



Renfrewshire
Council

To: Education and Children's Services Policy Board

On: 16 January 2025

Report by: Director of Children's Services

Heading: Keeping Brothers and Sisters Together – Annual Report

1. Summary

- 1.1 The Renfrewshire "Keeping Brothers and Sisters Together Policy" was approved by Board in May 2021. It was prompted by the Independent Care Review which highlighted the issue of children who are separated in placements when accommodated by local authorities. 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.
 - 1.2 The policy is ambitious and contains the following pledge: "When children come into care Renfrewshire will place brothers and sisters together". The policy committed to reporting progress on an annual basis.
 - 1.3 This is the third annual report on how Renfrewshire is delivering on the policy. This report covers our activity to keep brothers and sisters together between June 2023 and May 2024. Of the 69 children and young people who were newly accommodated during the period, 49 had a sibling aged under 16 years. Of these 49 children, 26 were placed with at least one sibling.
 - 1.4 This report details the reasons 23 brothers and sisters couldn't be placed together.
-

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 Members of the Board are asked to:
 - a) note the progress of the third 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 Children 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 This is the third annual report on progress and covers the period June 2023 and May 2024. The first and second annual reports were presented to the Education and Children's Services Policy Board on 27 October 2022 and 18 January 2024 respectively.
- 3.7 During the period June 2023 to May 2024 (the reporting period) 69 children and young people were newly accommodated by children's social work. 49 of these children had a sibling under the age of 16. A desk-top review of the circumstances of all children with siblings brought into care during the period June 2023 to May 2024 was carried out to ascertain compliance with the policy and to identify reasons for any separation of siblings.
- 3.8 26 children who were newly accommodated were placed with their sibling or siblings. 23 children who were accommodated could not be placed with their siblings for a range of different reasons including children whose siblings were brought into care at different times, or remained at home with at least one birth parent, and others who have an older sibling or siblings already in care. Where an older child in care has a new baby brother or sister who becomes accommodated, it is often not possible to place them together because of the capacity of the carer household or the different care plans of the children.
- 3.9 The reasons for children not being placed with their brothers and sisters were:
 - Siblings at home (12 children)

- came into care at birth after their older siblings were accommodated (3 children)
 - sibling was in residential care and this was not an appropriate placement for the younger child (5 children)
 - placed separately from siblings because of a permanence plan (1 child)
 - initially placed together however their complex care needs meant that separation was necessary (2 children).
- 3.10 As was the case in previous years' reviews, 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.
- 3.11 Of the 23 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, a sibling pair are currently placed separately but their permanent care plan is for them to be together.
- 3.12 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 internal foster care service accommodates many sibling groups as well as several households of three or more unrelated children.
- 3.13 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. Kinship carers tend to have less capacity to provide placements for multiple children. Review of our placement of children with siblings highlights 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.
- 3.14 The use of kinship care placements also means that half-siblings cannot always be accommodated together because of complex family circumstances. There is a very high frequency of half-sibling relationships amongst our population of accommodated children.
- 3.15 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. Equality and Human Rights

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 contained in the report.

8. Health and Safety

None.

9. Procurement

None.

10. Risk

None.

11. Privacy Impact

None.

12. Cosla Policy Position

None.

13. Climate Risk

None.

14. Children's Rights

This report demonstrates compliance with Article 3 (best interest of child), Article 9 (keeping families together), Article 12 (respect for children's views), Article 19 (protection from violence), Article 22 (refugee children) and 25 (review of a child's placement) of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

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