

# Children's Social Care Services Strategic Reform Programme

## Annual Report 2023/24



Children's Social Care Services  
Reform Programme



DoH

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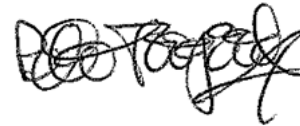
## MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIR

The Children's Social Care Services Strategic Reform Programme was established to address the difficulties that are impacting on the delivery of social care to children and young people, difficulties which Professor Jones described in his Report of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care Service as 'systemic and endemic'. These include issues that impact on families and, in some cases, lead to family breakdown and issues that create challenges for children's social care services to be able to support those children and their families and effectively address their needs. They include poverty and issues specific to Northern Ireland including the fear and trauma related to the legacy of the troubles and ongoing paramilitary activity which were exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Despite the challenging context in which organisations who provide social care services are operating, I have been struck by the commitment that colleagues from across the statutory and voluntary and community sectors have been prepared to make in establishing this programme of reform. I have seen evidence of a willingness to come together to work in partnership to deliver much needed change. This aligns with of the strong public service commitment in Northern Ireland identified by Professor Jones in his Review report.

The Reform Programme has now passed its first year of operation. This has been a year focused on building the structures, plans and relationships that will be key to achieving what the programme has been set up to do. As we get further into 2024/25, and with new voluntary and community sector representatives coming on board, I am confident that we will continue to build on the strong foundation set last year. This won't be without challenge – much remains to be done to deliver improved outcomes for children and families known to social services and the current constrained financial climate will limit how quickly and how much we can implement.

Nevertheless, I am confident for the future in the knowledge that we have the support of so many committed individuals not just within the HSC, but in other departments, their agencies and in the voluntary and community sector.



Peter Toogood  
Deputy Secretary for Social Care and Public Health, Department of Health



## ABOUT THE STRATEGIC REFORM PROGRAMME

### WHO WE ARE

The Department of Health (DoH) is leading a programme of work on service improvement and the delivery of transformation in Health and Social Care (HSC). The Children's Social Care Services Strategic Reform Programme (the Programme) was established to deliver reform within children's social care services to address a range of known service challenges, particularly in relation to an ever-increasing volume and complexity of case work.

A Children's Social Care Services Reform Programme Board provides vision, strategic oversight, direction & governance for the delivery of the programme.

The Programme Board comprises senior leaders in children's social care within the Department of Health (across policy, professional and commissioning groups), Health and Social Care Trusts and other Departmental ALBs – PHA, NISCC, RQIA and the Children's Court Guardian Agency (CCGANI). The Departments of Education and Justice, TUS and the voluntary and community sector are also represented. Membership of the voluntary and community sector on the Programme was expanded through a recruitment process with new representatives joining the Programme Board and workstreams from April. The membership of the Programme Board is listed on page 11.

### HOW WE WORK

The Programme Board has agreed Shared Values and Principles which guide its work:

- 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 Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services.

The Programme is informed by the findings of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services and, in particular, the recommendations that have been adopted as guiding principles - **taking advantage of the scale of NI; working at pace and without drift or delay; engagement with children and families as appropriate; the value of the contribution of foster carers; minimisation of privatisation; and the need to consult where relevant.**

## WHAT WE ARE DOING

The aim of the Programme is to improve outcomes for children known to children's social care, for those responsible for their care and for the groups of staff working with them at all levels. This will include contributing to the implementation of a number of the recommendations of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services.

To achieve this, a number of workstreams have been established:

### Waiting Lists

- To identify the root causes of waiting lists across children's social care services and to test proposals/solutions to address the causes identified.

### Children's Social Care Workforce

- To develop and improve support for the children's social care workforce.

### Residential Placement Capacity

- To understand children's residential needs and the residential capacity in Northern Ireland and develop a sufficiency and sustainability strategy. The workstream will produce an evidence base to inform the strategy, future reform and a future commissioning framework that will improve the quality of service delivery and outcomes for Looked After Children in Residential Care.

### Fostering

- To develop a foster care strategy that delivers better supported foster carers, increased recruitment and retention of foster carers and improved placement stability.

### 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.

### Reset and Rebalance – Working in Partnership with the Voluntary and Community Sector

- 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.

### 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.

### Reducing Unnecessary 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.

### 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.

## KEY ACHIEVEMENTS IN 2023/24

The work of the Programme is long term. The reform of children's social care requires longer term sustainable solutions and investment – which the Programme will be seeking to address and influence. The Programme Board met for the first time in April 2023, terms of reference were agreed and a number of workstreams were subsequently formed to begin to address the most pressing issues facing children's social care.

## WORKSTREAM ACHIEVEMENTS

Each of the nine Programme workstreams is led by a Chair and co-Chair and made up from representatives from a wide range of stakeholders within children's social care, working together to deliver on the outcomes for their workstream.

Seven of the workstreams have been active in this year, with the Family Support workstream producing Terms of Reference for the workstream and planning for a workshop which was convened in June 2024 to agree a workplan. A newly formed Re-set and Rebalance – working in partnership with the voluntary and community sector workstream met for the first time in April 2024. The workstreams have taken time to become fully established – recruiting their membership, scoping the issues to be addressed, developing Terms of Reference, and developing workplans. Progress in 24/25 includes:

### Waiting Lists

- A review and some revision of current Gateway ('front-door') processes has been completed, and agreement reached on terms of reference to develop a new 'front-door' model of practice in Northern Ireland.
- A review of existing team structures in Family Intervention and Looked After Children Services has been completed. Proposals regarding a Family Support/Intervention team structure, role and remit, including

examination of further potential skill mix will be developed as part of the work plan.

- A 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 has been implemented across all HSC Trusts with plans to include Looked after Children whose cases are unallocated within the scope of the policy. This will ensure a consistently applied and risk managed approach to unallocated cases across children's services.

### Children's Social Care Workforce

*(There is a range of ongoing work relating to workforce reform – both the **social work workforce** and the **social care workforce**. The achievements of the children's social care workforce workstream are reflected here. Other achievements relating to social work workforce reform in 23/24 are listed at the end of this document).*

- A scoping exercise of the children's social care workforce to seek a better understanding of their job roles, qualifications and training requirements has been undertaken; this includes a detailed analysis of the social care staffing in children's homes.
- A scoping and mapping exercise of the qualifications in children's social care services has been completed and will inform the development of the career pathway framework.
- There has been successful engagement with key stakeholders on the development of the Social Care Workforce Strategy.

### Residential Placement Capacity

- A literature review on international trends of residential care provision and staffing profiles has been completed.

- An examination of trend analysis of residential care in Northern Ireland in terms of placement provision, capacity and capability has been undertaken.
- A review of high-cost packages of care in the community has been conducted.
- An examination of edge of care services and impact on admissions to children's homes has been undertaken.
- Proposals to meet the specific accommodation needs of increasing numbers of unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people have been developed.
- A 3 year, cross-departmental action plan to implement the recommendations of a Review of Jointly Commissioned Supported Accommodation Arrangements for young people aged 16-21+ has been developed. The Review examined the housing needs of care leavers and young homeless people and was published in September 2023. Local Planning Partnership Groups have been established with representation from NIHE and other key partner agencies to identify and put in place plans to address unmet need in each Trust area.

### Fostering

- Benchmarking of foster care allowances with other jurisdictions has been completed and will inform future decision-making in relation to foster care allowances.
- A demand and capacity review of fostering short breaks provision and HSCT performance in recruitment and retention of carers was completed and will inform the development of recommendations on a regional model of short breaks fostering.



Photo credit: NISCC

- Process mapping from the receipt of an enquiry from a potential foster parent, through to approval has been undertaken, with a view to making this process regionally consistent, simpler, and easier to navigate.
- Options to improve the recruitment and retention of foster carers have been developed and explored, including the provision of short breaks and permanent placements specifically for children with a disability.

#### Children with a Disability

- A demand and capacity review of residential Short Breaks has been undertaken.
- A review of early intervention and community-based supports has been completed. It has considered the current level of need, gaps in services across Trusts, best practice to deliver this type of support, and has set recommendations for the way forward.
- A review of the service access criteria for Children's Disability services across the region has been undertaken with the aim of achieving greater consistency in provision across Northern Ireland.
- A draft regional model for CAMHS-ID has been progressed, with posts funded in each Trust to develop the model.
- A monitoring framework relating to commissioned Short Breaks has been introduced as part of a wider exercise to remobilise existing beds, which have been repurposed to accommodate children in care.
- A draft protocol has been developed to produce a standardised approach to transitions across the region for children with a learning disability.

#### Policy and Legislative Reform

##### *The Adoption and Children Act*

- The Children's Court Guardian Agency for Northern Ireland (Establishment and Constitution) Order (Northern Ireland) 2023 and The Guardians Ad Litem (Panel) (Revocation) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023 were made in February 2023 to give effect to the Guardian ad Litem's name change to Children's Court Guardian.
- Public consultation has been undertaken on the Transitional Adoption Support Services arrangements and the Extended Support for Care Leavers. Both Statutory Rules, accompanying guidance and Impact Assessments have been drafted, in consultation with stakeholders.
- In March 2024, a second Commencement Order was made to give effect to a series of amendments to the Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995. A Circular issued to HSC Trusts and other relevant organisations to advise of the changes being made.
- A review of costings required for Phases 2 & 3 of implementation has been undertaken to ensure budget requirements reflect any changes made during the Bill's passage and to also take account of final provisions in the regulations.

##### *The Life Deserved Strategy*

- A consultation analysis report on draft Foster Placement and Fostering Agencies Regulations was published in March 2024.
- A Task and Finish Group to review current care planning and looked after child review arrangements was established in September 2023. This group has met on three occasions and continues to progress its Terms of Reference.





- The first of three surveys planned for 2024 of children living in residential care in Northern Ireland went live in March 2024. This first survey focused on children and young people's experiences of the arrangements in place to assess their needs and to plan and review their care.

### Reducing Unnecessary Bureaucracy

- There has been significant work alongside the Epic Encompass team to ensure the Children's services build is fit for purpose, including family functionality. There is also work being undertaken around statistical and financial returns within the Encompass build to ensure bureaucracy is reduced for staff on the ground.
- A pilot is underway within the Belfast Trust in respect of Digital Dictation and will be rolled out to WHSCT. By way of the pilot, staff will be provided with technical solutions to recording, with the aim of enabling them to spend more active time with families.
- The UNOCINI document has been streamlined and the guidance is now being finalised in order to begin a pilot regionally. An initial pilot has found a net reduction in time spent writing assessments, without compromising the quality of assessments.
- Family Support<sup>1</sup>
- The membership and Terms of Reference for this workstream have been agreed.
- A 'storming and forming' workshop was held in June 2024.
- A clear workplan has been agreed with specific timescales in place and leads identified.

<sup>1</sup> The Family Support Workstream was established later than the others and, as a result, is running behind the other workstreams in terms of output. Additional, dedicated resource will be placed with this workstream in 24/25 to enable it to proceed at greater pace.

## Regional Care and Justice Campus Programme Workstream

The Regional Care and Justice Campus Programme workstream closed on 31 March 2024. A Partnership Board has been established at operational level to maintain and build on the achievements of this workstream. A number of the recommendations of the 2018 Review of Regional Facilities which led to the establishment of this programme have been met, including:

- The establishment of a single regional secure care Multi-Agency Admissions Panel, with the voice of children embedded in its work;
- A new multi-disciplinary mental health and therapeutic service (ACORN) in place across both facilities;
- Planned access by young people from Lakewood to the swimming pool and vocational training facilities in Woodlands, to support better health and wellbeing and improve life opportunities;
- The development of the new Northern Ireland Framework for Integrated Therapeutic Care (NIFITC), and the commencement of introduction of the Framework in residential care settings;
- Significant progress in the development of common standards to better align services and practice in the two secure facilities.

## **BUILDING ON THE WORK**

### Key Themes for 2024/25

Within children's social care, wide ranging reform is needed, involving many actors. In the context of a constrained financial environment, it is not possible to take forward all the actions we would like as quickly as we would like. The actions that the Programme will progress in 2024/25 will aim to alleviate

the most immediate pressures in tandem with formulating clear plans for the longer-term.

Taking these factors into account, the Programme will be focused on the following areas in 2024/25:

- 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**

A copy of the Delivery Plan for 2024/25 can be found at [health-ni.gov.uk](https://health-ni.gov.uk).

## MEMBERS OF THE CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE STRATEGIC REFORM PROGRAMME BOARD

Name	Position / Organisation	Role
Peter Toogood	Deputy Secretary, DOH	Chair
Eilís McDaniel	Director of Family and Children's Policy, DOH	Programme Director
Áine Morrison	Chief Social Work Officer, DOH	Member / Professional Advisor
Heather Stevens	Director of Mental Health, DOH	Member
Mary-Frances McManus	Deputy Chief Nursing Officer, DOH	Member
Michelle Tennyson	Housing and Health Lead, Department of Health/Northern Ireland Housing Executive	Member
Brendan Whittle	Director of Hospital and Community Care, DOH SSPG	Member
Catherine Cassidy	Deputy Director for Children's Services and Mental Health, DOH SPPG	Member
Ciara McKillop	Deputy Director for Older Peoples and Children with Disability, CAMHS and Emotional Health and Wellbeing, DOH SPPG	Member
Heather Reid	Director of Nursing and AHP, PHA	Member
Tom Cassidy	Director of Children's Services/Executive Director of Social Work, Western HSC Trust	Member

Name	Position / Organisation	Role
Maura Dargan	Director of Children's Services/Executive Director of Social Work, Northern HSC Trust	Member
Colm McCafferty	Director of Children's Services/ Executive Director of Social Work, Southern HSC Trust	Member
Lyn Preece	Director of Children's Services/Executive Director of Social Work, South Eastern HSC Trust	Member
Kerry-Lee Weatherall	A/Director of Children's Services, Belfast HSC Trust	Member
Dawn Shaw	Chief Executive, Northern Ireland Guardian Ad Litem Agency	Member
Lynn Long	Director of Mental Health & Learning Disability, Children's Services and Prison Healthcare, RQIA	Member
Marian O'Rourke	Director of Regulation and Standards, NISCC	Member
Stephen Martin	Chief Executive, Youth Justice Agency, Department of Justice	Member
Janis Scallon	Director for Inclusion & Well-being, Department of Education	Member
Claire McClelland	Director for Raising Aspirations, Supporting Learning & Empowering Improvement, Department of Education	Member
Glenda Davis	Special Educational Needs, Department of Education	Member

Name	Position / Organisation	Role
Gerry Largey	TUS	Member
Stephen Dallas	Bytes Project	Member
Jenny Irvine	ARC Healthy Living Centre	Member
Jacinta Linden	Bolster Community	Member
Michele Janes	Barnardo's NI	Member

Other achievements relating to social work workforce reform that are relevant to children's social care services but are being progressed outside of the Children's Social Care Services Reform Programme include:

- The ending of agency social work usage in June 2023
- The recruitment of c. 160 former agency social workers into HSCT employment in 2023
- The creation of a fast-track route into HSCTs for newly qualified social workers. 196 newly qualified social workers were recruited into HSC Trusts in the summer of 2023 and it is anticipated that an additional 220 will have entered the workforce by September 2024.
- Launch of a Social Work (NI) Supervision Policy to support practitioners in their role in March 2024.
- An increase in the number of social work training places funded by the Department of Health.