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Title of meeting:	Cabinet Member Meeting Children, Families and Education
Subject:	Children Going Home: Reunification Report 2024
Date of meeting:	25 July 2024
Report by:	Reneé Eddy - Service Lead for Building Your Futures and Adoption
Cabinet Member:	Councillor Suzy Horton
Wards affected:	None

1. Purpose

- 1.1 This report will provide information on our work to support children who are in our care to return home to a parent in a planned way where safe to do so. The Going Home approach is an extension of our Family Safeguarding model of practice and has developed and evolved in response to the learning and outcomes for the children and families and involved in reunification.
- 1.2 Portsmouth City Council's Going Home work is based on the knowledge that many children and young people in care have a wish to return to their birth families. Often they will gravitate towards families after leaving care or make contact while in care themselves, including using social media. But this is typically unplanned and takes place without resolving the issues that led to the child being taken into care in the first place.
- 1.3 This report will update on children and families who have been supported with a Going Home plan during the period of January 2023 to May 2024.

2. Background

- 2.1 Portsmouth Children's Services have been interested in the best way to reunify children for a number of years. The service had been cited on the work undertaken by the NSPCC (Wilkins M. and Farmer E. (2015) Reunification: an evidence-informed framework for return home practice. London: NSPCC) and we had been using their material to guide and shape the assessment of risk. Despite this, the rate of children returning to their parents care was low. The Family

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Safeguarding model of practice had been adopted in other areas of the service and the impact of the adult practitioners was evident in the outcomes for our Children in Need/Need of Protection. This extension of the Family Safeguarding approach to the Children We Care For Service sets out to empower families and their extended networks to help children achieve the best outcomes by having parental mental health, substance misuse and domestic abuse specialists all working in one team, alongside children's social workers. The key principles are:

- Having a multi-disciplinary team to provide support to the whole family to address their needs including specialist domestic abuse, mental health and substance misuse support.
- Having a supervision model that involves all of the professionals to build a holistic view of needs and share responsibility for decision making.
- Using a strengths-based framework to harness motivation to change.

2.2 Research tells us that for some children a return home from care is the best possible outcome. It is acknowledged however that for many others reunification can result in further abuse and neglect with research suggesting that 47% of children who have returned home as part of a planned reunification re-enter care, thus underlining the importance of robust assessment, planning, review, and support (Department for Education, 2013; Farmer, 2011; Wade, 2011). To ensure a robust approach time and resource was devoted to the initial planning work

2.3 This planning and development work was undertaken by a Going Home working group. The group had a number of key stakeholders including representatives from the Children We Care For Service, the Adult Family Safeguarding Service, Independent Reviewing Officers, Foster Carers and most critically children, young people and their families. The working group was supported with guidance from the Family Rights Group and the Centre of Family Safeguarding Practice (the initial project work was funded by DfE innovation grant). This group led the following work:

- Learning from examples of reunification that had worked well and those that hadn't.
- Development and delivery of awareness-raising training to social workers, IROs and foster carers. Encouraging a curiosity in what might have changed for the parents which with support would allow them to have their children returned to their care.
- Review of processes and paperwork to ensure that there was sufficient focus on identifying need and working with strength.
- Practitioner training in Motivational Interviewing including a focus on understanding trauma-informed and relational ways of working.

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- The introduction of 2 adult Family Safeguarding workers to the Children We Care For Service to work with parents on their needs around mental health, domestic abuse and substance misuse.
- Development of a 'Going Home' tracker that considered where all children in care are in their going home journey, recognising that for some children the focus should be about strengthening family relationships and for other children there should be a more active plan about returning home.

3. The Going Home model

- 3.1 When a child and family are identified as benefiting from a Going Home plan the first step is for a Going Home assessment to be co-produced with the child and family to identify areas of need and support, to assess the risk and to understand what might have changed for the family. There are multiple ways to start a Going Home journey for a child, including but not limited to: parent or child request, supervision between social workers and team managers, or as part of Child in Care Review.
- 3.2 Once a child and family are on a Going Home pathway the social worker develops a plan of support in collaboration with the child, parents and the professional network, including foster carers as they are key to the success of any planned transition. This support may include but is not limited to; intensive parental support, increased family time (i.e. lunch/tea-time, including overnight stays), direct work/social stories to prepare the child or young person for their return home. The Going Home plan and timetable is then shared with the professional network. A child friendly timetable and/or social story is developed and shared by the social worker based on the child's interests (age dependant).
- 3.3 When a child or young person returns home, visits are completed by the social worker and adult family safeguarding worker, the frequency of these are agreed on a need's basis, to support any 'bumps in the road'. Going Home support meetings take place prior to the planned move and then monthly when the child has returned to ensure the right support is in place.
- 3.4 For children and families where the plan is for the children to remain in the care of the local authority the work is focused on strengthening family relationships and promoting life-long links. The support includes:
- Parenting support
 - Referrals to other agencies, including Adult Family Safeguarding and Lifelong Links
 - Improving the quality of family time

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3.5 Here the adult family support workers and family support worker are key in strengthening family relationships with a view to moving any supervised family time out of family centres to the local community in a more natural environment.

3.6 All children and families that are on a Going Home pathway are reviewed regularly to prevent drift and to ensure additional management oversight and scrutiny of children's care plans.

4. Children's journeys

4.1 During the period of January 2023 to March 2024 11 children have returned home as part of a Going Home plan. Of these 11 children, 1 arrangement has become a concern and is at risk of breaking down, the team are completing increased visits and intensive support to prevent a return to care if at all possible and are developing contingency plans to include wider family.

4.2 Currently the team are actively supporting 4 children with a Going Home plan to return home within 12 months or less. This includes 2 siblings (aged 12 and 14) whose journey to return home started in October 2023 with increased overnight stays and support around the family. The children will return home to their mother in a planned way in July 2024.

4.3 In addition, the team are currently supporting a further 14 children and young people with a Going Home plan (to return home in 12 months and over). Here the role of the team around the family is to support restoration of family relationships, improving the quality of family time, and/or intensive parenting support to progress to a going home plan.

4.4 Every Going Home plan is different and reflects the individual needs of the child and their family. The work can be challenging for all involved and can take time to ensure that all involved are ready for the child to return home. It is important to consider that some parents will not have parented for several years, coupled with the fact that the excitement and joy of increased family time is often not a guide to how a full return home will go. Key to tackling this is ensuring that reunification is proceeded with gradually, with family time being built up over time, even when the child or parent wants to run ahead. The following are examples of the outcomes that have been achieved.

4.5 In 2022, 3 siblings (ranging from age 8 to 12 years) returned home to their mother in a planned way. The children returned home following the successful reunification of an older half-sibling the previous year and subsequently a plan was agreed for them to return home in a staggered way following an increase in overnight stays, with the support of their foster carers (who continue to be part of their lives).

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Last year their mother had a relapse in her mental health and required hospital care for a significant period. During this time the social work team and adult worker were able to ensure the children remained in the care of their mother's wider family. This was possible as mum had continued to keep the social worker and adult support worker updated on her health needs and plans were able to be put in place to ensure the children remained together with wider family until she was well enough to have them back in her care.

This has been a successful Going Home plan and the team submitted discharge paperwork to the court with a view to discharging the Care Order for all 3 children. The family had been known to Children's Social Care for a significant period prior to Care Order's due to domestic abuse, substance misuse and poor parental mental health and the children were made subject to Care Order's and placed in foster care for their safety. The professional network continues to be proud of the positive changes mum has made and happy for the children to be living with their family.

4.6 In 2023, 2 teenage siblings returned home to their mother in a planned way. This was following a long period of increased and then unsupervised family time and support. Since their return there has been no significant safeguarding concerns and the children have remained settled.

The family had been known to Children's Social Care for a significant period and following the Care Order's the court recommended that support should be put in place for mum to work towards a plan for Going Home should positive changes be made. The team worked closely with the family, foster carers and school in order to achieve this positive outcome for them. The team submitted discharge paperwork to the court and a date has been set by the Court in June 2024.

4.7 In August 2023, 1 child returned home to his mother in a planned way. The actual date of his return home was planned to coincide with the completion of their GCSE's following a period of increasing overnight stays. This young person's plan was a slow transition from his foster carers (as per his wishes) so that both the young person and his mother and older sibling could prepare for his return home. The transition home went really well, however currently there are some concerns and as a result increased support is in place for the child and his family.

This young person returned home following years of Children's Social Care involvement with him and his siblings for neglect and abuse. He experienced several breakdowns in care with foster carers and had during this time was supported to have continued family time with his mother and understandably his desire to return home increased in his teenage years. The family will continue to be reviewed and supported to ensure that he can thrive.

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4.8 In the summer of 2023, a 7 year-old child returned home to her mother, stepfather and two older half-siblings, following a period of planning and support from the child's social worker and an adult worker that specialises in mental health. A Social Story and timeline were completed by the social worker with the child using their favourite character (Paddington Bear) to explain in a child friendly way what was happening and when, and their foster carers were crucial in supporting this move. The child's social story included dates for dinner and sleepovers to prepare her for the upcoming date of their planned move home.

The child's foster carers were involved in all the pre-planning and process for the child to prepare them for a change in carers and home environment as this was following a long period of stability in their care.

Since their return, the family has needed a significant amount of wraparound support from the social worker and adult worker. Mother's relationship broke down during this period and subsequently her mental health dipped. The support that was offered focussed on the family relationships and dynamics between them as this was impacting on the child. The team has needed to adapt and respond to a changing situation and in response has completed weekly and sometimes daily visits to support the child and family.

5. Reflections and next steps

5.1 The Children We Care For Service continue to support children with restoring family relationships, improving the quality of family time, and/or intensive parenting support to work towards a plan to progress with a going home plan wherever possible. Robust assessments with targeted support and planning are fundamental to care and permanency planning and can promote multiple outcomes for children, supporting levels of resilience within families and prevent future unplanned returns home.

5.2 The wider pathway work continues to support children to build positive relationships with their families to ensure they have adults to support them as they mature towards young adulthood. The service recognise that some parents are not able to make positive or sustained change post care proceedings and subsequently for some children the plan will be for them to remain in our care with a focus on promoting good quality and safe family time and moving children and families from contact centres to a more natural environment where possible.

5.3 The work is complex, time sensitive, intensive and results in an increased workload for the Children We Care For Service which is already working to capacity. Going Home journeys can present multiple challenges for children and their families due to a range of complex issues and needs. The most common practical issue being



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overcrowding which impacts negatively on family relationships and tensions within the home of which can be the tipping point to initiate a return back into care. We are working closely with our colleagues in Housing Need and Support with the use of our Fostering Nomination Scheme to try and mitigate this issue.

5.4 More children continue to enter care, and in 2023 the number of children looked after by local authorities in England rose to 83,840, up 2% on last year, continuing the steady rise seen in recent years (Gov.UK website, Statistics: looked-after children, 2024). This is set alongside an ever-growing need and demand for foster carers and children's homes, with limited options. To get things right for children in care the national and local authority's focus is on early help for families to keep children with families wherever possible (NSPCC, 2024). As such, the emphasis is on ensuring that children are considered for a Going Home pathway and where possible parents are supported to make the appropriate changes for their child to return home safely in the near future.

5.5 The human cost for a child in care is immeasurable and research (Crocker & Allain, 2019; Faulconbridge, Hunt & Laffan, 2019) indicates this will likely impact multiple childhood developmental domains including their psychological wellbeing and mental health into their adult years. The emotional cost far exceeds the financial savings to the Local Authority. Nevertheless, the NSPCC (2024) indicate that "the average annual cost of a child re-entering care after a failed return home is £61,614, compared with supporting the child and their family on their return home costing on average £5,627".

5.6 To summarise, the Children We Care For Service and partners are working in a dynamic and creative way with partners to support children and their families with a diverse range of needs and outcomes. This includes improving relationships, the quality of family time, progressing with a Going Home plan, and/or re-establishing links with children's wider families to support them as they mature towards young adulthood. The plan is to continue to review and further develop this model, learning from those with lived experience of the work.

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Signed by (Director)

Appendices:



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Background list of documents: Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972

The following documents disclose facts or matters, which have been relied upon to a material extent by the author in preparing this report:

Title of document	Location