

BRIDGEND COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL
REPORT TO CORPORATE PARENTING COMMITTEE

4TH March 2020

REPORT OF THE CORPORATE DIRECTOR, SOCIAL SERVICES AND WELLBEING

LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN REDUCTION STRATEGY & EARLY HELP & SAFEGUARDING BOARD STRATEGY

1. Purpose of the Report

- 1.1 To update the Corporate Parenting Committee on the work of the Welsh Government National Technical Group which was presented to Corporate Parenting the 29th May 2019, and set outs the actions that the Local Authority has undertaken since this date in respect of its implementation of its Looked after Children reduction strategy.
- 1.2 This report contains information on the Early Help & Safeguarding Boards' strategy and provides details on the associating work streams and key actions relating to its updated action plan.

2. Connection to Corporate Improvement Objectives/Other Corporate Priorities

- 2.1 This report assists in the achievement of the following corporate priorities:-
- **Supporting a successful economy** – taking steps to make the county a good place to do business, for people to live, work, study and visit, and to ensure that our schools are focussed on raising the skills, qualifications and ambitions of all people in the county.
 - **Helping people to be more self-reliant** – taking early steps to reduce or prevent people from becoming vulnerable or dependent on the Council and its services.
 - **Smarter use of resources** – ensuring that all its resources (financial, physical, human and technological) are used as effectively and efficiently as possible and support the development of resources throughout the community that can help deliver the Council's priorities.

3. Background

- 3.1 On 29th May 2019 this committee was provided with a report by the Corporate Director of Social Services & Wellbeing in respect of the work being undertaken by Welsh Government to develop reduction expectations for Looked After Children (LAC) across Wales. The report highlighted that the First Minister's manifesto includes a firm commitment to support looked after children by focussing on the importance of reducing the need for children to enter care and also by improving outcomes for children in care.
- 3.2 The reports key findings were that in March 2018, there were 6,407 looked after children in Wales. This was an 8% increase on the previous year. Over the past 15 years, the number of looked after children had increased by 34%.

- 3.3 National data also highlights some other noteworthy patterns. For example, 24.6% of looked after children are placed out of county (1,575) and 5% are placed outside Wales (320). There will be good reasons why some of these children are placed out of area (e.g. placement with family or friends or the development of regional approaches to specialist provision), but it is recognised that others are placed further afield because there is no suitable provision locally. Some of the underlying issues have begun to be addressed through the National Fostering Framework, the Children's Residential Care Task and Finish Group and other work strands within the Improving Outcomes for Children programme. However, Welsh Government also wanted to take the opportunity to explore with local authorities the factors that influence decision making around out of county and cross-border placements, to ensure that more children can be placed closer to home where this is in their best interests.
- 3.4 To take this work forward Welsh Government established a technical group to inform and advise on the approach to this activity involving representatives from the Association of Directors of Social Services (ADSS) Cymru, Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA), local authorities, third sector and Welsh Government officials. The Corporate Director, Social Services and Wellbeing represents ADSS on this group. The Local Authority was visited by Welsh Government as part of the work of the technical group on the 1st May 2019. Following visits to all 22 Welsh Local Authorities the technical group has now produced an overarching report which highlights the key messages and also identifies actions that have to be taken forward nationally.
- 3.5 The overarching report highlighted the areas that each Local Authority has to target and report on a quarterly basis. The 4 areas in which the Local Authority has to set out its proposed reduction expectations are:-
- Numbers of children in care
 - Numbers of children who are placed out of county
 - Numbers of children placed outside of Wales
 - Numbers of children removed from parents with a learning disability

Within each quarterly report the Local Authority has to set out its proposed reduction expectation for the year, its achievements to date, the narrative behind these achievements and set out its next steps.

- 3.6 The Early Help & Safeguarding Board is jointly chaired by the Corporate Director of Education & Family Support and the Corporate Director of Social Services & Wellbeing. The Board is made up of senior managers from each directorate, and senior officers from the Police and Health. The purpose of this panel is 'to ensure a whole system approach to the safe reduction of the numbers of children in the Safeguarding arena'. The board has a joint action plan which has been in place since 2016. This plan focussed on the Institute of Public Care (IPC) recommendations in respect of Early Help & Safeguarding services (2018) and the Care Inspectorate for Wales (CIW) inspection of Children's Services in 2017. The plan also monitored actions linked to the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE's) agenda and rehabilitation and permanence. At the Board meeting on 22nd October 2019 it was identified that the existing action plan had been achieved almost in its entirety. As a result it was agreed that a new action plan would be drafted which would refocus on the crosscutting directorate activity.

4. Current situation / proposal

LAC Reduction Expectation Strategy

- 4.1 Ensuring the safe reduction of the LAC population was already a key strategic aim for the Local Authority. However, as a result of the LAC reduction expectation strategy, Children's Social Care have reviewed and refocused its approach and practice in this area. A key facet of this revised LAC strategy action plan was the launch of the Permanency Monitoring Group. The purpose of the Permanency Monitoring Group is to track the progress of children's journeys through the looked after system at an operational level, and for senior managers to assure themselves that actions are being taken to progress their plans for permanence appropriately. This group is an effective forum for not only tracking and monitoring but also in addressing care plan drift and practice issues.
- 4.2 Two key areas of practice have been the focus of this group. The first is to target the cohort of cases for looked after children/young people who could be subject to an alternative order or have their Care Order discharged. The second is preventing cases escalating to the point that the child/young person has to become looked after.
- 4.3 The first Permanency Monitoring Group which focuses on the LAC strategy action plan met on 10th September 2019. The group is chaired by the Group Manager for Case Management & Transition and the Group Manager for Information Advice and Assistance (IAA) and Safeguarding, and takes place bi-monthly. For more detail on the groups criteria and work streams please see **Appendix A** which contains the groups terms of reference. The group focuses on the case management of the cohort of cases in which it has been identified that there are opportunities to change the permanency plan. The group is currently concentrating on 45 cases, in which it has been identified that the care plan could potentially change in the following ways:-
- the Care Order could be discharged
 - a child/young person could be reunified with their birth family under placements with parents regulations
 - a Special Guardianship Order could be granted
 - a child/young person could be brought back into the county or from outside of Wales
- 4.4 By focussing on this cohort of cases, setting key time focused actions, and targeting services and resources on these cases it is anticipated that the Local Authority will increase the number of children that can be discharged from Care Orders in 2020-21, and increase the number of children who are brought back to live within the Local Authority. To support this programme of work the Local Authority has utilised Intermediate Care Fund (ICF) funding to create four Reunification Support Worker posts in the Fostering Service. These workers are focusing on providing placement stability, supporting the plans to bring children/young people back from out of county placements and reunification with birth families. The first workers were employed in November 2019. These Re-unification workers will work closely with edge of care services to support children to return home safely to families when they have been in the care system.
- 4.5 The Local Authority has adopted the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) reunification toolkit. In October 2019, key members of staff undertook reunification training. There are now officers in each team within

Children's Social Care who are able to mentor and support their team members so that they can assess, plan and support children, young people and their families in respect of reunification. It is anticipated that this will lead to an increase in the number of children/young people who are reunified with their birth families and crucially there being a decrease in those children/young people returning to the care system at a later date.

- 4.6 The Local Authority continues to focus on bringing children/young people back from independent and out of county placements. All placements with independent providers are continually reviewed within 12 weeks of the children being accommodated with Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA's). The aim being, where appropriate, to bring children and young people back into in-house fostering placements. All children placed with independent providers are monitored through the Placement Audit Tracking Monitoring Report. In addition to this, information is forwarded to the Fostering Team on a weekly basis, identifying children under the age of 10 currently in agency placements with a view to them reviewing their in house provisions. All cases should be reviewed at the Accommodation and Permanence Panel prior to the second LAC Review, for permanence planning. There is ongoing focus and investment in respect of marketing and the recruitment of general, respite, transitional carers and Parent and Child carers in order to ensure that there are placements for children to move into. The Development Officer who sits in the fostering team focusses on this and on the retention of existing foster carers.
- 4.7 At the end of quarter 3 the number of looked after children was 387, this is compared to the figure of 381 at the start of the financial year and demonstrates the fragility of this area and the frequent fluctuations in numbers throughout the year. So far during this year the number of children who have become looked after during a month has been 7.4. This is a decrease on the 7.7 average per month in 2018-19. This evidences that our Early Help and Safeguarding services are helping to support the reduction of the number of children and young people who need to become looked after. However, the number who have ceased to become looked after has been 6.8 per month, which is a decrease on the 7.9 per month in 2018-19, and explains why there has been a slight increase in the looked after children population.
- 4.8 The number of children who returned from out of county placements during the first 3 quarters of 2020 has been 17. This is positive as the expectation target the Local Authority had set itself for 2020-21 was for 6 children/young people to return. However, some children and young people have experienced changes in their placements or been placed out of the county. This remains an area of focus for Children Social Care, as wherever possible we would want children/young people to reside within the Local Authority. The number of children who returned from placements outside of Wales in 2020-21 has been zero. However, Bridgend only has 7 looked after children placed outside of Wales, and the Local Authority had already assessed that it would not have been appropriate for any of these children/young people to be returned during this financial year.
- 4.9 Edge of Care services are working closely with Children's Social Care in respect of the prevention agenda. Services have been developed which focus on reducing the numbers of children being looked after. These include the development of an innovative service called Baby in Mind. This service was developed in response to a review of the Local Authority's LAC population which demonstrated that 38% of children who became looked after during the year (2017-18) were under the age of

one. The Local Authority had also commissioned ten parent and child placements during the same period. It was recognised that by developing a service to respond to this identified group it could provide opportunities for earlier intervention and reduce the need to use the care system and/or parent and child placements. This team has now been in operation for 12 months and is able to demonstrate a positive impact on the prevention of babies entering the care system. 87% of babies who have been supported during 2018-19 by the Baby in Mind team have been prevented from becoming looked after. In addition, there has been a reduction of 50% in the use of Parent and Baby placements over the same period.

- 4.10 Early Help have developed the Rapid Response team to assist families in immediate crisis which offers wrap around support including support early in the mornings, evenings and weekends. This team was created to assist our long standing and successful edge of care service Connecting Families which has consistently demonstrated positive impact on prevention on of LAC. In addition to these services, we have the Integrated Family Support Service (IFSS) which is a statutory support service developed by Welsh Government in 2012 to support families where substance misuse is impacting on parents ability to care for their children.
- 4.11 Another service has been developed as part of a regional arrangement within the Cwm Taf Morgannwg region called Reflect, this service is delivered on behalf of the three local authorities by Barnardos Cymru. Reflect is a project that was created to support parents following the removal of their child from their care. Reflect was developed in recognition that many parents have children removed from their care but then access or receive little support and subsequently have further children who also need to be removed. The service therefore aims to prevent further pregnancy for a period of time and supports the parents to focus on their own needs so that they will be able to parent effectively in the future. The development of all of these new services alongside existing support services provides Children's Social Care with a wide range of services to support children and families with the aim of preventing children entering the care system safely or to safely exit care and live at home with the support they need.

Joint Action Plan

- 4.12 A new joint action plan has been drafted (**Appendix B**) and will be presented to the Early Help and Safeguarding board on 9th March 2020. The action plan focuses on 5 key areas that cut across the Social Services & Wellbeing and Education & Family Support directorates. These areas are:-
- The Youth Justice Service
 - The safe reduction of the Looked After Children population
 - To review and monitor edge of care services
 - Evaluation of the step up/down process between Early Help & Safeguarding
 - Regional MAPPS (Multi- Agency Placement Permanence Service)
- 4.13 The focus of the Early Help and Safeguarding board remains 'to ensure a whole system approach to the safe reduction of the numbers of children in the safeguarding arena'. The above five fields of business are the current areas of focus for the directorates, which are cross cutting and support the strategy of the safe reduction of Looked After Children, or in the case of the MAPPS service, ensure that children and young people and their carers receive the appropriate specialist therapeutic support whilst they are looked after. Edge of care services

play a critical role in supporting the Local Authority to reduce the number of looked after children. The teams work closely with Children's Social Care to support families and contribute to decision making regarding children remaining at home with their family safely. Bridgend Youth Justice Service also works closely with Early Help and Childrens Social Care.

- 4.14 The joint action plan focuses on the working interface between Early Help and Safeguarding to ensure that it is meeting the needs of the children, young people and families that they support. Early Help & Safeguarding colleagues are co-located together in the North, East & West safeguarding hubs. There are processes in place to ensure that the team managers work closely together and meet on a weekly basis to discuss cases and working practises. Regular joint development days are held to support the development of the staff and maintain positive working relationships. Team managers undertake audits together in respect of cases which have either been stepped down by safeguarding or stepped up by Early Help to ensure good practice is in place. The Early Help & Safeguarding Board monitors the interface between the two services, and receives regular feedback from senior managers at the board in respect of progress in this area.
- 4.15 From April 1st 2020 MAPSS (Multi Agency Permanence Support Service) will be commissioned within the Cwm Taf Morgannwg region. The commissioning process is currently underway in respect of a MAPSS for children who have the most complex and challenging needs and require a specialised high level service providing therapy to support both the child/young person and the parent/carer/staff member to prevent any placement or adoption from breaking down.
- 4.16 The service aims to:

Improve the mental health and emotional wellbeing of children looked after (CLA) who experience multiple difficulties for example mental illness, emotional and/or behavioral difficulties. Promoting secure attachment as a means of helping children and young people and their carers maintain placements (living and educational) so that they can feel safe enough to develop supportive attachments/relationships, opportunities for positive growth and start to process developmental trauma. Through helping the child's welfare system (Social Workers, carers, teachers etc) to best understand the child, their development, the trauma they have experienced and how this can present challenges for their care, to inform planning and intervention. The Early Help & Safeguarding Board will be monitoring the impact of this newly commissioned service.

5. Effect upon Policy Framework & Procedure Rules

- 5.1 There is no impact on the Policy Framework and Procedure Rules.

6. Equalities Impact Assessment

- 6.1 There are no equality implications in this report.

7. Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 Assessment

- 7.1 The implementation of the duties and responsibilities under the Social Services and Wellbeing (Wales) Act 2014 (SSWBA) supports the promotion of two of the seven

goals of the Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 within the County Borough of Bridgend. By promoting an environment that maximises people's physical and mental well-being and by supporting children, young people, adults and their carers and families to fulfil their potential no matter what their circumstances, the wellbeing goals of a Healthier and more equal Bridgend and Wales are supported.

7.2 The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 provides the basis for driving a different kind of public service in Wales, with five ways of working to guide how the Authority should work to deliver wellbeing outcomes for people. The following is a summary to show how the five ways of working to achieve the well-being goals have been considered in this report:

- Long Term – Social Services is demand led and the SSWBA focusses on sustainable prevention and wellbeing outcomes for the future. There is a requirement to meet the needs of people in the longer term and, because of rising demographics and increasing complexity, the safe reduction of looked after children numbers continues to be a priority.
- Prevention – the report reflects the ongoing commitment to new approaches adopted by the Directorate in line with the SSWBA, for example, the provision of information, advice and assistance to enable people to remain independent for as long as possible. This will ensure that need is anticipated and resources can be more effectively directed to better manage demand. There is a focus on prevention and early intervention in the Early Help & Safeguarding action plan.
- Integration and Collaboration – the implementation of the SSWBA requires local authorities to work with partners, particularly the NHS and the Police, to ensure care and support for people and support for carers is provided. The report evidences the work with partners that will be required to enable people to remain living within their communities, and where necessary, responding to safeguarding concerns in a timely, efficient manner.
- Involvement – the key stakeholders are the people who use social care. There is considerable engagement including surveys, stakeholder meetings, feedback forms and the complaints process. The provision of accessible information and advice helps to ensure that the voice of adults, children and young people is heard.

8. Financial Implications

8.1 Based on current projections the Local Authority in 2019-20 will, on average, spend £32,799 per Looked After Child, with a projected overall spend of £12,535,378. At the same period in 2018-19, the projected overall spend was £11,930,122. At the end of 2018-19 the actual overall spend was £11,486,106. The average spend per Looked After Child in 2018-19 was £30,147.

8.2 This figure has been largely affected by a small number of very complex cases with court orders in place requiring the authority to commission specialist placements and/or high levels of staffing to ensure the level of supervision and support is adequate.

9. Recommendation

9.1 It is recommended that the Cabinet Committee notes the information provided in this report.

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Background documents

None