



David Johnston OBE MP

Minister for Children, Families and Wellbeing

Sanctuary Buildings 20 Great Smith Street Westminster London SW1P 3BT
tel: 0370 000 2288 www.education.gov.uk/contactus/dfe

The Rt Hon Baroness Morris of Yardley
Chair of Public Services Committee
House of Lords
Westminster
London
SW1A 0PW

26/04/2024

Dear Baroness Morris,

Thank you for your recent letter, which asks for updates following your evidence review of the children's social care implementation strategy. I am grateful for your continued interest in this important area and welcome the opportunity to share the progress we have made on delivering our ambitious reform programme through our strategy, 'Stable Homes, Built on Love'.

In 'Stable Homes Built on Love', we committed to laying the foundations for this comprehensive and long-term reform plan over the two years immediately following publication and refreshing our strategy at the end of this point. We are halfway through this first phase of reform and we have made significant progress on many of the commitments we made in the strategy. We are addressing urgent issues facing children and families, laying the foundations for whole system reform. I am particularly pleased that at the end of 2023, we met our public commitments to publish the first national kinship care strategy, ["Championing Kinship Care"](#), a [Children's Social Care National Framework](#) revised statutory guidance ["Working Together to Safeguard Children \(2023\)"](#); and our [Data Strategy](#). Together, these documents set out how we expect the sector, and all local authorities in England, to move towards our long-term vision for reform and set direction for the years ahead.

In the next phase of reform, we want to scale up reform delivery where we have built the evidence that it works, and in the future, bring forward legislation when Parliamentary time allows.

As you will know, our strategy is centred around six pillars of reform that together describe the future for children's social care. In this letter, I have provided a pillar-by-pillar update on our progress, including where they relate to the issues you raised in

your letter to me. I hugely value the expertise, support and challenge that your committee provides to us.

Pillar 1: Family help providing the right support at the right time so that children thrive within their families:

Families are at the heart of our reform programme, and we want the services that support them to be welcoming and multi-disciplinary. Our new model, 'Family Help', features new multidisciplinary teams that work alongside existing services to help families overcome challenges.

In July 2023 we announced the first local areas to test this new and innovative approach through the Families First for Children Pathfinder¹ backed by £45 million to deliver the programme. Additional pathfinder areas were announced in April 2024 for Lewisham, Luton, Redbridge, Walsall, Warwickshire, Warrington, and Wirral.

Like you, we know that delivery requires better joined up working across government, and I am committed to working in partnership with my colleagues across Government. In April 2024, responsibility for the delivery of the Supporting Families programme transferred from the Department for Levelling Up Housing and Communities to the Department for Education. This will expand the impact of the programme by bringing together the system of support for children and families.

Pillar 2: A decisive multi-agency child protection system:

We owe it to every child to have strong and effective child protection arrangements that help keep them safe - inside and outside their homes.

Through the Families First for Children Pathfinder, we are testing a new lead child protection practitioner role which will carry out front-line child protection work, and a dedicated multi-agency child protection response with responsibility for specific child protection functions, including child protection enquiries and overseeing child protection plans. Our updated version of 'Working Together', the multi-agency statutory guidance, clarifies how individuals, agencies, and organizations keep children safe and promote their welfare.

We recognise that this joint working is essential to achieving our aims, particularly on effective working across different agencies. We continue to work with Department for Levelling Up and Housing Committee (DLUHC) on Local Government Funding of Children's Social Care. Alongside the Department for Health and Social Care and Home office, they are custodians of statutory safeguarding partners (Local Authorities, NHS Integrated Care Boards (ICBs) and police forces), who safeguard

¹ [Families first for children \(FFC\) pathfinder programme and family networks pilot \(FNP\) - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/families-first-for-children-pathfinder-programme-and-family-networks-pilot-fnp)

and promote the welfare of children.

Last December, we also worked with the Department for Health and Social Care and NHS England to publish the Government response to the National Safeguarding Practice Panel review into safeguarding of children with disabilities and complex health needs in residential settings.

We will continue to maintain cross-Government momentum to deliver our children's social care reform programme by working with other Government Departments at all levels and will continue to explore opportunities to work with the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit.

Pillar 3: Unlocking the potential of family networks:

Where children cannot safely remain with their birth parents, we want them to live with people who know and love them. I am full of admiration for kinship carers who step up to provide a safe and loving home for children in these circumstances.

Since your inquiry, I am pleased to say we have delivered many of your recommendations, including publishing the first National Kinship Strategy. The strategy sets out our plans to follow on from the support the department currently offers kinship families, including our £2 million contract with the charity Kinship, to deliver high-quality peer support groups for kinship carers across the country and our contract with the Family Rights Group to deliver the Family and Friends helpline. This is in addition to other government reforms such as the extension of the adoption and special guardianship support fund to allow some kinship families access to therapeutic services. The strategy is underpinned by a £20 million investment in this Spending Review period.

We will launch a Pathfinder programme this year in up to 8 local authorities to provide special guardian kinship carers who care for previously looked after children with a financial allowance, paid at the same rate as foster care.

Pillar 4: Putting love, relationships and a stable home at the heart of being a child in care:

To better support children in care and care leavers, we are taking action to ensure there are the right number of placements for children, whilst ensuring care leavers have support in place to transition to adulthood. This includes removing some of the financial barriers care leavers face, by increasing their allowance.

We have started to invest £36 million to recruit and retain more foster carers across the country to provide high quality fostering placement. We launched the first

regional recruitment support hub, and the region are also working to further roll out of 'Mockingbird' -a support system for fostering families.

To support local authorities with their sufficiency duty, we are also investing £259 million capital to increase the number of places in open and secure children's homes. Our investment in open children's homes is expected to create 95 new homes, providing 360 additional placements across England up to March 2025. So far 48 additional placements across 14 homes have been created, with the remaining 312 on track to be delivered by March 2025. Through investment in secure children's homes, we will create a further 54 secure welfare placements and 10 step-down placements in England.

You asked specifically for updates on Regional Care Cooperatives. As you know, Regional Care Cooperatives present a radical shift from the existing approach to commissioning and delivering care placements. We believe that this level of change is necessary to truly reform the system so that it works for the children and young people who need a stable, loving home.

The Department is commissioning a delivery partner to support the RCC pathfinders. The delivery partner will have significant experience in Children's Social Care and local government, with an extensive background of delivering departmental priority projects and rollouts. We have also commissioned an external five-year independent evaluation of Regional Care Cooperatives, as we know it will take that long to fully understand and measure the benefits. We will have interim evaluations in the next few years to share learning as the project progresses, to ensure that future investment is targeted correctly, and policies are developed in the most effective way.

Our long-term aims for RCCs remain the same as set out in *Stable Homes, Built on Love*. We committed to set up two pathfinders to trial an approach to RCCs within the current legal framework, ahead of bringing forward legislation at a later date, when Parliamentary time allows. We believe that by co-designing RCCs model with two pathfinder areas, a delivery partner and an evaluation partner, LAs will have the autonomy to trial and test proposals and develop an understanding of what works best. This approach will also allow the DfE to build an evidence base ahead of legislation and directly inform the legislative approach itself, as well as the future national roll-out of RCCs.

We will shortly announce the two regions that will be pathfinders and will be able to share further details with the committee about their plans at this point.

You asked about independent advocacy for young people with experience of social care. We ran a [consultation](#) to revise the [National Advocacy Standards and statutory guidance](#) which closed on 18 December 2023. We aim to publish the consultation response report in Spring 2024. On Independent Reviewing Officers, our publicly

available guidance sets out our current position, and can be found at:

- [The Children's Homes \(England\) Regulations 2015 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](https://www.legislation.gov.uk)
- [The Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)
- [Independent reviewing officers' handbook - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk)

Pillar 5: A valued, supported and highly skilled social worker for every child who needs one:

We know that having the right social worker can be transformative for children and families. That is why we are prioritising boosting social worker recruitment, high quality career development for social workers, improving retention and reducing the cost and reliance on agency social workers.

We particularly want social workers to be able to spend more of their time working directly with children and families. We established the National Workload Action Group to review the drivers of unnecessary workload for Children and Family social workers. The group is being coordinated by Research in Practice (RIP), alongside providing support for leaders. Resources will help leaders with the employer Health Check results and with implementation of agency rules statutory guidance from summer 2024. The resources will be available from the National Virtual Hub.

We have also appointed an expert writing group to support development of the Early Career Framework. The group has developed a draft of the first part of the framework describing the capabilities social workers need to support children and families, which will underpin the development of the programme.

Pillar 6: A system that continuously learns, improves and makes better use of evidence and data:

Finally, we want to shape a system that continuously learns and improves and makes better use of evidence and data. You asked specifically what assessment has been made on the feasibility of using an NHS number as a Consistent Child Identifier.

We set out our initial assessment on implementing the NHS number as a consistent child identifier (CCI) in our report to Parliament [Improving Multi-Agency Information Sharing: Government Policy on Information Sharing and the Use of a Consistent Child Identifier](#). We also committed to conducting a regional trial to test the feasibility of using it across children's services. We plan to run a design phase for the trial this summer to understand all aspects of 'how' to run this regional trial successfully, which we hope will take place in early 2025. That design work will engage with the

Office of The Children's Commissioner to ensure the pilot will help provide evidence around the impacts. The main purpose of the trial will be to test whether a CCI improves the identification/matching of a child, and whether it improves the sharing of information between services involved in safeguarding and promoting the wellbeing of a child.

Central government plays an important role in creating a system that continuously learns and improves. You asked about transparency, cross government commitment to reform, and the pace at which we are delivering change.

We continue to work in collaboration with HMG Departments to collectively protect vulnerable children. Ministers from across Whitehall will continue to set policy direction jointly through the Child Protection Ministerial Group and the Care Leavers Board. We are pleased to share that Minister Mercer has been appointed as Cross-Government Care Leaver Lead, supporting the Department to drive the care leaver agenda across Government and with our stakeholders in the public and private sectors.

We want to be transparent about the work we are doing for children, young people and families. Notes of the discussions held by our National Implementation Board are routinely published and can be found [here](#). A full breakdown of our progress since we published 'Stable Homes' can be found on the Department's [Education Hub Blog](#) and in our [written evidence](#) submitted to the Commons' Education Selection Committee.

Thank you for your continued support in our important work to reform children's social care for every child and family that needs it.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'David Johnston', with a large, stylized initial 'D'.

David Johnston OBE MP
Minister for Children, Families and Wellbeing