

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 2018-19 the number of children in care at year end increased by 19% to 78,150 children.

According to the latest data:

- Councils have seen a 53 per cent increase in children on child protection plans – an additional 18,160 children – in the past decade.
- In the past decade, there has been a 139 per cent increase in serious case where the local authority believes a child may be suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm, an additional 117,070 cases (up to 201,170).
- The age of children in care has been steadily increasing over the past five years. Young people over 10 years old account for 63 per cent of all in care, with teenagers being six times more likely than younger children to be living in residential or secure children's homes, which is significantly more expensive than foster care.
- The number of children placed in residential care by local authorities increased by 31% between 2014-15 and 2018-19.
- Recent data looking at price trends and costs of children's homes shows that on average, the cost has increased by seven per cent per year.

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.
- 712 families met the thresholds for the Strengthening Families programme in 2019/20 (year 5). 75% 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 72% and then family relationships at 63%.

The Challenges:

The challenges for children's services are to ensure that we achieve positive outcomes for children and families in the context of our increasing child population, rising demand for services; including increases in cases involving a myriad of factors including mental health problems (both for children and young people but also parental mental health), high levels of deprivation, domestic violence, substance misuse, child exploitation, migration across local authority lines, children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), and looked-after children and those on the edge of care. Alongside this we are facing increased placement costs and reduced placement sufficiency. Furthermore, we are responding to the Kent migration crisis and the request for all local authorities to increase the number of Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children they support through the National Transfer Scheme to 0.07% of child population

The Coronavirus pandemic has added further pressures to the existing service response to managing demand:

- Delayed referrals and increased complexity / anticipated surge following reopening of schools.
- Increase in contextual safeguarding, with a national increase in young people being placed on child protection plans and subsequently accommodated as a result of criminal exploitation and county lines during lockdown.
- A clear rise in the number of parents struggling to appropriately support their child's development and keeping them from harm with the 'trigger trio' (formally referred to as the 'toxic trio') of domestic abuse, parental substance misuse and parental mental ill health particularly diminishing parental capacity.
- The extent of child vulnerability in the borough, much of it hidden from sight under lockdown. The Children's Commissioner's local area profiles of child vulnerability provides information to identify how many vulnerable children there are in our local authority, and highlight those groups at heightened risk during the coronavirus emergency – such as those in overcrowded or inadequate accommodation, with fragile parents, young carers, or without internet access.
- Early years and school closures resulting in increased pressures for children and families.
- Support for care leavers; maintaining contact and preventing isolation; continued placements/delays in transition; increased risk of NEET (care leavers remain the responsibility of the local authority until the age of 25).
- Increase in mental health and wellbeing challenges for children and young people.
- Staff self-isolation and absence (including ongoing oversight of staff wellbeing).
- The disproportionate impact of COVID-19 and subsequent measures on those pregnant, giving birth or at home with a baby or toddler.

Current strategic planning for our children's services is 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;
- 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 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:

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 'go live' scheduled for May 2021. The wave 2 evaluation of the model was published on the 4th November 2020 and concludes that Family Safeguarding contributes to reductions in the rate at which children become looked after and the number of children on Child Protection Plans. The report states that "The financial case for Family Safeguarding is strong. Break-even occurs relatively quickly from savings on looked after children and Child Protection Plans, after which annual and cumulative savings greatly outweigh the costs of delivery."

The wave 2 evaluation is also encouraging about the resounding finding from the evaluation of Group Case Supervision¹ being "a central tenet of Family Safeguarding and one that facilitates the effective management of risk, the minimisation of drift and delay, and the sharing of important knowledge across different professionals. It introduces an element of challenge and increases the variety of views when families are discussed."

Together4Children

We have launched 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 Agency will deliver 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

¹ GCS works best when authorities ring-fence resource specifically for the organisation and co-ordination of the sessions. This includes diarising them well in advance, issuing reminders and circulating papers before the meetings, encouraging and confirming attendance, taking real-time minutes and circulating those promptly following each session.

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 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:

- 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.
- 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.

Big Fostering Partnership

The Big Fostering Partnership is a step down from residential to fostering scheme, previously named Pyramid Project. The aim is to place children and young people in highly skilled and resilient foster placements. It will allow us to have a closer working relationship with fostering agencies, targeted recruitment of foster carers to meet the specific needs of our children. It will also provide a central point for communication and family finding.

It is a 5 year project which will offer an extra option against increasing numbers of looked after children and insufficient capacity for complex children.

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. Looking at the number of children returning home to live with parents, relatives, or another person with parental responsibility where this was not part of the current care planning process, the number has reduced considerably since the implementation of Family Solutions, which demonstrates a significant improvement in planning and risk management in this area.

Sustainability has also improved enormously post-Family Solutions, with a significant reduction in the number of subsequent CIN, CP and CLA episodes within 12 months of the return home or anytime thereafter.

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 introduced a new volunteer scheme made up of four 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.
- 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 fourth 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.

Staffing: Agency Spend

As a result of the complex activity currently ongoing with maintaining statutory safeguarding responsibilities for children and young people both remotely and face to face during this period, there have been ongoing pressures to stabilise the workforce and maintain the wellbeing of staff. Despite the reduced number of referrals, the regional and national risk management strategy is to bolster the workforce for an anticipated surge in referrals and the complexities of these referrals.

We have the lowest use of agency staff (6) that we have had in a number of years and are significantly lower than many of our regional neighbours. This is largely due to our have been successful at recruiting to vacancies through WM Jobs and a social media campaign in an effort to attract experienced social workers to come and work for Telford and Wrekin following our Ofsted rating in January 2020.

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.