

Children's Safeguarding & Family Support – Cost Improvement Plan

Introduction:

In 2021, the number of CLA by local authorities in England rose to its highest level at 80,850, up 1% on last year and continuing the rise seen in recent years.

The increase was driven by there being slightly more CLA starting during the year than those ceasing. However, both starts and ceasing were down, and monthly figures show that:

- The numbers of CLA starting were consistently lower than we might usually expect throughout the year but were particularly low during periods when national lockdowns or restrictions were in place.
- The numbers of CLA ceasing were similarly affected by the first national lockdown but returned to the levels we might expect from September onwards. This fall is likely to have driven an increase in the average duration of care for those CLA ceasing, which increased by a further 79 days (more than two and half months) compared to last year.
- Another headline of particular interest, suggesting an impact of the pandemic is that the number of CLA who were adopted has fallen 18%, continuing a fall from a peak in 2015. The large decrease this year is likely driven by the impact on court proceedings during the pandemic, where cases progressed more slowly or were paused.
- The proportion of CLA starting in foster care continues to fall, as do CLA starting in placements in the community (which includes independent living). More children have been placed with parents, or other person with parental responsibility or placed in secure units, children's homes and semi-independent living (although much of the increase here is in semi-independent living) and in 'other' placements.
- The current national data collections (SSDA 903 and children in need census) are only just starting to pick up these emerging trends of the needs and circumstances of the growing adolescent population of looked after children, and those on the edge of care. . Specific contemporary issues were cited, such as child sexual exploitation, child criminal exploitation and county lines gangs.
- Within the wider context of increased demand and reduced budgets, rising unit costs, as highlighted in the published section 251 expenditure data, particularly for looked after children, is a substantive issue for children's social care.

In Telford & Wrekin:

- There are round 46,000 people aged 0-19 in the borough, and around 57,500 in the 0-24 age bracket.
- The Borough has a higher proportion of people under 20 (25.2%) compared to the England average of 23.6%.
- As the population of the Borough grows, the number of young people aged 0-24 is set to increase to around 60,200 by 2034 – there is projected to be less young people aged 0-14 (around 600 less) whilst the growth is in those aged 15-24, with a projected increase of 4,300 people in this age group.
- Telford and Wrekin is estimated to have 1,100 children aged 5-10 and 1,500 aged 11-16 with a mental health disorder.

- At the time of the 2011 Census, a total of 5,362 households in Telford and Wrekin were lone parents with dependent children, just under a quarter (24.4%) of all dependent children households within the borough. 43.5% of lone parent households were not in employment, compared to the national average of 40.5%.
- 4,550 (14.4%) of pupils have Special Education Needs Support (SEND). The proportion of pupils with SEN Support has grown from 10.9% in 2014 to 14.4% in 2020/21.
- There remain challenges for some children and young people around levels of deprivation, with 23.8% (8,600) of children aged 0-15 living in income deprived households.
- The most common risk factors identified in 1,964 assessments completed by Children Safeguarding Teams in 2020/21 were mental health (43.8%), domestic violence (39.9%), Emotional Abuse (21.4%) and drug misuse (21.1%).
- The rate of children looked after per 10,000 at 2020/21 year end was 102 with the rate of new LAC increasing by 17.8% from the previous year.
- 890 families met the thresholds for Strengthening Families in 2020/21. 63% of Strengthening Families family circle assessments identified mental & emotional health of children and young people as presenting need. The second most common need was adult mental health at 61% and then parenting at 51%.

The Challenges:

The challenge for children's services is to ensure that we achieve positive outcomes for children and families in the context of an increasing child population; rising demand for services including increases in cases involving a myriad of factors including mental health problems, high levels of deprivation, domestic violence, substance misuse, child exploitation, migration across local authority lines, children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Alongside this, as with the national picture we are facing increased placement costs and reduced placement sufficiency.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected service demand in other ways, there is an emerging mental health epidemic with children and young people disproportionately adversely affected, as they have had to adapt to extraordinary changes to the world around them. We have also seen a significant increase in the complexity of situations that young people are experiencing, which has continued during the easing of lockdown with more and more children appearing to be linked within peer networks of vulnerability. We have also been responding to a bulging backlog in the family courts.

The priorities for our children's services are reflective of the need to safely reduce the number of children and families in need of support escalating to statutory safeguarding services. There is a strong focus on the need to do more to prevent the problems leading to care entry, ensuring compliance with the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) 1989 and the Children's Act (UK, 1989), both of which emphasise the importance of a child being cared for by their parents

Our improvement plan is very much focused on reviewing and re-modelling services and finding new and innovative ways of doing more for less. Whilst doing so, our foremost priority

is to promote the wellbeing and safeguarding of vulnerable children and young people, in line with our statutory responsibilities.

Our Approach:

The main focus of the Children's Services Cost Improvement Plan (CIP) is to:

- Reduce the number of children becoming looked after;
- Increase the number of children ceasing to be looked after;
- Increase the number of children returning home to parents or family members;
- Reduce the length of time children are looked after for;
- Reduce the number of re-referrals to safeguarding;
- Reduce the number of looked after children placed in residential provision;
- Reduce the number of looked after children placed in external foster placements;
- Increase the number of looked after children placed with internal foster carers;

New Initiatives to support the delivery of the CIP:

DFE's Strengthening Families, Protecting Children Programme: Family Safeguarding

Telford and Wrekin Council applied and were successful to join the DFE's Strengthening Families, Protecting Children Programme, where £84 million has been invested over 5 years to support up to 20 local authorities to improve work with families and safely reduce the number of children entering care by adopting one of three successful models developed elsewhere.

Family Safeguarding was developed by Hertfordshire County Council in 2015, where it has delivered a radical impact in improving outcomes for children and their families whilst also significantly reducing demands and costs for the county. The model has been independently evaluated as being very effective, has been complimented by Ofsted and is being replicated by at least 8 other English local authorities already (some with financial investment from the DfE). Key to its success is the initial intensive support provided to both children and the adults in their families.

The Family Safeguarding Model is predicated on multi-disciplinary joint children and adult teams. The model will therefore be implemented by building on the skills mix of our current Children's Social Work teams by adding community-based mental health staff, domestic abuse specialists and substance misuse workers.

The new model went live in Telford and Wrekin in July 2021.

Together4Children

We continue to be part of the Together4Children Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) as a partnership between Shropshire Council, Staffordshire County Council, Stoke-on-Trent City Council and Telford & Wrekin Council. The RAA delivers a range of functions, including:

- Recruiting and assessing adoptive families;
- Finding families for the children from our region who need adoptive families;
- Providing adoption support services to adopted children, their families, birth families and adopted adults.

Working together across the partnership we aim to:

- Make best use of our collective resources to recruit, assess and support prospective adopters and foster carers across the region.
- Improve the quality and speed of matching for children through better planning and by having a wider choice of families.
- Provide high quality support to children and their families delivered through a combination of direct provision and effective partnerships.
- Provide all children and their families with the right support at the right time through a consistent permanency support offer available across the region.
- Respond to the regulatory requirements in respect of Adoption (including Non-Agency Adoptions and Intercountry Adoption).

In-house Fostering Strategy

As corporate parents our ambition is to recruit and retain the best foster carers to provide the best possible care for our looked after children. Our “in-house” foster carers are central to our aims to secure the best possible outcomes for children in our care. The rates and benefits provided to the carers who care for some children are no longer attractive in the competitive market and as such the borough is experiencing difficulty recruiting new carers and retaining existing.

When children come into our care “in-house” fostering is the preferred option because it enables children to remain close to their connections and for the borough to support them (and their carer family).

However, options of in-house care are becoming limited due to the number of foster carers entering, the ageing cohort of existing carers, carers supporting young people post their 18th birthday (known as Staying Put) and the number of carers exiting.

In spite of a concerted effort to improve the offer to carers, some fostering families choose to no longer care for children. The success and need for Staying Put arrangements has also increased and is will likely continue to increase, thus reducing the number of available “in-house” carers further.

The Fostering Plus pilot was introduced in 2018 with the aim of working to stabilise the foster care home environment for those children and young people whose needs would have ordinarily been met by Independent Fostering Agencies (IFAs) or residential children’s homes. It has been found that by adapting in-care provision to support systemically trained and intensively supported foster carers, in house services have been able to stabilise care for children with complex needs and avoid the need to move children to residential care.

The number of children in residential children’s homes at the commencement of the pilot was 48 and the percentage of total number of looked after children was approximately 12%. We have reduced this number to a steady 8%.

In the recent Foster Carer Health Check, foster carers were asked to rate our fees and allowances out of 10. 40% of foster carers who completed the survey rated our fees 5 or below. 25% of foster carers rated our allowances 5 or below.

Many new carers register interest via word of mouth and feedback from our existing foster carers is that our offer is no longer preferable to other boroughs or the independent sector. The borough is not unique in this challenge; Ofsted published a national report in November 2020 noting that recruitment of in-house carers was a significant difficulty for all the local authorities and agencies used in their study. The shortage of suitable carers was the most significant barrier to making good matches with children and ultimately identifying successful caring places for them.

Benchmarking has also been undertaken across other authorities' within the West Midlands. This activity focused on in-house foster carer fees and allowances and Independent Fostering Agencies. It has been established that in spite of concerted efforts to recruit and retain, Telford and Wrekin Council is no longer competitive as a destination for potential carers at levels 1-3 and that current payments are lower than the average across the region and lower than IFA's.

By increasing both the support provided and financial incentives to carers we aim to reduce future costs of the service by increasing the number of in-house options, as well as ensuring that in-house foster carers have the financial resources to provide the best care possible for children in their care.

The service is therefore proposing to increase retention of our in-house foster carers' resident in the borough by providing:

- more financial resource and stability;
- a comprehensive wrap-around support package;

This will include an increase of our fee rates at level 1, 2 and 3 for all age groups with increases ranging from 25%-50%.

	TW Current Fee (£)	PROPOSED Fee (£)
	x 1 child	X 1 child
Level 1	80	120
Level 2	120	150
Level 3	140	200

We are also looking to increase our allowances in line with the Consumer Prices Index including owner occupiers' housing costs (CPIH) which shows an increase of 2.1% in the 12 months to July 2021.

This increase will enable the authority to become financially competitive in the foster care market and ensure existing foster carers remain with the borough. We also intend to focus targeted recruitment campaigns for foster carers able to care for sibling groups and fostering plus placements.

In addition we have:

- Introduced the Mockingbird Model. Mockingbird uses an extended family model, in the form of 'constellations' which consist of a 'hub' home and several 'satellite' homes

nearby. The specially recruited and trained hub home carers offer respite care, peer support, regular joint planning and social activities. Because of its structure, Mockingbird helps alleviate the sense of isolation foster carers can feel and offers immediate practical support - similar to that a non-fostering family might receive from friends and relatives.

- Further developed our marketing strategy, with a dedicated resource to make the Telford and Wrekin fostering brand more visible across the borough.
- Reviewed our recruitment processes to ensure that the service responds swiftly to all enquiries and visit all potential new carers as soon as they express an interest in becoming a foster carer for Telford and Wrekin.
- Developed our support offer to Foster Carers which includes access to therapy to promote wellbeing and improve placement stability for our children and young people.
- Worked with colleagues from across the Council to look at additional ways to support our in-house fostering service to support our carers to care for children and young people with disabilities or additional support needs, e.g. through adaptations.

Child and Family Ambassador Volunteer Scheme

We know that in the right circumstances, volunteer services can effectively contribute to delaying or preventing entry to more expensive systems of care and support and provide an effective mechanism for support for families through stepdown from practitioner led services. We have further developed our volunteer scheme and now have a number of successful volunteer roles to support our service offer:

- Child and Family Ambassadors provide one to one support and encouragement to families receiving support from our Early Help and Safeguarding Services. The Ambassadors support families either alongside Practitioners or as part of an exit strategy to provide our families with additional support.
- FGC Ambassadors support the Family Group Conference (FGC) service in promoting the voice of the child, helping children and young people to prepare for the FGC and support them during the FGC itself.
- Care Leaver Mentors are safe adults independent of the care leavers' family and care system. The aim is to develop a stable friendship with a care leaver, helping to build their confidence and self-esteem and also to bring stability, security and consistency to a care leaver's life through regular contact for a sustained period.
- Rights and Reps Ambassadors support VOICE (Care Council) co-ordinators during meetings, seasonal activities and regional trips.

Systemic Practice

We are now in the fifth year of embedding Systemic Practice in to make system changes to the way we work with children and young people. The systemic practice model is family-focused, and strengths-based, to build families and/or young people's capacity to address their own problems more effectively.

We have delivered whole service implementation of the systemic practice model: with practitioners, managers and leaders having completed training through the Centre for Systemic Social Work. The practice model enables our workforce to work intensively with

families to empower them to solve their own problems and change behaviours instead of referring out to others.

NSPCC Reunification Practice Framework

In 2019-20, the NSPCC Reunification Practice Framework was introduced in Telford and Wrekin's children's services. It was reported in our 2020 Ofsted inspection that we have "A highly effective and creative service [that] successfully assists children, especially older children, to remain with their birth family, or supports a return to their family wherever it is safe to do so... Families are supported to ensure that changes are sustainable, avoiding the need for further care episodes and reducing the need for further statutory involvement. Exit strategies are carefully planned to ensure that families can sustain change themselves."

Ineffective support for reunification planning is extremely costly, and is not in the best interests of children and young people. The outcomes of returning children home from care show high breakdown rates (2 years after return 47% of the returns had broken down (Farmer et al 2011) mainly because of parental difficulties or children's behaviour. The average annual cost for each child that re-enters care from home is £62,000 compared with an average annual cost of supporting a child to return home which is just over £5,500

Family Solutions

The Family Solutions service includes Family Group Conferencing and works to achieve a number of key outcomes that each feed into the cost improvement plan.

Our services refer to Family Solutions when it is considered that a child is perceived to be at the 'edge of care' or at risk of becoming looked after.

Family Solutions also support children and young people to stepdown from residential to foster placement, providing clear stepdown plans and working with all involved to ensure that there is robust planning to achieve successful transition and prevent placement breakdowns.

The remit of this offer is now broader, with support for some of our older young people to transition to semi-independent living arrangements and support for reunification plans, with the whole team trained in and championing the NSPCC reunification practice framework.

Reducing Parental Conflict

We have recently been successful in an application to the Reducing Parental Conflict (RPC) Workforce Development Grant. The purpose of the grant is to help professionals to spot parental conflict, provide initial support and refer parents to further interventions such as therapy for a constructive resolution and prevent escalation. The programme fits with our approach to providing the right support for families at the right time, and is more important than ever given the circumstances of the last 18 months and the impact of a national pandemic.

New Beginnings

"New Beginnings" is an exciting 18 month pilot which will enable us to take a fresh approach to working with women where their unborn child is assessed as being at risk and requires a pre-birth assessment. We have appointed a full time psychologist who will work within our Parenting Assessment Team to offer cognitive capacity and psychological assessments and interventions as part of a new approach to improving outcomes for mother and child.

The team will offer early assessment, psychologically driven interventions and multi-disciplinary support, the goal is to enable mother and baby to remain together.