

Children's Social Care Services Strategic Reform Programme

Delivery Plan 2024/25



Children's Social Care Services
Reform Programme



DoH

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Introduction

This Delivery Plan sets out the background to the establishment of the Children's Social Care Services Strategic Reform Programme, including the association with the Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services, the organisation around the programme, what it aims to achieve and what its key priorities will be across all of its workstreams in 2024/2025.

Background and Context

The Children's Services Strategic Reform Programme was established in April 2023 in advance of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services reporting with the intention of locating responsibility for implementing some Review recommendations with the Programme. The Programme is organised around the range of issues that gave rise to the Review and were confirmed by it:

- Children on a waiting list for social work services;
- Workforce challenges, including a combined high rate of staff vacancy and staff absence in some social work teams and associated recruitment and retention difficulties;
- Placement capacity issues associated with the rising numbers of children in care;
- Challenges within foster care, including recruitment and retention challenges;
- Challenges facing children with a disability services, including a shortage of short break care options and transitions difficulties;
- Working more effectively and in partnership with the children's voluntary and community sector, potentially developing different funding models [this strand of work was initiated following the publication of the review report];
- Legislative and Policy reform. This strand of work is primarily focused on implementation of the Adoption and Children Act (NI) 2022 and the Strategy for Looked After Children, A Life Deserved. Any policy or legislative changes to support wider reform will also be

channelled initially through this strand of work;

- Reducing Unnecessary Bureaucracy;
- Providing a better family support offer to prevent family hardship and breakdown and to stem the flow of children into statutory children's services.

The Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services

The Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services was conducted over a 16-month period commencing in February 2022 and concluding on 21 June 2023 with the publication of the Review Report. The Review was led by Professor Ray Jones, assisted by a panel of experts.

The Review Report made 53 recommendations along a broad continuum ranging from the establishment of a new Children and Families ALB and appointment of a Minister for Children through to hosting an annual conference. The Department categorised the recommendations as follows:

- **Guiding Principles.** They include recommendations relating to proceeding at pace and without drift or delay; the need to consult, engage and involve children and families in decision-making; the need to provide more help for families, to avoid privatization of children's social care and to recognise the value of the contribution made by foster carers in Northern Ireland.
- **Service Development/Improvement.** There are recommendations relating to the development of new services, to providing better and different services, the need for a service reset towards family support and there are recommendations specific to the Sure Start Programme (which is the policy responsibility of the Department of Education (DE)) and to a number of regional facilities.
- **Structure/Governance.** The Family and Children's ALB and Minister for Children are within this group. They also relate to how the Department a recommendation around budgets, multi-professional/agency front-line teams; and internal team structures.

This group also includes a recommendation relating to the encompass computer system.

- **Workforce.** This includes recommendations relating to grading and banding structures; post-qualifying development programmes; skills mix within teams; recruitment processes; focus on retention; trainee social work role and qualification route.
- **Making and Tracking Progress.** This includes hosting an annual conference and a recommendation to make decisions and to have actions initiated within six months.
The programme will take full account of the outcome of the Review of Children’s Social Care Services, will take forward relevant recommendations and will be guided across all its workstreams by the guiding principles outlined above.

Programme Aim

The programme will seek to deliver reform within children’s social care services to address a range of known service challenges, particularly in relation to the increasing volume and complexity of case work.

Programme Structure

The Reform Programme is overseen by a Programme Board, which includes among its membership senior leaders in children’s social care within the Department (across policy, professional and commissioning groups), Health and Social Care Trusts and other Departmental ALBs – PHA, NISCC, RQIA and CCGANI. The Departments of Education and Justice, TUS and the VCS are also represented.

Nine workstreams have been established to deliver transformation within children’s social care services in response to identified pressures as follows:

Workstream No.	Workstream Activity	Lead
1.	Waiting Lists: To identify the root causes of waiting lists across children’s social care services and to test proposals / solutions under this workstream against the causes identified.	Catherine Cassidy, DOH (SPPG); Maura Dargan, NHSCT
2.	Children’s Social Care Workforce: To develop and improve support for the children’s social care workforce.	Aine Morrison, DOH (OSS); Marian O’Rourke, NISCC
3.	Residential Placement Capacity: To understand children’s residential needs and the residential capacity in Northern Ireland and develop a sufficiency and sustainability strategy based on need, capacity and reform which will improve outcomes for children. The Workstream will provide an evidence base to inform reform and a future commissioning framework that will improve the quality of service delivery and outcomes for Looked After Children in Residential Care.	Catherine Cassidy, DOH (SPPG); Kerry-Lee Weatherall, BHSCCT

Workstream No.	Workstream Activity	Lead
4.	Fostering: To develop a foster care strategy that delivers better support for foster carers, increases recruitment and retention of foster carers and promotes placement stability.	Catherine Cassidy, DOH (SPPG), DOH; Colm McCafferty, SHSCT
5.	Children with a Disability: To enhance the support offered to children with disabilities and their families and reduce variation in social work services across the region.	Ciara McKillop, DOH (SPPG)/Lyn Preece, SEHSCT
6.	Reset and Rebalance: To serve our children, young people and families collectively better, through a partnership between the Reimagine Children's Collective and the Department of Health and reset the dynamics between statutory bodies and voluntary and community organisations towards greater collaboration and mutual support.	Eilís McDaniel, DOH (Policy); Michele Janes, Barnardo's NI

Workstream No.	Workstream Activity	Lead
7.	Policy and Legislative Reform: To implement legislative and policy reforms aimed at improving outcomes for children known to social services and their families, primarily through the implementation of the Adoption and Children Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 and the DoH-led policy commitments within the Life Deserved Strategy for Looked After Children.	Eilís McDaniel, DOH (Policy)
8.	Reducing Bureaucracy: To eliminate unnecessary bureaucracy in order to free up staff to allow them more time to engage directly with children, young people and families.	Ciara McKillop, DOH (SPPG); Tom Cassidy, WHSCT
9.	Supporting Families: To create a responsive model of family support for Northern Ireland, supported across departments to improve outcomes for children, young people and families.	Tom Cassidy, WHSCT; Jacinda Linden, Bolster Community

Financial Context

The Reform Programme is taking place within a significantly constrained financial context. As such, the workstreams are progressing activities within existing resources. It is acknowledged that while much of the proposed work for 2024/25 may be achieved through the reconfiguration/redistribution of existing financial resources, others will require additional resources in order to fully implement. Where this is the case, appropriate business cases will be developed to enable participation in wider funding considerations.

Interdependencies

The Children's Social Care Services Reform Programme represents a comprehensive effort to address the complex challenges within children's social care in Northern Ireland. The nine workstreams are at the heart of this, with each targeting a critical area of improvement designed to enhance the quality, accessibility, and effectiveness of social care services. While each workstream is essential in its own right, no workstream can exist or function in isolation or independently of the others. Such is the nature of children's social care, where each area of service delivery impacts on others. For example, effective family support services can prevent entry into care; or an insufficient supply of foster care places can lead to children entering residential care; or an insufficient supply of the right kind of residential care can lead to an admission to secure care or, in some cases, to the regional juvenile justice facility and criminalisation in the process. Identifying these interdependencies is crucial for strategic planning. It can help determine not only what needs to be done but also the order in which it needs to be done and drive more effective resource allocation.

Mapping of interdependencies and the reporting mechanisms that are in place for the workstreams ensure that the Programme Board has sufficient overview and a clear oversight role in ensuring alignment of workstream activity.

Interdependencies also exist with other programmes of reform activity. This includes the work of:

- Workforce developments under the Social Work Workforce Implementation Board;
- Implementation of the Framework for Integrated Therapeutic Care in Looked After Children Services;
- Implementation of Children's Services Review recommendations that will sit outside the Children's Social Care Strategic Reform Programme, particularly those that are the responsibility of departments, including the Department of Health;
- Implementation of the Integrated Care System;
- Implementation of other related departmental strategies, including:
 - o The Strategy for Children and Young People;
 - o The Child Care and Early Learning Strategy;
 - o The Mental Health Strategy as it relates to children and young people;
 - o The Anti-Poverty Strategy;
 - o The Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy;
 - o Healthy Child Healthy Futures Review;
 - o Making Life Better; and
 - o Programme for Government.

Delivery Plan 2024/2025

Basis of Preparation

A lot of good work has taken place since the establishment of the Children's Social Care Strategic Reform Programme in April 2023, primarily focussed on building relationships, putting in place appropriate governance structures and further developing our understanding of the challenges facing children's social care sector. This is against the backdrop of completion of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services, publication of the Review Report and consultation on the Review Recommendations.

In developing the Delivery Plan for 2024/25, the following principles have been considered:

- Addressing those issues which require immediate attention;
- Laying the foundation for future years by, for example, building an evidence base of need and of what works;
- Responding to the accepted recommendations of the Children's Services Review.

Key Themes

The Programme Board's Delivery Plan in 2024/25 is focused on the following key areas:

- 1. STABILISING THE CURRENT WORKFORCE AND BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE WORKFORCE FOR THE FUTURE**
- 2. MAKING THE RE-SET TOWARDS FAMILY SUPPORT IDENTIFIED BY THE CHILDREN'S SERVICES REVIEW**
- 3. ENSURING A SUFFICIENT SUPPLY OF PLACEMENTS CAPABLE OF MEETING THE NEEDS OF ALL CHILDREN IN CARE**

Headline Actions

In support of these three key themes, the following headline actions for each workstream will be taken forward in 2024/25. These are summarised in **Table 1** below.

Reporting and Monitoring

Progress will be reported to the Programme Board in line with the programme governance arrangements agreed by the Board. This includes through a quarterly submission of written progress reports by all workstream chairs and co-chairs and more in-depth verbal briefings by workstream chairs at quarterly meetings of the Programme Board, in accordance with an agreed schedule. These mechanisms will allow the Programme Board to review progress being made and to identify and address risks or barriers to progress.

The Programme Board will prepare an End of Year Report, outlining the key achievements and progress made during the reporting year.

Table 1
Children’s Social Care Strategic Programme – Headline Actions 2024/25

Workstream	Ref.	Headline Actions	By When?	What will be different?	Assigned Recommendation
Waiting Lists	1.1	Revise current Gateway processes including DOH UNOCINI Guidance as a first step.	March 2025	Leaner and more efficient Gateway processes.	Guiding Principles 1,4,5,6,26,29,50,51
		Review all models of ‘front door’ children’s services nationally and internationally including MASH, making recommendations for NI.	June 2025	The number of referrals to Gateway services will potentially reduce.	
	1.2	Review and propose team make-up and structures for Family Support / Intervention Services and Looked After Children Social Work teams, (in the first instance) including the development of dedicated, enhanced support roles.	September 2025	The introduction of a social work support staff across the region with the potential to extend skills mix with teams further. More effective and consistent support for care leavers across the region. New team structures across the region with a greater community focus.	
1.3	Develop the existing regional Operational Policy (initially developed by SPPG and previously approved by Trust Directors) for the Management and Monitoring of Waiting List/Unallocated Social Work Cases to include unallocated Looked after Children.	Draft Policy – December 2024 Implementation in Trusts - January 2025	Effective management of waiting lists with an emphasis on effective risk management.		

Workstream	Ref.	Headline Actions	By When?	What will be different?	Assigned Recommendation
Workforce	2.1	Scope the existing children social care roles working across sectors to inform the workforce strategy.	July 2024	Greater understanding of the extent and nature of the children’s social care workforce. Greater skills mix within children’s residential care.	Guiding Principles 1,4,5,6,26,29,50,51 3 9 11 17 21
	2.2	Finalise and publish the Social Care Workforce Strategy.	December 2024	A new strategic approach to the children’s social care workforce underpinned by a career pathway to work and reflected in skilful practice.	
	2.3	Develop and publish the Social Care Career Pathways and Continuous Learning Framework.	December 2024		
Residential Placement Capacity	3.1	<u>Enhancing placement capacity by:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establishing need for residential care provision for children with a disability to facilitate planning for future provision; Implementing a 4-month multi-site pilot to test the effectiveness of multi-site provision to inform future decision-making about the continuum of provision of children’s residential care; Increasing capacity and accessibility for post 18 years accommodation through working with NIHE in Local Planning Groups towards the enhancement of options for young people moving forward; and 	December 2024	Greater range of residential care options to better meet the needs of children who require to be cared for in a children’s home setting. A greater suite of Residential care options to meet the varied and developing needs of children and young people who require Residential Care Provision including those over 18 years, children with a disability and Unaccompanied and Separate Young People.	Guiding Principles 1,4,5,6,26,29,50,51 28 33

Workstream	Ref.	Headline Actions	By When?	What will be different?	Assigned Recommendation
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reviewing the effectiveness and regional consistency of edge of care intensive support model to prevent care admissions into residential care. 			
	3.2	<p>NI Profile of Trend Analysis of children in residential care and expenditure:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Complete report on Baseline Trend Analysis, Needs Profile and Current Pathways; and Undertake 'spend to save' analysis in relation to the public sector provision of smaller homes, including analysis of ECR and High-Cost Cases across the region and associated costs, to determine if need can be met by the provision of 2-3 bedded homes across the region. 	December 2024	<p>A better understanding of the needs (including patterns and trends) of children and young people in residential care, of expenditure in children's residential care in Northern Ireland and improved matching of children to placements.</p> <p>The development of clear and improved pathways into residential care provision.</p> <p>A reduction in the number of young being cared for outside of their jurisdiction of origin.</p> <p>Better use of resources and a reduction in high-cost case expenditure across the region.</p>	
	3.3	<p>Commissioning Framework:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The development of the first Residential Care – Sufficiency of Provision Strategy for Northern Ireland and associated implementation plan. 	December 2024	A greater suite of Residential care options to meet the varied and developing needs of children and young people who require Residential Care Provision.	
Fostering	4.1	Undertake a review of fostering service models to improve performance in foster care recruitment and retention.	April 2025	Better supported foster carers, more effective foster care recruitment pathways, improved rates of foster carer retention and a more differentiated foster care provision.	<p>Guiding Principles 1,4,5,6,26,29,50,51</p> <p>26 27</p>

Workstream	Ref.	Headline Actions	By When?	What will be different?	Assigned Recommendation
	4.2	Development and/ or further expansion of fostering short breaks provision.	April 2025	Greater range and availability of short break care leading to a reduction in children waiting for short breaks provision and a reduction in admissions to longer term care.	
	4.3	Increase supported lodgings placement capacity through improved performance in the recruitment and retention of hosts across all Trusts.	March 2025	Strengthened placement availability and options for looked after children and care leavers.	
Children with a Disability	5.1	Reach agreement on CWD Service Criteria and work towards greater regional consistency in the provision of services for Children with a Disability.	December 2024	Regionally consistent services and pathways for families with children with a disability.	Guiding Principles 1,4,5,6,26,29,50,51 30 31 44
	5.2	Enhance availability of short breaks residential and fostering provision across Trusts.	June 2025	Sufficient supply of residential short break care starting with a restoration of short break care to pre-pandemic levels.	
	5.3	Enhance family support provision and early help for children and families (subject to investment).	June 2025	Improvement of the provision of therapeutic services for children with a disability informed by children and families. Improved early help offers to families with children with a disability.	

Workstream	Ref.	Headline Actions	By When?	What will be different?	Assigned Recommendation
Reset & Rebalance: Working with the Voluntary and Community Sector'	6.1	The Review Conference.	Autumn 2024	Better partnership working between statutory and voluntary/community children's services based on mutual respect and underpinned by an improved funding model.	Guiding Principles 1,4,5,6,26,29,50,51 47 53
	6.2	The Development of a Children and Family Charter.	Autumn 2024		
	6.3	A new approach to funding.	May 2025		
Policy & Legislative Reform a) Adoption and Children Act Implementation b) Life Deserved for Looked After Children	7.1a	Introduction of transitional adoption support services.	April 2025	Improvements in support services available.	Guiding Principles 1,4,5,6,26,29,50,51 25 37
	7.2a	Introduction of extended support for care leavers.	June 2025	Improved support for care leavers.	
	7.3a	Short breaks for disabled children.	April 2025	Children with a disability are able to avail of short break care outside of the looked after system.	
	7.1b	Introduction of new Foster Placement and Fostering Agencies Regulations and development of associated standards.	October 2024	Greater regulation of foster care and more consistent standard of foster care practice.	
	7.2b	Development and consultation on policy proposals to support the operation of multi-site children's homes.	December 2024	See 3.1.	
	7.3b	Introduction of the Staying Connected scheme (subject to availability of capital slippage)	December 2024	Greater stability in lives of children and young people by staying connected with family, friends, carers and other trusted individuals in their life and strengthen and support community integration.	

Workstream	Ref.	Headline Actions	By When?	What will be different?	Assigned Recommendation
Reducing Unnecessary Bureaucracy	8.1	Streamlining of the UNOCINI system and preparing for Encompass <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of UNOCINI tools and process to agree regional standardization. • Develop system build and processes within encompass to streamline and reduce social worker on-screen time. 	Final date - 2027	A reduction in unnecessary bureaucracy for social workers. More time for social workers to spend in direct work with children and their families.	Guiding Principles 1,4,5,6,26,29,50,51
	8.2	Planning for a digital dictation pilot in the Belfast and Western HSC Trusts: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review of current pilot within BHSCT, what has worked well and any learning for improvements. • Extension of pilot into the WHSCT with collation of data for consideration of further roll out. 	June 2025	Greater access to technology for Social Workers and associated efficiency. Accurate records for children and families and more time for social workers to spend in direct work with children and their families.	
	8.3	Develop an understanding of the potential for skills mix roles to reduce professional Social Work time spent on administrative functions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exploration Trust-wide of the current job roles aligned to Band 4 staff employed within Children's Services. 	March 2025	Staff skills being appropriately utilised, and more time spent with children and families. The potential for non-social work roles to be realigned to reduce pressure on qualified social work staff, helping to improve staff experience and retention. A reduction in social work staff undertaking bureaucratic functions.	

Workstream	Ref.	Headline Actions	By When?	What will be different?	Assigned Recommendation
Family Support	9.1	Explore what is working well at the front door and who is working well with families and children. Explore learning from internal and regional models of family support.	June 2025	A greater understanding of what works for parents and families in support terms.	Guiding Principles 1,4,5,6,26,29,50,51 22
	9.2	Map existing early intervention and family support services in Northern Ireland supporting Family Support hubs (multi-agency). Explore what is currently being commissioned and by whom.	February 2025	A greater understanding of current family support provision.	
	9.3	Develop a Family Support model NI which promotes early intervention and family support activity and collaboration with and between statutory, community and voluntary organisational boundaries.	February 2025	An effective model of family support focussed on intervening early and working in partnership with children and families leading to a reduction in the number of families who require statutory intervention.	