Introduction & Context

This document presents perspectives from 89 Local Authorities (LAs) whose employees attended the NVEST General Meeting held on 14/05/2025 to discuss the national roll out of Families First: Family Help. The meeting was attended by Tom Griffiths from the Department for Education who gave an update on the programme, followed by presentations from Dorset and Wolverhampton with a particular focus on the challenges of adapting Case Management Systems to meet the requirements for this new way of delivering services in Children's Social Care.

A total of 212 people attended the meeting, representing 89 Local Authorities. This shows the significance of the interest and challenges these changes are posing in relation to the timescales of the roll out of the programme and the changes required to the existing case management systems.

The purpose of the document is to share the concerns raised between all Local Authorities with the Department for Education and the current CMS suppliers in order to open cross-sector dialogue about how best to approach these challenges. We hope to achieve a richer understanding of the challenges facing the sector at this time from the perspectives of all parties concerned, with the aim of ensuring a well-co-ordinated implementation strategy.

Key Messages

The clear message coming from Local Authorities is that the scale of change required to make their case management systems compliant is significant. One early implementation authority said they had to postpone all other development work on their case management system to deliver the first pillar of the Families First framework. They welcome the practice changes, but they want the CMS adaptation to be right, first time.

An overarching concern is that they are being asked to start to make changes before the DfE guidance is available to support them and their CMS suppliers, and this includes the statutory reporting requirements for 2027-8. CMS suppliers must be confident that the investment they make in their product will meet the new statutory requirements. If they do not, they could end up having to repeat elements of their development. Apart from the adverse impact on the suppliers, who say they operate in a relatively low-margin market, this could also impact on customers who have to implement system changes more than once, which is also costly on them.

LAs say they would like to see a programme and roadmap agreed which takes their concerns into account, and one which recognises that there has to be a specific order in which changes are implemented.

1) Publication of the **2027-28 Statutory Data Collection Specifications**, to help CMS suppliers redesign their products. This should also cover transitional reporting requirements i.e. those reporting items that should continue until the Local Authority switches to the new Family Help model.
2) **Generic CMS change requirements** gathered from pilot and non-pilot sites (forming a steering group) to ensure these are broad and flexible enough for CMS suppliers to translate into product changes that can support the variations in practice and operational services in the Local Authorities, minimising the need for bespoke configuration work by the supplier. The steering group should include LAs from across the 4 suppliers.

3) **Consultation activities involving Local Authorities** within their supplier group to assist suppliers in producing specific product specifications that will be released to all customers. These should be signed off by the supplier's existing Customer Advisory Boards (or equivalent).

4) Agreement between the suppliers and the DfE about the **timescales for developments** required, both for product changes and eventual deployment to all customers, the scale of which we know is likely to vary from product to product. Some suppliers also have a much larger customer base than others which may also significantly impact on their resource capacity in implementing this quickly.

5) A **supplier-specific roll out plan** for their customer base following the release of the product which could include the steering group members as early adopters so that they can fully test out the changes before the product is rolled out across the entire customer base, ensuring there is time to address any critical issues.

There is uncertainty about the funding available to support the changes required by suppliers, and whether sufficient funding will be allocated to Local Authorities or indeed directly to the suppliers. Without funding, the suppliers might need to pass these costs onto their customers, and individual customers will need to negotiate based on the terms of existing contracts with suppliers. The cost of migrating client data in order to move children from one category/workflow to another should not be underestimated, whether this is handled in-house or by the supplier, which may also vary between CMS suppliers.

Invitation to join this conversation

NVEST member LAs have asked for NVEST to support them in continued communication and in the co-ordination of any continued LA engagement going forward, acting as a representative group to enable government and suppliers to engage effectively with a sufficiently broad cross-section of LAs. The NVEST steering group is made up of LA representatives accountable to the wider NVEST community.

We therefore ask that any response to this document is sent to: NVEST@eastsussex.gov.uk

Detailed Feedback

The following sections provide more granular detail of the issues and concerns expressed during NVEST discussion groups.

The below points are quotes or paraphrases from contributors to NVEST's meetings about the *Families First* implications for case management systems and data flows. Comments are not attributed to individual contributors or LAs.

In some cases particular comments may be in tension with others discussing the same theme; this is because not all LAs, or all participants, share identical concerns or challenges when considering these changes.

Comments should not be taken as official statements by specific organisations or individuals, but as a cross-section of concerns and ideas which are currently "live" in the NVEST community, and which can form useful reference material for further strategic discussion.

Challenges on Local Authorities

- Being asked to work out what we need to do in the CMS when the local practice model has not been properly designed yet. For example, are forms and workflows affected and how that might fit with current practice models like Sign of Safety.
- Suppliers need to issue a best practice model with their product design that should work 'out of the box' and comply with reporting requirements (not yet known).
- How to redesign now not knowing what the interim or future reporting requirements will be and what is voluntary/mandatory.
- The DfE want LAs to count everything the same as now, but want us to do it differently at the same time, can we not stop reporting on the distinction between EH and CIN? We are just adding more data into a return that is already overly complicated, and we know yet more is to follow.
- Where is Ofsted in terms of the Annex A and how they will inspect authorities that are in transition from one model to another especially when the CMS solution is not yet available to fully support it.
- How to separate the Targeted Early Help cohort from the CIN cohort and if this is about merging threshold why will this still be needed as it will complicate the supplier design as well?
- Every LA does Early Help differently how do we get some consistency going forward, including shared definitions.
- Account needs to be taken of those LAs who are going to commission out some of their Family Help service delivery and how they use the CMS.
- Concerns about potential data migration costs moving clients from one workflow across to another if 2 tiers are being maintained in a single workflow that will add even more complexity/cost.
- What is happening to the Supporting Families framework? Some LAs have spent a lot of money having this functionality embedded in their CMS to help identify families and monitor progress against outcomes and don't necessarily want to lose this but they also don't want to duplicate or overlap what the future reporting requirements are going to be.
- Reporting teams often the find out when changes have already been proposed and feel left out of discussions.
- System support teams are sometimes not included in the planning stages and are then asked to make things work at short notice, these changes are huge and cannot just be designed well in the current CMS systems.
- The potential wasted effort and impact on front line services if we redesign our CMS now only for the supplier to make more fundamental changes downstream.
- Guidance for LAs and Suppliers in November feels too late given the requirement for LAs to move to this way of working before we have a CMS that can comply with it.
- Some LAs are not on the most up to date supplier version and the impact of just upgrading to this new area may be greater than for other LAs
- For LAs that are migrating to another CMS or in the middle of a procurement this is going to present them with a significant challenge, and they might not achieve a go live of a new CMS until the year the reporting requirements are due to start.
- If the changes (post implementation) - require supplier assistance for any reason this could cause backlogs for suppliers and delays to go lives.
- Many LAs use external consultants for complex system change work as they cannot maintain specialist staff permanently due to budget pressures and there are a finite number of them this might put pressure on timescales.
- Having heard from a pathfinder that they had to put all their other CMS work on hold to deliver this, there was concern about capacity especially for those that are ramping up changes to improve service delivery (e.g. because of a poor Ofsted inspection outcome).
- What is this going to cost us, especially if we are to resource changes now and then again when the supplier solutions come out? Who will fund it?
- What element of the Families First roll out is meant to be for CMS changes and implementation especially given the cost of data migration?

- Who is funding the costs to suppliers, LAs or DfE? If LAs how is this meant to be co-ordinated by supplier?
- The cost for some suppliers will be a lot more than others, some must make much more fundamental product changes.
- Not all suppliers control the statutory reporting data fields in their database structures, LAs can change these causing a risk to them if their supplier doesn't support them in meeting future reporting requirements.
- Very little known so far about how multi agency CP teams (MACPT) will work and what their CMS needs are there seems to have been more focus on Family Help side.
- The ability for multi-agency professionals co-located to all be able to access the system from their own agency laptops is not possible and will pose a challenge on the delivery of multi-agency child protection teams.
- Some LAs use portals as a way of getting external professionals using the CMS but a) this is additional cost b) not all suppliers have this and c) it is not really the same as having a multi-agency team logged into the same system to work together so it is not necessarily the right solution for MACPTs.
- Timescales need to be realistic; the Family Hubs programme was far too ambitious and unrealistic.

Challenges on Supplier Timescales

- We feel the pain for suppliers if they only have the detail LAs currently do.
- How will the DfE ensure suppliers are able to deliver the requirements to an agreed quality and timescale?
- Suppliers have not committed to anything concrete yet as they are not clear either which makes it difficult for the LAs to plan what to do in the interim.
- Changes that require supplier development can take time e.g. 18 months to 2 years depending on the timing on their development roadmap and what else is committed to already.

Challenges on Supplier Design

- Systems should be led by and compliment practice, concern they won't deliver that.
- We want to work with suppliers, but please engage us early and communicate your plans clearly to the wider user base.
- Some of the supplier systems will need more radical redesign than others, for example where Early Help and Social Care have been on separate modules.
- Lack of confidence in supplier's ability and capacity to get this right.
- Some suppliers have their statutory reports hard coded into the product; they will need the future reporting requirements to build something that will be future compliant.
- We need national guidance that we (LAs and Suppliers) can use that sets out the changes needed, kinds of statutory forms and workflows that will need to be embedded and what will be configurable by customers.
- How to enable multi agency child protection teams where access is possible without having to use Council issued laptops. This is not possible in all LAs/in all CMS systems.
- Concerned about complex profile permissions for multi-agency working / access to CMS/ data breaches.
- There is a lack of confidence in some suppliers doing a good job by really engaging in the design with their customer base, how will this be avoided?
- There is a need for a more generic approach to product design which can easily be adopted and adapted locally; over the years the CMS systems have just been made more and more complex and costly to maintain.

Local Authority Representation

This report is derived from contributions by 212 NVEST participants, representing 89 Local Authorities:

Barnsley	Milton Keynes
Bath & North East Somerset	Newcastle
Bournemouth, Christchurch & Poole	North East Lincolnshire
Bradford	North Tyneside
Brighton & Hove	North Yorkshire
Bristol	Northumberland
Buckinghamshire	Nottinghamshire County Council
Bury	Oxfordshire
Cheshire East	Portsmouth
Cheshire West & Chester	Reading
Cornwall	Redcar & Cleveland
Coventry City	Rochdale
Cumberland Council	Rotherham
Derbyshire	Royal Borough of Greenwich
Devon	Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea
Dorset	Royal Borough of Kingston
Dudley	Royal Borough of Richmond Upon Thames
East Ridding	Rutland County Council
East Sussex	Salford
Essex County Council	Slough
Gateshead	Solihull
Halton	South Gloucestershire
Herefordshire	Southend
Hertfordshire	Southwark
Hull	St Helens Borough Council
Isle of Wight	Staffordshire
Kent	Stockton
Knowsley	Sunderland
Lancashire	Surrey
Leicestershire	Swindon
Leicestershire City	Telford and Wrekin
Lincolnshire	Torbay
Liverpool	Tower Hamlets
London Borough of Barnet	Trafford
London Borough of Bexley	Wakefield
London Borough of Bromley	Warrington
London Borough of Camden	West Berkshire
London Borough of Ealing	West Sussex
London Borough of Islington	Westmoreland and Furness
London Borough of Lambeth	Wigan
London Borough of Lewisham	Wiltshire
London Borough of Merton	Wokingham
Maidenhead	Wolverhampton
Medway	York