

## BUILDING THE FOUNDATIONS



# FOREWORD

We are delighted to introduce Foundations' first strategy. **Building the Foundations** sets out our initial steps down the path of achieving our vision that vulnerable children should have the foundational family or other close relationships they need to thrive in life.

**Dr. Jo Casebourne**  
Chief Executive

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**Josh MacAlister**  
Executive Chair

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**Family – in all its forms – can be one of the most powerful conduits for almost every outcome that children experience. These relationships are fundamental to children’s life chances and can be improved by high quality support, yet this is not always provided when needed. We don’t always do enough to support family relationships or help children thrive in their absence. There are big gaps in evidence about what approaches to supporting family relationships work best in different contexts – such as where there are risks of harm to children, or where children are in kinship or foster care.**

This is why we have such an important role to play in generating the actionable evidence that can shape and improve services to strengthen family relationships, so that more children can live safely and happily at home, with the foundations they need to reach their full potential.

The Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) and What Works for Children’s Social Care (WWCSC) formally merged in December 2022, bringing together two sister organisations with a shared mission to use high quality evidence to improve the lives of vulnerable children.

The newly merged organisation reflects the best of the previous two charities. Foundations will draw on the rigorous trial methods of WWCSC and the experience from EIF of evidence synthesis and using evidence to shape services for children and families. We will retain the focus on providing support at the earliest possible stages and will remain deeply rooted in children’s social care practice. We have brought together the talents of both former organisations to create a unified new team focused on delivering this exciting new strategy.

**Building the Foundations** sets out how we will prioritise a few major themes, with an eye always on generating actionable findings that can shape and improve services. These five areas are **supporting parenting, strengthening family networks, domestic abuse, relationships for care experienced people** and the **service and practice models** that underpin all of this. Our strategy means that we will make long term investments to find out what works in these fields rather than spread ourselves across many areas – we are opting for depth over breadth.

Over the next five years we will be rigorously testing ourselves to ensure the evidence we generate is making an impact on improving the foundational relationships that children need. For some of our work this will mean influencing policymakers, local service leaders and practitioners to use approaches that already have strong evidence of improving outcomes for children. In other areas it will mean undertaking large trials to gather the robust impact data we need or working to ensure interventions can be feasibly evaluated.

Few things are more important than the quality of our relationships, but not all children have access to the supportive relationships that can make such a difference to their lives. Loving and stable family, and family like relationships, can support children to live happy, healthy and fulfilling lives. We are excited about this new direction and looking forward to joining with you in the years to come to do all we can to improve how services build, bolster and nurture these relationships for the children who need them the most.



# OUR PURPOSE

## VISION

Vulnerable children have the foundational relationships they need to thrive in life

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## MISSION

Generating and championing actionable evidence that improves services to support family relationships

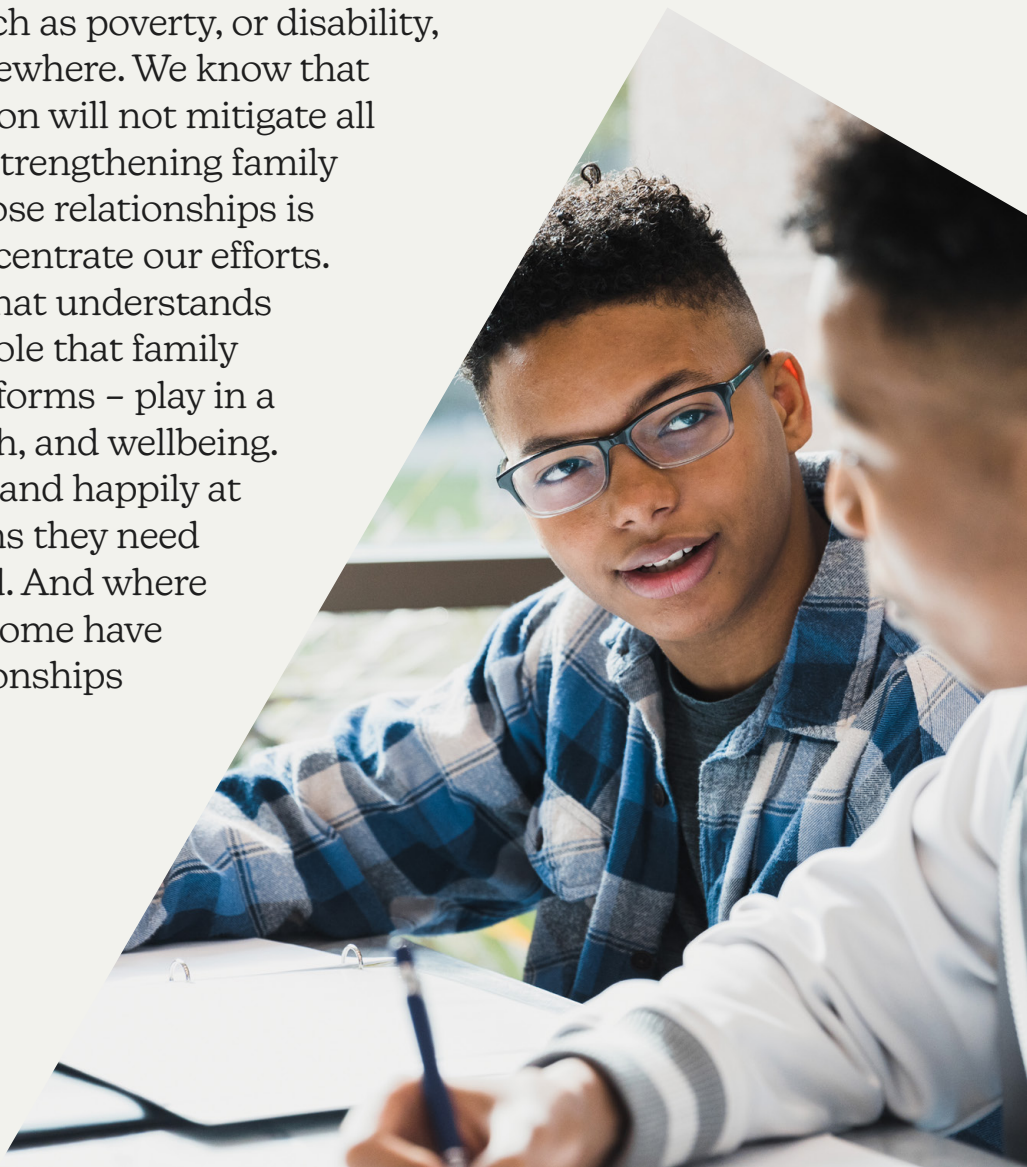
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There are too many children in crisis or chronic situations without the support they need, even though many people are working hard to make the lives of vulnerable children better. The earlier we make the right interventions, the fewer families could reach crisis. We believe a focus on strengthening family relationships for vulnerable children is a key part of the solution. Our vision is for a society in which vulnerable children have the family or other close relationships they need to thrive in life.

**As a What Works Centre, and proud member of the What Works Network, we will help to realise this vision through generating and championing the actionable evidence needed to change the system for the better. We will influence policy and guide practice to improve services that support family relationships and drive forward better outcomes for vulnerable children.**

We know that family circumstances, parental behaviours, and the home environment shape children’s outcomes. Relationships with parents and caregivers lay the foundations for life by helping children to be safe, well and thrive. The quality of these relationships is a significant influence on children’s long-term mental health and life chances. We also know that, for children who are unable to live with their parents, an enduring relationship with a trusted and supportive adult is critically important to repair trauma and support them to go on to flourish.

Of course, there are also other factors at play. There are significant risk factors, such as poverty, or disability, where the solution lies elsewhere. We know that a focus on family in isolation will not mitigate all problems, but we believe strengthening family relationships and other close relationships is an important place to concentrate our efforts. We want to see a society that understands and supports the critical role that family relationships – in all their forms – play in a child’s development, health, and wellbeing. Where children live safely and happily at home, with the foundations they need to reach their full potential. And where those who cannot live at home have the stable, enduring relationships they need to thrive in life.



We will work with national policymakers and local system leaders to translate evidence into solutions for effective family support services and bring evidence and rigour to critical interventions in the lives of children facing risks in the family environment. To achieve this, we will work to improve the following child outcomes:<sup>1</sup>

- Children and young people are supported by their family to develop and thrive
- Children and young people are safe in their homes<sup>2</sup>
- Children, young people, and families stay together as much as is safely possible
- Children in care and care leavers have stable, loving relationships.

Improving child outcomes is our ultimate focus but it will not always be feasible to influence these directly through our work, given the multiple factors impacting on them. We have therefore included the organisational outcomes we are seeking to achieve, and the indicators we will use to measure progress, within our five priority areas.

<sup>1</sup> These outcomes mirror those in the government's new National Children's Social Care Framework

<sup>2</sup> The National Social Care Framework outcome is "children and young people are safe in and outside their homes". As per our strategy, we are focusing on the family environment and have therefore chosen not to look at extra-familial harm.

# OUR GUIDING PRINCIPLES

We have identified five principles that will underpin how we work to deliver our strategy. They will guide us in all that we do:

**1. We will actively pursue a preventative and early intervention approach in our work.**

Support must be available to families at the earliest opportunity: families often say they receive help too late. We know that the more entrenched problems become, the more difficult they are to deal with. It is crucial that local systems and services pick up early signs that families are facing problems, struggling to cope, or are at risk. There are a range of early intervention programmes that have been shown to be effective in building family relationships and strengths and reducing risk, which have good evidence of improving outcomes for children. In all our priority areas we will seek to identify the most effective early interventions that can be provided.

**2. We will use robust and transparent evidence standards to generate and champion rigorous evidence.**

There is a lack of high-quality evidence available to support decisions and policymaking in providing effective support for children and families. We will use robust and transparent evidence standards to synthesise and generate high-quality evidence about what works. Working with local leaders and national policymakers, we will determine and communicate what the findings mean for those taking decisions with and for children and families.



### 3. We will seek change so that children and families have more power in how services work.

Services should be accountable for the experiences of the children and families they support. Yet, these experiences are often not captured or acted on. We have an important role to play in bringing about this change. First, our research and policy work will advance the use of child and family experience measures across services. Second, our rigorous impact evaluations will mean we promote approaches more likely to work for children and families. Third, we will directly include the voices of children, young people and families in our work. We will work with our Experts by Experience Panel and include people with direct experience on our advisory groups and boards.

### 4. We will ensure our work actively promotes equality, diversity, inclusion, and equity.

There are substantial racial disparities in early intervention and children's social care that cannot be explained by deprivation alone. Differences in representation of minoritised ethnic groups are present across the children's social care system. These differences indicate that some groups don't receive the support they need, resulting in poorer outcomes, while others are more likely to have a higher level of intervention. A lack of data limits the research that can be done, but we will consider what can be learnt about racial disparity in every study we carry out. We will speak up for families who experience racial discrimination and use evidence about what works to call for change. Our goal is to be a leader in all aspects of equality, diversity, inclusion, and equity (EDIE).

## 5. We will work with partners to enact change.

We will only ever be able to deliver a part of the change we seek. We will make careful decisions about the role we might play and where we need to work in partnership to achieve our aims. We will work with others where we know that we can bring about greater impact by working in collaboration. We will seek partners across our work, including research, communications, dissemination and supporting evidence use.



# OUR APPROACH

We want to see a society where vulnerable children have the foundational relationships they need to thrive in life. This means working to ensure that family support services strengthen family relationships, maintain family relationships for children in care where it is safe to do so, or build positive trusting relationships for children for whom it is not possible to have family relationships.

To do this, we will generate and champion the actionable evidence needed to change the system for the better, driving decisions and improving services to support quality relationships. And we will influence national policy and decisions about local services, so the right actions are taken at the right times, leading to better outcomes for vulnerable children.



## We will make a difference through:

### 1. Generating and championing high-quality, actionable evidence about what works

We will identify new and promising approaches in early intervention and children’s social care and develop a pipeline of interventions and approaches that can be evaluated for impact. We will work with others to understand the demand for evidence, the biggest gaps, and what children and families need the most.

### 2. Influencing policy and practice to use evidence to drive better decision making

We will influence government policy to fund and/or promote the approaches proven to improve outcomes and shift spending away from those that do not. We will shine a light on the evidence available, to help national policymakers increase the number of decisions based on evidence. At a local level, we will increase capability, opportunity, and motivation for evidence use by providing tools and guidance for commissioners and service leaders, to support more effective services and practice.

### 3. Increasing demand for evidence about what works to improve family relationships

We will work to increase demand for evidence on how to improve the family environment, making the case for:

1. Increasing the prioritisation of, and investment in, effective preventative and early intervention approaches at national and local levels
2. The research community building evidence on racial disparity and using findings to call for change
3. A national focus on how children and their families experience services and can have more power in how services work.



We will draw on different approaches and capabilities to bring about the changes we want to see, working across the research and impact cycle of evidence, evaluation, national influencing, local delivery and communications to:

- Conduct evidence syntheses which summarise what is known in areas which support our strategy and can help us achieve our impact
- Generate evidence about which interventions improve child outcomes, through evaluations that examine whether, how, and why they work
- Develop a case-by-case approach to national influencing in our priority areas, with the aim of influencing national policy development, funding decisions and local delivery
- Work with local leaders to support decision making on how to increase the availability of services that have evidence of improving child outcomes
- Champion activities that have been shown to improve child outcomes, and the use of evidence and evaluation to improve better decision making.

# OUR FIVE PRIORITY AREAS

**We have five priority areas that make up 80 per cent of our work. The remaining 20 per cent will be responsive to the changing policy environment.**

These five areas were selected using criteria including the scale of the problem, the level of policy interest, the maturity of the current evidence base and the potential for achieving impact.

They will be reviewed regularly to ensure we are tackling the most important issues that improve the family environment to achieve positive outcomes for vulnerable children.

Across these areas, we will use the following measures as indicators of our impact in improving the lives of children and families:

- Increase in the use of evidence-based interventions and approaches available for children and families
- Increase in the number of government programmes that promote evidence-based interventions and approaches
- Increase in the number of policies and practice that embed high quality evaluation
- Increase in the number of interventions and approaches shown to have an impact (and that can be recommended for delivery) in our priority areas
- Decrease in the use of interventions and approaches proven to be ineffective/that have no impact on child outcomes
- Improvements in the capability, opportunity, and motivation of local leaders to deploy evidence-based interventions and approaches (because we know these things are precursors to behaviour change).

We will also use the following indicators of impact in our work to influence local system leaders to improve the availability and use of evidence-based support for families:

- Increased commissioning of evidence-based interventions or approaches
- Decommissioning of interventions or approaches shown not to improve outcomes
- The implementation of Practice Guide recommendations
- Stronger local monitoring and evaluation of the impact of services
- Stronger local arrangements for matching interventions with diverse population needs.



## 1. Supporting parenting



**It is important that parenting support is carefully matched to the needs of the child and family. Parents' ability to appropriately nurture their children is influenced by a range of factors, including their own characteristics, the characteristics of their child and levels of stress or support.**

Parental capacity can be adversely affected by risks, including substance misuse, parental conflict, abuse and neglect, sexual abuse, emotional abuse and parental mental health issues. We know that evidence-based support which is carefully matched to parent and child needs can improve outcomes for children. There is a lack of evidence about the types of parenting support likely to be most effective in the context of some risks, such as domestic abuse, and we will seek to generate this evidence.

There is an existing evidence base on how best to support parenting for some groups of children and parents, for example, programmes which support parents with managing their child's behaviour. Our work will primarily focus on supporting the use of programmes shown to be effective, but with further evidence generation activity to fill gaps, for example, on interventions to support parenting in higher risk families and in a child protection context.



## 2. Strengthening family networks



**Research shows that children in non-family care settings such as residential homes and secure accommodation experience worse long-term outcomes than their peers. We believe there is a legal and moral obligation for statutory services to support care for children in a family-like setting whenever that is possible.**

One way to do this is by looking within the child's own network for alternative sources of support and care. Stronger family networks are relevant at every stage of intervention, from targeted early help, right through to reunification from care.

However, there is a lack of evidence about how best to support use of family networks to improve outcomes for children. Further research to understand how to keep children either with their family or as close to a family environment as possible is critical.

Areas of focus in this priority area are Family Group Decision Making, Kinship Care, Reunification and Family Relationships and Contact for Children in Care. Through our work in these areas, we want to see children and young people supported by their family to develop and thrive, be safe in their homes, and stay safely with their families as much as possible.

### 3. Domestic abuse



**Domestic abuse is the largest driver of children being taken into care and can have a huge adverse impact on outcomes for children. There are major weaknesses in the evidence about how best to support children and families where there is domestic abuse. The interventions currently in use vary widely and are often unevaluated.**

A main area of our focus will be to build the evidence base by developing the pipeline of programmes that can be evaluated for impact. We will look at relevant interventions across preventative approaches, perpetrator programmes and support for parent and child victim-survivors.

We will also seek to develop and build consensus around the evaluation methods which are the strongest and most appropriate in this area and the best outcome measures to use. The current lack of consensus about how best to evaluate, or what outcomes to use, is a challenge for our research but underscores the urgency of our work in this field.

## 4. Relationships for care experienced children



**Having strong, healthy, and caring relationships is critical for children and young people's development, stability, and mental health. However, children and young people with experience of care can lack strong and supportive relationships.**

Today, one-third of care leavers don't know where to get help and support when they leave care. Building supportive relationships for care experienced children is a key protective factor and improves outcomes for the most vulnerable children. Additionally, it can help prevent intergenerational cycles of care.

There is a large evidence need in this area: there are very few evidence-based programmes that support relationships for care experienced children. Broader evidence synthesis work needs to be conducted. Given the limited evidence on which approaches work best, we will evaluate some of the most common programmes and scope new research on foster care.

## 5. Service and practice models



**Outcomes for children and families can be directly influenced by how services are organised. There is huge variation in service delivery approaches among the 152 local authority areas responsible for supporting vulnerable children in England. High quality evaluation of current, often multi-agency, models is crucial to support central government to improve local services and practice.**

Little is known about which services and practice models work best, particularly those which involve a multi-agency or system-wide focus. We will generate new knowledge about what works best in terms of structuring multi-agency and multi-disciplinary support for children and families and assess which of the many variables are linked to improved outcomes. We will particularly focus on early intervention and prevention to better understand how local areas can introduce ‘whole system’ or place-based approaches to identifying and resolving problems at the earliest opportunity.

We will run high-quality evaluations of multi-agency and multi-disciplinary services to understand what should be promoted and scaled up. We will evaluate models promoted by the government and disseminate the learning and implications for local services.

# STRATEGY OVERVIEW



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## OUR PRIORITY AREAS

1. Supporting parenting
2. Strengthening family networks
3. Domestic abuse
4. Relationships for care experienced children
5. Service and practice models

Better child outcomes through improved services

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What Works Centre for Children & Families

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