



SOCIAL SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 22ND OCTOBER 2019

**SUBJECT: WELSH GOVERNMENT – LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN
REDUCTION EXPECTATIONS**

REPORT BY: CORPORATE DIRECTOR FOR SOCIAL SERVICES AND HOUSING

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To advise Scrutiny Committee of Welsh Government's expectation on all Council's in Wales to safely reduce the numbers of children Looked After and seek support for the proposed actions to be undertaken in Caerphilly in response.

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 In February 2019, Welsh Government advised that they would be visiting each Local Authority to discuss local plans to reduce Looked After numbers. Their visit to Caerphilly took place at the end of March 2019 and the Council was invited to submit a reduction plan to Welsh Government by the end of April 2019. Subsequently, Welsh Government amended the report template and the final version that was submitted in July is attached for information at Appendix 1.
- 2.3 In recognition of the challenges facing Local Authorities, Welsh Government announced additional Integrated Care Funding (ICF) specifically focussed on the reduction of the number of Looked After Children. This report includes details of how this funding will be utilised within Caerphilly.
- 2.4 The content of this report was presented to Cabinet on 18th September 2019 and was approved. In addition, 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 is reviewed next.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 Scrutiny Committee is requested to note the content of this report and the Welsh

Government Template attached at Appendix 1.

3.2 Scrutiny Committee is requested to support the service developments detailed within this report aimed at achieving an overall reduction in Looked After numbers.

3.3 Scrutiny Committee is requested to note Cabinet's decision to include the 'safe reduction of children looked after' under Wellbeing Objective 6 of the Corporate Plan when that Plan is reviewed next.

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

5.1 Committee Members will note that for the current financial year, the Council is predicting a continued rise in Looked After numbers because the proposed new services will not be fully implemented until the end of 2019/20.

5.2 Based on previous annual increases, it is predicted that by the 31st March 2020, the Council could be looking after 490 children. It is proposed that based on 490 children, we will aim to achieve a 10% (49 number) reduction by the end of March 2022.

5.3 As the attached template reports, we plan to achieve this reduction through a number of different ways including:

- The systematic review of all children placed with parents who are subject of Care Orders to consider revocation of the Orders
- The systematic review of all children placed with relative foster carers on Care Orders where the Order could transfer to Special Guardianship
- Reducing the number of children entering care through the development of Family Group Meetings and improved long term Family Support services
- Increased use of Section 76 (voluntary) care placements for periods longer than 16 weeks

5.4 Welsh Government are concerned about the number of children Looked After placed out of county. Caerphilly's intention is to place children as 'close to home' as possible which can sometimes mean an out of county placement is preferable. 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.

5.5 Committee are already aware that increased recruitment of foster carers in Caerphilly has resulted in a reduction of 27 independent fostering agency placements, the majority of which were out of area. It is also important to note that 46 children are placed with carers out of area who are actually Caerphilly approved foster carers.

5.6 Welsh Government also expect Local Authorities to reduce the numbers of children Looked After outside of Wales. Caerphilly currently has 10 children placed outside of Wales. This is a very low percentage of the total number (XX). Committee Members

will see from the attached report that there are no plans to change the placements of 8 of those 10 children because it would not be in the best interests of the individual children. The report also acknowledges that there will always be a need to place outside Wales for specialist services that may not be available in Wales.

- 5.7 Finally, Welsh Government expect to see a reduction in the number of children removed from the care of parents who have a learning disability. 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 considered disproportionate in Caerphilly and as a result no specific actions are identified to address this. However, it is recognised that the development of enhanced family support services will assist children to remain at home where parents have learning difficulties (not disability).

Integrated Care Funding (ICF) Grant

- 5.8 To support the First Minister's Manifesto Pledge, Welsh Government has released additional ICF funding to support regional proposals to reduce Looked After numbers.
- 5.9 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. This consists of four key strands:
- Family Group Meetings
 - Special Guardianship Supports
 - Enhanced 'Edge of Care' services and
 - Mediation services for children facing homelessness

Family Group Meetings

- 5.10 A Family Group 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. They can be held in a range of circumstances from help for a family early on when they are beginning to experience difficulties right up to when families are involved with Child Protection services and children may be at risk of becoming Looked After.
- 5.11 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.

Special Guardianship Support:

- 5.12 This proposal is aimed at delivering a consistent Gwent wide 'offer' of support to Special Guardians to both assist them in their caring role but also to assist the Courts in having a viable alternative to adoption and long term fostering.
- 5.13 If a child or young person 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. The Special Guardians have Parental Responsibility to care for the child and make all the decisions about their upbringing.

5.14 The aim is for each Local Authority to 'offer' the following range of supports:

- Improved assessment and ongoing support
- Establishing education priority status for children subject to SGO's in each Local Authority
- Providing 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. Caerphilly has historically invested in this type of service through the development of the Intensive Support Team. This was enhanced last year through dedicated funding by Welsh Government and continues to be a priority specifically referred to in this new tranche of ICF funding.

5.16 The proposal is to expand the Intensive Support Team to include Psychology support, an Education worker, a children's Community Connector and additional Family Support Workers.

5.17 In addition, it is proposed to utilise service specific reserves to fund a team of Family Aides/Support Workers to offer practical parenting and emotional support to those families where parents have learning difficulties and where children can be supported to remain at home with the additional support. This support may need to be for longer periods of time but will reduce the need for removal.

Mediation support for young people facing homelessness:

5.18 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.

5.19 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

Risks for the Council

- 5.20 Children's Services are actively supporting Social Work Teams to manage more risks outside Court proceedings. We are encouraging Social Workers to support families to identify their own solutions where the parenting standards are considered to be 'good enough' and where it is safe to do so. We also intend to use voluntary care ie where there is no court order, for longer periods of time. Currently, there is an expectation from the Judiciary that court proceedings should be issued if a child has been in voluntary care for 16 weeks however, historically, voluntary care has been able to be used as a positive family support.
- 5.21 All of the above actions are likely to lead to criticisms from the Judiciary and CAFCASS if we subsequently have to issue court proceedings and it is important that Cabinet are aware of this risk.

6. ASSUMPTIONS

- 6.1 There are no assumptions made or presumed in this report.

7. LINKS TO RELEVANT COUNCIL POLICIES

- 7.1 Social Services & Well Being (Wales) Act 2014
- 7.2 **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 across Children's Services and the region 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 There are no direct funding implications arising from this report. However, any increase or reduction in the number of children Looked After by the Council has a direct impact on the Children's Services and Social Services budget. In addition, reference needs to be made to the Welsh Government funding made available to support the reduction in Looked After Numbers through the Integrated Care Fund.

11. PERSONNEL IMPLICATIONS

11.1 There are no personnel or HR implications arising from this report.

12. CONSULTATIONS

12.1 The report is for information purposes and reflects the views of consultees.

13. STATUTORY POWER

13.1 Social Services & Well Being (Wales) Act 2014

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Consultees: Caerphilly County Borough Council Cabinet
Councillor Lyndon Binding, Chair of Social Services Scrutiny Committee
Councillor John Bevan, Vice-Chair of Social Services Scrutiny Committee
Councillor Carl Cuss, Cabinet Member for Social Services
Christina Harray, Interim Chief Executive
Dave Street, Corporate Director – Social Services and Housing
Steve Harris, Head of Business Improvement and Section 151 Officer
Rob Tranter, Head of Legal Services and Monitoring Officer
Social Services Senior Management Team
Children's Services Divisional Management Team

Attachments:

1. Welsh Government Reduction Expectations Template July 2019