



Department
for Education

The Families First Partnership (FFP) Programme Guide

**Delivery expectations for statutory
safeguarding partners in England:
Year 2 (2026 to 2027)**

March 2026

Introduction

The 2026-27 Families First Partnership (FFP) programme guide has been produced to support statutory safeguarding partners¹ to implement **Family Help and multi-agency child protection reforms and increase support for family networks**. The rollout of these reforms represents a significant step forward in delivering the government's mission to provide children with the best start in life and break down barriers to opportunity.

About this guide

This programme guide is not statutory guidance and does not replace existing statutory guidance, including:

- [Working Together to Safeguard Children 2026: statutory guidance](#) (referred to in this document as 'Working Together') is the multi-agency statutory guidance for every organisation, individual and agency who is involved in helping and supporting families and protecting children; or the
- [Children's social care: national framework - GOV.UK](#) (referred to in the document as the 'National Framework') which sets out the purpose, principles and enablers of good practice of children's social care and the outcomes that should be achieved.

This guide describes the programme vision and objectives, and sets out the practice change we expect to see to improve the support provided to children and their families. It should be used by local areas to support implementation of policy expectations set out in Chapter 2 and be read in conjunction with [Families First Partnership Programme: Quarterly Monitoring Financial Year 2026-27](#) and support documents hosted on the Knowledge Hub, which provide a range of best practice and case study examples.

Who is this guide for?

This guide is for everyone who works with children and their parents or carers, including strategic leaders, senior and middle managers, and those in direct practice.

Successful outcomes for children depend on strong partnership working. Statutory safeguarding partners and relevant agencies, through their local multi-agency safeguarding arrangements, are critical to the programme's success in improving outcomes for children, young people and families.

¹ A statutory safeguarding partner in relation to a local authority area in England is defined in section 16E of the Children Act 2004 as: (a) the local authority, (b) an integrated care board for an area any part of which falls within the local authority area, and (c) the chief officer of police for an area any part of which falls within the local authority area.

Multi-agency and multi-disciplinary working will be fundamental to the implementation of reforms:

- by multi-agency working we mean: working across organisations to meet children, young people and families' needs through effective information sharing, joint decision-making and co-ordinated interventions, to facilitate effective help, support and protection. This includes in child protection, where experts from different agencies form multi-agency child protection teams to lead child protection decision making, whilst remaining connected to their parent agency;
- by multi-disciplinary working we mean: a range of practitioners and professionals from different backgrounds working together, to enable the best outcomes for children, young people and families.

Funding and grant conditions

In November 2025 we announced that we will provide over £2.4 billion for FFP over the next three years, of which over £800 million is new investment, made up as follows:

- Continuing the £523 million investment available in 2025-26 for each year of the multi-year settlement;
- £319 million from the Transformation Fund over 2026-27 and 2027-28 announced at Spending Review 2025;
- New funding of £547 million over the next three years.

This investment supports the government's continued commitment to reform local government funding and will ensure local authorities, with their partners, are able to fund preventative support and services including targeted early help, child in need and child protection activity. This will enable local authorities, with their partners, to rebalance spending away from accommodating children in care and increase spend on prevention.

FFP funding is ringfenced for spend on prevention. It will be allocated to local authorities through the new Children, Families and Youth Grant and distributed via the new [Children and Young Person's Services \(CYPS\) formula](#). This new formula will better reflect the current level of need for services for children and families in each local area and will ensure money goes to where it is needed most.

Draft [grant conditions for FFP](#) funding were published alongside the Local Government Finance Settlement for 2026-27. The grant conditions set out in more detail how local safeguarding partners should work together to agree priorities and how this funding should be used. The Department for Education, alongside the Home Office and the Department of Health and Social Care, will continue to work closely with local partnerships on the delivery of the FFP programme. An [explanatory note](#) includes further information on the distribution methodology and data considerations.

The grant conditions clearly state that funding for FFP is not designed to displace existing prevention spend but intended as additional investment into services. It is essential that local authorities maintain existing levels of preventative spend and use additional

investment to boost spending in this area so that we can rebalance the children's social care system. This will be monitored by asking grant recipients to provide additional spend data. This also sets out the expectation that local areas will use the funding to build on local planning undertaken in year one of the programme (2025-26) and complete any remaining transformation activity. The majority of the grant is expected to be used to fund new and updated services with full operational delivery of reformed services by March 2027.

Statutory safeguarding partners already have a joint and equal duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of all children in their area. Local safeguarding partners and relevant agencies should come together to consider how they deliver their current services, where existing resources will be re-organised and used to deliver the reformed system and where there are gaps.

Local authorities can use this grant funding to support other local partners and specialist services to deliver transformation and/or implementation activity for these reforms. Mechanisms for distributing funding can also be agreed locally, for instance via a section 75 agreement with health partners. However, this money should not be used to plug gaps in funding that statutory safeguarding partners should reasonably be filling. DfE expects local authorities and their safeguarding partners to demonstrate how they are delivering all aspects of the reforms via their Families First Partnership quarterly programme data collection. This must be multi-agency in approach as it requires multi-agency delivery.

DfE will monitor completion of transformation activities, implementation of the policy expectations in this guide and use of FFP funding through quarterly programme data collections and structured engagement. Chapter 2: Delivery expectations provides an overview of how we will monitor delivery and the progress expected during year 2. Full reporting requirements are set out in [Families First Partnership Programme: Quarterly Monitoring Financial Year 2026-27](#) on the Knowledge Hub.

Where areas do not demonstrate expected progress, the department will provide an enhanced level of support and challenge to enable effective implementation of reformed services and improved outcomes for children and families. Where local authorities are found not to be adhering to grant conditions, government will engage with local authorities to obtain assurance. Dependent on the outcome of this, MHCLG will consider whether there has been a failure to meet the Best Value duty. Local authorities may also receive support via DfE's CSC Improvement and Intervention programme, including CSC Improvements Teams and Expert Advisers. More information on the national FFP delivery support offer can be found in chapter 4.

Adherence to the FFP grant conditions and prioritising prevention is crucial to local government financial sustainability. The emphasis and investment on prevention across the whole of the FFP programme is expected to lead to a significant reduction in the numbers of looked after children and to keep more families together where it is safe to do so. We expect local authorities to use the savings realised through implementing the

reforms to increase spend on Family Help, thereby creating a virtuous circle and moving funding to a more sustainable footing.

Accountability

As part of their statutory responsibilities to safeguard and promote the welfare of all children in their local area, the Department for Education, the Department for Health and Social Care and the Home Office expect local authorities, police and health to work together to implement the FFP reforms.

Robust multi-agency safeguarding arrangements will help to ensure that information about a child and their family is shared effectively, that risk of harm is correctly identified and understood, and that children and families receive targeted services that meet their needs in a co-ordinated way. Strong, collaborative leadership and timely decision-making are crucial to the effectiveness of multi-agency working and to identify and address system issues. The three safeguarding partners are responsible and accountable for this in their local areas.

Ofsted will continue to evaluate the experiences and progress of children through its inspecting local authority children's services (ILACS) framework. They have a crucial role reporting on what is working well and what needs to improve in children's social care. In March 2026, Ofsted updated its framework to better align with children's social care reforms, taking into account the recent updates to Working Together to Safeguard Children and the Children's Social Care: National Framework. These updates to ILACS aim to support local authorities on their journey to implement the reforms set out in this guide. Their evaluation criteria now better reflect the move towards a seamless system of Family Help, the importance of engaging family networks in the help and care of children, and the multi-agency context in which help, support and protection is delivered. In the same update, Ofsted has carried out the commitment to remove the overall effectiveness judgement from ILACS. These changes apply for inspections carried out from 1 April 2026. As reforms to children's social care are embedded, Ofsted will continue to rebalance inspection, ensuring it continues to act as a lever for improvement. In 2026, Ofsted will consult on wider reforms to ILACS and its social care common inspection framework (SCCIF), to wholly align with the government's reform programme for implementation in 2027.

Safeguarding partners are inspected by their respective inspectorate bodies (Ofsted, the Care Quality Commission and HM Inspectorate of Constabulary, Fire and Rescue Services) and jointly through Joint Targeted Area Inspections (JTAs). The inspectorates will continue to work together to ensure that their inspections reflect the new ways of working that local areas are embedding in their practice.

Chapter 1: Rebalancing the system of help, support and protection

The Families First Partnership (FFP) programme shifts focus towards intensive earlier help for families, more expert, focused multi-agency child protection practice and greater use of family networks. This ambition is in line with Working Together, which sets out how agencies, organisations, and individuals work together to provide help, support and protection - covering universal services and community based early help, through Family Help (including targeted early help and statutory services under section 17 of the Children Act 1989), and including action taken under section 47 of the Children Act 1989 to protect children from significant harm.

Funding will support the continued implementation of 1) Family Help, 2) multi-agency child protection teams and 3) support for family networks, through Family Group Decision Making and Family Network Support Packages. These three features are the core of FFP, which implemented together will reset the children's social care system to earlier and more effective help for families.

Figure 1: Our vision for a reformed system of help, support and protection



Children and families should not be left waiting for help; the system should respond flexibly and wrap support around them at the earliest point of need. Within this system, multi-agency child protection teams will advise on and take swift, decisive action to protect children from actual or likely significant harm. Through these reforms, children and families will feel tangible benefits, with improved access to support and more consistent relationships – underpinned by a culture of being worked with, rather than done to. In providing support, it is crucial that local areas understand and take account of the diverse backgrounds of families. Practice should be anti-discriminatory and address barriers to accessing services.

This chapter sets out how the different parts of the system interact to provide a child-centered focus within whole-family support across help, support and protection.

Universal services and community based early help

Universal services and community based early help play a crucial role in identifying emerging problems and providing support at an early stage. This includes support delivered through [Best Start Family Hubs](#) (BSFHs), youth services, breakfast clubs, after

school clubs and routine health and housing provision. Local areas should build on the strengths of their universal and community based early help delivery models and workforce when designing their approach to Family Help. Voluntary and community services are also a vital part of the end-to-end system, and their contribution should be recognised and valued. This is particularly important for families and communities that may be wary of, or unaware of, the services available to them, or have difficulty accessing services, e.g. those living in rural communities.

BSFHs can act as a non-stigmatising gateway to targeted whole-family support delivered through Family Help, with a shared ambition to strengthen the end-to-end system of support for and around families. Some of the Families First for Children pathfinders have integrated family hubs and Family Help to support delivery, for example using family hubs as the primary co-location space for multi-disciplinary Family Help teams. Integrating BSFHs with Family Help can help support earlier engagement, build sustained relationships, co-locate multi-disciplinary teams and ensure continuity of support as family needs change.

As a community-based model for providing early help to families, BSFHs play an important role in delivering intensive evidence-based interventions for parenting, and identifying families who may need more intensive support from Family Help and multi-agency child protection teams, for example, those families where domestic abuse is a factor. For families who no longer require the support of targeted and specialist services, BSFHs, BSFH network sites and other forms of community-based setting can offer an ongoing, local support network, by providing early help, and playing an important role in early identification of family need, making appropriate referrals into targeted support.

Education and childcare settings and attendance

Education and childcare settings will often have the strongest relationships with children, young people and their families and be the first to identify when help or protection is needed. These settings should have a clearly defined and integrated role within multiagency safeguarding arrangements (MASAs) giving them a stronger voice in Safeguarding Partnerships and ensuring that they are strategic partners in local decision making and safeguarding responses.

For the most vulnerable children, regular attendance is also an important protective factor and the best opportunity for needs to be identified and support provided. Education and childcare settings therefore may be able to offer support directly to families, connect them with other local services that provide more targeted support, have continued contact with a family to monitor progress or change, and know when to escalate to seek further input, intervention or oversight.

They are also vital in recognising underlying causes of severe absence and children missing education which can act as vital warning signs to a range of safeguarding issues including domestic abuse, neglect, sexual abuse and child sexual and criminal exploitation. Improving attendance is everyone's business and the barriers to accessing

education are wide and complex, both within and beyond the school gates, and are often specific to individual pupils and families. Live attendance data is therefore one of the best early-warning indicators of need, particularly where pupils are absent more often than they attend. Alongside expectations in statutory [attendance guidance](#), partnerships should consider how:

- families with severely absent pupils are factored into local eligibility decisions: if pupils face out-of-school barriers and the family do not have a social worker, they should routinely be assessed for Family Help;
- Family Help contributes to the expectation that schools and local authorities agree a joint approach for all severely absent pupils;
- practitioners understand the importance of absence as an indicator of wider need, the benefits of improving attendance to improve outcomes for the whole family, and the [role of the Virtual School Head for children with a social worker](#).

Areas should also liaise with education teams to ensure they are aware of issues relating to the needs of children who are not on a school roll, for example children missing from education or electively home educated children.

Family Help and multi-agency child protection

Family Help and multi-agency child protection reforms are wholly interdependent. It is critical that safeguarding partners implement them together as an integrated system. Together, they will drive a fundamental rebalancing of the whole system: enabling earlier, wraparound support for families and those who work with them; preventing escalation into crisis; enabling a clear, expert focus on children who need protection from significant harm; and reducing costly and unnecessary statutory intervention in family life where child protection is not needed.

To keep children safe and support families, child protection knowledge and skills will continue to be needed across the whole system of help, support and protection. Highly experienced multi-agency child protection teams (MACPTs) with embedded, Lead Child Protection Practitioner (LCPP) social workers will bring an expert focus to child protection decision making. They will lead all child protection decision-making – from convening and chairing strategy discussions to overseeing the development, delivery, review and closure of child protection plans and informing decisions about moving into pre-proceedings and the Public Law Outline (PLO) process. These teams will enable a consistent and robust application of the significant harm threshold, acting as a local centre of excellence on child protection issues.

Multi-agency child protection teams will come alongside and support Family Help Lead Practitioners (FHLs) throughout child protection activity. FHLs will retain the primary relationship with and overall responsibility for supporting the child and their family. The MACPT will focus on identifying and responding to significant harm, ensuring a clear emphasis on the child's daily life, voice and safety and drawing on input from the wider MACPT and Family Help service. Through accessible consultation, MACPTs will be

available to Family Help practitioners, and others, who need a fresh, expert pair of eyes to consider concerns about actual or likely significant harm.

This new system design is intended to improve the experience for families that want help and where child protection action is not needed, whilst also allowing the system to swiftly identify and act decisively in response to concerns about significant harm.

Achieving these two goals within children's social care was the intention of the 1989 Children Act. Family Help and MACPT changes are a direct attempt to achieve this across England.

Engaging family networks throughout the system

Meaningful engagement of family networks is the golden thread that should run through the system of help, support and protection – from universal services through to interaction with care. Key to this will be engaging family networks through Family Group Decision Making and Family Network Support Packages (policy expectations at Chapter 2) from the earliest stage, to allow families to harness their strengths and prioritise their own solutions.

Preventive support is not limited to the earliest parts of the system. Local areas should also consider using the FFP programme as a way to provide whole-family support where a child becomes looked after by the local authority. This includes supporting birth parents whose children are at risk of removal and supporting children to return safely to their parents or wider family network from care. Continuing the Family Help model of lead practitioner led support can have a significant impact on supporting birth parents overcome challenges that are impacting on their ability to provide a stable, loving home. Similarly, Family Help and supporting family networks can play a crucial role in supporting reunification by enabling families to develop sustainable plans that facilitate a child's safe return home.

Foster care is also a key component of a whole-family approach within the system of help, support and protection system for children who are unable to be with their birth families. Foster carers play an important role by providing stability, maintaining family relationships and helping to ensure that children remain connected to their parents and wider networks where this is safe to do so. Local authorities should ensure that fostering services are closely aligned with Family Help, Family Group Decision Making and wider multi-agency support. This includes enabling foster carers to contribute to assessment and planning and involving them in early whole-family discussions where appropriate. Strengthening collaboration between fostering teams, Family Help practitioners and wider support services can improve placement stability and support smoother transitions for children returning to their families or moving into long-term foster care.

Local partnerships should understand their data on reunification and consider how Family Help supports robust preparation, planning and support for all children. The Care

Planning, Placement and Case Review regulations and guidance² already provides clear direction for local authorities regarding their duty to return a looked after child to their family unless this is not consistent with safeguarding and promoting the child's welfare. The rollout of Family Help provides an opportunity to strengthen practice and improve outcomes for these children and their families. It is important that local support services are accessible for all children and young people, including looked after children who may be accessing the same services as families in Family Help.

² [Children Act 1989: care planning, placement and case review - GOV.UK](#)