

<b>Bath &amp; North East Somerset Council</b>			
MEETING/ DECISION MAKER:	<b>Children, Adults &amp; Well-Being Policy Development &amp; Scrutiny Panel</b>		
MEETING/ DECISION DATE:	<b>15<sup>th</sup> December 2025</b>	EXECUTIVE FORWARD PLAN REFERENCE:	
TITLE:	<b>Bath &amp; North East Somerset Families First Partnership Programme Update</b>		
WARD:	All		
<b>AN OPEN PUBLIC ITEM</b>			
<b>List of attachments to this report:</b> Families First Presentation			

## 1 THE ISSUE

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide an information update to the Children's, Adults, Health and Well-Being Policy Scrutiny Committee about the Families First Programme of reforms, its statutory context, local implementation, funding, issues, and next steps. Committee members are asked to note progress and provide feedback on priorities and risks.

## 2 RECOMMENDATION

**The Committee is asked to;**

- 2.1 Proposal 1** Note the national requirements and local response to the Families First Programme.
- 2.2 Proposal 2** Comment on the proposed approach to service design and engagement.
- 2.3 Proposal 2** Identify any areas for further scrutiny or assurance.

### 3 THE REPORT

- 3.1 The Families First Programme (The Programme) is a national reform initiative arising from the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill and recommendations from the Independent Review of Children's Social Care. The Programme was developed by the Department for Education (DfE) in collaboration with safeguarding partners, including local authorities, health services, police, education and childcare settings. The guidance was officially published on 20th March 2025, with a joint ministerial foreword from the DfE, Department of Health and Social Care and the Home Office. It builds on learning from grant funded pathfinder local authorities which have been testing new approaches to family help, multi-agency children protection and family-led decision-making.

The key objectives of the programme include:

Strengthening early family support and reducing reliance on statutory services as well as the number of children who need to come into local authority care.

Integrate Family Help, Child in Need and statutory child protection to create a seamless system of support for children and families.

Establish a Multi-Agency Child Protection Team (MACPT) to support and oversee safeguarding concerns.

Embed Family Group Decision Making across all services (FGDM) to ensure family inclusion in planning and support decisions.

Create an Integrated Front Door for all contacts and referrals.

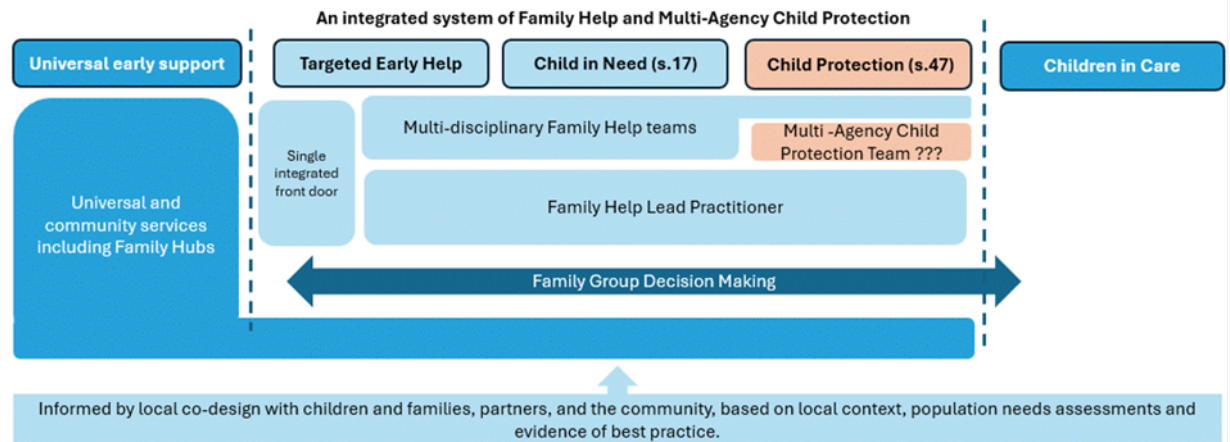
Josh MacAllister's Independent Review of Children's Social Care (2022) influenced many of the Programme's core principles. The Programme builds on recommendations from the review, aiming to rebalance children's social care by strengthening family support systems and reducing reliance on statutory interventions such as care. The programme integrates targeted early help with statutory child in need interventions via Family Help Teams, ensuring families receive targeted early help before statutory intervention is required. The Programme aims to transform family support and child protection in England by integrating multi-agency collaboration, early intervention and family-led-decision making.

In addition, recommendations from the National Panel's review of two high profile child deaths published in 2023 underpin the requirement to develop multi-agency child protection teams and the Child Protection Lead Practitioner (LCPP) role to strengthen safeguarding decision-making for children.

The reforms are described as the development of an integrated system of Family Help and Multi-Agency Child Protection. See below:

## A whole-system approach to reform

Locally designed systems that meet the needs of the population with effective, integrated and joined up services with partners and that rebalance children's social care to earlier intervention



3.2

The DfE has designated 2025–26 as a transformation year to support implementation. Regular meetings with DfE advisors review and monitor our progress and enable a space for exploration of risks and issues impacting on the developments. In the latest meetings with DfE, they reported that local authorities are at different points in the transformation relating to this programme and the scale of change required will depend on current structures and service delivery arrangements. B&NES have worked at pace to complete a whole scale review of Children's Services to better understand the current working arrangements to inform the change required to meet the requirements. A key part of the guidance from DfE proposes that the transformation should be reflective of the needs and demands of local areas, this has resulted in the guidance being less prescriptive to enable this local response. DfE, at our most recent monitoring meeting in November 2025, were in support of our timescales of full implementation in July 2026. This fits with a requirement to ensure implementation and embedding of new arrangements during 2026-27.

### Local Response

Our vision is to create a system of support in Bath and North East Somerset that places families at the centre of all decision-making, ensuring that every child grows up safe, supported, and able to thrive within their family and community wherever possible. This will be supported by continued commitment to strengthening and expanding our current prevention services so that families receive help at the earliest possible stage, reducing the need for statutory intervention and preventing escalation of risk.

We aim to develop an integrated approach that prioritises early intervention and prevention which is front and centre of our local programme. The local authority and its partners fully recognise the importance of timely support that can transform outcomes for children and families. There is a commitment to working collaboratively across agencies such as health, education, police, and voluntary partners so that we can collectively, identify emerging needs quickly and respond with tailored, holistic support.

Empowering families is at the heart of our ambition. Through Family Group

Decision Making and co-created family support plans, our ambition is that all children and families we work with will have a strong voice and genuine influence over the decisions that affect their lives. Our approach will focus on building resilience, strengthening protective factors, and supporting children and families to find sustainable solutions within their own networks wherever possible.

By embedding these principles into our practice, we hope to create a culture that values partnership, promotes inclusion, and delivers consistent, high-quality support. Ultimately, our goal is to reduce the number of children entering care, improve family stability, and enable children to achieve their full potential.

To achieve this vision we have achieved a full understanding of the needs and demand within B&NES across children's social care services through undertaking a detailed discovery this has focussed on:

- 3.3 Demand and caseloads.
- 3.4 Establishment (roles, posts and funding)
- 3.5 Use of funding for roles including grants
- 3.6 Processes and use of systems across the service.

Given the scope and scale of the reforms, a Programme Management approach has been adopted to provide the structure and resources that are needed to affect the necessary change.

The Transformation Steering Group meets monthly and has agreed four key workstreams to reflect the requirements of the Programme. The workstreams are:

- 3.7 **Integrated Front Door** – further development of a single point of entry and access to Children's Social Care for those within the local authority area needing support. This includes access to, what is currently, targeted early help, child in need, child protection and all other areas of children's services.
- 3.8 **Family Help** – providing a seamless system that ensures identification of need and support, led by Family Help Lead Practitioners (FHLs) working across multi-disciplinary teams who will act as the lead professional/key worker and will, in most cases, stay with families as long as they require help and support.
- 3.9 **Multi-Agency Child Protection Team** – establishing a team that brings together social care, police, health and education to improve safeguarding responses. The workstream is also developing the role of Child Protection Lead Practitioners who will step in when families' needs change and there are safeguarding concerns.
- 3.10 **Family Group Decision Making** - this will be provided right across Family Help and the MACPT to strengthen family involvement in decisions, ensuring co-created solutions.

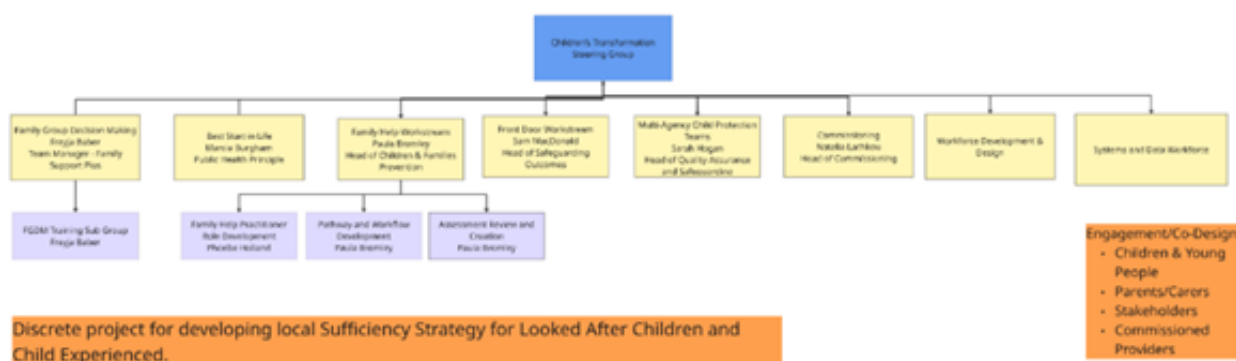
The Transformation Steering Group is the place where workstream leads present highlight reports based on progress since the previous meeting. Reports include progress, risks, issues, planned activity for the next period and RAG rating on status.

The workstreams meet every 2-3 weeks and they review project plans and milestones. They are focused on planning activity and discussing options for operating

models to ensure B&NES is successful in fully implementing the reforms as required. They also identify any risks and mitigations to ensure timescales are being achieved as well as escalating any key issues or blockages to the Transformation Steering Group.

Subgroups of the workstreams meet as and when required and are undertaking key tasks as set out in project plans, acting as task and finish groups often requiring smaller groups or with different membership.

The diagram below sets out the full governance structure:



## 4 STATUTORY CONSIDERATIONS

4.1 The National Families First Partnership Programme does not have its own statutory footing as a standalone legal requirement. Instead, it operates within the existing statutory framework for children's social care in England. The programme is guided by existing statutory duties under:

- a) Children Act 1989 – particularly Section 17 (duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in need) and section 47 (where there is reasonable cause to suspect a child is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm).
- b) Working Together to Safeguard Children (statutory guidance) – which sets out the responsibilities of local authorities, health, and police as statutory safeguarding partners.

The Families First Partnership Programme guide explicitly states that it does not replace statutory guidance; rather, it supports implementation of reforms within those duties.

In summary, the Families First Partnership Programme is policy-driven, not a new statutory duty. It builds on existing legal obligations under the Children Act and statutory guidance like Working Together, while introducing reforms supported by the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill.

## 5 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS (FINANCE, PROPERTY, PEOPLE)

5.1 For the financial year 2025-26 B&NES were awarded £528,927 to assist with transformation and implementation. We are required to report our activity and

spend quarterly to the Department for Education, and the table below sets out our reported agreed spend and commitments against this grant. To date, a total commitment of £477,443 has been agreed by the Transformation Steering Group to support the transformation work.

FFP Funding			
	Actual Spend Reported Q2	Commitment 2025-26	Total
<b>Transformation Costs</b>	£ 61,200	£ 206,833	£ 268,033
<b>Partner Agencies</b>	£ 40,000		£ 40,000
<b>Workforce Dev</b>		119410	£ 119,410
<b>Sufficiency Data</b>		50000	£ 50,000
<b>Total</b>	£ 101,200	£ 376,243	£ 477,443
<b>To be allocated</b>			£ 51,485

There is £41,485 remaining from the allocated funding. This funding will support single and multi-agency training, partnership engagement including further release of professional time to support development of the programme.

## 6. B&NES Progress

### 6.1 Integrated Front Door:

Our vision for the integrated front door is to create a single, streamlined access point for all contacts related to Family Help and Child Protection. We aim to strengthen our existing multi-agency arrangements so that professionals can share information quickly and directly, enabling timely and well-informed responses to referrals.

We plan to include Early Help Practitioners within the front door team to ensure families receive support at the earliest opportunity.

Lead Child Protection Practitioners (LCPPs) will also be connected to the front door, providing additional support and input into decision-making.

LCPPs are senior statutory child-protection professionals embedded within Multi-Agency Child Protection Teams (MACPTs), operating collaboratively with partners (police, health, education) to respond swiftly and effectively to significant harm. They act independently for Section 47 enquiries, chairing strategy meetings and conferences, and making timely statutory decisions under Working Together 2023. They will support with:

### 6.2 Decision-making & action: Analyse multi-agency intelligence; initiate enquiries or legal steps; chair child protection conferences.

Coordination & oversight: Provide expert supervision to social workers, ensure quality plans, maintain seamless case oversight across agencies.

### 6.3 Collaboration with family help: Work alongside Family Help Lead Practitioners to maintain support continuity.

By bringing agencies together in a strong, integrated front door, we can reduce duplication, improve coordination, and foster joint problem-solving and shared learning.

The working group leading on these developments have designed options for operating models that will allow us to implement a unified, accessible entry point where all contacts to the front door will be triaged to the right area of support. The aim is to streamline referrals, improve coordination among professionals, and ensure that families receive the right help at the right time, regardless of where they first seek assistance.

### 6.4 Family Help and Family Help Lead Practitioners:

Our local vision for Family Help Teams and the Family Help Lead Practitioner is to establish integrated, multi-disciplinary teams that support families across a continuum of need, from Targeted Early Help to more complex Child in Need cases. This approach aims to deliver a seamless and consistent service, reducing change for families as their circumstances evolve/risk increases.

We want to build Family Help teams with professionals from a variety of disciplines e.g. social workers, health professionals, education specialists, and family support practitioners with a range of skills to support domestic abuse, substance misuse and mental health issues, which regularly impact on parenting. Professionals will work collaboratively to provide holistic support to families. Families receiving support from Family Help Teams will receive support from a Family Help Lead Practitioner (FHLP).

Family Help Lead Practitioners, including social workers and alternatively qualified professionals, will case-hold children on a continuum from targeted early help right through child in need, child protection and legal planning. The aim is to ensure continuity of worker, reduce handoffs and build trust between families and professionals supporting reduction in risk and building support, thus, improving outcomes through collaborative, strengths-based approaches. Practitioners will conduct Family Assessments to understand the challenges and provide tailored support and work alongside families to co-create Family Help Plans.

There is a real emphasis in the Programme guidance on the importance of a strong and well-resourced targeted early help offer that supports families before challenges escalate into crises. It also strongly promotes proactive intervention, ensuring families receive support before statutory involvement is required. The guidance also sets out the need for universal services like education and childcare settings to provide accessible early intervention. It sets out the need for Early Help to be sufficiently resourced and positioned to reduce the number of children entering care through strengthening family resilience as early as possible.

### 6.5 Multi-Agency Child Protection Team and the Lead Child Protection Practitioner

The development of the Multi-agency Child Protection Team has been driven by the National Child Safeguarding Review Panel's review of high-profile child deaths and the need for strong decision making in respect of significant harm. Pathfinder Local Authorities have taken a range of different approaches to this depending on their size and existing structures. We are considering two key options for this, including a model where all Family Help Teams have a multi-agency approach and include a Lead Child Protection Practitioner (LCPP) who chairs all strategy meetings, oversees all child protection investigations and chairs child protection conferences. The other option is to develop one core Multi-Agency Child Protection Team with a group of Lead Child Protection Practitioners who can support the whole service in these functions, line managed outside of the mainstream Family Help teams to offer quality assurance and consistency of decision-making.

The working group for MACPTS has been tasked with designing the local approach to MACPT that ensures the safety and well-being of children, and they are responsible for planning, coordinating and executing all tasks relating to the creation and implementation of the team. Partners, including police and health are part of the workstream.

The Lead Child Protection Practitioners (LCPPs) will be social workers with substantial frontline child protection practice experience within children's social care (enquiries, reviews, conferences, decision making and supervision) and an in-depth knowledge of the statutory and legislative framework. They will provide key support, advice, decision making and quality assurance of child protection investigation and interventions to identify and reduce risk.

## 6.6 Family Group Decision Making (FGDM)

The Programme Guidance requires Local Authorities to embed FGDM throughout the system of help, support and protection, not just at crisis points. It sets out how FGDM should be offered at an early point to provide families with an opportunity to respond to concerns so that they are part of any support plan and so that this can happen before formal action is taken.

The approach must be aligned with safeguarding processes and used in a way that supports safe decision-making for children. It is likely that under the Children's Well-being and Schools Bill, local authorities will be mandated to offer FGDM before applying for a care or supervision order. In BANES we are in the fortunate position of having already established this approach of offering FGCs to all families open to social care.

FGDM is a core element of the Families First reforms, aimed at empowering families to take the lead in planning for children's safety and well-being. It should be embedded across early help and statutory services, offered early, and supported by multi-agency collaboration.

In B&NES we have a well-established Family Group Conference (FGC) service within the Family Support Plus Team. An FGC is a meeting where the wider family and friends' network has the opportunity to understand and talk about concerns then plan for the child(ren). This is organised and chaired by an FGC coordinator and attended by the social worker and other professionals. A key

element of FGCs is private family time which allows the family to create a plan without professionals being involved in their decision-making.

In response to FFP, the B&NES approach is to ensure family led decision making is embedded within the Family Help Team and MACPT, with all Family Help Lead

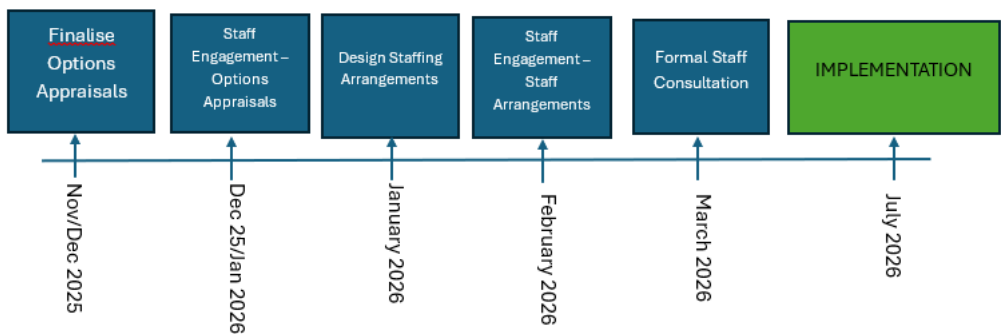
Practitioners trained in this as an approach. This will broaden the involvement of family networks throughout our work and meetings with families, rather than relying only on this being achieved by referring for an Family Group Conference. Within Targeted Early Help and Child in Need cases, all cases will be supported with Family Group decision making principles at the heart of practice.

## 7 Key Timelines, Stakeholder Engagement and Next Steps

During November 2025 a series of workshops were held with the Children's Social Care Leadership Team with Workstream Leads where options for delivery models for each area of the programme were initially presented for consideration.

During December and January 2026, these options appraisals will be summarised and shared with staff and key stakeholders where opportunities, through a variety of mediums, will be provided to influence our preferred approach for the future. The options for the operating model will be finalised in January 2026. Following this, the programme team will establish a variety of staffing options to successfully deliver that operating model, giving due consideration to our expected levels of demand. Those options will be shared with staff to gather their feedback and suggestions during February 2026.

Depending on the final options and staff arrangements, formal consultation will commence with staff and Trade Unions in March 2026. It is anticipated that this will occur over 45 working days so that we can fully implement the operating model and team design by 1<sup>st</sup> July 2026.



In addition to the workshops that took place in April and June of this year with key statutory partners and partners from the voluntary sector where details of the Families First Partnership Programme were shared, there are a series of engagement and consultation events and activities with key stakeholders including children, young people and their families, scheduled from now through to the summer of 2026.

We have also developed a structured communication approach, including regular staff briefings to provide updates on programme progress. In addition to this, there are a number of engagement events between December and January where staff

and stakeholders will consider a variety of options for operating models with opportunities to influence the way in which we implement these reforms in B&NES. Heads of Service and managers from across the service are also expected to cascade key messages to their teams. Additionally, staff involvement in workstreams is enabling frontline practitioners to actively contribute to the design of future service models.

The table below sets out the confirmed engagement events/activity for 2025/26.

<b>Date / Period</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Audience</b>	<b>Channel / Method</b>	<b>Purpose</b>
19 Dec 2025	Share transformation plan with DfE	DfE	Official submission	Inform and align
Dec 2025 – Jan 2026	Staff engagement & workforce feedback on options (due mid-Jan)	Internal workforce	Summary of options document; feedback form	Gather input on options
Monthly (Internal)	Updates incl. workstream leads info, steering group updates, timeline	All staff	Email briefing; 7-min briefings via HOS/TM meetings	Keep informed; encourage feedback
Feb 2026	Share new structure (high-level: HOS/Managerial)	Internal workforce	Email; staff briefing	Inform about upcoming changes
1 Mar 2026	Start consultation (45 days / 9 weeks)	Internal workforce; unions	Drop-in sessions; union updates	Engage and consult
Mar 2026	Stakeholder event #3 (early consult phase)	Families & commissioned services	In-person event	External engagement
Jan 2026	Stakeholder event #2	Families & commissioned services	In-person event	External engagement
Monthly (External)	PCF updates	Parent Carer Forum	Email	Keep informed
Ongoing	Feedback capture	Internal workforce & stakeholders	FFP inbox; MS Forms link & QR code; Teams channel	Collect feedback
1 Jul 2026	Implement new structure	All	Internal comms; external updates	Confirm change completion

## 8. CONCLUSION

Bath & North East Somerset is committed to delivering the Families First Partnership Programme in a way that reflects the unique needs of our local communities. Our approach prioritises early intervention, prevention, and family group decision-making, ensuring that children and families receive timely, holistic support before challenges escalate into crises. By strengthening our existing prevention offer and embedding family-led decision-making at the heart of practice, we aim to create a system that reduces reliance on statutory care and improves long-term outcomes for children.

Progress has already been made, including the establishment of robust governance through the Children's Transformation Steering Group and the development of key workstreams: Integrated Front Door, Family Help, Multi-Agency Child Protection Team, and Family Group Decision Making. This approach aims to enable seamless collaboration across agencies and ensure that children and families experience continuity of support.

While challenges remain, such as data quality, workforce capacity, and sustaining partner engagement, mitigation plans are in place, and our implementation timeline of July 2026 is supported by the Department for Education. Continued oversight of the programme and partnership involvement will be essential as we move into the next phase of stakeholder engagement and operational design.

Our ambition is clear in that we want to build a system that empowers families, strengthens resilience, and delivers consistent, high-quality support. Through this transformation, Bath & North East Somerset will create a safer, more inclusive environment where every child can thrive.

## **9. RISK MANAGEMENT**

A risk assessment related to the issue and recommendations has been undertaken, in compliance with the Council's decision making risk management guidance.

Whilst the DfE Guidance sets out a start date of April 2026, DfE has confirmed our planned implementation date of 1<sup>st</sup> July 2026 and are assured by our programme management approach and our robust plans.

The quality of our demand and caseload data in some existing areas of the service is not as strong as it could be and has presented challenges in understanding the capacity that we need to design into any new operating model. To mitigate this a series of sessions have taken place with Heads of Service, Business Change and Business Intelligence to review the data that is available to us to arrive at a consensus allowing us to design services of the future based on a sound evidence base.

Continued partner engagement is essential to ensure that, as a partnership, we can fully implement the reforms and ensure improved outcomes for children and families.

To further mitigate these risks, an additional project manager has been appointed to provide more resource, and we continue to strengthen our

structured programme plans. We also continue to seek advice and support from our DfE Advisor.

## **10. EQUALITIES**

At this point in the programme development and implementation, there are no key policy changes as preferred options for delivery models are yet to be agreed. As referred to in section 6.5 of the report, the key milestone for this is January 2026 at which point an EIA will be completed and relevant actions captured to ensure negative impact is mitigated. However, there are a number of equality issues that have been identified deriving from this national programme:

### **Accessibility and Inclusion**

Digital exclusion: Families without access to technology or digital literacy may struggle to engage with services or participate in Family Group Decision Making (FGDM).

Language barriers: Non-English-speaking families may face difficulties understanding processes or accessing support unless translation and interpretation services are consistently provided.

Disability access: Families with disabled children or parents may encounter barriers if services are not fully accessible or inclusive in design.

### **Cultural Competency and Bias**

Cultural sensitivity: Multi-agency teams must be trained to understand and respect diverse cultural norms and parenting practices to avoid misinterpretation or bias in assessments.

Implicit bias: Professionals may unconsciously treat families differently based on race, ethnicity, gender, or socio-economic status, affecting the fairness of decisions and support offered.

### **Equity in Service Delivery**

Geographical disparities: The programme allows for local flexibility, which may lead to unequal service provision across different regions depending on resources and leadership.

### **Consistency of support:**

The quality and availability of Family Help and MACPTs (Multi-Agency Child Protection Teams) may vary, impacting outcomes for children in need

### **Participation and Voice**

Power dynamics: Families may feel disempowered in decision-making processes, especially if professionals dominate discussions or if FGDM is not facilitated equitably.

Children's voice: Ensuring that children are heard and their views are considered appropriately in planning and safeguarding decisions is essential so need to be inconsistently applied.

As options for service delivery are being designed the above implications will be considered to ensure actions to mitigate these risks are built into implementation plans.

## **11 CLIMATE CHANGE**

Given that this report relates to reforming Children's Social care there is no direct correlation to the Council's target of reducing carbon emissions. However, all policies, procedures and work processes will consider any impact on the council's target.

## **12 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED**

None. B&NES have committed to implementing the requirements of the Families First Partnership Programme.

## **13 CONSULTATION**

Jean Kelly, Director of Children's Services

Darryl Freeman, Executive Director Operations

Cllr Paul May, Cabinet Member for Children's Services

Jeff Wring, S151 Officer

<b>Contact person</b>	<i>Paula Sumner, Interim Assistant Director, Children's Transformation</i>
<b>Background papers</b>	<i>None</i>
<b>Please contact the report author if you need to access this report in an alternative format</b>	