

Witness Name: Katherine Ashworth

Exhibits:6

Dated: 26/10/2025

THE SOUTHPORT INQUIRY

SECOND WITNESS STATEMENT OF KATHERINE ASHWORTH, HEAD OF SERVICE OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY WELLBEING AT LANCASHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

I, Katherine Ashworth, Head of the Children and Family Wellbeing Service of Lancashire County Council, will say as follows:

Introductory matters

1. I make this supplementary witness statement further to my previous witness statement dated 5 September 2025 and in order to assist the Inquiry in explaining proposed changes to the operation and interactions between the Children and Family Wellbeing team (hereafter "CFW") and their Early Help work with Lancashire County Council's Children's Social Services (hereafter "CSC") team.
2. I exhibit the following documents to this statement:
 - **Exhibit KA14:** "Families First Partnership Programme". This is the government reform Families First Partnership Programme published in March 25. **LCC002184**
 - **Exhibit KA15:** "Independent Consultant Report, Neil Penswick, dated 7 March 2025". This is an evaluation of threshold decision making by Lancashire County Council Education and Children's Service on the provision of support at level 3 and 4 by Mr Neil Penswick commissioned by LCC. **LCC002194**

- **Exhibit KA16:** "Keeping children safe Report v0.1 .doc". This is a document detailing some of the new changes within LCC to bring itself into line with national reforms. **LCC002305**
- **Exhibit KA17:** "Working Well with Children and Families Pt 1&2 V6". This is the new framework produced following the review of the Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023. **LCC002307**
- **Exhibit KA18:** "WWWCF_3_Lancs oct 25". This is a recent version of the Draft Working Well with Children and Families LCC Guidance following the review of the Working Together to safeguard Children 2023 (**Exhibit KA17**). **LCC002308**
- **Exhibit KA19:** "MASH Action Plan 2025". This is an action plan produced by Head of Service of MASH Duty and Assessment team Amanda Richardson Roe following the actions the recommended made by Mr Penswick. **LCC002306**

Work undertaken by Lancashire County Council in response to The Families First Partnership Programme

3. The Families First Partnership Programme (hereafter "FFPP") is a national reform programme in England that is led by the Department for Education (hereafter "DfE") with involvement with health, police and other statutory partners. In March 2025 the FFPP guide was published and in April 2025, the FFPP was delivered. The FFPP initiative seeks to realign children's social care by prioritising early and integrated intervention, thereby lessening the system's reliance on crisis responses. The programme goal is to help families to access support sooner and in a more joined up way preventing children from entering Local Authority care where this can be safely avoided. The programme sets out a headline vision that every family in need of support can get "*the right help at the right time*". **[Exhibit KA14]. LCC002184**
4. The core components of FFPP are Family Help, Multi-Agency Child Protection Teams and Family Group Decision Making. The FFPP guides local areas to create or insert certain features into their offer. Local areas are tasked with designing their own

delivery models within national expectations to implement the reforms. The Government has committed more than £500 million in the financial year 2025–26 for the FFPP to support transformation in local authorities and their safeguarding partners. The *Families First Partnership Programme Transformation (Revenue) Grant 2025–26* is ring fenced for local authorities to invest in the transformation of activities.

5. LCC have been undertaking work to bring itself into line with the statutory changes that are to come into force. As part of the FFPP reforms, LCC commissioned a focused report from Mr Penswick an independent Consultant Social Worker and former Ofsted Inspector [Exhibit KA15] Mr Penswick's report was also commissioned to assist LCC in preparing for the next OFSTED inspection of Children's Services.
6. I have been involved in the consequent discussions about the value that Consultant Social Workers can bring to Early Help as part of compliance with statutory reform and general improvements.

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Thresholds

7. The question of Thresholds is often finely balanced where the work of Early Help is concerned. In determining the application of Threshold, we are always considering whether a child and family's needs sit at a targeted Early Help level, where my service is the designated response, or whether a child and family's needs fit within section 17 of the Children Act 1989. The room for interpretation between those two points on a spectrum can often be small margins. You can expect and we do see differences of opinions between professionals on that interpretation. In an Early Help context, we have a robust, diverse and strong offer we can make to families, and we work well to meet their needs. Our Early Help Family Support Workers have strong skills in building relationships with families and bringing together multi agency professionals. However, we are not qualified social workers.

8. The reality of definitions in law under the Children Act 1989 mean that if section 17 of the Children Act 1989 is engaged then work undertaken in response to that assessment of need is carried out as part of a Child in Need (hereafter "CIN") plan, as opposed to an Early Help plan. Lots of things about the two approaches are actually very similar in practice. Both require family consent which needs to be maintained over a prospectively lengthy period of time. The sort of work we would do would be similar as addressing family circumstances and children's life experience to move forwards positively. This includes; parenting capacity, substances misuse, mental health issues and such like. We would reasonably expect in the Early Help arena that there will be a fine continuum of need.
9. We do have cases at the very complex end of Early Help which will be on cusp of being a CIN or arguably meet the statutory definition of CIN.
10. The decision to step across to Early Help is made by children's social care managers. If it is decided that a case is to step across to Early Help, as part of the transfer process Early Help are given guidance by the social work managers that points to the actions required to progress matters at an Early Help level. This information forms the basis of our Early Help plan.
11. It is important to note that in some circumstances, the families of the children that meet the statutory definition of CIN may not consent to a CIN plan managed by a social worker within CSC. They may however consent to an Early Help plan managed by an Early Help lead professional. In these circumstances the priority is ensuring children and families have access to the support they need from the service they consent to engage with. In my experience this is a relatively common occurrence.
12. The issue of Thresholds for intervention is, therefore, complex in my view. There are often grey areas. What we have done consequently is to look at what work we are

carrying out within the service and secondly, we have had conversations with colleagues in CSC about our work so that we can make improvements and align the Council to the FFPP. Within LCC we already have processes to allow Early Help and CSC to discuss case transition, or transfer and we effect those processes through weekly conversations known as Family Discussion. We have also identified further changes to improve the resilience of the Early Help offering to ensure that discussions and decisions around challenges, escalations and stepping across are robustly supported. That has produced a change in process and how we analyse Thresholds.

13. The most notable distinction between Early Help and CSC is what can be compelled under the Section 17 Children Act 1989 CIN statutory framework versus consent-based cooperation under an Early Help lead professional. Whilst section 17 Children Act 1989 support and services for a child are consent based it is my understanding that a social worker in CSC can consider other more compulsive measures if they are concerned about the welfare or safety of the child and parental co-operation is not forthcoming. Those measures are not available to Early Help who would have to refer the case for stepping across to CSC.

14. There are no mechanisms for Early Help workers to hold other agencies to account. They are reliant on other agencies voluntarily keeping them up to date about what they are doing, and there is no right of redress. Colleagues in CSC operating under a statutory framework have a greater ability to push back on other agencies and to escalate as necessary. A CIN recognition carries more weight with other agencies and provides agencies with a level of understanding about that child and the extent to which they are at risk of impairment to their development. Early Help is more about recognising challenges in families to provide intensive support to help.

Ongoing Improvements

15. LCC has made changes to the operation and structure of its Early Help function to bring it closer to CSC. In the background to those matters LCC also has had regard to planned legislative change in the form of the FFPP which increases social work supervision but reduces the allocation of social workers per child. This will inevitably impact upon the work of the CFW team within Early Help.

Consultant Social Work Supervision and Oversight

16. We are in the process of implementing models to affect a way of providing social work oversight and supervision as additional support for complex families in Early Help that sit between the boundary of Thresholds.

17. We intend to achieve this aim through the utilisation of existing expertise in the form of Consultant Social Workers. Consultant Social Workers are a higher grade level of social workers who offer greater expertise. The Consultant Social Workers model is not new within LCC in child protection cases; however, there is a move to include Consultant Social Workers into the context of Early Help to provide an additional level of social work expertise.

18. The plan is that the Consultant Social Workers already working within CSC will carry a smaller caseload to allow additional capacity to provide supervision, oversight and some joint working with families alongside other Family Support Workers within our Early Help work.

19. Our Family Support Workers (hereafter "FSW") in Early Help are line managed by a senior FSWs for case supervision and oversight. The Consultant Social Workers will not be focused on the details of lower-level family need but on the joint working of complex cases. Consultant Social Workers will work alongside the Senior FSWs to look at complexities, escalating risks and to identify when escalating support and review is required providing additional advice and support to Early Help lead

professionals. The additional supervision of a Consultant Social Worker introduces qualified social work expertise into the decision making within Early Help where services are delivered are at the highest level. The Consultant Social Worker could, for example, advocate within the step across process or could be engaged in organising a strategy meeting. This additional expertise brings gravity to the decision making within Early Help, specifically bringing complex safeguarding issues to the forefront.

20. Under this model the Consultant Social Workers will retain a small a caseload connected to social care. The reduced capacity of that caseload will mean that each week the Consultant Social Workers have 2–3 days working with Early Help families rather than their own caseload of CSC children.

21. The new changes require additional financial resources, approximately the cost of 10 new social workers. The consideration of the additional resource needed is explored in the Keeping Children Safe Report v 0.1 [Exhibit KA16]. In practice Early Help will be allocated Consultant Social Workers from the existing pool of social workers within CSC. To ensure continuity and capacity within CSC, new social workers are being recruited to backfill those spaces and to pick up their caseloads.

LCC002305

22. Targeted Early Help is well invested, extensive and works well with families to meet needs and improve outcomes for our children and families. The Council have a strong and robust Early Help offer. The introduction of Consult Social Workers into Early Help is a hugely positive step forward for my service. These changes demonstrate that we are evolving in way in that brings expertise across the Threshold boundaries. This model is also a significant step towards the planned legislative changes in the form of the FFPP.

23. The national reforms also introduce the term Family Help and the role of Family help practitioners. The Family Help model is an overlay of Local Authority led

arrangements in place for an individual family with needs assessed between universal services right up to the boundary of the section 47 of the Children Act 1989.

24. In practice a Family Help practitioner will be allocated to a child and family and will remain with that child and family as their needs escalate or de-escalate through the CON before reaching the section 47 definition of Child Protection.

25. The implementation of the FFPP is a positive development. Consequently, I do not believe that more children and families will sit within Early Help. I believe the demand for Early Help services will remain the same. As we understand it, the differences of the FFPP are the package of support and the overall wrap around service offered to an individual family.

26. As a service we understand the logic and principles behind this reform. In backdrop of national reform, we are further developing our Early Help offer; specifically, the concept of lead professional support and the fluidity of moving with a family as their needs change. This lead professional concept offers a more seamless delivery of services to our families removing the need for a handover process between CSC and Early Help for children and families with needs assessed as not meeting the definition of section 47 Child Protection of the Children Act 1989.

Working Well with Families Guidance 2023

27. LCC have identified a need to update our transfer / step across policy to firm up mechanisms around those processes which we are addressing. There has also been a pan Lancashire review of the Working Well with Families Guidance 2023 which is on the cusp of being published. This review will impact how the Early Help service is delivered to our families. I have a copy of that draft [Exhibit KA17]. The development

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of this document has been led by our safeguarding assurance partnership with input from principal social worker, Tonya Harrison.

28. I understand that the WWWCF3 Lancs Oct 25 Draft [Exhibit KA18] is the most recent version of this document; however, I believe further amendments are taking place. I am not part of this process, but I am aware that further amendments are being made before the document is published.

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MASH Action Plan

29. In preparation for the upcoming reforms Director of CSC Louise Anderson directed the Head of Service of MASH Duty and Assessment team Amanda Richardson Roe to prepare a MASH action plan [Exhibit KA19]. I was consulted with in relation to the development of this document in June 2025 as parts of the plan involved Early Help and the delivery of the service. This document actions the recommendations made by Mr Penswick.

LCC002306

Statement of Truth

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief in its truth.

Signed:

Signature

Dated: 27th October 2025

Index to the Second Witness Statement of Kathy Ashworth Early Help.

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