



Department  
for Education

# **Early careers framework early adopters**

**Application guide**

**March 2023**

# Contents

Executive summary	3
Programme objective	3
Why we are running an Early Adopter programme	3
What the Early Adopter programme will involve	4
What is planned and when will it happen	4
Proposed outcomes	5
Funding and eligibility	6
Delivery requirements and available funding	6
Who can submit an EOI	6
Who is eligible to become an Early Adopter	6
Funding	7
Application process	8
How to apply	8
Completing your application	8
Submitting your application	9
Assessing the application and next steps	10
Essential	10
Desirable	10
Selection process	10
Key information to include within the application	11
The assessment panel	12
Application outcome	12

## Executive summary

Every child deserves to grow up in a safe, stable and loving home. Last year, three independent reviews looked at the changes that are needed to achieve this. Between them they looked at the full breadth of children's social care and heard from thousands of people with lived experience of these services or who work in them. We agree with their problem analysis and vision for change. This vision is underpinned by the fundamental principle of the Children Act 1989 that children's welfare is paramount. The best way of promoting children's welfare is very often by supporting children's families and the loving relationships around them. To achieve this vision, we need to rebalance children's social care to more meaningful and effective help for families, so that it achieves the outcomes children deserve. Achieving this will require a reset that puts love and stable relationships at the heart of what children's social care does.

The Independent Review of Children's Social Care (the Care Review) recommended significant reform to the operation of Children's Social Care, underpinned by a highly effective workforce. In *Stable Homes, Built on Love* we have committed to establishing a new Early Career Framework (ECF) for social workers. The initial induction period for all social workers will be extended to two years with an offer of further training and development for another three years. The programme will be underpinned by a new framework document, setting out the knowledge and skills social workers need to support and protect children and families. The ECF will ensure that wherever they are in the country new social workers will have a strong entry to the profession, helping to improve services and improve retention.

We want to work with local authorities (LAs) and social workers to design an effective and deliverable programme. The Early Adopter programme will be one of the main ways we do this, enabling us to understand best practice, test new approaches and help to design our approach to national roll out.

## Programme objective

### Why we are running an Early Adopter programme

Designing the ECF will be complex. There are multiple elements we need to get right, including but not limited to: the articulation of knowledge and skill required by early career social workers; the mode and delivery of training and assessment; and the appropriate balance between central and local delivery.

We therefore want to work with local authorities to design a delivery model for the ECF which is consistent, effective, and deliverable. Specifically, we will work with local authorities to:

- understand the strengths and limitations of current extended programmes.

- gain insight to inform the design of the social worker journey through the ECF and the delivery model to support it.
- Strengthen and test our understanding of programme benefits and how to ensure we realise them.

## **What the Early Adopter programme will involve**

The LAs we appoint in the first round of Early Adopters will already be delivering a structured early career offer of support that extends beyond the one-year ASYE. By working closely with LAs, we will seek to understand how these extended provisions work in practice and within different local contexts. This will inform how we begin to design and test aspects of the ECF as it is being developed.

LAs will be expected to engage with the Department, across operational, management and leadership levels, and to share detailed knowledge and best practice methodologies of their extended programmes. This would include access to social workers and might include other key professionals in the LA e.g. learning and development HR employees.

LAs taking part in the Early Adopter programme are likely to participate in research with the DfE and an external evaluator to help inform the development and implementation of the future rollout of the ECF. As the programme progresses, we would expect participating LAs to be open to adopting and testing new tools, approaches and content.

## **What is planned and when will it happen**

This EOI process will be used to appoint the first cohort of Early Adopter Local Authorities. Their appointment will start from June 2023 and we expect to continue to work with them until national roll out of an ECF. We are exploring being able to start national roll out of an ECF for Social Workers from 2026.

This will enable the Department for Education (DfE) to work with LAs with existing strengths and delivery programmes in extended early career support to understand and analyse their models, explore and learn about what is working well within current provision and the impact the extended support is having on social workers. It will also give DfE the opportunity to carry out early product development in real time over the first year of the Early Adopter programme. Information gathered during this phase will be pivotal for the design and testing of the programme as we move forward.

In the second year of the Early Adopter programme, we expect to appoint a second cohort of Early Adopters in order to explore how a broader range of LA characteristics and demographics may affect delivery of the developing programme. This will enable us to build an evidence base of what works, which will be used to inform any future support for the ECF. The first cohort would continue to work with DfE, and we expect that all Early Adopter LAs would begin to adopt and test an early package of ECF components from September 2024.

**Please note** - this guidance should be read alongside the **Early Adopter Programme LA Expression of Interest (EOI) form**.

## **Proposed outcomes**

The proposed outcomes of the programme are:

- **Outcome 1** - Understand the support needs of early career child and family social workers as they begin their career and improve both quality of practice and retention.
- **Outcome 2** - Test a newly developed draft of the ECF Framework that sets out the knowledge and skills needed by social workers at practitioner and expert practitioner level.
- **Outcome 3** – Work with LAs to design and develop a deliverable programme of development that meets the requirements of the new framework and that supports social workers to gain the necessary knowledge and skills.

## **Funding and eligibility**

### **Delivery requirements and available funding**

In the financial year 23/24, LAs will commit to:

- Engagement with DfE through attendance at regular policy design workshops, forums and 1:1 meetings
- Provide access to frontline social workers
- Take an active role in the design and testing process
- Periodic review meetings with the LA DCS

There will initially be £50,000 of grant funding awarded for each Early Adopter LA in line with the engagement requirements of the programme.

There will be further funding confirmed in the coming months for the testing and delivery of some early policy and implementation models in Early Adopters. We expect to be able to share more information about the level and objectives of the delivery funding by the interview stage of the EOI. This will include the opportunity for LAs to discuss and shape these requirements in discussion with DfE.

As a number of the workshops will involve in person attendance at a range of DfE sites, reasonable travel expenses will be reimbursed in line with DfE expenses policies.

Funding for future financial years will be confirmed in due course.

### **Who can submit an EOI**

LAs that are delivering a structured, enhanced early career support offer that extends beyond the first twelve months of a children and family social worker's career, may submit an EOI application for consideration.

LAs can only submit one EOI application on behalf of their own organisation.

Applications will be considered from LAs who work within formal or informal partnerships; however, the application should be submitted from a lead LA who is submitting on behalf of a collaboration involving more than one LA. The lead LA will be responsible for managing the funding and resource capacity to work with the department.

### **Who is eligible to become an Early Adopter**

We're focusing on learning from extended early career programmes that have been running for a minimum of two years. We recommend that LAs only submit an EOI if they are confident in answering yes to the following questions:

- Are you an Outstanding, Good or Requires Improvement Ofsted rated LA?
- Do you currently deliver an extended offer for social workers beyond the first year?
- Have you been delivering your extended provision for at least two years?
- Do you have sufficient resource that would enable you to effectively work with the Department?
- Are you confident that participation in this programme will not be detrimental to the delivery of other work that you currently do?

**Please note – LAs that are selected for the Families First for Children pathfinder will not be eligible to join the first cohort of ECF Early Adopters.**

## Funding

Early Adopter LAs will have access to funding under section 46 of the Children and Social Work Act 2017, specifically sub-section (1)(a), to ensure adequate provision is made for social work training. Funding will cover the engagement of LAs in the programme design: in the FY 23/24 this will initially be £50k. There will also be further funding confirmed in the coming months for the testing and delivery of some elements of the proposed ECF programme. We expect that LAs will work alongside DfE until the ECF programme is rolled out nationally: funding for future financial years will be confirmed in due course.

The purpose of this funding is to support engagement with the Department, and partners, in the design of the ECF. It will enable us to learn from what is already working in the sector, and test and evaluate different approaches to better understand the deliverability of the ECF ahead of a national rollout of the ECF programme.

LAs can spend this grant to support costs associated with meeting these activities.

Funding will be paid in arrears based on delivery against the agreed terms and payments will be staged throughout the length of the programme, subject to the provisions of the DfE [General Grant Terms and Conditions](#).

# Application process

## How to apply

The application period for will open from **7 March 2023** and will close at **midday on 31 March 2023**. The DfE must receive all completed applications by email by the deadline and will not be able to consider applications that miss this deadline.

Key dates and deadlines for the application process are set out in the table below.

Milestones	Dates
Expression of Interest (EOI) launched via gov.uk	Early March
Early Adopter information session (recorded)	16 March 2023
EOI opens	7 March 2023
EOI closes	31 March 2023
Assessment of EOI applications	April 2023
Interviews taking place	From W/c 17 April until early May 2023
Decision announced	Mid/late May 2023

If you are interested in attending, or would like a recording of, the online Early Adopter info session 11-12pm on 16<sup>th</sup> March, please contact [SocialWork.ECF@education.gov.uk](mailto:SocialWork.ECF@education.gov.uk).

## Completing your application

Please complete the accompanying EOI application form. Further information and prompts have been provided for each question.

Some sections will require accompanying text to support your response and have stated word limits. Please ensure that you adhere to these, as your response beyond the word limit will not be considered. Please include the total number of words for each section at the bottom of each text box.

**All sections are mandatory and must be completed for your application to be accepted.**



## Submitting your application

Please email a single Word or PDF version of your completed application to [SocialWork.ECF@education.gov.uk](mailto:SocialWork.ECF@education.gov.uk).

Submission should be made from a recognised LA email address and should include '**LA name**' followed by '**ECF – Early Adopters EOI**' in the email "subject" field when submitting your application.

## Assessing the application and next steps

The selection process will aim to identify a range of LAs to take part in the programme based upon the following essential and desirable criteria:

### Essential

- The LA is currently delivering an extended ASYE offer and have been doing so for two years or more.
- The LA is rated Good, Outstanding or Requires Improvement
- Evidence of the LA's capacity, capability and expertise to take part in the programme. (this will be assessed across the application and will be explored in depth if invited to interview).
- Ability to work collaboratively and have the flexibility and preparedness to adapt to changing priorities as they arise and adopt new tools and approaches in stages from September 2023 onwards.

**Please note – LAs that are selected for the Families First for Children pathfinder will not be eligible to join the first cohort of ECF Early Adopters programme.**

In the event that more than 10 LAs meet the essential criteria, we will use the desirable criteria set out below to assess applications for shortlisting and appointment decisions.

### Desirable

- Broad and deep early career offer that will extend the knowledge and understanding of the ECF policy development team.
- Have social workers who have completed the LA's extended offer.
- Extended programme and workforce data which can evidence the impact the offer is having.
- Targeted support for social workers with protected characteristics.
- Diversity of LA characteristics across the Early Adopter cohort, including a geographical spread across regions.

## Selection process

We are looking for a **maximum of 10 LAs** to take part in the programme. There are two stages to the selection process: application and interview.

Applications will be initially assessed based on: Ofsted rating; whether the LA is currently delivering extended early careers offer (and the length of time this has been established) and adequate evidence of their capacity, capability and expertise to take part in the programme.

- **Step 1:** Written bids will be assessed on essential criteria relating to Ofsted, confirmation of delivery of an extended offer, and the minimum length of time the programme has been established. All bids that meet the essential criteria, will pass to step 2.
- **Step 2:** Bids will be assessed on the strength of evidence provided showing the LA's capacity, capability and expertise to take part in the programme. All bids that meet this criteria and have answered all questions, will pass to step 3.
- **Step 3:** Bids with the strongest evidence provided in response to the questions on the application form will be invited to interview. We will interview a maximum of 15 LAs.

## Key information to include within the application

The application will assess the strength of evidence you can provide for your enhanced early career support that extends beyond the first twelve months, the length of time you have been delivering the extended support, and the capacity, capability and expertise of the LA. The essential criteria as set out in section 3a of the application form, will be scored on a pass/fail. Responses to the following questions in section 3b, will be scored out of a maximum of 4 points, based on the strength of evidence provided:

- **Background of LA programme (4 points):**
  - How established is your extended programme of work?
  - What year did it start?
  - What were the reasons that you chose to develop the programme beyond the ASYE?
- **Content and Structure of Offer (4 points):**
  - What is your extended offer of support and development for early career social workers? Please give information on the programme content and delivery methods.
- **Size of the programme (not scored):**
  - How many social workers are currently going through your extended programme, and do you have any data you could share?
  - How many cohorts have completed it to date?
  - How many newly qualified social workers do you usually recruit each year?
- **Impact of the programme (not scored):**
  - Do you have a robust system for collecting recruitment, completion, and attrition data from your extended early career programme?
  - Do you collect any qualitative data? What do you do with this data?
  - How does the data inform your programme development?
  - What evidence do you have of impact of support for social workers with protected characteristics?
- **Capacity to engage as an Early Adopter LA (4 points):**

- Set out your existing capacity and capability which will enable you to effectively participate in the programme alongside other commitments.
- Who would lead on the engagement and design work with the Department? (name, job role/expertise they will bring to the programme).

## **The assessment panel**

Applications received will be evaluated by an assessment panel within DfE. All applicants will be notified in writing of the outcome.

## **Application outcome**

The bidding officer from each LA will be notified whether they have been shortlisted for interview via email in early April 2023. Shortlisted LAs will be invited to attend an online interview which will include a presentation on their programme and a number of questions including some relating to their workforce data and the capacity of the LA to work with the Department as an ECF Early Adopter.

The criteria above (see page 9) will be used to decide which LAs will be appointed as Early Adopters. Appointed LAs will be issued with a grant funding agreement that will set out the terms and conditions of the grant. This should be agreed and signed by the Director of Children's Services or equivalent in the organisation.

For those LAs that are not successful at application or interview, or that do not meet the EOI criteria, there will be other ways they can engage with the development of the ECF beyond being an Early Adopter in cohort 1.

In addition to working with Early Adopters, we are planning workshop sessions to take place over the coming weeks which will focus on initial reactions and requirements of local authorities to support the implementation of the ECF as described in the Stable Homes, Built on Love: Implementation Strategy. Should you wish to register your interest in being involved in one of these workshops please contact

[SocialWork.ECF@education.gov.uk](mailto:SocialWork.ECF@education.gov.uk).



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