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| <b>14 March 2023</b>  |                                 | <b>ITEM: 7</b> |
| <b>Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee</b>  |                                 |                |
| <b>Stable Homes, Built on Love: Government Implementation Strategy and Consultation on Children's Social Care Reform 2023</b> |                                 |                |
| <b>Wards and communities affected:</b><br>All   | <b>Key Decision:</b><br>Non-Key |                |
| <b>Report of:</b> Janet Simon, Assistant Director of Children's Social Care and Early Help                                    |                                 |                |
| <b>Accountable Assistant Director:</b> Janet Simon, Assistant Director of Children's Social Care and Early Help               |                                 |                |
| <b>Accountable Director:</b> Sheila Murphy, Corporate Director of Children's Services   |                                 |                |
| <b>Report is</b> Public   |                                 |                |

## Executive Summary

On the 16<sup>th</sup> June 2022, Children's Overview and Scrutiny Committee, received a report on Josh McAllister's Care Review of Children's Social Care and the National Safeguarding Panel Review of Child Protection following the deaths of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson. The report to Committee, highlighted that the findings from the child protection review identified a set of chronic challenges that get in the way of child protection work and these relate to practice and practice knowledge; system processes; leadership and culture; and wider service context.

The Care Review is presented as a once in a generation opportunity for radical change in children's social care, there were eighty recommendations which would require an investment of £2.6 billion over a five-year programme. The care review called on the government to be ambitious for children and to play a more active role in creating the conditions for success both in the design and delivery of services and for children's rights and outcomes.

The government published their response to the reviews on the 2 February, 'Stable Homes; Built on Love' with an implementation/strategy plan and consultations are through to 11 May 2023. The government implementation plan responds to recommendations made by 3 independent reviews; Josh McAlister, the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel into the tragic murders of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson, and the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) review of the children's placement market. The combined findings from these reviews revealed the current children's care system is often fragmented, siloed, and struggling to meet the needs of children and families across England. Vulnerable children will be better supported to stay with their families in safe and loving homes, as part of an overhaul of children's social care.

Backed by £200 million over the next 2 years, a new and wide-ranging children's social care implementation strategy will transform the current care system to focus on more early support for families, reducing the need for crisis response at a later stage. *Stable Homes, Built on Love: Implementation Strategy and Consultation*, sets out six pillars for reform underpinned by £200m of new investment, alongside related consultations on a new framework for children's social care and the children social care workforce.

Minister for Children, Families and Wellbeing, Claire Coutinho in introducing the consultation document said:

'Children in care deserve the same love and stability as everyone else. Our wide-ranging reforms will put strong relationships at the heart of the care system. From supporting our brilliant foster carers, kinship carers and social workers to getting early help to families and improving children's homes, we want every child to get the support and protection they need.'

## **1. Recommendation(s)**

**1.1 That the Overview & Scrutiny Committee note the contents of the Government's implementation strategy for reforms to children's social care and the potential impact these will have on service delivery over the next few years.**

**1.2 That the Overview & Scrutiny Committee note that the implementation strategy is open for consultation until 11<sup>th</sup> May 2023.**

## **2. Introduction and Background**

2.1 The Government's implementation and strategy consultation, '*Stable Homes; Built on Love*', is over 200 pages long and is a direct response to the Care Review, the National Child Protection Review and the Competition and Markets Authority review, all of which reported in 2022. The government's implementation and strategy consultation document is seen as phase one of implementing a whole system change to how children's social care will operate over the coming two to five years. Realising a new vision for children's social care requires long-term reform, underpinned by further investment and changes to legislation. Phase one will be between now and the spending review in two years' time and will seek to make immediate improvements while laying the foundations for whole system reform. Activity in phase two will be about embedding reform everywhere. This will require further investment, legislation (subject to parliamentary time) and a wider programme of support to embed the reset of the whole system envisaged within the implementation plan.

2.2 *Stable Homes, Built on Love: Implementation Strategy and Consultation* sets out six pillars for reform underpinned by £200m of new investment alongside related consultations on a new national framework for children's social care

and the child and family social worker workforce. Summary actions are as follows:

- **Pillar 1: Family help provides the right support at the right time so that families stay together** - Families will receive local early help and intervention with challenges such as addiction, domestic abuse or mental health, to help families to stay together where possible and overcome adversity. This will start in 12 local authorities and is backed by £45 million to embed a best practice model that will then be shared more widely. These 12 local areas will test a new approach to family help to provide increased, evidence-based support for families to overcome issues to prevent problems from escalating. In a welcoming and non-judgemental way, the new service will help families with issues such as domestic abuse or poor mental health, giving them access to local support with the focus on the help they need rather than bureaucratic boundaries and assessments between services and professionals.
- **Pillar 2: A decisive multi-agency child protection system** – This includes the development of a new Child Protection Lead Practitioner role and moves to strengthen leadership across multi-agency partnerships. A new Child Protection Lead Practitioner role will have advanced, specialist training, and will work in a fully joined up way with other services such as the police, to better identify and respond to significant harm. The change will mean services work more effectively to protect children from harms that happen outside of the home, such as criminal exploitation and serious violence.
- **Pillar 3: Unlocking the potential of family networks** – Actions here include the publication of a national kinship care strategy by the end of 2023, new training and support for kinship carers and testing family group decision making and Family Network Support Packages. There will be a focus on improved support and reducing barriers to kinship care, including investing £9 million in a kinship care training and support offer for all kinship carers. The government will explore the case for a new financial allowance, possible additional workplace entitlements and options for an extension of legal aid for kinship carers who become special guardians or who hold child arrangement orders.
- **Pillar 4: Putting love, relationships and a stable home at the heart of being a child in care** – Includes investment in a fostering recruitment and retention, two Regional Care Cooperative pilots, renewed focus on the quality of leadership and management in children’s homes and a universal offer of wrap around support and accommodation for all care leavers. In addition to the recruitment programme and the above inflation increase to allowances, the government is investing £30 million in family finding, befriending and mentoring programmes to support children in care and care leavers to find and maintain loving relationships. The government will also increase the leaving care allowance from £2,000 to £3,000 from April this year, an above inflation increase to help them set up home independently. For care leavers

undertaking apprenticeships, there will be an increase to the bursary available from £1000 to £3,000.

- **Pillar 5: A valued, supported and highly skilled social worker for every child who needs one** – This includes plans for a 5-year Early Career Framework for social workers, boosting social worker recruitment and retention, a National Workload Action Group plus action on the cost of, and reliance on, agency social workers (a separate consultation running concurrently). Local authorities will be supported to recruit up to 500 new child and family social worker apprentices and there will be consultation on proposals to reduce over-reliance on agency social workers. The government will also introduce a new early career framework for social workers that will make sure that social workers have the knowledge and skills they need to support and protect children.
- **Pillar 6: A system that continuously learns and improves and makes better use of evidence and data** – Includes the introduction of a Children's Social Care National Framework, supported by a data dashboard, enhancement of the Department's intervention role and offer and a new formula for children's services funding. Setting clearer direction for everyone who works in the system, through a new children's social care national framework and dashboard.

2.3 Children who grow up in loving, stable homes tend to have better outcomes, which is why the proposals put relationships at the heart of the care system and prioritise family-like placements where a child can no longer live with their parents. Recognising the transition within a family can be challenging for all involved, the government will also provide training and support to kinship carers.

2.4 Foster carers will also see an above-inflation increase in their allowance to help cover the increasing costs of caring for a child in their home. This is alongside £25 million over the next 2 years on a recruitment and retention programme, which is the largest investment in recent history, helping to attract more people to offer a loving home for children in need.

2.5 The strategy and implementation document are ambitious for reforms within children's social care. A phased approach will allow testing of the proposals before rolling out to the whole sector. There will be opportunities going forward to input before final decisions are taken regarding any changes to the way children's social care deliver services to the most vulnerable children and their families in the community.

### **3. Issues, Options and Analysis of Options**

3.1 It is positive there is a clear direction of travel following last year's reviews, the government strategy and implementation document points to a range of consultations over the coming year and a period of pathfinder and pilot activity. This is important for medium to long-term change, however, most of

the changes signalled in this strategy will not deliver results quickly. Inflation and pressures on council budgets will only compound the difficulties facing services, while the impact of the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis is increasing children's need for support every day.

There will be an opportunity for debate and review over the coming months during the consultation period. There will be significant changes in how services are delivered to and with vulnerable children and families going forward for the next generation. Committee will need updating when the pilots have started operating and at the point phase two of the reforms are being proposed.

#### **4. Reasons for Recommendation**

- 4.1 To ensure that Children's O&S is kept informed of the potential changes to the children's social care landscape both within Thurrock and across the country.

#### **5. Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)**

- 5.1 The Government consultation will close on the 11 May 2023. This will allow opportunity to input into the consultation process.

#### **6. Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community impact**

- 6.1 There will be an impact on Council Policies and performance as and when the proposals are agreed by the Government and are then developed into legislation and guidance.

#### **7. Implications**

##### **7.1 Financial**

Implications verified by: **David May**  
**Strategic Lead Finance**

Financial implications arising in 2023/24 will need to be contained within the Children Social Care budget. Growth funding of £1.432m in 2023/24 has been received for placement realignment and inflation.

Future medium- and long-term financial implications will need to be considered as part of the Medium Term Financial Strategy.

##### **7.2 Legal**

Implications verified by: **Judith Knight**  
**Interim Deputy Head of Legal (Social Care and Education)**

The report has no immediate legal implications. However, the Council needs to be mindful that the Government's Consultation contains Key Milestones (subject to the outcome of the consultation exercise): including updating Working Together to Safeguard Children Statutory Guidance and Information Sharing Guidance. The Council will need to respond to any changes in the guidance. At present the timetable for proposals on legislative reform is set for Autumn 2023 when the legal implications will become clearer.

### 7.3 **Diversity and Equality**

Implications verified by: **Becky Lee**  
**Team Manager - Community Development and Equalities. Adults, Housing and Health Directorate**

There are no direct diversity and equality implications within this report. The development of the recommendations will reshape children's social care in a way that should benefit children and families, particularly those that are vulnerable

### 7.4 **Other implications** (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health Inequalities, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder, and Impact on Looked After Children

None

### 8. **Background papers used in preparing the report** (including their location on the Council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

- None

### 9. **Appendices to the report**

- None

### **Report Author:**

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