

Update on the government response to Children's Social Care: Stable Homes, Built on Love consultation

Purpose of Report

1. To update the committee on the government response to the consultation following pledges for the future of children's social care made in February 2023, when the new strategy Stable Homes, Built on Love was launched to transform the experiences and outcomes of children and families who need support from children's social care. This document sets out a summary of the consultation findings and the government response to the findings.

Relevance to the Council's Business Plan

2. Each of the reviews and subsequent government response will impact on the priorities linked to the 'Best Start in Life', 'The Right Skills', 'We are Safe and Vibrant' and 'Well-Connected Communities'.

Background

3. The government review of the children's social care system in England began in March 2021, gathering evidence from public engagements, research and visits to local areas. On 23 May 2022 the independent review of children's social care published [The independent review of children's social care: final report](#). The review suggested that the issues facing the social care system can only be addressed through a "radical reset". Findings were divided into key sections as follows:
 1. Reset children's social care.
 2. A revolution in Family Help.
 3. A just and decisive child protection system.
 4. Unlocking the potential of family networks.
 5. Transforming care.
 6. The care experience.
 7. Realising the potential of the workforce.
 8. A system focused on children and families.
4. On 02 February 2023 the government published its strategy and consultation on children's social care, [Stable Homes, Built on Love](#) responding to the recommendations made by the:
[The independent review of children's social care: final report](#)
[Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel report into the tragic murders of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson](#)
[Competition and Markets Authority \(CMA\) review into children's social care placements](#)

5. The proposals set out in 'Stable Homes, Built on Love' are backed by £200 million of additional investment to existing spending over the next 2 years, and organised under 6 'pillars' of reform:
 1. Family help provides the right support at the right time so that children can thrive with their families
 2. A decisive multi-agency child protection system
 3. Unlocking the potential of family networks
 4. Putting love, relationships and a stable home at the heart of being a child in care
 5. A valued, supported and highly skilled social worker for every child who needs one
 6. A system that continuously learns and improves, and makes better use of evidence and data
6. Alongside the strategy the Department for Education launched a consultation, which was open for 14 weeks and closed on 11 May. On 21 September 2023 the government's consultation response was published. 1,043 online responses to the consultation were received.
[Children's Social Care Stable Homes Built on Love consultation response \(2\).pdf](#)
7. In the same period, the government consulted on:
 - A draft Children's Social Care National Framework (National Framework) and indicators for a Children's Social Care Dashboard (Dashboard). The National Framework describes the outcomes that should be achieved so that children and young people can grow up to thrive. The Dashboard is being created to help establish a stronger learning infrastructure, bringing transparency to the system so that the impact of what happens in practice can be understood by leaders and government. The government response to the [Children's social care national framework and dashboard - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#) consultation has been published separately. The government is adapting the National Framework based on feedback and will issue it as statutory guidance in December 2023.
 - Proposals to introduce national rules on the engagement of agency social work resource in local authority children's social care.

Main Considerations

Government Response

8. In July, the department announced the first areas it selected (non-competitive) to take part in the Families First for Children Pathfinder and Family Networks Pilots. Together, these programmes will lead the way in designing and testing reforms for family help and children's social care. Applications also opened in July for local authorities to set up Regional Care Co-operatives, as part of the commitment to establish pathfinders and support local areas to provide enough stable and loving homes for children in the right place at the right time.
9. A fostering recruitment and retention programme has been developed to increase the sufficiency of foster carers. Wiltshire was successful in the joint bid with Cornwall Council to lead this programme in the South West, with all authorities agreeing to be part of this. This work is now underway with the funding period ending in March 2025 with a total of £3.5 million identified for this programme. The programme is designed to deliver end-to-end improvements that support boosting foster carer numbers,

starting with attracting new carers and expanding the support offer to those already fostering. The programme includes:

- A recruitment support hub to provide information about fostering and support alongside the assessment and approval process to maximise the number of people who take forward a fostering application
- A marketing campaign to attract new foster carers
- Roll out of Mockingbird - an evidence-based programme across the region to support retention of foster carers.

10. The South West, led by South Gloucestershire, has submitted a bid to set up a Regional Care Co-operative, focusing on children with the most complex needs who require specialist residential placements. We are through to the second and final stage with a decision being made about bids in November 2023.

11. For children in the most complex situations and who are currently (or at risk of) being deprived of their liberty, government has launched a cross-government task and finish group, jointly with NHS England (NHSE). This is to improve how system partners work together to improve experiences and outcomes for these children, working on an aligned cross-government approach to design, commission and deliver the best possible models of integrated care.

12. Wiltshire Council is in the process of submitting a bid to be part of Wave 2 of the Families First Pathfinder, with the application due on 06 November. This pathfinder will test:

Family Help:

- Establishing Family Help Services, integrated front door through a multi-agency family help teams based in the L.A.
- Establishing a new family help lead practitioner role to provide tailored support and coordinate multi-agency teams, open up responsibility for S17 work to practitioners not employed by the Council.
- Strengthening and reframing section 17 work, fewer thresholds, assessments and handovers between professionals.
- Ensuring family help works for everybody by meeting the needs of specific cohorts – including children with disabilities.

Child Protection:

- Establishing a new Lead Child Protection Practitioner Role within a multi-agency child protection team.
- Establishing a dedicated multi-agency child protection team, L.A, police, health, education etc.
- Designing child protection processes and systems that work for all children.
- Parental representation and family network engagement.

Multi-Agency Safeguarding Arrangements:

- Clearly setting out safeguarding partner roles, responsibilities and joint functions. Includes identifying those who should have strategic oversight and accountability of local safeguarding arrangements.
- Introducing a new Partnership Chair role.
- Strengthening the role of education at a strategic level.

Family Networks:

- Offering Family Group Decision Making throughout family help and child protection.
- Mandatory use of Family Group Conferencing in pre-proceedings.
- Involvement of family and reps in child protection conferences.

- New Family Network Support Packages to provide practical and financial support.

Whilst Wiltshire Council already undertakes many of these aspects in current practice, the funding available (£3-4 million) will assist us developing further and testing some other models and influence future models of children's social care.

13. The government hasn't yet published their response to the consultation on the child and family social worker workforce. Once published, it will outline plans for national rules on the use of agency social workers. A number of Early Career Framework (ECF) Early Adopter local authorities have been commissioned to work on this.
14. At a joint Children's Social Care and Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) roundtable in May 2023, sector experts in disability informed policy thinking about the support disabled children and their families need across the full reform programme. The government will continue to develop and learn about what works best for these children and families.
15. The government has conducted a consultation with children and young people including children in care, care experienced young people and adults and organisations representing them. The main themes from the consultation were:
- More money for families.
 - More support for carers.
 - Better mental wellbeing support for children, young people and carers.

In response the government acknowledges that more money must be available for families, children, young people, care experienced young people and adults and carers, including helping families manage the increased costs of living.

The government are working with the Department of Health and Social Care, and with schools to strengthen support for those suffering from mental ill-health, as well as addressing the root causes.

16. The government is working with departments and organisations to develop and increase networks of support to children and young people, primarily from adults they trust, for example:
- Teachers or other staff at school.
 - Doctors.
 - Youth workers and charities.
 - Wider family and friends.

There is a recognition that children and young people whatever their situation need:

- To spend time with the people they love.
- Have corporate parents.
- Have a home when they leave care.
- Do well in school or at work.
- Have good health support.

The government acknowledges the importance of consistency in social workers (keeping the same social worker) for children and young people as this provides the opportunity of regular contact and builds trust. Part of the government response is

planning to recruit more social workers, provide training and support to ensure better retention to provide long-term support.

17. The government is in the process of developing a Children and Young People's Advisory Board for children's social care. The Advisory Board will ensure that children and young people's views continue to be heard as part of the process to transform children's social care.
18. Working with Barnardo's and Coram Voice the government is currently revising the 'National Framework' guidance for people working with children and young people. This will set out the outcomes that children's social care should achieve. There will be a version for children and young people. The revised National Framework will be published alongside the revised Working Together to Safeguard Children (Working Together) guidance both scheduled to be published in December 2023. The National Framework describes the outcomes that local authorities should achieve for children, young people, and families. A dashboard is being created to establish a stronger learning infrastructure for children's social care, helping to bring transparency to the system and ensuring that the impact of children's social care practice can be understood. Taken together, the Government hopes that the National Framework and Dashboard will raise quality and consistency of practice nationally. [Children's Social Care National Framework](#)
19. The National Implementation Board and policy focused reference groups include people with lived experience of the children's social care system representing a wide range of experiences. These groups continue to challenge and support delivery of the reform programme. People with lived experience are also members of the National Practice Group, which plays an integral role in supporting the government to set national direction for practice in local authority children's social care.

Summary

20. The government response advocates a greater focus on families, recognising that for most children, the family will be the place where they flourish. In the highest performing local authorities, practice will already mirror these reforms. Wiltshire is well placed with sensitive and skilled social care practice with families set alongside a passionate, child-centred approach that can also act with authority and decisiveness when required. However, there remain challenges facing the sector nationally and locally, including:
 - Placement sufficiency.
 - Ongoing post-pandemic challenges.
 - Cost-of-living pressures.
 - Rising numbers of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.
 - Recruitment and retention challenges that exist across all sectors.
21. The government proposals recognise the benefits in a system that merges targeted early help and child in need work into one family help service. There is a clear task for Wiltshire to ensure that any changes in practice support making the right decisions for children. Strong oversight of both practice and dynamic risk highlighted in the care review will continue to be crucial. Some of our most skilled and complex work

supporting families and safeguarding children is with children in need. Families' needs and risks to children are dynamic and can change very quickly.

22. One of the central themes to the government response is seeking solutions within family networks and working with strengths, responding proportionately without delay in action to safeguard children when required. The government response highlights providing early targeted support to children in their families. We recognise this will need commitment from all partners and local agencies; local authorities cannot do this alone.

Public Health Implications

23. There are only positive Public Health implications to be gained as part of this work. The entire area focuses on increasing life chances of families and children.

Procurement Implications

24. Procurement implications only arise if recommendations agreed and adopted by the Local Authority require it. At this stage this is not an active consideration.

Equalities Impact of the Proposal

25. All planned activity is given due care and attention to issues of equality and impact. An Equality Impact Assessment was completed for the Business Plan as a whole.

Environmental and Climate Change Considerations

26. No specific implications at this time.

Workforce Implications

27. Workforce implications only arise if changes to the planned activity are made.

Risks that may arise if the proposed decision is taken and actions that will be taken to manage these risks.

28. If there is a decision to change the planned activity of the directorate, the risk implication would be taken into consideration when altering the plan and the service-based risk registers would be updated during the normal quarterly cycle.

Financial Implications

29. Any change to planned activity would have to be discussed with the Finance Team to ensure it could be met within the current budgetary envelope or planned budget development.

Legal Implications

30. The legal implications of any change to planned activity, particularly any change to the delivery of statutory services, would be carefully considered and a decision made only when informed by the correct legal implications.

Proposals

31. The Committee is asked to note the position of Families and Children's Services and await further discussion once the government has responded formally to both reviews and pathfinder programmes have concluded.

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