



Renfrewshire
Council

To: Education and Children's Services Policy Board

On: 18 January 2024

Report by: Director of Children's Services

Heading: Keeping Brothers and Sisters Together – Progress Report

1. Summary

- 1.1 The Independent Care Review highlighted the issue of children who are accommodated by local authorities being placed in separate placements from their brothers and sisters. In response, Children's Services co-produced a report with our Children's Champions Board, "Keeping Brothers and Sisters Together", which recommended practice improvements to keep more brothers and sisters together when they are in the care of the local authority. The Renfrewshire "Keeping Brothers and Sisters Together Policy" was approved by Board in May 2021.
- 1.2 The policy is ambitious and contains the following pledge: "When children come into care Renfrewshire will place brothers and sisters together".
- 1.3 The policy recognised there will be some situations when brothers and sisters cannot be placed together and when this occurs, the policy requires a clear decision-making process to be evidenced, along with robust arrangements to maintain family time and regular care reviews. The policy states that all sibling separations in care must be approved by the Head of Child Care and Justice Services and be reported to Board on an annual basis. The first annual report on progress between June 2021 and May 2022 was presented to the Board 27 October 2022.
- 1.4 This report covers our activity to keep brothers and sisters together between June 2022 and May 2023. Of the 52 children and young people who were newly accommodated during the period and who had siblings, 26 were placed with at least one sibling.
- 1.5 Review of the circumstances of the siblings placed separately shows that separation was necessary and appropriate. The main reasons for separation related to the different needs and care plans of siblings, the significant support needs of individual children, the complexity of some family relationships and high numbers of half-sibling relationships, as well as the capacity of some kinship and foster carers to provide care to multiple children.
- 1.6 Where siblings were separated, robust family time contact plans are in place and brothers' and sisters' relationships are supported in line with the individual needs and

aspirations of the children.

2. Recommendations

2.1 Members of the Board are asked to:

- a) note the progress of the second year of implementation of the Keeping Brothers and Sisters Together Policy.
-

3. Background

- 3.1 The Children (Scotland) Act 2020 became law in January 2021 and places new duties for local authorities in relation to ensuring that brothers and sisters are supported to be together and where this is not possible, to have their relationship supported on an ongoing basis. Our Brothers and Sisters policy is compliant with the requirements of this piece of legislation and has been highlighted as national best practice.
- 3.2 The policy pledges that Renfrewshire will place brothers and sisters together. It is recognized, however, that there are circumstances in which this will not be possible, or indeed in the best interests of the individual children and young people. Moreover, there are times when brothers' and sisters' individual needs are not compatible with each other, and difficult decisions require to be made by the team of professionals responsible for their care that they should be placed in separate placements.
- 3.3 In circumstances where the separate placement of siblings is due to the unavailability of kinship or foster carers, or residential service able to take a sibling group, or for significant safeguarding reasons, there is a requirement that a robust family time contact plan is in place and the possibility of the children being reunited in placement is regularly reviewed via the established Looked After Reviews process.
- 3.4 Where the team around the child agree a care plan which separates brothers and sisters in care for other reasons, the policy requires the explicit approval of the Head of Childcare and Justice Services. In this process, the reasons for the separation must be fully recorded and a family time contact plan developed. In addition, an annual report on delivering the pledge is produced for Board to hold the service to account for performance in this area.
- 3.5 A range of practice tools are in use to inform the assessment of brothers' and sisters' relationships and to support the development of these very important relationships, irrespective of their placement, including child-friendly family time contact plans developed by our Promise Ambassador in partnership with local children and young people.
- 3.6 A desk-top review of the circumstances of all children with siblings brought into care during the period June 2022 to May 2023 was carried out to ascertain compliance with the policy and to identify reasons for any separation of siblings.
- 3.7 In addition to the 52 newly accommodated children and young people during the period, there are 24 young people in long-term kinship placements who were, for the first time, included in our Looked After statistics. The decision to do so was made to ensure parity between all placement types and to expand payments to all family and friends carers of young people placed outwith parental care. Of these 24 young people, 14 were living with at least one sibling in a kinship care placement and 10 had no siblings under the age of 18

who were accommodated in Renfrewshire, or the siblings were in secure care or a pre-adoptive placement.

- 3.8 The group of 52 children who are in care separate from one or more of their siblings includes those children whose siblings were brought into care at different times, such as when older children (single and sibling groups) are already in care and a new baby brother or sister is subsequently accommodated in a separate placement. The group also includes children whose siblings are half-siblings where parents have re-partnered (sometimes resulting in three or more siblings with different half relationships on the maternal and paternal side). These half-sibling relationships tend to be complex, and children have never lived together and sometimes are not aware of each other's existence.
- 3.9 Over the period, three young people were accommodated who were separated from a sibling because the sibling was in a residential placement. These types of placements tend to be used for young people whose needs are such that they cannot be met in a family-based placement. In these cases, it would not be appropriate to keep siblings together when some of them could settle well into a foster or kinship placement. Similarly, we cannot place siblings together when one of them is placed in secure care. Three young people were placed in secure care during the period and were therefore separated from their siblings.
- 3.10 Of the 52 children with siblings who were accommodated separately from their siblings, 28 have half siblings who were Looked After at home with one or two parents, or in an accommodated placement. Most of these accommodated children are in kinship placements where the carers are typically not blood-related to the child in local authority care.
- 3.11 As was the case in last year's review, it was shown that small sibling groups of two or three who were brought into care at the same time were most likely to be kept together. There were a small number of cases where one or more children was already in a care placement and the carer was able to accommodate a newly arrived sibling. Younger sibling groups were more likely to be placed together than older children.
- 3.12 Of the 52 brothers and sisters who were separated, there were a number of issues in common. Most frequent was the placement of siblings at different times. A typical scenario was one or more siblings placed together and then a sibling (usually a new baby) coming into care several months or years later. In these cases, either the care placement was unable to offer an additional placement, or the child(ren) already placed had a permanence decision agreed and were at various stages of progression to a permanent destination. In the current review, one child had adopted siblings and another had a sibling in a pre-adoptive placement, hence they cannot be kept together.
- 3.13 The physical capacity of foster and kinship carers' homes was a barrier to some sibling groups being placed together. However, the carers' ability to provide the level and nature of care required for individual children with differing care and support needs was a more prevalent reason for siblings not being placed together. Our in-house foster care service accommodates many sibling groups as well as several households of three or more unrelated children. These placements are simply unable to accommodate sibling groups at the present time.
- 3.14 Renfrewshire has made considerable progress in recent years towards shifting our balance of care away from foster care towards kinship care. More than half our accommodated children and young people are now in kinship placements. This aligns with the recommendations of the Independent Review of Care and our statutory duty to keep children within their birth families wherever possible. Kinship carers are different to

foster carers in that they are not 'recruited' and trained to care for children who have experienced trauma and who present challenging behaviours. As such, kinship carers tend to have less capacity to provide placements for multiple children. This review has highlighted that while many kinship carers are managing very well with one or two children, they are unable to take on new siblings as they come into care.

- 3.15 The use of kinship care placements also means that half-siblings cannot always be accommodated together. The review highlighted instances where the kinship carer was not related to one or more of the sibling group, and they were unwilling to offer sibling group placements in these circumstances. There is a very high frequency of half-sibling relationships amongst our population of accommodated children.
- 3.16 In line with the requirements of the policy, all children accommodated separately from their siblings have a 'family time' contact plan which specifically addresses their contact with siblings. This is reinforced by the statutory duties imposed by the children's hearings system which requires that all reports submitted about children who have siblings includes a specific assessment of their relationship and each child's individual views and wishes about sibling contact.

Implications of this report

1. Financial

Where children require external placements to remain together there are higher costs than if placed in internal provision.

2. HR and Organisational Development

All staff in children's social work have been trained in the operation of the Policy..

3. Community/Council Planning

Our Renfrewshire is thriving - Providing good quality care is central to ensuring that the most vulnerable children in Renfrewshire are provided with an opportunity to thrive in a safe and nurturing environment.

4. Legal

The Children (Scotland) Act 2020 placed a new duty on local authorities in relation to how they support and promote contact between brothers and sisters. The current policy satisfies the authority's duty in this area.

5. Property/Assets

None.

6. Information Technology

None.

7. Legal

The Recommendations contained within this report have been assessed in relation to their impact on equalities and human rights. No negative impacts on equality groups or potential for infringement of individuals' human rights

have been identified arising from the recommendations. Our approach locally will be compliant with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill

- 8. Health and Safety**
None.
- 9. Procurement**
None.
- 10. Risk**
None.
- 11. Privacy Impact**
None.
- 12. Cosla Policy Position**
None.
- 13. Climate Risk**
None.

List of Background Papers

Keeping Brother and Sisters Together - Report to Education and Children's Services Policy Board on 20 May 2021

Keeping Brothers and Sisters Together – Progress Report – Report to Education and Children's Services Policy Board on 27 October 2022

Children's Services
KN

Author: Karen Nowland, Quality Assurance & Practice Development Officer,
email - karen.nowland@renfrewshire.gov.uk