



Sector Briefing: DfE Review of the Residential Child Care Workforce

Overview

The Department for Education (DfE) review of the residential child care workforce presents a significant opportunity to shape the future of the sector. However, as currently framed, the review risks being constrained by limited scope, unclear purpose, and an underdeveloped process.

The information provided to date is insufficient to support a meaningful and credible review. There is a clear need to reset the approach—placing purpose, children's needs, and professional expertise at the centre of the work.

Why This Matters

Residential child care plays an essential role for children and young people whose needs cannot be met elsewhere. Sector voices emphasise that this role is diverse, evolving, and rooted in individual needs, not reducible to a residual or exceptional function.

If the purpose of residential care is defined too narrowly, or predetermined, the consequences will be significant:

- workforce development risks being misdirected
- provision may fail to meet multiple, co-occurring, interacting, high level needs
- children's outcomes may be compromised

Workforce development must follow purpose—not the reverse.

Key Concerns

1. Purpose remains undefined

The review has not yet established a clear and shared definition of the role of residential child care. This creates uncertainty about what the workforce is being designed to deliver.

2. Risk of predetermined outcomes

There are concerns across the sector that the review may be shaped by a prior policy intention to reduce residential care, rather than being an open inquiry grounded in evidence.

3. Scope is too narrow

The current remit focuses on skills, qualifications, and training. While important, this is insufficient without a clear model of care.

4. Lack of a principles-led foundation

The review does not yet clearly articulate the values underpinning care, such as: children's rights, relational practice, therapeutic and trauma-informed approaches. This absence risks technical solutions without ethical coherence.

5. Process and timeframe are inadequate

A limited timetable and unclear engagement model restrict the possibility of meaningful reflection, dialogue, and challenge.

6. Transparency and trust

There is insufficient clarity about: who is shaping the conclusions, how evidence will be used, whether dissenting views will be recognised. This undermines confidence in the process.

What the Evidence Suggests

The analysis underpinning this briefing identifies that a credible review must go beyond workforce diagnostics.

A coherent model of care requires integrated consideration of:

- values and purpose
- children's developmental and relational needs
- practice frameworks
- workforce capabilities and organisational culture
- outcomes and evaluation
- wider system relationships (education, health, justice)

Without this broader framework, workforce recommendations risk being partial and misaligned.

Proposed Direction for the Review

To ensure the review is credible and effective, the following actions are recommended:

Clarify purpose

- Publish a clear statement of the role and function of residential child care
- Ensure this is open to challenge and informed by sector evidence

Expand the scope

- Move beyond workforce issues to develop a full model of care
- Link workforce development explicitly to that model

Adopt a principles-led approach

Anchor the review in: children's rights, relational and trauma-informed practice, child-centred outcomes

Strengthen the process

- Introduce structured and transparent methodology
- Enable iterative consultation and reflection

Engage the sector meaningfully

- Identify and involve a broad expert group
- Share notes, facilitate dialogue, and enable feedback

Ensure transparency and accountability

- Clarify authorship and decision-making
- Provide audit trails from evidence to conclusions
- Permit minority or dissenting reports

Extend the timeframe

- Allow sufficient time for: reflection, critical engagement, iterative development

What Good Looks Like

A successful review will:

- Be grounded in children's needs, rights, and lived experience
- Define purpose before workforce solutions
- Take a whole-system view, recognising interdependencies
- Be evidence-led and independent, not policy-led
- Enable open, expert dialogue and challenge
- Produce conclusions that are coherent, practical, and credible

Conclusion

This review represents a critical moment for residential child care.

Done well, it could establish a shared and authoritative understanding of both the purpose of residential care and the workforce required to deliver it.

However, without a shift in approach, towards clarity, breadth, and genuine engagement—there is a risk that it will fall short of that ambition.

The sector now has an opportunity, and responsibility, to shape this process so that it

reflects the complexity, value, and necessity of residential child care for those who need it most.