

# BRIDGEND COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

## REPORT TO CORPORATE PARENTING CABINET COMMITTEE

2 November 2010

### REPORT OF THE CORPORATE DIRECTOR - CHILDREN

#### The Looked After Children Project

#### 1. Purpose of Report.

To provide information to the Committee on the Looked after Children Project.

#### Connection to Corporate Improvement Plan / Other Corporate Priority.

2.1 Looked After Children are a key responsibility for the Council as corporate parents and fall within the following community strategy themes:

- Young Voices,
- Healthy Living,
- New Opportunities.

#### 2. Background.

3.1 For 2007-2008, the Supporting Vulnerable Children Programme was confirmed as a corporate priority and responded to the Authority's top risk in the context of the Joint Risk Assessment exercise - "Failure to sustain improvements in Children's Services following invocation of the intervention protocol".

3.2 Three elements of that programme:

- reduction of Looked After Children Numbers,
- fostering Recruitment and
- improved Adoption Outcomes

were combined into a single Project for 2008-2009, to provide a focus to this work.

3.3 The project ceased to be managed under the council's Supporting Vulnerable Children Performance Review Board in 2010, following agreement at the Children's Performance Management Board that the project was still needed but that it would be subsumed into mainstream activity, with oversight by the Safeguarding and Family Support Service's Performance Review Group chaired by the Head of Service.

#### 3. Current situation / proposal.

4.1 Looked after children have remained a key corporate priority within Bridgend County Borough Council since 2007. The Looked After Children population has increased by 13% in 2009/10 from 2008/09, against a Welsh average of 9%. It is important to consider the LAC population per 10,000 children and young

people in Bridgend ( 0-18) as this evidences the proportion of looked after children within the general children and young people's population. Bridgend is placed above the Welsh average in this regard. Some of Bridgend's neighbouring authorities have seen smaller rises but this would be expected given the economic and social demography of the area in their figures as can be seen in the table below.

	Total looked after children 2007-08	Total looked after children 2008-09	Total at 31 March 2010	2009 - 2010 difference	LAC Per 10,000 Population aged 0-17.99 years
<b>Local Authority</b>					
<b>Neath Port Talbot</b>	<b>285</b>	<b>290</b>	<b>391</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>135.65</b>
Merthyr Tydfil	175	160	167	7	134.43
<b>Swansea</b>	<b>395</b>	<b>430</b>	<b>559</b>	<b>129</b>	<b>122.31</b>
Torfaen	205	205	210	5	104.78
<b>Bridgend</b>	<b>275</b>	<b>255</b>	<b>289</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>99.45</b>
<b>Rhondda Cynon Taf</b>	<b>450</b>	<b>440</b>	<b>479</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>94.09</b>
Newport	300	290	297	7	90.6
Caerphilly	285	315	332	17	85.15
<b>Wales</b>	<b>4625</b>	<b>4705</b>	<b>5129</b>	<b>424</b>	<b>80.88</b>
Denbighshire	130	140	163	23	80.81
<b>Blaenau Gwent</b>	<b>130</b>	<b>125</b>	<b>119</b>	<b>-6</b>	<b>79.38</b>
<b>Cardiff</b>	<b>520</b>	<b>520</b>	<b>530</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>78.49</b>
Conwy	160	160	174	14	77.82
Gwynedd	165	160	172	12	71.08
<b>The Vale of Glamorgan</b>	<b>180</b>	<b>175</b>	<b>187</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>66.55</b>
Carmarthenshire	190	225	243	18	64.33
Pembrokeshire	145	140	145	5	56.58
Powys	140	140	147	7	54.22
Wrexham	120	130	142	12	50.19
Monmouthshire	75	110	93	-17	49.2
Isle of Anglesey	75	70	69	-1	48.66
Flintshire	155	150	158	8	48.53
Ceredigion	70	70	63	-7	46.09

4.2 Based on lessons learnt in the previous LAC project, it has been identified that the main exit routes out of care for children and young people who have had a long term period in care are:

- The care order is discharged on the basis that there is sufficient evidence that the child or young person has been receiving a good enough standard of care from their parent and that the Local Authority no longer needs to share parental responsibility;

- The child is adopted;
- The carers, most commonly relative carers, apply for a Special Guardianship order or Residence Order;
- The young person turns 18 and ceases to be looked after, or if accommodated, leaves the care of the Local Authority between the ages of 16 and 18.

4.3 At the end of July 2010, the number of children and young people in care in Bridgend was 298. Of this number there were:

- 30 children/young people placed with their parent under a care order;
- 66 children and young people on interim care orders being twin tracked with the possibility of their long term plan being either adoption, rehabilitated back to the care of their parent/s, kinship foster placement, Special Guardianship Order or Residence Order or long term care (usually foster care, though this could also include residential placements);
- 11 children placed for adoption;
- 6 children on placement orders, but not yet placed with adopters;
- 56 children and young people were in kinship care placements (some of whom may consider an SGO for the child in their care);
- 16 will turn 18 during 1.4.09 to 31.3.11.

4.4 During 2009/10, the average number each month of children becoming looked after was 8 and the average number of children ceasing to be looked after each month was 7. As a rough estimate, if this trend continued then the LAC population would be approximately 306 by the end of March 2011.

4.5 It should be remembered that some children may be counted twice across these categories – e.g. the case is being twin tracked whilst the child is placed with kinship carers, or the young person is placed with parents and will turn 18 in the course of the year. In the latter example, there is little merit in pursuing a revocation of the care order due to the time, effort and costs involved. For some children and young people, it is entirely appropriate that they remain in the care of the Local Authority until they turn 18, however initial auditing of LAC cases suggest that there is a reasonable prospect of the following outcomes being achieved by 31<sup>st</sup> March 2011:

- 12 adoption orders granted
- 10 children placed for adoption
- 13 children and young people having their care orders discharged
- 10 children and young people becoming subject to Special Guardianship Orders or Residence Orders

4.6 The demand for, and supply of, foster placements and residential placements is not able to be met within local in-house provision. This is placing a significant strain upon budgets and, more importantly, some children and young people are unable to remain in their local community. Though this may be a deliberate choice that is in the child's best interests, more often it is because of placement availability. The current budget for independent foster placements in 2010/11 is

£2,754,520 which equates to 73 placements at £37,500 per annum per placement.

4.7 The out of county residential placement budget is £2,229,450, the equivalent of 9 placements at £250k each based on a gross estimate with contributions from Education and Health.

4.8 Figures in August 2010 identified that there were, along with the resulting financial consequences:

- 78 children/young people in independent foster placements
- 18 children/young people in out of county residential placements.

### **Aims of the Project**

The aim of the project is to reduce the numbers of looked after children from 298 to within a range of 280-290 by the end of the financial year (March 2011). This will be achieved by a number of activities:

- i. revision of the threshold to care panel to monitor and review whether:
  - the child **should** be accommodated and that appropriate care planning is in place;
  - we can reduce the number of emergency placements so that where appropriate, children are brought into care in a planned, supported way;
  - we can avoid the likelihood of drift whereby children/young people remain in an out of authority placement, longer than necessary;
- ii. creation of permanency planning meetings to ensure that permanency plans are appropriately identified in a timely way;
- iii. quality assurance auditing to check whether appropriate arrangements are in place and the child's care plan is effectively meeting their needs or whether other arrangements should be in place;
- iv. where rehabilitation home is being considered, that there are clear, outcome focused care plans which are robustly monitored within supervision and the LAC review process;
- v. ensuring that alternative orders are effectively considered, such as Special Guardianship Orders and Residence Orders;
- vi. monitoring to make sure that family and friends are properly explored as potential carers for children who are unable to remain in their parent/s care;

### **Targets set include:**

4.10 The targets we have set include:

- a reduction of the number of children in out of county residential homes to a total of 12 by the end of March 2011;

- a net gain of 10 foster carers approved by the local authority by the end of March 2011 ensuring that the carers recruited are well matched to the needs of the children requiring placement;
- to sustain adoption outcomes, with 12 adoption orders per year, placing 10 children for adoption and approving 12 prospective adopters by the end of March 2011. This is taking into account the increasing number of children being referred for twin tracking. Twin tracking is a process in which there are two options for permanence – one would be rehabilitation home but in the event that this is not feasible, adoption will be the other. The adoption process begins alongside activity to establish whether the child can return home or to friends and family. The below table indicates how twin-tracking has increased since 2008.

a reduction in the number of admissions from 97 last year, to under 90 admissions by 31.3.11.

We will also need to set a target for the reduction of the number of children in Independent Foster Agency (IFA) placements from the current figure of 78.

	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9	2009/10
Number of children referred to adoption for twin tracking	37*	25	36	54

*\* This figure includes a number of children carried over from the previous year who had not been referred in 2005/6*

The outcomes and outputs that we want from the project include:

evidence that looked after children are thriving and in stable, supportive environments

evidence that looked after children are able to access and take up the same opportunities as other children and young people.

- an increased rate of Looked After Children being discharged through children being rehabilitated back to the care of their parents, discharge of care orders, permanency planning and use of adoption, Special Guardianship and Residence Orders as appropriate for the child;

appropriate Looked After Children admissions

- a reduced number of children placed with Independent Foster Agencies;
- out of authority residential placements have focused contract arrangements which are monitored and reviewed to ensure that the placement is meeting the child's needs and represents best value to the authority.

4.12 There are risks that could affect the project such as:

- plans for revocation of the care order or rehabilitation home may have to be
- halted and reassessed because changes in the circumstances of these children
- and their families result in them remaining looked after longer; legitimate surges in admissions may impact on the net decrease in looked after numbers, for example, the admission of a large sibling group can skew figures significantly and unexpectedly; a lack of availability of appropriate adoption matches locally, regionally and nationally;
- inability to give high priority to discharge work through failure to recruit and retain staff and managers;
- high workload demand on Legal Services leading to the revocation of care order work being given lower priority than other, more urgent work;
- reduced rate of recruitment of local foster carers.

### **Effect upon Policy Framework & Procedure Rules.**

None

#### **4. Equality Impact Assessment**

This has been considered but as this is not a report about policy or decision making and each child's needs are assessed on an individual basis, it is not applicable.

#### **5. Financial Implications.**

The rising numbers of looked after children and the use of independent foster placements continues to place a burden on the budgets of the Safeguarding and Family Support Service. This is alongside an increase in the number of care proceedings and costs incurred for the Authority's Legal Service when making such applications.

#### **8. Recommendation.**

It is recommended that the Committee notes this report on the LAC project and receives updates on the project's progress as identified in the Informal Forward Work Programme schedule.

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**Background documents**

None