

16 November 2023		ITEM: 7
Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee		
Update: Stable Homes, Built on Love: Government Implementation Strategy and Consultation on Children's Social Care Reform 2023		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: Non-Key	
Report of: Janet Simon, Assistant Director, Children's Social Care and Early Help		
Accountable Assistant Director: As above		
Accountable Director: Sheila Murphy, Corporate Director of Children's Services		

Executive Summary

On 2nd 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 government's 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). This report sets out the actions taken so far in implementing the Government's Strategy.

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 Overview & Scrutiny note actions taken thus far in implementing the Government Strategy.**

2. Introduction and Background

- 2.1** In 2022, a number of national reviews 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. 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 Government response and strategy. This was

based on extensive consultation including gathering the views of children, young people, families and from across the sector and wider stakeholders.

- 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 multi-agency safeguarding responses was a key recommendation.
- 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.

2.2 The Strategy sets out six pillars to transform children's social care:

- Family Help provides the right support at the right time so that children can thrive with their families.
- A decisive multi-agency child protection system.
- Unlocking the potential of family networks.
- Putting love, relationships, and a stable home at the heart of being a child in care.
- A valued, supported and highly skilled social worker for every child who needs one.
- A system that continuously learns and improves and makes better use of evidence and data.

3. Issues, Options and Analysis of Options

3.1 The strategy sets out reforms in Children's Social Care and includes a multi-agency approach to safeguarding with an emphasis on family help; engaging and supporting family networks as part of a single system; improvements to recruitment and retention of social workers and a commitment to supporting kinship carers and care leavers.

3.2 The Government is sponsoring several test and learn pathfinder programmes to test out delivery of some elements of its strategy before they are rolled out nationally.

3.3 Alongside a wide range of consultation and engagement sessions the following is a summary of actions taken thus far.

- An evaluation of the multi-agency arrangements in local areas commissioned to start in autumn 2023.
 - Multi-agency practice principles published to support responses to child exploitation and extra familial harm.
 - £10m investment to test new initiatives to reduce delays in public law cases
 - A joint Children's Social Care and Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) roundtable convened with sector experts on disability in May 2023
 - Legal aid entitlements extended to prospective guardians making applications for Special Guardianship Orders (SGO) in private family law proceedings.
 - Announcement of the first 3 areas for the Families First for Children Pathfinder
 - Bidding launched for LAs to apply for grant funding to deliver family finding, befriending, and mentoring programmes for children in care and care leavers.
 - Work with 27 local authorities to deliver the Staying Close Programme.
 - Co-designing of the Northeast Fostering Pathfinder to develop a foster care recruitment and retention programme.
 - National Minimum Allowance for Foster Carers increased by 12.43% and increased the amount of income tax relief available to foster carers.
 - Launch of the first Residential Childcare Workforce Census
 - Leaving Care Allowance and apprenticeship bursary each increased to £3,000
 - Launched the national workload action group.
 - Published a policy paper on multi-agency information sharing.
- 3.4 £45 million of funding has been made available for the Families First for Children (FFC) Pathfinders to design and test reforms set out in [Stable Homes, Built on Love](#). The pilot will prioritise family-led solutions by increasing the use of family group decision-making and testing the introduction of FNSPs.
- 3.5 Dorset, Lincolnshire and Wolverhampton Councils were announced in July 2023 as the first wave of local authority pathfinders to take part in delivering the FFC programme to run until 2025. The pilots will include the introduction of family network support packages (FNSPs) to remove any financial or practical barriers faced by families accessing services and involves designing a new model of provision which will test the implementation of reforms across 4 policy areas:
- Family Help
 - Child Protection
 - Family Networks
 - Safeguarding Partners
- 3.6 The vision as set out, is to ensure that children, families, and communities:
- Are given the opportunity to co-design and co-produce the reformed system.

- Can access one system and work with one lead practitioner, who coordinates one bespoke team around the family and co-creates one plan to support them.
 - Only need to tell their story once and experience the system as welcoming, supportive, fair, and focused on their strengths.
 - Can access strong, decisive multi-agency safeguarding arrangements to protect children and young people from harm.
- 3.7 A second wave of local areas piloting the programme is expected to launch in spring 2024 and applications to take part close on 06th November 2023. To be eligible, local authorities must:
- Be one of the top 153 upper tier local authorities.
 - Have an Ofsted rating of requires improvement or above on the last day of the application window.
 - Have multi-agency support with applications countersigned by local statutory safeguarding partners (police force and Integrated Care Board)
 - Not be subject to section 114 notice spending controls on the last day of the application window.
 - Not already be participating in the Family Networks Pilot.
 - Not exceed the upper limit of their grant funding band.
- 3.8 As part of the Strategy, the government has pledged to deliver a fostering recruitment and retention programme so foster care is available for more children who need it, investing over £27 million over the next two years. The DfE are looking to run two regional pathfinders to test creation of end-to-end improvements in the Fostering Recruitment and Retention Programme. The regions taking part will play a key role in shaping future delivery.
- 3.9 The DfE invited regions to bid to be Pathfinders and take part in a pilot project. Thurrock has joined the Eastern Region in a bid to be part of the creation of a Regional Recruitment hub to improve the recruitment and retention of Foster Carers and implementation of the 'Mockingbird' model which provides peer support for new and existing foster carers via experienced and dedicated carers who act as a hub, supporting and providing respite to other carers. This approach has been successful in stabilising placements and retaining foster carers.
- 3.10 A successful bid would mean that Thurrock Council and the Region will benefit from grant funding to support this initiative including signposting and routing applicants to their local authority supporting increased recruitment and placements locally for children. It is anticipated that this will go live in April 2024 when the successful regions have been announced.
- 3.11 In addition the strategy has recognised that young people leaving care need sufficient funds to meet their needs when they start living independently. As a result, the government have increased the amount available for the care leavers allowance from £2,000 to £3,000. In addition, the Care Leavers apprenticeship bursary will increase from £1,000 to £3,000 to give better

opportunities for care leavers to start and complete high-quality apprenticeships.

- 3.12 Thurrock CSC are well placed to work towards the principles within the strategy which already align well with many aspects of our current work. The Family Help model is aligned with the Think Family Model and the recent launch of a network of Family Hubs across Thurrock. The Service has also worked to strengthen its support to foster carers and connected carers and our offer to care leavers.
- 3.13 The use of agency social workers continues to be essential to support gaps in services where permanent staff are not retained, and determined and creative recruitment is only having a moderate impact on vacancies.
- 3.14 Review and 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 there is a strong emphasis on robust responses to referrals including from family and anonymous calls which were highlighted in that report as areas of potential weakness.
- 3.15 The service has robust arrangements including appropriate challenge 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.

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 nationally.

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

- 5.1 The Government consultation closed 11 May 2023 which provided a wide 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 there are changes and developments in legislation and guidance.

7. Implications

7.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **David May**

Head of Financial Management (Children Services and Dedicated Schools Grant)

There are significant cost implications associated with the proposals in the Government's strategy. Additional funding has been provided to local pathfinders, before wider roll out. There are aspects that will increase costs to the local authority such as care leavers support, enhancement of "Kinship" support and further support to foster carer. Consideration will need to be given if new burdens funding is to be provided to the local authority or if these costs need to be provided for within existing budget provision.

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 Response in September 2023 sets out potential legislative change in relation to disabled children.

The Children's Social Care National Framework will be issued as statutory guidance. Working Together to Safeguarding Children Statutory Guidance will be updated.

There is a proposed consultation on statutory guidance for national rules on Local Authority use of agency child and family social workers.

The Council will need to adapt its policies and procedures, as needed, to these changes.

7.3 Diversity and Equality

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

Successful implementation of the Government Strategy will improve the lives of the most vulnerable children and families in our communities.

A Community and Equality Impact Assessment on any potential changes will be undertaken as required.

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

There are implications for Children Looked After and Care Leavers in the Strategy which aims to improve their outcomes.

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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