

People and Health Overview Committee

29 October 2024

Families First for Children Pathfinder Update

For Decision

Cabinet Member and Portfolio:

Cllr. C Sutton, Children's Services, Education & Skills

Local Councillor(s):

All

Executive Director:

P Dempsey, Executive Director of People - Children

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Report Status: Public (the exemption paragraph is N/A)

Brief Summary:

This report is an update to the People and Health Overview Committee on Children's Services implementation of the Families First for Children Pathfinder Programme.

Recommendation:

It is recommended that members consider the content of the report and support our on-going participation in the Families First for Children Pathfinder programme.

Reason for Recommendation:

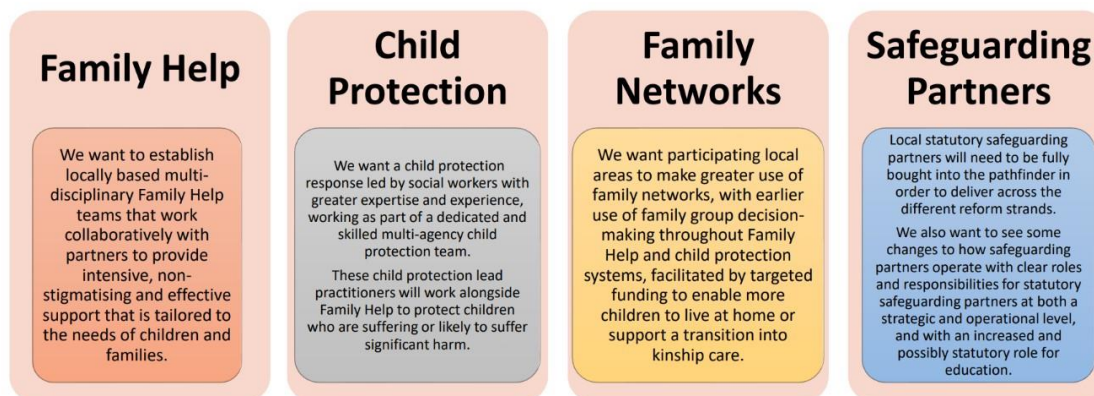
Participation in the Pathfinder programme is a huge opportunity for Dorset to shape the transformation that is required in children's social care, to secure DfE funding to support the required change, and for our children and families to benefit from the reforms sooner rather than later.

1. **Background**

- 1.1 The Independent Review of Children's Social Care published its final report in May 2022. The Review was described as a "once-in-a-generation opportunity" to set out a bold and broad plan to improve outcomes for children and families. The big question it sought to answer was: How do we ensure children grow up in loving, stable, and safe families and, where that is not possible, that care provides the same foundations?
- 1.2 The review found the current system to be increasingly skewed towards crisis intervention, with outcomes for children unacceptably poor, and costs continuing to rise. It reported that without a 'radical reset' of the whole system, outcomes will remain poor, and in a decade's time the children in care population will have increased from 80,000 to 100,000, and costs will increase to £15billion from £10billion now.
- 1.3 'Stable Homes, Built on Love', published in February 2023, is the Government's strategy for implementing the recommendations of the Review.
- 1.4 The Strategy sets out six pillars to transform children's social care. These are as follows:
 - 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.
- 1.5 The Government is sponsoring several test and learn pathfinder programmes to test out delivery of some elements of its strategy before they roll it out nationally. Dorset is one of 12 (3 x wave 1, & 9 x wave 2) local authorities nationally who have been selected to deliver the Families First for Children Pathfinder Programme. This Pathfinder involves

designing a new model of provision to deliver the following elements of the strategy:

There are **four key reform strands** to the Families First for Children pathfinder that will be delivered as a whole system transformation. There will be minimum requirements alongside local flexibility and delivery questions to be worked through via co-design.



In summary, the ambitions of the Pathfinder are to deliver:

- Deeper integration and partnerships in child protection and family help.
 - More support and help to families early, preventing crisis.
 - Support to enable families and family networks to make their own decisions and plans to keep children safe.
 - An enhanced safeguarding role for education at the strategic level
- 1.6 From August to December 2023, we undertook a co-design process to agree our proposed delivery model for the Pathfinder reforms. This exercise was carried out in collaboration with Children’s Services staff, the wider council, and partnership colleagues. The model has also been built in line with the views and lived experience of our children, young people, and families.
- 1.7 Our delivery plan was submitted to and agreed with the Department for Education in December 2023.
- 1.8 In February 2024, we presented an update report to the People and Health overview committee outlining our delivery plan (please see previous report for further detail).

- 1.9 Since February 2024, we have been implementing the commitments we made through a structured plan. This report provides a detailed, up to date position on the current state of the delivery of the programme, broken down by specific workstreams/pillars.
- 1.10 The evaluation of the Pathfinder will be conducted both locally and nationally to assess the impact of the reforms and inform both local and national future policy/legislation. We intend to report back to this committee in Quarter 4 of the 2024/2025 financial year with an overview of the impact of the Pathfinder to date and our longer-term plans for delivery of services alongside any increased/changed financial settlement from central government to support us.

2. **Overview of the implementation of the Families First for Children Pathfinder model.**

2.1 **Family Help reforms**

- 2.1.1 Our enhanced locality staff structures for Family Help went live on the 17th June 2024 including new Family Help duty systems and Family Help Line of Sight meetings ensuring social work oversight to Family Help practice, a requirement of the reforms.
- 2.1.2 We have enhanced our integrated front door with increased Family Help expertise in the form 4 additional Family workers.
- 2.1.3 DEAL (Dorset Education and Advice Line with SEND expertise) integration also went live on the 20th May 2024.
- 2.1.4 Our Family Help Practice Lead is now in post and working alongside locality managers and their teams to implement enhanced family help ways of working including the role of Family Help Lead Practitioners.
- 2.1.5 We have partnered with Dorset Voluntary and Community Sector Assembly to commission an external provider (Daybreak) to deliver Family Network Meetings in the Early Support/Community space.
- 2.1.6 We are developing an innovative collaboration between Homestart, Dorpip and Dorset Mind to offer enhanced

Perinatal Mental Health and Parent Infant Relationships provision through our Family Hub Network.

2.2 Family Networks reforms

- 2.2.1 Our local Family Networks Strategy sets out how we intend to deliver the Family Networks reforms. This strategy was signed off in March 2024 and communicated to staff in May 2024.
- 2.2.2 We are going through a period of consultation on our new Connected Person's Service which will go-live before the end of the year. A joint decision has been made between Dorset Council and Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council to separate the financial contributions currently made to Aspire Regional Adoption Agency to undertake Special Guardianship Order (SGO) work. This work will transfer to the new Connected Person's Service.
- 2.2.3 Our internal Family Group Conference (FGC) Service went live on 1st June 2024. Through the Pathfinder we have recruited 1x FGC Manager and 7x FGC co-ordinators. The staff have been trained and have delivered upwards of 50 FGC's so far.
- 2.2.4 Our approach to Family Network Meetings (FNM) went live in July 2024. Our grade 10 Family workers have been trained in the FGC approach and are leading and modelling the rollout of FNM training across the locality teams.
- 2.2.5 Family Network Support Packages are live with clear financial guidance and local tracking / monitoring processes in place.
- 2.2.6 Work on a pre-proceedings pilot with the Family Rights Group continues, the ambitions of which align closely with the Families First for Children Pathfinder. It is anticipated that elements of the pilot will be focusing on establishing ways in which families with experience of the child welfare system may be involved in service design/developments. As well as some focused work relating to the local kinship care population and strengthening understanding of kinship care across the whole local family justice area.

2.3 Child Protection reforms

- 2.3.1 Since April 2024, we have been piloting a new approach to Child Protection Conferencing in one of our localities (Dorchester and West). We have presented our findings from the pilot to the Department for Education and are now moving to implement learning across Dorset.
- 2.3.2 Our Multi-Agency Child Protection Operational Board has been in place since April 2024. This group is focussing on enhancing the effectiveness of child protection through collaborative multi-agency effort, focusing on coordination, leadership, and continuous improvement in practice. It is attended by a wide range of partners including Health, Police and Education representatives
- 2.3.3 Multi-Agency Child Protection Teams went live on 17th June 2024 supported by Multi-agency Child Protection Team Line of Sight meetings.

2.4 Safeguarding Partners reforms

- 2.4.1 The inaugural meeting of the Dorset Education Safeguarding Board took place on Monday 15th July 2024 with good attendance and engagement. We are now in the phase of testing and learning our agreed initial arrangements and will be closely aligning evaluation to enable us to understand impact
- 2.4.2 The strategic partners for Dorset have agreed new arrangements for the Dorset Safeguarding Children Partnership in line with Working Together to Safeguarding Children 2023. Changes have been reported to and approved by Dorset Council Cabinet and partnership governance bodies.

2.5 System reform / enabling functions

2.5.1 **MOSAIC / Case Management Systems (CMS)**

Staff structures have been updated on our case management system, MOSAIC, to reflect the enhanced locality structures that went live on 17th June 2024. The remainder of service critical changes to CMS systems will go

live on 7th October including but not limited to; a single assessment and plan for Children, Young people and families, and updates to support work at our integrated 'Front Door'.

2.5.2 **Workforce development**

Across May 2024, locality staff were inducted into the new Pathfinder model. These whole day sessions provided comprehensive training in Family Help, Child Protection, Education Safeguarding, Quality Assurance, Kinship Service, Pathfinder Learning Programme, Integrated Front Door and Family Networks. A suite of other learning is also being delivered to complement and support the Pathfinder model through specific sessions examples of which include; Whole Family Working, Family Led Decision Making, Parent Assess Training. We have also stood up a local Level 4 Apprenticeship in Family Work and are proactively campaigning (the DfE) for a national standard / apprenticeship and professional development route for family work.

In addition to internal workforce development, there are several partner inductions that have taken place over the summer and early autumn including Health, Police and Voluntary and Community Sector partners.

2.5.3 **Recruitment**

We have recruited circa 70 new staff across several functions as part of the enhanced Pathfinder model. Most of these roles are being supported by the Pathfinder Grant funding which has allowed us to expand. New / increased roles include:

- Educational Psychologists
- Assistant Team Managers (Social Work Qualified)
- Assistant Team Managers (Contextual Safeguarding)
- Family Workers
- SEND case workers
- Service Managers (Inclusion and belonging)
- Social Workers

- Youth Support Workers
- Business Support
- Youth Voice workers

2.5.4 **Programme Evaluation**

Evaluation of the Families First for Children Pathfinder consists of three main strands:

a) Project specific evaluations tailored to test specific interventions – for example the impact of the reforms (on staff, partner agencies and families) of the Child Protection Conference pilot. These reforms are centred around the modernisation of conferences - making them more family friendly, testing the social worker chairing the conference and the advice and guidance role offered to the family as the Section 47 (child protection) process begins. Other projects underway include setting a baseline for education being an equal partner in safeguarding, the impact of Family Group Conference and Family Network Support Packages.

b) A baseline case sampling of the overarching themes of the Pathfinder and it is envisaged this work may be repeated in the Springtime to determine any change.

c) Tracking case studies through the Pathfinder as families progress through their journey – so for example speaking to a family that took part in a Family Network Meeting, produced a plan and then monitoring the impact of the plan over time. Similarly interviews with staff (and a staff survey) has taken place to gain the staff perspective on the changes.

We will report back to this committee on the full programme evaluation and specific learning / impact we are evidencing as the Pathfinder model beds in, however ahead of a more detailed impact assessment, there are already some emerging points of learning that speak to families / practitioners' experience of the enhanced model:

- There is positive feedback from families regarding consistency of worker. As cases move from Early Help to Child in Need for example, the Family Help Lead

Practitioner will continue to hold the relationship with the family.

- Professionals from our locality Family Help Teams report a culture of professional recognition and respect. Our Family Help Teams are made up of professionals from a multitude of backgrounds, including social work and the team members recognise and respect those mixed backgrounds and the positive effect the multi-disciplinary knowledge has in working with children, young people and families.
- Through recent reflective sessions with the workforce, we have gained some feedback on how they feel about the model (selected quotes below)
 - *“I am an early help worker with 23+ yrs experience. The new format works well, there is seamless co-ordination and it has made my life easier as a worker. I get consistent advice and response from managers”*
 - *“I started in Dorset 5 months ago (Family Worker). I have learned so much from SW qualified members of team and I now feel confident and empowered to deal with more complex cases”*
- As above, there is some emerging feedback from non-social work qualified staff, that they are feeling more confident and empowered to work with increased levels of complexity (i.e. Section 17 child in need work which would previously have been held by Social Workers).
- Having experienced and skilled family workers who are permanently based at the Front Door has given more consistency in decision making and their soft skills, upskilling all staff.
- There is a lot of emerging learning about our new in-house Family Group Conference (FGC) service that has been sourced through qualitative family feedback:

- Families appreciated the informal, relaxed nature of the conference, with many mentioning that the set-up, including refreshments and the location, helped ease nerves.
 - Communication with the FGC coordinator prior to the meeting was helpful in preparing participants.
 - The majority of participants felt that the family network played a significant role in the process, with the focus remaining on the child's needs throughout.
 - The child's voice was well-represented, either directly or through advocates, ensuring that the child's welfare remained the focal point of discussions.
 - Most respondents believed the plan developed during the conference was genuinely family-led, with family members contributing their ideas and solutions. This sense of ownership fostered optimism about the plan's success.
 - The role of the independent coordinator was viewed positively, particularly by families with prior social worker involvement. The coordinator's impartiality and ability to lead the proceedings in a clear and supportive manner were highly valued.
 - Feedback indicated that the conferences were well-organized, with families generally satisfied with the outcomes. Many participants expressed surprise at how productive and supportive the process was, emphasizing the collaborative nature of the conference.
- We continue to test and learn through our Child Protection Case Conferencing Pilot. High-level learning so far includes:
 - **Improved Family Engagement:** Families felt more supported, particularly through pre-

conference visits and the new approach of co-producing child protection plans. The process became less authoritarian, with families reporting it felt more like a collaborative effort.

- **Enhanced Understanding and Participation:** The QARO's (Quality Assurance and Reviewing Officer) pre-conference contact increased family awareness of their rights and involvement in the process, leading to better understanding and cooperation.
- **Support for Modernisation:** The introduction of simplified reports, the use of screens to display plans during meetings, and the increased inclusion of family members were well-received.

- There is also lots of emerging learning and positive news relating to partners (health, police and education) experience of the new model including:

- **Thematic Learning and Positive Outcomes:**

The Child Protection Conference Pilot and broader efforts in Dorset's Child Protection reforms have demonstrated significant improvements in multi-agency collaboration, enhancing the overall effectiveness of child safeguarding efforts. Partner organisations, including Health, Police, and Education, have positively contributed to the success of these reforms.

- **Improved Multi-Agency Collaboration:**

Across all child protection processes, partner organisations collaborated closely in various forums, including Multi-Agency Child Protection Team (MACPT) meetings and Line of Sight reviews. This collaboration fostered shared decision-making, ensuring that each partner's professional input was valued and contributed to more robust, holistic plans for children and families. The involvement of multiple perspectives in these meetings strengthened decision-making processes and helped create a united approach to safeguarding.

- **Family-Centred and Collaborative Approach:**

A key success was the shift toward a more family-friendly approach, where partner organisations worked together to empower families rather than imposing solutions. This was evident in the way family members were engaged in decision-making, particularly through Family Group Conferences (FGCs), where families were given the opportunity to lead in creating their own plans. This collaborative ethos was appreciated by both professionals and families, as it fostered a sense of ownership and responsibility for the outcomes, ultimately leading to better engagement and more realistic, actionable plans.

- **Enhanced Professional Relationships:**

The reforms promoted stronger, trust-based relationships between professionals from partner organisations, which helped facilitate open dialogue and positive professional challenge. This collaborative spirit was critical in ensuring that different agencies were aligned in their efforts to safeguard children, and that decisions were made collectively with a clear understanding of each partner's perspective. Thematic learnings showed that this collective ownership of safeguarding decisions reduced conflict and enhanced the quality of interventions.

- **Efficient Service Delivery and Innovation:**

Several operational innovations were implemented during the reforms, such as the inclusion of School Nurses in health assessments, virtual participation of Police Officers in Child Protection Conferences, and streamlined processes for sharing plans and reports in real-time. These innovations were well-received by partner organisations as they enabled more efficient service delivery without compromising the quality of support provided to families. These changes reduced administrative burdens while maintaining focus on the child's wellbeing.

- **Positive Outcomes for Families:**

Partner organisations consistently reported that families responded well to the new collaborative approaches. The emphasis on co-production of child protection plans, supported by clear communication and preparation prior to meetings, was noted as a key strength. Families felt heard and involved, which increased their trust in the process and their commitment to follow through with agreed-upon actions. This, in turn, led to stronger family outcomes, as the plans were more likely to reflect the family's needs and capabilities.

- We continue to closely monitor our statutory reporting and local key performance indicators. Whilst it is too early to draw long term conclusions from changes to practice and data, positively since June:
 - There has been a sharp increase in the timeliness of assessments, both for those at Early Help (from 65% in June to 88% in August) and for child in need (84% in June to 91% in August) indicating that children and families are getting support more quickly.
 - It is also positive to note that overall caseloads appear to have reduced. Whilst we know that averages can be impacted by a range of factors, both the average across localities and the maximum number held has reduced for both Lead Family Support Workers and Lead Social Workers. Reduced caseloads are part of the vision for our Pathfinder model, providing practitioners with the capacity needed to deepen integration with partner agencies and work with family networks to fully embed the practice approaches of the Pathfinder reforms.

3. Financial Implications

3.1 Participation in the Pathfinder has presented an opportunity to secure a level of DfE funding to undertake the change and development work required that would have been unlikely to be available for other authorities.

3.2 Our final costed plan that was submitted to the DfE included detail of how we intend to use the grant funding to deliver the Pathfinder reforms and includes:

- Seconding/backfilling roles in police/health to support development of the programme and deeper integration
- New/additional roles in the Multi-Agency Family Help and Child Protection spaces (examples include, family help workers, youth practitioners, advanced practitioners)
- Programme management roles
- Enhancements to the learning and development offer for staff in line with the new model
- Commissioning services differently (e.g., in the early support space).

3.3 The total funding we will receive for the programme is £4,897,346.

3.4 The grant funding allocation runs to the end of 2024/25, and we have costed up to this point. We also expect increased funding to continue for 2025/26 and beyond to account for the costs of delivering the Government's Strategy thereafter. We have been engaging regularly on this with the Department for Education and await the outcome of the spending review.

4. Natural Environment, Climate & Ecology Implications

4.1 There are no implications for the environment, climate, and ecology other than that there may be benefits that may arise from a reduction in cross country travel if this strategy is successful in creating more local care placements for Dorset and for other authorities around the country.

5. Well-being and Health Implications

5.1 The aim of the Government Strategy is to improve the lives, and the health and wellbeing of children, young people, and families. Successful delivery of the strategy in Dorset will bring improvements to the health and wellbeing of our children, families, and communities.

6. Other Implications

- 6.1 Participation in the Pathfinder puts Dorset on the national stage, leading the implementation of a national strategy and with a responsibility and an expectation that we will thereafter support others on their own implementation journey.
- 6.2 There has been a reshape of some existing roles within our locality structures, predominantly a change in portfolio responsibility. There have been no contractual changes as a result.

7. Risk Assessment

HAVING CONSIDERED: the risks associated with this decision; the level of risk has been identified as:

Current Risk: Low
Residual Risk: Low

8. Equalities Impact Assessment

- 8.1 The EQIA for the programme was signed of in April 2024 and is included as appendix 1.

9. Appendices

- 9.1 Appendix 1 – EqIA FFCP Full programme October 2024

10. Background Papers

[Stable Homes, Built on Love: Implementation Strategy and Consultation](#)

[Working together updated guidance](#)

[National social care strategy](#)

[Kinship care national strategy](#)

[Digital and data strategy](#)

11. Report Sign Off

- 11.1 This report has been through the internal report clearance process and has been signed off by the Director for Legal and Democratic (Monitoring Officer), the Executive Director for Corporate Development (Section 151 Officer) and the appropriate Portfolio Holder(s).