



SOCIAL SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE - 1ST DECEMBER 2020

**SUBJECT: THE SAFE REDUCTION OF THE NUMBER OF CHILDREN
LOOKED AFTER IN CAERPHILLY**

REPORT BY: CORPORATE DIRECTOR – SOCIAL SERVICES & HOUSING

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To update Scrutiny Committee (Committee) on the actions taken to implement Welsh Government's expectation to safely reduce the numbers of Children Looked After in Caerphilly.

2. SUMMARY

- 2.1 The First Minister for Wales made a manifesto pledge to reduce the numbers of Children Looked After in Wales by 2022.
- 2.2 As part of a national programme of work, Welsh Government officials and advisors visited Caerphilly in March 2019 and the Council was invited to submit a reduction plan to Welsh Government by the end of April 2019.
- 2.3 In recognition of the challenges facing Local Authorities, Welsh Government announced additional Integrated Care Funding (ICF) specifically focussed on supporting the safe reduction of the number of Children Looked After. This report includes details of how this funding has been utilised within Caerphilly.
- 2.4 In September 2019, Cabinet agreed that the 'Safe reduction of Children Looked After' would be included within Wellbeing Objective 6 of the Corporate Plan: *Support citizens to remain independent and improve their wellbeing*, when the Plan was reviewed next.
- 2.5 The reduction plan and an overview report was presented to Committee in October 2019 so this report provides a timely update for Members.

3. RECOMMENDATION

- 3.1 For Scrutiny Committee to note the actions taken to implement plans to safely reduce the numbers of Children Looked After and to confirm the current position in Caerphilly.

4. REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDATIONS

- 4.1 To ensure Scrutiny Committee is fully aware of the expectations of Welsh Government to reduce the number of Children Looked After and the plans to achieve this within Caerphilly.

5. THE REPORT

Welsh Government Reduction Expectations updates:

- 5.1 Committee will recall that for the 2019/20 financial year, Children's Services predicted a continued rise in Looked After numbers because the ICF investments proposed would not be fully implemented until 2020. On that basis, it was predicted that the total number of Children Looked After would be 490 by the end of March 2020. In response to Welsh Government, the Council proposed that Children's Service would aim to achieve an overall reduction of 10% (49 number) by the end of March 2022 ie aim for a total number of 441.
- 5.2 The actual number of children in care at the end of March was 451 so significantly lower than the predicted 490 and only just above the 2022 target. This number remained relatively stable for the first quarter of this year but has risen by 19 during quarter 2. There can be no doubt that the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted on service pressures and the demand for accommodation for children.
- 5.3 Committee were previously advised that Children's Services planned to achieve the reduction through the following:
- The systematic review of all children placed with parents to consider revocation of the Care Orders
 - The systematic review of all children placed with relative carers to consider transferring to a Special Guardianship Order (SGO)
 - Reducing the number of children entering care through the development of Family Meetings and improved long term Family Support services
- 5.4 It is important for Committee to understand the breakdown of the Children Looked After population in Caerphilly. Of the 470 children currently in care:
- 72 children are placed at home with parents under a Care Order
 - 118 children are placed with relative carers under Care Orders
- This is important because it means that 190 children are considered appropriately placed and cared for within their families.
- 5.5 As stated at 5.3, the focus has been on reviewing the legal status of children to revoke Care Orders wherever it is safe to do so. To date 18 Care Orders have been revoked with a further 24 at various stages of the revocation process. In addition, 26 children have been identified where there is the possibility for relative carers to become Special Guardians. It is important to note that support, including financial support continues to be provided to relative carers irrespective of the legal Order in place.
- 5.6 Welsh Government continue to be concerned about the number of Children Looked After placed out of county. Caerphilly's intention is always to place children as 'close to home' as possible which can sometimes mean an out of county placement is preferable. Currently, 40 children are placed with their parents who live outside

Caerphilly County. A further 24 children are placed with Caerphilly approved carers who live out of area. It is important to acknowledge that it can be in the best interests of a child to be placed out of area. For example, a child from Rhymney may be better placed in Merthyr or Ebbw Vale in order to maintain links with family and school than being placed with Caerphilly carers in Risca.

- 5.7 Welsh Government also expect Local Authorities to reduce the numbers of Children Looked After outside Wales. Caerphilly currently has 6 children placed outside of Wales. This is a reduction of 4 since March. 3 children are placed long term with relative carers, 2 children are placed with Independent foster carers in Norfolk to be close to family who originate from there and 1 child is in residential care. Therefore, for 5 of the children, the placements out of Wales are considered to be in the best interests of the individual children. For the one child in residential care, the plan is for that child to transfer to the new Children's Home in Caerphilly after Christmas. It is important to note that there will always be a need to place outside Wales for specialist services that may not be available in Wales.
- 5.8 Finally, Welsh Government expect to see a reduction in the number of children removed from the care of parents who have a learning disability. Committee will be aware that Caerphilly has a very robust process in place to assess the cognitive ability of parents and specialist assessments are completed wherever necessary. The number of children removed from parents with a diagnosed Learning Disability is not disproportionate in Caerphilly and as a result no specific actions were identified to address this.

Integrated Care Funding (ICF) Grant updates:

- 5.9 As stated above, to support the First Minister's Manifesto Pledge, Welsh Government released additional ICF funding to support regional proposals to reduce Looked After numbers. Working in partnership with Aneurin Bevan University Health Board and the four other Gwent Local Authorities, a regional service model approach was agreed that could be delivered in each Local Authority area consisting of four key strands:
- Family Meetings
 - Special Guardianship Support
 - Enhanced 'Edge of Care' services and
 - Mediation services for children facing homelessness

Family Meetings:

- 5.10 A Family Meeting is a way for families, including wider family and close friends to come together to discuss a concern or problem which involves the children or young people in the family. The aim of the Meeting is to make a plan to support the child or young person that everyone is engaged in and supports. Families can be 'experts' on themselves. They are often the best people to make safety plans for their children and the meeting is an opportunity for families to take control of the decision making in their lives, helping families to identify their own strengths and solutions to their difficulties.
- 5.11 The implementation of this service was significantly delayed due to recruitment restrictions during the pandemic. However, it became fully operational in September and is currently working with 10 families. This number will naturally increase over time with the expectation that any child being considered for Child Protection Conference or becoming Looked After will be subject to a Family Meeting to attempt to resolve the concerns at a lower support level.

Special Guardianship Support:

- 5.12 If a child cannot be cared for by their parent(s), Local Authorities have a duty to find permanent alternative carers for them. A Special Guardianship Order (SGO) provides a legally secure placement for a child until they reach the age of eighteen years. It can be a positive alternative to adoption because it retains the child's sense of identity and belonging. A Special Guardian has Parental Responsibility to care for the child and make all the decisions about their upbringing.
- 5.13 Utilising the ICF funding in addition to transferring existing Social Worker vacancies, Children's Services were able to create the Family & Friends Team to provide dedicated support for the 190 Children Looked After placed at home with parents or with relative carers as detailed at 5.4 above. In addition, 212 children are already supported under SGO arrangements in Caerphilly.
- 5.14 Through the additional investment, Caerphilly Special Guardians can access the following range of supports:
- Improved assessment and ongoing support
 - Support to remain in education provision and enhance academic achievement (similar to that provided to Children Looked After)
 - Develop daytime and evening peer support groups for Special Guardians
 - Provide a training programme for Special Guardians
 - Offer out of hours telephone contacts in line with foster carers
 - Organise family days, social events and activities
 - Provide advice and assistance including signposting to other services
 - Provide mediation to assist with new or existing contact arrangements
 - Access to Psychology consultation and support

Enhanced 'Edge of Care' support:

- 5.15 Edge of Care Services are those aimed at preventing the need for a child to become Looked After and supporting care experienced children to be able to return home to their families wherever possible. Committee is aware that Caerphilly has historically invested in this type of service through the development of the Intensive Support Team. This was enhanced with the additional ICF funding to include Psychology support, an Education worker, a children's Community Connector and additional Family Support Workers to provide longer term family 'maintenance' support to reduce the need for children to become Looked After.
- 5.16 Since 1st April 2020, 198 children have been supported by the Team. In the year to date, 117 children have been supported to remain living within their families thereby avoiding becoming Looked After and 17 children have been removed from the Child Protection Register.

Mediation support for young people facing homelessness:

- 5.17 The best place for young people to live is within their families but sometimes there may be difficulties which make it hard to live in the family home. Mediation is a structured process where individuals try and resolve differences and problems with the support of an impartial mediator. Outcomes from successful mediation include:
- The young person can remain at home or return home with a level of support
 - The young person remains at home or returns home temporarily whilst accommodation options are fully explored and a planned move is able to be achieved rather than moving in a crisis
 - The young person is unable to return home but relationships within the family are positively repaired and maintained for the longer term
- 5.18 Currently, the Mediation worker is supporting 8 children to avoid family breakdown. This number can vary based on demands at any time.

6. ASSUMPTIONS

- 6.1 No assumptions have been made in the writing of this report

7. LINKS TO RELEVANT COUNCIL POLICIES

- 7.1 Social Services & Well Being (Wales) Act 2014
- 7.2 Well-Being of Future Generations Act (Wales) 2015
- 7.3 **Corporate Plan 2018-2023.** The content of this report contributes towards Well Being Objective 6: Support citizens to remain independent and improve their well-being.

8. WELL-BEING OF FUTURE GENERATIONS

- 8.1 The content of this report contributes to the following Well Being Goals:

- A resilient Wales
- A more equal Wales
- A Wales of cohesive communities

The report is consistent with the five ways of working as defined within the sustainable development principle in the Act as follows:

- Long Term – the provision of safe care and accommodation for children in the greatest need is, and always will be, a key strategic priority for the Council. Improving outcomes for children Looked After will deliver longer term improvements for them individually.
- Prevention – Children’s Services is committed to preventing the escalation of need and subsequent demand on higher tier statutory services through the delivery of early intervention and family support services.
- Integration – Service developments in Children’s Services are increasingly integrated with Health and other professionals eg. MyST, Gwent Attachment

Service, Psychology support to Supporting Family Change, Intensive Support and Fostering Teams

- Collaboration – the developments funded through the WG ICF funding have been agreed across the five Local Authorities and the Regional Partnerships.
- Involvement – all key stakeholders have been consulted and involved in the development of the WG Reduction Expectations Plan and service developments.

9. EQUALITIES IMPLICATIONS

9.1 The Council's full Equality Impact Assessment process does not need to be applied

10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

10.1 The service developments detailed from paragraph 5.9 above rely on the ICF grant funding which totals £870k for Caerphilly. If this funding reduces or ceases, it would have a significant negative impact on the ability of Children's Services to provide early intervention and prevention support.

11. PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

11.1 The ICF grant is funding a range of posts across Children's Services so there would be HR implications arising from any reduction or cessation to this funding.

12. CONSULTATIONS

12.1 The views of consultees are incorporated into the report.

13. STATUTORY POWER

13.1 Social Services & Well Being (Wales) Act 2014

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