

Meeting of:	CABINET
Date of Meeting:	19 SEPTEMBER 2023
Report Title:	A 3 YEAR SUSTAINABILITY PLAN TO IMPROVE OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES IN BRIDGEND
Report Owner / Corporate Director:	CORPORATE DIRECTOR OF SOCIAL SERVICES AND WELLBEING
Responsible Officer:	LAURA KINSEY HEAD OF CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE
Policy Framework and Procedure Rules:	There is no effect upon the Policy Framework and Procedure Rules
Executive Summary:	<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</p>

	<p>on the analysis from which is the evidence base for the actions in the 3-year plan.</p>
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	<p>There has been extensive engagement on the strategic plan over the summer of 2023 and the outcome of that engagement is reflected in the plan for Cabinet consideration.</p>
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1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is for Cabinet to approve a 3-year plan (**Appendix 1**) to improve outcomes for children and families in Bridgend.
- 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 7th 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.

- 3.16 The 3 year plan has benefitted from extensive engagement and involvement of key stakeholders over the summer of 2023. This engagement commenced following detailed scrutiny by Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Committee 2 on 10th July 2023. The performance measures within the plan have been strengthened considerably following the scrutiny consideration. In addition, there has been engagement with: Welsh Government Policy Lead, Cwm Taf Morgannwg Regional Safeguarding Board partners, third sector commissioned providers, frontline workforce in children’s social care, children and young people in Bridgend Youth Voice Forum and a public survey which received 31 responses. Overall, responses were supportive of the strategic plan and a number of helpful detailed comments have informed the plan which is presented to Cabinet for consideration.

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	There has been detailed engagement in the development of this plan from key stakeholders including children and families, workforce, Welsh Government and partners.
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 In order to support the service to be able to meet the predicted service demands, IPC has presented proposals with regards to the level of resourcing required within the service to meet this ongoing demand. The proposals do have significant financial implications for the Council, the impact of which will be felt in the short, medium and longer term.

8.2 The level of additional resource required to support Children's Services is substantial and will impact on the budget position for the Council as a whole, therefore the overall financial position for the Council is summarised below.

8.3 The 2022/2023 budget was approved in February 2022, prior to the significant increases in inflation and energy costs being evident. During the last financial year, the Council has had to meet significant additional costs which have been reported to Cabinet and Council. As a result, the Council has had to meet additional costs through some of the central contingency budgets. Whilst the Council was able to do this, it has meant there is less flexibility within base budgets to look at options to meet these new, significant, requirements for social care.

8.4 On 21st June 2023, Council considered the closing position for the 2022/2023 revenue budget. The report detailed that Social Care and Wellbeing overspent by £10.8m last year. This was offset by underspends in all other service Directorates, the Council wide budgets and a higher than anticipated collection of Council Tax.

8.5 The table above illustrates that most services are spending within their budget and the overspend in Social Care and Wellbeing is being offset by savings elsewhere in the Council, many of which are one-off. The outturn position for social care is a significant overspend which is broken down below.

Social Care Revenue Position

	Budget 2022/2023 £'000	Outturn 2022/2023 £'000	Variance £'000	Budget 2023/2024 £'000
Social Services as a whole	85,387	96,255	10,868	92,791
Details :				
Adult Services	63,788	68,366	4,578	68,661
Children Services	21,599	27,889	6,290	24,130

Total	85,387	96,255	10,868	92,791
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This position is net of the use of Earmarked Reserves which is detailed later in this paper.

- 8.6 The financial pressures for Social Care services were considered as part of the budget setting process for 2023/2024 and growth of £8.1m was awarded to the service. In July 2023, Cabinet considered the financial position for the authority at the end of June 2023. This report also reported the likely spend position for the full financial year and the overspend position for social services is currently £11m.
- 8.7 Due to the increasing budget pressures, the service has been supported via the use of Earmarked Reserves (EMR). Due to underspends across the Council in recent years social services have received funding to establish EMRs and is utilising these to meet the increasing costs, in particular workforce costs.
- 8.8 The Service is utilising these to meet the increasing costs, in particular workforce costs, and the use of EMRs to date and planned for the current year are summarised below:

	Planned 2022/2023 £'000	Actual 2022/2023 £'000	Variance £'000	Balance at 01.04.23 £'000	Planned Usage 2023/2024 £'000
IAA / MASH	1,639	1,625	-14	1,864	1,614
Locality Teams	76	79	3	355	177
Other Children Services	876	358	-518	1,412	699
Total	2,591	2,062	-529	3,631	2,490

- 8.9 The IPC report has identified service areas where additional resource is required to enable the service to address the current demands. Comparing the requirements against the agreed revenue budget for 2023/2024, the shortfall in funding in a full year is £3.5m which is required to fund services in the Information, Advice and Assessment Service, the locality teams and the edge of care service.
- 8.10 The IPC report has identified service areas where additional resource is required to enable the service to address the current demands. Comparing the requirements against the agreed revenue budget for 2023/2024, the shortfall in funding in a full year is £3.5m which is detailed below:

Service area	2023/24 budget £'000	Proposed budget £'000	Variance £'000
IAA	1,840	2,721	881
Locality Teams	2,277	4,447	2,170
Edge of care			500

Total			3,551
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- 8.11 As already detailed, the Council has experienced, and continues to experience, significant pressures across the revenue budget. Due to the above, the Council is unable to identify funding at the level identified in the base budget in the current financial year, therefore options for the short, medium and long term will have to be developed.
- 8.12 When the 2023/2024 budget was approved, a number of recurrent pressures for 2023-24 totalling £9.77 million were agreed with a further £1.3 million being retained centrally to support emerging pressures. It is proposed that £1m of this is allocated to Social Services and this resource would be part of the base budget and therefore recurrent funding.
- 8.13 The use of EMRs should only be considered on a short-term basis to support the service as the Council is unlikely to be able to replenish these reserves going forward due to the budget pressures already outlined. EMRs should not be used to fund ongoing budget commitments and this additional spend is required to support a permanent increase to the staffing structures in Children’s Social Services.
- 8.14 The service is utilising EMRs to fund the additional capacity required within Children’s Services already. Currently it is planned that £2.4m will be pulled down in the current year to support the service. It is not possible to increase this level of funding from within Children’s Services as some of the balance going forward is required to continue to fund social work training and the implementation of the Signs of Safety framework.
- 8.15 A review of existing EMRs across the Council is being undertaken. This has identified £2.5m to date which could be unwound and repurposed to support children services. All existing EMRs have been identified for specific purposes and to meet previously agreed priorities therefore this work has required all areas to review their priorities going forward.
- 8.16 To ensure this plan addresses financial sustainability for the service and the Council, the use of EMRs in the current year should only be agreed if Cabinet and Council agree to prioritise this service when agreeing the budget for 2024/2025.
- 8.17 Further work will be undertaken as part of the budget planning process for 2024/2025 to identify permanent funding to meet the £2.5m shortfall identified.

9. Recommendation

- 9.1 Cabinet is asked to:
- approve ‘Think Family’, the 3 year sustainability plan for children and families in Bridgend.
 - Agrees that the budget virement of £1m to social services be submitted to Council for approval in accordance with the Council’s Financial Procedure Rules;

- Notes the additional use of £2.5m EMR's in the current financial year to support the service as detailed in the report.

Background documents

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