

▼ Northern Ireland has prioritised family support so not as many young people are in care

PHOTOGRAPH: RADHARC IMAGES/ALAMY



have been protected from the massive council cuts. "It can't not be significant," says Northern Ireland's chief social worker, Sean Holland. "We haven't lost any Sure Starts, and we've prioritised family support [and] our last minister, Michelle O'Neil, said she wanted to reduce the number of children in care."

The cost savings of keeping children out of care are significant. "You're talking up to £250,000 for a foster care or residential place – I can run a family support hub for £27,000," Holland says.

In Scotland, Dr Louise Hill, policy lead at Strathclyde University's Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children in Scotland "We have become very risk-averse in terms of taking action on child protection issues."

In England, Leeds is having some success in bucking the trend. The city council has instituted a right to a family group conference for children at risk of any statutory intervention – during which the local authority works hard to put in place services to prevent the situation escalating. As a result the city has cut the number of children in care from 1,450 to 1,255 since 2011.

Nadhim Zahawi, the children and families minister, says: "The decision to issue a care order rests with the courts and is always made according to the individual's needs and with the best interest of the child at heart."

"We understand how important support from children's services is for families," he adds, citing the local government budget of £200bn up to 2020, which includes support for children and young people. But Leeds' director of children's services, Stephen Walker, says that the ability to support families before crisis hits depends on sufficient resources and support being available. And local authorities warn of a £2bn shortfall in children's services funding. With less early intervention and support, inevitably more children end up in care.

"The evidence of Northern Ireland raises profound questions about how many kids should be in care," says Bywaters. "Most of the money [cut from children's services] has come out of early help and family support, and then you're left with the very high-cost options of child protection plans and taking kids into care. Governments should be thinking in a much deeper way about the bigger picture."

Paul Bywaters
Social work professor

'Everyone needs to think about this. We can't all be getting it right if the rates of looked-after children are so different'

35

The number of children per 10,000 in care in Northern Ireland. In England it's 52, in Wales 62, and 82 in Scotland

£2bn

The predicted funding gap for children's services in England and Wales by 2020

25,000

The reduction in the number of children in care if England's figures matched those in Northern Ireland

Opinion
Jane Dudman



A decade of cuts has set back diversity in the public sector

Ian Thomas is used to tough jobs. The former children's services director at Rotherham council is now chief executive of Lewisham, a London borough facing huge financial pressure, including a £15.6m overspend on children's services.

But there's one thing, at least, that Thomas doesn't have to worry about. The people who work for him broadly reflect the borough's 227,000 residents, with about 42% of non-white staff – the same ratio as in the capital as a whole. That makes Lewisham one of the UK's rarest local authorities. Most UK councils, like most UK public services, are not diverse. In the UK, 13% of people are from a black, Asian or other minority ethnic (BAME) background. Yet only 10% of local government workers, 12% of UK civil servants and 6% of prison officers in England and Wales are from a BAME background. And figures compiled by the Guardian show how a decade of cuts has laid waste to diversity in the police, with the deepest cuts at the lowest ranks of officers, precisely those with a greater number of BAME staff.

'Judges, senior civil servants and NHS chief executives are still predominantly white'

Only two areas of public service better reflect the UK population: social work and the NHS. Latest figures show that around one-fifth of social workers and NHS staff are from BAME backgrounds, although given that 42% of medics are not white, diversity in non-clinical NHS jobs is very much lower.

The lack of diversity is even more acute at senior levels. Judges, senior civil servants, chief constables and NHS chief executives are still predominantly white. In local government, according to last year's Colour of Power report, none of the 108 chief executives of England's largest councils was a BAME person.

What's holding up change, given that politicians and officials have been clear for decades about the need to tackle this? There's been training on unconscious bias and the civil service has had a race champion since 2014. But good intentions have not produced results. Cuts have had an impact at every level, squeezing out BAME workers from entry-level jobs, but also squeezing out middle managers, leaving a smaller pipeline of potential leaders. At a recent event on diversity, Thomas made a real point: it's not up to BAME workers to make the public sector more diverse. It's for all public leaders to tackle how they recruit, retain and promote staff.

The challenges facing public services are huge. They need every drop of talent they can get. Neglecting to muster that talent isn't just a shame, it's a willful failure.

Jane Dudman is the Guardian's public leaders editor

Clare in the community Harry Venning

It's society so injured to hardship that the sight of it barely registers anymore? Well I, for one, refuse to walk past this scene and do nothing!

Come along, boy, we'll find you a nice dry home.

