

Reimagining pre-proceedings

By [Family Rights Group](#), a registered charity

A **15-month pilot project** led by the **Family Rights Group**, a leading specialist child welfare charity, is set to launch in Dorset, aiming to transform how families at risk of care proceedings are supported. This initiative is part of the charity's wider 'Reimagining Pre-Proceedings' project, funded by the **Legal Education Foundation**, and builds on lessons from the [Care Crisis Review](#) and reports from the [Public Law Working Group](#).

The Dorset pilot seeks to 'create the conditions for families to get the help they and their children need at an earlier stage,' preventing the need for care proceedings wherever possible. By focusing on **early intervention** and fostering collaborative partnerships, the pilot will bring together families, social workers, the local Family Court, and other key partners to promote positive outcomes for children.

The Dorset pilot aims to drive system change in pre-proceedings work by:

- Ensuring families can understand and address social workers' concerns while having their voices heard.
- Equipping practitioners with the tools and confidence to work collaboratively with families, incorporating their insights and lived experiences.
- Promoting effective partnership working between families, social workers, local authorities, and the judiciary.
- Demonstrating how early, coordinated interventions can safely avert care proceedings.

The work in Dorset includes:

- 1 Co-produced legal and practice programme for the judiciary:
 - Designed in collaboration with families and delivered in partnership with the [Magistrates Association](#) and [Judicial College](#).
- 2 Focused local pilots:
 - In two family justice areas, the pilot will emphasise early and effective partnership working with families.
 - Practitioners will gain deeper insight into families' experiences of the child welfare and family justice systems.
- 3 Engagement with key stakeholders:
 - Collaboration with directors, service managers, judges, magistrates, and other decision-makers to identify what is working well and what needs improvement.
 - Peer learning and cross-disciplinary activities to drive systemic change.
- 4 Accessible resources for families:
 - Tailored advice materials, including easy-read versions of the Public Law Working Group's best practice guidance, to ensure families are informed and supported.
- 5 Evaluation and dissemination:
 - Independent evaluation led by Caroline Thomas, Honorary Research Fellow at the [University of Stirling](#), will assess the approach and its impact.
 - Resources and findings from the pilot will be shared widely, allowing adaptation and adoption by other local agencies and family justice partnerships.

The pilot will begin with families, social workers, and other stakeholders in the local family justice area collaborating to identify strengths and areas for improvement in Dorset's current

systems. These insights will shape a more effective, family-centred approach.

Initial feedback from stakeholders highlights the importance of early intervention. **Cathy Ashley**, Chief Executive of Family Rights Group, stated:

"At a time when record numbers of children are in the care system, the Dorset pilot presents a unique opportunity to help safely avert the need for care proceedings by supporting the child welfare and family justice system to deliver early, effective partnership working with children and families."

The urgency of this pilot is underscored by the growing number of children in care. According to the charity [Become](#), as of March 2023, more than **83,840 children in England** were in care – the highest number on record.

Theresa Leavy, Executive Director for People – Children, at Dorset Council, welcomed the pilot, saying:

"We are delighted to be the pilot area, and at the forefront of positive change which will help to shape the best support possible for children and families in Dorset. We are looking forward to working within the broader systems our families experience, boosting collaboration, focusing on people's strengths, and restoring relationships."

See more: [Reimagining pre-proceedings](#)



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