

Deaths of children in need

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Content warning

This report includes information on the deaths of children. This content may be difficult to read and is not intended to be read by children, but by researchers and policy makers interested in making children safer. The Children's Commissioner's office would like to acknowledge that the death of any child is a devastating loss, and to recognise that this report is possible because families and professionals faced with the loss of a child shared their data and experiences to allow lessons to be learned.

Executive summary

Deaths from abuse and neglect

- **Deliberately inflicted injuries, abuse or neglect account for 2.1% of child deaths in England.** An independent body, the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, reviews all deaths where abuse or neglect is suspected, and all deaths of looked after children, and seeks to identify any emerging trends or thematic issues.
- **Available evidence is not good enough to say whether the trend is up or down.** The two available sources of data (the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel and National Child Mortality Database) on child deaths due to abuse and neglect, or where abuse or neglect are suspected, only start in 2018 and 2020 and have unresolved discrepancies between them.

Deaths of children in need

- **New analysis for this report estimates that deaths of children in need in 2018-19 to 2022-23 were four times more likely to be due to deliberately inflicted injury, abuse or neglect than the deaths of children without any social care involvement.** These children were 'children in need' but were not looked after, and were not on child protection plans, meaning they may have been awaiting an assessment, being assessed, or on a child in need plan. Children previously known to social services, but not at the time of their death, were even more likely to die for these reasons – six times more likely than children not known to services. These findings are only exploratory but indicate that children with intensive types of social care involvement may be being effectively safeguarded from the most lethal abuse and neglect, with the risk instead falling on children with lesser or previous involvement.
 - **New analysis for this report estimates that children in need make up a disproportionately large percentage of all child deaths.** This proportion may be growing.
 - **New analysis for this report finds that children in need's mortality risk appears to have grown over time.** Between 2014 and 2023, there was a 51% increase in the number of deaths of children in need, but an increase of only 1% in the number of these children. Increasing numbers
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of children who are children in need due to their disabilities and health conditions cannot explain this rise, nor can the increasing number of looked after children among the children in need. This implies an urgent need to investigate the reasons for this increase.

Gaps in knowledge

- **Data quality is limited and more research is needed to confirm and explain these patterns.** The Department for Education includes unborn children and young people aged 18 and over among its published number of deaths of children in need. There are gaps in data, including on care leavers, and the factors present in all child deaths (not just those of children where abuse or neglect are suspected). This initial analysis should be built on with in-depth research on the trends and patterns in, and causes of, the deaths of different groups of children in need.

Recommendations

This research shines light on the specific risks faced by children known to children's social care, lack of information sharing between services, and limited contact with children's services professionals. Fundamentally, children known to social care are five times more likely to die due to deliberately inflicted injury, abuse or neglect, meaning we are doing too little to protect them.

The Children's Commissioner is calling for:

- **A change in the law that gives children equal protection from physical assault to adults.** The current defence of reasonable chastisement or punishment to a charge of assault on a child should be removed – sometimes referred to as a 'smacking ban'. This would bring England in line with the rest of Great Britain. It would not create a new offence but would give children equal protection from violence as adults.
 - **Schools to be at centre of safeguarding arrangements.** Schools should be the fourth statutory safeguarding partner, in recognition of their role in protecting the children who they see every day and the additional insights and data they can contribute about vulnerable young people. They should continue to maintain accountability for children for a year when they are removed from school to be home educated.
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- **Greater oversight of home-educated children.** No child who has ever been known to children's social care due to concerns around abuse or neglect should be taken out of school for the purposes of being home educated without the prior agreement of the local authority. For children with a social worker or for whom there is a live referral to children's social care, home education should not be permitted.
- **A register of children not in school to be implemented urgently.** This must include children who are home educated and be introduced via legislation as a matter of urgency, backed by the resource to effectively implement and monitor it.
- **Improved data sharing:** A shared unique child identifier should be introduced and, in the first instance, the government's upcoming Children's Wellbeing Bill should stipulate what data should be proactively shared with safeguarding partners. That should include ensuring Border Force data is shared with local authorities and schools when children leave and enter the country.
- **National thresholds of need for children in need.** Through a review of the Children Act 1989, there should be national guidance set out that defines consistent thresholds of need that children and families must meet to be offered support through a child in need plan, under section 17.

The report concludes with further recommendations on how the current system of recording, reporting and learning from the deaths of children in need could be made more effective.

About this report

This report contains new findings on the deaths of children in need. 'Child in need' is an umbrella term including looked after children, children on a child protection plan, and children on a child in need plan. This report examines the characteristics of children and young people who die having had social care involvement, and how they compare to all child deaths. The Children's Commissioner's office recognises that each of the data points analysed in this report represent the tragic loss of a child, and so the report ends with recommendations, including on how to create a better system of understanding child deaths, and hopefully preventing, future deaths.

Methods

This report summarises existing evidence, and reports on new analysis by the Children's Commissioner's office. This report contains analysis of published and previously unpublished National Child Mortality Database (NCMD) data provided to the Children's Commissioner's office. This report also analyses published and unpublished data from the Department for Education, and other sources including Office for National Statistics population estimates and mortality statistics. Due to limitations in the available data, in places the analysis combines data from more than one source, which are not fully compatible. The sources used are labelled and full references are provided at the end of the report.

The unpublished NCMD data covers child deaths with a completed review, and consists of a table of social care involvement by primary category of death for each of four financial years of data (2019-20 to 2022-23). This analysis combines years to maximise numbers, but due to disclosure control by the NCMD of small numbers (zero to five) in some cells of the tables, the data are incomplete and so the findings should be considered exploratory estimates. Future research is needed using the full unsuppressed data.

To inform this report stakeholder interviews also took place in May to September 2023 with representatives of the National Child Mortality Database, the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, North Central London Integrated Care Board, the Department for Health and Social Care, the Department for Education's Serious Incident Response Team, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, and Coram BAAF.

Findings

Background

All deaths must be registered, but there is an additional statutory process when a child dies, in which detailed information is gathered locally, analysed centrally and published by the National Child Mortality Database (NCMD). The NCMD programme publishes thematic reports. For example, one thematic report covers deaths due to 'traumatic incidents', excluding suicides but including vehicle collisions, drownings, violence and maltreatment, and unintentional injuries.¹ It has not published a thematic report considering children's social care involvement, or deaths due to deliberate injuries, abuse or neglect. According to Children's Commissioner's office analysis of reviews of deaths in the NCMD for the year to end of March 2023, deliberately inflicted injury, abuse or neglect accounted for 2.1% (69) of deaths.

An additional process is in place for some children in need who die. Currently, serious incidents and deaths of children who are in care, or of any child where abuse or neglect is known or suspected, must be reported by local authorities to the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel ('the panel'). The panel is an independent body with administrative support provided by the Department for Education. In the year to March 2023, the panel were notified of 146 deaths of children and 227 incidents of suspected serious harm.² The Department itself and Ofsted receive the same information, and the Department has a team to track the notifications to identify any emerging trends or thematic issues. As discussed later in this report, the NCMD and panel data have unresolved discrepancies between them, and the extent of overlap between their numbers is not published.

The panel decide whether to commission national reviews where it views cases as complex or of national importance. The panel publishes reports on particular cases and themes, such as the murders of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson, and the management of bruising in non-mobile infants.³

Who are 'children in need'?

Around 1 child in 30 in England is a child in need at any one time, an umbrella term including three main groups of children: looked after children, children on a child in need plan, and children on a child protection plan.⁴ The Department for Education defines children in need as a group supported by children's social care, who have safeguarding and welfare needs, including children on child in need plans, children on child protection plans, looked after children, care leavers (who may be children or adults), and disabled children.⁵ As well as ordinarily having a social worker assigned to them, other services may be involved. There were 339,500 children in need on 31 March 2024, according to published Department for Education statistics. Among them, the Department for Education estimates that approximately 105,000 children were on child in need plans, based on data returns from most local authorities.⁶

Outside of these groups, who are offered statutory support, are an unknown number of children who receive non-statutory early help services, estimated by the Association of Directors of Children's Services at 185,100 on 31 March 2022. No national data are gathered by the Department for Education on these children or their outcomes, including mortality.⁷

Number of deaths of children in need

Around 1,000 children in need die per year. This compares to around 3,500 deaths of children in England in total (in the year to March 2023, around 3,700) (Table 1). As such their risk of death of children in need appears to be higher than that of the population of all children .

Table 1: Numbers of children in need and deaths of children in need

	Children in need 339,500					All children in England
	Children on a child in need plan	Children on a child protection plan	Looked after children	Care leavers	Other children in need¹	
Number of children	105,000	49,900	83,840	48,050	114,280	11,999,000
Number of deaths per year²	unknown	40-70	40-60	20-50	unknown	around 3,500

¹ 'Other children in need' means adopted, awaiting assessment or assessment not required, assessment started but not completed, or unknown.

Note: All numbers of children are as of 31 March 2024 except 'other children in need' which is 31 March 2022, and 'all children in England' which is mid-2023.

Sources: Children's Commissioner's office analysis of: published Department for Education statistics; published National Child Mortality Database data; published Office for National Statistics data; and Table 1 of 'Children on child in need plans', Children's Commissioner's office, 2024.

1,000

there are around 1,000
deaths of children in need
in England per year

3,500

there are around 3,500
total deaths of children
in England per year

Mortality rate of children in need

In 2022 the mortality rate of children in need was much higher at 227 per 100,000 than the 31 per 100,000 in the general population of children.⁸ This means that children in need were over 7 times more likely to die than children in general. The Department for Education's data quality issue, discussed below, is likely to account for part of this by inflating the rate, due to the inclusion of unborn children and adults.

1 in 30

children are children in need

Children in need are supported by children's social care due to safeguarding and welfare needs. They including children on child in need plans, children on child protection plans, and looked after children.

This means that children in need make up a substantial minority of all child deaths. For the year to March 2023 the percentage was more than 1 in 4 (27%), comparing published Department for Education data with Office for National Statistics data.⁹ This should be considered a maximum due to the data quality issue (the Department's overly inclusive definition of children in the data) discussed below.

1 in 4

child deaths are of children in need

In 2022-23, there were 1,010 deaths of children in need, of 3,743 deaths of children in England in 2022-23 (27%).

Our exploratory analysis of the unpublished administrative data underlying the Department's published statistics finds unborn children and young people aged 18 or over are among those recorded as deaths of children in need (ceasing to be a child in need in 2021-22 due to death). The true number of children in need who died during the year, excluding these unborn children and adult care leavers, may be closer to 550. In this case, the proportion of all children who died who were children in need defined in this way would be around 15%,

rather than the 27% calculated using the published number. Both 15% and 27% are larger than one benchmark – the 1 in 30 children who are children in need at a point in time (around 3.3%). So, we can conclude that children in need make up a disproportionate percentage of all child deaths.

This analysis is based on the number of deaths of children in need over the course of the year, so the mortality risk can be considered an estimate, given that some additional vulnerable children start or cease being considered children in need during the course of the year, and would not be captured as such on 31 March. Existing published data does not allow the calculation of a true annualised mortality rate for children in need.

Trends in deaths of children in need

Change in number

The number of deaths of children in need has slowly grown over time. Each year between 2013 and 2023, there were between 670 and 1,010 deaths of children in need in England (Figure 1). These numbers are taken from Department for Education statistics on children who ceased to be children in need, in the year to March 31. These document the different reasons children cease being a child in need, such as being adopted, and including death. Our preliminary analysis of unpublished children in need data for 2021-22 finds some unborn children and young people aged 18 and over are included in the child death statistics, so these numbers should be considered maximums.¹⁰ No data is available on which of the

children in the Department's statistics were, for example, children on a child in need plan as opposed to children on a child protection plan, demonstrating a gap in the data.¹¹

Change in rate

The mortality rate of children in need may be rising over time, because there was a 51% increase (from 670 to 1,010) between 2014 and 2023 in the number of deaths of children in need, compared to an increase in the number of children in need on 31 March of only 1% (from 397,630 to 403,090).¹² The Children's Safeguarding Practice Review panel told the office that this rise could be driven by a range of issues, and merited further investigation. The rise in the rate could be a real trend, or due to data issues. These data issues include: the inclusion of an unknown number of adults and unborn children in the Department for Education's children in need statistics, a number which may have varied over time; and the unknown level of in-year changes in child in need numbers, which may have varied over time.

Figure 1: Number of deaths of children in need, 2013 to 2024



Source: Children's Commissioner's office analysis of published data from Department for Education. Note: these figures should be viewed as maximums because preliminary analysis by the Children's Commissioner's office finds unborn children and young people aged 18 and over among the children in need data for 2021-22.

Number of deaths of looked after children

There are smaller numbers of looked after children than children in need. Rounded to the nearest ten, Department for Education data shows that between 40 and 60 looked after children died per year, looking across the years 2018 to 2022. These numbers are taken from published statistics on children who have ceased to be looked after for different reasons.¹³ They do not fully match to National Child Mortality Database (NCMD) numbers of child death reviews which identified that children were looked after. These were smaller at 25, 26 and 37 in 2020, 2021 and 2022 respectively.¹⁴

The Department for Education told the Children's Commissioner's office it did not know why its figures for the deaths of looked after children, derived from the annual 'Children looked after' statutory data return, are higher than the number of deaths of looked after children reported via the serious incident notification process. The Department told us it had started to explore the discrepancies between its data and the NCMD data.

A disproportionate number of looked after children who died were 16 and 17 years and living in independent or semi-independent accommodation.¹⁵ In such accommodation children are given support but not care. From a written parliamentary answer, it is known that in the 5 years between 2016-17 and 2020-2021, 29 such children died.¹⁶ A Freedom of Information request by the Times newspaper found that 50 looked after children aged 16 and 17 died in the 10 years to 2021 while living in such unregulated accommodation.¹⁷ The Children's Commissioner has previously called for mitigation against the risks of placing children in settings where they do not receive care.¹⁸ She has recommended universal care standards, and that data should be collected in the annual Child in Need census on how many children are accommodated under section 17 of the Children Act or housing legislation – that is, given support but not care – and where they are placed.¹⁹

Deaths of looked after children by age

The youngest children face higher risks. Around 5% of all children in England, and of all looked after children, are infants aged under one year. Some children become looked after from birth or shortly after, to prevent the harm that services fear would be caused to them at home.

Overall, children under one accounted for 62% of all child deaths in 2022, but only 22% of deaths of looked after children in the period 2012-2022 (Table 2). This risk is therefore much higher for infants than older children. But for looked-after children the risk is much higher for older children than for infants. However, published data does not allow analysis of the causes of looked after children’s deaths by age. Chromosomal, genetic and congenital anomalies, and perinatal or neonatal events, explain most of the deaths of infants in the general population. Information on causes of death would be needed for future analysis to conclude on whether looked after infants are being safeguarded from the most serious abuse and neglect leading to death.

Table 2: Age of deaths of looked after children

Age group	Percent of child deaths, 2022	Percent of deaths of looked after children, 2012-2022 ²⁰	Population benchmark, all children, mid-year 2022 ²¹	Population benchmark, all looked after children ²²
Less than 1 year	62%	22%	5%	5%
1 year or older	38%	78%	95%	95%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

Source: Children’s Commissioner’s office analysis of unpublished data from Department for Education

Interpretation and discussion

Children in need are known to children's social care, because without intervention it is deemed, in the Children Act 1989, that they are 'unlikely to achieve or maintain... a reasonable standard of health or development' – for example if they are living in challenging circumstances at home. While this cohort of children have been identified as more vulnerable, and at higher risk of having poor health outcomes, they ordinarily will have a social worker, so there should be a greater level of oversight of their health and safety. On balance, given their circumstances but also given the interventions they receive, it is unclear whether to expect higher or lower mortality than average. But it is important that services know which is the case and why. It is also important to understand the reasons for deaths of children in need compared to other children, to allow for interpretation of whether services are successfully identifying risks and safeguarding children against unsafe situations.

Could the higher mortality of children in need be due to health conditions and disabilities?

Our conversations with stakeholders explored reasons for the higher risk of death for children in need. We heard that health professionals assume the higher risk is due to the morbidity and mortality associated with higher rates of SEND among children in need. Some children will be 'children in need' because they have a life-limiting condition. Disability is one of the grounds for being a child in need, and some disabilities have implications for morbidity and mortality.

However, the rise in deaths of children in need (Figure 1) cannot be explained by increasing numbers of children who are children in need due to their disabilities and health conditions. Over the same time period (2013 to 2023), the number and percentage of children in need who were children in need because of their disability or illness decreased.²³

Greater data availability would allow improved understanding of the relationship between child mortality and disability. The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel gathers data on 'does this child have a disability'. The National Child Mortality Database does not. The Child Death Review statutory forms ask: 'Did the child have a learning disability?'. The National Child Mortality Database do not

routinely publish analysis of the answers. This gap in understanding is important given that research shows that people with a learning disability and autistic people die earlier than average, and do not receive the same quality of care as people without a learning disability or who are not autistic.²⁴

Are more or fewer children dying from abuse and neglect than in the past?

There is no clear answer to this question. Available evidence only covers the last five or so years. The two available sources of data on child deaths known or suspected to have been due to abuse and neglectⁱ are the National Child Mortality Database and the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel. These have unresolved discrepancies between them. The trend is upward in the NCMD, and downward in the CSPRP. Specifically, the NCMD data shows an upward trend, from 55 of the deaths reviewed in the year to March 2019, to 69 in the year to March 2023, whereas the CSPRP report that annual deaths suspected or known to be due to abuse or neglect fell to around 152 in the year to March 2023ⁱⁱ from a high of 198 in July 2018 to June 2019.²⁵

Are children in need more likely to die from abuse and neglect?

The group of children in need can be assumed, on average, to have experienced more abuse or neglect than the general population of children, which may have long-term consequences for health. These vulnerable and disadvantaged children with a social worker may be more likely than other children to experience, for example, untreated health conditions or dangerous environments.

Looked after children have been taken into care to protect them from abuse or neglect up to and including risk to life. So it is possible that looked after children may have a lower than average mortality risk due to abuse or neglect. But occasionally, the systems in place to protect looked after children fail.

ⁱ The NCMD reports on deaths with a primary category of 'deliberately inflicted injury, abuse or neglect'.

ⁱⁱ The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel's Annual Report 2022/23, published January 2024, covers the 18 month period from January 2022 to March 2023, during which period there were 190 of these deaths, or the equivalent of 152 over 12 months.

In 2022, prospective adopter Laura Castle was convicted of the murder of one year old Leiland-James Corkill after he was placed in her care.²⁶

However, other high profile child deaths like those of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson illustrate the risks from parents among a wider group of children on the edge of care. Both children were assessed by social workers but not given a social worker, that is, given any longer-term statutory services.²⁷

Given these competing hypotheses, new analysis was needed to explore whether the risk was higher or lower for children in need. So the Children's Commissioner's office requested and carried out exploratory analysis of data from the National Child Mortality Database on child deaths due to deliberately inflicted injuries, abuse and neglect, broken down by whether the child had had social care involvement. This new analysis, of 100 deaths for these reasons in 2019-20 to 2022-23 with a completed review, finds that the answer is yes (Table 3). These preliminary findings suggest both that children in need were more likely than other children to have died from abuse and neglect, and that children who died from abuse and neglect were more likely to be a child in need. Most deaths included in this analysis (64%) were of children who had been known to services at the time of their death (27%) or previously (37%). The other 36 deaths (36%) due to deliberate injuries, abuse or neglect were of children not known to social services.

Table 3: Social care involvement and deaths due to deliberate injuries, abuse and neglect

	Children who were known to social care at the time of death or previously	Children not known to social care	All children
Deaths due to deliberately inflicted injury, abuse or neglect	64 (64%)	36 (36%)	100 (100%)
Other deaths of children	2,190 (26%)	6,220 (74%)	8,410 (100%)

Source: Children’s Commissioner’s office analysis of unpublished National Child Mortality Database data for 2019-20 to 2022-23. As data are incomplete due to suppression of small numbers in some cells in some years, these figures should be considered estimates.

This can also be expressed as the percent of deaths of children known to social care who died from deliberate injuries, abuse or neglect: 2.8% (meaning 97.2% of deaths were for other reasons), compared to 0.6% for children not known to social care. So these ‘children in need’ were 4.9 times more likely to have died from deliberately inflicted injury, abuse or neglect than children without any social care involvement.ⁱⁱⁱ

Looking just at the children previously known to social services, but not at the time of their death, this group was even more likely to have died for these reasons – 6.1 times more likely than children not known to services. No information is available on how long ago services were involved.

The analysis suggests that children with more intensive involvement (on a child protection plan, or as a looked after child) may be being effectively safeguarded from the most lethal abuse and neglect, with the risk falling on children with lesser involvement. Children in need whose deaths were reviewed in

ⁱⁱⁱ The odds ratio is 4.9, because 2.8% is about 5 times larger than 0.6%.

2019-2023, and who were neither looked after nor on a child protection plan, were four times more likely to die from deliberately inflicted injury, abuse or neglect than children without any social care involvement. They may have been awaiting an assessment, being assessed, or on a child in need plan. However, these figures should be considered as estimates and the analysis should be replicated using complete data. The data analysed here was incomplete due to suppression of small numbers in some cells in some years, and did not include any looked-after children or children on a child protection plans – this may be because none died in this subgroup, or due to suppression of very small numbers of these deaths.

How many deaths of children in need might have been preventable?

Children who were known to social care, previously and/or at the time of their death, were more likely than other deaths of children to have ‘modifiable factors’ identified in their reviews. The National Child Mortality Database defines a modifiable factor as a factor (identified in a child death review) that may, by means of a locally or nationally achievable intervention, be modified to reduce the risk of future child deaths. Published data from the National Child Mortality Database shows that only around a third (35%) of children never known to social care had modifiable factors identified in their reviews, completed in the year to March 2023. But this was higher at 42% for children known to social care at the time of death, and even higher, 52%, for children previously known to social care. Among the 42%, the percentage for children on a child protection plan was particularly high at 56%, 41% for looked after children, 36% for children in need, and 40% for other children known to social care, including children known to social care in more than one way.

Recommendations

This report has focused on what data is gathered and published, and by whom, about children in need who die, and what this data reveals. Preventing child deaths wherever possible should of course be a primary goal of every government. To do so requires concerted effort across many different services – from town planning to help prevent road traffic accidents, to effective health visiting services that can encourage safer sleeping, through to involving children in more clinical trials for cancer treatments.

This research, though, shines a light on the specific risks children known to children's social care face. That includes lack of information sharing between services and limited contact with children's services professionals. Fundamentally, the deaths of children known to social care are five times more likely to be due to deliberately inflicted injury, abuse or neglect than the deaths of other children, meaning we are doing too little to protect them. A number of changes would help:

- **A change in the law that gives children equal protection from physical assault to adults.** The current defence of reasonable chastisement or punishment to a charge of assault on a child should be removed – sometimes referred to as a 'smacking ban'. This would bring England in line with the rest of Great Britain. It would not create a new offence but would give children equal protection from violence as adults.
- **Schools to be at centre of safeguarding arrangements.** Schools should be the fourth statutory safeguarding partner, in recognition of their role in protecting the children who they see every day and the additional insights and data they bring about vulnerable young people. They should continue to maintain accountability for children for a year when they are removed from school to be home educated.
- **Greater oversight of home-educated children.** No child who has ever been known to children's social care due to concerns around abuse or neglect should be taken out of school for the purposes of being home educated without the prior agreement of the local authority. For children with a social worker or for whom there is a live referral to children's social care, home education should not be permitted.

- **A register of children not in school to be implemented urgently.** This must include children who are home educated and be introduced via legislation as a matter of urgency, backed by the resource to effectively implement and monitor it.
- **Improved data sharing:** A shared unique child identifier should be introduced and, in the first instance, the government's upcoming Children's Wellbeing Bill should stipulate what data should be proactively shared with safeguarding partners. That should include ensuring Border Force data is shared with local authorities and schools when children leave and enter the country.
- **National thresholds of need for children in need.** Through a review of the Children Act 1989, there should be national guidance set out that defines consistent thresholds of need that children and families must meet to be offered support through a child in need plan, under section 17.

Beyond these specific lessons for how to better protect children who are known to children's services, this report has revealed that, while England has a robust system to record and examine the deaths of every child, more could be done with the learning to ensure that as much as possible is actioned. It is imperative that the information that comes from each of these deeply tragic deaths is treated with profound respect, and used as effectively as possible to prevent further deaths.

The following recommendations focus on how the current system of recording, reporting and learning from the deaths of children in need could be made more effective:

- Building on the exploratory analysis in this report, the Department for Education should carry out or commission research to understand the extra mortality risk faced by current and former children in need, including any role played by these children's disabilities, health conditions, and histories of abuse and neglect. This should include a thematic review by the National Child Mortality Database on children known to social care, exploring the reasons for the higher mortality rates and higher rates of modifiable factors, and mortality risk by age.
 - The Department for Education should improve its children in need statistics to distinguish the deaths of children on child in need plans from other groups of children, and adult care leavers.
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- Building on their existing work, the Department for Education and National Child Mortality Database should reconcile the discrepancies between their numbers of deaths of care experienced children.
- The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel should coordinate its data collection and publications with that of the National Child Mortality Database programme and Department for Education children's social care statistics. The panel should publish annual summary statistics, including on the characteristics of incidents, and the programme should publish complete and harmonised data on children's social care statuses.
- The remit of the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel should expand to cover all deaths of children in need.
- The National Child Mortality Database should gather data on whether children were receiving Early Help services at the time of their death.

References

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- ³ Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel publications are available at: [https://www.gov.uk/search/research-and-statistics?organisations\[\]=child-safeguarding-practice-review-panel&parent=child-safeguarding-practice-review-panel](https://www.gov.uk/search/research-and-statistics?organisations[]=child-safeguarding-practice-review-panel&parent=child-safeguarding-practice-review-panel)
- ⁴ Children's Commissioner's office, 2024. *Children on child in need plans*. Available at: <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/huge-regional-variation-in-support-from-childrens-social-services-for-some-of-englands-most-vulnerable-children-new-report-shows/>
- ⁵ Department for Education, 2019. *Review of children in need*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-children-in-need/review-of-children-in-need>
- ⁶ Department for Education, 2024. *Children in need*. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-in-need>
- ⁷ Association of Directors of Children's Services, 2022. *Safeguarding pressures phase 8*. Available at: <https://adcs.org.uk/safeguarding/article/safeguarding-pressure-phase-8>
- ⁸ Children's Commissioner's office calculations based on data published by the Office for National Statistics and Department for Education. General population of children: 3,687 deaths, 11,761,656 population. Children in need: 880 deaths, 388,490 population.
- ⁹ 1,010 / 3,743. Children's Commissioner's office analysis of Department for Education published data, *Children In Need*, October 2023. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/characteristics-of-children-in-need> and National Child Mortality Database, 2023. *Child Death Review Data: Year ending 31 March 2023*. Available at: <https://www.ncmd.info/publications/child-death-data-2023/>
- ¹⁰ Department for Education guidance for local authorities allows for these inclusions, for example stating that "whilst most children in need will be aged under 18, your return should include young people aged 18 or over who are still receiving care and accommodation or post-care support from children's services". Department for Education, 2022. *Children in need census 2023 to 2024: Guide for local authorities*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/children-in-need-census-2023-to-2024-guide>
- ¹¹ Children's Commissioner's office analysis of Department for Education published data, *Characteristics of Children In Need*, October 2022. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/characteristics-of-children-in-need>
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¹² Department for Education, 2017. *Characteristics of children in need: 2016 to 2017*. Available at:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/656395/SFR61-2017_Main_text.pdf

¹³ Children's Commissioner's office analysis of Department for Education published data, *Characteristics of Children In Need*, October 2022. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/characteristics-of-children-in-need>

¹⁴ National Child Mortality Database, 2022. *Child Death Review Data: Year ending 31 March 2022*. Available at:

<https://www.ncmd.info/publications/child-death-review-data-release-2022/>

¹⁵ 29 deaths is 5.8 deaths per year, or 9.7% to 14.5% of the 40 to 60 deaths of looked after children per year. In comparison, 11% of all looked after children were living independently (3%) or in semi-independent living accommodation not subject to children's homes regulations (8%) on 31 March 2023. Children's Commissioner's analysis of Department for Education data.

¹⁶ Written parliamentary answer, UIN 125326, tabled on 18 February 2022. Available at: <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2022-02-18/125326>

¹⁷ 'Hundreds of vulnerable children die in care', The Times, 7 August 2023. Available at:

[https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/hundreds-of-vulnerable-children-die-in-care-](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/hundreds-of-vulnerable-children-die-in-care-n7rwbk9l7#:~:text=Figures%20released%20to%20The%20Times%20through%20Freedom%20of%20Information%20(FOI,p)

[n7rwbk9l7#:~:text=Figures%20released%20to%20The%20Times%20through%20Freedom%20of%20Information%20\(FOI,p](https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/hundreds-of-vulnerable-children-die-in-care-n7rwbk9l7#:~:text=Figures%20released%20to%20The%20Times%20through%20Freedom%20of%20Information%20(FOI,p)

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¹⁸ Children's Commissioner, 2023. *Supported accommodation: response to government consultation*. Available at:

<https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/supported-accommodation-for-children-in-care/>

¹⁹ Children's Commissioner, 2023. *Homeless 16- and 17-year-olds in need of care*. Available at:

<https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/homeless-16-and-17-year-olds-in-need-of-care/>

²⁰ Children looked after at 31 March who died, by age. Analysis of unpublished data provided to Children's Commissioner's office by Department for Education.

²¹ Office for National Statistics. 2023. Mid-year estimates of the population for the UK, England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Available at:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/bulletins/populationestimatesforenglandandwales/mid2022>

²² Department for Education, 2022. *Children looked after in England including adoptions*. Available at: [https://explore-](https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2022)

[education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2022](https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2022)

²³ Specifically, episodes of being a child in need with a primary need at assessment of child's disability or illness. Children's Commissioner's office analysis of published Department for Education data. *Children In Need*, October 2023. Available at:

<https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/characteristics-of-children-in-need>

²⁴ LeDeR is a service improvement programme funded by NHS England. Available at: <https://leder.nhs.uk/>

²⁵ National Child Mortality Database, 2023. *Child Death Review Data: Year ending 31 March 2023*. Available at:

<https://www.ncmd.info/publications/child-death-data-2023/> and annual reports of the Child Safeguarding Practice Review

Panel, available at: [https://www.gov.uk/search/transparency-and-freedom-of-information-releases?organisations\[\]=child-safeguarding-practice-review-panel&parent=child-safeguarding-practice-review-panel](https://www.gov.uk/search/transparency-and-freedom-of-information-releases?organisations[]=child-safeguarding-practice-review-panel&parent=child-safeguarding-practice-review-panel)

²⁶ The Guardian, Woman convicted of murdering baby she wanted to adopt, 17 May 2022. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/may/17/woman-leiland-james-corkill-laura-castle-convicted-murdering-boy-adopt>

²⁷ Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel. 2022. *Child Protection in England*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-review-into-the-murders-of-arthur-labinjo-hughes-and-star-hobson>



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