

**Portsmouth
Children
and Families
Workforce
Strategy**

2026 – 2029

Foreword

During the last strategy period (2023–2026), we have made significant and sustained progress in strengthening our workforce, practice and culture. We have introduced clearer and more attractive career pathways, including Advanced Social Worker roles and targeted market supplements, contributing to increased workforce stability, falling vacancy levels, reduced reliance on agency staff and the successful conversion of locum colleagues into permanent roles. Our recruitment and development pipeline has flourished, with more alternatively qualified colleagues progressing through social work apprenticeships and a Stronger Futures Academy that is widely valued for its ASYE and second year in practice offer.

We are proud of our active engagement with the Workforce Race Equality Standard and the steps taken to embed anti racist practice across the directorate, including the creation of a dedicated Black and Global Majority staff group. At the same time, the Portsmouth Model of Family Practice has continued to mature, with a renewed emphasis on purposeful, impactful intervention that parents and young people consistently tell us is making a real difference to their lives.

Our workforce is our greatest strength. As we move into the 2026–2029 strategy period, we do so within the context of the national Family First children's social care reforms and local government reorganisation planned for 2028. Throughout this transition, our priority remains continuity and stability: children and families will continue to receive safe, consistent support, and our staff will be supported through clear communication, high quality supervision and ongoing development as arrangements evolve. The reforms set a clear national direction, requiring local authorities to reshape systems so that help is provided earlier,

practice is relational and restorative, and children can grow up safely within their families and communities wherever possible.

This strategy is informed by the Children's Social Care National Framework (statutory guidance), which sets out the purpose, principles and outcomes children's social care should achieve, alongside the key enablers of effective practice. We will continue to align our local workforce development with this national direction, drawing where relevant on Department for Education commissioned Foundations Practice Guides to support evidence informed leadership and decision making.

Portsmouth wholeheartedly embraces this ambition. The reforms strongly align with our long established commitment to relational, restorative and trauma informed practice. They reinforce our approach to Family Help as a central and accessible offer, bringing together multidisciplinary expertise to support families before concerns escalate, and the importance of strengthening family networks, including the expanded use of Family Group Decision Making.

Building on strong foundations, this strategy sets out how we will continue to develop a confident, skilled and compassionate workforce, equipped to deliver high quality practice and support meaningful change for children and families. Our commitment remains clear: to support our people to do their very best work so that children in Portsmouth are safe, nurtured and supported to thrive within their families wherever possible.



**Sarah Daly, Director -
Children, Families and
Education**

National and local context for workforce recruitment and retention

Children's social care operates within a highly pressured labour market. National reforms, increasing complexity of need and sustained competition for skilled practitioners, continue to affect our ability to recruit and retain the workforce needed to deliver safe, high quality practice. The context below outlines the key national and local factors shaping our recruitment and retention priorities for 2026–2029.

National context

- **Competitive labour market:** Local authorities compete for a limited supply of experienced social workers and specialist practitioners, with pay differentials, agency work and cost of living pressures influencing movement and retention.
- **Reform driven role diversification:** The shift to Family Help and integrated, multidisciplinary working increases demand for a broader range of roles, including family practitioners, specialist adult practitioners and network building roles such as Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) coordinators.
- **Retention and working conditions:** National evidence consistently identifies manageable workloads, high quality reflective supervision, protected learning time and strong practice leadership as critical to staff retention.
- **Early career reform:** The introduction of a two year early career programme raises expectations around structured support and practice educator capacity, creating opportunities to improve retention alongside the need for sustained investment.





Local context

- **Local labour market pressures:** We continue to face strong financial competition with neighbouring authorities. We mitigate this through a strong learning and development offer, reflective supervision and a focus on staff wellbeing. We typically hold 6–18 Social Worker vacancies and aim to halve this average over the next three years.
- **Growing our own workforce:** We are strengthening our recruitment through investment in Step Up to Social Work apprenticeships and university partnerships, supported by values based selection and the involvement of care experienced young people in interviews.
- **Learning, development and supervision:** We provide a comprehensive offer through the Stronger Futures Academy, including Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) and second year in practice pathways, underpinned by reflective supervision, coaching and growing practice educator capacity.
- **Staff experience and workforce mix:** We know that practitioners value working in Portsmouth and highlight the relational practice model and development opportunities, while highlighting the importance of work–life balance. We also benefit from a skilled alternatively qualified workforce, supported by clear learning pathways.
- **Diversity of our workforce:** We are seeing positive progress in increasing diversity at practitioner level, reflecting success in recruitment and early career pathways. However, this diversity is not yet consistently reflected within our management and senior leadership structures. This highlights the need to strengthen progression pathways and ensure equitable access to development opportunities, so that our leadership more closely represents the communities we serve.

Portsmouth Model of Family Practice

The national children's social care reforms set out a clear ambition to improve outcomes for children, young people and families aged 0–25 by reshaping services around strong relationships, early and meaningful Family Help, and support that keeps children safely within their families wherever possible. Our vision is anchored in a strong and coherent approach to Portsmouth Family Practice, shaping how we engage, support and work collaboratively with families.

1. Whole family working: We understand the strengths, needs and dynamics of the whole family system, recognising that supporting adults within their cultural, social and historical context is essential to improving outcomes for children.
2. Restorative: We work with families using high support and high challenge, creating space for families to lead the change they want to see and ensuring that practice is fair, transparent and inclusive.
3. Relational: We prioritise warm, respectful and trustworthy relationships with children, parents and family networks, recognising that relationships are shaped by culture, identity, community and experiences of discrimination.
4. Trauma informed and repair focused: We recognise how trauma including intergenerational, racialised and systemic trauma affects behaviour and relationships. We focus on creating safety, promoting healing, and supporting relational repair within families and their networks.
5. Strengths based, compassionate and culturally humble practice: We approach families with curiosity and compassion, actively challenging stereotypes and bias, and recognising the strengths, cultural identity and lived experiences that shape each family's story.
6. Holistic and evidence informed: We consider children's and families' lives in full, including how inequality, discrimination, socio economic factors and access to resources impact their experiences, wellbeing and opportunities.
7. Family networks and Family Group Decision Making (FGDM): We prioritise the involvement of wider family and community networks in planning, ensuring that plans are culturally relevant, sustainable, and shaped by people who know the child best.
8. Hopeful, change focused and equitable: We maintain a belief in families' capacity to change while recognising that different families face different barriers. We adapt our approach to ensure every family has equitable access to the support, opportunities and resources they need to thrive.

Portsmouth Approach to working with children and families



10 Service Standards

1. Explain to children and families why we are working with them and what we can and cannot do.
2. Listen to children and families and take into account of their wishes and feelings in everything we do.
3. Take care to ensure children and families understand what we are saying, by using clear and straightforward language.
4. Do everything we say and when we say we will do it.
5. Be on time for meetings and appointments.
6. Keep children and families updated on their progress.
7. Keep children and families personal information safe and explain how we are going to use it.
8. Try to answer any questions from children and families or find someone who can.
9. Work collaboratively with the other services and professionals working with children and families.
10. Treat people with respect and dignity.

10 Underpinning Principles

1. Our relational approach to working with families and each other will be about listening, nurture, compassion AND boundaries, accountability and challenge.
2. We will prioritise the building, maintaining and repairing of relationships.
3. We will be intentional about our priority to keep families together safely by understanding and addressing past experience and/or trauma (including those of parents).
4. We will work collaboratively with families through the co-production of effective support plans.
5. We will recognise the impact of unconscious bias and privilege on the way we work with families and each other.
6. We are strengths focused – with clarity of risks to child.
7. We work restoratively with families and within the multi-agency partnership.
8. We take time to reflect and learn.
9. We encourage professional curiosity and tenacity (including appropriate escalation).
10. We will seek to and co-ordinate professional intervention through the Team Around the Worker approach

10 Practice Standards

1. All families understand the reason for involvement from Children and Families Services and have given appropriate consent.
2. Children are spoken to alone and worked with by professionals who have the skills and resources to directly engage with them.
3. Impact chronologies, genograms and sociograms will support our understanding of the child's family and networks.
4. Assessments will seek to understand the parent/carer's past experiences and trauma, how these may shape current patterns of relating and coping, and what support is needed to promote healing, strengthen relationships and enable safe repair within the family.
5. Assessments will consider the lived experience of the child and their parents/carer.
6. We will take into account cultural heritage and equality factors and reflect on the impact of unconscious bias and privilege.
7. Every child has a plan co-produced with their family network, setting out agreed actions, timescales, responsibilities and desired outcomes. The plan prioritises how the network will support safety and wellbeing, and includes a contingency arrangement developed by the family with professional support.
8. All case records are analytical, well written and timely, so that everyone can understand significant events that have happened; what the plan is; the purpose of our activity and intervention; and what difference has been made.
9. Every child's record includes bi-monthly, reflective supervision that clearly records professional reasoning, explores risk and strengths, and demonstrates how supervision is shaping the direction and quality of practice.
10. Every case will be supported by good quality management oversight. This will include reflective supervision; quality assurance of work being undertaken and a consideration of the impact of intervention.

Since 2016, Portsmouth as a city has been committed to restorative practice as the foundation for how we work with children, families and each other. Restorative practice has shaped our culture, our language and our approach, our relationships with partners, ensuring that collaboration and doing things with families are central to everything we do. This commitment has been strengthened over time through our adoption of the Family Safeguarding model, which brought a focus on addressing the root causes of harm, integrating adult specialist practitioners, and supporting families to make sustainable change so that children can remain safely within their networks.

As we move into the next phase of development, national Family First reforms set out a renewed ambition to ensure that children grow up in their families wherever it is safe to do so, supported by timely, meaningful and multidisciplinary Family Help. In Portsmouth, this requires us to build on our strong restorative and Family Safeguarding foundations, while reshaping our system to provide earlier help, clearer pathways and a more consistent, relational offer for families.

Our Move to Family Help

Portsmouth is committed to creating a coherent, accessible and responsive Family Help offer that:

- provides earlier, more proactive support to families
- strengthens the role of the wider family network
- brings together multidisciplinary expertise
- promotes healing, resilience and sustainable change

Family Help will ensure that our restorative and trauma informed approach is available at the earliest point, supporting families before challenges reach crisis.

This direction of travel is consistent with the Children's Social Care National Framework, particularly its emphasis on strong relationships, safe and effective practice, and building the conditions for earlier support. As national Foundations Practice Guides are published, we will use them (where relevant) to strengthen the consistency and evidence informed delivery of Family Help in Portsmouth.

Strengthening Our Family Safeguarding Approach

Portsmouth's Family Safeguarding model remains a central part of our practice. Over 2026–2029 we will:

- extend Family Safeguarding principles and support across Family Help, Child Protection and Children we Care For.
- continue to work together within a single, multi-disciplinary workforce of adult mental health, substance use, domestic abuse and adolescent specialists.
- strengthen the use of trauma informed tools (such as DDP), purposeful intervention, direct work and motivational interviewing
- maintain a focus on building parental capacity for change.
- ensure the model continues to evolve in line with emerging evidence and reforms.
- Embed equity, identity and anti discriminatory practice within Family Safeguarding, ensuring practitioners understand how race, culture, language, disability, faith, sexuality, gender identity and socio economic factors influence family life, relationships, safety and trust.

Family Safeguarding and Family Help work together, with shared underpinning values that ensuring continuity for families and consistency for the workforce.

Family Group Decision Making as a Core Pillar of Practice

A key development in this strategy is the embedding of Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) as a central, guiding approach across all levels of need. FGDM directly supports our restorative values and strengthens family networks, ensuring that planning is led by the people who know the child best.

Portsmouth will:

- offer FGDM proactively and early as part of Family Help.
- use FGDM as a default approach at key decision points, including where there are concerns about safety or potential entry to care.
- train practitioners across the workforce to deliver high quality, consistent FGDM.
- ensure that every plan reflects the voice, strengths and contributions of the wider family and friends' network.
- evaluate the impact of FGDM on safety, stability and long term outcomes.

FGDM will support families to develop their own solutions, reduce reliance on statutory systems, and create plans that reflect lived experience, cultural heritage and natural support networks.

Our Future Workforce

To deliver this strengthened model, Portsmouth will ensure our workforce:

- is skilled in relational, restorative and trauma informed practice.
- understands how Family Help and Family Safeguarding operate as a single, coherent system.
- can confidently facilitate Family Group Decision Making.
- receives reflective supervision that promotes curiosity, learning and high quality analysis.
- is equipped with tools, guidance and learning opportunities that support consistent, evidence informed practice and purposeful intervention

This strategy has six key objectives:

Objective 1 Recruit, retain and develop a skilled, diverse and multidisciplinary workforce

Objective 2 Develop a 2-year early career programme for Social Workers

Objective 3 Strengthen our learning culture and our shared “deal” with staff

Objective 4 Develop the skill base of all our staff around the Portsmouth Model of Family Practice

Objective 5 Prepare for local government reorganisation (LGR) in 2028 while maintaining safe, stable and high quality services

Objective 6 Develop confident, compassionate and transformational leaders



Objective 1 – Recruit, Retain and Develop a Skilled, Diverse and Multidisciplinary Workforce

To deliver our vision for a strong and effective Family Help system, Portsmouth will build on the multidisciplinary expertise we already have across our system as demonstrated in our existing targeted Early Help service, Social Workers our adult family safeguarding workers and our Personal Advisors. While qualified Social Workers remain central to our statutory responsibilities, we know that strong Family Help depends on a wider range of skills, experiences and professional backgrounds. Over 2026–2029 we will therefore grow and enhance a diverse, multidisciplinary and community connected workforce, strengthening the blend of social work, specialist and alternatively qualified roles that can bring practical, relational and therapeutic support to families earlier and more effectively.

We will therefore expand our recruitment approach to include:

- **Alternatively qualified practitioners**
Professionals with qualifications in fields such as psychology, youth work, education, early years, family intervention, community development, counselling, health and wellbeing, tenancy support or adult services. These roles complement social work by offering practical, relational and therapeutic support to families as part of multidisciplinary Family Help teams.
- **Practitioners with lived or professional experience**
We value staff whose personal or professional journeys such as family support work, foster care, care experience, community leadership or voluntary sector roles enhance their ability to build trust and connect with families in meaningful ways.
- **Specialists aligned to Family Safeguarding and Family Help**
To meet the complexity of need in Portsmouth, our workforce will continue to include adult domestic abuse practitioners, substance misuse workers, mental health specialists, housing advisors and financial wellbeing workers, all of whom contribute to stronger whole family support.
- **Family Group Decision Making facilitators**
As FGDM becomes a core principle of our approach, we will invest in developing facilitators with strong skills in mediation, relationship building and network oriented planning.
- **A workforce reflective of the communities we serve**
We will actively seek applicants who reflect Portsmouth's cultural, linguistic and social diversity, recognising the importance of representation in reducing barriers to engagement and strengthening community trust.

Our recruitment commitment for 2026 – 2029

Over the next three years, Portsmouth will:

- Promote Family Help as an attractive, values driven career pathway
- Recruit a broader, multidisciplinary workforce to strengthen early support
- Ensure clear career progression routes for alternatively qualified staff including apprenticeships
- Provide structured induction, training and ongoing development for all roles
- Maintain a consistent restorative and trauma informed practice model across the system
- Strengthen collaboration across earliest help (tier 2), Family Help and community sectors

This expanded approach ensures that our Family Help system is staffed by a workforce that is skilled, compassionate, diverse and aligned with the needs of families, enabling earlier, more effective support and reducing escalation into statutory intervention.



Objective 2 – Develop a 2-year Early Career Programme for Social Workers

The Department for Education (DfE) has confirmed significant changes to the early career pathway for newly qualified child and family Social Workers. The existing Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) is being replaced by a new two year early career programme, aligned with the national Early Career Framework (ECF) and assessed against the new Early Career Standards (ECS). This is part of the government's wider Children's Social Care reform programme intended to strengthen practice, improve retention and ensure that all new practitioners receive consistent, high quality support across their first two years in practice.

Our current ASYE programme continues to provide robust support for Newly Qualified Social Workers, ensuring they develop the foundational knowledge, skills and professional confidence required for effective practice. Through the Stronger Futures Academy, practitioners are supported to understand the journey of children and young people 'through their eyes', with care experienced young people contributing directly to reflective learning and improvement. This approach will continue to evolve as we transition to the new DfE framework.

The Academy model ensures that practitioners have access to the right specialism at the right point in the child and family journey, enabling them to build confidence in assessment, relational practice, trauma informed approaches and working with family networks to promote sustainable change.

In preparation for the national move to a two year early career programme, Portsmouth has already introduced a second year practice development pathway. This supports practitioners to consolidate their learning, deepen their reflective capability and strengthen their application of theory to practice through continued learning, coaching and action learning sets. This aligns with the DfE's new expectation that newly qualified Social Workers receive two full years of structured support, focused on building "professional confidence and competence" and improving retention.

As the DfE prepares to fully implement the new early career programme and Early Career Standards replacing ASYE from September 2027 we will continue to adapt our local offer to ensure it fully reflects the national direction and provides high quality, evidence informed development for all new Social Workers.

Objective 3 – Strengthen our learning culture and our shared “deal” with staff

We will establish a clear and consistent “deal” with all staff that sets out mutual expectations and promotes a strong learning culture across Children and Families Services. Our aim is to ensure every practitioner understands what high quality Family Practice looks like, feels supported to develop their skills and reflective capacity, and is confident in delivering restorative, trauma informed and equity focused work with families.

To achieve this, we will:

1. Clearly communicate our expectations of practice and the behaviours that underpin our Family Practice model.
2. Provide a rich and varied learning offer that supports these expectations, including access to high quality training, resources, coaching and reflective practice.
3. Build a culture where curiosity, reflection and shared learning are embedded into everyday practice.
4. Ensure staff receive protected time for professional development (pod and team meetings, practice weeks, podcasts etc) and reflective supervision.
5. Strengthen access to tools and resources, including evidence informed practice guidance and restorative, trauma informed and culturally humble approaches.
6. Promote learning from success, appreciative inquiry, and cross team collaboration to support consistency and continuous improvement.
7. Create opportunities for practitioners to develop expertise, influence practice and act as champions within their teams.



Objective 4 – Develop the skill base of all our staff around the Portsmouth Model of Family Practice

We will develop the skills, confidence and cultural competence of our workforce so that all practitioners can deliver high quality Family Practice consistently. This includes strengthening restorative, relational and trauma informed approaches, deepening equity focused and anti discriminatory practice and embedding Family Group Decision Making as a core part of how we work with families and their networks.

To achieve this, we will:

1. Ensure all practitioners understand and can apply the key components of Family Help, including early, purposeful intervention and strong relationship based practice.
2. Strengthen practitioners' skills in restorative, trauma informed and anti discriminatory approaches so they can work effectively with families and their networks, recognising the impact of identity, culture, poverty and structural inequality on family life.
3. Embed the consistent use of Family Group Decision Making across the service, ensuring staff understand when and how to use FGDM to support network led plans.
4. Promote the use of restorative conversations, circles and approaches that help build, strengthen and repair relationships within families and their networks
5. Promote high quality assessment, analysis and planning using evidence informed tools and reflective approaches.
6. Support staff to co produce family plans that are clear, SMART and rooted in the strengths and contributions of the wider family and friends' network.
7. Ensure staff have the necessary tools, resources and support to work confidently and purposefully with families at all levels of need, including within integrated Family Help teams.
8. Strengthen collaborative working and consistent practice across multidisciplinary teams to support a holistic, whole family approach.

Objective 5 – Prepare for local government re-organisation (LGR) in 2028 while maintaining safe, stable and high quality services

Local government re-organisation will be a significant change programme during the life of this strategy. Our priority is to maintain stable leadership, a confident workforce and safe practice throughout the transition, protecting continuity for children and families and ensuring that any new arrangements strengthen (rather than dilute) our Portsmouth Model of Family Practice.

To achieve this, we will:

1. Put in place a clear LGR workforce transition plan (including communications, engagement and HR processes) and review it regularly.
2. Maintain strong supervision, management oversight and quality assurance so that practice remains safe and consistent throughout the change.
3. Protect professional development and induction for new starters, ensuring that learning and standards are not disrupted by organisational change.
4. Support staff wellbeing and retention through visible leadership, timely updates and access to reflective spaces during periods of uncertainty.
5. Ensure knowledge, practice tools and learning resources are captured and transferred effectively so that organisational memory is retained.
6. Work with partners to maintain effective multi agency working arrangements and clear pathways for children and families.



Objective 6 – Develop Confident, Compassionate and Transformational Leaders

We will develop managers and leaders who can guide the organisation confidently through ongoing change and transformation. Leaders play a critical role in shaping culture, modelling expectations and ensuring high quality, relational practice across the service.

To achieve this, we will:

1. Equip managers and leaders with the skills to lead in times of change, including managing complexity, uncertainty and system transformation.
2. Strengthen leadership capability in restorative practice, trauma informed approaches, anti discriminatory practice, and working with family networks.
3. Support leaders to champion the Family Practice model and ensure it is embedded consistently across teams.
4. Promote reflective, relational and emotionally intelligent leadership that supports staff wellbeing and retention.
5. Provide development pathways for aspiring, new and experienced leaders, ensuring a strong leadership pipeline aligned with the needs of our transforming system.
6. Ensure leaders are confident in using data, evidence, feedback and reflective learning to drive improvement and evaluate the impact of change.
7. Strengthen cross service and multi agency leadership to support integrated Family Help and collaborative working across the children's system.
8. Foster a culture where leaders model equity, inclusion and cultural humility in all decisions, behaviours and interactions and provide challenge where needed.

Monitoring and Review of this strategy

This strategy is reviewed annually by the Workforce Development Strategy Board.

Progress will be reported to the Board on the 6 objectives and will include a focus on the following:

- Recruitment, retention and learning from exit interviews
- Impact of learning and development
- Progress of our newly qualified social workers
- Quality of staff supervision
- Identified training needs analysis for staff
- Staff feedback
- Outcomes for children and families
- LGR transition readiness and workforce stability indicators (e.g., vacancy and turnover, staff feedback, supervision compliance, and continuity of key roles)

An annual report on the Children's Workforce Development Strategy will be prepared by the Principal Social Worker and presented to the Workforce Development Board.



You can get this information in large print, Braille, audio or in another language by calling 023 9284 1193

Produced by: marketing@portsmouthcc.gov.uk • Published: **September 2026** • Ref: 257.1