in the project are due to be announced this month.