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I have been keeping Members updated on the progress of the Family Justice Review and today marks a key milestone with the publication of the UK Government's response to the Review, commissioned early in 2010. The Review Panel's final report which was published in November 2011 set out an extensive set of recommendations on how to reform the family justice system. This is a highly complex area crossing both devolved and non-devolved matters, including public and private law. I would like to thank the Panel for their focus and diligence in undertaking such a comprehensive review of this complex system, as well as thank all those who informed the work and responded in the consultation process. In particular I would like to pay tribute to Keith Towler, the Children's Commissioner for Wales, who was an integral member of the Review Panel in championing the voice and rights of children in Wales.

I have always maintained that the child's welfare and best interest comes first and I am committed to implementing those areas of the response devolved to Wales, based on our principles and in light of the needs of children in Wales. In particular, I expect that the **rights and voices of children** are at the heart of the process. I will continue to work with partners across the whole Family Justice System so that there are robust means to ensure that children's views are properly represented.

Improving the safeguarding and welfare of children and young people, particularly improving life chances for our looked after children, are central to our **Programme for Government** and framework for a **Sustainable Social Services for Wales**. This is based on a strong national purpose and clear accountability for delivery, underpinned by a competent and confident professional workforce.

The family justice system makes life-changing decisions which affect many thousands of children and families every year, but, as the Family Justice Review has pointed out, it is a system that is not working as well as it should and is under ever greater strain. I am pleased therefore that the Welsh Government has ensured

that the key devolved aspects have been reflected in the positive response from the UK Government to the Family Justice Review. I have arranged for Members to receive a link to the response, which I would urge you to consider. In the meantime, there are some key areas I would like to draw your attention to which are particularly salient for the Welsh Government and agencies within Wales in taking forward the ambitious plans to improve the family justice system.

I welcome that the Review has recognised the benefits of preserving the provision of expert independent social work advice to the courts in Wales, by **Cafcass Cymru**, through Welsh Ministers. Cafcass Cymru is an important part of the family justice system and each year works with over 8000 children and their families across Wales. Since the CSSIW inspection of the organisation in 2010 which assessed its overall effectiveness as satisfactory, significant improvements have been made and I am confident that through Cafcass Cymru we will continue to provide a quality service to the courts in taking forward the ambitious strategic plan we launched at the beginning of the year.

The current socio-economic climate is taking its toll on families in our local communities and there are rising pressures in the 'looked after' system which has seen an increase of 15% in the past two years. This is putting further pressures on the family justice system, and therefore the reforms proposed on **public law** will help reduce the unacceptable delays and enable better case management and care planning. It is unacceptable that processes designed to protect some of our most vulnerable children, may be adding to the difficulties they face.

Having a strong and confident workforce will be key to supporting the reform of the family justice system and helping drive the cultural and systems change in Wales. Our Sustainable Social Services agenda for the further professionalization of our Workforce will include a new career pathway for social workers and build upon our national training programme to improve assessment and case management skills of social workers.

This agenda will be underpinned by our drive to reduce complexities in core social services practices, including through the introduction of our new Social Services Bill and delivery of our legislative programme. Taken together, these will further improve local authority practices and strengthen pre-court proceedings.

Like me, Members have also been concerned about the adversarial nature of **private law** cases. I welcome therefore, proposals which will support separating parents in working together to make arrangements about their children's lives, and reducing the need to take such cases through the courts, and focussing clearly on their children's needs. I fully support plans to make consideration of mediation compulsory and we are well placed in Wales through our Children's Rights agenda and focus on citizens rights and control, to support this which will clearly be in the best interests of the child, providing greater voice and control to children and families.

Any changes to devolved legislation will be taken forward at the earliest opportunity in the context of the Welsh Government's legislative programme. For example, Members will be aware of our progressive plans through our Social Services Bill to simplify arrangements in relation to **adoption** by placing a duty on the 22 local authorities in Wales to come together and establish a single adoption agency. This complements the UK Government's plans to simplify the adoption process and the role of adoption panels.

Despite the rejection of any legislative provision in support of **shared parenting** by the Review Panel, I note the UK Government's proposal to develop a legislative statement emphasising the importance of children having an ongoing relationship with both parents after separation, where it is safe and in the child's best interests. I will continue to contribute and to influence in its development and to ensure that the rights of the child remain paramount.

The enormous challenge of addressing the issues in the family justice system will require leadership at all levels, across Wales and within the UK. The creation of a **Family Justice Board** will provide greater leadership and co-ordination across delivery agencies nationally and locally and we will have key representation from Wales on this Board. It will be supported by a young people's board, with representation from Wales and England, which will support their work and ensure the voices of children and their wishes and feelings are taken into account. I will ensure that appropriate connections are also made with our Social Services Partnership and Leadership Forums.

The Family Justice Review has established a platform for dialogue and engagement in Wales; we are already beginning to hear a new conversation across devolved and non devolved partners about how agencies can work together more effectively in the best interests of our children. I have said it many times but make no apologies for saying again that the size and geography of our nation affords us significant opportunities to make a direct and positive difference for children and families.

The First Minister's key message is one of delivery, I want to personally drive this agenda forward in Wales. I want the conversation, which started with the commissioning of this Review, to continue and extend. I will therefore be establishing a new **Family Justice Network in Wales** that brings together the key players, so that we have a local community of understanding and common purpose to improve public services and outcomes for children and families in Wales. This network will further support and inform the work of the Family Justice Board and the contribution of the Welsh representatives which sit on it.

I intend to publish the terms of reference for the Network in the coming weeks and at the same time will update Members on next steps regarding those actions that fall within the remit of the Welsh Government.

We need to build on the work already started to achieve the improvements the Welsh Government would want to see, however, whilst some changes will happen immediately,

others, including legislative changes (both devolved and non-devolved) will take longer to implement.

Our commitment to this is clear and we will work collaboratively within Government and with partners, through our new Network, to deliver on this ambitious agenda, whilst ensuring that a distinct Welsh voice is retained within the system. The publication of the UK Government response marks the start of the journey and we can build on the foundations we have already set out to maximise the opportunities for Wales. Ultimately we are working towards delivering a system which is simpler and more straightforward for parents; is streamlined and less resource intensive for professionals; and above all else provides children with a faster system which recognises, listens and responds to their needs and concerns, protects their welfare and secures their safety; and one that helps them enjoy their childhood in the most stable environment.

I firmly see the delivery of this work as an integral part of my Sustainable Social Services programme and we will provide more details of the Welsh Government's proposals shortly.