

**CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE**

7 MARCH 2023

**STABLE HOMES BUILT ON LOVE: IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY AND
CONSULTATION (CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE REFORMS 2023)**

**REPORT OF THE
DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES**

Purpose of the Report

1. The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the Government's strategy Children's Social Care Reform – Stable Homes, Built on Love, published on 2 February 2023 for consultation.
2. This paper provides the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny committee with evidence of the implications of this review for Leicestershire, taking account of internal reviews that have taken place and initial reflections on the key proposals.

Policy Framework and Previous Decisions

3. On 2 February 2023 the Government Launched the implementation strategy Children's Social Care Reform: Stable Homes, Built on Love for consultation. The implementation strategy is the governments response to three reviews that took place in 2022. The Independent Review of Children's Social Care (May 2022), The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel Review into the Murders of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson (May 2022) and the Competition and Markets Authority Review of Provision of Homes for Children Coming into Care (March 2022).

Background

4. In 2022, a number of national review papers placed a spotlight on children's social care. Three of these are addressed in the Children's Social Care Reform Strategy: Stable Homes, Built on Love.
5. These reports included The Independent review of Children's Social Care, published in May 2022. This presented recommendations to Government including detailed proposals which are considered in the recent Government response. This was based on extensive consultation including gathering the views of children, young people, families and from across the sector and wider stakeholders.
6. Secondly, The Child Safeguarding Practice review panel's review into the Murders of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson, published in May 2022, made a number of recommendations based on an evaluation of practice following the deaths of Arthur in Solihull and Star in Bradford – both cases drawing high profile media attention and identifying weaknesses in how services to keep these children safe were provided.

This included front door processes, attention to the concerns of family members and quality and timeliness of assessment work in both cases. The need for greater integration of multiagency safeguarding responses was a key recommendation.

7. Finally, The Competition and Markets Authority review of provision of homes for children coming into care, published in March 2022, a market study launched in response to concerns around how the placements market was operating, both in terms of availability of placement and cost of placements.

Stable Homes, Built on Love

8. The Government strategy sets out its overarching plans to reset children’s social care in what it describes as a ‘once in a generation reform,’ including a wider reaching consultation process to gather reviews from stakeholders which ends on 11 May 2023.
9. The key ambition for the proposals is to focus on what really matters for children – ‘family, love and a safe, stable and reliable place to call home.’ The strategy, supported by £200 million additional investment over the next two years, states its intention to lay the groundwork for long-term, future reform, which will be significant in defining how services will be provided by both children’s social care and wider safeguarding partners, based on likely statutory reform and updated frameworks for practice models.
10. The strategy sets out six pillars to transform children’s social care:

Pillar 1: - Family help provides the right support at the right time so that children can thrive with their families

11. Developing the established concept of meaningful and effective help for families facing challenges is the foundation of children’s social care. The strategy sets out the ambition for every area in England to provide families with supportive and welcoming Family Help Services that are delivered by skilled multi-disciplinary teams.
12. The Government is investing £45 million which will be allocated for up to 12 ‘families first for children pathfinder’ areas to path find a new approach to Family Help by introducing multidisciplinary family help services, to provide “non-judgmental”, joined-up support for families affected by issues such as domestic abuse or poor mental health. This will bring together existing targeted early help and child in need services and focus on the right people with the right knowledge, skills, and relationships to provide support to children and families.
13. As part of this, the Department of Education will consult on enabling a broader range of practitioners to be case holders for children in need to broaden the skill base of the workforce so that support services are matched to the needs of families.

Pillar 2: - a decisive multi-agency child protection system

14. Pillar 2 sets out proposals for a strong and effective Child Protection system that is based on stronger multi-agency collaboration and integrated responses is proposed.
15. The proposals build on the concept of a Child Protection lead practitioner, who will have received advanced specialist training and who will be appointed to lead safeguarding cases – working in a multi-agency team consisting of social workers, police officers and health professionals. This reflects recommendations from both the Care Review and the National Review into the Murders of Arthur and Star.

16. These experienced social work practitioners will co-work with family help teams and the arrangements tested in the pathfinder Authorities. To support this the Department of Education, will also consult on new multi-agency child protection standards as part of a review of Working Together to Safeguard Children in 2023 exploring new standards of multi-agency working arrangements based on greater integration of staff.
17. In addition to this, guidance supporting the Children's Safeguarding Partnership arrangements will be amended to give clearer roles and responsibilities for Local Authorities, Police and Health partners. This aims to ensure leaders with the right level of authority are making key decisions and effectively overseeing the whole system.
18. There will be more robust and effective accountability and more support in place for partnerships. It will also explore how the role of education can be strengthened, including consulting on its role as a safeguarding partner.

Pillar 3: Unlocking the potential of family networks

19. Family networks are identified as playing an essential part in supporting families and enabling children to live safely at home with their parents. When a child cannot remain with their parents, wider family and friends can also offer a safe, loving, and stable alternative to becoming looked after and living with strangers. This is not a new concept and builds on established efforts to build safety in family networks embedded within the Signs of Safety practice framework already adapted locally and in a number of Local Authorities nationally.
20. Families first for Children Pathfinders in up to 12 areas will test using family group decision-making, such as family group conferences, at an early stage to support parents to minimise risks to children. In addition, seven areas will test providing family support network packages providing resources to help families care for children and avoid them going into care. This is part of creating a culture of 'family first' and takes current practice forward decisively.
21. To support this, the Government will publish a national kinship care strategy by the end of 2023. This will look at issues such as educational entitlements, training and improving local authority practice - as well as updating on reform activity such as exploring financial allowances.
22. In addition, it proposes an investment of £9 million in a training and support offer for all kinship carers (those with a legal order and informal kinship carers) by the end of this Parliament.

Pillar 4: Putting love, relationships, and a stable home at the heart of being a child in care

23. When care is the best choice for a child, it is essential that the care system provides stable, loving homes close to children's communities based on homes that provide consistency, stability, and warmth. The report concludes that the way the service currently plans, commissions, and provides homes for children in care is not working, with children often living far from where they would call home or in the wrong type of home for what they need.
24. When children leave care, they face barriers to having a stable home, a good job, strong relationships, and good health. To meet this ambition a number of proposals

are set out including investment of £27 million over the next two years in foster carer recruitment and retention to make fostering an option for more children. This will be based on a developed best practice regional model that can then be delivered more widely to provide enhanced support to foster carers.

25. A range of initiatives to strengthen the quality of leadership and management in the children's homes sector aims to build quality into residential provision. This will include exploring proposals for professional registration of the workforce and a leadership programme, financial oversight to improve transparency for finances and the development of Regional Care Cooperatives (RCCs) to plan, commission and deliver care places which will be based on testing in two sites.
26. To support these developments, it is proposed to set up an expert group to review standards of care, regulations and guidance and consultation with a view to updating legislation. For care leavers, there will be priority given to loving relationships with funding for practical interventions of well evidenced family finding, befriending, and mentoring programmes investing over £30 million over two years.
27. This will be supported by strengthening the corporate parenting responsibilities towards children in care and care leavers across the public sector so that more organisations consider the needs and views of children in care and care leavers in delivering their policies and services. This will have consultation in Autumn 2023 and bring forward any legislative changes to support implementation.
28. A key part of this will be the development of the education, employment and training offers using the Virtual School Heads (VSHs) and Pupil Premium Plus (PP+) funding. Also proposed are a range of supports to Care Leavers to enhance support, access to training, apprenticeships and leaving care grants. All of this will aim to provide a universal offer of wrap around support and accommodation for all care leavers and an increase in leaving care allowance and stronger offer of Staying Put and Staying Close.
29. A key proposal will aim to respond to health support to reduce the gaps in mental health and physical health disparities and increase life expectancy for children in care and care leavers, including enhancing social workers' and other practitioners' understanding and skills to respond to children's mental health needs.

Pillar 5: A valued, supported and highly skilled social worker for every child who needs one

30. The proposals set out that social workers need the time and tools to do their job well. The report recognises the pressure on the social work workforce with high vacancy rates, increased use of agency provision and lack of experienced social workers.
31. The report points out the need for stronger training for social worker and continuous support during their career. It identifies their wellbeing be a priority for leaders and the Government. To achieve this there are specific actions identified over the next two years.
32. This includes the need to prioritise high-quality career development for social workers with the establishment of an Early Career Framework (ECF) – proposed to be five years. To improve retention Local Government will be supported to improve working conditions and reduce caseload pressures. Key to this are proposals to reduce the cost and reliance on agency social workers.

33. A separate consultation on the Child and Family Social Worker Workforce was published in February 2023. This set out proposed national rules on agency usage, including potential price caps, minimum qualification rules for agency staff and specific recruitment and commissioning expectations. Alongside this is an aim to boost social worker recruitment – with up to 500 additional child and family social worker apprentices offered nationally.

Pillar 6: A system that continuously learns and improves, and makes better use of evidence and data

34. To be successful, the report proposes a clearer framework for accountability, inspection, funding, and regulation to provide clearer national direction. This would underpin a system that continuously learns and improves.
35. To achieve this, it is proposed that a Children’s Social Care National Framework is developed to set out the outcomes children’s social care departments should deliver. This will be supported by a Children’s Social Care Dashboard, providing information on how outcomes are being achieved and Practice Guides to set out the best evidenced approaches for achieving the outcomes set out within the National Framework.
36. A key improvement will be how technology and data are used and a new data strategy is proposed by the end of 2023 to transform data in children’s social care.
37. Future inspections will need to be aligned with the National Framework and Ofsted will rebalance how it looks at practice focused on service improvement, with enhanced offers of support to Local Authorities seen to be drifting.
38. This work will be supported by an updated funding proposal based on an up-to-date assessment of needs and resources. Before the next Spending Review, the DfE will aim to update, publish, and consult on a new formula for children and young people’s services funding provided to local authorities and then work with the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) to identify opportunities for implementing the new formula.

Leicestershire Children’s Social Care and Targeted Early Help.

39. The publication of the strategy, Children’s Social Care Reform: Stable Homes, Built on Love is welcomed with the hope that they allow improvements in the children’s social care system by building upon areas of strength that the strategy identifies and seeking improvements in the system in those areas of significant and chronic challenge.
40. There will be significant cost implications associated with the proposals in the strategy, and whilst the additional investment to fund local pathfinders before wider roll out is welcomed, there are many aspects that will increase costs. For example, care leaver costs, enhancement of Kinship support and further support to foster carer.
41. Leicestershire Children and Family Services are well placed to work towards the proposals which already align well with many aspects of current work.
42. The Family Help model is aligned with the Department’s ambition to develop an approach to the provision of support for children in need cases. A revised offer has been tested which will aim to better use the skills of the alternatively qualified workforce to deliver strong interventions to progress Child in Need plans. This pilot is

being co-produced between existing Children and Family Wellbeing Service and Children's Social Care with an ambition to strengthen the offer and reduce the reliance on social workers whilst maintaining strong oversight to plans.

43. This alignment of Targeted Early Help and established collaboration with Children's Social Care places the Department well for delivering the future Family Help model and the connected workforce remodelling aims to broaden the skills based on the Children's workforce and create a new structure for how services are delivered.
44. The new Domestic Abuse team, with investment in early offers of help, provides an example of creative uses of resources to offer early help to families affected by domestic abuse. Careful evaluation of this project will help when considering how this is diverting cases from more costly child protection services and will help consideration of further development for similar help in response to substance misuse and mental health problems. This model of aligning staff skills to need will need wider roll out to establish community-based delivery across the county in the future.
45. In 2023-24, the Department is creating a network of Family Hubs across Leicestershire, these will offer parents and carers access to family advice and support services, placing the service in a strong position to improve engagement with hard-to-reach communities.
46. Positively, the workforce reforms are reflected in a recruitment and retention strategy, with regular reviews of pay and conditions in place, recent enhancements to some pay grades and close scrutiny of caseloads on a monthly basis. The use of agency social workers continues to be essential to support gaps in services where permanent staff are not retained, and creative recruitment is only having a moderate impact on vacancies.
47. The Department is, however, well placed to extend the offer to social work apprenticeships with an established offer in place with Warwickshire University and current efforts to establish managed recruitment from abroad.
48. The local evaluation of service provision at the Front Door in response to the National Review into the murders of Star and Arthur has confirmed that the service has established pathways for families to be directed to early help and has built stronger responses to family and anonymous calls which were highlighted in that report as areas of potential weakness.
49. The service is satisfied that it has robust arrangements in place with both the Police and Health partners to respond to Child Protection referrals and sufficient experience within the workforce to provide expertise in leading child protection responses. Some staff are co-located within the Wigston police station who currently focus on child exploitation and domestic abuse. Two health practitioners are co-located in the First Response team. The Department is well placed to build on this should a multi-agency Child Protection team be required as part of these proposals, with careful thinking, realignment of staffing and wider modelling across the service. The service continues to evaluate the quality of information sharing and collaborate with partners through both single and multiagency audits internally and within the Children's Safeguarding Partnership.
50. The Department has worked to strengthen its support to foster carers and kinship carers. Enhanced support from newly established Special Guardian support team captures recognition of how important lasting family carer can be for children. On this basis the concept of Family First is aligned with its own strategic vision.

Consultation

51. The consultation on the strategy is open until 11 May 2023. The Department will be developing a response alongside gathering the views of young people and wider stakeholders to inform the Council's response.

Background Papers

Stable Homes Built on Love: Implementation Strategy and Consultation Children's Social Care Reforms 2023:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1133537/Children_s_social_care_stable_homes_consultation_February_2023.pdf
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1133537/Children_s_social_care_stable_homes_consultation_February_2023.pdf

The Independent Review of Children's Social Care (May 2022):

<https://childrensocialcare.independent-review.uk/final-report/>

The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panels review into the murders of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson (May 2022):

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-review-into-the-murders-of-arthur-labinjo-hughes-and-star-hobson>

The Competition and Markets Authority review of provision of homes for children coming into care (March 2022):

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/childrens-social-care-market-study-final-report>

National Safeguarding Practice Review into safeguarding children with disabilities and complex needs in residential settings (October 2022):

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/safeguarding-children-with-disabilities-in-residential-settings>

Child and Family Social Worker Workforce Government consultation (February 2023):

https://consult.education.gov.uk/social-work-reform-unit/child-and-family-social-worker-workforce/supporting_documents/Child%20and%20Family%20Social%20Worker%20Workforce%20consultation%20document.pdf

Circulation under the Local Issues Alert Procedure

52. None

Equalities Implications

53. These are addressed throughout the Government proposals and intend to improve standards and outcomes for all children including disabled children, young children, and those from minority and harder to reach groups.

Human Rights Implications

54. There are no human rights implications arising from this report.

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