Developing a Restorative Approach in Vermont

Phase One Report, 2nd April 2026

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1.Introduction

This report is not intended to be like the familiar reviews of Child welfare and Youth Justice services. In contrast, this report starts from the assumption that expertise in Child Welfare Services sits inside and around the organisation. The insights, analysis and understanding of complexities, risks, strategic trade-offs, strengths, areas for improvement and priorities, are best generated and understood from the perspective of the people most affected by the work. Such an approach draws from practitioners working day-in-day-out, with children, youth and families, their team managers, District and Regional managers, senior executives and of course, the children, young people, families and communities they serve. Therefore, the analysis, insights and ways forward have been gathered collaboratively, drawing on the knowledge, skills and aspirations of those closest to the realities of child welfare and youth justice work.

The Vermont Department for Children and Families' (DCF) aims to foster the healthy development, safety, well-being, and self-sufficiency of Vermonters. The Family Services Division (FSD) vision, is that Vermont's children and youth live free from abuse, neglect, and youth offending, in resilient families that are supported and valued by their communities.

FSD's mission is to engage families, foster and kin caregivers, partner agencies and the community to meet those aims. FSD is committed to supporting its staff and caregivers in the work they do *with* children, youth, service providers, caregivers, and families as well as create positive worksite cultures and environments within each FSD District Office across the State.

This report sets out how a commissioned piece of development work focussed on how the State of Vermont might undertake and embed a *Restorative approach* in its policies and practices. A restorative approach is fundamentally aimed at building, maintaining and where needed, repairing relationships and relational conditions to improve outcomes for children, young people, families and communities. The work recognises that healthy, constructive, inclusive and just relations are at the heart of children and young people's health, safety and wellbeing.

This describes the progress made to date in Vermont Children and Families Services, in embedding this relational restorative approach in its practices, policies, partnerships and organisational culture and leadership, but at a local, institutional and statewide level.

2. Background

A team comprised of Paul Nixon Independent social worker, Professor Jennifer Llewellyn, Schulich School of Law, Dalhousie University and Dr Gale Burford previously University of Vermont are supporting, advising and learning from Vermont FSD leaders, managers, practitioners and partners about strategies, practices, policies, process and structures, that enable a restorative approach to grow in Vermont.

The goal from the outset has been to take a restorative approach grounded in *restorative principles* in this change and development process itself to encourage strong partnerships, inclusion, participation, voice and insights of people across the agency and local ownership and leadership of this change.

To facilitate this work a multi-agency *Restorative Advisory Panel (RAP) was established* to build and strengthen connections and knowledge needed to help advise and support leaders and practitioners across Vermont, in establishing and sustaining a restorative approach to practice and decision making.

Vermont is seeking to grow this relational restorative approach to practice and partnerships across the state: with families and communities, government and community organisations, courts and other key agencies like Health, Police and Schools working together to improve outcomes for children and young people in Vermont.

Guiding Restorative Principles

The project has been supporting the Vermont FSD to develop a *Restorative Approach* to its change and improvement work – bringing a relational lens and way of looking at and thinking about change - through attention to connections and authentic partnerships.

The key principles and values guide taking a Restorative approach are:

1. **Relationally focused:** attention to interconnection seeking to understanding and promote just and fair relations between individuals, groups and communities
2. **Comprehensive and holistic:** considers histories, contexts and causes of harm and its impacts
3. **Inclusive and participatory:** ensuring those most affected, are centrally involved in decision making. That our approach is culturally responsive, trauma-informed, focused on participant safety, well-being and inclusion.
4. **Responsive:** Contextual, flexible practice, accessible, efficient and effective processes, informed by data and knowledge
5. **Focused on promoting individual and collective accountability & responsibility:** bring people together to make decisions, building relationship and understanding
6. **Collaborative and non-adversarial:** among parties involved and among system/community agencies.
7. **Forward-focused:** educational, solution-oriented, preventive, and proactive.[1]

Staff in Vermont FSD and in the RAP have reported they want to grow a restorative approach in an *incremental* and *sustainable* way. The project has sought to take a restorative approach in its development, engaging a wide range of staff and agencies, with the intention that over time, it will become the central feature of Vermont's day-to-day practice, partnerships, thinking and culture.

To achieve this goal, a key set of processes have been undertaken between October 2024 and March 2026, seeking to support, engage, promote, encourage and build capacity for a restorative approach across FSD. Engagement in these processes has been a key achievement and outcome in and of itself as well as being key to the development and further development and growth of this approach within FSD and with children and youth and their families and communities in Vermont.

The way of working explicitly sought to engage with the leaders at various levels in the organization in a collaborative and capacity building way. This was done by taking a restorative approach in real time, supporting restorative ways of thinking and strategizing with leaders in this work. As consultants to the project, we have not aimed to assess, judge and recommend, but to support learning and action in both some of the project processes and outcomes. We have done this deliberately in collaboration with leaders because ultimately this is their change work to do, not ours to do for them. Leadership has been evident for this relational change in many places, both inside and outside the organisation.

Summary of Key Restorative Development Plan 2024 -25

[1] These are drawn from Llewellyn's account of a relational approach grounded in relational theory for further reading see: Jennifer J. Llewellyn, Bruce P. Archibald, Don Clairmont, and Diane Crocker, "Imagining Success for a Restorative Approach to Justice: Implications for Measurement and Evaluation" (2013) 36:2 Dal LJ 281 online at: https://digitalcommons.schulichlaw.dal.ca/dlj/vol36/iss2/2/; Jennifer J Llewellyn, "Transforming Restorative Justice" (2021) 4:3 Intl J Restorative Justice 374 online at: https://digitalcommons.schulichlaw.dal.ca/scholarly_works/1422/.

a) Engagement, training and awareness-raising with all staff
b) Evaluation of current state of Restorative work in Vermont
c) Self-assessment – qualitative review and analysis with staff
d) Review of organizational policy, procedures & law
e) Review of data and evidence
f) Establishment and initial work of the multi-agency RAP – *Restorative Advisory Panel*
g) Facilitation and development of District Restorative Action Plans
h) Planning for local and Statewide innovations, change & improvement priorities

3. Early Engagement, Training and Consultations

The engagement of FSD staff managers and leaders began in earnest in October 2024, this involved wide groups of staff in different parts of FSD, who would be leading and practising restorative work across the State and be directly impacted by these changes.
Large groups of staff from across the strategic centre of the organisation at the Waterbury HQ, within a wide range of disciplines, were engaged in assessment conversations about how they might be able to build and improve the quality of working in relationships and therefore improve the quality of outcomes in Vermont.

From January to June 2025 there was an extensive online engagement with staff across the whole state, in the regions and districts providing training workshops, knowledge and awareness raising about a Restorative approach and its theories and practices, followed by structured engagements in a Restorative Self-Assessment Process.

4. Restorative Self-Assessment Process

The self-assessment process was designed to draw out local expertise, knowledge, insights and experience related to the current state of practice, partnerships, policy, leadership and organisational culture in Vermont. This set a foundational understanding of the existing relational strengths that could be built on, and about what needed to be shifted or improved.

The Year I statewide self-assessment process was designed to contain both *challenge and support*, encouraging critical analysis, reflection and insights and building understanding, ownership and investment in change. It was conceptually organized around three interlocking domains (Practice, Partnerships, Organisational culture & Leadership) as a basis for group reflection. Staff across all levels participated in circles to share knowledge and insights and generate ideas for change. A guiding principle of restorative a restorative approach is to be inclusive and participatory in processes. This is achieved by doing things in partnership 'with' people, not 'to' or 'for' them and this principle was reflected in the approach to these discussions.

The process itself was thus designed to strengthen ownership and insights into a restorative approach at both state, district and practice levels to help support change. Across districts, staff and leaders expressed a strong commitment to children, youth and families and to improving how work is done together. Through the engagement of leaders, managers and practitioners across FSD, the intersection and overlaps among the three domains that align with Vermont's unique practice contexts, and legal and policy guidance.

The relational aspects of building an approach in Vermont that strengthens understanding and partnerships between different groups, means that staff have been invited to think and act *restoratively* at all levels. This requires thinking and acting *systemically,* understanding in greater depth the complexity associated with good outcomes for children, youth, and families, and how one set of relationships affects another. Leadership, in all its forms can shape organisational culture, which in turn can shape practice culture. These domains do not operate or function in isolation, they intersect, with powerful reciprocal impacts on each other.

Consultations with staff during the training and learning phases of the work highlighted different group and team interest in changing and influencing all of these domains, as they were understood in terms of

their direct and/or indirect impacts on quality of care and outcomes for children, young people, families and communities.
Learning was drawn from: (i) district self-assessment meetings and notes structured around three domains—Practice with children, families and communities; Partnerships; and Organisational culture and leadership; (ii) an interim mapping and initial review of laws, policies, rules and public reports relevant to Family Services Division (FSD) work; and (iii) discussions with district managers, practice leaders, central office leaders and partners.

Document inputs included Vermont statutes and FSD policies in force, the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) Round 4 Statewide Assessment and Final Report, the Child & Family Services Plan (CFSP) 2025–2029, district indicator decks and face-to-face contact trend materials. Internal meeting notes and district syntheses informed the analysis of practice themes.

The following reports were presented to FSD in October 2025 summarizing the progress of the restorative work in Vermont that have set out the detail of work plans, and their implementation. The following reports have been presented to FSD in October 2025;

a) Interim Law & Policy Mapping and Initial Review – Year 1 Vermont Child & Family Services: Paul Nixon, Jennifer Llewellyn and Gale Burford September 2025
b) Preliminary District-by-District Synthesis – Vermont Restorative Approach Project
c) State-Level Thematic Synthesis – Vermont Restorative Approach Project
d) Developing a Restorative Approach in Vermont Child & Family Services Year-1 Learning Report

This report provides an overview of the work to date and describes the next steps in embedding this work for the future. Throughout the engagement a series of key themes, concepts, suggested policy and practice changes and have emerged and informed ongoing re-examination of partnerships and culture for how these areas might change. Emergent patterns in practice, partnerships and organisational culture that need attention, rethinking and a renewed focus have revealed the need to create a shared restorative (relational) language, thinking, practices, understandings and behaviours.

Throughout the process of the Review, a series of high-level themes have emerged that direct our attention to key areas for change. These themes speak to factors and elements that shape and define organisational culture; how we think, talk, act, engage, behave – '*how we do things around here!*' They speak to key aspect of what defines the system of care and how it works.

Overview of themes from the Restorative Review

1.Time and face to face contact -most frequent need for more face-to-face person time with children, families and colleagues.
2. **Language and meaning** - words used in policy and practice shape behavior and perception. Need a language that conveys collaboration and shared responsibility.
3. **Clarity and confidence** Uncertainty about structures, roles, parameters contribute to inconsistency. Clear expectations build confidence.
4. **Curiosity and communication -** more curious conversations between professionals and with families
5. **Learning and connection** - teams value opportunities to come together to learn, reflect, and strengthen relationships

Key messages from Restorative Review from the Districts engagements

In the Restorative Review, the development process, training and the self-assessment there where very high levels of engagement from a wide range of Central Office and District staff including many practitioners, administrative staff, Teams leaders, District Managers and often some other interagency representatives too.

Throughout these engagements, including comprehensive self-assessments, all relevant details have been thoroughly reviewed. These are some of the key messages, insights, analysis and recommendations for change and development, by those directly involved in practice, partnerships and organisational culture and leadership.

1.Engagement, participation, voice of children & young people

a) A common concern in all the engagements with staff was a lack of face-to-face time with children and young people. Staff were frequently required to make complex decisions about children's lives without knowing them well or having a more complete understanding their wishes and feelings.

b) There was an apparent trade-off between agency systems, processes and bureaucracy demanding time and attention over time with children, insufficient resources and capacity being cited as the obstacle.

c) Creating more face-to-face contact with children and young people will require clearer priorities, practice standards, capacity and training and leadership.

d) A Children and Young People's group with *Lived Experience* of the system would bring advocacy, training, advice and challenge and support to the system.

e) Staff talked about the need for a culture of *engagement and feedback* where they could learn more and improve practice through getting more systematic feedback from children, families, communities about the quality of their practice and services.

2. Family engagement, decision-making and participation

a) Family engagement practices are highly varied often depending on the individual worker or team, that bring different expectations and understandings of what engagement, partnership and participation should look like. Safety Planning included different approaches, ranging from creative partnerships to families who were clearly having their *participation managed* within a bureaucratic process.

b) There were significant differences and uncertainty about information sharing laws, policies and practices. Sharing information is a prerequisite to authentic partnerships with families and other agencies, but different assumptions and expectations were operating in day-to-day practice.

c) The narrow and proceduralist nature of Child Protection processes often meant that there was less space for negotiation and sharing power with families, or uncertainty in engaging children and their families, in decision making processes.

d) Family Group Conferencing drew significant support from Vermont staff, with many reporting positive, practical experiences involving families in decision-making and wanting to return to Family Conferencing practices in Vermont.

e) Engaging kinship networks and finding wider family and friends, was seen as a key area to improve practice and resources, recognizing this takes time, focus and trust and a more responsive and bespoke policy and practice framework for kinship care.

f) Parental of Family Advocacy Groups were seen as one way of providing advocacy, voice and influence to supporting changes in practice and the development more inclusive models of family engagement.

3. Interagency partnerships and working together

a) A common pattern reported was that Inter-agency partnerships were highly variable and often lacked local structure and leadership. Indeed, in different parts of Vermont, the same agency was described as *the best and worst partner* based on local culture and leadership.

b) It was apparent in the analysis of frontline staff, that there was a shortage of *joined up* Strategic Interagency Governance and leadership both at a Statewide and Regional level on tackling significant shared problems around families: like mental illness, domestic violence, drug and alcohol issues, behavior problems with children and young, neglect, homelessness and the impact racism and poverty.

c) There was significant concern about the lack of clear *Integrated Multi-agency Prevention Strategy* that has led to inadequate preventive, relevant and timely support and services for children and families facing serious mental health, substance abuse, behavioural, and domestic violence issues. Contemporary patterns in child abuse and neglect and youth offending reveal most often complex and multi-faceted needs and risks and therefore, require a comprehensive and integrated interagency strategic and operational response.

d) Most Districts wanted to improve understanding, communication, working together with other agencies and integrate support and services around families in more integrated and holistic ways.

e) There were concerns about pressure from other agencies to take children into care or custody, without those agencies understanding the risks of this course of action to children. There was a needed improve understanding and involvement in decision making, that could come from education, research and training to recognise that placing children in care or custody carries its own significant risks, which must be weighed and balanced against other risks.

f) Information sharing between agencies was highly variable, with many staff reporting that law, policy and practice in this area was unclear and complex, and they were uncertain what to implement in day-to-day practice. Staff were looking for more trust and cooperation between agencies, greater clarity and simplicity about what the law and policy requires, and to improve information sharing to improve partnerships; conversations between agencies and with children and families being seen as the richest form of data sharing.

g) In both work with families, communities and other agencies, staff were keen to develop stronger working relationships, better mutual understanding, trust and information sharing that would help collaboration and ultimately better outcomes for children and young people.

4. Practice approach

a) The practice approach in Vermont should be more explicitly articulated though a single, simple, integrated ***Practice Framework*** that articulates theories, values, principles and evidence, that will inform and guide the way practice should happen with children and families.

b) The framework should be Restorative and integrate key relational principles and theories of practice that are:

- Child centered and family focused
- Strengths based
- Trauma informed
- Culturally Responsive and Anti-Racist
- Restorative

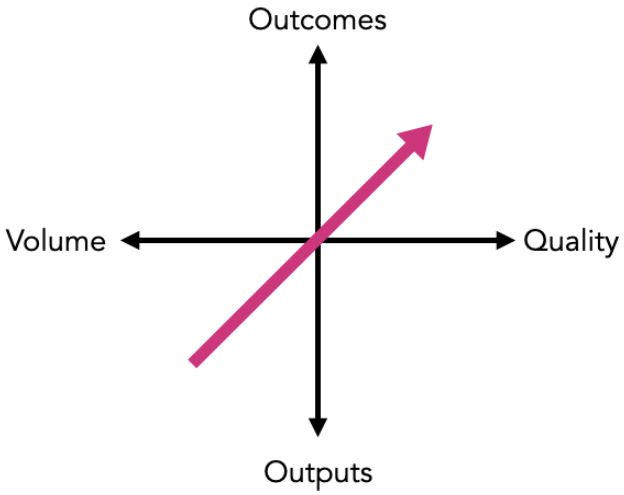
c) **Supervision** was regarded as central to quality practice and providing an essential professional process and relationships, that enabled practitioners to practice well. It had a significant influence on practitioners' work experience, sense of support, a place for reflection and learning. The core functions of supervision – *management, development, support and*

alignment with the organization - were not well articulated in teams and day to day practice, and many teams felt this was an area for improvement.

5. Quality Assurance, Data and evidence

a) The teams articulated the need for stronger and more structured client feedback processes, so they could have data that better informed them about client outcomes and the quality of the client's experience. A shift was needed from tracking organizational output, volume and speed, to focusing on measures of client quality experience and outcomes. (See figure 1)

Figure 1. Shifting the Focus of Data reporting to improve outcomes and quality



b) Staff talked about the need for a culture of *engagement and feedback* where they could learn more and improve practice, through getting more systematic feedback from children, families, communities, about the quality of their practice and the impact of services and supports on outcomes for children and families.

c) The self-assessment process often highlighted a greater need for data on evidence-based practices and strategies. Staff would like more accessible access to data, knowledge and research in accessible formats, about *what works* in Child Protection and Youth Justice.

d) There was an appetite for getting reliable, meaningful and usable data down to team level, to help drive understanding and performance and improve insights and knowledge at team level

6. Workforce Development and skills

a) There was a strong consensus on the importance of diversifying the workforce in terms of professional skills and areas of specialization to better address the complex and evolving needs and risks within families. The prevailing patterns of needs have shifted to neglect and emotional abuse. Families then often require input from mental health, addictions services and behavioral services, with help and support coming far too late for most families to be timely or useful. Staff reported significant difficulty in getting mental health and addictions services, or behavioral support involved.

b) Teams talked about a wish to grow their skills and confidence in communicating with children, dealing with conflict and resistance from families and other agencies, better and clearer

information sharing, improving family engagement and creating lasting change with families in collaborative ways.

c) Growing emerging leaders in the organization was a concept that appeared through questions about change and restorative leadership. Consideration needs to be given to how the organization can retain, grow and develop leaders internally, to maintain a sustainable and confident workforce and hold on to its important institutional knowledge.

7. Strategy, Policy and procedures

a) There is a clear desire for greater alignment between stated policy intent and how policy is experienced in day-to-day work. Uncertainty about the boundaries of new models of practice has created hesitation and variation. The use of terms such as 'escalation' and 'risk' can unintentionally drive reactive responses and impact how families are perceived.

b) Staff consistently expressed the need for clearer parameters and more consistent guidance to ensure that policies enable, rather than constrain restorative ways of working. Reinforcing language that reflects shared values, such as wellbeing and partnership, would help to build coherence across levels of the system.

c) Frontline practitioners discussed a lack of clarity about the overarching Strategy of FSD. While they understood procedures and performance management systems, they found it hard to articulate a single integrated strategy that was driving the work and direction of the department. Developing a single integrated *Prevention Strategy* for children and young people, would help galvanize and focus the intention and direction of the department. It would help to organize its improvement and reform objectives and priorities, in a single integrated mainframe of Prevention of Harm to children and young people and effective strategies in responding to and preventing Youth Offending. This would help children and young people in a more intentional and integrated way, improve their wellbeing, safety, resilience and reduce the risk of offending, by creating better outcomes for children and young people.

d) Prevention work is inherently restorative because it requires authentic and constructive relations and partnerships to be effective. Using a restorative framework Vermont FSD could help articulate and instigate stronger partnerships between children and young people, families, communities, government and non-government agencies, the courts and the business community in Vermont.

e) A common concern was the inconsistency, both operationally and strategically, of interagency partnerships and working together. There was a desire for a more integrated view and response to the needs of children and families. The lack of strong interagency strategy, based on an integrated analysis of children's needs and risks, a shared data set and a collectively agreed set of priorities, is creating a vacuum for interagency collaborations. This in turn produces unhelpful or undermining conditions for more joined up services and responses to the needs of children, and is playing out at both a statewide and regional level.

f) Child Protection was seen as often stuck in a reactive, procedural and risk averse position. A common concern was that child protection work had become over proceduralized, narrow, reactive and overloaded. Too many families were being drawn into the child protection system, with most then receiving no help. The procedural, highly regulated and legalistic nature of Child Protection systems mean professionals and families get caught up in processes, where there was little space for participants and relational work in the systems are losing sight of children's needs.

g) The expansion and advocacy for kinship care as the preferred placement option for children unable to reside with their parents, was articulated as a very important outcome throughout the Districts. Staff were strongly behind the concept of kinship care being developed as a

Distinct Service type, ranging from being an early family support respite option, right through to permanency and leaving care options. Currently kinship care policy sits largely within either informal support arrangements of foster care models. Kincare needs its own services, practices and supports, because the profile of kinship caregivers is different to foster carers the way placements come about are different, the change in family relationships and roles is different and the support needs of these placements is different.

h) Safety Culture for staff is well embedded and is creating stability and security. It was clear from spending time with staff, listening to their concerns and hearing about their day-to-day working practices, that a safety culture for staff had been successfully implemented and was making a significant difference in terms of staff stress, wellbeing, belonging and safety.

8. Leadership

a) The leadership support, across all levels of the organization, for a developing a Restorative approach across Vermont has been excellent. Since initial engagement with senior leaders and managers at the strategic centre, who have been very enabling and supportive, there has followed an ongoing programme of engagement, training, self-assessment and the development of both Statewide and local District Action Plans to create lasting change.

b) There has been strong appetite for local and regional leadership with the restorative work, to create change at different speeds, dependent on local needs and priorities and local capacity and capability. The Operational Managers and District managers have shown excellent regional and district leadership, building staff ownership, understanding and commitment to local leadership, innovation and change. FSD can manage change locally and statewide at different speeds, based on needs and local leadership and context. This is a clear Restorative principle, '*move power and responsibility to the people most affected*', being actioned in day-to-day leadership.

c) Creating leadership at different levels of the organisation, is embodying strong restorative principles, in building this change process, growing commitment to devolving power and intentionally supporting the leadership in the Districts. Distributing power creates the right relational conditions required for subsidiarity - such that local people as have the power needed to participate fully and responsibly in decision-making, about the issues and needs that they are the closest to.

d) The strategic centre and senior executives have developed statewide plans for change and improvement, while at the same time, Operational and Regional managers can create change at a local level, driving local initiatives and building local partnerships. Change can happen at different speeds depending on Statewide, Regional and District priorities, timing, capacity and capability.

e) Creating the right relational conditions for a restorative approach means creating support to practice staff, challenge to the orthodoxy, and space to practice and be relational. This means providing enabling polices, creating diffuse leadership, working proactively on interagency conflicts, and understanding and building a new consensus on how service work together and understand different leadership roles and mutual responsibilities.

6. District Action Plans

a) Restorative principles and local ownership and leadership

The District Action Plans were designed to devolve power, responsibility and leadership to the local Districts enabling them to focus on their local strengths, interests, needs and priorities. The core restorative principled commitment to inclusion and participation aligned with the commitment to

subsidiarity allows power, responsibility and decision-making to be exercised by those most affected and in true partnership to those others closest to the problem or need.

The concept was taken up with enthusiasm at a District level with local leaders taking a key role in helping their staff with support, engage in a structured process of a Restorative Self-Assessment with the whole staff group. This led to a greater understanding and ownership within the whole staff group of the work they were doing that was having a positive impact on outcomes for children, but also identifying what needed to be improved and changed locally.

This method was grounded in relational theory and restorative principles, rather than an external expert driven model, which imposes of solutions, from outside, based on a forensic examination and judgements and recommendations. The insight, knowledge and local wisdom teams held, flows from the people closest to the needs and problems, identifying what needs to change. This in turn, creates a strong sense of agency, ownership, understanding and commitment to a locally owned change process.

Teams involved in the Self-Assessment process understand more deeply, ***why*** things need to change, ***how*** that change will take place, and ***what*** will it look like and their role is in that change.

During and after the Self-Assessment process, local plans were developed collaboratively by local teams. It was the work of the District Managers, to get sign-off approval on the District Action Plans, to ensure they aligned with the overall direction, laws and policies of FSD, but the plans were locally designed, owned and driven, with arrangements in place to monitor how they were developing.

Below are some examples of key improvement plans, innovations and changes decided locally. They have been organised thematically, to give an overview of local priorities and direction. Attached also are the District Action Plans for completeness which will be implemented and reviewed over the forthcoming year 2026. (See appendix 1).

b) Thematic overview of Restorative District Action Plans

'*Our work is relational - with each other, our clients, our foster parents, our community and State partners. Without transparent and collaborative relationships, we cannot do the work we need to do to keep kids and families safe and also maintain a healthy/safe workforce*'

(Opening Statement in one VT District Action Plan - Vermont 2025)

1.Practice

Practice related shifts were among the strongest and most detailed themes. Staff described wanting to spend more time with children and families, building relationships and understanding their context. There is a strong sense that professional anxiety sometimes drives escalation and that more time for conversation, both with families and between professionals, could prevent unnecessary movement through the system. Workers emphasised the value of using practical tools to structure conversations and help families participate meaningfully. The overarching practice priority is to create the conditions (time, space, and clarity) for restorative, relationship-centred work.

Key themes that emerged around practice included;

- Lack of face to face time with children and families and the need to understand why this is?
- Need for greater integration of a Relational / Restorative approach into practice
- Greater clarity and support on how a restorative practice model can manage conflicts, resistance and improve client engagement in a change process
- Diversifying the skills and knowledge in the workforce to respond more directly to different needs and risks – Domestic violence, Mental illness, Drug and Alcohol addictions, behaviour management problems.
- Improve the quality of supervision to enhance the quality of practice
- Family engagement practices and Family Group Conferences should be developed further

- Stronger practice partnerships with Indigenous Groups and non-government community agencies

Practice - examples of agreed and written actions in District Action plans

- 'To strengthen and maintain cultural connections for children and families with Abenaki heritage as well as other children served by their community programs'.
- 'We will start to build effective partnerships with other services (both Government and Non-Government) to improve information sharing, integrated assessments, and service responses to meet family's needs in more holistic, coordinated and integrated ways'
- 'We will embed a community mental health employee into the District office to provide peer support to families.'
- 'Train and develop staff skills in having difficult conversations'
- 'Elevate the voices of parents, youth, and children as well as increase positive collaboration with families and community partners'
- 'Increase quality of monthly face to face time with children we work with. This is not only for children in DCF custody but for all case types'
- 'Developing and refining operating agreements to ensure they are not just theoretical but actively integrated into daily practices'
- 'Co- create standard operating procedures for when a family identifies as having Abenaki heritage or connections to ensure we keep them connected to their cultural community from the start'
- 'A full assessment of the child's life and their multiple relationships is essential in providing high quality services and their voices to be heard in the process'
- 'Share information with Staff on The Abenaki cultural community center & what supports are available to children & families (food shelf, afterschool programming, community classes & groups)'
- 'Over time, FSW written work will reflect an increase in shared power with families'
- 'Provide ongoing professional development opportunities to deepen understanding and skills in restorative approaches'
- 'Organize monthly case review sessions followed by feedback meetings to discuss outcomes and insights.'
- 'Reintroducing Family Group Conferencing to our practice: educating staff about FGC, exploring facilitation, tracking outcomes'
- 'Training and education for staff on the value of kinship caregivers'
- 'Reflective sessions to identify best practices and areas needing attention, ensuring alignment with restorative principles'
- 'We want to strengthen family "buy-in" by amplifying their voices in case planning. And put the family in the center of making their own changes'
- 'Conduct comprehensive training sessions on restorative practices for all district staff, emphasizing their application in child welfare and youth justice contexts.'
- 'Director will continue to work to meet with a broad array of community partners, including mental health practitioners, law enforcement, and schools'
- 'Local FSD managers will meet regularly with stakeholders where communication remains a challenge.'
- 'keep children placed in the same town as their school, community and connections is so important. Placing them with their extended family members is optimal, keeping them within their natural family system.'

2. Partnerships

Partnerships were identified as a major area of importance and opportunity. Many teams highlighted the need for stronger connection and communication across services, especially between social work,

health, and education and community and non-government organisations. There is a shared recognition that siloed working and the habit of handing over concerns rather than holding them collaboratively weakens both confidence and outcomes. Staff suggested joint learning events, shared tools, and a renewed shared vision to strengthen multi-agency relationships. A consistent message is that trust and understanding grow through direct, repeated interaction—not just through process or structure.

Districts described mixed relationships with schools, community providers and law enforcement in many localities, as well as the benefits of multidisciplinary consultation for complex decisions. Variability across districts was noted, together with a desire for more consistent expectations and tools for joint planning, information-sharing with clarity about roles, and shared review of learning after critical events.

Restorative Partnerships – examples of key actions & plans

- 'To restore the partnership with the Abenaki Nation of Missisquoi'
- 'Improved communication between community partners'
- 'Greater understanding of local roles and resources available'
- 'Implement collaboration meetings with community partners to develop relationships and better lines of communication to support families'
- 'Improved transparency during times of limited options'
- 'Increase family and child involvement and reduce the timeline for receiving case plans, to improve the effectiveness and responsiveness of our support services'.
- 'Stronger working relationships with the leadership teams of community partners.'
- 'Planning joint learning opportunities with DCF/CFS partners. Both agencies will identify areas for moving our practice forward.'
- 'Recruiting caregivers & respite providers to provide culturally connected care & support to children from their community.'
- 'Repair relationship with the local mental health agency'
- 'Coordinate with existing partners in care coordination referrals for intensive family support, exploration of kinship relationships and timely and thorough family finding'
- 'Use training and evidence with stakeholder groups, informing and educating others of the focus and supportive evidence behind promoting kinship care.'
- 'Implementation of education through the Leadership Academy Project product.'
- 'Increasing understanding of agency roles. Ongoing education for Community Health staff and DCF staff on how their roles can increase safety in a home and wellbeing in a family.'

3. Leadership and organizational culture .

Organisational Culture & Leadership themes highlighted the importance of leadership visibility and consistency, alongside the need to strengthen trust and communication across all levels. Key themes include: variation in trust and communication with Central Office; balancing federal/state requirements with relational practice; need for clearer decision-making authority; and strong appetite for a restorative approach to leadership.

Staff emphasised the value of supportive supervision and peer learning, and pointed to workload and staffing stability as persistent constraints. There was interest in embedding brief feedback and reason-giving steps into everyday work, routine restorative debriefs after removals or serious incidents, and clearer prompts in supervision and quality assurance that check for participation, shared understanding, and follow-through.

Leadership & organizational culture - examples of District Action plans

- 'Team attend Cultural Competency trainings by Chief Brenda.'

- 'Kinship to have dedicated Resource Team that can be intentional and thoughtful about engaging with kinship resources'
- 'Strengthen the internal culture of team-as-secure-base and expand internal leadership capacities'
- 'Facilitate workshops and activities designed to build trust and psychological safety among team members, encouraging open communication and mutual respect.'
- 'Implement regular team-building exercises to strengthen relationships and foster a sense of community'
- 'Staff meetings will continue to be utilized for office-wide learning opportunities related to best practices in the work. This focus on practices in the restorative milieu'
- 'Encourage leadership to foster an environment conducive to growth and development, focusing on open communication, continuous learning, and constructive feedback'.
- 'CIES Leadership Team pulling recordings as needed to review for quality and learning opportunities'.
- 'Leaders should model restorative practices and support staff in adopting these approaches.'
- 'Continue to maintain the data about the short-term ED & PD staffing for Central Office.'
- 'Offering debriefs when CIES Leadership Team has deemed appropriate'
- 'Identify and implement strategies to strengthen trust, promote open dialogue and ensure the safety of all team members'
- 'Implement feedback mechanisms to encourage open dialogue and measure the frequency and quality of feedback received.'

A set of all the District Action Plans are attached as appendices to this report.

d) Juvenile Justice - Restorative priorities

The Juvenile Justice Teams gathered collectively at an in-person, face-to-face Statewide forum, to discuss and formulate their key actions plans for taking forward their restorative priorities collectively across the State. These were the key agreed priorities for the State.

1. **Local Juvenile Justice Teams** – more prevention V reaction, Avoiding court system, direct referral to BARJ Community focus and support
2. **Engagement with Schools -** Avoid the need for DCF/Court intervention. Schools not aware of supports available to youth and families. Schools less awareness of underlying issues for youth. High exclusion rates.
3. **Increase Time with Youth –** better decision-making and enabling youth voices to be heard having wider impact by our system.
4. **Victim Voice/Inclusion –** Improve decision making, Victim voice is imperative to healing and repairing harm.
5. **Community Engagement - I**nclusivity, accountability and hope. Youth need more access to community support. Grow restorative community. More clarity and learning opportunities for youth.

7. Statewide Action Plans

In tandem with the creation of 12 local *District Action Plans* the senior executives in FSD at the strategic centre, have designed 4 distinctive *Statewide Action Plans* to help drive change and improvement across the whole state. These reflect statewide concerns for developing a Restorative approach across Vermont.

a) Family Group Conferencing

Family Group Conferencing (FGC) Children, youth, and families are experts in their own lives and know what they need to succeed. Decision-making should be informed by, but not owned by, Family Services staff. Children, youth, and families have better outcomes when they are in charge of the decisions that impact their lives. To achieve this within Family Services, we will implement Family Group Conferencing as a strategy to devolve power to the families, youth, and children we serve

Visioning and planning to offer FGCs will happen initially through a workgroup that includes, but may not be limited to, people from central office, district offices, external consultants, and families.

The goal for implementation is taking what we know from our own experience, what is known nationally and internationally, and creating a bold plan to offer FGCs across Vermont. We acknowledge that this will likely not be a uniform approach in all parts of the state, but will allow for local knowledge and nuance to be applied as we work to find what is most effective in each community. We will be challenging our long-held practices and assumptions about mandated uniformity of services in each district.

The workgroup will codify the underlying restorative values (the why), understand and address real and perceived barriers to implementation, understand and offer support to local districts as plans to roll out FGCs are created, and solidify commitments for how leadership will support shared decision-making in the event of undesirable outcomes.

FSD will know it is working when FGCs are being offered routinely in each district. Also, when each district can describe why FGCs are important, how and when they happen, and how FSD implements and supports the decisions made in those conferences.

b) Kinship Care

Enhancing kinship care is crucial to reducing the negative effects on children entering DCF-FSD custody and improving placement stability and permanency with relatives. When children must be removed from their homes for safety reasons, placing them with relatives or close family friends helps maintain vital connections to their culture, identity, and community. Research shows that such placements are generally less traumatic and provide continuity with familiar adults and environments.

FSD will form workgroups comprising of FSD central office and district staff, community partners, people with experience as kin caregivers, family and youth with lived experience in the FSD system, and other stakeholders to examine policies, practices, funding sources, and other resources to expand kinship placements. These groups will develop kinship-specific support services, identify financial resources to allocate toward kin placement, enhance family finding practices, and revise policies and procedures to prioritize kin placements. Additionally, we will focus on licensing rules, ICPC, and other areas to facilitate placements and remove barriers for kin, while ensuring child safety.
FSD will assess effectiveness by analyzing current data on placements in kinship homes and the stability of these placements and then compare it with data collected after the implementation of the plans to determine if kinship placement and placement stability have increased.

c) Effective practice and engagement with youth beyond parental control

To limit children and youths' involvement with DCF-FSD now and into their adulthood, to lessen the traumatic impacts of the system and aid in facilitating the system of care to practice preventive work that focuses on high-risk youth in their homes, schools, and communities. The system as a whole can better serve the at risk/high risk population and needs to prioritize prevention.

By creating easily accessible tools to promote transformative social work practice for the field and education for community partners/stakeholders by way of those tools and through collaboration. It is imperative to increase our community partnerships to develop resources to provide family systems support that meets the self-identified needs of these children, youth, and families to achieve the goal of limiting DCF-FSD involvement and improving generational family experiences.

Activities to achieve this initiative include:

- Develop workgroup (began in November 2025)
- Revise Case Plan to reflect research on family engaged case planning (draft created in March 2025)
- Development of Family Support Plan, (draft created March 2025)
- Revise Policy 60 to support research and workgroup findings.
- Development of guidance for front end response during screenings for high-risk youth cases, and guidance for localized teaming with community partners.

d) Shared Training and Collaboration Across Youth Serving Contracted Providers & DCF Staff

FSD is intentional that processes and outcomes are improved when they are developed in relationships with others. Trust is built and relationships with colleagues and community partners are strengthened when we spend time together and understand our common values and approaches to working with youth and families. Bringing periodic foundational learning content to the group of FSWs, YDP, Compass, and BARJ providers who are working with the older youth population in Vermont will provide an opportunity to develop relationships across the state around relevant topic areas.

Members of the ASU, in consultation with other DCF staff and contracted partners, will identify specific topic areas the field is interested in learning more about and explore potential subject-matter expert resources who are available to facilitate training. A training schedule will be developed and shared with relevant stakeholders. The ASU will aim for the majority of learning opportunities to happen in person at the Waterbury State Office Complex. DCF will look to leverage no/low-cost opportunities that leverage in-house staff/partner expertise.

The ASU is also exploring the idea of facilitating periodic (perhaps 2-4x/year) virtual meetings for the statewide field to share resources, consult on difficult cases, and build relationships generally. This model could be used as a template for developing local meetings where partners may not already be meeting together.

Topic areas that have been identified for shared training and collaboration include:

- Chronic Absenteeism
- Human Trafficking
- Engage Children and Youth Authentically
- Domestic Violence/Intimate Partner Violence, Healthy Relationships
- Racial equity
- Family engagement and mediation

8. Restorative Advisory Panel (RAP)

The Restorative Advisory Panel (RAP) was designed to enable a wide and diverse group of Non-government, Community and Advocacy groups and individuals to come together, alongside government to provide advice, challenge and support to how Vermont grows its Restorative approach.

The panel is chaired by a Community Service leader with the support of a FSD District manager. Its aim is to promote, support and advise on the development of policies, practices and services, and to help build understanding and knowledge about restorative approaches across the state.

The RAP is still developing, but had already agreed its first area of focus for leadership and change. This work is being instigated and led by members the RAP.

The three areas of priority for advice and development are:

1. **Mapping and reporting back the current state of Restorative approaches**, practices and initiatives across different groups, communities and agencies in Vermont. Seeking to describe their nature, purpose, function and impact, so the RAP can disseminate information about good, established or emerging practice in the state. A restorative map of Vermont would allow the RAP to describe where practice is now and provide advice and support about where perhaps this work could go next. This would of course be evidenced and illuminated by data and stories.

2. **Child and Youth Voice and influence** - this has been a common theme in all the restorative conversations and is deeply reflected in restorative principles - '*give power and responsibility to those most affected*. Children and Young People voice and influence could help change the whole system. The RAP seeking to advocate, promote and encourage systems to enhance child and youth voice in all they do. The aim being identifying the good work already happening and advise on, advocate for, and promote practices and systems that enhance child and youth voice and influence.

3. **Family and community engagement** - this has been a strong theme in all the restorative conversations. Finding out what current methods and practices are, what has worked to effectively and authentically engage family and community in decision making. The RAP would advise and advocate on this issue - drawing attention to current examples of excellence in Vermont and describing the gaps and missing pieces, setting an agenda for change, learning and improvement.

RAP Terms of Reference: The Restorative Advisory Panel (RAP) provides guidance and support for implementing a restorative approach in Vermont.

See terms of reference below

1. Engaging and developing an understanding of the key principles of a restorative approach as they guide the work in Vermont.
2. Supporting restorative practice model and framework development.
3. Supporting and encouraging the development and application of a restorative approach in strategy, policy and practice.
4. Advising on partnerships, knowledge, capability and skills needed for success.
5. Requesting, collecting or advising on restorative data, evaluation, research in Vermont
1. Promoting the participation and voice children, families and community in decision making
2. Promoting a restorative approach across agencies, groups and communities.
3. Promoting and fostering strong partnerships across the agencies, support and encourage conflict resolution
4. Actively communicating and disseminating of knowledge and information on restorative work in VT
5. Sharing learning and knowledge, at least annually to Vermont FSD and other appropriate agencies and stakeholders.

9.Conclusions

This report is intended to describe where the Restorative work in Vermont has developed to date, illustrate the current progress being made and where the focus and attention needs to go next. The energy, thinking, actions and enthusiasm from practitioners and leaders both inside FSD and elsewhere has been outstanding.

There are some clear, forward thinking and innovative ideas for change coming from staff at all levels of the organisation. This change can also be led from different places, at different speeds, both out in the Districts, in partnership with different agencies, community organisations and, at the strategic centre of FSD.

There is a need to enhance the participation and leadership of other groups and agencies in this process, in particular the voices and leadership of children and young people, families and communities and practitioners across a range of agencies and groups in Vermont.

We want to acknowledge, express our thanks and gratitude to all the people involved in this Restorative work, who are seeking to improve relationships across Vermont, resolve conflicts constructively, and help make the State a better place for children and young people to grow up safe, happy, healthy and thriving.