


Committee and Date
People Overview and Scrutiny
14th January 2026

Item

Public



Children's Services Reforms

Responsible Officer:	Natasha Moody		
email:	Natasha.moody@shropshire.gov.uk	Tel:	01743 251446
Cabinet Member (Portfolio Holder):	Ruth Houghton		

1. Synopsis

- 1.1 This report provides an overview for People Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the reforms being implemented Nationally related to Children's Services and helps leaders across the organisation understand how this might impact locally on both Children's Services and also the expectations on how this will change the way the organisation works more broadly.
- 1.2 These reforms signal the largest changes within Children's Services in decades, and their impact are critical to achieving better outcomes for children but also ensuring good value for money. Their aim is to meet the needs of families as early as possible to prevent needs escalating.
- 1.3 The reforms will see us need to work more holistically as an organisation as they rely on the resources of other departments such as adults, housing, domestic abuse which are often contributory factors in children needing help and support.
- 1.4 There is likely to be a wider impact of this transformation that changing the way children's services work, as if successful, it should inform wider changes across the organisation to the way in which we work such as harnessing digital means to maximise our efficiency.
- 1.5 All of these reforms are expected to be delivered in partnership with statutory safeguarding partners (police, health, local authority and education) and children and families themselves.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 Since the new government formed, several initiatives, programmes and reforms related to Children have commenced. These have been initiated on the back of significant work a summary of this can be found here [Executive Summary of 'Stable Homes, Built on Love: strategy and consultation'](#)
- 2.2 This report will offer an overview of the reforms, the expectations being placed upon us, some initial reflections on how this might impact across a broader range of services outside of Children's Services and the progress to date.
- 2.3 These programmes are all aimed at how the safeguarding children's partnership in its broadest sense help to deliver better outcomes for children and their families. They are all focussed on how we intervene and support earlier and utilise technology to help us meet the needs of children and their families sooner and reflect the changes that were implemented in Working Together 2023 [Working together to safeguard children 2023: statutory guidance](#)
- 2.4 The key programmes are,
- Families First Partnership [The Families First Partnership \(FFP\) Programme Guide](#)
 - Best Start in Life [Giving every child the best start in life](#)
 - Family Hubs [Family Hubs and Start for Life programme - GOV.UK](#)
 - Local Youth Transformation [The Local Youth Transformation Pilot - GOV.UK](#)
 - Private Law Pathfinder [Private Law Pathfinder Delivery Update](#)
 - Reform of the SEND system [Reform of the SEND system: What might the next stage look like and how can we build consensus? | Local Government Association](#)
- 2.5 Each of these programmes seeks to reform the way we work preventatively with children and their families. Some are specific to age ranges where we see pressure in the system and others are more holistic. This is a whole system reform to rebalance the system towards more preventative Family Help.
- 2.6 All of these changes will result in changes to the statutory framework, guidance and inspection regimes over the coming years. This is still going through the stages before gaining royal ascent [Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill](#)
- 2.7 Each requires partners and corporate support to achieve the ambitions set by central government and have a level of oversight nationally. This report seeks to provide an overview on our response, the support required and the benefits we might realise following implementation.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1 We ask that the Committee review the report and supporting documentation and make recommendations that it considers critical to inform Cabinet on the most effective way to deliver the programme.
- 3.2 Offer reflections on the assessment on our progress towards implementing the reforms and whether this is an accurate assessment based on your respective areas or portfolios.

- 3.3 Seek to understand the reforms well enough so that you can champion and advocate within your area or portfolio for the changes that will be needed.
- 3.4 Endorse the proposed strategic approach and plan that is set out and seek to integrate this into the overarching improvement, corporate and partnership planning currently underway.
- 3.5 Acknowledge that a key change to the way we need to work is ensuring that the voice of children, young people and families are heavily involved in shaping the reforms this will impact on our traditional ways of working.
- 3.6 Consider and agree the reporting to the scrutiny to maintain regular assurance on the progress being made to achieve these reforms.

Report

4. Overview of Reforms

- 4.1 These reforms signal the most critical changes within Children's Services and the partnership for decades. The ambition is to rebalance the system towards greater early intervention and prevention as opposed to later acute care.
- 4.2 Each of the aspects of reforms has its own requirements a summary of these is provided below,
- 4.3 **Best Start in Life Family Hubs**, We are required to:
 - 4.3.1 Prepare a readiness survey that tells the Department for Education how well prepared we are for the reforms (Appendix A.)
 - 4.3.2 Identify our local Best Start in Life Family Hubs site, this has a strong criterion based on deprivation. Data is currently being analysed which indicates Shrewsbury is the site we ought to select based on the criteria from the Department for Education.
 - 4.3.3 Review our parenting programmes so that parents can access parenting support either via parenting programmes or through supporting them to enhance the home learning environment from April 2026. The DfE have stipulated the courses we can provide.
 - 4.3.4 Publish the 'Best Start in Life Plan' this should be available to the public to explain to them the actions our partnership is taking to achieve the good level of development target set.
 - 4.3.5 For Shropshire our Target is 77% this is a 9% increase and is ambitious given children will need to be 3-4 years old ideally to reach this target.

- 4.4 **Families First Partnership**, We are required to:

- 4.4.1 Deliver a seamless system of support across **Family Help**, this is a newly defined continuum which would have previously been known as, 'Early Help and Children in Need.' There is a requirement of the Safeguarding Partnership to identify a broad range of partners who can deliver early help outside of the local authority. The partnership is required to deliver several key milestones (Appendix B) which will help us secure more effective earlier support for families.
- 4.4.2 Develop a **Multi Agency Child Protection Team (MACPT)** This is a completely new aspect of the system the multi-agency partnership are being asked to develop. This should be a team that provides a 'second look' at the partnership support and provides 'high support, high challenge' to ensure that our practice is as effective as it can be to prevent poorer outcomes for these children.
- 4.4.3 Embed **Family Group Decision Making (FGDM)** throughout the system so that at the earliest point in a family's journey opportunities to utilise and build upon the family's strengths including their widest family network are explored and built upon.
- 4.4.4 Each of these aspects has a partnership task and finish structure. Each is led by a multi-agency partner – education lead Family Help, MACPT led by Police and FGDM led by the Local Authority.
- 4.4.5 All aspect of this reform will require a change to the way we work placing much more focus on:
 - a. Engaging Children and Families
 - b. Multi-Disciplinary and Joint Working, there is a need to consider fully where the partnership should be building multi agency capacity rather than single agency responses.
 It is envisaged all of these changes will reduce the number of children in care and see more children being worked with within Family Help and Child Protection.

4.5 Youth Strategy (precursor was the Local Youth Transformation Fund)

We are required to deliver:

- 4.5.1 Trusted Adults: We are required to upskill people working with young people to identify the early signs and intervene to help children feel connected and supported to be emotionally well. This could include mentors from the private sector alongside public partners. Placing Youth Workers in localities where there is a high level of need so that targeted interventions can take place.
- 4.5.2 Strengthening the Workforce: Developing and growing a skilled and sustainable paid and volunteer youth sector workforce, with the highest standards to meet young people's needs.
- 4.5.3 Friends and Relationships: Helping young people to develop positive social connections in schools and colleges, in their communities, and online.
- 4.5.4 Richer Lives: Providing enriching and meaningful activities for young people in and outside of education.

- 4.5.5 Good Work: Providing better education, guidance, training, and support for young people to get a great job.
- 4.5.6 Keeping Young People Safe: Intervening earlier to increase young people's safety in communities.
- 4.5.7 Health and Wellbeing: Supporting young people's physical and mental health to allow all young people to take up opportunities and live richer lives.
- 4.5.8 Engaging Young People in decisions: Putting young people in the driving seat of their own lives. This includes lowering the age at which they can vote.

4.6 Private Law Proceedings

- 4.6.1 It allows the court to identify families' needs earlier and fosters improved multiagency working between HMCTS, Cafcass, Cafcass Cymru, local authorities, specialist domestic abuse support providers and the police. This approach is designed to improve experiences for families by reducing the time from application to a court order and requiring fewer court hearings for each family.

We are required to:

- 4.6.2 Collate information to inform an assessment
 - 4.6.3 Work as a multiagency partnership to understand the best resolution.
- f. Work with the court to achieve timely resolution for families.

4.7 SEND Reforms

- 4.7.1 The Government have committed to the reform of the SEND system, we await the formal papers but in December 2025 the Department for Education wrote to Local Authorities to ask them to start to work as a partnership to work towards a rebalanced more inclusive system of early intervention and support, to support them to achieve this they asked that local partnerships assess their maturity against seven key pillars,
 - a. Co-Production with parents and carers and children and young people.
 - b. Effective System's Leadership and Governance
 - c. Accurate understanding of needs through effective use of data
 - d. High quality deliver at all levels
 - e. Effective partnerships across health, education and social care
 - f. A skilled partnership workforce
 - g. Targeted, judicious and sustainable use of resources

There is a clear indication that the reforms will be built upon existing reforms to compliment the wider system reforms.

5. Our Local Context

- 5.1 The case for change locally, Shropshire has a high number of children in care; we stand second highest regionally which seems at odds with the local context in which there are relatively low levels of poverty.
- 5.2 We spend £1,400 per child per year, this is in line with the national average level of spend for Children's Services.
- 5.2 What is in stark contrast to the national picture is the proportion of this spend on Children's Social Care, in Shropshire we spend circa 80% of every pound on Children's Social Care whereas the average is 47% spent on Children's Social Care this reflects the fact that Children's Services has a broad range of statutory duties outside of Children's Social Care. As budgets have tightened, spend on earlier intervention and prevention services have reduced to such a low level that it is ineffective at helping to prevent children coming into care resulting in unaffordable spend on children's care.
- 5.3 Following an initial assessment of needs, the majority of children known to Children's Services will be due to the needs of their parents, hence the need for greater collaborative working with adults' services and those services commissioned by the Local Authority and its partners.
- 5.4 Within the SEND system is under pressure. There is a recognition nationally that the High Needs Block DSG deficit is at unprecedented levels and is estimated to reach £5 billion at the end of the 2025/26 financial year. Shropshire's cumulative DSG deficit is circa £41 million. The Department are committed to rebalancing this system towards more inclusive systems of support building on the existing reforms.
- 5.4 These change programmes represent a chance to rebalance the system. However, it is important to recognise that the overall amount of spend on Children's Services (total budget across LA education, early help and social care services) is in line with the national average. Our priority is to reallocate the resources we have, so that we reinvest into earlier help and support to prevent rising demand and reduce children looked after numbers.
- 5.5 A key area of scrutiny is therefore consideration of how this spend is being rebalanced.

5.6 Baseline Self-Assessment

- 5.7 We conducted a self-assessment across the partnership to ascertain the baseline position from which we are starting and a summary of this has been included below

Our Partnership Self Assessment (2025)



19

- 5.8 This tells us that,
- We have the conditions to embed FGDM as this has been an area of progress in recent years.
 - We have made some strides to embed Family Help within the Local Authority but the preventative work has shrunk to such a level we are ill equipped to identify people preventatively. This is because 80% of the budget for Children's Services is spent on Children's Social Care. We need better tools to help us know and understand people who are likely to need help and support and provide this prior to referral. There is also a need to increase the range of partners supporting and leading in the Family Help space as this is largely delivered through the Local Authority.
 - We have significant work to develop and embed MACPT, this will be an area of challenge as we seek to work with partners who have a larger geographical patch (NHS and Police), with already stretched resources whilst navigating the changing roles that may exist across our partnership moving forwards.

5.9 Initial Stakeholder Feedback

To compliment this, we held an initial stakeholder session to add value to this self-assessment the findings of this are below,

Summary of key themes

- People felt Family Hubs were strong and we needed to build upon them.
- People described the system as reactive, siloed and confusing.
- People said that we were pushing children through a system rather than responding or meeting needs.
- People from the same team don't see each other in person regularly.
- People from the same team do not know data that is shared in a partnership arena.
- People want to know more about each others roles and how they can work effectively together.
- People are frustrated at the level of duplication and inefficiency of the systems and processes.
- People don't always feel safe enough to speak up with each other to address the behaviour we don't want to see in the system.
- People know that there is inconsistent practice but do not always address it.
- People know that supporting families earlier is the right thing to do but the resources needed to achieve this are not always in the right place.
- People were keen to be one partnership team supporting children and families but the system is described as too complex to change.
- There is a need to mature the way we work with representative groups.
- Language is getting in the way of us being an effective system.

6 Our Plan

- 6.1 In order to deliver these ambitious changes we feel strongly that there is a need for one plan to guide them all. We think that these programmes represent a change to the way we work as a whole system which means we need to see them as one integrated package of reforms. We will seek to deliver the change needed through a single Children's Transformation as part of the wider corporate improvement plan. A copy of the full document is included Appendix C
- 6.2 We have agreed a thematic roll out approach and are in the scoping phase to understand more about how we may need to sequence some of this roll out to meet the needs of national departments and achieve local ambitions.
- 6.3 Our plan will reiterate as key milestones are met, for example once we are clearer about the outcome of the needs and harms assessment this is likely to provide much more detail on how this will affect the composition of our teams. Regular oversight and scrutiny from Members is welcome as we move throughout the delivery of this programme.
- 6.4 We have developed in partnership our draft plan (Appendix C.) We welcome feedback from scrutiny to ensure that these plans are impactful and reflect the views of residents that they represent.
- 6.5 The pillars of the changes will be,
- a. Workforce
 - b. Children and Family Voice
 - c. Outcomes, data and systems.
 - d. Inclusive Places and Spaces
 - e. Leadership, Governance and Commissioning
- These are aspects of all the reforms that connect the key changes being sought.

7 Our Structure

7.1 Good governance will be critical for the success of the programme. Given the breadth of the change required the relationships with key external governance structures is critical.

7.2 Our proposed governance structure for internal delivery is as follows;

Meeting	Purpose	Role	Frequency	Responsible Officer
Children's Ambition Board	Strategic Partnership Board driving ambitious outcomes for children and families. to oversee the Children's Transformation	Sets the vision, oversees the Children's Transformation Programme and ensures multi-agency alignment	Every 2 months	Tanya Miles – Interim Chief Executive
Shropshire Safeguarding Children's Partnership	Statutory Safeguarding board for Children & Adults in Shropshire	Overseeing the FFP Implementation. Decision making board for the Families First Partnership	Monthly	David Shaw - DCS
Internal Children's Transformation Board	Internal Governance ensuring delivery assurance and compliance for Children's Services Transformation projects.	Monitors progress, manages risks and aligns internal workstreams with strategic priorities. Internal Workstreams to provide updates monthly	Monthly	David Shaw - DCS
FFP Tactical Delivery Group	Provides strategic direction for the Families First transformation programme, ensuring alignment of Start for Life and Family hub, and the Local Youth Transformation Pilot.	Provide governance and oversight for the programme's delivery plan & progress of the Task and Finish Groups ;FH, MDT's, MACPT's & FGC.	Monthly	Natasha Moody – Assistant Director for FFP
Operational Task & Finish Groups	Short-term, outcome focused groups delivering specific objectives within defined timeframes. •Family Help •Family Group Conferencing •Multi-Disciplinary Teams •Multi-Agency Child Protection Teams	Each Tactical Delivery Lead will co-ordinate their T&F Group regularly to deliver the detailed work required to achieve the programme objectives.	TBD	Task & Finish Group Leads
Operational Internal Workstreams	Thematic areas of delivery; •Places and Space •Children & Family Voice •Commissioning •Data & Systems •Inclusion •Workforce	Each internal workstream lead will co-ordinate their workstream regularly to deliver the specific objectives and deliver the work identified.	TBD	Workstream leads

8 Risk Assessment and Opportunities Appraisal

- 8.1 The key risks related to this programme of change are detailed below. There are many risks that are documented but the most critical is the priority of these reforms amongst the broader context the council faces in terms of the financial emergency. This is undoubtedly drawing focus towards short term savings as opposed to long term change of this nature.
- 8.2 These changes are due to become statutory and whilst this is not a current risk, there is an emerging risk about our ability to remain statutorily compliant.
- 8.3 There is a very real challenge that the Local Authority faces with a high number of children in care, for this programme to be successful there is a key interdependency with practice for Children in Care. As reducing the number of children in care will help us to achieve the overall rebalance of the system as circa 80% of children's services spend in on Children's Social Care currently (for most Local Authorities this is closer to 50%.)
- 8.4 Strategic Risk:

<i>Risk</i>	<i>Response</i>
<p>Overwhelming Volume of Change</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is change to the way aspects of Public Sector delivery takes place e.g. change of the footprint of the ICB's, LGR and removal of Police and Crime Commissioners. All of this change alongside these service level changes can become overwhelming for people and there is a risk that we lose momentum as these changes are deemed as less important than other more strategic issues, 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Ensure good communication and alignment with the other changes to ensure that where possible these dovetail together. b. Ensure that communications are sympathetic to the volume of change and make sure that the methods used to communicate are clear. c. Ensure good feedback loops from a range of people to understand how well the changes are landing and if any barriers or if there is pulls in different directions to ensure these are escalated to the respective governance structures
<p>Financial:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is a risk that the budget is not sufficient to deliver the required change across the local authority and the broader partnership. There is a risk that the budget constraints in place make it challenging to spend the allocation on time which could result in claw back from Department for Education. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Gants being mapped and a clear breakdown of spend being developed. b. Broader range of grants being drawn together to ensure that where possible the programmes align and income can be used efficiently to deliver all programme objectives. c. Partners making necessary representation to raise this risk e.g. DfE if required. d. Continue to monitor the spend and raise key concerns. e. Seek exceptional arrangements for grant funding to enable swift spend against the agreed plan. Any deviation from plan would be subject to normal spend control processes.
<p>Scale of Culture Change:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is a risk that the scale of change needed at a time of 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Resources allocated b. Leadership buy in secured from Leadership Board

<p>considerable strain within the council is not achievable.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is a risk that the organisation and the partnership see this as a programme related to Children's Services missing the critical role that they need to play in these reforms. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> c. Woven into the fabric of how we work around here as part of the improvement plan, corporate plan and partnership plan. d. Representation and deliverables from across the organisation and partnership secured. e. Regular monitoring and progress by Leadership Board. f. Partnership leads appointed. g. Partnership support to develop the 'what good looks like' for us collectively. h. Sequencing of the aspects of change. i. Frequent monitoring and oversight by partnership and DfE.
<p>Risk to Safety:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rebalancing a system of support to children and families brings a risk that children and families needs are not met resulting in a risk of harm. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Practice Lead a requirement of the programme. b. Learning from pathfinders and other local authorities. c. Regular check and challenge from Department for Education. d. Sequencing of change and roll out approach considered thoughtfully. e. Working with Telford and West Mercia footprints to test and learn on some aspects of the programme. f. More frequent oversight of the programme and reporting to the safeguarding partnership.
<p>Delivery:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is a risk that this work is not prioritised meaning that key milestones are not met this is also pertinent to partners who are straddling up to four Local Authority Areas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Regular reporting to Leadership Board, Cabinet, Scrutiny and Partnership Boards. b. Tactical Delivery Group to ensure alignment with all 4 LA's. c. Alignment with the overarching council improvement and partnership plan. d. PM support secured. e. Regular reporting to DfE to maintain progress and oversight of progress.
<p>Workforce:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is a risk that the workforce are not equipped to support the changes, they are resistant to change and/or burnt out from the level of change. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Developing a coherent narrative and approach to integrating reforms so we have a systematic way of enveloping all changes. b. Skills Audit and Population Needs Analysis. c. Engagement of workforce a critical component of the change programme. d. Regular communication. e. 'Go and See' partnership leaders to visit practitioners to ascertain the appetite and acceptance of change to refine the delivery methods. f. Independent scrutineer utilised at critical points to check and challenge.
<p>Reputation and Public Trust:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is a risk that the public lose faith or see the changes in a critical light. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Co-production and measuring families perception is a key aspect of the programme. b. Monitor feedback c. Regular communications with members, MPs and community influencers such as PCF. d. Regular audits and reports to maintain an overview of practice. e. Examples of the change and it's benefits shared widely. f. Communications support secured.

9. Financial Implications

- 9.1 Shropshire Council continues to manage unprecedented financial demands, and a financial emergency was declared by Cabinet on 10 September 2025. The overall financial position of the Council is set out in the monitoring position presented to Cabinet on a monthly basis. Significant management action has been instigated at all levels of the Council reducing spend to ensure the Council's financial survival.
- 9.2 The budgets for local authorities have previously been made via grant agreements for different programmes of work such as Holiday Activities and Food, Supporting Families, Children's Social Care Prevention Grant. From 2026/2027 financial year, these grants will be consolidated into a Children, Families and Youth Grant. **This ringfenced grant is designed to strengthen local authority support for children and families across England, reducing inequalities and breaking down barriers to opportunity (Appendix E.)**
- 9.3 The financial aspects of this programme are two-fold, there is an income coming into the local authority which is summarised below and there is an anticipated cost avoidance which is being attributed to achieving this change nationally.

Programme of Work	Funding Allocated 2025/2026	2026/27	2027/28
Families First Partnership	£1.759m	£2.872m (this has increased due to the consolidation of a number of grants. However, we are yet to understand if this is a real terms increase or decrease.)	£2.872m
Best Start in Life	£0.152m	£0.811m (see full details Appendix D)	£0.742m

- 9.4 The Department for Education are investing earlier as Local Authorities have been clear they cannot reduce demand without twin tracking investment.
- 9.5 We need to reinvest savings into prevention we will not be able to realise the full anticipated benefits.
- 9.6 The DfE have made the case to the treasury that investment in prevention will realise a reduction in the high costs of care, however this is a 5-year plan to reduce the overall costs at the more acute end.
- 9.7 The first Pathfinders such as Wolverhampton (which started in 2023) are seeing this reduction in care numbers within 2025/26 but later Pathfinders are not seeing this reduction yet.

- 9.8 We assume that Shropshire will follow a similar trajectory where investment in this approach will start to realise the benefits 2-3 years after the reforms being implemented within the cost of care.

10 Climate Change Appraisal

- 10.1 It is envisaged that these changes will have limited effect on Climate Change, the small impact will mean more locality working with teams based in local communities as far as possible.

11 Conclusions

- 11.1 These changes represent the single biggest set of changes to the way Children's Services and the partnership work in a lifetime. They provide a unique opportunity to support more children closer to home, in their community as soon as they face challenges to help them resolve them quickly to achieve better outcomes for families.
- 11.2 The landscape within which we operate nationally, regionally and indeed locally present challenges to the effective deliver particularly given the financial challenges the local authority is currently facing and the fact that increased funding is being targeted towards areas of deprivation means that Shropshire will have to work hard to rebalance the system without the same financial investment.
- 11.3 Commitment from the council to reinvest spend into early intervention will be critical to achieve the rebalancing of spend towards the national average of 50% spend.
- 11.4 We seek your feedback and support to ensure that these changes are successfully embedded.

Appendices

Appendix A: Readiness Survey

Appendix B: Summary of Minimum Expectations

Appendix C: Delivery Plan

Appendix D: Best Start in Life Family Hubs Grant

Appendix E: Letter from Josh McAllister

Appendix F: DfE-NHSE Joint Letter to Local Authorities and ICBs