

BRIDGEND COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT TO SUBJECT OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 2

23 SEPTEMBER 2021

JOINT REPORT OF THE CORPORATE DIRECTOR SOCIAL SERVICES AND WELLBEING AND THE CORPORATE DIRECTOR EDUCATION AND FAMILY SUPPORT

EARLY HELP AND PERMANENCE STRATEGY

1. Purpose of report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to update scrutiny members with progress in implementing the Early Help and Permanence Strategy and to seek feedback on the revised draft strategy (attached as **Appendix 1**) to the report.

2. Connection to corporate well-being objectives/other corporate priorities

- 2.1 This report assists in the achievement of the following corporate well-being objectives under the **Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015**:
- **Supporting a successful sustainable economy** – taking steps to make the county borough a great 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 for all people in the county borough.
 - **Helping people and communities to be more healthy and resilient** - taking steps to reduce or prevent people from becoming vulnerable or dependent on the Council and its services. Supporting individuals and communities to build resilience, and enable them to develop solutions to have active, healthy and independent lives.
 - **Smarter use of resources** – ensure that all resources (financial, physical, ecological, human and technological) are used as effectively and efficiently as possible and support the creation of resources throughout the community that can help to deliver the Council's well-being objectives.

3. Background

- 3.1 The Early Help and Permanence (EHP) strategy focuses on how we will improve and promote outcomes for children and young people in Bridgend. The successful delivery of early help to children, young people and families in Bridgend is reliant on the strength of partnership working, leadership and management commitment, and having a clear, robust and agreed framework from which to work.
- 3.2 Key to its implementation is a joined up approach between practitioners to share information and ensure the child/young person and their family are at the centre of any support they receive, which is delivered at the right time and in the right way.

- 3.3 The strategy supports the local authority's corporate plan and directorate business plans. Its focus is on supporting families to stay together wherever it is safe to do so, and minimising the need of statutory intervention and ultimately children and young people experiencing care.
- 3.4 The Education and Family Support directorate along with the Social Services and Wellbeing directorate are driving a 'whole system' approach to support children, young people and families.

4. Current situation/proposal

- 4.1 The EHP strategy has recently been revised to reflect emerging priorities and to re-focus efforts to support a safe reduction in numbers of care experienced children and other children and young people open to statutory services.
- 4.2 The EHP strategy (**Appendix 1**) and supporting action plan (**Appendix 2**) are draft documents which officers are keen to seek the views of stakeholders, particularly children, young people and families.
- 4.3 Progress in delivering the strategy over recent years has been marked with the creation of some new innovative services and good outcomes for children, young people and families. Achievements to date in delivering the EHP strategy include:

Baby in Mind

- 4.4 In 2019-20, the team worked alongside 18 families with 83% of babies supported by the team being able to remain safely within the family home. In November 2020, the service won a national Social Care Wales Accolade award in recognition of its pioneering work.
- 4.5 During 2020-21, the Baby in Mind Service worked with 29 families. 86% of the babies were supported to remain in the family home and of the 4 babies who were placed in the care of the local authority, three have since returned to the care of their parents.

Connecting Families

- 4.6 Connecting Families offered edge of care support to 59 families consisting of 115 children in 2019-20. Of these children, 93% were supported to remain at home with their families. An additional 8 children were referred to the service for placement support with 100% of these remaining with their carers.
- 4.7 In 2020-21, Connecting Families provided support to a total 178 children. 153 children were referred for edge of care support with 92.7% remaining out of care. 25 children were referred for placement support with 100% remaining in their existing placements.

Rapid Response

- 4.8 Rapid Response supported 159 children in 2019-20. Of those children referred, 157 received edge of care support with 96% of children supported to remain safely at home. 2 children received placement support with 50% remaining in the placement.

- 4.9 In 2020-21, Rapid Response provided edge of care support to 166 children with 96% remaining at home with their families. 100% of the three children referred for placement support were able to remain in their existing placements.

Integrated Family Support Service (IFSS)

- 4.10 11 children were referred to IFSS in 2019-20 for edge of care support with 64% being supported to remain safely in the care of their families. One child was referred for placement support and has remained at home.
- 4.11 In 2020-21, 22 children were referred to the service for edge of care support with 96% remaining at home. 6 children were referred for placement support with 100% remaining in their placement.

Children's Social Care Safeguarding restructure

- 4.12 On 13 September 2021, Children's Social Care restructured their safeguarding teams. This will lead to the creation of a Care Experienced Children's Team (Care Experienced Children were previously referred to as Looked After Children, LAC) who will work with care experienced children aged 0-16 once their care proceedings have concluded. To support the creation of this team a new Team Manager and Senior Social Worker role has been created. The team will focus on providing support to care experienced children once their final care plan has been agreed by the Family Court.
- 4.13 Our Safeguarding teams will be renamed 'Locality teams' and will continue to work on the same footprint and be located alongside their colleagues in Early Help. These teams will focus on working with children and their families on a Care and Support or on a Child Protection basis and whilst cases are subject to care proceedings.

Looked After Children's Reduction Strategy

- 4.14 Children's Social Care has a reduction strategy for Looked After Children, which is in line with Welsh Government's expectation. The strategy focuses on how we can support the safe reduction of our Looked After Children's population by discharging Care Orders for children who are placed in their parents care and increasing the use of Special Guardianship Orders for Foster and Kinship Carers.
- 4.15 During the financial year of 2020-21, there was a small reduction in the Local Authority's Looked After Children population from 394 to 390. At the time of writing this report this number had reduced further to 384. We continue to focus on reducing the number of children who cease to be looked after, paying close attention to the number of children who are either fostered by family members, with the aim of them successfully obtaining a Special Guardian Order, or those who are Placed with Parents where we are able to safely discharge the Care Order. During 2020-21 we introduced a Care Order Discharge Legal Surgery, chaired by the Group Manager Case management and Transition and attended by a Senior Childcare Lawyer. This reviews these cases and identifies those where either of the above options i.e. Care Order discharge/SGO can potentially be achieved. The creation of the Care Experienced Children's Team will further support this agenda. During 2019-20 the number of Special Guardianship Orders granted in respect of

Looked After Children was 6, increasing to 9 during the last financial year. A further 5 have already been granted during the current financial year. During 2019-20 the number of Care Orders discharged was 3 but this number increased to 10 last year and so far this financial year there have been a further 5.

Multi Agency Placement Support Service (MAPSS)

- 4.16 Tender for the regional MAPSS service was published in March 2021 with evaluation taking place in April 2021. The evaluation panel concluded on the basis of awarding to the most economical advantageous tender. However, following a formal challenge by one of the unsuccessful applicants a decision was made to abandon the tender process and re-tender. Having considered the lessons learnt, a re-draft of the specification has taken place, with input from the local authority and the tender is due to be published during August 2021. The new evaluation and award will take place during the autumn 2021.

Restructure of the Fostering Service

- 4.17 The re-structure report has been completed and was signed off during August 2021. Following this there will be consultation with the unions at the beginning of September 2021 before commencing the consultation with members of staff during September and October 2021. The new structure will be implemented in December 2021.

Practice Support Workers

- 4.18 During 2020-21 the service received 68 referrals. During quarters 1 and 2 the focus of the referrals was for placement support, whilst in quarter 3 and 4 the service saw increased referrals to support children and young people return to the care of their families. At the end of 2020-21 the service had worked with 23 children, where re-unification to their birth family had been achieved.
- 4.19 During quarter 1 of 2020-21, the local authority saw the percentage of children who are looked after, who experience more than 3 placement moves, reduce significantly to 0.51%. Throughout the year this number slowly rose to 10.26% but this still represents better performance in this area for the local authority than in previous years.
- 4.20 There is further evidence that the role of the Practice Support Worker has been effective with the number of children and young people who were placed out of county reducing from 48 at the start of the year to 39. This has included cases where children have returned to live with in-house foster carers and where they have been supported to return home to their birth families.
- 4.21 In terms of the cost benefit of this project, during quarter 4 of 2020-21, 5 children were supported to return to the care of their parents. Based on the cost of in-house foster carers between the date the children returned home and their eighteenth birthday, the saving to the local authority will be approximately £735,676.

Challenges in delivering the strategy

- 4.22 Covid pandemic - this has impacted on the ability of many services to deliver face to face interventions. Although many service providers are now able to return to services that resemble those delivered prior to the pandemic, many of them have significant waiting lists. This continues to have a negative impact on services (both quality and timeliness) delivered by Early Help and Safeguarding.
- 4.23 Increase service demand and complexity of cases – early help services are now running significant waiting lists for some services. Whilst this has been exacerbated by the pandemic, reported data evidences a 21% increase in referrals for early help services in quarter 1 of 2021-22 compared to the same period in 2019-20. A business case has been submitted for a budget pressure in 2022-23 to provide support in meeting this additional demand. The complexity of cases open to early help is also providing additional challenges.
- 4.24 Workforce shortages – there are currently significant staffing challenges in respect of recruiting into Social Care, particularly in terms of recruiting Social Workers to work within safeguarding teams. In addition, similar experiences are being faced with recruiting family support workers and other family intervention workers across early help services.
- 4.25 Grant funding – both the nature and the timeliness of grant funding (new and existing funding streams) continues to provide significant challenges with recruitment and retention of practitioners, particularly across early help services.

Priorities/next steps

- Embed our one Council and partnership whole system approach to improving and monitoring performance thorough the use of a shared data set that is accurate, up to date and meaningful
- Identify comprehensive packages of support to safely enable children and young people to remain in their own families where possible with an emphasis on early help
- Identify more cases of children receiving care and support which need to be closed or stepped down to Early Help
- Ensure that effective support systems are put in place so that children who enter the care system can return to live safely with family members at the earliest opportunity
- Support more children and young people at home on Child Protection Plans instead of under Placement with Parent regulations
- Review all children and young people placed on a Care Order with parents and consider whether any can be discharged or stepped down to Supervision Orders
- Support more family members to become kinship carers
- Support more carers to become Special Guardians
- Recruit more local authority foster carers
- Reduce the number and length of time that children and young people are living in residential care settings
- Ensure that effective support systems and therapeutic interventions are put in place to prevent placement breakdown and promote placement stability for care experienced children

- Develop a constructive relationship with the Judiciary alongside mechanisms for regular dialogue with the Child and Family Court Advisory Support Service (CAFCASS) and clarity of expectations of the dialogue and collaborative working with children’s guardians
- Develop a Corporate Parenting Strategy which commits the whole Council and partners to committing to taking the actions which result in the best possible lives for care experienced children
- Develop a child’s rights approach to participation and involvement of children and young people in the work of early help and permanence services, including the reshaping of services

5. Effect upon policy framework and procedure rules

5.1 The strategy will be implemented in line with existing policies and procedures.

6. Equality Act 2010 implications

The protected characteristics identified within the Equality Act, Socio-economic Duty and the impact on the use of the Welsh language have been considered in the preparation of this report. As a public body in Wales, the Council must consider the impact of strategic decisions, such as the development or the review of policies, strategies, services and functions. This is an information report, therefore it is not necessary to carry out an Equality Impact Assessment in the production of this report. It is considered that there will be no significant or unacceptable equality impacts as a result of this report.

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

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 well-being goals of a healthier and more equal Bridgend and Wales are supported.

8. Financial implications

8.1 There are no financial implications resulting from this report.

9. Recommendations

9.1 It is recommended that members:

- consider the content of the report, strategy and supporting action plan; and
- formally feedback comments on the revised draft strategy and action plan in line with agreed priorities.

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September 2021

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Background documents:

None