

Implementing the national children's social care reforms: update for partners

The Families First Partnership Programme is delivering the Government's children's social care reform agenda in Hertfordshire.

The reforms seek to strengthen support for children and families through earlier intervention, improved partnership working and greater involvement of family networks in planning and decision-making. The aim is to ensure families can access the right support at the right time through a more joined-up and effective system of help.

Implementing the reforms has required a redesign of Hertfordshire County Council's Children's Services operating model. This includes the creation of a new Family Help service, Multi-Agency Child Protection Teams (MACPTs), Specialist Support teams and a strengthened approach to Family Group Decision Making, as part of a broader programme of change designed to deliver the ambitions of the Families First Partnership Programme.

The workforce consultation on the new service model has now concluded and implementation is underway. The new Family Help service is expected to be fully operational by December 2026, with Multi-Agency Child Protection Teams fully implemented by March 2027.

Family Help in Hertfordshire

A central element of the reforms is the introduction of a new Family Help service that prioritises prevention, partnership and community-based delivery, making services more accessible, less stigmatising and better aligned to local need.

Hertfordshire's new locality-based Family Help service has been designed to bring targeted early help and statutory family support services into a single, joined-up approach. Families will benefit from one lead practitioner and one family plan, helping to ensure support is coordinated effectively and centred on the family's strengths and needs.

Community-based Family Help teams will provide consistent, relational support across the continuum of need, helping to reduce unnecessary service transitions and ensuring families receive the right help at the right time.

The Family Help model comprises ten district areas operating across four localities. The number of Family Help teams within each district has been informed by a comprehensive assessment of local need, ensuring resources are distributed appropriately across Hertfordshire.

Each locality will also include a dedicated Specialist Adolescent Support Service (SASH) team to support young people experiencing extra-familial harm, complex mental health needs or other challenges that are not primarily linked to concerns regarding parenting capacity within the home.

Multi-Agency Child Protection Teams

To strengthen oversight, decision-making and safeguarding arrangements for children experiencing the highest levels of risk, Multi-Agency Child Protection Teams (MACPTs) will operate across four localities: North, South, East and West.

Each MACPT will provide a dedicated child protection response aligned to the Family Help, SASH, 0-25 and Children Looked After services operating within its locality. The teams will deliver expert oversight of child protection activity, including threshold decision-making, risk

management and statutory safeguarding processes. They will also support consistency, professional challenge and quality assurance across safeguarding practice.

Multi-agency partnership working is central to the MACPT model, with Health, Police and Education leads integrated within each team to provide specialist expertise, support shared decision-making and enable timely and effective information sharing when safeguarding concerns arise.

The structure has been co-designed with subject matter experts from across the safeguarding partnership. It enables Family Help and SASH teams to maintain continuity of relationships with children and families, whilst ensuring specialist child protection expertise provides oversight and support at points of heightened risk.

Recruitment to MACPT roles is currently underway, with the teams expected to be fully operational by March 2027.

Strengthening Family Group Decision Making

A key feature of the reforms is the increased emphasis on Family Group Decision Making and the important role that wider family networks can play in supporting children safely within their families wherever possible.

To support this, additional capacity is being invested within Hertfordshire's Family Group Conferencing Service. This will enable a more responsive offer to families, increase the availability of Family Group Conferences within Child Protection and Pre-Proceedings work, and support the introduction of Family Group Conference reviews where ongoing family planning and oversight are required.

In addition, Family Network Meeting Coordinators will be introduced within the new Specialist Support Teams. These dedicated roles will focus on strengthening and embedding consistent Family Network Meeting practice at the earliest possible stage of Family Help involvement, helping practitioners identify and engage wider family networks before difficulties escalate.

These developments will strengthen family-led planning and decision-making, ensuring children and families can benefit from the support, strengths and resources available within their wider networks.

Specialist Support Teams

The new operating model also includes a range of Specialist Support Teams of staff with alternative qualifications to social work that provide targeted expertise to support locality-based Family Help, SASH and MACPT arrangements. These teams will bring together practitioners with specialist skills who can contribute enhanced skills and knowledge directly to family plans and deliver focused interventions where additional support is required.

The specialist functions will include Education Wellbeing Practitioners, Neurodiversity Workers, Healthy Relationship Workers and Family Network Meeting Coordinators. These teams will play an important role in delivering targeted interventions, group-based programmes and community engagement activity, helping to strengthen preventative support for children, young people and families.

A small number of county-wide services will continue to operate where a centralised approach remains the most effective way of meeting need. These include MASH, Gateway, Out of Hours Services, Families First, Youth Justice, Homelessness Support Services and Participation Services.

Building Bridges

The Families First Partnership Programme also includes the implementation of the Building Bridges service, which provides expert preventative and restorative interventions aimed at reducing unnecessary family breakdown and supporting children to remain safely within their families wherever possible.

Delivered on an East and West basis, the service is structured around two complementary functions: Staying Together and Reunification. This model strengthens Hertfordshire's ability to prevent children entering care, support permanence and improve outcomes for children, young people and their families.

Local Government Reorganisation and the Families First Partnership Programme

The four-locality model developed through the Families First Partnership Programme was designed before confirmation of Hertfordshire's future Local Government Reorganisation arrangements. Whilst there is broad alignment between the two approaches, there are some differences, particularly across parts of the North and East of the county.

The immediate priority remains implementation of the national children's social care reforms and delivery of the new operating model across Hertfordshire. Completion of implementation by March 2027 remains a key expectation of the Department for Education and will ensure children, young people and families begin to benefit from the reforms as quickly as possible.

The service model being implemented through the Families First Partnership Programme remains the agreed model for delivering the national reforms in Hertfordshire. Any future consideration of organisational arrangements arising from Local Government Reorganisation will be undertaken separately and at the appropriate time.

Maintaining focus on delivery of the agreed reforms will provide stability for children, families, partners and the workforce, whilst avoiding unnecessary disruption or delay to implementation.

As Local Government Reorganisation progresses, any future implications for service configuration and shared services will be considered carefully and in partnership with safeguarding partners and other stakeholders. This will ensure future decisions are informed by evidence, maintain service continuity and continue to prioritise the best possible outcomes for children and families.

Ensuring delivery

Implementation of the Families First Partnership Programme will continue throughout 2026 and 2027, with safeguarding partners playing a central role in delivering the reforms and improving outcomes for children, young people and families across Hertfordshire.

The Department for Education (DfE) has a rigorous monitoring and assurance process in place, with a high level of scrutiny of implementation by central government. We've already received confirmation from the DfE that Hertfordshire's approach is aligned to the requirements of reform. Following this confirmation, the county council has been appointed as a Children's Improvement Partner (CIT) to support other areas in the implementation of the delivery.