

News story: £15 million investment to help keep families safely together

Children at risk of being taken into care are set to benefit from programmes that tackle the root cause of family problems, by strengthening the expert support available from social workers, addiction specialists and psychiatrists.

The new programme, Supporting Families; Investing in Practice, will help families work on issues together, including those impacted by domestic violence, substance misuse or addiction, in order to help create stability in the home for young people and prevent them being taken into care, where that is in their best interests. This is part of wider Government work to improve outcomes for children in need of support of a social worker, by creating home and school environments in which they can thrive.

Modelled on existing Family Drug and Alcohol Courts (FDACs) and a programme known as Family Group Conferencing, the innovative new projects will be rolled out in up to 40 new council areas. The Government has today announced up to £15 million over the next year, following the emerging success of these existing programmes.

Children and Families Minister Nadhim Zahawi said:

Every child, no matter what hand they have been dealt, deserves the opportunity to grow up in a stable, loving family so they can develop into confident adults equipped to take on life's challenges successfully.

For too many children, this is not the reality, and we are seeing rising numbers of children going into care. Often, their parents are struggling with problems of their own and that has an impact on the whole family. Projects like these are making sure vulnerable families get the support they need from experts who can help them address their problems head on and stop them from spiralling out of control.

I want to see children to be able to stay with their family where it's appropriate and safe for them to do that – that's why I will continue to back innovative approaches with a track record of success in doing this, to give the most vulnerable children in our society the best chances in life.

The programme is in partnership with the What Works Centre, which will oversee the implementation of the programmes in local authorities. It will gather further evidence of their effectiveness in keeping children and parents together, with the aim of spreading best practice in the future.

The projects being introduced or expanded in up to 40 new areas are based on:

Family Drug and Alcohol Courts

This project provides a problem solving approach to care proceedings, where a team of substance misuse specialists, domestic violence experts, psychiatrists and social workers carry out an early assessment and agree an intervention plan with parents who come before the court in care proceedings. Once in proceedings, parents begin a “trial for change”, supported by the specialist team and with regular meetings with the judge, who reviews the progress being made as well as adjudicating in the case. The Family Drug and Alcohol Court model has been evaluated previously and found to have strong evidence of a positive effect on family reunification. As well as expanding the model to new sites, innovations of the FDAC model in existing sites will be tested to see if further improvements can be made.

Family Group Conferences

This project puts families at the heart of making safe decisions and plans for children that are at immediate risk of being taken into care. Children and young people are involved in the conference along with their wider family network, and often supported by an advocate from outside the family. Together, a plan is agreed by all those involved and families agree to meet again to assess how well the plan is going and make the changes necessary to protect children.

Chief Social Worker Isabelle Trowler said:

Four years ago when the Innovation Programme was launched we held high hopes for identifying promising practice – which we could spread across England. The announcement today has turned that into a reality.

Extending the reach of these tested programmes is indicative of the relentless hard work of everyone involved in developing practice to help support children and families. It is a very important milestone in our collective journey to giving the best response we can, to children, families and carers, in need of support.

Executive Director of the What Works Centre Michael Sanders said:

At the What Works Centre we’re really excited to be launching this programme today in partnership with the Department for Education. By conducting large scale, robust evaluations of the impacts of these two programmes, we’ll be able to help local authorities make a decisions about what mix of approaches is best for them, at the same time as ensuring that these promising practices are made available to support more families than ever before.

Steve Bambrough, Associate Clinical Director at the Tavistock Clinic and member of the FDAC National Partnership, said:

The problem-solving Family Drug and Alcohol Court model achieves better outcomes for parents, better outcomes for children, and better value for money. It is a fair and trauma-informed approach which gives people the best chance of change and that's why it makes for better justice. We're delighted that this funding will enable more families and local authorities to have access to a compassionate and evidence-based approach to family justice.

The £15 million investment comes on top of £84 million committed by the Department for Education in April to help up to 20 councils support families to stay together through the Strengthening Families, Protecting Children programme. These projects aim to build resilience among more vulnerable families and improve how councils design and run services.

The work complements the Government's wider programme to improve the outcomes of vulnerable children, by recruiting and training the next generation of professional social workers.