

APPENDIX 11

Children's Safeguarding & Family Support – Cost Improvement Strategy

Introduction:

Over recent years, Local Authorities across Britain have faced an unprecedented surge in demand for children's social care support, and that this is showing little sign of abating. The most expensive cases, where children are taken into care, have risen by almost triple the rate of population growth. Between 2010-11 and 2017-18 the number of children in care at year end increased by 15% to 75,420 children, more than triple the rate of overall population growth.

There has also been a notable increase in the number of older children entering care, with an increase of 78% 16+ year olds entering care between 2010-2011 and 2017-2018. It is reported across local authorities these children often have more complex needs and as a result are harder to place into foster care and are more likely to go into residential care. The number of children placed in residential care by local authorities increased by 9.2% between 2013-14 and 2017-18, and the cost of residential care increased by 22.5% over the same period.

In Telford & Wrekin:

- There are round 44,300 people aged 0-19 in the borough, and around 55,800 in the 0-24 age bracket.
- The Borough has a higher proportion of people under 20 (25.2%) compared to the England average of 23.7%.
- The number of young people aged 0-24 is set to increase to around 62,100 by 2031 – an extra 3,700 0-15 year olds and an extra 2,100 16-24 year olds.
- 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%.
- 4,402 (17.9%) of pupils have Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND). The proportion of pupils with SEND has grown from 10.9% in 2014 to 17.9% in 2018.
- There remain challenges for some children and young people around levels of deprivation, with 23.8% (8,603) of children aged 0-15 living in income deprived households.
- The most common risk factors identified in 1,807 assessments completed by Children Safeguarding Teams were domestic violence (43.4%), mental health (43.4%) and drug misuse (24.5%).
- The rate of children looked after per 10,000 at 2018-19 year end was 97 with the rate of new LAC increasing by 3.8% from the previous year.
- 633 families met the thresholds for the Strengthening Families programme in 2017/18. 70.3% of Strengthening Families assessments identified mental & emotional health of children and young people as presenting need. The second most common need was family relationships at 58.0%.

- Of the new presentations into alcohol and drug services in the year, the number who were living with children was 63 for alcohol services and 49 for drug services, and the number who were parents not living with children was 82 for alcohol services and 122 for drug services. Around 27 children were known to children's safeguarding and Family Support whose parents were in alcohol treatment services, and around 30 for adults in drug treatment services.

The Challenge:

The challenge for everyone in children's services is ensuring that we achieve positive outcomes for children and families in the context of our increasing child population, rising demand for services, increased placement costs and reduced placement sufficiency.

We are faced with a continued rise in safeguarding activity with factors contributing to this, for example domestic abuse and mental health problems, appearing to be becoming more acute and more prevalent. Current strategic planning for our children's services is reflective of the need to reduce the number of children and families in need of support escalating to statutory safeguarding services.

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;
- Reducing 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 in external foster placements;
- Increase the number of looked after children placed with internal foster carers;
- Reduce the use of agency social workers.

New Initiatives to support the delivery of the CIP:

Fostering Strategy

Over the last 12 months we have seen a reduction in the percentage of looked after children placed in residential and external fostering provision. There has also been an increase in the proportion of looked after children placed with internal foster carers, despite rising numbers.

As part of our revised fostering strategy, we have revised foster carer fees to aid the recruitment of more people to foster for Telford and Wrekin Council and to retain our skilled and committed existing carers. We have also introduced a limited number of specialist foster carer roles which will ensure that some of our most complex children and young people who

do become looked after, remain close to home within a family based setting instead of entering specialised residential provision (children with disability carers, fostering plus carers, parent and baby placements).

In addition we have:

- implemented a new 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.
- introduced stronger support which includes access to therapy for our foster carers to promote wellbeing and improve placement stability for our children and young people.
- reviewed sufficiency for placements with our internal foster carers and as a result are now looking to do more focused recruitment for fostering plus carers and sibling groups
- secured funding through the DFE to implement the Mockingbird Family Model into our fostering service through our regional partnership with Staffordshire, Shropshire and Stoke-on-Trent. The 'Mockingbird Family Model', delivered by The Fostering Network, brings foster families together in groups, centred around one experienced foster carer who lives nearby to act as a mentor. This builds a network on which they can rely in difficult moments, in the same way that families who are together from birth often rely on the support of extended family, friends or neighbours, and helping them cope with challenging behaviour or problems caused by trauma before they escalate. It comes as findings from the Mockingbird programme show that foster families assisted through the programme built stronger relationships and became more resilient.

Family Solutions

Our Family Solutions service was introduced in 2017 to work intensively with families where children and young people have been identified as being at risk of becoming looked after.

The service also works with children and young people where the plan is for them to step down from residential care to fostering and in plans for reunification home. Repeat referrals have improved enormously since the service has been established, with a significant reduction in the number of subsequent CIN, CP and CLA episodes within 12 months of children and young people returning home or anytime thereafter.

Prior to Family Solutions, 90% of children and young people who had stepped down, did not remain in their stepdown placement. With Family Solutions, 80% of stepdown placements have been sustained.

Family Group Conferencing

A Family Group Conferencing (FGC) Service has also enabled us to offer FGC's in-house and at pace with a skilled staffing pool. The ethos of Family Group Conferencing is to support our Local Authority priority to build community capacity and to empower families to access a network of family and community assets to help them tackle challenging issues.

As a key part of our CIP strategy we have secured additional investment to increase the number of families the service supports by offering an FGC to all families referred for an Initial Child Protection Conference (ICPC) and all families where there is consideration of issuing for a Care Order in Court to reduce the number of children and young people subsequently becoming looked after and instead, use FGC's to find friend and family supported solutions to challenges that families are faced with.

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 piloted a new volunteer scheme made up of three volunteer roles:

- 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.
- Rights and Reps Ambassadors support VOICE (Care Council) co-ordinators during meetings, seasonal activities and regional trips.

The pilot has been successful having recruited to all three roles. We are now looking to complete an evaluation to inform further volunteer roles that we are looking to introduce in the New Year.

Systemic Practice

We are now in the third 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

Returning home to a parent or relative is the most common outcome for children in care. However, around a third of those who return home are back in care within five years. So for

almost a third of the children who had returned home, evidence shows that the arrangements often do not last.

There is a high cost to local authorities of failed reunification of children returning home from care both in terms of the child and financial impact (£300 million a year). In 2019 we introduced the NSPCC Toolkit in Telford and Wrekin, an evidence informed framework for return home practice that supports practitioners to make structured decisions about whether or not a child should return home to the care of their parents or birth families. The framework outlines a staged approach to working with families and professionals, mandating that the needs of the child be kept paramount throughout the process.

Strengthening Families, Protecting Children Programme: Family Safeguarding

Telford and Wrekin Council applied and have been 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.

Telford and Wrekin have been identified to commence implementation of the model in the first cohort with a start date of October 2020. The provisional timeline for trailblazer local authorities who have already commenced are indicative only, as it is dependent on final project delivery timescales. However, the timeline suggests we will be operational in February 2021 would see impact from that point.

Staffing: Agency Spend

Regional benchmarking shows that although this is an area that is a continuing challenge, across the West Midlands, Telford and Wrekin are doing comparably well.

The most recent published regional data shows that Telford and Wrekin report the lowest social worker turnover rate in the region (8.3%).

Telford and Wrekin are one of the regional local authorities to have consistently lower agency rates compared to others. Telford also has a vacancy rate that is consistently lower than other local authorities in the area.

However, the significant financial pressures resulting from the need for agency staff mean that this is an area of significant challenge to the service.

There has subsequently been a continued need to employ a number of agency practitioners to cover vacancies that we have been unable to recruit to, and to compensate for the challenges and competition in respect of social work recruitment generally.

Our risk management strategy to mitigate the ongoing challenges recruiting experienced practitioners has included filling vacancies with newly qualified social workers. Whilst they will initially need a higher level of support and lower caseloads, there are long term benefits from supporting skilled and enthusiastic social work graduates to continue to develop their skills and experience and subsequently remain in Telford and Wrekin.