

Report to: People Scrutiny Committee

Date of meeting: 17 March 2025

By: Director of Children's Services

Title: National Policy Reforms – Children's Services

Purpose: In 2025, the Labour government set out a broad range of ambitions for Children, Young People and Families and has introduced several policy changes affecting services, and this report provides an overview of those changes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1) The report is for information providing a briefing to People Scrutiny on national policy changes and how these changes will affect Children's Services.

1 Background

1.1 East Sussex, Children's Services welcome many of the reforms particularly those that are supportive of enhancing strong partnerships between local authorities, schools, health services, and other agencies with a strong focus on prevention, and holistic family support which we know will achieve better outcomes for children and families and the most effective use of limited resources.

1.2 In relation to health reforms we welcome any actions that take a holistic approach to child health that goes beyond just physical health such as addressing mental health, safeguarding, and the social determinants of health, including poverty, housing, and education.

2 Supporting information

Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill

2.1 The most significant reforms are set out in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, which was introduced to Parliament in December 2024. The Bill sets out 39 new policies across the children's social care and education sectors.

2.2 Whilst some of the education reforms will affect how we deliver services, the majority impact schools.

2.3 Most of the social care reforms were foreshadowed in the policy paper, '**Keeping Children Safe, Helping Families Thrive**', published in November 2024 which builds on Josh McAllister's, Independent Review of Children's Social Care, "**Stable Homes, Built on Love**" published in 2022, which proposed a variety of reforms aimed at improving the care system for vulnerable children. As a result, we have been thinking about some of these reforms for

some time. The Bill has however, been more prescriptive than expected with some of the policies and the timeline for delivery is challenging. A Transformation Board has been established, chaired by the Director of Children's Services, and it will oversee the delivery of the key changes.

Families First Partnership Programme

2.4 The Families First Partnership Programme is the umbrella term being used for the main reforms to the children's social care sector. This is a welcomed government initiative aimed at providing support to families in need, helping them overcome challenges that may impact their well-being and success. In East Sussex we are building on many strengths as we develop services to address the key elements of The Families First Partnership Programme. The programme has 4 key outcomes:

- i. Children and families stay together
- ii. Children and families supported by a family network
- iii. Children and families safe inside and outside of home
- iv. Children in care and care leavers have stable loving homes.

2.5 The 5 key transformation strands are:

- i. Developing a **Family Help service** which is an integration of our targeted Early help services (Level 3 on the Continuum of Need (Con)) with Children in Need (Level 4 on the Con). This will provide more seamless support for families and involves:
 - o Creation of Family Help Lead Practitioner (FHLP) role which can be a keyworker or social worker with social workers being allocated complex CIN and CP
 - o Introduce single assessment/plan from EH to LAC
 - o Whole family working and establish Team Around the Family
 - o Offer Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) ensuring family network where possible lead plan
 - o Integrated front door to services
- ii. Developing **Multi Agency Child Protection Teams (MACPT)**
 - o Establish MACPTs led by experienced Social Worker with police, education and health (and others depending upon need)
 - o Create Child Protection Lead Practitioner– experienced Social Worker
 - o Child Protection Lead Practitioner - undertake statutory functions for child protection cases held by Family Help Lead Practitioner (CP investigations and CP conference)
 - o Providing child protection case consultation for Family Help Lead Practitioner Maintaining an understanding of patterns of significant harm in the local area and agency responses – expected delivery in 2027.
- iii. Enhancing our **Family Network and Kinship** care services
 - o From Level 2 to Level 4 on our Continuum of Need, “unlocking the potential of family and friend networks” to support children in being safe and thriving within their families.
 - o Family Group Decision Making and Family Led Plans integral from front door to care and reunification

- When it is not possible for a child to live safely at home, Family Network members may step in as Kinship carers, which is prioritised as the first care option.
 - Family Group Conferencing embedded in pre-proceedings
- iv. **Enhancing Multi agency safeguarding arrangements (MASA)**
- Lead Safeguarding partners: Chief Executive (Local Authority), Chief Officer of Police, Chief Executive (Integrated Care Board).
 - Delegated Safeguarding Partners: Director of Children's Services (Local authority), Senior Police Officer, Executive Lead for Safeguarding (Integrated Care Board).
 - Partnership Chair and Independent Scrutiny (no longer independent chair)
 - Partnership Chair and works with independent scrutiny.
 - Independent Scrutiny: Provides rigorous support and challenge, ensures statutory duties are fulfilled, and incorporates the voice of children and families.
 - Enhanced role for Education in MASA
 - Corporate Parenting Responsibilities to extend to Health and Police
- v. **Transformation Enablers (workforce data and systems)**
- Developing a workforce strategy and competencies for the entire Family Help and MACPT workforce
 - Understanding local demographics and needs, understanding particular needs of communities, establishing clear and effective multi-agency data and information-sharing arrangements to support coordinated service delivery.

2.6 Other key changes in the Bill include:

- i. **A single unique identifier to be introduced** for each child across multiple data sets, with a new duty to share information for welfare and safeguarding purposes. Department for Education to run regional pilot to test feasibility of using NHS number as the consistent identifier.
- ii. **The strategic role of virtual school heads to promote educational achievement of children with a social worker and in kinship care to be made statutory.**
- iii. **Councils required to assess whether they should provide 'staying close' support to care leavers**, and publish arrangements they have in place for such children.
- iv. **The education secretary would be able to direct councils to "regionalise"** and "harness collective buying power" in relation to social care services. Pathfinders in South East (of which we are a part of) and Greater Manchester are testing approach in 2025.
- v. **A statutory framework for deprivation of liberty in accommodation.**
- vi. **Regulations to reduce councils' spend on social care agency workers.** Includes a commitment to consider how to "build a sustainable SEND workforce
- vii. **New law to ensure those involved in "low-level abuse" of 16 and 17-year-olds in children's homes can be prosecuted.**
- viii. **Legal duty for councils to publish a kinship local offer.**
- ix. **Mandate councils to offer 'family group decision-making' meeting** when considering care order.
- x. **Powers for Ofsted to take enforcement action at provider level where there are quality issues across multiple social care settings**, and fine people for not registering care homes or foster agencies.

- xi. **A financial oversight scheme enabling government to better scrutinise the financial health of large children's social care providers**, those deemed "difficult to replace". This would include large providers with dual-registered special schools.
- xii. **A "last resort" profit cap to "curb profiteering" in non-local authority children's home and fostering agency providers.** Will later also apply to supported accommodation providers.
- xiii. **Allowing children (those aged under 16) to work more than two hours on Sundays** to give more flexibility for employers, but all children will be required to have a work permit. Powers to change these rules will pass to the education secretary, rather than councils.

Education Policies

2.7 These policy changes reflect Labour's commitment to reforming the education system, focusing on inclusivity, support for educators, and enhancing student well-being and outcomes and are very much aligned to the work we have been taking forward in East Sussex.

2.8 There are 7 key areas of reform:

- **Standardising teacher qualifications and pay**
 - All new teachers in state primary and secondary schools will be required to have Qualified Teacher Status (QTS)
- **Curriculum reforms**
 - All state-funded schools, including academies, will be mandated to teach the national curriculum and standardise pay and conditions
- **Intervention in underperforming schools**
 - The Secretary of State will have the flexibility to determine the most appropriate action for improving failing schools, moving away from the automatic issuance of academy orders.
- **School admissions & place planning**
 - Enhanced Local Authority Powers: Local authorities will have increased authority to establish new schools of all types and local authorities and will have greater powers to direct the admission of individual children into both maintained schools and academies when needed.
- **Support for electively home educated (EHE) children**
 - These changes are part of an ongoing effort to ensure that home education is properly supported and that the welfare and educational standards for children who are home-educated are being met. One of the most significant proposals has been the introduction of a registration system for home-educated children.
- **Regulation of independent educational institutions**
 - increasing regulation of independent educational institutions, including unregistered schools
- **Provision of breakfast clubs and affordable uniforms**
 - Free Breakfast Clubs: State-funded schools to ensure all children on roll in reception to year 6 have access to a free breakfast club aimed at improving attendance and support children's learning.
 - Seeks to limit the number of branded items required for school uniforms, reducing costs for families and ensuring affordability.

Other Education Reforms

2.9 Recruitment of Teachers: Committing to hiring an additional 6,500 teachers to address shortages and improve education quality.

2.10 Nursery Expansion: Opening 3,000 new nurseries by upgrading spaces in primary schools to enhance early education access.

2.11 The government is considering extending free childcare to cover more children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, as part of a broader effort to support working families and promote early childhood education.

2.12 Updates to the early years foundation stage (EYFS) curriculum ensure that children develop both academic and emotional skills at an early age, with a focus on social mobility.

2.13 Parental Leave Review: Initiating a review of the parental leave system to better support working families.

2.14 School Accountability: Enhancing the inspection regime by replacing single headline grades with detailed report cards and bringing Multi-Academy Trusts into the inspection system.

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

2.15 The government has outlined its commitment to improving services for children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) through various policy statements and manifestos. These include:

- i. **Increase Funding for SEND Services:** as yet there is no indication of where the additional funding will go – likely to be focused on those areas with greatest High Needs Block deficits.
- ii. **Improving Access to Support:** The Government has proposed measures to make it easier for children with SEND and their families to access the necessary, simplifying and streamlining processes and improving the quality of Education, Health, and Care (EHC) Plans.
- iii. **Education and Inclusion:** The Government aims to promote inclusive education and ensure that children with SEND are supported to learn in mainstream schools where possible, while also providing specialist support where needed.
- iv. **Teacher Training:** The Government has proposed increasing training for teachers and other education staff to improve their ability to support students with SEND in mainstream settings, ensuring that all educational professionals have the knowledge and skills to meet diverse learning needs.
- v. **Strengthening Rights for Families:** The Government has advocated for stronger rights for families of children with SEND, including ensuring that families have access to the information, advice, and support they need to challenge decisions that impact their children's education and care.
- vi. **Focus on Early Intervention:** The Government has also prioritised early intervention to support children with SEND as soon as difficulties are identified, aiming to reduce the need for more intensive support later on.
- vii. **Collaboration between Services:** The Government supports the creation of more collaborative working between education, health, and social care services to provide more holistic support for children with SEND and their families.

2.16 There is currently a call for evidence being conducted and we anticipate more significant reforms to the SEND system over the course of this parliament.

Child Health Reforms and ambitions

Child Health Action Plan

- i. **Reducing Waiting Lists:** Implementing 40,000 additional planned care appointments to expedite paediatric services.
- ii. **Mental Health Support:** Introducing specialist mental health professionals in every school and establishing Young Futures hubs in communities for preventive care.
- iii. **NHS Dentistry:** Providing 700,000 extra urgent dental appointments annually and launching a supervised toothbrushing program for young children.
- iv. **Regulating Smoking and Vaping:** Progressively banning smoking for future generations and restricting vape marketing targeted at children.
- v. **Junk Food Advertising:** Implementing a 9pm watershed for junk food ads on TV and banning paid-for advertising of less healthy foods online aimed at children.
- vi. **Breakfast Clubs:** Offering free breakfast clubs in every primary school to ensure children start their day with a healthy meal.
- vii. **Energy Drink Ban:** Prohibiting the sale of highly caffeinated energy drinks to individuals under 16.
- viii. **Fast Food Outlets:** Empowering councils to prevent new fast-food outlets from opening near schools.

Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing: New Priorities

2.17 In response to the growing mental health crisis, particularly exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been updates to national frameworks aimed at improving mental health support for children:

- **Mental Health in Schools:** Continued expansion of mental health support teams in schools, ensuring that more children have access to on-site mental health professionals.
- **Prevention and Early Intervention:** A stronger emphasis on early identification of mental health issues, with initiatives designed to provide earlier and more accessible support for children and young people.
- **Access to Primary Care:** Ensuring that children have better access to general healthcare, including mental health services, through primary care settings.
- **Wellbeing Programs in Schools:** More emphasis on promoting physical activity and mental resilience among young people, incorporating these into school curricula and extracurricular programs.

Grooming Gang Inquiries and Youth Violence and Gang Prevention

2.18 The Home Secretary has announced £10 million for local authorities to reopen grooming gang inquiries and cold cases related to child sexual exploitation, aiming to address and prevent such crimes.

2.19 The Government is developing policies to target youth violence and gang involvement with increased resources aimed at prevention through early intervention, better community support, and education programs, including knife crime prevention

Support for Children in the Justice System

2.20 **Reforms to Youth Justice:** There is a growing focus on providing diversionary programs and alternative sentencing to keep children out of the formal criminal justice system. Policies are shifting towards rehabilitation and support rather than punitive measures, especially for first-time offenders or those with mental health needs.

The Online Safety Bill (2025 Implementation)

2.21 As part of the **Online Safety Bill**, set to be fully implemented by 2025, technology companies will face more stringent requirements to protect children from harmful online content. This includes:

- i. **Protection from Harmful Content:** Increased measures to prevent children from being exposed to harmful content, cyberbullying, or exploitation online.
- ii. **Age Verification and Data Protection:** Stronger safeguards to ensure that social media platforms and online services are safe for children, with a focus on privacy and age verification.

Changes to Benefits and Wages

2.22 Continued reforms to Child Benefit and welfare programs to support families, with a particular emphasis on addressing child poverty and inequality. This includes:

- i. Enhanced support for low-income families, particularly those with children in vulnerable situations, with targeted benefits designed to reduce poverty.
- ii. Reducing child poverty by raising the minimum wage
- iii. Tackling regional inequalities. This is part of a broader strategy to reduce economic inequality and support working-class families.

3. Conclusion and reasons for recommendations

3.1 People Scrutiny Committee to note the breadth and depth of policy reforms affecting the delivery of services to children, young people and families in East Sussex.

3.2 It is recommended that the People Scrutiny Committee receive updates on progress on these reforms by the Department through an agreed approach.

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LOCAL MEMBERS

ALL

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

[Keeping children safe, helping families thrive](#)

[Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill](#)

Appendix 1: ESCC CSD Early Intervention and Social Care Reform Governance Structure