

To: Education and Children's Services Policy Board

On: 27 October 2022

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 as an area which required to be addressed by local authorities. The Children's Champions Board in Renfrewshire highlighted keeping brothers and sisters who are in the care of the local authority together as one of their priorities.
- 1.2. The Children's Champions Board produced a report, ["Keeping Brothers and Sisters Together"](#), which recommended practice improvements to keep more brothers and sisters together in care. This report was presented to the Education and Children's Services Policy Board on 20 May 2021. After considering the report, the Policy Board approved a policy on "Keeping brothers and sisters together policy".
- 1.3. The approval of the policy meant that Renfrewshire was the first council in Scotland to introduce a formal policy in relation to keeping brothers and sisters in care together. The policy leads with the pledge: "When children come into care, Renfrewshire will place brothers and sisters together".
- 1.4. The policy did however recognise that there will be times 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 are to be reported on an annual basis to the Champions Board.
- 1.5. This report provides an overview of the first year of the implementation of the Keeping brothers and sisters together policy. During the period June 2021 to May 2022 a total of 96 children and young people were accommodated. 47 either had no siblings or their siblings remained at home. Of the remaining 49 children, 18 siblings were placed together in care, and 31 were placed apart from their brothers and sisters.

- 1.6. 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.
 - 1.7. 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.
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2. Recommendations

- 2.1. Members of the Board are asked to
 - a) note the progress of the first year's implementation of the brothers and Sisters policy.
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3. Background

- 3.1 The Children (Scotland) Act 2020 became law in January 2021 and placed new duties on 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 Keeping brothers and sisters together policy is compliant with the requirements of the legislation.
- 3.2 The Renfrewshire policy pledges that when children are accommodated by the council, we will place brothers and sisters together. The policy recognises, 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 individual needs of the children are at odds and difficult decisions require to be made by the team of professionals responsible for their care.
- 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, separation may occur with the 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 Child Care and Criminal Justice. 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 will be produced 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. Our Promise Ambassador has

co-produced with care experienced children and young people child-friendly family time contact plans which detail children's important relationships and their wishes about how, when and where they spend time with their siblings, wider families, and friends. These family time plans will be introduced in the coming months alongside wider training and practice development around family contact.

- 3.6 The policy has now been in operation since June 2021 and the first annual review of its operation has been carried out. During the period June 2021 to May 2022 a total of 96 children and young people were accommodated by Renfrewshire Council. 47 had no brothers or sisters in the care of the local authority. This group includes children whose siblings remained at home (with either or both parents), those whose siblings had been in care but are now aged over 18 years, and those whose siblings are resident in another local authority area, either in care or not.
- 3.7 49 children and young people were accommodated either as part of a sibling group or where their brothers or sisters were already in the care of the authority. The family relationships for this group of children are complex including children whose siblings who 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 new partners (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.
- 3.8 Of the 49 children accommodated who have siblings also in care, 18 were placed together. The review showed 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 child 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.
- 3.9 In attempting to meet the needs of the family groups the service placed two sisters in an external residential placement to prevent them being separated and approved a change in registration of a foster carer to allow three siblings to remain together.
- 3.10 Of the 31 brothers and sisters who were separated, there were a number of issues in common. Most frequent was the siblings being accommodated 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.
- 3.11 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.

- 3.12 Renfrewshire has made considerable progress in recent years towards shifting our balance of care away from foster care towards kinship care. 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. Kinship carers often don't have the accommodation 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.
- 3.13 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.
- 3.14 In line with the requirements of the policy, all children accommodated separately from their siblings have a 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. This year this required the purchase of two independent foster care placements.

2. HR and Organisational Development

Ongoing training and development work will be required to assist staff in the consistent implementation of the policy.

3. Community/Council Planning

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| 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. |
| Building strong, safe and resilient communities | Providing children and young people with safe, supportive and nurturing placements, increases the likelihood of them becoming effective citizens who contribute productively to the communities in which they live. |

- 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.
- 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

Children's Services
JT/KO
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