

Children and Lifelong Learning Scrutiny Panel

DATE	02/03/2026
REPORT OF	Ann-Marie Matson, Director of Children's Services
SUBJECT	Children's Social Care Reforms
STATUS	Open

CONTRIBUTION TO OUR AIMS

Children's Social Care Reforms is a key aspect of the Stronger Communities element of the Council Plan 2025 -2028. The Council Plan recognises the importance of nurturing our children and building their future and aligns to our partnership approach of 'Our Children Our Future', where children, young people and families are at the centre of all we do.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The National Children's Social Care Reforms have been described as the biggest reform of Children's Social Care, in a generation. Multiple independent reviews and other significant publications over the past few years, have hugely influenced the proposed reforms.

The 'Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill' is currently going through parliamentary processes, and once it has received Royal Assent it will place the Children's Social Care Reform recommendations into legislation.

Ahead of formal legislation, the Department for Education commenced a national rollout of the Family First Partnership Programme from April 2025. Nationally, all Local Authorities were required to submit a local area delivery plan in June 2025, to the Department for Education, followed by a further iteration focused on planning and implementation, in December 2025. Both submissions were met for North East Lincolnshire. The expectation is that full implementation of all elements of the Family First Partnership Programme has taken place by March 2027.

Since July 2025, North East Lincolnshire has made significant progress in socialising, engaging and co-designing our local approach to meet the requirements of the Family First Partnership Programme. We are building on our solid foundations and strong partnerships to shape and influence the opportunities to further develop our services, support and interventions. The key focus is on a child centred, relational approach, with prevention, early identification and multi-agency working at the core.

For the wider reforms, we are focused on reviewing and strengthening our Fostering and Kinship Care offer, our integrated care leaver offer and ensuring SEND is a golden thread throughout.

We have strong engagement from all system partners and continue to shape and develop our future model of delivery, to ensure positive experiences, impacts and outcomes for our children, young people and families.

MATTERS FOR CONSIDERATION

This report seeks to provide an update and assurance to Scrutiny members on what the National Children's Social Care Reforms are and why they are important. The report provides a synopsis of the key headlines regarding the reforms, with a specific focus on the Family First Partnership Programme. It includes an overview of our local area approach and actions to date, enabling panel members to understand and seek assurances on how the reforms will have a positive impact on the experiences and outcomes for our children, young people and families.

1. BACKGROUND AND ISSUES

1.1 The National Children's Social Care Reforms have derived from a number of recommendations within independent reviews and reports and have been described as the biggest reform of Children's Social Care in a generation. The reforms are focused on:

- Providing earlier help to families, via strong partnerships, that work together in a family first approach to reduce escalation of needs
- Enabling children to remain safely at home with family support
- Improving the outcomes and experiences for children and families
- Improving practitioner experience and greater job satisfaction
- Promoting holistic, consistent support for children and families from the right person at the right time

Key publications influencing the reforms have included the Independent Review of Children's Social Care by Josh MacAlister and the review into the tragic deaths of Star Hobson and Arthur Labinjo-Huges, both published in May 2022.

1.2 At the time, the Department for Education responded to these recommendations and published its strategy, 'Stable Homes, Built on Love' in February 2023, which set out a range of proposed reforms for Children's Social Care, many of which require a whole system response to safeguard, help and protect children. These were further developed under the 'Keeping Children Safe, Helping Families Thrive' policy in 2024.

1.3 In 2024, the government began the process of placing the Children's Social Care Reforms and Recommendations into legislation, highlighting their importance within the proposed 'Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill' which is currently going through parliament. It had its 3rd reading in the House of Lords on the 9th February 2026 and has now been passed back to the House of Commons with amendments, which require approval, prior to Royal Assent.

1.4 In January 2026, a vote was passed in parliament regarding amendment 17, which called for a pause to the Multi-Agency Child Protection Team element coming into force, until a full evaluation of the pathfinder test sites has been clearly evidenced. This will be further debated in the House of Commons, however the Department of Education guidance is to continue the planning of Multi-Agency Child Protection Teams whilst we await any further update.

1.5 The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill draws together the recommendations from the numerous publications referenced above, to provide a key step towards delivering the Children's Social Care reforms and the governments mission to break the link between young people's background and their future success.

1.6 The Bill is split into three parts:

- Part 1 – Children’s Social Care and Safeguarding
- Part 2 – Schools Related
- Part 3 – General Provision and Finance

1.7 The main themes of the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill are:

- To make a government that puts children first
- Keeping families together and safe
- To support children with care experience to thrive
- Crack down on excessive profit making
- Drive high and rising standards for every child
- Remove barriers to opportunity in schools
- Create a safer and higher-quality education system for every child

1.8 In order to test certain elements of the reforms, the Department for Education established the ‘Families First for Children Pathfinder Programme’ in July 2023, where 12 pathfinder sites were enlisted to develop and trial ways of working relating to: Family Help, Child Protection and Family Networks.

1.9 Following the early learning from these 12 pathfinder sites, and backed by government investment, the Department for Education has commenced a national rollout of the Family First Partnership Programme, which commenced in April 2025.

1.10 The key aims of the Family First Partnership Programme are to transform the whole system of help, support and protection, to ensure that every family can access the right multiagency help and support when they need it, with a strong emphasis on prevention and early intervention to prevent crisis. All aspects of the Family First Partnership Programme are within the context of the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Bill.

1.11 The Family First Partnership Programme comprises of three key reform strands, these are: Family Help, Multi-Agency Child Protection Teams and Family Group Decision Making.

Progress to date

1.12 Over recent months, significant progress has been made in establishing the foundations required to deliver the Families First Partnership Programme. Interim strategic capacity has been secured, alongside dedicated part time senior capacity from Humberside Police and the Integrated Care Board. Additionally, identification of in-kind resources, to ensure effective planning and implementation has been sought.

1.13 Robust governance arrangements are now in place, including key forums and task-and-finish groups aligned to each of the Family First Partnership Programme pillars, as well as the wider reform subgroups. Lead roles for each of the three pillars have been identified across Children’s Social Care and key partner organisations, strengthening shared ownership of the reforms.

- 1.14 A baseline assessment for the Family First Partnership Programme was completed as part of our initial delivery plan submission in June 2025, with an updated implementation plan submitted to the DfE in December 2025. This work has been supported by the development of a detailed project plan and a communication and engagement plan, to ensure clarity and cohesion across the system.
- 1.15 A successful partnership-wide launch and co-design event introduced the programme requirements in September 2025, with a further event scheduled for 2 April 2026, where we will report on progress to date and continue building our relational practice culture. Since September, several deep-dive sessions have also taken place, involving system partners in shaping the new models required for transformation.
- 1.16 Additionally, we have undertaken a detailed review of our insights and intelligence into the voice of our children, young people and families, to ensure we are placing their views and experiences at the centre of our continued transformation journey.
- 1.17 We have drafted delivery models for all three pillars of the Family First Partnership Programme, which have been co-designed with system partners. Our Family Group Decision Making model will begin an iterative process from Spring 2026, once we have the necessary training, policies and procedures in place.
- 1.18 For Family Help we are planning a test and learn pilot within one of our localities as we continue to evolve the model and for Multi-Agency Child Protection Teams we continue to make progress with regards to our delivery model and pathways, whilst having a watching brief on the national picture.
- 1.19 The wider reforms cover Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), Kinship and Foster Care, Care Leavers and Care Experienced Children, alongside a substantial element for Schools, all of which we are progressing with leadership and transformation oversight via the Children's Assurance Partnerships and Evaluation (CAPE) Service, due to them being inextricably linked. They are also accountable through relevant partnership governance and reporting arrangements.
- 1.20 We are awaiting publication of the expected SEND national reforms. Prior to then we are progressing with a Local Area Partnership Maturity Assessment Tool that has been shared by the DfE. This will enable us to understand where we are as a local system, against the principles of the expected SEND reforms and begin early planning regarding the expected changes ahead. A subgroup has been established to specifically focus on these aspects which feeds into both the reforms governance and the SENDAP Partnership Board arrangements.
- 1.21 There is significant pace behind progressing our updated local Kinship Care offer and arrangements. This includes reviewing our current offer, extending the support where feasible, promoting Kinship Care across the system, supporting early identification of family networks more robustly and strengthening our engagement with Kinship carers. This is a significant workstream but is essential to supporting our ethos of enabling children and young people to remain within or close to their family network.

1.22 Other workstreams include improving our integrated care leaver hub offer, to ensure it meets the needs of our young people, remains inclusive and encompasses all relevant sectors across our partnership. For example, housing, health and employment are all critical to supporting and enabling our care leavers to live rich and fulfilled lives.

1.23 Through our collaborative approach, we have identified next steps as follows:

- Continue working up the new modelling based on the co-design work undertaken to date for the Family First Partnership Programme, with test and learn opportunities commencing in year
- Children's Services and whole partnership workforce engagement events to continue throughout the year. The next key events are planned for April 2026 with a focus on relational practice, with care and belonging at the core of our culture
- Continue to progress the Kinship Care, Foster Care and Integrated Care Leaver Hub offers at pace
- Complete the Local Area Maturity Assessment Tool and develop a plan to ensure we are in the strongest position possible when the SEND Reforms are published
- Ensure we maintain strong governance arrangements across all the interconnecting workstreams, as part of the Reforms agenda
- Keep a watching brief on the Children Wellbeing and Schools Bill, as this progresses for Royal Assent in 2026

2. RISKS, OPPORTUNITIES AND EQUALITY ISSUES

2.1 All risks and opportunities are identified and managed through the reforms governance arrangements and are documented, mitigated against and escalated as required. Exceptions are reported to the Safeguarding Children's Partnership Board or other relevant Board such as SENDAP or the Corporate and Community Parenting Board.

2.2 There is a significant risk to achieving the requirements set out within the reforms if we do not have the right level of input and engagement from across the whole system. However, this risk is being mitigated by the work undertaken thus far, to ensure the proposals are co-designed with all the relevant people and agencies. So far, the internal and partnership engagement has been exemplary.

3. REPUTATION AND COMMUNICATIONS CONSIDERATIONS

3.1 As part of the project planning, a communication and engagement plan has been developed, with regular briefings, engagement and co-design work being a critical component of everything that we do.

3.2 Staff across the Children's Services workforce receive a weekly briefing on the progress of the reforms work and there have been and will continue to be a focus on partner organisations disseminating key messages across their workforce at regular periods, alongside receiving the SCP quarterly briefing which includes updates on the reforms.

- 3.3 Children, young people and families are also part of our communication and engagement plan to ensure that we listen to the voice of those we are serving and take their feedback into consideration in terms of any changes to our ways of working.
- 3.4 All communication and engagement work will be an ongoing process as we move towards implementation in 2026, ensuring two-way feedback and communication loops to aid reflection, learning and adjustments as required.

4. FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

- 4.1 All Local Authorities have received funding via the Children's Social Care Prevention Grant, with funding specifically allocated to support the transformation of services in targeted family help, children in need and child protection activity. The grant should also be utilised to support changes to family group decision making in line with the new planned legislative changes in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill.
- 4.2 Additionally, a one-off grant allocation was provided in 2025 - 2026, which is specifically ring fenced for the Families First Partnership Programme transformation activity. There are specific grant determinations that must be met regarding utilisation of this funding, which includes co-design, working with partners and expectations for transformation of services.
- 4.3 We have received confirmation of the grant allocation for the two grants referenced above for 2026-2027 and the following two financial years, which have been amalgamated into one funding stream.

5. CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The Children's Reforms are all focused on improving the outcomes and experiences of children, young people and families as outlined in this paper.
- 5.2 Some of the key outcomes expected are:
- Children and families are empowered in family led decision making. They create family led plans, have a strong voice and are heard
 - Children are supported to remain with their families or within their extended family network, where safe and appropriate to do so.
 - Children's and families get coordinated, holistic and consistent help at the right time, from the right people
 - Families are supported by consistent, trusting relationships with minimal changes of worker
 - The workforce can meet the diverse needs of a diverse age of children, families and communities.
 - Children are supported by their family and community network
 - Families have positive experiences of help and support where they feel listened to and treated with dignity, respect, compassion and care
 - Children benefit from an inclusive education system that meets their diverse needs

6. CLIMATE CHANGE, NATURE RECOVERY AND ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

6.1 There are no known climate change or negative environmental implications arising from the matters in this report

7. FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

7.1 As described in section 4, there is specific grant funding to support these Reforms, and we are now aware of the three year funding allocation.

8. MONITORING COMMENTS

8.1 In the opinion of the author, this report does not contain recommended changes to policy or resources (people, finance or physical assets). As a result no monitoring comments have been sought from the Council's Monitoring Officer (Chief Legal Officer), Section 151 Officer (Director of Finance) or Strategic Workforce Lead.

9. WARD IMPLICATIONS

9.1 All wards will be impacted

10. BACKGROUND PAPERS

10.1 Not applicable

11. CONTACT OFFICER(S)

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