

Children's Safeguarding & Family Support – Continuous Improvement Plan (2025 Update, with JSNA Data)

Introduction

Children's social care across England is experiencing unprecedented demand and financial pressure. Nationally, councils spent over £12.2 billion on children's social care in 2022/23 - a rise of more than £600 million (5%) from the previous year. This represents an increase of over £2 billion in just six years, with costs now more than £1 billion higher than in 2010/11. The most significant growth has been in residential care placements, where expenditure has risen by 89% since 2010/11, driven by both an increase in the number of children placed and the complexity of their needs.

The sector faces a perfect storm of challenges:

- **Rising Demand:** The number of children in care continues to grow, with over 82,000 looked after children nationally as of 2024. There has been a marked increase in older children entering care, children presenting with complex trauma, and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC).
- **Socio-Economic Pressures:** Since 2010, child poverty in England has increased by 21%, and the number of children living in temporary accommodation has almost doubled. Overcrowding and housing insecurity remain significant issues, contributing to family stress and safeguarding risks.
- **Mental Health and Exploitation:** There is a growing prevalence of mental health issues among children and young people, alongside increased risks from gang-related activity, child sexual exploitation, and substance misuse.
- **Placement Sufficiency:** Councils report a shortage of suitable placements, particularly for children with complex needs. The lack of secure children's homes in regions such as the West Midlands exacerbates these pressures, often resulting in children being placed far from their families and communities.
- **Workforce Challenges:** Recruitment and retention of social workers and foster carers is a persistent issue, with high caseloads and workforce shortages impacting service delivery and stability.

Regionally, the West Midlands mirrors these national trends:

- **Population Growth:** The region has seen a steady increase in population, with Telford & Wrekin's population rising by 1.5% in 2023, compared to 1.0% for England overall.
- **Referral Rates:** While Telford & Wrekin's referral rate to children's social care (318 per 10,000 children) is below the regional and national average, the complexity of cases is increasing, placing additional strain on resources.
- **Budget Pressures:** Local authorities in the West Midlands face rising costs for placements, workforce, and operational delivery. The withdrawal of unregulated

accommodation for 16- and 17-year-olds has placed further demands on budgets, with government funding unlikely to fully offset the impact.

In Telford & Wrekin, these pressures are compounded by local factors:

- 21% of children live in income-deprived families.
- The number of UASC has more than doubled, now making up 11.9% of the looked after population.
- Accommodation for children with complex needs is scarce, and the cost of placements continues to rise above inflation.
- Workforce turnover and vacancy rates are the lowest in the region, but recruitment and retention remain ongoing challenges.

Against this backdrop, Telford & Wrekin's Children's Services are committed to continuous improvement, innovation, and partnership working. The service is focused on early intervention, strengths-based practice, and maximising value for money, while ensuring the safety and wellbeing of vulnerable children and young people remain paramount.

Local Context and JSNA Headlines

- **Population Growth:** The borough's population reached 191,915 in 2023, a 1.5% increase from 2022, outpacing regional and national averages. Internal migration accounted for 56% of this change, and international migration for 42%.
- **Deprivation:** 21% of children live in income-deprived families. The JSNA Deprivation Profile highlights significant contrasts between different areas of the borough, informing targeted interventions.
- **SEND and Vulnerable Groups:** The JSNA assesses the current and future health, care and support needs of children and young people with disabilities aged from birth to 25 years who have a special educational need or disability (SEND) and their families. There is a strong focus on linking early years public health data to later service requirements, and on understanding the intersection of SEND and safeguarding status.
- **Referral Rates:** 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 at 318, below regional and national averages.
- **Looked After Children:** The number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) has more than doubled, now comprising 11.9% of the looked after population. Accommodation for children with complex needs remains scarce, with no secure children's homes in the West Midlands.

Strategic Developments

Families First Strategy

Telford & Wrekin is ahead of the national trajectory for social care reform, with the Family First Strategy and systemic practice model underpinning all work with children and families. The approach is relational and strengths-based, ensuring every child has the right to grow up in their birth family where it is safe to do so, or within their wider relational network.

Valuing Care

The adoption of the Valuing Care tool continues to refine placement matching and cost efficiency, focusing on children's needs, strengths, and aspirations. The Valuing Care approach enables more effective conversations around how care can best meet individual children's needs, maximising the efficiency of spending on placement costs.

Family Safeguarding

Family Safeguarding has enabled multi-agency, strengths-based interventions, reducing child protection planning and care applications. Over 180 practitioners have been trained in motivational interviewing, supporting consistency of approach and improved outcomes.

Family Hubs

Physical and digital Family Hubs have been launched, improving access to support and early intervention for families. The JSNA evidence base was used to develop the Family Hubs & Start for Life model, ensuring services are responsive to local needs.

Fostering Sufficiency

Targeted recruitment and enhanced support for in-house foster carers have improved retention and placement stability. Financial incentives and therapeutic support are central to the strategy, making the authority financially competitive in the foster care market.

Special Guardianship Order: No Detriment Policy

The financial offer to Special Guardians has been revised, introducing a 'no detriment' offer for those caring for children whom they previously looked after, securing the best outcomes and right permanence for children.

Family Solutions

The Family Solutions service supports children at the 'edge of care' and those stepping down from residential to foster placements. The remit has broadened to support older young people transitioning to semi-independent living and to provide a consistent response in supporting reunification plans.

Systemic Practice

Now in its eighth year, systemic practice is embedded across Children's Services, with enhanced therapeutic support across the whole system and training to aid relational working and care planning.

Family Networks Pilot

The Family Networks Pilot is a Department for Education (DfE) funded initiative being piloted in Telford and Wrekin, delivered locally as part of the Families First for Children Pathfinder programme. Its core aim is to test and develop new ways of supporting children at risk of entering care by unlocking the strengths and resources of their wider family and relational networks.

The pilot focuses on families in pre-proceedings (PLO), where children are still under the parental responsibility of their birth parents and there is a genuine possibility to keep them living safely within their family networks.

It builds on the principles of Family Group Conferencing (FGC), but goes further by providing practical support and targeted funding - known as Family Network Support Packages (FNSPs) - to help extended family members overcome barriers to supporting children and parents.

FNSPs are flexible and creative, designed to address specific needs such as accommodation, respite, or practical help, with the intention of preventing children from becoming Looked After under section 31 of the Children Act 1989.

Together4Children Regional Adoption Agency

The partnership continues to deliver recruitment, assessment, and support for adoptive families, finding families for children who need adoption and providing support to adopted children and their families.

Commissioning and Brokerage

Commissioning and brokerage in Telford & Wrekin are central to the cost improvement strategy, with a clear focus on maximising value for money, improving outcomes, and reducing unnecessary expenditure. The approach is both strategic and operational, targeting the main cost drivers in placements and support services.

Intended Outcomes

- Reduced average unit cost of placements and support packages.
- Improved placement stability and outcomes for children and young people.
- Greater sufficiency and flexibility in local provision.
- Sustainable budget management and cost avoidance.
- Enhanced partnership working with providers and families.

Coproduction

The Dandelion group, comprising parents with lived experience, supports practice and system change, co-producing service developments and enhancing parental involvement in child protection conferencing.

Criminal Exploitation Team

Ongoing investment in the CATE team has ensured all recommendations relating to Children's Services from the Independent Inquiry Report have been completed.

Practitioner Recruitment and Retention

The Social Work Workforce Strategy and Progression Framework supports recruitment and retention, with the lowest turnover, vacancy rates, and use of agency practitioners in the region.

Financial Overview

- **Budget Monitoring:** The service is maintaining budget discipline through increased health contributions and use of UASC reserves. However, pressures from placements, NRPF, and operational costs persist.
- **Cost Improvement Actions:** Ongoing review of commissioning, brokerage, and placement processes is focused on maximising value and outcomes. The use of the Valuing Care tool and Families First approach is central to these efforts.

Summary and Next Steps

The ongoing development of the Children's Services Improvement Programme aims to ensure that families experiencing complex and multiple difficulties receive accessible, coordinated support at the time they need it. Targeted and specialist interventions are offered to children, young people, and families with existing risk factors and vulnerabilities to reduce the severity of problems and prevent escalation.

The focus remains on early intervention, integrated working, and continuous evaluation to improve outcomes and reduce costs. The service is committed to learning from research, regional and national best practice, and the lived experience of children, families, and staff.

We will continue to:

- Promote integrated working across all tiers of need.
- Evaluate service provision to ensure objectives are met.
- Review, appraise, and prioritise change activity to deliver corporate and departmental objectives.
- Oversee a high-level change programme plan focused on identifying and delivering opportunities across the child's journey to improve outcomes and reduce costs.

