From: Paul Webb, Cabinet Member for Children's Services

Christine McInnes, Corporate Director for Children, Young People and Education

To: Children, Young People and Education Cabinet Committee – 26 November 2026

Subject: Together with Parents – ending the service at contract end

Decision no: 26/00074

Key Decision: It affects more than two Electoral Divisions

Classification: Unrestricted

Past Pathway of report: N/A

Future Pathway of report: Cabinet Member Decision

Electoral Division: All

Is the decision eligible for call-in? Yes

Summary: This report sets out the background and rationale to end the Together with Parents service at the end of the contract on 30 April 2027.

Recommendation(s):

The Children, Young People and Education Cabinet Committee is asked to CONSIDER and ENDORSE or MAKE RECOMMENDATIONS to the Cabinet Member for Children's Services in relation to the proposed decision as detailed in the attached Proposed Record of Decision document (Appendix A), to not recommission the Together with Parents service following expiry of the current contract on 30 April 2027

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1. Introduction

1.1 Kent County Council commissioned the Together with Parents service in April 2022 to provide early support for families whose children have neurodevelopmental needs, including those awaiting assessment, diagnosis or referral to the Neurodevelopmental Pathway. The model was innovative when commissioned as lived experience was embedded throughout service design, leadership and delivery. This service was available to families of children known to Children's Social Care or Early Help.

1.2 The contract is held by Whitehead-Ross Social Work Ltd and the service provides two elements; Guided Support, offering targeted one-to-one help,

navigation and self-advocacy; and Stronger Together, offering peer support, workshops, information and parenting programmes including Cygnet.

1.3 The contract was let for an initial term of three years from 1 April 2022 to 31 March 2025 and has utilised the two allowable contract extensions. The contract is due to end on 30 April 2027. From May 2027, Family Hubs will provide the locality-based support, alongside other successful programmes piloted and developed through this period.

2. Key Considerations

2.1 This service was commissioned as a result of the joint Ofsted and Care Quality Commission Inspection in 2019 which highlighted a need to increase levels of early support for families whose children have neurodevelopmental needs, including those awaiting assessment, diagnosis or referral to the Neurodevelopmental Pathway.

2.2 The funding available was limited and therefore a prioritisation approach was taken for the children awaiting assessment and was targeted at children who were known to Social Care or Early Help.

3. Background

3.1. The service was commissioned following SEND improvement activity arising from the Ofsted and Care Quality Commission joint inspection in 2019 and was designed to help families build resilience and self-help strategies while navigating the Neurodevelopmental Pathway. It has contributed to Kent's 'Support First' approach and has generated learning about co-production, lived-experience delivery, accessible parent programmes and community engagement.

3.2. The original funding included a repurposed Early Help allocation and a contribution from NHS Kent and Medway. The NHS contribution ceased, leaving KCC responsible for the full annual cost. The ending of the contract does not reflect the quality of the service or the value reported by families and professionals. It reflects the expiry of the available contract term, the non-statutory status of the provision, the duplication of service delivery, and the need to prioritise statutory responsibilities within the available budget.

3.3. Since this service was commissioned, national legislation and policy have increasingly shifted children's services towards earlier, more integrated and whole-family support. The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026 introduces measures to strengthen multi-agency safeguarding and the involvement of families and their wider networks through family group decision-making, while the Families First Partnership Programme sets the direction for a more integrated Family Help model.

3.4. As KCC is implementing Families First, its services need to align with the policy and guidance underpinning that model, including the move towards coordinated, whole-family support rather than separate or parallel interventions. KCC is responding to this through changes to its Family Help provision and the development of an integrated offer for children and families. Continuing to

commission Together with Parents as a separate service alongside this developing provision risks duplicating support available through the Family Help model, rather than fully embedding the whole-family approach that Families First is intended to achieve.

3.5. The development of the 'This is Me' programme in Kent, a strengths-based tool that helps schools and families identify a child's needs and the practical adjustments that may help, has been piloted in districts with outstanding evidence-based impact and was developed to support schools and families at the start of the Neurodevelopmental Support Pathway. This offer does not replace every aspect of the Together with Parents service, particularly its relationship-based one-to-one and peer support, however it will focus on support for the child and family throughout their diagnosis journey.

3.6. Families First in Kent is focusing on a "tell it once" approach, with professionals working together to provide the right support at the right time. Family Hubs will provide the local access route for universal and targeted support, including parenting support, SEND information and advice, and connections to health, education, community and voluntary services including Kent's parent carer forum for families of children and young people with SEND (Kent PACT) and Independent Advice and Support Kent (IASK). This model is intended to reduce duplication and provide more coordinated support for families known to KCC, while maintaining open access to help for other families. Again, while this does not replace the Together with Parents service in a like for like way, the multifaceted approach being taken by KCC to support families on the Neurodevelopmental pathway will work to alleviate any potential service gaps or disruption caused by ceasing the provision.

3.7. The mandatory Family Hubs Best Start Inclusion Practitioner (BISP) roles, funded by the Department for Education (DfE), commenced in October 2026. They provide a focus within Family Hubs, working in collaboration with Health and SEND services, to identify and provide early support and service navigation for families whose children may have emerging needs. Maintaining Together with Parents would therefore be a significant duplication.

3.8. Since contract commencement in April 2022, the Together with Parents service has performed well against its contractual KPIs and maintained strong levels of activity and engagement. The service received approximately 960 referrals and delivered 5,855 Family Advice interventions. It also reached 394 parents and carers through workshops, 1,606 through peer support groups and 3,473 through Cygnet courses. Families value practical and emotional support from staff who understand the experience of navigating neurodevelopmental pathways. Delivery has increasingly focused on building parental confidence, resilience and self-advocacy.

3.9. This service is has reached the end of its contractual term. There are alternative services that have been developed for a wider number of families with evidence of impact and success and therefore this service is no longer required. The ending of this service is in no way a reflection of the service delivered by Whitehead Ross Social Work Ltd.

4. Options considered and dismissed, and associated risk

4.1 The options included for consideration were:
Option 1 – Continue with the existing contract – this was dismissed as there is no scope to extend the contract further and other successful programmes have been implemented and established focusing on a wider group of families
Option 2 – Commission a replacement countywide service - this was dismissed as there is no requirement to commission a further service since other successful programmes have been implemented and established focusing on a wider group of families
Option 3 – End the contract and transition families to established locality-based provision, removing duplication with the developing Family Help and Family Hub offer and aligning support with KCC's implementation of the Families First whole-family model – preferred.

4.2 The proposal being progressed for decision is Option 3 as the service has reached the end of its permitted term. The contract would end on 30 April 2027. From May 2027, support for families will be provided through Family Hubs which have established locality-based route into universal and targeted support, including parenting support, SEND information and advice, 'This is Me', IASK, Kent PACT and links to wider health, education, community and specialist services.

5. How the proposed decision supports the Council's Strategic Statement

5.1 The proposal aligns with Reforming Kent 2025–2028, including the aim of supporting residents who need help, by moving towards locality-based access through Family Hubs and connected SEND, community and voluntary sector routes.

6. Financial Implications

6.1. The Together with Parents service is non-statutory and has an annual value of £369,380. It ends on 30 April 2027, with no further extension available.

6.2. KCC funds the full cost, through the General Fund, following the end of the NHS contribution. Current spend for this service is included within the key service line on the "Early Help and Preventative Services" budget. Agreeing not to recommission the services will lead to a saving in 2027/28 as other established provision is already funded separately and will not need to be expanded to compensate for this service ending.

7. Legal implications

7.1. Since this service was commissioned, national legislation and policy have increasingly shifted children's services towards earlier, more integrated and whole-family support. The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026 introduces measures to strengthen multi-agency safeguarding and the involvement of families and their wider networks through family group decision-making. Alongside this, the Families First Partnership Programme supports the development of a more integrated Family Help offer, bringing services together around children and families and placing greater emphasis on earlier support to address needs before they escalate.

7.2. The current contract will legally expire on 30 April. KCC has historically adopted a good practice approach to the decommissioning of voluntary and community sector provision, reflecting the principles of the Kent Compact. On this basis, a 90-day notice period is considered appropriate to support an orderly exit and transition, including effective communication with service users and stakeholders and measures to minimise disruption to existing provision.

7.3. The Council must comply with the Public Sector Equality Duty under section 149 [1]of the Equality Act 2010 when considering this decision, including having due regard to the potential impact on people with protected characteristics. An Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) has been completed and identifies a medium adverse impact associated with ending the Together with Parents service.

7.4. A structured decommissioning process, which will include liaising with referral services to identify and mitigate impact, notice to the provider, full case holding review and agreed date for cessation of referrals and related communications, will be undertaken as part of the ending of the contract.

8. Equalities implications

8.1. An Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) has been completed and identifies a medium adverse impact before mitigation, particularly for disabled children and young people, families awaiting neurodevelopmental assessment or diagnosis, and parents and carers who currently benefit from one-to-one advice, peer support and structured programmes. These impacts have been recognised and considered as part of the decision-making process, acknowledging that the potential impact of ending the Together with Parents service cannot be removed entirely.

8.2. The identified impacts will be mitigated through a planned transition to KCC's Families First approach and locality-based, whole-family provision. This will include early communication with families, individual exit planning, clear referral cut-off arrangements, active signposting and planned handovers where ongoing support is required. As all families currently receiving the service are already known to KCC, this will support continuity and enable their needs to be considered through the developing locality offer.

8.3. The EqIA will remain under review throughout the decommissioning and transition process to assess the effectiveness of these mitigations and identify any further action required.

9. Data Protection Implications

9.1 Upon contract cessation, the Council will ensure that all contract closure activities are undertaken in accordance with the terms of the contract and the requirements set out within the existing Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA).

[1] https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/section/149

10. Other corporate implications

10.1 The commissioning team will engage with the Commercial and Procurement Division to confirm the arrangements needed for ending of the contract. They will also work with the operational teams so there is a shared and known exit plan for the families supported.

11. Governance

11.1 The proposed decision is for the Cabinet Member for Children's Services to agree not to recommission the Together with Parents service following expiry of the current contract on 30 April 2027.

11.2 The proposed decision also seeks to delegate authority to the Corporate Director for Children, Young People and Education (or other officer authorised by the Corporate Director of CYPE) to take all necessary actions to implement the decision, including, but not limited to, contract and provider exit arrangements, decommissioning and transition arrangements, information governance and data transfer, the transfer and management of outstanding cases, communications with affected families and providers, and to enter into any contracts or other legal agreements required to implement the decision.

12. Conclusions

12.1 The Together with Parents service has provided valued support to families and demonstrated the benefits of combining practical intervention with lived experience. The service has contributed to the Support First approach and wider neurodevelopmental transformation.

12.2 The contract has reached the end of its permitted term and will end on 30 April 2027. Ending the contract will remove the annual commitment of £369,380. From May 2027, Family Hubs will provide the locality-based route to support alongside 'This is Me', SEND services, IASK and Kent PACT.

12.3 The future offer will be more integrated and locality-based, but it will not be a like-for-like replacement for the Together with Parents service. A controlled decommissioning process will support affected families, manage risk and ensure that the support available from May 2027 is clearly communicated and understood.

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13. Recommendation(s):

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14. Background Documents

None

15. Appendices

Proposed Record of Decision
Equality Impact Assessment

16. Contact details

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