

Appendix 11

Children's Safeguarding & Family Support – Continuous Improvement Plan

Introduction:

Councils in England are spending more than ever on social care services for children and families. Growth in expenditure of more than £600 million in 2022-23 represented a 5% increase from the previous year, meaning total annual expenditure now exceeds £12.2 billion, over £1 billion higher than it was in 2010-11 and more than £2 billion more than it was six years prior.

Within this, the rapid growth in spending on residential care placements has emerged as the most pressing issue for many local authorities in recent years. Since 2010-11, expenditure on children's residential care has risen by more than £1 billion, equivalent to an 89% increase. Much of this has been a result of increases in the number of children placed in residential care, which has more than doubled since 2011. Worryingly, this trend appears to be occurring, at least in part, due to a shortage of suitable alternative placements rather than because this type of care has been assessed as the best option for the child.

Crucially, and most alarmingly, around half of the spending growth has occurred in the last two years alone. The accelerating cost of residential care placements is a consequence of both growing numbers of children and increased complexity of needs, but there are also fundamental issues with where and how this care is provided, in particular the relatively weak power of councils to influence prices. But the increase in the demand for residential care placements is in part a consequence of wider social and economic changes which have served to exacerbate many of the key factors that drive increases in children's social care activity.

Since 2010, the number of children living in poverty in England has risen by more than one-fifth (21%). At the same time, the number in temporary accommodation has almost doubled and those living in overcrowded homes is up by 8%. There are also now more older children in the care system. As a result, the prevalence of mental health issues has risen and there is a greater presence of complex risks from issues such as gang-related activity, child sexual exploitation, and substance misuse. The growing number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children entering the care system in recent years has also been a contributing factor to the ageing of the care population. These children often arrive in the UK after fleeing traumatic experiences such as war and famine, and once in the UK can require specialist care to help them recover from past trauma and thrive.

Delivering better outcomes for the children and young people coming into contact with children's services in Telford and Wrekin is fundamental to breaking down the barriers to opportunity. Our continuous 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.

Local Context and Challenges:

- Telford and Wrekin has an increasingly growing population. The 2023 population was estimated to be 191,915, an increase of 2,915 (1.5%) since mid-year 2022.
- The change in the borough's population (1.5%) compares with an increase of 1.0% for England, 1.1% for the West Midlands and 1.0% for the borough's CIPFA statistical neighbours.
- Internal Migration accounted for 56% of population change from 2022 to 2023.
- International Migration accounted for 42% of population change from 2022 to 2023
- 21% of children in Telford and Wrekin live in income deprived families.
- Demand for Children's Social Care is lower than it has been for the last three years with the referral rate per 10,000 children in Telford and Wrekin at 318 at year end. This is lower than the West Midlands, our statistical neighbours and all England rate. This is also true for new child protection plans.
- There are increased complexities in the needs of many of our children and families.
- Increased demand and rising unit costs, particularly for looked after children, is a substantive issue for children's social care. Care Market costs have significantly increased above inflation with workforce being a challenge.
- There is a lack of adequate accommodation across the national system but there is also a lack of local accommodation which has negative outcomes for children, i.e., leading to them being moved far from family and wider kinship networks.
- Accommodation for children with complex and specialist needs is the scarcest; there are no secure children's homes in the West Midlands.
- The government withdrew the use of unregulated accommodation for 16- and 17-year-olds from October 2023. While intended to improve the quality of children's homes through better oversight, this has placed extra demands on the system. The Department for Education (DfE) has allocated £123m to cover the impact of these changes over a three year period, but when taking account of demand growth, it is estimated that the total cost to local authorities could be nearly three times this.
- National foster carer shortage – both in terms of recruitment and retention.
- Workforce availability across health and social care. The most important factor in retaining social workers is high caseloads with issues related to being overworked were those most cited by people considering leaving the sector.
- In December 2021 the National UASC Transfer Scheme (NTS) was made mandatory to ensure more equitable distribution of new arrivals across the country. In August 2022, the NTS rate was increased from 0.07% to 0.1% of a LA's child population and, in a push to end the use of hotels to accommodate UASC, the ten-day transfer deadline was reduced to five working days. This has had a significant impact in Telford and Wrekin, with numbers now at 48 (having more than doubled over recent years); these young people make up 11.9% of our looked after children population. Many of whom have suffered complex trauma and need additional support.
- We continue to see evidence of the ripple effect felt by our children's services stemming from external factors beyond our control as a local authority. Some of the factors are mentioned elsewhere in this report, such as housing, the cost-of-living crisis and challenges faced by other partner agencies. Education, schools and pressures in the health service have a significant impact on children, and their families, as well as detrimentally on children's services.
- Child sexual exploitation, child criminal exploitation and county lines gangs.

- There is significant evidence relating to the increasing poor emotional wellbeing and mental health needs of children, and their parents and carers, plus a body of national policy and service provision to both prevent and tackle this.
- There are also challenges and pressures on the education and SEND system (including the high needs block of funding) which are of equal concern.
- In Telford and Wrekin, 55% of new entries into care were aged 11+ which is an age group where early help, edge of care, child exploitation and diversionary services can have a considerable effect in avoiding care. We have seen a notable difference in the number of children entering care aged 0-1 so far this year with this previously being our highest age bracket for children coming into care. This is an age group where early help, parenting programmes and effective pre-proceedings work can have a significant impact on outcomes for families.
- There are an increasing number of young people aged 16-17 presenting as homeless. This is another key area of focus with the development of a Telford and Wrekin Joint Housing Protocol.

Our Operating Model

Our approach to delivering children's services is to ensure that every child has the right to grow up in their birth family, where it is safe for them to do so, and in their best interests. This principle is grounded in Article 8 of the Human Rights Act 1998 – right to a Private Family Life. Where it is not possible, our aspiration is for them to reside within their family or relational networks.

Therefore, the lens of our practice when working alongside families is first and foremost how we can support parents to make this happen. We consider how we can aid the capacity of birth parents to make changes to their parenting to meet the needs of their child or children, utilising professional support complemented by a framework of support available from their extended network of family and friends.

This includes involving extended networks at the earliest stage in terms of identifying support to enable parents to care for their child/children, identifying who could care for their child/children in a crisis or if the situation became unsafe for the child to remain in their parent/s' care and any support that may be required to enable this to happen. As well as ensuring that the child/children/young person maintains meaningful links with people that are important to them.

This is reflected within our Family First Strategy and overarching practice framework which outlines our relational approaches when working alongside children, young people and their families, and our commitment to this approach. We are ahead of the trajectory of the ongoing social care reforms with publishing our Family First Strategy, following the National change of Family safeguarding and support, practicing with the lens of family first – ensuring that wherever possible a child has the right to safely remain in their birth family, involving the family at an early point to support parents with caring for children, identifying carers early if this isn't possible and complete assessments or support families in private law applications in a timely manner.

We have introduced the Special Guardianship Order: No Detriment Policy. There are occasions when it is not appropriate for a child to remain living with their parents and permanence is secured elsewhere. In the best interests of the child and guided by legislation the option to place with extended family members or family friends is often the first port of call. On these occasions Court Orders enable other adults to look after the child either as a connected carer or a special guardian.

In order to secure the best outcomes and right permanence for children the Local Authority has now revised its financial offer to Special Guardians by introducing a 'no detriment' offer for to Special Guardians who care for children whom they previously looked after.

Implementation of Valuing Care

In direct response to challenges with both placement sufficiency, spend and more importantly improve outcomes for the children and young people we have been collaborating with IMPOWER consulting to develop and apply a new approach to help reduce spending on statutory services for children in care. Valuing Care is an approach to practice and commissioning which embeds a focus on children's needs, strengths, aspirations and outcomes to enable more effective conversations around how care can best meet individual children's needs. The aim of Valuing Care is to better match needs with placements wherever possible and maximise the efficiency of spending on placement costs, which CCN research earlier this year showed can fluctuate wildly depending on myriad factors.

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 local authorities across the country. Key to its success is the initial intensive support provided to both children and the adults in their families.

Family safeguarding was launched to support children and their families within the child in need and child protection, pre and post proceedings framework from a multi-agency approach centered on strengths-based working. This included training over 180 practitioners in relation to motivational interviewing and completing engagement work with the partnership to ensure a consistency of approach. The implementation of family safeguarding alongside mechanisms for overseeing and monitoring pre and post proceedings in a timely effective manner has aided a reduction in child protection planning and care applications.

Family Hubs

Telford and Wrekin was one of 75 LA's eligible for Government funding to implement a family hub model having been pre-selected in LA rank order using the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Indices. Family Hubs have now been launched in Telford and Wrekin –

through both physical sites and a robust digital offer. Family Hubs are very much focused on the importance of giving families the support they need recognising that all families need support from time to time to help their babies and children thrive, whether that's from friends, family, volunteers, or practitioners.

The ambition is for every family to receive the support they need, when they need it. Family Hubs enable all families to have access to the information and tools they need to care for and interact positively with their babies and children, and to look after their own wellbeing. They look to improve join-up between state and non-state services and take a whole family approach better supporting families to access the help they need. Evidence is clear that identifying risks early and preventing problems from escalating leads to better long-term outcomes.

NSPCC Reunification Practice Framework

When a child is being cared for by the local authority we will continually review if it is in the child's best interests to return to the care of their parents or be placed within their relational network and identify the support that would be required.

If a child is subject to a Care Order and is placed at home with his/her parents under Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010, the local authority will keep the arrangement under regular review and seek to revoke the Care Order at the earliest opportunity once assessments show that the parent/s have been able to make and sustain positive change.

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."

Family Solutions

The Family Solutions service includes Family Group Conferencing and works to achieve several key outcomes that 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.

Family Group Conferences/Family Conversations

Families are offered the opportunity to engage in a family group conference. The ethos of this is to recognise the strengths that are evident within the family and how these can be

built upon to support in meeting the needs of the child/young person, supporting them to resolve difficulties using their own knowledge and skills which is complimented by professional support.

Linked to this we also offer family conversations to enable the extended relational network of a child/young person to be able to voice their opinions; sharing their knowledge and expertise to devise a family plan to meet the child/young person's needs and to help keep them safe. Family meetings need to occur at the earliest stage to support parents caring for their children, but also as a mechanism for identifying who could care for the child in a crisis or be considered to care for the child if it is not safe for them to remain at home with their parents. The meetings also seek to identify any barriers for family members/extended networks being able to care for a child/young person and provides an opportunity for support to be provided early with an aim to mitigate any difficulties identified.

Systemic Practice

We are now in the eighth 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 enhanced our Systemic practice offer to include check points for consultations to aid care planning and relational working alongside families from a therapeutic lens. This has also included direct therapeutic work to support children and their families. Every service has a POD to explore systemic concepts to aid relational working. There is a programme of training to aid the embedment of systemic practice across Children's Services.

Family Networks

Family Networks Pilot through the Department for Education as part of the programme launched to transform children's social care. This pilot is designed to help keep more children in loving and stable family homes where it is safe to do so. The purpose of this pilot is to find transformative ways to involve wider family members with funding to support parents so that children and stay at home with their families. The pilot will conclude in March 2025.

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.

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.

We have increased both the support provided and financial incentives to our in-house foster carers, aiming 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.

This has enabled the authority to become financially competitive in the foster care market and has ensured that existing foster carers remain with the borough. We are also holding family finding events and focusing on targeted recruitment campaigns for foster carers able to care for sibling groups and fostering plus placements.

We have also:

- 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 and housing offers.
- Enhanced focus on Family and Friends foster care.

Commissioning and brokerage of care and placements

We are in the process of implementing the Valuing Care tool to existing commissioning and brokerage processes and practice – with a focus on home finding and provider management. The aim is to demonstrate an alternative approach to finding care which better meets need and provides better value, by more clearly and accurately describing the child's need and focussing on strengths and aspirations.

As part of this we will be looking to identify opportunities for changes to care, support and placements (inc. step down, reunification, permanence, alternative level of support, engagement with health). We are also delivering an intervention which uses the 'Family Values' approach to improve, develop and strengthen foster carer recruitment and retention.

Coproduction

We have commenced our co-production journey by the development of the Dandelion group, parents with lived experience that support practice and system change. They are actively involved in supporting the development of services and practice to ensure a family friendly acknowledging that there is a direct correlation between the lived experience of the parents and that of the child/young person.

We have invested in training three of the Dandelion members in peer parent advocacy training and have they commenced one to one advocacy with parents supported within the family safeguarding service to understand our processes and enable them to have a stronger voice. They have co-produced changes to the child protection conferencing process and have enhanced the parental involvement within this forum. In addition, the Dandelion group have co-delivered training from the lens of parental perspectives to aid relational

working. This development has been recognised as an area of strength and the first of its kind within the region.

Reducing Parental Conflict

Following our successful application to the Reducing Parental Conflict (RPC) Workforce Development Grant, a Reducing Parental Conflict partnership conference was held in February 2022 to raise awareness and knowledge and enhance skills around Reducing Parental Conflict. We have also developed and implemented a bespoke intervention tool kit and introduced experts' 'Specialist Relationship Champions' across the Partnership to be a point of contact to share good practice and knowledge. We have also enhanced practitioner training completed by Relationship champions.

Investment in specialist Criminal Exploitation Team

We have invested in our CATE team and have completed all recommendations following on from the Independent Inquiry Report.

Practitioner recruitment and retention

Introduction of a Social Work Progression Framework to better support our Social Worker recruitment and retention. We have again this year, achieved the lowest turnover, vacancy rates and use of agency social work practitioners in the region.

Summary

The ongoing development of our Children's Services Improvement Programme aims to ensure that families experiencing complex and multiple difficulties will receive accessible co-ordinated support at the time that they need it. Targeted and specialist interventions are offered to children, young people and families with existing risk factors and vulnerabilities in order to reduce the severity of problems that have started to emerge and prevent problems escalating.

We want to achieve good outcomes for all children and families in Telford and Wrekin, as quickly and effectively as possible. Ensuring good outcomes for vulnerable children requires a strong collaborative approach between all agencies and a culture of mutual support and challenge. We will continue to promote integrated working across all tiers of need and evaluate service provision to ensure they are meeting our objectives.

The aim is to continuously review, appraise and prioritise change activity to deliver corporate and departmental objectives. Within this will be the oversight of our high-level change programme plan focused on identifying and delivering opportunities across the child's journey to improve outcomes and reduce costs.