Evaluation of The Mercers' Company's Better Outcomes for Families and Carers Programme

By Sarah Frost, Kerry Swain and Fiona Weir Winter 2021/22

Part 1: Towards Better Outcomes for Families and Carers – Understanding the Landscape

Fiona Weir Final – January 2022

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Towards Better Outcomes for Families and Carers – Rapid Review Summary

Our team of independent evaluators carried out a rapid review of 49 sources including legislation, guidance, policy, 'grey literature' (research published outside of commercial or academic publishing and commonly includes government documents and white papers), academic research and other relevant information relating to support for children, families and carers in England. This rapid review is the first part of a wider evaluation of 37 projects that have been awarded grants through The Mercers' Company's Church and Communities Better Outcomes for Families and Carers (BOFF&C) priority between 2018-2021.

Headline Findings and Implications for Consideration

Our rapid review suggests the following tentative findings. These will be considered alongside findings from other parts of the evaluation, and will help shape recommendations to be made in February 2022.

The 'Early Help' landscape

The landscape is very complex for children, families and carers needing additional support in England. Table 1 (on page 7) provides a simple summary of current arrangements, which may help Mercers' better understand scale and types of need and current responses.

What we know about outcomes for children in need and in care

Research shows that children in need and in care have poorer outcomes across all domains, including education, health, offending, employment and homelessness. However, evidence about 'what works' is not as strong as it should be and there are 'disjointed pictures' locally and nationally. The independent review of children's social care acknowledged the challenges in its recent case for change – particularly that "we are not doing enough to help children." It will put forward recommendations to improve outcomes, and outcome evidence, in its report to government early next year.

Tentative findings about 'what works' in 'Early Help' for children, families and carers

These can be seen as desirable features of the projects and activities funded by Mercers' BOFF&C initiative:

- Use whole system approaches
- Build positive relationships
- Give staff autonomy and flexibility
- Acknowledge adversity
- Use asset-based approaches (approaches that recognise and build on people's and communities' strengths and potential) and community- or peer-led support;
- Ensure variety in the support offer through partnership working
- Work through schools
- Ensure work is age-appropriate and timely.

Tentative findings about barriers and challenges

While the issues identified relate mostly to statutory services, they may still be considered as problems that BOFF&C activities could help to avoid or mitigate.

- Funding cuts have driven a reduction in 'Early Help' so that many families' and carers' needs are now not met
- Particularly, neglect is not prioritised
- There may be a lack of appropriate training and support in the extended team around the family
- Difficult administrative processes reduce support time
- Practitioners' attitudes can prevent parents/carers from seeking 'Early Help'
- 'Early Help' is less effective if important partners are missing from multi-agency work.

There is limited evidence in this review about the needs, outcomes and issues relating to children, families and carers with specialist needs – including children affected by domestic abuse, children affected by substance misuse, disabled children, young carers and parent carers of disabled children. However, findings about 'what works' and 'barriers and challenges' apply to these groups too.

Why evidence about outcomes is poor, why it matters and what could be done

Evidence about outcomes is poor for a variety of reasons, especially because:

- There are varying definitions and models of 'Early Help'
- Targets, funding priorities and a shift towards more crisis support may be skewing evidence
- Poverty is an 'elephant in the room'
- Opportunities to measure impact and outcomes are missed.

This really matters because without evidence about whether, and what, 'Early Help' is effective, it is impossible to provide the best support for children, families and carers who need it. Taylor et al. (2019) provide practical steps for evaluating impact which Mercers' could recommend to funded organisations and/or use to evaluate BOFF&C outcomes in future.

Legislation and policy

A very wide variety of policy and legislation influences support for children, families and carers in England, especially Working Together to Safeguard Children, the 2005 Children and Young People's Planning Regulations and the 1989 and 2004 Children's Acts. Understanding legislation and policy helps to understand the environment within which the Voluntary, Community and Faith Organisations (VCFOs) funded under the BOFF&C initiative operate, and helps Mercers' to prioritise funding for activities that are non-statutory and unlikely to be funded by local authorities or other statutory agencies.

1. Introduction

This stand-alone report, **'Part 1: Towards Better Outcomes for Families and Carers – Understanding the Landscape'**, presents findings from a rapid review of legislation, policy, 'grey literature', academic research and other background information relevant to the evaluation of 37 projects that have been awarded grants through The Mercers' Company's Church and Communities Better

Outcomes for Families and Carers (BOFF&C) priority, between 2018-2021. The review and evaluation were carried out in winter 2021 by our team of independent research and evaluation consultants.

The companion report, **'Part 2: Better Outcomes for Families and Carers Evaluation Findings Report: What We Know Now'** can be read alone or in conjunction with this report, and presents the analysis and conclusions from fieldwork carried out for this evaluation.

Both reports should be read in conjunction with **'Part 3: Better Outcomes for Families and Carers Summary Conclusions and Recommendations'**.

1.1 About the Funding Under Evaluation

The Mercers' Company has a philanthropic interest in projects of social benefit in England, and funds a number priority areas including **Better Outcomes for Families and Carers (BOFF&C)** which is the subject of this evaluation. The main philanthropic aim of this funding is to *"Deliver better outcomes for families and carers* "because *"People thrive when communities thrive"*. Mercers' recognises that in principle, 'families may include households where there are no children (for example parent carers and their disabled children aged 18+) but in practice this happens only rarely in the projects they fund.

The Company's Church and Communities Committee has awarded 39 BOFF&C grants to charities and social enterprises since 2018, funded by the Mercers' Charitable Foundation, the Charity of Sir Richard Whittington and the Earl of Northampton's Charity, for which The Mercers' Company is corporate trustee. Grants support these two priority groups:

• Families facing poverty or other challenges

• Carers and their families.

Mercers' funding approach is led by the needs identified by the charities and social enterprises they work with. Funding is flexible and they do not look for any specific outputs or outcomes; they seek to understand factors that create pressures for families and carers, and they appreciate that a range of different approaches may be effective.

Funding is offered in four specific geographic locations where the Company has strong historic links:

• London

• Norfolk

• Lincolnshire

• North East (specifically Northumberland, County Durham, Tees Valley and Tyne and Wear).

1.2 About this Policy and Research Review

The Mercers' Company have commissioned our independent evaluation to capture learning from the BOFF&C projects, to help inform their ongoing approach to funding in this area. Specifically the key aims of the evaluation are to:

- Evaluate the funding awarded so far to projects that deliver better outcomes for families and carers

- Understand the collective difference made by the different interventions and the lessons learnt

- Present this in the wider context of services and upstream preventative work with children and families and carers needing additional support in England.

This rapid review of relevant policy and research is the first part of the evaluation, and particularly focuses on the third aim. It presents information drawn together from recent, published research on 'Early Help' for children, families and carers in England. It is not intended to give a comprehensive overview of the research in this area, but rather to gain quick and useable insight into some of the current understanding about relevant needs and issues.

A rapid review is a systematic but pragmatic way of looking at relevant research and policy evidence, using a simple framework. It is by nature limited in scope and carried out relatively quickly, and it may therefore have some omissions. However, clear selection criteria mean that it is robust, transparent and can be replicated. It provides an understanding of scale and types of need, service responses, costs and other key issues, including the role of voluntary, community and faith organisations in supporting children, families and carers and thereby contributes to the knowledge and understanding that Mercer's seek. The selection criteria used are set out in Appendix 1.

49 sources were used in total (see Appendix 2 for a full list), including:

- 19 sources which were government legislation and the guidance (LG)

- 23 other 'grey literature' sources including policy briefings, reports from non-governmental organisations and practitioners' planning documents (G)

- 7 academic sources (A).

Notably among the 'grey literature' sources is the recent Independent Review of Children's Social Care – The Case for Change[1]. This very wide-ranging, government-commissioned review has included visits, conversations, surveys and events, including: evidence from more than 700 people with lived experience of children's social care; around 300 people working with children, families and carers; over 900 responses to a 'Call for Advice'; and 207 responses from academics, researchers and others to a 'Call for Evidence' (including the National Children's Bureau (NCB) review described immediately below).

Notably among the academic sources was one wide-ranging rapid scoping review of other research and practice, carried out by the NCB, in response to the Government review of children's social care bounced in January 2021 (Edwards et al. 2021)[2]. This aimed to better understand the state of the evidence base in relation to the delivery and effectiveness of 'Early Help', and to makes some recommendations for the review. It looked at approximately 100 sources many of them local and national project and service reviews, including Home Start and Sure Start programmes.

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[1]IRCSE (2021) https://childrenssocialcare.independent-review.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/case-for-change.pdf
[2]Edwards et al (2021) https://www.nagalro.com/_userfiles/pages/files/20210513_rapid_review_full_report_final.pdf

The wide scope of these two reviews, particularly, allows us to feel more comfortable about our own more limited scope, because we know that additional sources which we have not had time to look at, have been reviewed by these teams and are therefore reflected to some extent here.

2. An overview of needs and support for children, families and carers

2.1. A Summary of the Landscape

The landscape is very complex for children, families and carers needing additional support in England. Table 1 below provides a simple summary of current arrangements, so that we have an overview before we begin to explore further. The rest of this section provides some additional detail to help us understand needs and service responses. You can find further comprehensive discussion of the landscape and policy context, including discussion of definitions and service responses, in Edwards et al. 2021.

Note that the projects supported by Mercers' are most likely to be working in the middle of this spectrum – i.e. generally providing 'Early Help' or support where there are no current child protection issues, supporting 'troubled' families, children and carers in need.

Table 1: Overview of needs and service responses in England

	1	2	3	4
Which children?	All children	Many children at some points in life	Children with additional needs or whose welfare is a concern	Children needing protection and statutory support
Needs	Needs that all children have	Child or family have needs that cannot be met by universal services	Child's needs are complex or enduring and require statutory social care assessment	Child or family needs require child protection and specialist support
Common service descriptions	Universal; Mainstream	'Early Help'; early support; Additional support; Short-term support; 'troubled families programmes; 'Team around the family'; Preventative services	Child in Need; Enhanced or intensive support; Targeted services; Multiple and complex needs	Child protection; Child at risk; Child at risk of significant harm; Looked-after children;
Approximate numbers of children	11.6 million[3]	870,000–5 million	390,000	80,000
Approx. government spending per child	£5–8,000 (baseline)	+£800	+£40–100,000	+£56,000 average
Service examples	E.G.: Schools; children's centres; GPs	E.G.: family support workers; parenting programmes; short-term counselling	E.G.: Disabled children's service; Young Carers' support	E.G.: Social work services

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[3]Statistica 2020: https://www.statista.com/statistics/281174/uk-population-by-age/

2.2. Scale of Need – How many Children, Families and Carers need Support?

It is hard to know how many families and carers are in need of help and support in England, because different agencies use different criteria and because some need is hidden. Figures from a variety of sources help us to build a picture of the scale of need, but estimates vary considerably. Voluntary, communality and faith organisations (VCFOs) such as those funded by Mercers' under the BOFF&C initiative may work with small groups with specialist needs or large populations.

There are approximately 16.4 million families and 11.6 million children under age 18 living in England[4]. The majority of families have two adults living together with at least one child, but there are 2.9 million single parent families and 278,800 households where two families live together[5], and 44,500 foster families[6]. Disabled young people aged 18-25 are not included in the figures for children, but local authority children's services have statutory responsibilities for their welfare and they are included in local authority figures.

The Children's Society assess that 4.3 million children currently live in poverty in the UK, with that number rising sharply and set to reach 5 million this year[7]. The government's own figures identify that in 2020 "there were 2.99 million children (aged 0 to 19) living in families in Relative low income and 2.44 million children (aged 0 to 19) in Absolute low income across the United Kingdom"[8]. ('Relative low income' is defined as families with incomes below 60% of the median for the current year, and 'absolute low income' is currently defined as families with incomes below 60% of the median in the baseline year 2010/119[9]).

The government's family support programme Supporting Families (previously Troubled Families) reports that it has worked with 870,000 families since 2015[10]. The Trussell Trust report that they provided 2.5 million food parcels in 2020-21, of which 980,000 went to children[11].

At the highest levels of need, the latest government figures report 80,080 looked after children (i.e. cared for by local authorities and/or outside their families) and 389,260 children in need in England in March 2020[12]. However, a deeper-dive government study showed that there are many more referrals to children's social care services resulting in assessment – which is a key measure of recognised and significant need: in 2017-18 there were 655,630 referrals and 631,090 assessments (Department for Education (DfE) 2021)[13]. The National Children's Bureau's – one of the UK's leading children's charities and well respected for its research – believes that official government figures decontextualise and underestimate the number of children and families needing help. Their recent review[14] observes:

"There were 583 per 10,000 children classified as children-in-need, 97 per 10,000 children on child protection plans and 90 per 10,000 children looked after during the year to March 31st, 2020 (DfE, 2020). These annual figures understate the level

[4]ONS 2021a: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/datasets/famili esbyfamilytyperegionsofenglandandukconstituentcountries
[5]ONS (2021b): https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/bulletins/familiesandhouse holds/2020
[6]Fostering Network 2021: https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/advice-information/all-about- fostering/fostering-statistics
[7]The Children's Society (2021): https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/our-work/ending-child-poverty
[8]HM Gov 2021a: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-in-low-income-families-local-area- statistics-2014 to-2020/children-in-low-income-families-local-area-statistics-fye-2015-to-fye-2020
[9]HM Gov 2022a: https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn07096/
[10]HM Gov 2021b: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/supporting-families-2021-to-2022-and- beyond/supporting-families-2021-22-and-beyond
[11]Trussell Trust (2021): https://www.trusselltrust.org/news-and-blog/latest-stats/end-year-stats/
[12]https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/characteristics-of-children-in-need/2020
[13]DfE 2021: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/951146/ Children_s_social_care_cost_pressures_and_variations_in_unit_costs_Jan_2021.pdf
[14]Edwards et al (2021) https://www.nagalro.com/_userfiles/pages/files/20210513_rapid_review_full_report_final.pdf

of involvement of children over their lifetime. In England a set of cohort studies of children followed until their fifth birthday showed that 22.5% of children were referred to children's social care before their fifth birthday; 17.0% had required a social work assessment; 14.3% had been a child in need and 11.1% had been in need because of concerns about abuse or neglect." (Bilson and Martin, 2017)

2.3 Assessing and Describing Needs

Children, families and carers in need of additional support are of course all different, and describing needs is complex and often only gives a partial picture. Working Together to Safeguard Children (WTTSC) 12 – the government's current statutory guidance - includes a framework (figure 1) which is intended to provide an holistic overview of the various factors affecting a child's health and well-being, which can be used for social care assessment. Three domains of need are identified: the child's own developmental needs; the parenting capacity to meet needs; and wider social determinants or 'family and environmental factors'.

Figure 1: Working Together to Safeguard Children – Assessment Framework (DfE 2020 p.30)
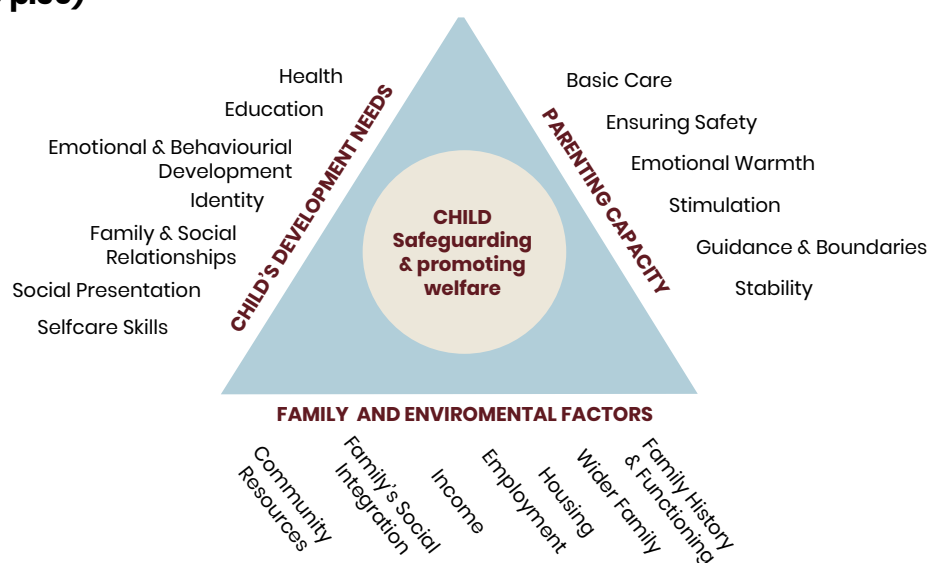
The WTTSC guidance[15] recognises there is a 'continuum of need' for children, rather than a neat categorisation, but nevertheless most local services use frameworks with 'tiers' or 'levels' to assess and describe need and to plan their responses – see Table 1 above for further detail.

Need for additional/external agency support is often related to poverty; but of course not all poorer families and carers need such support, and families' and carers' needs may also relate to other factors such as health, disability, experiences of domestic violence and/or other crime, children's engagement in education, etc. Different agencies focus in slightly different ways on the needs of the child, families, carers and/or the wider social determinants of need. Notably, non-governmental and VCFOs may clearly recognise that families' and carers' needs not only arise from their own problems but also from structural and social issues such as inequality and poor service integration. For example, the National Children's Bureau outlines "The change we need to see" (see table 2, column 3), and a Head of 'Early Help' in London (interviewed for the Action for Children study into the effects of Covid-19) highlights that standard assessment practices may reinforce practitioners' perceptions that families' and carers' problems are 'in the home' rather than in wider society:

[15]'Working Together' Guidance 2018, republished by DfE in 2020: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/942454/ Working_together_to_safeguard_children_inter_agency_guidance.pdf

"[Pandemic restrictions have made] us question whether… reliance on home visits again tries to locate a family's problems always in the home and not in a much wider contextual world where so many of the problems are … structural issues like lack of money, like lack of support networks, like in stable work, like overcrowding."[16] (p.15)

Table 2: Perspectives on need

Current government guidance	Government's 'troubled family outcomes framework'[17]	NCB framework[18]
Focus on child's needs	**Focus on family needs**	**Focus on wider determinants of need**
"In particular, be alert to the potential need for 'Early Help' for a child who: • is disabled and has specific additional needs • has special educational needs (whether or not they have a statutory Education, Health and Care Plan) • is a young carer • is showing signs of being drawn into anti-social or criminal behaviour, including gang involvement and association with organised crime groups • is frequently missing/ goes missing from care or from home • is at risk of modern slavery, trafficking or exploitation • is at risk of being radicalised or exploited • is in a family circumstance presenting challenges for the child, such as drug and alcohol misuse, adult mental health issues and domestic abuse • is misusing drugs or alcohol themselves • has returned home to their family from care • is a privately fostered child • has a parent/carer in custody".	"To be eligible for the Troubled Families Programme, each family must include dependent children and/or expectant parents and have at least two of the following six problems: 1. Staying safe in the community: Parents or children involved in crime or anti-social behaviour; 2. Getting a good education and skills for life: Children who have not been attending school regularly; 3. Improving children's life chances: children who need additional support, from the earliest years to adulthood; 4. Improving living standards: families experiencing or at risk of worklessness, homelessness or financial difficulties; 5. Staying safe in relationships: families affected by domestic abuse; 6. Living well, improving physical and mental health and wellbeing: Parents and children with a range of health needs".	"**CHILD POVERTY:** We need to put an end to the rise of poverty which blights childhoods and holds our children back in so many ways. **MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING:** We need to tackle the root issues affecting our children's mental health and wellbeing, making sure they get the support they need at the right time. **EARLY YEARS:** We need to support our children to get the best start in life, because we know that the early years are the foundation on which their future life chances are built. **EDUCATION and INCLUSION:** We need our education system to support the ambitions and aspirations of all our children with equality and dignity. **SOCIAL CARE:** We need to ensure all our children, especially those who are most vulnerable, get the intensive support they need before their families reach crisis or they are put at risk of harm. **INTEGRATION:** We need education, health and social care services to work together in children's best interests".

[16]Action for Children 2020: https://media.actionforchildren.org.uk/documents/embargo-covid-19-impact- recovery.pdf
[17]Troubled Families Outcomes framework 2020: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/922390/ Troubled_Families_Financial_Framework_2020.pdf
[18]NCB 2021: https://www.ncb.org.uk/what-we-do/our-strategy

2.4 Scale of Need - How many Children, Families and Carers need Support?

Support is divided into statutory versus non-statutory – i.e. help that must be provided to children by law, and all other support. By law, local authorities have a legal duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in need, children at risk of significant harm and those living away from their families and carers, and must provide or commission appropriate support to do so[19]. The vast majority of children, families and carers (at least 90%) fall outside this group and do not therefore qualify for statutory support.

Local arrangements for supporting children, families and carers vary in different areas but share certain characteristics and structures; statutory provision is particularly shaped by legislation and statutory guidance. The full evaluation report will include local information for the four chosen case studies. In all/most areas:

- Planning and delivery is led by the local authority, who hold most of the statutory responsibilities relating to children and young people

- Local vision and services are described in a local Children's Plan, which the local authority is legally required to prepare and publish

- There is a dedicated local authority Children's Service to lead on delivering this plan, which is led by an executive Director of Children's services

- There is also an elected Lead Member for Children's Services (an elected local councillor who is a Cabinet member), plus oversight from a Scrutiny group also made up of elected members

- Ofsted has the responsibility to inspect each local authority's children's social care provision, including 'Early Help'

- Plans are made in consultation with relevant partner organisations, children and young people, and other relevant stakeholders. Local health commissioners and police and housing bodies have related statutory responsibilities

- Services may be 'commissioned out' so that they are delivered by other statutory partners, private companies and voluntary or community sector organisations, but local authority commissioners retain responsibility for quality and outcomes

- A local Safeguarding Children's Board, which is a legal requirement, involves all partner organisations including the police, education and housing services

- There are clear, published procedures for identifying need and case-management, including for Children in Need (CIN), children at risk of significant harm, child protection, Looked After Children (LAC), care leavers and young carers

- Individual high-risk cases are managed in partnership through multi-agency risk assessment conferences (MARACs)

- Most local authorities have an 'Early Help' or 'stronger families' team, whose focus is on providing support as early as possible, in order to prevent problems, improve outcomes for children, families and carers, and/or reduce the need for higher level support

- Schools have a statutory duty to cooperate with local authorities to protect and promote the welfare of children. Each school has its own independent governing board and the local authority has a support function rather than a regulatory or funding one

- In all areas, voluntary, community and faith organisations (VCFOs) are likely both to provide commissioned services and non-commissioned/independently

[19]HMSO/Children's Act 1989: https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/41/contents

funded activities. Most if not all of the services provided by VCFOs are non-statutory, not least because they have high running costs and present organisational risks that most VCFOs cannot afford to carry

- Partnerships working between local authorities and relevant VCFOs are required by law, but effectiveness, consistency and strength of relationships vary from place to place.

2.5 Types of Support

Most support is focused on the welfare of the child, but support for families and carers is sometimes also provided on the basis that the welfare of children depends on the welfare of their families and carers– i.e. parents, carers and other family members may also be supported if/when positive outcomes for them will also improve or preserve outcomes for children.

Looked-after children

Services protecting children and/or removing children from significant harm, and addressing the serious factors that give rise to them needing protection (approximately level 4 in table 1 above) are directly provided by local authorities' children's social care teams, or commissioned by them.

The activity funded under the Mercers' BOFF&C program does not target looked after children, but may reach their family members – e.g. mothers whose children are in care.

Children in need

Services for children in need (level 3 in table 1) are mostly funded by local authorities but may be commissioned from a range of external providers, all working together. The range of services and support that can be provided is wide: a recent House of Commons' briefing paper[20] provides this list:

The type of services that can be provided include:

- Advice, guidance and counselling
- Occupational, social, cultural, or recreational activities
- Home help
- Facilities for, or assistance with, travelling to and from home for the purpose of taking advantage of any other service provided under the 1989 Act or of any similar service
- Assistance to enable the child concerned and their family to have a holiday
- Such steps that are practicable to enable a child in need (who is not a looked after child) who is living apart from their family to live with their family, or to promote contact between them and their family (if necessary in order to safeguard or promote their welfare)
- Day care for a child if they are under 5 years of age but not yet attending school
- Care or supervised activities (either outside school hours or during school holidays) for a child attending any school
- Accommodation
- Assistance in kind or in cash.

Some of the activity funded under the Mercers' BOFF&C programme targets children in need and/or their families and carers – e.g. young carers, disabled children, parent carers, children experiencing domestic abuse. However, it does not duplicate statutory support but rather provides help and activities that are not offered by local authorities and their formal partners.

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[20]HOC 2020: https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7730/

'Early Help'

'Early Help' services (level 2 in table 1) are likely to be provided by a range of organisations, including local authorities' 'Early Help' or 'child and family support' teams and/or voluntary, community and faith groups. Local arrangements often mean that one organisation or professional with a trusted relationship with a child or family takes the lead – such as a school or family support worker – with others involved as and when necessary. Edwards et al. (2021)[21] observe:

> "'Early Help' is a form of service-provision prior to Section 17 involvement, used by Working Together (DfE 2018), and implies a focus on intervention before a challenge facing a family escalates to the point where statutory CSC services are required (Lucas and Archard 2020). As such, its definition has predominantly been an operational one: it differs depending on what it is services are doing and what they are calling 'Early Help'. Following the Munro Review of Child Protection (Munro, 2011), EH has become the preferred term for a range of services provided to children with additional and (increasingly) complex needs, which fall below the threshold for referral to children's social care."

'Early Help' may take many different forms, and in many cases may involve connecting disconnected families with the kind of informal support that is given by communities, rather than with formal services. Edwards et al. summarise:

> "The predominant form of support that families rely on is informal, and emerges indirectly from community relationships and universal welfare provision... often, these are very 'ordinary' forms of support: help applying for benefits, support with childcare, help managing disputes, or even just the availability of someone to talk to or somewhere to go to meet with others... Informal support and local authority services may seem incompatible because of the formal nature of children's services. However, services can be structured in such a way that they indirectly strengthen informal support provision... [One programme found that] by strengthening the existing informal support structures and providing an additional range of activities that could help families develop relationships and access community resources, community-based practice achieved a dramatic reduction in the numbers of children in care, the numbers of children on supervision orders, and the numbers of children on the child protection register (which reduced to close to zero)."

This kind of support is also appropriate for children, families and carers 'stepping down' from statutory services, where there are no longer concerns about significant harm, but where continuing support may help prevent problems from reoccurring.

Most of the activity funded under the Mercers' BOFF&C initiative targets children below the threshold for statutory support and/or their families and carers, and could be considered 'Early Help'.

2.6 The Financial Costs of Supporting Families and Carers with Additional Needs

Financial constraints shape the support available for children, families and carers to a considerable extent, and so it is helpful to understand some of the issues.

The government and local authorities have figures relating to the costs of supporting children in need and families/carers facing problems. However, full costs are difficult or impossible to calculate and figures must be viewed with caution for many reasons, not least because of the wide variety of possible support described above. Also: there is wide variation in the numbers recognised as needing support; there is wide variation in the duration of support needed by individual families and carers;

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[21]Edwards et al. (2021): https://www.nagalro.com/_userfiles/pages/files/20210513_rapid_review_full_report_final.pdf

direct support costs are distributed across many different agencies (including local authorities, NHS services and charities); some costs are hidden within mainstream budgets (e.g. schools); and many likely costs are indirect and can only be estimated (e.g. costs to the criminal justice system relating to children affected by trauma).

In total, £10.5 billion was spent on children's services in 2019-20, of which £8.2 billion was statutory spending and £2.3 billion was non-statutory spending[22]. This spending is not evenly divided between all children, but is allocated according to assessed need, with the highest spending on children with the highest needs.

At the highest levels of need, a child who was looked after in local authority care in 2017-18 cost £37,824 on average per year (the range in the sample of 13 LAs was £50,719-£32,986)[23], rising sharply to around £56,000 per year in 2019-20[24]. Placements in residential care routinely cost £1000 per week, and exceptionally, specialist placements can cost as much as £8,000 per week or over £400,000 per year for a single child.

Where children are identified as 'in need' and needing support but not protection, costs are lower but still significant. A government report in 2013 identified that local authorities spent £5-8,000 on an 'average' family and 8-10 times as much on a 'troubled' one:

> "We spend disproportionately more on troubled families than the 'average' family. For example, in West Cheshire, the council is spending an average of £7,795 on an average family in its area, compared to £76,190 for a troubled family. In Solihull, local services spend an average of £5,217 on an average family, compared with £46,217 on a troubled family. The amount spent on a troubled family is estimated at nearly £100,000 in Barnet. This is not sustainable."[25]

Due to these extremely high costs, most Local Authorities spend a large part of their total budgets on a small number of children and young people – as few as 24 and no more than 2096 individuals per local authority in 2020[26] (depending on size and deprivation). The overall costs of social care leave other services under serious pressure:

> "Typically, top-tier councils spend up to 70% of their entire budget on adult and children's social care, sucking up so much resource that authorities are forced to divert cash from – or shut down – so-called non-core services such as libraries, parks, museums and leisure centres to pay for child protection."[16]

The Troubled Family Programme (2013-2021) explicitly seeks to bring the costs of support for children in need and 'troubled' families (approximately level 2 in table 1 above) under tighter control, through 'Early Help' or prevention services, a focus on outcomes and 'payment by results' rather than up-front funding for local authorities. Its total budget is approximately £165 million per year, allocated to local authorities at a rate of £800/per family.

[22]IRCSC 2021: https://childrenssocialcare.independent-review.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/case-for- change. pdf
[23]HOC 2019: https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcomloc/1638/163807.htm
[24]Guardian 2021: https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/aug/11/crisis-in-childrens-services-in-england- is-shock-ing-if-not-surprising
[25]HMSO 2013: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/ file/68744/T he_Cost_of_Troubled_Families_v1.pdf
[26] https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2020#dataDownloads-1

The top children's charities Action for Children, Barnardo's, NSPCC, The Children's Society and the National Children's Bureau joined forces to analyse government figures in 2020[20], and found that funding per child had dropped by a third since 2010, and by more than a half in the worst-affected areas. Overall, they found that *"Funding available per child and young person for all children's services except schools and early education fell from £813 in 2010-11 to £553 in 2017-18"*[27] and they conclude that children's services in England are 'at breaking point'.

In summary, rising demand and reduced funding means that local authority spending is overwhelmingly allocated to the children with the most serious needs. 'Early Help' to prevent future need has been particularly squeezed, because there is little money left to carry out such work, after statutory responsibilities are met.

2.7 The Role of the Voluntary, Community and Faith Sectors

The role of voluntary, community and faith organisations (VCFOs) in meeting the needs of children, families and carers is often overlooked and impossible to quantify, although it is clearly crucial to BOFF&C and therefore this evaluation. There are hundreds of thousands of VCFOs organisations supporting children, families and carers across England – from the 'big names' above to regional and local charities, and grassroots organisations like football clubs and the Scouts – all of which play important roles, particularly in safeguarding and in improving health and wellbeing. Both locally and nationally, VCFOs **provide** services and support, **fund** a great deal of activity, **work in partnership** with statutory services, **reach** families and carers that statutory services do not reach, **create change** and **lobby** for service improvement.

Reductions in statutory funding for children, families and carers – especially for 'Early Help' – impact greatly on voluntary and community sector support for children, families and carers. Clearly, local authority funding of just £800 per 'troubled' family, cannot provide all the support needed and VCFOs often pick up needs unmet by statutory services. VCFOs are also affected by falling funding and rising demand, caused by growing poverty and increased numbers of children, families and carers no longer receiving local authority support. VCFOs are often well-placed to identify need and respond to it, but underfunded. Barnardo's chief executive says:

"Far too often families are reaching crisis point – with rising numbers of children being taken into local authority care. At Barnardo's we see the impact of this failure to step in early. Children are suffering from trauma, affecting their education, health and happiness, with lifelong impact. That's why we're calling on the Government to step in with additional funds so that communities can support local children and parents in need of help."

2.8 The Impacts of Covid-19

Action for Children recently carried out research to understand the impact of Covid-19 on vulnerable children, families and carers, and to highlight ways in which services can prepare for recovery. They concluded that:

"The impact of Covid-19 on vulnerable children and families is likely to be profound. It was clear from our research that school closures, social distancing and lockdown measures have seriously affected the ability of services to support children and families at the very time when these children and families are facing even greater challenges"[28] Page 6.

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[27]Barnardo's 2020: https://www.barnardos.org.uk/news/childrens-services-breaking-point-charities-warn
[28]Action for Children 2020: https://media.actionforchildren.org.uk/documents/embargo-covid-19-impact- recovery.pdf

They highlighted some key issues:

Increasing deprivation and need caused by Covid-19 and the lockdown:

"Many parents [did] not proactively seek support beyond help with immediate essentials… '[Families have been seeking] support for everyday essentials, food, utility bills, replacement of broken cookers… Far fewer are proactively seeking support for wellbeing needs." Page 9.

"[I] worry that lockdown is storing up problems for the future: 10 years of economic disadvantage." Page 14.

The need for additional funding for 'Early Help' services as well as acute/crisis ones:

"Understandably, and rightly, there will be calls for acute services, including children's social care, to receive extra funding and support. This is correct and necessary, as these children will continue to need individual support and protection. However, it will not be sufficient. Acute services cannot simply absorb the additional burden created by a swell of demand as the lockdown eases. And as our research makes clear, there will be increased demand from families who don't meet the criteria for support from statutory services, but who are wrestling with new and pressing needs created by the strains of the lockdown, or the effects of previous support having been withdrawn. The 'Early Help' system for children and families below the threshold must be funded to expand to meet this need, so that children and families are able to bounce back strongly." Page 4.

'Out of sight' children and carers – especially those who are currently unknown to services and whose increasing needs have not been noticed during lockdown, particularly while schools were closed:

"Most interviewees recognised a particularly significant challenge in identifying children who may become vulnerable as a result of Covid-19, or during the lockdown, but who were not currently known to any service. These 'out of sight' children were seen as potentially the most vulnerable. 'We are less concerned about children in the children's social care system, and more concerned about the children who aren't – who aren't in touch with any services'." Page 8.

"Low school attendance had interrupted usual safeguarding mechanisms: teachers were no longer seeing many of the children they may have been concerned about, and so were less able to spot new problems as they emerged. Professionals were also concerned about their ability to identify children who may become vulnerable as a result of the pandemic and emergency lockdown measures." Page 6.

Some improvements in service responses that should be maintained:

"Local responses to the challenges presented by Covid-19 to the delivery of support for children and families were characterised by innovation, rapid adaptation and nimble partnership working. Many of the professionals we spoke to saw opportunity here: there was a strong sense that rapid progress had been made in some areas, and that this should be retained." Page 15.

2.9 The Case for Change

The government announced an independent review of children's social care in January this year and is due to report in spring 2022.[29] This spring, the independent review panel published its 'case for change' report in spring 2022. Which acknowledges and highlights some important issues that have the potential to change children's social care, and particularly 'Early Help':

We are not doing enough to help families:

"In the majority of cases, families become involved with children's social care because they are parenting in conditions of adversity, rather than because they have caused or are likely to cause significant harm to their children. We have a shared obligation to help families raise their children. Communities can also play a key role in supporting families, in some cases removing the need for statutory intervention." Page 10.

We need a child protection system that keeps children safe through more effective support and decisive action:

"The system particularly fails teenagers who face harm outside of the home. Teenagers are the fastest growing group in both child protection and care (Department for Education, 2021), and many experience serious harm or die… When children have met the threshold of child protection and are at risk of serious harm, we need to be more decisive in providing effective support for families, and in making decisions if it is clear that support will not lead to enough change…. More needs to be done to support parents who have their children removed." Page 11–12.

Care must make rather than break relationships:

"Many of the current problems we see in the care system are symptomatic of the state trying and failing to provide a relationship as a service. The review will consider whether the state should instead play the role of enabling lifelong loving relationships for children in care… Care too often weakens rather than strengthens relationships: many care leavers report having small support networks." Page 12.

Change will not happen without addressing system causes:

"There is no situation in the current system where we will not need to spend more – the choice is whether this investment is spent on reform which achieves long term sustainability and better outcomes, or propping up an increasingly expensive and inadequate existing system. We don't do enough to understand the collective costs of poor outcomes for children in contact with social care when we think about the case for investment… [The] disjointed national picture translates into a similarly complicated picture locally…One in three of all social workers in children's services do not work directly with children or families (Department for Education, 2021a). Even those in direct practice spend less than one third of their time with families (Department for Education, 2020)." Page 13.

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[29]IRCSE (2021) https://childrenssocialcare.independent-review.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/case-for-change.pdf

3. Rapid Review Findings: Achieving Outcomes, What works, Barriers, Challenges and other Issues

3.1 Introduction

This section presents findings about what works in 'Early Help', to improve outcomes for children in need and families/carers under pressure, based on our rapid review of the sources described in section 1.2 above (a full list of sources can be found in Appendix 2).

We initially hoped to use a simple but systematic, outcomes-focused, framework for our analysis – for example similar to the government's Families Outcomes framework the National Children's Bureau's headlines for change or the old but still relevant Every Child Matters Outcomes Framework[30]. However, it soon became clear that such a framework would not work, since most of the available evidence does not focus on outcomes for children and families receiving 'Early Help', but more often discusses issues and approaches for children, families and organisations. We have therefore used an iterative thematic analysis to identify and present the emerging themes and issues that seem strongest. Our review was small-scale and rapid, and our findings are therefore accurate but not complete; a bigger review would have been able to look more systematically at more sources.

3.2 What we know about Outcomes for Children and Families receiving 'Early Help'

The most recent overview of outcomes for children in care and in need comes from the Children's Social Care independent review panel's 'Case for Change', which states clearly "This review is unambiguous that children and families involved with children's social care are not getting a good enough deal." Page 15:

> "The outcomes for children who have been in care (and to a lesser extent children who have had a social worker but have not been in care) are frequently discussed, but still warrant setting out in full. We should not casually accept such poor life experiences."

- **Health**: Adults who spend time as children in the care system are 70% more likely to die prematurely than those who do not (Murray et al., 2020). In terms of mental health, nearly half of looked after children meet the criteria for a psychiatric disorder. In comparison, one in ten children who are not looked after suffer from a diagnosable mental health disorder (House of Commons Education Committee, 2016).

- **Offending**: Children who have been or are in care are over-represented in the justice system - care leavers are estimated to represent between 24% (K. Williams et al., 2012) and 27% (Social Exclusion Unit, 2002) of the adult prison population. This is despite less than 1% of under 18s entering care each year (House of Commons Education Committee, 2016) and estimates that care leavers represent 2% of the adult population. This is also true of Children in Need: between April 2018 to March 2019, 56% of children sentenced in the Youth Justice System at some point had a social worker (Ministry of Justice and Youth Justice Board, 2020).

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[30]IRCSE (2021) https://childrenssocialcare.independent-review.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/case-for-change.pdf

- **Educational:** Attainment at key stage 4 is 34% lower for a child on a Child in Need plan, 46% lower for a child on a Child Protection Plan, and 53% lower for a child in care, when compared to children with no social work interventions during the school years (Berridge et al., 2020). We also know that only 6% of 19-21 year olds who left care enter university (Department for Education, 2021) and while the rates rise to 12% by 23 years old, this compares to 43% in the general population (Harrison et al., 2020).

- **Unemployment:** 39% of care leavers between the ages of 19 and 21 are not in education, employment, or training, compared to 13% of all young people of that age (Department for Education, 2021). After 11 years, four times more looked after children were on benefits and less than half were in employment compared to all school leavers (Department for Education, 2021).

- **Homelessness**: It is estimated that 25% of those who are homeless had been in care at some point in their lives (Reeve, 2011)." Page 15-16.

It is worth noting that the outcomes identified in 'The Case for Change' rely on government monitoring of high-cost services such as unemployment and criminal justice/offending. Children, young people and families often experience more personal adverse outcomes, such as poor physical and mental health and family breakdown, but the evidence for these is much harder to find.

Edwards et al., 2021, carried a rapid review of research, particularly evaluations of 'Early Help' services. Their aim was to contribute to the government's review of children's social care and explicitly to "better understand the state of the evidence base in relation to the delivery and effectiveness of 'Early Help', and to make some recommendations for the review." Page 4. They summarised findings from a number of evaluations of individual 'Early Help' services, many of them local, plus some wider programme evaluations. Notably, they reviewed two large-scale, national evaluations of the Sure Start programme that has provided 'Early Help' support to families since 1998 and was a cornerstone of mainstream, local support from 1999-2005.

Edwards et al., 2021, found evidence of tangible outcomes for children and families, particularly improvements in health and wellbeing:

"The National Evaluation of Sure Start (Melhuish, Belsky, and Leyland, 2010)... highlighted that children growing up in areas with Sure Start has lower BMIs and better physical health than those in the control group. Additionally, there were significant differences for maternal wellbeing and family functioning, with families in Sure Start areas having more cognitively stimulating home learning environments for their children and less chaotic home environments. Mothers in Sure Start areas also reported greater life satisfaction and reduced engagement in harsh disciplinary practices." (Melhuish, Belsky, and Leyland, 2010)

"Institute of Fiscal Studies explored the health effects of Sure Start (Cattan, Conti, Farquharson, and Ginja, 2019) [and] found that Sure Start reduced the likelihood of hospitalisation among children of primary school age, peaking at an 18% reduction by age 11, which is the equivalent of averting 5,500 hospitalisations of 11 years olds annually. In looking at these patterns in more detail, it was observed that the decrease in hospitalisations was related to a reduction in infections in younger age groups and a reduction in injuries for older age groups. In addition to age-related patterns, the most deprived areas demonstrated the largest benefits in terms of reductions in hospitalisations, compared to more affluent areas." Page 20-21.

Some 'softer' wellbeing outcomes were reported in local programmes, for example:

"The Family Innovation Fund was launched in Essex to provide 'Early Help' for families and covered various types of support including parenting support,

support for young people who demonstrate risky behaviours, coaching and mentoring support, and counselling services. Over the two-year evaluation, 11,000 individuals were involved with this 'Early Help' service. Of these, over 90% experienced increases in resilience levels. The main areas of improvement for children and young people were an increased ability to manage feelings, increases in emotional wellbeing, more positive relationships, and improvements at school. Likewise, parents learned strategies to better cope with their children's behaviour, which led to improved relationships across the family and parents feeling less alone and more confident." (Edwards et al., 2021). Page 15.

"Mothers and staff [in a domestic abuse 'Early Help' service]… noted changes in children's and young people's self-confidence, physical health, risk-taking, school attendance, school work, behaviour, relationships and ability to talk with their mothers." (McCarry et al., 2021). Page 9.

Some of the findings from Edwards et al. suggest that family circumstances affect the outcomes experienced; we try to unpick this issue further in the next section:

"Leicestershire County Council conducted a qualitative analysis with families who had participated in 'Early Help' interventions. It was found that families had positive experiences with 'Early Help' services and felt more self-sufficient and optimistic about the future at the end of the interventions. These outcomes were also observed by 'Early Help' workers in cases of most significant changes, where they viewed parents as more confident, upbeat, and positive after 'Early Help' programmes. Within this analysis, nine clusters of families were identified from nearly 1,000 families; families that made the most progress were those with Special Education needs, adults requiring support, and families with low levels of domestic abuse. Whilst positive outcomes were found generally, this suggests that 'Early Help' may be more helpful for certain types of families with specific presenting issues." (Edwards et al., citing Forster 2018)

Following their review, Edwards et al. concluded:

"The research evidence broadly suggests that the provision of 'Early Help' can reduce rates of child welfare intervention and improve child and parent outcomes." Page 27.

3.3 Tentative Findings about What works

There is little evidence about outcomes for children and families receiving 'Early Help', for reasons discussed. Most of the discussion about effectiveness focuses on issues and approaches. This section provides an overview of some key findings from the research we reviewed. These can be seen as features Mercers' might want to look for in BOFF&C activity.

Corliss et al., 2021, surveyed local authorities (LAs) to find out their views on how to prevent children from being taken into care. 60 LAs responded to their survey, making findings robust (although research design meant that the response options were limited). 33/60 (55%) discussed their 'Early Help' approaches, and although they found no clear consensus in how 'Early Help' was defined, some common characteristics emerged, which are echoed by other sources we reviewed:

"Local authorities tended to describe flexible 'Early Help' services, individually tailored to family needs. These included short, often practically focused early support and targeted programmes of longer duration with focused support delivered when needed. Many respondents talked of partnership; strengths-based, relationship-based and solution-focused practice; and team-around-the-family approaches. Seven responses highlighted multi-agency working as key in the delivery of their 'Early Help' services." (Corliss et al., 2021). Page 7.

Use whole system approaches

Corliss et al. found that 49/60 (82%) LAs judged that whole system approaches worked best in keeping children out of care – which includes systemic practice, 'signs of safety', restorative practice, family safeguarding models and strengths-based models. These are value-driven approaches which might be characterised (in the words of Ella Fitzgerald!) as "It's not what you do, it's the way that you do it":

> "When exploring why they had chosen [whole system approaches], local authorities cited the values of collaboration, partnership and communication, and relationship-based, strength-based, solution-focused practice. All the respondents who completed the free-text responses used one or more of these terms. While some local authorities indicated that they had introduced these approaches in the early 2010s, for many the adoption had been relatively recent—i.e. since 2015." Corliss et al., 2021. Page 6.

Build positive relationships

In addition, Edwards, Devany and McCarry all highlighted the importance of relation-ships, and particularly trust built between practitioners and families:

> "Community development helped alleviate the mistrust between parents and social workers, likely improving relationships with child protection social workers in the future and increasing the odds of parents seeking out support earlier in the future." Edwards et al., 2021. Page 8.

> "Relationships and services can seek to compensate or mitigate for the consequences of adversity." Devany 2019.

> "Mothers reported that the dedicated support from the service had a positive impact on their children... Children and young people similarly gave positive feedback on the services, particularly liking the key worker approach... Persuading a mother to engage with a service in such a context when she is fearful and still living with the perpetrator requires a high degree of skill, sensitivity and awareness of the dynamics of domestic violence." McCarry et al., 2021. Page 9.

Give staff autonomy and flexibility

Findings suggest that 'Early Help' is most effective when practitioners have the flexibility and autonomy to adjust their practice to children's and families' needs. McCarry, 2021 highlighted the importance of flexible key-worker led support that "enhances families' sense of control". Hogg, 2018 found "Good examples... of practitioners using their discretion and autonomy to maximise the benefit to clients rather than just to manage caseload pressures". Hogg, 2018. Page 178.

Flexibility and autonomy also came up as an important issue for staff in schools – see below.

Acknowledge adversity

Although the impacts of poverty were often unacknowledged, research suggests that it is helpful when they are. Acknowledging the effects of other adverse experiences, including domestic violence and homelessness, also seems helpful:

> "The current focus on adversity in childhood is a helpful one." Spratt, Devaney and Frederick, 2019. "We need to see adversity as having both an individual and a structural dimension. We need to start talking about the temporal nature of adversity e.g. a lifecourse perspective." Devany, 2019.

> "The effects of structural features such as unemployment and poverty are not widely recognised among practitioners. Community volunteers and parents are much more aware of how these factors impact on parental stress and hence on their capacity to access help, to engage with change efforts and to meet their children's needs." Hogg, 2018.

Hogg also argues that acknowledging adversity may be particularly useful because it reflects parents' own perspectives and experiences, in a way that traditional narratives about 'neglect' do not. This chimes with McCarry's finding that often, mothers' concerns about the wellbeing of their children provided their motivation to engage with services.

> "Parents made only very limited explicit reference to the concept of 'neglect' in describing the circumstance that led to their own involvement with services. Rather they talked of this in terms of the practical difficulties they had experienced e.g. substance misuse, unemployment and related financial difficulties, children's behaviour 'problems'." Hogg, 2018. Page 172.

Use asset-based approaches and community- or peer-led support

Hogg (2018) suggests that empathetic recognition of adversity may be why community and peer support are sometimes more effective than statutory services (see above), but this is not the only reason. Other sources point out that families live within communities – so that strengthening community ties helps develop relationships and informal support; and recognising and nurturing community assets helps in turn to strengthen children's and families' assets and resilience. The CYPN 2019 round table specifically recommended 'good old fashioned community development work':

> "A lot of ['Early Help'] has become over-professionalised. The team around the family is a team of professionals. But how do we actually support community resilience? It's good old-fashioned community development work." CYPN, 2019. Page 28.

> "Local authorities should consider investing in more local provision, and use trained volunteers and youth workers to deliver services." CYPN 2019. Page 29.

> "Asset-based approaches emphasise the need to redress the balance between meeting needs and nurturing the strengths and resources of people and communities. Working with communities is at least as important as working with individuals. A shift has occurred – strengths-based and relational practices are once again coming to the fore." Devany, 2019. "[Jack and Gill, 2010 found that] by strengthening the existing informal support structures and providing an additional range of activities that could help families develop relationships and access community resources; community-based practice achieved a dramatic reduction in the numbers of children in care, the numbers of children on supervision orders, and the numbers of children on the child protection register (which reduced to close to zero). This was achieved by working 'in partnership with local people to establish play schemes, youth clubs, women's groups and adult education classes on the estate' (Pages 83-84)." Edwards et al., 2021. Page 8.

Ensure variety in the support offer through partnership working

Since children and families are so very different, partnership working – especially with community organisations – enables each local authority to extend their 'standard' 'Early Help' offer to meet a wider variety of needs more appropriately and effectively. Edwards et al. point out:

> "The importance of diversity as a feature of effective 'Early Help' services has largely gone unacknowledged in considerations of design, with a greater focus on identifying and consolidating investment in 'the best' intervention or service for a given targeted population. Indeed, the drive towards standardisation and manualisation goes against the recommendations of the Munro Review, which emphasised the need for 'requisite variety' in a child-centred system".

Leaders at the CYPN, 2019 round table also recommended a more joined-up approach:

"Early intervention is not just a matter for children's services or social care. Heath, education and the voluntary sector, among others, must all align to deliver provision. Local authorities must find ways to forge relationships between agencies".

Work through schools

Richards, 2018 highlighted that schools have a particularly significant role in "shaping and monitoring the wellbeing of children". Page 1.

School staff meet low level needs directly, with – or very often without – the involvement of children's social care services:

"The lack of progress, and the impact of seeing neglected children every day, meant some interviewees described school staff feeling forced into providing some basic care for pupils themselves: 'I think we manage it internally. I mean a lot of schools do breakfast clubs, you know we have a supply of fruit… We have a stack of jumpers that don't go home… I think the education policy now is that if you can't get any external help you've just got to get on with it really, and either do nothing or you do something, and I think most of us tend to do something, however small' – Safeguarding lead professional one." Richards, 2018.

Although most school staff interviewed about their experiences of 'Early Help' and child protection were positive about partnership working, some interviews revealed tensions between schools' focus on day-to-day wellbeing on the one hand, and social care priorities on the other:

"'We went and bought the child shoes, because his shoes had holes. And they said but actually we were masking the problem to some extent… but also we recorded it. It's very difficult because you are ultimately… you don't want a child to come in with holey shoes getting wet feet. And I think that we reviewed it afterwards and said we wouldn't change our actions because it was recorded and every time we had to do something and intervene.' Safeguarding lead professional five." Richards ,2018. Page 49–50.

Leaders at the CYPN round table also highlighted plans for mental health support teams in every school, as part of the government's mental health green paper, as "quite a game changer." CYPN, 2018. Page 128.

Ensure work is age-appropriate and timely – Sooner may not always be better in 'Early Help'

Finally, our review suggested a possible issue relating to the question of "How early should 'Early Help' be provided?" Edwards et al. concluded that earlier may not always be better:

"Meta-analytic research has found that parenting interventions are more effective when children are older than 6 months (Bakermans-Kranenburg et al. 2003). Contrary to the assumptions of early intervention, in a landmark meta-analysis Facompré and colleagues (2018) found that attachment-based interventions were actually more effective with older children. Another meta-analysis found that children's age did not moderate the effectiveness of the Incredible Years intervention." Edwards et al., citing Gardner et al., 2019.

3.4 Tentative findings about Barriers and Challenges to 'Early Help'

Our review also found evidence of barriers and challenges to providing 'Early Help' for children, families and carers, which are summarised in this section. While the issues identified here relate mostly to statutory services, they may still be considered as problems that BOFF&C activities may help to avoid or mitigate.

Funding cuts have driven a reduction in 'Early Help' so that many families' needs are now not met

Our review suggests that funding cuts are a key issue preventing 'Early Help', and that this is recognised by leaders – including the current independent review panel – and also by practitioners:

> "Practitioners' dominant view was that it is the structural issues (cuts, resourcing levels, workloads, too high thresholds, gaps in service provision) or the behaviour of practitioners in other services rather than their own action or inaction that are the main barriers to effective 'Early Help'." Hogg, 2018. Page 178.

Edwards et al.'s review suggests that spending intended to reduce the number of Children in Need has been less effective over the past decade, and that this reflects a shift in service provision, so that many families' needs are no longer met:

> "'Early Help' has deteriorated and the result in much of England may be an 'Early Help' system that increasingly focuses on the acute and edge-of-child-protection services Hood et al., 2020 and fails to effectively meet the needs of families within a context where they are increasingly left without the essential stability that comes from adequate resources, reliable social support networks, and secure housing." Edwards et al., 2021. Page 29.

Shortage of funding has also led to 'rationing' of services. McCarry found that domestic abuse support workers felt that the 12 weeks 'Early Help' support they were able to give was too short, and that in practice some maintained informal contact with families after this time. However, this kind of extension will not always be possible, and rationing may undermine access and/or effectiveness:

> "The onus is typically on local services to, in some scenarios, ration finite access to these services in order to ensure they are provided to those most in need, or, in other scenarios, actively identify families that may require 'Early Help' and then convince or coerce them to accept it. Such a relationship between services and families may undermine the benefits of acting early." Edwards et al., 2021. Page 7.

Richards 2018, also found that school staff perceived that thresholds for eligibility have risen, so that fewer of their referrals are picked up by social workers.

Particularly, neglect is not prioritised

This shift towards more acute or urgent intervention means that abuse and safeguarding is prioritised over neglect. Richards 2018, found that school staff were concerned that assessment tools did not identify neglect well and that, where there were no identified child protection issues, the 'cumulative effects of neglect' were being missed and children were left unsupported:

> "'So he was constantly full of nits, constantly hungry, always unwashed, her shoes, the soles of her shoes would be hanging off, and you think, you're going to grow up constantly in and out of child protection, depending on who Mum's boyfriends going to be but no one's ever going to take the fact that you are dirty and hungry and really unloved seriously, that's never going to be enough of a concern, to anybody.' Safeguarding lead professional one." Page 49.

There may be a lack of appropriate training and support in the extended team around the family

Richards 2018, also identified that Safeguarding Leads in schools received statutory safeguarding training and CAF training, but nothing else; staff felt that they also needed further training and support in domestic abuse, child abuse, substance misuse, parenting skills, understanding of social work processes and decision-making, etc. Staff valued reflective resources such as supervision and access to an advice line over written guidance.

Difficult administrative processes reduce support time

Richards 2018, found that school safeguarding leads spent many hours referring children, but their referrals were often unsuccessful. In smaller schools this was likely to mean that some children did not receive any support at all, because the schools themselves do not have the capacity to deliver the 'Early Help' proposed in the child's individual support plan. School staff also reported that lack of feedback about why a referral had not been successful discouraged them from making future referrals.

Practitioners' attitudes can prevent parents/carers from seeking 'Early Help'

Our review suggests that practitioners' attitudes and behaviour towards families can be a significant barrier, delaying or entirely preventing parents/carers from seeking 'Early Help':

"Practitioners' discourses tend to position parents as clueless people in need of educations, direction and control by professionals rather than as partners whose strength are key if they can genuinely be engaged through relationship-based working. This unequal power relationship is reflected in the strongly embedded parental fear of scrutiny that acts as a major barrier to them accessing 'Early Help'." Hogg, 2018. Page 178.

'Early Help' is less effective if important partners are missing from multi-agency work

The 'what works' evidence suggested that partnership working is important, and consequently, effectiveness may be reduced if some partners are not involved. The CYPN 2018 round table discussion noted:

"Since vast numbers of schools had converted to academies, and were no longer under direct local authority control, it was harder to work with school staff. X said discussions about 'Early Help' had become particularly difficult with secondary schools. She said they needed to create a "team around the school" to build trust with the local authority." Page 28.

"The biggest partner we've had missing around the table has been health – our clinical commissioning partners – because they are so focused on the elderly and stopping people ending up in accident and emergency," she said. "However, 50 per cent of spend in accident and emergency is actually on children." Page 29.

3.5 Further iInsights about Issues Relating to Children and Families with Specialist Needs

Some of the projects and activities funded under the BOFF&C initiative involve work with children and families with specialist needs – including children affected by domestic abuse, children affected by substance misuse, disabled children, young carers and parent carers of disabled children.

The sources we reviewed had nothing specific to say about issues relating to disabled children, young carers and parent carers of disabled children, although these are all groups included in the general observations about needs, outcomes and issues in the sections above.

Domestic abuse

1 in 6 UK children are likely to experience living with domestic abuse at some point, with harmful effects on their health and wellbeing and other outcomes. McCarry et al. found that 'Early Help' is important (defined as responding as soon as possible to emerging problems). Findings from their mixed method evaluation of an 'Early Help' service in NW England between 2014-15 identified three key emerging issues:

1. The benefit of "any help at all" for children living with domestic abuse, who currently receive very little support

2. The importance of flexible key-worker led support that enhances families' sense of control

3. The importance of relationships built on confidentiality, reliability, respect and trust.

The study also highlighted the ongoing harm and risks to children after separation – especially mental health risks – which are often overlooked because social care assessment of risk is 'downgraded' when the physical risk is reduced.

Parental substance misuse

Roy 2021 reports on the largest known study of parental substance misuse (PSM) as a feature of children's social care work in England, profiling 299 children living with parental substance misuse and referred to children's social care in one local authority in England. The findings show that:

- "Children experiencing PSM needed support with health, education, emotional and behavioural development and family and social relationships, with… children in the older age categories (10–14 and 15–19) significantly more likely to have identified support needs than younger children."

- "The support needs identified depended on age of the child but included children: being involved in criminal, anti-social or violent activity; displaying self-harming or sexualized behaviours; and experiencing significant mental health problems. Support needs raised in relation to family and social relationships included the child being witness to or involved in significant family and peer conflict, the child suffering significant bereavement and the child being a carer for siblings or parents."

- "Just under half of the children were (or had) experienced domestic abuse (42.8%). Equally, another half (44.5%) were living with a parent who had a mental health problem. Significant support needs were also identified in relation to parenting capacity to ensure the child's safety (63.9%) and stability (34.1%)."

3.6 Why do we currently have a limited understanding about Impact and Outcomes?

Our review identified some important issues which affect evidence and evaluation, and limit our current understanding; this section briefly describes some of the most striking. These provide useful learning for this evaluation because they help to explain why findings may be limited, and how the Mercers' Company might contribute to wider understanding about 'what works' for children and families.

There are varying definitions and models of 'Early Help'

There is widespread agreement that there are different definitions and models of 'Early Help'. This not only causes problems in practice, but also limits what can be said about 'what works', because services are so diverse and evaluations are not necessarily comparing like with like. Even the most extensive review of 'Early Help' we found, Edwards et al., was not able to identify the specific activities, approaches or other factors that have impact. Here are some observations from the sources we reviewed:

"In practice, 'Early Help' has become a description of the earliest part of the safeguarding system rather than a focused, preventative tier of support and intervention… The lack of a common definition of 'Early Help', wide variation in the thresholds for accessing support between local areas and huge year-on-year cuts over the past decade have added to the instability of the services provided and the families who are able to access them. Building firm conclusions on such shifting sands is a hazardous business." Edwards et al., 2021. Page 3.

"One of the main challenges with evaluation is the heterogeneity of local 'Early Help' offers and the changing nature of these." Edwards et al., 2021. Page 25.

"The concept and scope of 'Early Help' is fragmented, without a clear vision of what kinds of support are required in what measure to adequately meet the diverse needs of families as, or before, they arise." Edwards et al. ,2021. Page 30.

"Findings indicate a need for a clearer model for 'Early Help' in the local setting and a better understanding of how coordinated inter-professional working can be assured within the severe resource constraints that people experience." Hogg, 2018. Page 168-9.[31]

"A wide range of different 'Early Help' services were described and there did not seem to be an agreed consensus about what constituted "early." Corliss et al., 2021.[32]

Targets, funding priorities and a shift towards more crisis support may be skewing evidence

Edwards et al. also identify a related problem: that is, without a clear, agreed definition of 'Early Help', and with increased funding pressures, the activity that has been described as such has changed over the years. Support described as 'Early Help' is increasingly likely to be targeted and even crisis-driven, and consequently, evaluations may not easily be able to separate the impacts of preventative support from the impacts of targeted work with children and families with much more complex needs:

"Services developed from an older tradition of community development and family support... have increasingly found themselves outside the preferred policy and evidence paradigm. Moreover, acute fiscal pressures on local authorities in the post-2009 era of austerity have led to huge cuts in universal and community-based services, reinforcing the shift to targeted and casework-based versions of 'Early Help'. In short, there is a risk that the evidence base on 'Early Help' may be skewed towards certain types of services." Edwards et al., 2021. Page 27.

A round table discussion organised by Children and Young People Now in 2019 identified similar issues. Notably, leaders reported that the Troubled Families programme and Ofsted inspections were "foremost in decision making" - i.e. that current policy is driving evidence, rather than evidence driving policy:

"'Because [Troubled Families is] around payment by results, you've got to show all the evidence,' said Staffordshire County Council head of child wellbeing... 'It's our most robust and reliable source of data'." CYPN, 2019. Page 27.

"Isle of Wight Council children's services area director... concurred, suggesting local authorities had become too focused on outputs and short-term outcomes. 'We don't spend as much time looking at the trend data over time – some of those bigger, wider determinants,' she said. 'The Ofsted regime has a huge part to play in that'." CYPN, 2019. Page 28.

Poverty is an 'elephant in the room'

Several sources we reviewed observed that understanding about the impacts of 'Early Help' may be limited or confused by a lack of understanding about the effects of poverty and other factors affecting outcomes for children. 'What works' in 'Early Help' is likely to depend not only on what support is provided, but also on the material and social circumstances of each family, yet discussions about 'Early Help' rarely recognise this.

"[There is] a growing body of international evidence highlights the causal association between poverty and child abuse and neglect Bywaters, et al., 2016

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[31]Hogg 2021: https://pure.port.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/10501116/DHoggthesis02012018.pdf
[32]Corliss et al 2021: https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13575279.2021.1975648

and between income and children's outcomes more generally. Cooper and Stewart, 2013, 2020. Addressing the material determinants of child and family outcomes directly and building informal structures of long- term, reliable, reciprocal social support does not feature strongly in any of the five highly-evaluated programmes reviewed above, despite this certainly being within the remit of 'Early Help' offers and central to the historic practice of 'Early Help' in England. White, et al. 2014; Frost, Abbott and Race, 2015." Edwards et al., 2021. Page 28.

"There was a noticeable lack of reference to the influence of overall economic/socio-political context (poverty, inequality, stigmatised underclasses) or central/local government policy as part of understanding the ecology of why and how neglect arises. This is despite the very large volume of published research linking the two." Hogg, 2018. Page 173.

Ignoring the effects of poverty may lead decision-makers to draw very wrong conclusions. Particularly, Edwards et al. point out that, although it appears that 'Early Help' services are becoming less effective, this may in fact be because the external pressures on children and families are growing:

"The effects of austerity may be one reason for emerging evidence that, at a systemic level, 'Early Help' expenditure is becoming less effective for reducing rates of Children in Need and 'Early Help' services are increasingly focused on more intensive and edge-of- child-protection programmes and away from universal support." Page 30.

Opportunities to measure impact and outcomes are missed

The CYPN round table discussion also identified that the focus is too often on *process measures*, meaning that there was too little evidence about impact and outcomes for children and families:

"X agreed, adding it was important to distinguish outcomes that are based on processes from more tangible outcomes that improve lives. 'When the [EIF] team goes out to local areas and asks for a description of the local offer, there's a multitude of things that the 'Early Help' architecture is going to achieve, which often feels quite unfocused, unfeasible,' she said. 'The first step is how you boil that down to a key set of outcome areas, and then, what are the things in a one- to two-year timescale which are upstream of improving attendance or attainment – what are the valid measurements that aren't just process outcomes? We tend to measure our assessments, referrals, step-ups and step-downs'." CYPN, 2019. Page 28.

The lack of impact evidence may also reflect the design of *tools* that practitioners have available to record and measure what they are doing. For example, McCarry noted that there are no assessment tools focusing specifically on the impact of domestic abuse on children, and so these are not systematically described and data is 'unreliable'.

The CYPN round table also raised the issue of missing data and 'lost opportunities' to understand the impacts of 'Early Help':

"Many agreed that opportunities to evidence the impact of early intervention delivered by children's centres had been missed because of poor data collection. Around 1,000 – just over a third of the total – have closed since 2009 according to research by the Sutton Trust, largely as a result of government funding cuts. "Who knows if they work?" asked X. "I can find a research report that says they do, and one that says they don't." CYPN, 2019. Page 28.

4. Overview of Key Legislation and Policy Affecting Children and Families

4.1. Introduction

This section provides a brief overview of the most important legislation and policy relating to children and families needing additional support in England. The context is extremely complex, since of course children's and families' lives are also complex. There are 16 directly relevant Acts and/or policy documents. Wider legislation and policy are also potentially relevant – for instance relating to health, education, employment, housing, communities, equality and more – but are beyond the scope of this report.

The most relevant policy and legislation for this evaluation is:

- Working Together to Safeguard Children – statutory framework and guidance 2018
- The Children and Young People's Plan (England) Regulations 2005
- The Children Act 2004
- The Children Act 1989.

Other policy and legislation briefly described here includes (in reverse date order):

- Domestic Abuse Act 2021
- Children and Social Work Act 2017
- Children and Families Act 2014
- Care Act 2014
- Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012
- Equality Act 2010
- Children and Young Persons Act 2008
- Childcare Act 2006
- Education Act 2002
- Crime and Disorder Act 1998
- Housing Act 1996
- The Carers (Recognition and Services) Act 1995.

Understanding the legislative and policy context is helpful for this evaluation because (a) the projects funded under the Mercers' BOFF&C initiative are affected by it and in some cases have legal responsibilities themselves; (b) Mercers' need to understand statutory activity in order to avoid funding it and focus their funding on non-statutory activity; (c) LAs are generally able only to meet their statutory responsibilities (and not always even those) and so cannot prioritise activity that is not mandated by legislation – and such activity often needs to be picked up by voluntary, community and faith organisations (VCFOs); (d) VCFOs that have a good grasp of what is mandated may be able to use this knowledge to gain support and/or funding and to lobby for change, so there is potential learning here for the BOFF&C projects.

4.2 Overview of Key Policy and Legislation

Working Together to Safeguard Children

This is currently the most influential framework and guidance relating to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children in England. Working Together to Safeguard Children (WTTSC) does not introduce any new law but instead draws together all the relevant existing legislation and represents it with new statutory (i.e. legally-binding) guidance, which applies to all organisations and agencies that have functions relating to children – that is, all local authorities, clinical commissioning groups, police, all schools, and all other organisations and agencies working with children.

The legislative framework for WTTSC includes The 1989 and 2004 Children Acts, Education Acts and all the other Acts listed above.

The statutory guidance in WTTSC is detailed – there are more than 100 pages setting out the legal requirements for assessment of need; assessment of risk; case management and other processes including section 47 enquiries and child protection; the responsibilities of all relevant organisations; multi-agency working; reviews and improvement.

WTTSC has 6 points of guidance specifically relating to voluntary , community and faith organisations (VCFOs) (NB: the same guidance also applies to private sector organisations). It makes clear that:

- VCFOs "should have appropriate arrangements in place to safeguard and protect children from harm" and explains the Charity Commission's regulatory responsibilities
- Both paid and unpaid/volunteer workers in VCFOs have the same safeguarding responsibilities
- The responsibility to cooperate with statutory partners also applies to VCFOs.

The Children and Young People's Plan (England) Regulations 2005

This created a legal requirement for local authorities to prepare and publish a plan, in consultation with children and young people, partner organisations and other stakeholders. It stated that plans should include a vision, needs assessment, key actions, budget statement and arrangements for partnership working and review; and should also "set out the improvements which the authority intend to make during the plan period to the well-being of children and relevant young persons". It provides an explicit framework for understanding and planning well-being, which mirrors the Every Child Matters outcomes framework[23] [24]:

(a)   Physical and mental health and emotional well being

(b)   Protection from harm and neglect

(c)   Education, training and recreation

(d)   The contribution made by them to society, and

(e)   Social and economic well-being.

The Children Act 2004

The 2004 Children Act followed the Public Inquiry into the murder of Victoria Climbié[33], and was the keystone of a major review of child protection. It was closely linked with the Every Child Matters (ECM) green papers and the influential 2003 ECM outcomes framework[34], which established a cross-sector commitment to joint-

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[33]Wikipedia 2021a: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Every_Child_Matters
[34]DfE 2011: https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20110208173300/http://www.education.gov.uk/childrena ndyoungpeople/sen/earlysupport/esinpractice/a0067409/every-child-matters

working to ensure that every child in the UK could "stay safe, be healthy, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution, and achieve economic wellbeing". ECM was decommissioned in early 2011, and has been replaced by other policy described in this section, notably Working Together to Safeguard Children.

This Act updated the 1984 Children Act, making new provision about services provided to and for children and young people by local authorities and others, and establishing the 'watchdog' role of Children's Commissioner. Significantly, Section 10 of this Act imposes a new legal duty on local authorities to cooperate with others to promote children's wellbeing – widening the scope of these responsibilities from children in need and safeguarding/welfare, to all children and all areas of wellbeing. Section 11 updated public sector duties relating to providing and commissioning services. Section 16 updated safeguarding duties and requirements for local authorities and safeguarding partners, including arrangements for the new Safeguarding Practice Review Panels.

The Children Act 1989

This is key UK legislation safeguarding the welfare of children and setting out arrangements for children who are not looked after by their parents. Crucially, it created a range of legally-binding duties, mostly for local authorities but also for other organisations working with children. Most significantly, it created a legal duty for local authorities to promote and safeguard the welfare of 'children in need' in their areas. 'Children in need' are defined in this Act as those who are unlikely to have a reasonable standard of health or development without support, including disabled children and young carers, and those whose needs arise due to poverty, homelessness and/or other multiple and complex family circumstances.

In addition, Section 27 imposes a duty on local authorities to cooperate with other key services, notably other local authorities, health bodies and housing authorities. Section 47 establishes that local authorities must make enquiries to ensure welfare, not merely be reactive. Sections 44 and 46 define emergency powers for local authorities and police respectively. The Act also requires children's services to involve children themselves, notably in decisions about their own care.

Other relevant legislation

Domestic Abuse Act 2021 defines any child as a victim of domestic abuse who "sees or hears or experiences the effects of" domestic abuse involving one or both of their parents. Also creates a duty to consider the welfare of any child related to a perpetrator before issuing any domestic abuse protection notice or order.

Children and Social Work Act 2017 amended the Children Act 2004 to make provision about the regulation of social workers, as well as updating provisions relating to looked after children and the welfare of children.

Children and Families Act 2014 made extensive provision relating to children, families and people with special educational needs or disabilities. Made other provision relevant to children's welfare, including the right to request flexible working, adoption, family justice, parental leave, children with disabilities or special educational needs, childcare. Introduced new duties relating to young carers and parent carers assessments. Also created the role of Children's Commissioner.

Care Act 2014 was primarily legislation relating to adult social care services and support; but included arrangements for children transitioning to adult care and support, and thereby strengthened provision for young carers, parent carers and other carers of disabled children.

Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 determined that any child remanded in criminal proceedings is considered to be a looked-after child.

Equality Act 2010 requires statutory services and decision-makers to have regard to the desirability of reducing socio-economic inequalities. Includes equality duties relating to age, and for schools.

Children and Young Persons Act 2008 made provision relating to social work services or children and young people, and amended parts of the 1989 Children Act.

Childcare Act 2006 Regulates childcare and Early Years provision. Section 40 requires Early Years providers to comply with the welfare requirements of the Early Years Foundation Stage.

Education Act 2002 made wide-ranging provision about education, training and childcare. Section 175 sets out responsibilities of local authorities and school governing bodies to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in education.

Crime and Disorder Act 1998 established that youth justice services must be available in all areas, with local authorities, police and other public sector organisations cooperating.

Housing Act 1996 Section 213 set out the duties for local authorities and housing authorities with respect to children who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. Any child experiencing 'persistent' homelessness becomes a child in need.

The Carers (Recognition and Services) Act 1995 defined young carers as "Children and young people (under 18) who provide or intend to provide a substantial amount of care on a regular basis."

5. Towards Better Outcomes for Families: A summary of findings from our review and implications for the Mercers' Company's Better Outcomes for Families and Carers (BOFF&C) funding initiative

In summary, our review suggests the following headline findings that the Mercers' Committee and Executive and funding managers may wish to consider particularly carefully. These will be considered by the Mercers' Committee and Executive Team alongside findings from the fieldwork undertaken for this evaluation, and will help shape the final recommendations.

The 'Early Help' landscape

The landscape is very complex for children and families needing additional support in England. Table 1 (page 8) provides a simple summary of current arrangements, which may help Mercers' better understand scale and types of need, and current service responses.

What we know about outcomes for children in need and in care

Research shows that children in need and in care have poorer outcomes across all domains, including education, health, offending, employment and homelessness. However, evidence about 'what works' is not as strong as it should be and there are 'disjointed pictures' locally and nationally. The independent review of children's social care acknowledged the challenges in its recent case for change – particularly that "we are not doing enough to help children". It will put forward recommendations to improve outcomes, and outcome evidence, in its report to government early next year.

Tentative findings about 'what works' in 'Early Help' for children and families

These can be seen as desirable features of the projects and activities funded by Mercers' BOFF&C:

- Build positive relationships
- Acknowledge adversity
- Ensure variety in the support offer through partnership working
- Ensure work is age-appropriate and timely.

Tentative findings about barriers and challenges

While the issues identified relate mostly to statutory services, they may still be considered as problems that BOFF&C activities could help to avoid or mitigate.

- Particularly, neglect is not prioritised
- Difficult administrative processes reduce support time
- 'Early Help' is less effective if important partners are missing from multi-agency work.

There is limited evidence in this review about the needs, outcomes and issues relating to children and families with specialist needs – including children affected by domestic abuse, children affected by substance misuse, disabled children, young carers and parent carers of disabled children. However, findings about 'what works' and 'barriers and challenges' apply to these groups too.

Why evidence about outcomes is poor, why it matters and what could be done

Evidence about outcomes is poor for a variety of reasons, especially because:

- There are varying definitions and models of 'Early Help'

- Targets, funding priorities and a shift towards more crisis support may be skewing evidence

- Poverty is an 'elephant in the room'

- Opportunities to measure impact and outcomes are missed.

Poor evidence about outcomes really matters, because without information about whether, and what, 'Early Help' is effective, it is impossible provide the best support for children and families who need it. The Early Intervention Foundation. Taylor et al., 2019 provide a guide with practical steps for evaluating impact in 'Early Help' services.

A full discussion of the guide is beyond the scope of this evaluation, but it is worth noting that it is structured around 6 principles which are very similar to those guiding our own work:

Principle 1: Know where you are starting from (especially knowledge about families' needs)

Principle 2: Prioritise outcomes to evaluate.

Principle 3: Embed evaluation in commissioning and practice.

Principle 4: Use high-quality measures.

Principle 5: Make comparisons.

Principle 6: Follow through (publishing and citing on what you find).

Mercers' could recommend that funded organisations use this guide or similar, and/or use something like it themselves to evaluate BOFF&C project outcomes in future.

Legislation and policy

A very wide variety of policy and legislation influences support for children and families in England, especially Working Together to Safeguard Children, the 2005 Children and Young People's Planning Regulations and the 1989 and 2004 Children's Acts. Understanding legislation and policy helps to understand the environment within which the VCFOs funded under the BOFF&C initiative operate, and Mercers' themselves seek to prioritise funding for activities that are non-statutory and unlikely to be funded by local authorities or other statutory agencies.

Appendix 1: Review Inclusion Criteria

DRAFT (criteria initially proposed):

A) All relevant legislation/policy (est. ten sources) PLUS

B) Other sources that meet all seven of these criteria:

1) Includes a primary keyword 'children' AND/OR 'family+' AND/OR 'parent+', PLUS at least one secondary keyword 'poverty', 'challeng+', 'carer+', 'at risk', 'in need', 'vulnerable' OR 'deprive+'

2) Published within last three years

3) Top 10/12 within top 40 Google Scholar results in date range

4) English policy/practice context

5) Focus on social policy, with a predominantly social not fiscal focus.

6) Retrospective not prospective study

7) Full text available online in English.

USED:

A) All relevant legislation/policy/grey literature (19+22 sources) PLUS

B) Other sources that meet all 7 of these criteria:

1) Includes either keyword 'children' AND/OR 'famil+' PLUS 'Early Help'

2) Published since 2017

3) Top ten results within top 40 Google Scholar results in date range

4) English policy/practice context

5) Full text available online in English.

Appendix 2: Sources Reviewed

Source type	Link	Short reference	Long reference (if any)
LG	https://www.legislation.gov.u k/ukpga/1989/41/contents	Children Act, 1989	-
LG	https://www.legislation.gov.u k/ukpga/2004/31/contents	Children Act, 2004	-
LG	https://www.gov.uk/governm ent/publications/working-together-to-safeguard-children--2	Working Together Framework, 2018	DfE, 2018 'Working Together to Safeguard Children: Statutory Framework'.
LG	Above	WorkingTogether to Safeguard Children, 2018	DfE, 2018b 'Working Together to Safeguard Children: Statutory Guidance'.
LG	https://www.legislation.gov.u k/ukpga/2017/16/contents/enacted	Children and Social Work Act, 2017	-
LG	https://www.legislation.gov.u k/ukpga/2014/6/contents/enacted	Children and Families Act, 2014	-
LG	https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2008/23/contents	Children and Young Persons Act, 2008	-
LG	https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents	Equality Act, 2010	-
LG	https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/23/contents/enacted	Care Act, 2014	-
LG	https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2002/32/section/175	Education Act, 2002	-
LG	https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1996/52/contents	Housing Act, 1996	-
LG	https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2006/21/contents	Childcare Act, 2006	-
LG	https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2012/10/section/104/enacted	Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act, 2012	-
LG	https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/37/contents	Crime and Disorder Act, 1998	-
LG	http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1995/12/contents	Carers Act, 1995	The Carers (Recognition and Services) Act, 1995.
LG	https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2021/17/contents/enacted	Domestic Abuse Protecton Order, 2021	-
LG	https://www.legislation.gov.u k/uksi/2005/2149/contents/m ade	The Children and Young People's Plan (England) Regulations, 2005	-

LG	https://assets.publishing. servi ce.gov.uk/government/ upload s/system/uploads/ attachment_data/file/922390/ Troubled_F amilies_Financial_ Framework_2020.pdf	Troubled Families Financial Framework	Financial framework for the Troubled Families Programme, April 2020.
G	https://researchbriefings.files. parliament.uk/documents/CB P-7585/CBP-7585.pdf	Troubled Families Programme Briefing	Loft, P., 2020. 'Troubled Families Programme (England)' - Briefing Paper Number 07585, House of Commons Library, 27 November 2020.
G	https://www.ons.gov.uk/peop lepopulationandcommunity/ bi rthsdeathsandmarriages/ famil ies/bulletins/ familiesandhouseholds/2020	ONS, 2021	ONS, 2021. Households and families in the UK: 2020.
G	https://www.trusselltrust.org/ news-and-blog/latest-stats/ end-year-stats/	Trussell Trust, 2021	Trussell Trust, 2021. "End of year stats 2020-21".
G	https://www.gov.uk/governm ent/publications/supporting- families-2021-to-2022-and- beyond/supporting-families- 2021-22-and-beyond	HMSO, 2021	HM Gov, 2021. "Supporting families 2021-22 and beyond".
G	https://www.gov.uk/governm ent/statistics/children-in- low- income-families-local- area- statistics-2014-to- 2020/ children-in-low-income- families-local-area-statistics- fye-2015-to-fye-2020	HMSO, 2021	-
G	https://www.ncb.org.uk/what- we-do/our-strategy	NCB, 2021	NCB, 2021. "United for a better childhood: our strategy".
G	https://assets.publishing.servi ce.gov.uk/government/upload s/ system/uploads/attachment_ data/file/68744/The_Cost_of_ Troubled_Families_v1.pdf	HMSO, 2013	HMSO, 2013. "The cost of troubled families". Department for Communities and Local Government.
G	https://www.bbc.com/news/uk- england-57851976	BBC, 2021	-
G	https://commonslibrary.parlia ment.uk/research- briefings/ cbp-7730/	HOC, 2020	HOC, 2020. Local authority support for children in need (England): House of Commons Library Research Briefing, January 2020.

G	https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/951146/Children_s_social_care_cost_pressures_and_variations_in_unit_costs_Jan_2021.pdf	DfE, 2021	DfE, 2021. Children's social care cost pressures and variations in unitcosts Research report January 2021.
G	https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmcomloc/1638/163807.htm	HOC, 2019	HOC, 2019. " Funding of local authorities' children's services", Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee Report.
G	https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/aug/11/crisis- in-childrens-services-in- england-is-shocking-if-not-surprising	Guardian, 2021	-
G	https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find- statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2020#dataDownloads-1	HMGov, 2020	-
G	https://www.barnardos.org.uk/news/childrens-services-breaking-point-charities-warn	Barnardo's, 2020	-
G	https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/advice- information/all-about- fostering/fostering-statistics	Fostering Network, 2021	-
G	https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/datasets/familiesandhouseholdsfamiliesandhouseholds	ONS, 2021	-
LG	https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20110208173300/http://www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/sen/earlysupport/esinpractice/a0067409/every-child-matters	DfE, 2011	DfE, 2011. 'Every Child Matters'. Archived website.
G	https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Every_Child_Matters	Wikipedia, 2021	-

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