

Written Ministerial Statement

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Department of Health and Department of Justice REGIONAL CHILDREN AND FAMILIES AUTHORITY

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Mr Nesbitt (The Minister of Health) and Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice): This statement is made jointly by the Minister of Health and the Minister of Justice and relates to the establishment of a Regional Children and Families ALB. The establishment of the new ALB (Regional Authority) was recommended by the Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services, which reported in June 2023. The Independent Review recommended that a new Children and Families ALB should include within its remit not only children's social care services but also youth justice services. It also suggested that certain education services, including education welfare services, should come within scope of the new body.

Given the recommended remit of the new Regional Authority, we agreed to undertake a joint exercise across the Departments of Health and Justice to identify the steps necessary to establish it. Our joint decision was noted by the Executive on 16 October 2025. Professor Ray Jones, who authored the Review report, was also advised of our joint decision.

The work took place over a six-month period and drew heavily on Cabinet Office and Institute for Government Guidance, as well as from specific examples of how other ALBs were established. Alongside this joint work, the programme of work to reform children's social care services continued under the direction of the Children's Social Care Strategic Reform Board.

Among other things, the joint exercise explored the need for primary legislation to establish the Authority, the projected delivery timeframe and the costs associated with establishment. A detailed project plan, outlining three key phases of the work - **Design, Build and Implement** - was developed. The plan indicates that this would be a significant programme of work and a substantial change management project, spanning approximately four years. The conservative cost estimate over a 4-year period is around £4.68m. Final costs are likely to be in excess of this to include Department of Justice costs and digital or other systems costs, which cannot be accurately quantified at this stage.

While it was always understood that this would be a complex undertaking, the project plan highlights the scale of the exercise – in terms of what it would involve, the time it would take and associated **initial** costs. While the Design Phase would start in this mandate, the Build and Implementation Phases would take place in their entirety in the next Assembly mandate and during the tenure of new Ministers, who may have other policy priorities.

Also, the landscape has changed quite significantly since the Children's Services Review reported and recommended the establishment of an ALB. The financial circumstances within which all Northern Ireland Departments are operating has created significant pressures and challenges for delivery bodies on the ground. While there may be efficiencies to be gained within a Regional Authority in the longer term, the cost (in its widest sense) to deliver it outweighs identified benefits at this stage.

Work undertaken by the children's services reform programme has the potential to deliver regionalisation of services without structural change. This includes a new regional plan for the delivery

of children's residential care and a corresponding regional plan for foster care. Structural changes within Health and Social Care, including the establishment of Committee in Common arrangements, create the scope to maintain sufficient focus on children's services within HSC Trusts and to promote and facilitate greater regional approaches. The Children's Social Care Strategic Reform Board, together with plans to strengthen the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership, will also facilitate and enable greater cross-departmental working.

Finally, one of the key recommendations of the Review was the reset and refocus of children's social care services with a stronger emphasis on supporting families at an earlier stage. Strengthening family support was a central theme throughout the review with Professor Jones describing it as the golden thread running through children's social care. In that context, a new regional model of family support for Northern Ireland has been developed called *Together for Families*. Transformation Funding and matched National Lottery Community Fund funding of almost £60m has been secured to implement the model. *Together for Families* is a relational, tiered, neighbourhood-based model for children, young people and families. It is focused on prevention and early intervention. It seeks to implement a systemic, region-wide model for children's social care services in Northern Ireland that shifts the emphasis from reactive, high-cost statutory intervention to early, community-based family support that keeps families safely together. The model is an output of the work undertaken by the Family Support Workstream of the Children's Social Care Strategic Reform Programme. It is informed by the Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services and seeks to promote greater collaboration across agencies in supporting children and families. It was developed in close collaboration between the statutory, community and voluntary sectors and provides a framework to drive change in a co-ordinated and consistent way. A Regional Partnership Board and Local Partnership Panels will also be put in place as part of implementation of the model.

This in itself will be a significant implementation programme requiring time and attention across the children's social care system. The benefits of early intervention in the context of families is well evidenced and, through *Together for Families*, the aim is to prevent family breakdown, enable more families to stay safely together, disrupt the current rising numbers of children being taken into state care and enable some children to return safely home from care through effective family support. *Together for Families* will also play a key role in helping to address wider socio-economic inequalities such as educational attainment and economic inactivity. It will therefore help to deliver system-wide positive impacts in the medium to longer-term.

Based on all of the above, as Ministers of Health and Justice, we have concluded that now is not the right time to progress the ALB further given the scale of the exercise in terms of time, cost and whole-system effort, as well as the changing landscape within which we are now working. The work undertaken as part of this exercise will be maintained for the record and can be accessed in the event that a future Minister or Ministers want to pursue this further. Work will continue to reform children's social care services, including through implementation of the *Together for Families* regional model of family support.