

Tuesday 28<sup>th</sup> January 2025

## Families First for Children Wave Two Pathfinder Programme – Updating Report

### 1. Purpose of the report

- 1.1 To provide Children's Scrutiny Committee with an update of the progress of the Families First for Children Wave Two Pathfinder (henceforth 'Families First'), and the key developments and areas of work undertaken to deliver the programme to date.

### 2. Recommendations

- 2.1 That Committee notes the progress with the Families First Programme in Children's Services, the key developments, and the implications of these.

### 3. Aim

- 3.1 To provide an overview of the activity in the Families First programme since April of last year, the key opportunities for the programme, and the next phases of implementation.
- 3.2 To outline how effective delivery of the Pathfinder will support overall Council Plan priorities and demand management overall.
- 3.3 To begin to set out the future context for service delivery in Children's Services.

### 4. Know

#### ***Context***

- 4.1 The Families First for Children Pathfinder is an exciting opportunity to lead national level reforms to protect children and help and support families. Families First is a central feature of the government's 'Children's Social Care strategy 'Stable Homes Built on Love'. This responded to recommendations from the [Independent Review of Children's Social Care](#), completed in 2022. It also responds to key outcomes from the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel report on [Child Protection in England](#) and the [Competitions and Market Authority's Market Study of Children's Social Care Provision](#). The Families First programme continues to be endorsed by government, and remains central to the Department for Education's national children's social care policymaking and reform.

- 4.2 A central contention of the Independent Review was that a radical shift in children's social care is required for families to receive responsive, respectful, and effective support at the earliest possible point. This support should draw on the strengths and resilience of family and community networks, and move away from processes which are professionally led, and require hand-offs and multiple, overlapping interventions by different services. This requires significant investment in family help and preventative services. It is modelled in the Care Review that this will if implemented successfully it's recommendations would mean, nationally, particular many fewer children requiring care and expensive crisis provisions (It is argued that modelling indicates 30,000 less children in care by 2032 if the reforms are implemented in full). This in turn will create substantial financial savings to Local Authorities – especially in a care system that is more than ever shaped by market forces and costs that continue to rise – enabling them to further reinvest in family help and preventative services.
- 4.3 In Walsall Children's Services, the Walsall Right 4 Children programme has seen a clear stabilisation of the children's social care workforce, along with a focus on getting the fundamentals of practice right for children and families, along with innovation and the successful implementation of a range of specific and national initiatives. These have included Family Hubs, the Holiday and Food Activity Programme, Supporting Families, and the Family Safeguarding model, embedded through the DfE's 'Safer Families, Protecting Children' programme. Through these changes, enhanced family support and improved child protection practice has meant that the profile of children entering care has changed. There have been fewer children aged 12 and under entering care following a period of Child Protection Planning (the focus of the Family Safeguarding Model). Despite the overall positive impact of Specialist Adolescent Support Services Turning Point, and more recently Youth in Sight, there has been an increase in vulnerable older children 13 and above entering care – this again reflects a national context. This has meant that until recently the overall number of child in care has remain relatively stable. However, the challenges of placement sufficiency and ever-increasing placement costs, especially for older children, has meant care costs have inexorably risen.
- 4.4 There has been a more positive trend across Q1-Q3 of 2024-25. This has seen the total number of children in care reduce from 661 to 598. This is discussed below at 4.22-4.23.
- 4.5 Families First is about implementing the fundamental changes identified in the Care Review to help families sooner, drawing on the strengths of family and community networks, and to act decisively and purposefully where children are identified as at risk of harm or experiencing abuse. This recognises that for some children, care is absolutely the right thing that means they are safe, and free from harm and abuse. It is also about developing a strong network of helping services for families that can recognise and respond to need early, when help is most likely to be effective. There is a focus on practical support, and on developing the right specialist support services to provide intensive help

when needed and to help families respond to crisis. This structure of family help is strongly grounded in communities and locality working, and engaging with partnerships across the voluntary and community sector. This way of working sits within a context of getting multi-agency safeguarding arrangements right, and whole systems change. The Pathfinder has four identified reforms strands:

- Family help
- Child protection
- Family networks
- Multi-agency safeguarding arrangements

- 4.5 As a Wave 2 Pathfinder for Families First, Walsall has responded to a Design Specification from the DfE, that set out the key reforms required for the programme under the four strands above. To do this an overarching Delivery Plan has been developed and endorsed with the DfE. From the outset, this has been a Partnership Plan, developed with engagement from across the Walsall Safeguarding Partnership, and approved by the Families First Programme Partnership Board. A partnership project team of key Strategic and Delivery Leads has been recruited to support this work as outlined in the previous report to CMT. With the recent appointment of a Health Strategic Lead, this project team is now complete.
- 4.6 To implement these changes, a number of partnership working groups and single issue task and finish groups have been convened. This work served to develop the practice and operational detail of the Families First framework, turning the high-level Delivery Plan into a detailed series of proposals about the implementation of the reforms.
- 4.7 These proposals were then drawn together to create a cohesive Families First Blueprint. This Blueprint was, in turn, subjected to a sequence of ‘test and challenge’ sessions, going through the proposals to review strengths, gaps and likely challenges. This process was undertaken at both a strategic and operational level to refine the Blueprint.
- 4.8 From the outset, it has been recognised that culture and values sit at the heart of the Families First framework, as this is about how we work with children and families as well as the what we do – the specifics of policy, procedure and process. Given this, and the broad scope of the reforms, it was agreed that a comprehensive programme was required, and a 5-day Induction and Development programme has been designed. This programme was undertaken with all the key staff who will be moving into the new ways of working at the first phase of implementation. This has meant they have had a detailed overview of the reforms, with a focus on culture and values, and the programme then explored key practice development themes of assessment, planning, and reflective and systemic practices. This Induction and Development programme was also a final round of ‘test and challenge’ for the Blueprint, to brief and gain feedback from all staff who will be implementing the Families First framework. Evaluations of 5 days were positive, with a strong message of enthusiasm for

the reforms and understanding of why and how we are looking to introduce the reforms. The key message also was that staff wanted to 'get on with it' and start working in this new way.

- 4.9 Family Safeguarding provides the foundation for the practice framework for Families First. The emphasis and framework around multi-agency working in Family Safeguarding has been shown to provide a strong basis for effective and purposeful multi-agency help for families, in particular for children and families where children are on Child Protection Plans and have high levels of need under Child in Need Plans. The aim of the Families First framework is to use this as a foundation for a much broader scope of family help services, and for effective multi-agency child protection arrangements.
- 4.10 The Families First Induction and Development programme was undertaken four times across the four localities in Walsall, with other centralised service invited to specific sessions. This was done through September and October, with localities supporting one another to minimise the impact on service delivery. Based on the feedback from these sessions as a final round of 'test and challenge' learning, the Families First Policies and Procedures have been written and shared, and work on the changes to key processes in the Mosaic Case Management System has been finalised and tested.
- 4.11 Following this work, the internal launch of Families First occurred on November 4<sup>th</sup> 2024.
- 4.12 Establishing the Family Help Service has been a key priority. Multi-disciplinary teams have brought together, building on the foundations in place within locality Early Help and the Family Safeguarding Teams. Teams are working in a multi-disciplinary way, with a full integration and launch of the Families First practice framework from 4<sup>th</sup> November 2024. Some roles have been recruited to, facilitating further multi-disciplinary family help support. Pathways have been established, and multi-agency roles and responsibilities agreed. Work has been undertaken to develop the single Family Help Assessment and Plan, and Team Around the Family process – this has been a key piece of work that has involved replaced existing Mosaic workflows with a new, simplified and streamlined process. Within this new Family Help offer, there has been an increase in Partnership Officer to support working alongside schools, health and voluntary and community services.
- 4.13 We are looking to be bold in placing family networks at the heart of family help and child protection, with a new service offer. This new service – currently titled the FAMILY Service – will deliver Family Group Conferencing and Family Network Meetings to engage and mobilise the networks of family, friends and community support around children and families, and to build these networks where they have limited support. There is evidence from Local Authorities where this type of service has been embedded as part of a cohesive practice and operational framework that it has a significant benefit for children and families, and for the outcomes of professional helping interventions. The recruitment and development of this service has been really positive, with

strong interest and candidates recruited for all 14 practitioner and manager roles. All staff will be in place and this service will begin to operate in December.

- 4.14 Child protection reforms have been positively received by partners. There has been additional time needed to collaboratively develop the model to ensure buy-in, and to agree finalised versions of the proposals. The Multi-agency Child Protection Team structure is now agreed, and the details of this proposal are being finalised. The recruitment of Lead Child Protection Practitioners – a new role – has had some challenge. There was a more limited take up of interest in the Senior LCPP role than expected by Child Protection Conference Chairs. Also prior to receiving the news of being successful in our bid to become a Wave Two Pathfinder, Walsall had recruited five Consultant Social Workers. These were all internal experienced social workers. This has meant the pool of potential recruits for this new role has been smaller than it might otherwise have been. This said, there is now a team of five suitably qualified and skilled practitioners in place to begin the pilot. This will begin in one locality in January, before expanding across a second locality in February. At the end of the Pathfinder period, the pilot will be reviewed alongside a wider review of the Child Protection Conference Chair and Independent Reviewing Officer role.
- 4.15 Partnership reform has been positively received, with a good level of investment from partners in Families First, and a strong engagement across all working groups and with the Programme Board. Multi-agency safeguarding arrangement reform proposals have been agreed through the Walsall Safeguarding Children Partnership. A key feature of these changes has been a strong emphasis of the role of schools and education in Family Help and Child Protection. This has been a strength of our approach so far with two local Headteachers taking on the roles part-time of Strategic Education Leads. Alongside colleagues in Education in Children's Services, this has provided a strong basis to engage with schools and education providers through the reform process. This has been reported to have been really positively received, with schools and providers welcoming being able to fully engage in the design and delivery of Families First.
- 4.16 A staff training and development offer has been developed to accompany the launch of Families First, with some training programmes booked or delivered. This training programme aligns with and builds on the existing training offer, with a focus on expert training and supporting practitioners to develop specialist knowledge and skills. There is also a full training programme for systemic practice in progress. This was begun during the 5-day Induction and Development programme and will continue throughout the next year. This will include Senior Management, and Managers and Practice Supervisor trainings to commence in January 2025.
- 4.17 The next phase of implementation of Families First will include a full partnership launch: with locality launch events, and continuing engagement activities with schools and education providers, health, police, other key partner agencies and

the voluntary and community sector. This will begin in January and February. In addition to this, the following key activity will take place:

- The continued develop of the MASH 'front door' and initial response to family help support requests and child protection referrals
- Launch of the FAMILY Service
- Launch of the Multi-agency Child Protection Team and Lead Child Protection Pilot
- Launch of the 0-5 Helping Children to Thrive centralised family help service
- Launch of Youth and Community Service Offer
- Integration of the Disabled Children's and Young Person's Team into Family Help Service
- Re-launch of Exploitation Service and Hub
- Expansion of Family Help Service offer
- Expansion of our Volunteers Service offer
- Commissioning of child protection expertise training programme
- Mosaic CMS – full redesign programme
- Development of full outcomes and performance framework
- The alignment of the Practice Development Hub to provide a centralised learning and development hub across Children's Social Care, Early Help and Youth Justice
- Opportunities for enabling technologies to create efficiencies and streamline service delivery, and to develop partnership working and information sharing

4.18 There are key corporate connectivities with the above strands of work. The expansion of the Family Help offer will include working arrangements with other teams in Children's Services, in particular the Youth Justice Service, SEND and School Attendance and Home Schooling. It will include working alongside Adult Services, Public Health, Housing, Customer Services and Resilient Communities. It will also involve key statutory and voluntary partners – in particular the Police, Health Services, Child and Adolescent Mental Health, Probation, Black Country Women's Aid, CGL Substance Recovery Services, and local Community Associations.

4.19 Work is ongoing with the Mosaic Development Team, and now the first immediate stage of change has been implemented, attention will shift to a more expansion redesign of the Mosaic CMS through a practitioner and technical collaborative working group. This is an exciting piece of work that will bring significant benefit to practitioners. Enabling technologies has also been a key workstream that is already showing impact in enabling managers to focus time through the use of Co-Pilot. This has shown an overall positive impact, and is now being piloted as a key step in procedure change to support quality of supervision records, and early signs of impact are positive (recognising that Co-Pilot itself remains at the piloting stage).

- 4.20 The work on the Families First Programme has involved many areas of council services, and required strong collaboration and work at pace. The support offered by colleagues by Finance Business Partners, HR Strategic and Operations, the Mosaic Systems Team, Business Insights, Proud Programme Support and DaTS has been essential to this. A big thank you is warranted to all those involved for their support and commitment to the programme.
- 4.21 A separate report has been provided to Committee on the recent key policy changes announced in Keeping Children Safe, Helping Families Thrive. As outlined in this report, the Families First programme not only remains at the forefront of national Children's Services reforms, these reforms will gather pace, with all local authorities expected to implement these reforms. It is expected this will generate significant interest in the work undertaken by the Pathfinder local authorities. This has already been observed in recent requests to visit Walsall.
- 4.22 There has already been demonstrable benefits to service delivery from Q1-Q3 of 2024-25. The number of children in care has reduced from this period from 661 to 598, with a smaller increase of children remaining on Child Protection Plans – up from 199 to 238.

A review of these changes has been undertaken. This found firstly that Child Protection Planning for children remains appropriate, and children who should be entering care still are. Second, the decrease across this 9-month period is a result of both fewer children entering care, and more children leaving care.

In respect of reduced number of children entering care. It is too early to draw clear conclusions, but it is noted that:

- There has now been a period of relative stability in the Family Safeguarding Service over the previous 2-3 years
- The Family Safeguarding model is embedded, and social workers all use this approach, with more consistent management, and specialist practitioners embedded
- This has been the preparation and initial implementation period of Families First, which builds on Family Safeguarding, and focuses on effective child protection, family networks and preventative family help
- The review found that the proportion of children on Child Protection Plans prior to coming into care has increased, and fewer children have entered into care directly from a voluntary level of support. This appears indicative of more purposeful family help being provided.

There was not one reason for the greater numbers of children leaving care, but rather it was a 9-month period where there was a combination of:

- More children returning to live with their parents or family
- More children turning 18
- More children being adopted

4.23 These changes cannot so much be directly attributed to the Families First programme, so much as reflecting the journey within Children's Service, which Families First continues and embeds. The review findings just outlined indicate how the reduction of children in care has been safe, and not occurred because of changes in decision-making or ineffective child protection practice. It supports consideration that there can be continued reduction of children in care through purposeful practice and a focus on preventative family help and targeted service delivery. This is a key focus of the Families First programme. The review shows that a decrease in the numbers of children in care at the scale of Q1-Q3 2024-25 should not be expected as this has occurred because of a range of factors coming together, and such a rate of decrease is not sustainable, but a continued shift because of carefully planned service reforms is achievable.

### ***Council Plan Priorities***

4.24 The Pathfinder programme will provide a significant opportunity to develop services for vulnerable children and families in Walsall, impacting on the Council Plan priority that children 'have the best possible start and are safe from harm, happy, healthy and learning well'. It continues the transformation work that is being undertaken through the Walsall Right 4 Children programme which focusses on the aspiration that every child and family in Walsall is understood, feels happy and safe, with a strong sense of belonging enabling them to learn, achieve and succeed.

4.25 The Pathfinder reforms, especially in respect of Family Help, are about ensuring that all children and families who need additional help for children to thrive receive that help from the right professional who they can develop a relationship with and have consistent support from. As needs increase or situations change, the level of support will increase but remain coordinated by a consistent professional. Children and families will be encouraged to work with their wider family and community networks, and to identify the help they need from professionals and services.

4.26 Pathfinder directly contributes to the below Council plan outcomes and markers of success:

Outcome 7 – Children and young people thrive emotionally, physically, mentally and feel they are achieving their potential.

- Marker of success 13 - Children and young people have access to high quality education and training opportunities and schools are more inclusive.
- Marker of success 14 - Children and young people with additional needs or in specific circumstances are identified and supported to have their health and education needs met.

Outcome 8 - Children and young people grow up in connected communities and feel safe everywhere.

- Marker of success 15 - Services and support are responsive to needs of different communities, partners are proactive in responding to these needs and children and families have easier and timelier access to services.
- Marker of success 16 - Children and families are better connected with community resources to enable them to build resilience, are involved in developing their plans and can provide regular feedback.

4.27 Being part of the Pathfinder creates opportunities to elevate Walsall’s public profile. This will potentially enhance recruitment opportunities across the system from fostering to practitioner recruitment as it will make Walsall appealing as an innovative place to work and do business with. A communication and marketing strategy will be built into the overall project plan.

### **Risk Management**

4.28 As with any programme, the implementation of Pathfinder will introduce key risks outlined below in table 1 – these will be managed, mitigated and monitored throughout the duration of the programme. The success of this project plan is dependent on this work being prioritised across the workforce, having the right arrangements in place, and to be supported effectively by wider council services and systems.

Table 1:

Key Risk	Mitigation
Families First involves an intensive period of change that will impact across Children’s Services, but in particular Children’s Social Care and Early Help Services. This may be disruptive and whilst initial feedback from staff is they recognise the opportunity this brings, it will create anxieties.	This needs to be managed through coordinated project management so that staff are and engaged and consulted throughout the change management process, and briefed and prepared for changes as they are implemented.
There is a level of risk that Families First can impact on service delivery. For example, a move to an integrated Family Help model could result in increased referrals and demand on services	What is key here is the project and change management process, and that changes are carefully considered, consulted and tested. A central feature of the Families First Programme is to trial reforms and learn, and there is scope to iteratively design and develop, and to test reforms as they are

	<p>implemented. To return to the example just given, this will mean: understanding and benchmarking current data and trends, creation of new policy and process in consultation and collaboration with frontline practitioners, introducing these changes in a coordinated way, with a clear communicated and quality assurance plan, with a cycle of analysis and refinement and adaptation as required. This process of continual learning will be central to the implementation of Families First.</p>
<p>There is a risk that Families First could negative impact on partnership arrangements and relationships, if it is regarded that reforms involve Children’s Social care moving statutory responsibilities to other agencies. On the other hand, if the reforms are implemented well with partners, they could have a significant positive impact, creating a shared framework for partners working together to meet statutory responsibilities for all organisations as set out in Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023.</p>	<p>This will be mitigated through a strong programme board which will be supported by a communications plan to ensure all changes are clearly understood as to both their implementation and rationale.</p>
<p>Families First is a long-term change programme. If the Families First reforms are introduced and begin to gain momentum but then service changes are not maintained or key posts are lost then this will impact both on capacity to deliver the changes required and scope of the Families First framework, and on morale and staff and partnership buy-in to the programme.</p>	<p>There should be a strong, proactive strand of work to develop an outcomes framework and key performance measures, and financial modelling – incorporating the below work to reprofile savings for 2025-26 onwards. This will provide a foundation for understanding and being able to communicate on the outcomes of the families First framework, and what changes are effective. This, in</p>

	turn will support sustainable future service (re)design and commissioning.
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### **Financial Implications**

4.29 The grant funding allocated for the Families First Pathfinder is a total of £2.23m. This runs across 2024-25. The DfE has confirmed that there will be additional funding to support the Families First Pathfinder for 2025-26, however this will come out of the Prevention Support grant funding that all local authorities will receive. This funding should be used to support a range of preventative support services in Children’s Services, and the proposals that sit across the reforms outlined in **Keeping Children Safe, Helping Families Thrive**. This funding has been set at a slightly higher figure of £2.88m, but this does create some financial challenges as the proposed legislative changes go beyond those what are set out in the Pathfinder design specification.

4.30 The Delivery Plan for Families Frist provided to the DfE was accompanied by a Costed Plan which set out the detail of how the £2.23 grant funding would be spent. The key areas of spend are outlined as follows:

Project team / Training / One-off costs	£809k
Commissioning	£30k
Family Help staffing	£558k
Child Protection staffing	£129k
Family Networks – FAMILY Team staffing	£285k
Family Network Support Packages	£418k
<b>Total</b>	<b>£2.23m</b>

To note, the costed plan above funded only 7 months of the posts which sat within service. It was identified that a further £819k would be required to fund the posts for the full 12 months.

There has been some reallocation of the funding. Recruitment timelines have been a specific issue. This reflects the challenges for local authorities in terms of mobilisation for the Families First programme given the timescales. Additionally, as the Pathfinder has progressed there has been learning about the different strands. The DfE have agreed to reallocation of funds accordingly, for example in relation to Family Network Support Packages, where all the Pathfinders have spent less than DfE projections, and the set allocation of 25% funding to Family Networks, or which 75% had to be reserved for these Packages. This money has been reallocated across the Family Help and Child Protection Strands.

- 4.31 It is projected that the £2.23m grant funding will be spent in full, with some costs being occurred into the next financial year. The DfE have advised this is permissible where the funding has been allocated this financial year but delivery runs into Q1 of 2025-26.
- 4.32 The Families First programme represents a unique opportunity to invest in family help and preventative services as part of a whole system reform. The funding provided to Local Authorities is to test reforms, with a view to creating sustainable change. Above all is the human benefits and cost of how the children’s social care system operates, and this alone would support arguments for service reform. Yet there is also a significant financial impetus in getting this right, as this will create substantial long-term and sustainable savings for the council.
- 4.33 Reducing the numbers of children entering care is the most cost-effective strategy for sustainable budget savings in the longer-term. There are the in-year costs avoided for any child who does not enter care. For many children, there are also successive year-on-year costs avoided if they do not enter care; and, as children in care get older, the likelihood of some of these children struggling to cope and needing to move to new homes increases – with potentially significant costs especially where this means a residential home is needed.
- 4.34 There are further additional savings that can be directly attributed to improved family help and preventative and crisis support for children and families. This is principally through:
1. Increase of children able to live with wider family and network Connected Carer Foster Carers as an alternative to other foster care placements
  2. Reduction of children and families requiring more intensive, costlier professional intervention, and in the use of externally commissioned crisis services
  3. Reduction in Care Proceedings and associated costs including legal fees and commissioned experts

The initial savings identified for the programme have been submitted and included within the MTFO position, which is to be agreed at Cabinet and Council in February 2025. These are as follows:

<b>2025/26</b>	<b>2026/27</b>	<b>2027/28</b>	<b>2028/29</b>
(729,827)	(1,480,219)	(1,480,219)	(1,480,219)

The level and achievement of these savings will be reviewed on a regular basis through an agreed tracker which is currently being developed.

In terms of the revenue implications of the programme within the MTFO, while we await confirmation of funding allocations post 2025/26, the estimated

recurrent revenue costs of the project will be highlighted as a risk within the future year budgets.

As the original costings only funded 7 months of the service staffing costs (as noted in 4.30), and it is unclear how much of the £2.88m Prevention grant will be required to support reform activities over and above the Pathfinder design specification (as noted in 4.29), a detailed review of the service model will be required to inform the level of funding required from the Prevention grant post Q1 and to confirm the full year recurrent revenue costs of the project.

- 4.35 The Families First programme provides a way of investing in targeted family help and preventative services and resources, supported by the grant funding from the DfE. It is acknowledged that to seek to continue the level of investment the Families First programme requires is a significant financial investment. If the programme delivers on the proposed reforms, and this in turn reduces the numbers of children in care, and children entering care, the potential savings will be substantial. The wider aim of the reforms as set out in the Care Review in 2022 has been to support Local Authorities to achieve changes, and reduce the numbers of children in care, to continue to be able to invest in family help and preventative services.
- 4.36 Other local authorities have been able to successfully refocus the provision of services in this way, with a strong focus on family help and preventative services, leading to a positive impact of this on the quality of practice and support for children and families, and significant financial savings / costs avoided. This includes all three of the Wave One Pathfinder Authorities for the Families First Programme – Wolverhampton, Lincolnshire and Dorset.
- 4.37 A model to track the financial benefits of the Families First programme is currently being developed. This model will be used to understand the savings to the council from the reduction of children in care outlined above at 4.22-4.23. The financial benefits of this change are significant, but this will be felt most significantly in future financial years due to the cumulative nature of such changes.
- 4.38 The work undertaken within the Families First programme is preventative, and so does not directly tackle the key financial challenges the council faces in respect of placement sufficiency, and the impact of the need for higher cost placements, and the costs when children need to move placements. Families First is fundamental to how these financial challenges can be met though.

This is because to create greater scope for children to live safely in the right family homes, there needs to be an overall reduction in the numbers of children in care. Second, the clearer the planning and direction of practice, and the stronger we are able to work with families, this may improve the experience that some children in care do have. For some children this will help with the challenges they experience and which occur around placement stability. Third, reduced numbers of children in care enables Children in Care Teams to do more focused work with those children who do enter care. This will help some

children to achieve stability and to return home / build positive family relationships.

- 4.39 The cost benefit analysis model being developed for the Families First programme is therefore centred on the financial benefits of preventative support, crisis services and systemic change. This model will also establish a data driven approach for understanding what kind of family help services a child and their family received, and the impact of this. In turn, this can be used to support decision-making about the investment required for sustained change and the continued safe reduction of children in care. This will inform proposals for the use of the Preventative Grant for 2025-26.

### ***Legal Implications***

- 4.40 Statutory guidance has been amended through Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023 to enable the Pathfinder reforms. Legal Services are being consulted about proposed changes, and any potential legal implications to ensure consistency and accountability, and alignment with statutory provisions under the Children Act 1989.

### ***Procurement Implications/Social Value***

- 4.41 A key feature of the Families First programme will be to review support for children and families at a local level, and across Walsall's communities. The aim will be to scope what is available and to identify and meet gaps. This will have potential implications for procurement and commissioning of services, and adding social value to local areas.
- 4.42 As the thinking for the Families First programme has developed, a significant, if the programme is to make a difference, then engagement with the voluntary and community sector will be essential. This reflects how the Families First framework for Walsall is about understanding and working with children and families in their communities, and building networks of family, friends and community support around them. This will form a key part of the second wave of implementation. This will include developing links between the programme and Resilient Communities.

### ***Property Implications***

- 4.43 There are no new property implications as a result of this proposal. There is ongoing work to identify and continue to develop the Locality Hub buildings.

### ***Health and Wellbeing implications***

4.44 Staff wellbeing is a key part of the service Workforce and Wellbeing Strategy. This is being updated for 2025-26, and Families First will support this this work.

### ***Staffing implications***

- 4.45 Families First will mean there are changes in Children's Services, especially Children's Social Care and Early Help. For the duration of the Pathfinder period, changes will be centred on working practices, but there will be ongoing consultation and development activity to explore the right structures and career frameworks to really embed Families First.
- 4.46 Recruitment for Families First has almost been completed. All Project Team roles are now filled, and new teams and roles have been established as set out above. The final posts to be recruited into are now all currently out for advertisement.
- 4.47 There may be changes identified through the Pathfinder to existing roles and service structures. These will be understood through internal quality assurance and performance analysis, and through the programme evaluation methods. Any proposed changes will be implemented through the appropriate council Business Design and HR processes.

### ***Reducing Inequalities***

- 4.48 The impact of Families First will be beneficial to reducing inequalities. It will enable Children's Services to redesign core systems in line with feedback from Walsall's children and families, and from our staff. This will support accessibility for the service and the offer to children and families in respect of both Family Help and Child Protection. The Families First framework means that the programme is centred on working with and empowering communities, and this will include understanding the differing profiles and needs of communities in a way that and reflects and seeks to counter the adversity and disadvantage that occurs within some communities.
- 4.49 A key strand of the Families First is to review and develop our Family Help offer for parents of disabled children, and children with additional learning needs and special educational needs. A working group is currently mapping the needs of disabled children and children with SEN in order to explore the right alignment of services with Families First.

### ***Consultation***

- 4.50 The Big Conversation Consultation exercise is continuing with children and families. This consultation activity will run throughout the duration of the

Pathfinder period, and will be fundamental to the continuing development of the Families first framework.

- 4.51 As outlined above, the Families First framework has been developed through a series of working groups and consultation activities with children, families, our practitioners and partners. Now that the plan is in place and we have entered the implementation phases, there will be a focus on working with children and families to understand their experiences of Family Help and Child Protection. This will build on the consultation and design work to review what it is that does and does not make a difference for children and families, and what we can learn and could be improved as a result of their experiences. This will be fundamental to the ongoing delivery of the Families First framework.

## **5. Decide**

- 5.1 Committee are not required to make any formal decisions at this stage – Committee are being asked to continue to endorse and support the Families First Programme in Children’s Services, and note the continuing development of the programme of work and move into the delivery phase as set out in this report.

## **6. Respond**

- 6.1 The focus at present is to embed the new Families First framework, and to make sure that this results in the intended changes in practice and children’s and family’s experiences. This will include a focus on management oversight, quality assurance and performance monitoring, consultation and engagement with children, families and practitioners, and direct observations of practice.
- 6.2 The next phase of the implementation of the programme is outlined above. The strategy here is to have key phases of implementation that break down the overarching reforms into a series of sequential changes, which in turn amount to a significant shift in practice, culture and operational delivery.
- 6.3 Alongside the current focus and planned activity, the other main area of work will be planned for the sustainable embedding of the Families First framework to become ‘business as usual’. This will depend on the outcomes and evaluating the impact of reforms. The plan is to begin to outline the options and when key decisions will be needed so that we can be in as strong a position as possible with respect of sustainability, and have the right conditions in place for sustainability if the programme has the positive impact that it should. This will include an emphasis on this being a partnership framework, and strategic conversations with key partners support by the Families First Programme Partnership Board and the Walsall Safeguarding Partnership.

## **7. Review**

7.1 Governance arrangements are in place, with the individual working groups and different strands of activity feeding into the Project Group. The Project Group is a partnership group with Strategic Leads from different organisations. The Project Group, in turn, reports into the Families First Programme Partnership Board. This overarching progress is reported into, and held to account by the Proud Board and the Walsall Safeguarding Children Partnership Executive Leadership Team. There are also monthly progress meetings, and a quarterly full programme review meeting with the Department for Education, attending by the Families First leads in the department and by the respective policy leads for the four reform strands.

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