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Vicky Ford MP

Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families

Sanctuary Buildings 20 Great Smith Street Westminster London SW1P 3BT

tel: 0370 000 2288 www.education.gov.uk/contactus/dfe

Andy Gill
Chair, BASW England
By email: england@basw.co.uk

Maris Stratulis
National Director, BASW England

31 March 2021

Dear Andy and Maris,

Thank you for your letter of 19 February, addressed to the Secretary of State, on behalf of the British Association of Social Workers of Wellesley House, 37 Waterloo Street, Birmingham, B2 5PP, about the Independent Review of Children's Social Care. I am replying as the minister responsible for this policy area. I apologise for the delay in responding.

May I begin by wishing you well in these challenging times.

As you are aware, the government launched this widescale review of children's social care, to take a fundamental look at the needs, experiences and outcomes of the children it supports.

With regards to your first point about the time frame of the review, the review will move at pace to make the urgent change needed to improve the lives of vulnerable children. The work of the review has started immediately and it has already launched a Call for Advice and expression of interest for our expert group. The department will set out the full expected timescales for the review, including when it will be published, shortly.

With regards to your second point over the leadership of the review, Josh MacAlister brings a wide range of experience to this role and was chosen for his understanding of the challenges facing the system and his experience of implementing innovative solutions. Josh was the founder and chief executive of Frontline, a charity set up to recruit, train and support high potential graduates and career changers to become social workers. Before that, he was a teacher, and so he brings a wide range of experience in different sectors and he understands the issues facing some of our most vulnerable children and young people and their families.

It is common practice for independent reviewers to be directly appointed based on their expertise. Whilst the lead reviewer will ultimately make a final set of recommendations, this will be on the basis of extensive consultation with other groups and individuals with lived experience of children's social care, whose voices should be heard. Josh has permanently stepped down from his role at Frontline to take up the role of independent reviewer. This is to ensure he is able to act independently and focus his full efforts on the review. Josh will be expected to comply with the Seven Principles of Public Life, in line with standard practice for senior appointments.

In addition, the views and voice of children and young people that have had a social worker will be at the heart of the independent review. The Experts by Experience Group will provide Josh and the review team with a way to test emerging thinking and final recommendations, as well as help inform how the review engages with other children and care experienced adults. It will include children and young people from a wide range of care settings.

The Experts by Experience Group was recruited through an expression of interest process, which launched on 15 January alongside the launch of the independent review. Applications were assessed by Josh and a small selection panel. With regards to the content and findings of the review, the reviewer will be independent of government with freedom to make ambitious recommendations based on his findings. The reviewer will report his findings to ministers and the government will respond to the review recommendations.

With regards to the content of the review and its findings, it is important to note that because the review is independent, we cannot comment on what the review should focus on. Josh is independent and it will be for him to look at the evidence presented to him and decide where change is needed. He has launched a Call for Advice to hear from those with an interest in children's social care and anyone with an interest in the review to respond through this process.

This offers an opportunity for practitioners to feed their views into the review and hear first-hand from those working at the very front line within communities. More information can be found on the review's website, which is available at: tinyurl.com/2uwtf5ee.

The Call for Advice provides an opportunity for anyone with an interest in the review to provide advice to the reviewer. The intent is to shape the orientation period of the review. It will be the first of many opportunities to engage in and shape the review.

The review will start from children's experiences and will prioritise hearing the voices of children, young people and adults that have received the help or support of a social worker, or who have been looked after. The purpose of the expert by experience group is to advise the reviewer on the best way to do this. The review will set out publicly its plan and approach to engaging those with lived experience of children's social care.

With regards to your point about ensuring the review is rooted in the best evidence available, a Call for Evidence has also recently been launched. The Call for Evidence aims to uncover academic and professional research and evidence, not already submitted via the Call for Advice. This will include academic research, past reviews and local practice knowledge, and will help to ensure that the review is considering the most appropriate research and analysis.

The review will consult with a range of professional bodies and organisations to seek a varied view and gather evidence for how best to address and understand the issues young people, children and families are facing.

These are examples of ways by which individuals and organisations can get in touch with the review. Where these are not suitable, individuals can engage with the review team directly by emailing review.childrensocialcare@education.gov.uk. The review will provide numerous opportunities for people to contribute and we understand that sharing views about things that work well, or could work better, can mean people draw upon experiences which may bring up difficult feelings and memories. The review is committed to ensuring those who contribute and participate have the support they need. The review team will set out further information on their planned engagement approach, including the support offer for those who are involved shortly.

Finally, the review is committed to listening to and feeding in the diverse range of experiences of children, young people and families who have experience of children's social care. We know that Black, Asian and minority ethnic people are overrepresented in many parts of children's social care and so this will be a particular consideration for the review. The expert by experience group will advise the reviewer and in our recruitment for this group we will ensure it is representative of those with experience of children's social care. The reviewer would also be keen to hear views through the Call for Advice about how the review can best engage with a diverse representation of children and families.

Thank you for writing about this important matter. I hope this reply is useful.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Vicky Ford". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Vicky Ford MP
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families