

OVERVIEW OF LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN AND CARE LEAVERS' COMMISSIONING STRATEGY

Summary

1. The Head of Provider Services and Transformation has been invited to the Meeting to provide an update on the key areas of the Looked After Children and Care Leavers' Commissioning Strategy.

Background

2. At its meeting on 8 May 2014, the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Panel discussed the draft Worcestershire Children's Services Commissioning Strategy for Looked After Children and Care Leavers 2014-17 and it is now timely for the Panel to receive an update.

3. The number of children and young people who are looked after by Worcestershire County Council has increased from 580 in 2010 to 680 on 7 June 2015. Worcestershire also has 326 care leavers (as at 31 March 2015).

4. The Council has recognised the pressures and agreed an additional £2.5 million in 2013/14 and £3.5 million in 2014/15 and £3.1m in 2015/16.

5. The Looked After Children & Care Leavers' Commissioning Strategy as set out in April 2014 has been progressed in the development of residential provision in-house

Key Areas of Development

6. Key areas have been given further investment of time and resources to make the change required to meet the identified needs of our looked after children and care leavers- in particular to develop an in-house fostering service for 70% of our looked after children in need of this type of placement, development of a short breaks unit to prevent young people from needing to be looked after, and the re-commissioning of supported living provision jointly with District housing providers

7. Another key action that has been progressed this year is the development of a Staying Put Policy

8. There has been a review of the Care Leaver's service and decision made that outsourcing this provision will bring greater benefits for care leavers. This is in progress at present.

9. The Council is also supporting a Back to Basics Improvement Programme with social workers to embed best practice across the newly recruited service.

Numbers of looked after children and care leavers

10. These additional actions will not yet ensure that the right placement is available at the right cost for the child at the point they need it, and the Looked After Children and Care Leavers' Commissioning Strategy is being refreshed to address these pressures.

11. The Action Plan for 2015/16 is being finalised and will be available for presentation at the end of July 2015.

12. This is in line with a National trend. Worcestershire has traditionally had a higher rate of looked after children per 10,000 than its statistical neighbours, and this remains the case. However at 31 March 2014 Worcestershire's rate was lower than the national average (56/10,000 compared with 60/10,000).

13. The reasons for this are difficult to ascertain as each local authority operates differently and many factors are at play- such as, investment in earlier help, investment in in-house provision, culture and practice (e.g. in respect of homeless 16/17 year olds or kinship arrangements), and the fact that even amongst statistical neighbours there are large variations such as counties that do not include their main city.

14. The increase in the number of looked after children was forecast in the Needs Assessment that informed the Looked After Children and Care Leavers' Commissioning Strategy 2013-16.

15. Without mitigating actions, the forecast is for a rise in the number of looked after children of 30 per year over the next 3 years. However, the forecast cannot predict activities or events that may impact in the future and inevitably becomes less accurate for future years.

16. The Looked After Children and Care Leavers' Commissioning Strategy is based on the principles of 'Right Child, Right Plan, Right Place, Right Time, Right Cost'.

17. At any one time there will be approximately 300 children with a plan to cease to be looked after. This will be because this is the right plan for that child or young person.

18. Between 1 April 2014 and 31 March 2015, 312 children started to be looked after and 272 ceased to be looked after.

19. Of those who ceased to be looked after:

- 63 children were reunified home to a birth parent
- 11% of children returned to live with a member of the extended family in an informal arrangement or formal legal arrangement under a Child Arrangement Order or a Special Guardianship Order or remained with their foster carer in a permanent arrangement through Special Guardianship (whether a related or non-related carer)

Numbers of children and young people ceasing to be looked after

Numbers of children changing placements

- 20% were placed with an alternative permanent family for adoption
- 82 young people ceased to be looked after on their 18th birthday
- 120 children ceased to be looked after within 12 months of starting to be looked after

20. In addition to children ceasing to be looked after, some children have a Care Plan that means they need to move to a different type of placement, or move placements due to unforeseen changes.

21. 11% (69 children) moved placements 3 times between 31/03/14 and 31/03/15.

22. 68% of children under 16 looked after for 2.5 years or more have lived in the same placement.

23. This may be because they have had difficulty in living with a family, and have been in residential provision, but they are now ready for a foster family, or it may be that they have been living with a foster family, but they are in crisis and need more intensive residential care for a period of time.

24. Some children are looked after in an emergency and are in short-term placements whilst an assessment is undertaken, at the end of which it is decided that they are unable to return home, and a long-term foster home is sought.

25. The number of children who start and cease to be looked after is affected by a number of factors that are interrelated and impact on each other:

- Individual circumstances- whilst a range of external factors may impact on a family and also on the responses of services to meet needs and risks, each child and their family remains unique and the ways in which they cope with or address challenges as they arise will impact on the welfare of the child and the potential for significant harm or family breakdown
- Social factors- effectiveness of help at an earlier stage across the childcare system (universal, targeted and specialist services for children and their parents and carers). The right intervention at the right time from the right person/service can prevent children and young people from needing to be looked after, and can enable a more swift and successful return home if a child does need to be looked after. Early help commissioned services are now in place. However, these are only one part of the whole system of prevention and intervention.
- Economic factors- more children are looked after from areas where there is higher unemployment, lower educational attainment, poorer housing and lack of access to health and leisure services. Worcestershire mirrors the national trend

Complexity of system

for this and any decisions about where to target scarce resources needs to consider the impact on the most vulnerable children in these areas.

- Political factors- new statutory requirements or government guidance arising from a political response to issues and concerns raised at a national level will impact on practice – recent examples are child sexual exploitation, avoiding delay in care proceedings, Staying Put arrangements, health service restructure, welfare reform
- Judicial factors-new legislation and legal judgements or outcomes from judicial reviews will change practice in order to be legally compliant-e.g. Southwark Judgement re homeless 16/17 year olds, Mumby Judgment re Regulation 24 placements with kin carers. The timescale for concluding care proceedings within 26 weeks is now strictly monitored by the courts.
- Resources- the reduction in public finance across a range of services may have unintended consequences for looked after children and care leavers, in particular if services are restricted for parents dealing with substance misuse, domestic abuse or mental ill-health

Workforce issues

26. Once a child becomes known to the Children's Social Care Service, the role of the child's social worker becomes pivotal as the lead person to undertake, and engage the child, their family and other professionals, in the assessment, plan and effective interventions for the child.

27. As a result of the many factors, the systems around a child and their family are not always able to be co-ordinated effectively or easily. This is compounded by legislation and guidance that is extensive and detailed and must be followed.

28. Therefore it is essential to have a sufficient number of skilled and experienced social workers with manageable workloads.

29. Worcestershire has struggled to recruit in the past but since the restructure in 2013, we have actively recruited and supported sufficient newly qualified social workers to fill the vacancies. The workforce remains relatively inexperienced and a programme to develop basic standards of best practice (Back to Basics) is underway.

Budget issues

30. The complexity of the system and the changes of plan and placement required in order to meet the needs of children and young people have implications for trying to forecast the type of resource and the amount of resource that will be required.

31. The Looked After Children and Care Leavers' Strategy outlined a number of ways to ensure that provision is made at the right cost and this has created an Action Plan to ensure these are progressed:

- Increase the number of Worcestershire CC foster carers to

- reduce the demand on external, and more costly placements, which do not provide better quality foster homes
- Increase the number of small residential homes within the county to reduce the dependence on external residential provision, especially provision far from Worcestershire
 - Develop a specialist family support service to provide intensive support to prevent family breakdown and aid and sustain reunification home
 - Utilise family meetings and family group conferences to build on family strengths to avoid children needing to be looked after, or plan their entry/exit to or from care in a timely way

32. The Action Plan 2013/14 had costs attached to these actions and, in addition, each child's Care Plan was tracked to try to forecast the costs attached to their placements. Additional resources of £3.5 million were allocated to the Placements Budget for the following financial year (2014/15).

33. However, the number of looked after children increased by 49, which exceeded the forecast. In addition, although progress had been made since January 2015 after an effective publicity campaign, the number of Worcestershire foster carers had not significantly increased by the end of the year.

34. This resulted in a higher number of children being placed in external residential provision as there were no other placements available to meet their needs.

35. Further additional resources of £3.1million were allocated to the Placements Budget for 2015/16.

36. In addition, resources have been allocated through the Council's FutureFit Transformation fund in order to push some actions faster:

- Head of Provider Services and Transformation to lead on the progression of developments in fostering, residential, short breaks, adoption and specialist support services and to develop an Edge of Care Strategy
- Fostering Transformation Manager to lead on the recruitment and retention of Worcestershire foster carers for Worcestershire children
- Development of specialist support for reunification in conjunction with NSPCC Return Home project
- Additional experienced social worker support for newly qualified social workers to embed good practice
- Investment in a tracker system to aid the progression of children's plans through legal proceedings

37. The Action Plan for 2015/16 is being finalised and will be available for presentation at the end of July 2015. It is likely to require further additional resources to meet the forecast needs.

Actions already undertaken or planned

38. The Looked After Children & Care Leavers' Commissioning Strategy has been progressed in the development of residential and supported living provision in-house and development of a short breaks unit to prevent children needing to be looked after

39. Key areas have been given further investment of time and resources to make the change required to meet the identified needs of our looked after children and care leavers- in particular to develop an in-house fostering service for 70% of our looked after children in need of this type of placement

40. Other key actions that have been progressed this year are the development of a Staying Put Policy, and re-commissioning supported living provision

41. There has been a review of the Care Leaver's service and decision made that outsourcing this provision will bring greater benefits for care leavers. This is in progress at present.

42. The council is also supporting a Back to Basics improvement programme with social workers to embed best practice across the newly recruited service.

43. Finance officers are also working on the development of a 2-3 year financial strategy and working with operational managers on the financial savings which should be attributable to the developing Edge of Care Strategy.

Private children's homes and fostering agencies (for Worcestershire children)

44. As at 15/05/15 there were 51 looked after children in externally procured residential placements and 2 young people in secure placements, and 28 children in in-house residential provision. The average cost of external provision is £3700 per week and in-house provision is £2200 per week.

45. There were 243 children in externally procured independent fostering agencies, and 128 with in-house non-related carers. The average cost of an externally procured fostering placement is £800 per week in comparison to an in-house placement of £350 per week

46. 13% of children lived over 20 miles from their home address at the end of March 2015.

Role of corporate parent

47. The role of Worcestershire County Council as a Corporate Parent is crucial in providing leadership and strategic direction to improve outcome for all of our looked after children and care leavers.

48. Worcestershire's Corporate Parenting Board was refreshed in 2014 and is in the process of updating the Corporate Parenting Strategy and Action Plan for 2015-17. The Corporate Parenting Board has set a priority of raising the profile of corporate parenting across the council and with key partner agencies in 2015/16

through an awareness-raising and training strategy, alongside a focus on areas for improvement to ensure our looked after children receive the service they should from their corporate parents.

49. The key question for all corporate parents is 'is this good enough for my child?'

50. The proposal is for all relevant senior officers, councillors and key individuals in partner agencies to sign the Corporate Parenting Pledge. The draft Corporate Parenting Strategy, Pledge and Action Plan are being presented at the next Corporate Parenting Board on 19 June. This will be followed by an externally facilitated development day in July.

51. The Senior Leadership Team has also considered how other areas of the council can fulfil our corporate parenting role, especially Open for Business, through a focus on improving outcomes for care leavers in employment, education and training.

Purpose of this Meeting

52. The Panel is invited to consider the update and determine if it wishes to submit any comments to the Cabinet Member or carry out any further scrutiny.

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Background Papers

In the opinion of the proper officer (in this case the Director of Children's Services) the background papers relating to the subject matter of this report are:

Agenda and Minutes of:

Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Panel 8 May 2014, which are available on the Council's website at:

<http://www.worcestershire.gov.uk/cms/democratic-services/minutes-and-agendas.aspx>