



HORIZON

REFORMING CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

March 2026

NEWSLETTER

1st Edition



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Children's Social Care Services
Reform Programme



A MESSAGE FROM THE HEALTH MINISTER



Health Minister, Mike Nesbitt

Welcome to the first edition of the Horizon newsletter. Children's social care can change lives, providing children and young people with the opportunity to grow up in loving and safe environments and giving them the hope and confidence to thrive.

The Children's Social Care Reform Programme has been put in place to make changes that deliver better outcomes for children, young people and their families by providing them with the right support, at the right time, and in the right place.

The Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services set the direction for where we need to go, and a lot of work has been done since the Review was published in June 2023 to plan in more detail the best way to achieve this.

This has involved looking carefully at what support children and families need and what evidence shows us works for families. Concrete plans are now starting to come together. One example of this is the work that has led to the development of a regional model for family support services in Northern Ireland.

The model is focused on supporting families early, and with the right services working together and available when and where families need them. We have invested some additional money in services for children with disabilities and their families. £1.376m additional funding was provided in 2024/25 and from March 2025, £13.1m additional recurrent funding is being made available per year.

If you are familiar with the Independent Review, you will know that the main recommendations called for a body that would bring children's social care services together in one place. I have consistently taken the view that such an agency will work best if we include the services of other government departments. To that end, the Justice Minister and I have now agreed to work together to identify the steps to be taken to establish a new Regional Children and Families Authority and our departments are working together on this.

The Reform Programme is a significant undertaking during challenging times, and moving from planning to action will not be without its hurdles, particularly given the severe funding difficulties that government is facing. However, doing nothing is not an option, we know that change is necessary. We must work together across the statutory, voluntary and community sectors to do better for our children, young people and families, particularly the most vulnerable. Above all, we need to support families as early as possible when problems or challenges begin to emerge rather than when they reach crisis point. If we can do this, we will be well on the way to achieving the outcomes that we are determined to deliver.

PROGRESS ON CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE REFORM

In this first edition of the newsletter, Peter Toogood, who leads reform of adult and children's social care in the Department of Health, sets out the reform programme's progress so far and what is coming up later this year.

Watch the full interview



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

Progress So Far

"Much of the work done to date has been about building relationships, as well as developing evidence-based plans to address known issues now and to prepare for future demand. This has been a complex process and our current constrained financial context has not made it any easier. I have heard this described as 'flying the plane while trying to build it'.

That being said, we have made progress in a number of areas, for example:

- We now have a draft strategic plan for residential care services for children and young people in Northern Ireland.
- We have progressed a number of initiatives to stabilise, support and grow the social work workforce and implementation of the social care workforce strategy is now underway.
- We have also been doing things like making all Trusts 'Fostering Friendly Employers'.
- We have invested in 60 new support officers – new staff who will work alongside social workers to support children and families."

Look Ahead

"A Strategic Plan for the Reform of Children's Social Care will be finalised shortly and will provide clear direction on what the Programme is aiming to achieve over the next 5 years. While this plan is wide ranging, over the next year we are going to be focusing our collective efforts on a smaller number of priorities that will have the biggest impact.

One of the key priorities is to support families to enable them to stay safe, well and together. So, we will develop and start to implement a comprehensive new model of family support for Northern Ireland, which we are calling 'Together for Families' – a bid to the Executive's Transformation Fund is at an advanced stage which will enable this work to proceed."

“ Much of the work done to date has been about building relationships, as well as developing evidence-based plans...this has been a complex process...I have heard it described as 'flying the plane while trying to build it' ”

REFORM PROGRAMME EXPLAINED

Since April 2023, two major programmes have been working to improve social care services in Northern Ireland - one relating to children's social care and the other to adult social care.

Both programmes were initiated following comprehensive reviews of current services. They were set up to start to tackle the problems in the current system and to make services better for everyone who needs them.

Right now, both programmes are developing long-term strategic plans. These plans aim to bring about real change in the immediate to long term – to offer practical solutions to the challenges we face today, and those we expect in the future based on current trends like the growth in the number of children in state care or the projected growth in the elderly population.



#everydayheroes



THE CHILDREN'S REFORM PROGRAMME



Children's Social Care Reform Programme Annual Report 2024-25



WHO'S INVOLVED IN LEADING THE REFORM?

The Children's Social Care Reform Programme is focused on creating strong foundations for the future. This includes building important partnerships at every level and working together in new ways. It is guided by a Programme Board made up of people from across different sectors: who all share one goal - improving services for children, young people, and families.

- **Department of Health leaders** – experts in policy, social care, and commissioning.
- **Key Service Delivery Partners** - Health and Social Care Trusts, the Youth Justice Agency, the Education Authority, The Probation Board of Northern Ireland, the Police Service of Northern Ireland – those who deliver services every day.
- **Key agencies** – including the Public Health Agency (PHA), Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC), Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA), the Children's Court Guardian Agency (CCGANI) and Trade Union representatives.
- **Other government departments** – Education, Justice, and Communities to ensure that policy is working for families in a joined up way.
- **Voluntary and community sector representatives** – organisations that provide vital support to families and communities.

There are 5 Reform Coordinators assigned to support the Programme and its workstreams.

Details of the 2024/25 Programme achievements can be found in the Annual Report.

HOW ARE CHILDREN, YOUNG PEOPLE AND THEIR FAMILIES BEING INVOLVED?

Children, young people and their families were at the heart of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care and it is vital that they continue to be involved in the work to bring about change.

The Reform Programme delivered 'The Foundation of the Future Conference', a special event that shared updates and celebrated progress with children, young people, families, carers, and professionals working in social care.

Work is well advanced on a co-designed Children and Family Charter, now called Our Pact, developed with children, young people, parents, carers, and staff. Built around four principles—Respect, Listening, Equality, and Honesty—it aims to be accessible, engaging, and meaningful.

The Focusing on Families survey gathered views from families and practitioners to shape Northern Ireland's Family Support.

At the Everyday Heroes conference in Newry (March 2025), practitioners, parents, carers, and young people shared their views on what family support for Northern Ireland should look like. The session provided valuable insights into what families need most from support services.



**Health Minister, Mike Nesbitt
and Professor Ray Jones**



Graphic
Recording

A LOOK AHEAD

BUILDING A STRATEGIC WAY FORWARD VISION

**TO WORK TOGETHER TO ENSURE EVERY CHILD AND YOUNG PERSON GROWS UP
IN A SAFE AND STABLE HOME WITH HOPE AND OPPORTUNITY TO THRIVE AND
REACH THEIR FULL POTENTIAL.**

The Children's Reform Programme has been focused on urgent issues and key recommendations from the Independent Review. Now, it's moving into a new phase that looks ahead and is planning for the longer term.

Once finalised, a 5-year Strategic Plan will set out a clear vision and will focus on a small number of strategic priorities to help drive real, meaningful and lasting change across children's social care.

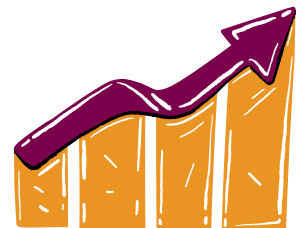
A more detailed 3-year Delivery Plan will outline the practical steps that will be taken to turn the strategic plan into action - ensuring that progress is made in a structured way with clear timescales for delivery.

MEASURING SUCCESS: THE OUTCOMES FRAMEWORK

A major part of looking ahead is being sure that the work to reform children's social care is working and that things are getting better for children, families / carers and staff. As well as measuring the success of the Reform Programme, a Children's Social Care Outcomes Framework will be important to measure how well the system is doing in supporting children and families after the Reform Programme has ended. That's why work is underway to develop a Children's Social Care Outcomes Framework.

This framework will:

- Show what 'good' looks like for children, families / carers and staff
- Help us track how things are going and ensure we stick to our promises
- Make sure services keep getting better over time.



By focusing on outcomes and not just processes, we can make sure that the changes make a difference to the lives of children and families – differences that they can see and feel.

A small working group has been set up to take this work forward but we want to make sure that children, young people, families / carers and staff are also involved in designing the Outcomes Framework.

We will be reaching out to the organisations in the Programme who can help us with this. If you would like to be involved, you can get in touch with one of those organisations or email us directly at strategicreformpmo@health-ni.gov.uk.

If you work for a HSC Trust you can reach out to your HSC Trust Reform Co-ordinator.



Family
SupportNI



HSCNI