

<b>Meeting of:</b>	<b>SUBJECT OVERVIEW SCRUTINY COMMITTEE 2</b>
<b>Date of Meeting:</b>	<b>10 JULY 2023</b>
<b>Report Title:</b>	<b>A 3 YEAR SUSTAINABILITY PLAN TO IMPROVE OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES IN BRIDGEND</b>
<b>Report Owner / Corporate Director:</b>	<b>CORPORATE DIRECTOR OF SOCIAL SERVICES AND WELLBEING</b>
<b>Responsible Officer:</b>	<b>JOE BOYLE POLICY OFFICER</b>
<b>Policy Framework and Procedure Rules:</b>	<b>There is no effect upon the Policy Framework and Procedure Rules</b>
<b>Executive Summary:</b>	<p>The 3-year plan is necessary to improve the way that children and families are supported in Bridgend.</p> <p>The plan would replace the current 3-year strategic improvement plan for children services in Bridgend if approved by Cabinet in the Autumn following consultation.</p> <p>When Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) expressed their ‘serious concerns’ regarding Bridgend children’s services in May 2022 they stated they needed to see ‘sustainable improvement at pace’. In their improvement check carried out in November 2022 they noted improvements, a number of them significant, however these had been achieved in a way which was not sustainable in the medium to long term – by investing significant short-term resource into a service which is operating above the agreed workforce establishment in order to support an unprecedentedly high number of contacts and children and families who require statutory intervention to keep them safe and supported.</p> <p>The Corporate Management Board commissioned the Institute of Public Care (IPC), experts in supporting evidence-based improvements in the way children and families are supported, to analyse arrangements in Bridgend and make recommendations on a sustainable operating model which improves outcomes for children and families in accordance with Welsh Government and Council policy. This report draws on the analysis from which is the evidence base for the actions in the 3-year plan.</p>

	<b>Scrutiny views are sought on the 3 year plan prior to engagement with key stakeholders over the summer period and consideration by Cabinet in Autumn 2023.</b>
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## **1. Purpose of Report**

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is for the Committee to consider a 3-year plan (**Appendix 1**) to improve outcomes for children and families in Bridgend. It is intended that this plan is subject to consultation and engagement over the summer period prior to submission to Cabinet in the Autumn for approval.
- 1.2 The development of this plan, and the evidence base underpinning it, has been strongly informed by a detailed expert review undertaken by the Institute of Public Care (IPC) commissioned by the Corporate Management Board (CMB). The analysis from that review is summarised in this report and is the underpinning evidence to support the system changes in the plan. The changes set out aim to significantly improve the experience of children and families in Bridgend and reduce the need for statutory intervention in their lives.

## **2. Background**

- 2.1 In February 2022 Cabinet approved a 3-year strategic plan for children's services in Bridgend. The plan is based on 5 themes:
  - A stable, well-supported, motivated permanent workforce
  - Strength based, social work practice which supports children and families to stay together (wherever possible) and safeguards children from harm
  - Evidence based services and interventions
  - Seamless partnership working at an operational and strategic level
  - Listening to and acting on the voice of children and families
- 2.2 The context for the February 2022 plan was the need for significant improvement in Bridgend children's services. The combined impact of tragic child deaths and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns on the complexity of challenges faced by vulnerable children and families, was highly significant. As demand on the service increased, and workforce was depleted, pressures became acute and a critical incident was called in February/ March 2022 as the Council struggled to meet statutory responsibilities. Delivery of the priority actions in the plan approved by Cabinet in February 2022 has enabled improvements to be made and statutory duties to be met in a timely way with comparative quantitative performance good in very challenging circumstances.
- 2.3 However, whilst the most urgent issues the Council faced in safeguarding and protecting children and families which resulted in a judgement of 'serious concerns' by Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) following a performance evaluation inspection in May 2022, had been addressed to the extent that in the follow up improvement check in November 2022 progress was recognised, it is clear that services continue to require improvement to be sustainable and improve outcomes for children and families. CIW and IPC are clear that the way improvement has been achieved is not sustainable or optimal given the level of statutory intervention in the lives of children

and families that is the outcome of current operating models. A sustainability plan was needed to sustainably address workforce capacity on a permanent basis and to ensure that there is an integrated set of arrangements for working with children and families with complex needs in which more are supported in highly targeted preventative services. Partners need to continue to implement signs of safety as the model of safeguarding practice and the voice of children and families' needs to be effectively heard and acted upon. Therefore, the refreshed 3-year plan sets out a sustainable future operating model which is based on:

- A realistic assessment of the staffing capacity and associated financial investment required to meet demand to the required standards.
- Lessons learnt from a strong evidence base, experience and best practice elsewhere in terms of the Council-wide service, workforce and financial strategy to best improve outcomes for children and families in a way which reduces the need for statutory intervention.

2.4 The analysis which underpins the 3-year service plan is included in the report from the IPC. This evidence-based analysis is that a number of things need to change for sustainable improvement including:

- Sufficiency of workforce.
- A changed operating model between prevention (early help) and statutory services which provides an integrated service in which more children and families with complexity of need are supported preventatively where families are motivated and consent to change.
- Continued focus on implementing the Signs of Safety and Wellbeing model of practice.
- Commissioning the right quantum and quality of service.
- Enhanced working in partnership with professionals and partners and co-productively with children and families.

### **3. Current situation / proposal**

3.1 IPC's analysis is that Bridgend appears to have had a starting point of a relatively low level of staff in its children's social care services compared to staffing levels in other Welsh local authorities. Bridgend ranks 16th out of 22 Welsh local authorities, a relatively low proportion overall. Similarly, overall spend on children's services in Bridgend has been comparatively low. There are difficulties in making comparisons between local authorities about activity and spending reflecting different contexts, differences in how services are organised and differences in what is counted whether staff or spending.

3.2 While during and post-Covid all services have been challenged, the social care services appear to have experienced the brunt of an imbalance between demand and capacity in the last two years. The level of demand for children's statutory social care services over the last 18 months, particularly in Information, Advice and Assistance (IAA) and hub-based locality services has increased substantially. The headlines are that:

- 8,334 contacts to children's social care in 2022/23 compared to 5,667 (47.1% increase compared to 2021/22)
- 3,114 assessments in 2022/23 (89.4% increase compared to 2021/22)

- 1,202 children with care and support plans as at 31.03.23 (9.3% increase compared to 31.03.22)
- 2,154 initial strategy meetings in 2022/23 (98.3% increase compared to 2021/22)
- 1,557 completed S47 safeguarding investigations in 2022/23 (80% increase compared to 2021/22)
- 270 children on the child protection register as at 31.03.23 (54% increase compared to 31.03.22)

3.3 It should be noted that quantitative performance is remarkable given the challenges of volume and complexity being faced by the children's services workforce. At the meeting of the Improvement Board chaired by the Chief Executive on 7<sup>th</sup> June 2023, the Independent Advisor to the Council commented: "Performance within Bridgend Childrens Social Care is good given the volume and context of the increased activity, and the staffing and workforce pressures. This performance reflects well on managers and practitioners across the whole of the Bridgend Childrens Social Care Services, who are doing an amazing job in very difficult circumstances". This has been fed back to staff. It is however important to note that the quality of practice is more variable – it is very difficult to achieve consistently high-quality practice which is dependent on time spent developing relationships with children and families, when caseloads are higher than optimal (in safeguarding localities) and there is a high level of agency workforce.

3.4 A key driver of demand has been the response in the community and in partner agencies to the particular context in Bridgend. There has been an understandable caution about managing risk and an increase in expectations of children's social care to assess concerns and intervene where there are concerns for the safety and welfare of a child. This change in practice across professionals is not a simple short-term change in referral practice. On the basis of experience of high-profile tragic child deaths elsewhere IPC analysis is that they would expect this profound change in professional practice to have a lasting impact. At the same time, the Council is dealing with very significant workforce shortages and the impact on families of both the post-Covid experience and of the cost-of-living crisis which is further stressing many families with complex challenges and limited resources. The direct impact on the numbers requiring support is likely to continue for years rather than months and this continued to be the case in Quarter 1 of 2023/24.

3.5 IPC analysis strongly suggests that whilst demand for service is being generated across the system, it is currently being channelled in particular to statutory children's services delivered in the IAA/ Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) and locality teams. Their report also advises that whilst other local authorities have found that although demand can remain high, responses can be geared to responding through more effective early help provision for families with more complex needs and thus reducing the proportion who need statutory intervention.

3.6 Independent analysis is that the Council has worked hard and in general successfully over the last year to deal with the unprecedented demand rises. It has involved significant short-term funding to deal with a real capacity crisis. This response is evident in the current workforce position summarised below:

- Permanent establishment in children's social care: 122.91 full time equivalents
- The service is currently operating at 29% above establishment to meet all statutory duties in a timely way. This additional establishment is funded through a

combination of earmarked reserves and specific grants but is also contributing to a significantly overspent position

- There are 20% vacancies in the permanent workforce. There are usually around 5% absentees from work at any time.
- All vacant posts (and more) are covered to ensure the safety of safeguarding and child protection arrangements.
- 38% of the current children's social care workforce is therefore filled by agency staff

3.7 A considerable workforce plan is being implemented between the Social Services and Wellbeing Directorate and Human Resources. This includes an expanded 'grow your own' social worker programme, recruiting secondees and trainees, international recruitment (4 recruits have started in Bridgend to date), implementation of a support officer model and investment in supervision, training and development and improved marketing and business process. Whilst there is some short-term improvement, and the Memorandum of Cooperation led by the Association of Directors of Social Services to stabilise the agency market is having some impact, the main gains will take 2-3 years to be realised due to the timescales of social work training.

3.8 The capacity and resources required to maintain a sustainable service in the longer term, and how services are configured and managed to have the greatest impact and be most efficient, has been carefully considered. This consideration includes the arrangements of services across early help, edge of care, IAA and the locality social care teams, how they are working and what they need to look like in the future, particularly in terms of supporting families with complex needs who are at risk of becoming involved with safeguarding and care services have been reviewed. The most striking first feature that IPC found about Bridgend is that early help and social care are separate systems with their own routes for accepting and screening referrals and assessing subsequent needs. On a day-to-day basis there is good working practice between colleagues which mitigates the limitations of the arrangements, but overall, the interactions between the systems are limited with relatively few children and families stepped up or down between the systems.

3.9 IPC's analysis is that the current systems are too complex, and colleagues across the system work hard on a day-to-day basis to ensure that they are managed effectively, and that decision-making is consistent. However, IPC's review of specific case files, and interviews with managers indicated they are well aware of the difficulties the system creates particularly in terms of:

- Complicated family situations where careful judgements are needed to identify primary concerns from background issues.
- Dealing with different arrangements for assessment across different teams.
- Judgements about the support services which are most appropriate for a particular family.
- When, and for how long different services should be involved.
- Securing a shared plan of intervention that all partners are clear about.

3.10 For families or other professionals other more basic arrangements are potentially confusing. Currently on the website there are number of different telephone numbers which could be used regarding children's services which can build in potential confusion particularly with the separation between early help and social care contact

arrangements. IPC interviewed operational leaders of the services involved, and they reviewed a small selection of ten illustrative case files, selected as examples of more and of less effective practice. IPC state that it was clear to them, from this element of the work, that colleagues work hard together to co-ordinate responses to families and to make sure that gaps in provision are minimised. IPC have identified the following areas for further practice and system improvement:

- A professional, external to the Council, would experience the pathways into the Council's children and educational services, within which early help services are located, as fragmented and not part of a joined-up children's service.
- A family would experience the pathways into the Council's services as fragmented and they would have to repeat their story more than once before decisions are made about which service can support them or offer them advice and information.
- There appears to be no single arrangement for the ownership of family's pathways from the point of enquiry to the point of the delivery of IAA, assessment of need (by social care services) or provision of services and support by early help services - either in terms of an accountable senior officer, or a joint collaborative ownership across the services as they operate as aligned services.
- There is no shared approach to the assurance of practice quality across the different pathways and services – this is done within services. A theoretical risk exists that families can be passed between different services' front doors if both services determine that their threshold is not met, and their needs and or risks are not assessed and addressed. This is a theoretical system risk to children and an organisational risk for the Council. Multi-disciplinary response and allocation arrangements could be developed to address this, and to promote stronger shared ownership, better co-ordination of responses and improved understanding of capacity and skills across the system – for example along the lines of the SPACE Wellbeing Panels currently used across Gwent.
- The new practice framework of Signs of Safety implementation is following the best practice model in terms of the 'Signs of Safety' model across social work teams and 'Signs of Wellbeing' across the early help teams. Attention and energy will be needed to ensure the implementation of the practice model does not perpetuate splits and create additional thresholds for families between the two services.
- Management, governance and commissioning arrangements for services to meet the needs of families, particularly those with more complex needs, currently are not integrated, and despite the best efforts of staff and managers on a day-to-day basis this undermines the ability of the Council to secure and maintain effective and efficient services which meet the different needs of these families.
- Much of the money underpinning early help services at the current time is based on annual Welsh Government grants which have specific requirements attached and do not form part of a secure base budget. This has made long-term needs-based planning and investment difficult and may well have undermined population needs based planning of these services. Grant funding to local voluntary organisations is not managed by the services involved in delivering this agenda, so that these resources are not best used to focus on the areas which would likely offer greatest impact. They are managed by a Central Grants Team which is based in the Finance, Performance and Change Directorate. Research studies from across the UK in this area have shown the importance of the integration of grant funding to the voluntary sector with the totality of services available to support early help and children and families getting the right help at the right time.

- 3.11 In the light of the current challenges and the need to build a comprehensive and effective integrated service, IPC recommend a more integrated service is developed which is designed for Bridgend but draws on best practice from other local authorities in Wales who have achieved significant improvement. As part of the whole system review, information on how other local authorities in Wales organise their services was gathered. It was clear that Bridgend is different to other Welsh local authorities in terms of its organisational and management arrangements for early help, edge of care and social care services. Information is provided from 6 comparator local authorities as to how these services are managed and provided as a single service in the full IPC report.
- 3.12 As part of the project to inform their report, IPC undertook a review of recent literature and emerging UK policy in this area. There is a clear and growing evidence base which recognises that early help services for children and families with more complex issues need to be designed and delivered differently to those which are needed to meet the needs of families with less complex or less long-term issues. There is also a clear and fast-developing evidence base which can be used to help specify the particular services most likely to be able to support children and families with more complex needs.
- 3.13 In terms of Welsh policy, while Welsh Government has not produced specific policy on leadership and governance as yet, it committed itself to seven priorities in its Children and Young People's Plan published in March 2022 including:
- All children and young people should be supported to have a fair chance in life
  - All children and young people should have a good and secure home to live in.
  - All children and young people should receive the support they need to stay together or come back together with their family, if possible
- 3.14 To help deliver these ambitions it is currently working on a National Transformation Programme for Children's Services which, is intended to build on UK-wide evidence and deliver:
- Through the Regional Partnership Boards funding to 'Support families to stay together safely' along with therapeutic support for care experienced children.
  - Specialist accommodation for children with complex needs, especially for those at risk of going into a secure welfare or mental health placement, or who are stepping down from secure provision.
  - Promoting trauma-informed models of care and ensuring that there are appropriate joint commissioning arrangements in place between health, social services and education, so the needs of these children are met, and they do not fall between different types of provision.
- 3.15 The 3-year strategic plan is the Council's response to the expert analysis on how Bridgend achieves sustainable improvement in outcomes for children and families and moves, within agreed timescales, with outcome. Each of the 7 themes is described in a section. For each theme, the plan describes why it is important, how we have been working to date, and what national policy and guidance we need to take account of in the next period. We then commit ourselves to specific objectives, measures and the key actions we will need to take to deliver them in the next 3 years. The appendices include a three-year action plan and a list of immediate priorities we

will focus on in the next year. This is important as it is anticipated given that Bridgend is an authority that requires improvement in respect of support for children and families, that there is likely to continue to be close regulatory monitoring no later than 6 months after the June 2023 Joint Inspection of Child Protection Arrangements.

#### **4. Equality implications (including Socio-economic Duty and Welsh Language)**

4.1 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. It is considered that there will be no significant or unacceptable equality impacts as a result of this report.

#### **5. Well-being of Future Generations implications and connection to Corporate Well-being Objectives**

5.1

Involvement	In undertaking the review, IPC have worked with a steering group from Education and Family Support and Children's Social Care (CSC) and provided regular updates to the Corporate Management Board.
Long term	The report sets out to identify the long-term structures and plans for children and families.
Prevention	To prevent challenges and issues that have arisen in CSC over recent years and provide greater safeguarding and support to children and young people across Bridgend County Borough.
Integration	This report looks to set out and provide advice towards a more integrated support arrangements for children and families.
Collaboration	IPC have worked in consultation with CSC in order to provide this analysis and report to BCBC.

#### **6. Climate Change Implications**

6.1 There is no impact or link to Bridgend County Borough Council's climate change aspirations as a result of this report.

#### **7. Safeguarding and Corporate Parent Implications**

7.1 This report outlines and proposes changes, reflecting expert advice, as being required towards our statutory safeguarding accountabilities. Implementation of the plan will ensure effective safeguarding arrangements and support the wellbeing of care experienced children for whom the Council is corporate parent. The elements of the plan are based on a robust evidence base of what works in safeguarding, protecting, and improving outcomes for vulnerable children and families.



## **8. Financial Implications**

- 8.1 The revenue outturn report considered by Cabinet and Council in June 2023 detailed the financial pressures across the Authority during 2022/2023 and these have continued into the current financial year.
- 8.2 The report highlighted the significant financial pressures in the Social Services and Wellbeing Directorate in the year to March 2023. This was considered as part of the budget setting process for 2023/2024 and growth was awarded to the service to address those pressures.
- 8.3 The Service Sustainability Plan detailed in this report will have further financial implications for the Council. Details of these pressures, how they will be met and the implications for the Council as a whole will be reported to Cabinet following this engagement

## **9. Recommendation**

- 9.1 The Committee is recommended to consider the report and comment on the draft 3-year sustainability plan for children and families in Bridgend which will be subject to engagement and consultation prior to submission to Cabinet for approval.

## **Background documents**

Institute of Public Care, Bridgend County Borough Council, Sustainable Children's Services Analysis Report, May 2023'