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THIS IS A MEETING WHICH THE PUBLIC ARE ENTITLED TO ATTEND

10th March 2021

Dear Sir/Madam

SOCIAL SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

A meeting of the Social Services Scrutiny Committee will be held in virtually via Microsoft Teams - if you would like to attend this meeting live via Microsoft Teams please contact committee.services@blaenau-gwent.gov.uk on Wednesday, 17th March, 2021 at 10.00 am.

Please note that a pre and post meeting will be held 30 minutes prior to the start and following the conclusion of the meeting for members of the committee.

Yours faithfully

Michelle Morris
Managing Director

AGENDA

Pages

1. SIMULTANEOUS TRANSLATION

You are welcome to use Welsh at the meeting, a minimum notice period of 3 working days is required

We welcome correspondence in the medium of Welsh or English. / Croesawn ohebiaith trwy gyfrwng y Gymraeg neu'r Saesneg.

should you wish to do so. A simultaneous translation will be provided if requested.

2. **APOLOGIES**

To receive.

3. **DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS AND DISPENSATION**

To consider any declarations of interests and dispensations made.

4. **SOCIAL SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MINUTES** 5 - 14

To receive the Minutes of the Social Services Scrutiny Committee held on 21st January, 2021.

(Please note the Minutes are submitted for points of accuracy only)

5. **REVISED SAFE REDUCTION OF CHILDREN LOOKED AFTER STRATEGY 2020- 2025** 15 - 36

To consider the report of the Head of Children's Services.

6. **UPDATE ON PROGRESS OF THE MY SUPPORT TEAM** 37 - 42

To consider the report of the Head of Children's Services.

7. **CHILDREN'S SERVICES RESPONSE TO VULNERABLE CHILDREN DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC** 43 - 50

To consider the report of the Head of Children's Services.

8. **FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME: 22ND APRIL 2021** 51 - 54

To receive the report.

To receive and consider the following report(s) which in the opinion of the proper officer is/are an exempt item(s) taking into account consideration of the public interest test and that the press and public should be excluded

from the meeting (the reason for the decision for the exemption is available on a schedule maintained by the proper officer).

9. **UPDATE ON LEGAL COSTS ASSOCIATED WITH
CHILDREN'S SERVICES**

55 - 62

To consider the report of the Head of Children's Services.

To: Councillor S. Thomas (Chair)
Councillor K. Rowson (Vice-Chair)
Councillor D. Bevan
Councillor G. Collier
Councillor G. A. Davies
Councillor G. L. Davies
Councillor P. Edwards
Councillor K. Hayden
Councillor W. Hodgins
Councillor J. Holt
Councillor M. Moore
Councillor G. Paulsen
Councillor T. Sharrem
Councillor B. Summers
Councillor T. Smith

All other Members (for information)
Manager Director
Chief Officers

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COUNTY BOROUGH OF BLAENAU GWENT

REPORT TO: **THE CHAIR AND MEMBERS OF THE SOCIAL SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

SUBJECT: **SOCIAL SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 21ST JANUARY, 2021**

REPORT OF: **DEMOCRATIC & COMMITTEE SUPPORT OFFICER**

PRESENT: COUNCILLOR S.C. THOMAS (CHAIR)

Councillors: K. Rowson
D. Bevan
G.A. Davies
P. Edwards
K. Hayden
W. Hodgins
J. Holt
M. Moore
G. Paulsen
T. Smith
B. Summers

AND: Corporate Director of Social Services
Head of Children's Services
Service Manager Children's Services
Manager, Community Options
Project Manager, Adult Services
Communications & Policy Officer
Scrutiny & Democratic Officer / Advisor

ITEM	SUBJECT	ACTION
No. 1	<u>SIMULTANEOUS TRANSLATION</u> It was noted that no requests had been received for the simultaneous translation service.	
No. 2	<u>APOLOGIES</u> There were no apologies for absence reported.	

No. 3	<p><u>DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST AND DISPENSATIONS</u></p> <p>There were no declarations of interest or dispensations reported.</p>	
No. 4	<p><u>SOCIAL SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE</u></p> <p>The Minutes of the Social Services Scrutiny Committee Meeting held on 10th December, 2020 were submitted, whereupon:-</p> <p><u>INTEGRATED CARE FUND (ICF) UPDATE 2019/20</u></p> <p>In response to a Member's question regarding the Integrated Care Fund (ICF), the Director of Social Services said that the Regional Partnership Board had received a letter from the Welsh Government confirming the continuation of funding for next year and even though the funding would be slightly lower than expected, the Director felt comfortable continuing to deliver services on that basis.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED that the Minutes be accepted as a true record of proceedings.</p>	
No. 5	<p><u>CORPORATE PARENTING PROGRESS REPORT 2020-21</u></p> <p>Consideration was given to the report of the Service Manager, Children's Services which was presented to inform Members of the progress made by Blaenau Gwent Corporate Parenting Board (CPB) throughout 2020 to improve outcomes and services for our Children Looked After (CLA).</p> <p>The Service Manager Children's Services spoke to the report and highlighted the main points contained therein and informed Members that the action plan had been developed in February 2020, prior to the Covid pandemic, and some other measures had been put in place which may have superseded some of the actions because of priorities.</p> <p>In relation to Key priority 2, the Chair enquired if the Multi Agency Child Exploitation (MACE) meetings had been held</p>	

on a quarterly basis throughout the pandemic. The Head of Children's Services confirmed that the MACE meetings had continued as they were part of the safeguarding structures in place within Gwent. The Directorate had taken safeguarding responsibilities very seriously, particularly through the pandemic, as children were not being seen as regularly as they would have been through the Education system. Existing structures and systems continued to be in place.

A Member enquired regarding support for young carers. The Head of Children's Services said this report focused on Children Looked After, but informed the Member that the Authority regarded young carers as vulnerable learners and all had been offered places in school hubs throughout the Covid pandemic. The Families First Team had responsibility for providing services to young carers and they had been actively involved in making contact with that cohort. Where necessary, face to face visits had been undertaken to ensure that cohort of children were supported. Effort had also been made to bring this cohort of children together, virtually as a group, so they could provide peer support to one another.

In response to a Member's question regarding providing laptops to Children Looked After, the Service Manager said an audit had been carried out with parents, guardians and carers of Children Looked After to establish if laptops or Wi-Fi connections were needed. During March and April 2020 laptops had been bought for each child in the household that needed one so they were ready to go online with their schools. The Team worked closely with schools and social workers to ensure that these children could do online learning.

A Member referred to Key priority 3, Action 3 – Promote "Children Looked After Friendly Schools" and felt that the wording on this action point should be changed. The Service Manager said the Children Looked After friendly schools was a policy document, however, the word promote could be changed to - ensure that schools are adhering to the policy. The Head of Children's Services explained there was a duty on schools to ensure they meet the needs of Children Looked After. Action Point 3 referred to a Blaenau Gwent guide, that had been created on what

is best practice, for all schools supporting Children Looked After. The guide had been adopted and was being tested in a pilot area in Blaenau Gwent with the expectation that the guide would be rolled out to all schools in Blaenau Gwent. The aim was to ensure that schools adopt all the areas in the guidance in order to achieve 'best practice' status to make sure that a robust structure was in place and to have a resource that schools could refer to ensure they were doing the best for all Children Looked After.

A Member enquired regarding gathering all the information from different departments and partner organisations in a timely manner to give an accurate measurement of all the information. He also enquired if a further report would be presented to a future meeting of the Scrutiny Committee. The Head of Children's Services said the Corporate Parenting Board met four times a year and was the vehicle to ensure that all the information was brought together via partner engagement. Task and finish groups were also a driving force in relation to engaging partners. With regard to the education performance information that was missing, the Welsh Government had not requested information on learners this year, it would need to be established what information would be required to be reported on going forward. Corporate Parenting information was reported annually to the Scrutiny Committee in January and when that information was available it would be presented to the Scrutiny Committee at that time.

A Member commented that it was a positive report and commended the staff for all their hard work over the last 12 months and enquired if students attending college were included in the provision of ICT equipment. The Service Manager confirmed that the ICT provision included students attending colleges and one student attending university.

The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1; namely that progress made throughout 2020 and the work of the Local Authority and its partners to improve outcomes for our children looked after as part of our corporate parenting responsibilities be acknowledged.

No. 6

COMMUNITY MEALS

Consideration was given to the report of the Head of Adult Services which was presented to inform on the transition of the Community Meals (CM) service and progress made since transition from the Community Services Directorate to the Social Services Directorate.

The Director of Social Services spoke to the report and highlighted the main points contained therein.

A Member requested clarity on the actual numbers of drivers and vans. The Director of Social Services clarified that two drivers went out at the same time in one van and subsequently the fixed term post had reduced and three drivers had been allowed to finish. Through redeployment, an additional driver had been used to support the service going forward.

A Member commented that with the significant 36% increased demand for the service was there capacity in the service to take it to where the Directorate needed it to be to offset any budget pressures. The Director of Social Services said the vision was to develop a model to make it work within the Community Options Service, whereby people with learning disabilities or mental health issues would go out with the drivers and learn new skills in terms of delivering the meals. In order to continually develop the model and service there was a need to understand the underlying cost to deliver the service to look at employing additional staff if demand for the service increased further. A full budget report would be presented to the Scrutiny Committee when the information became available.

In response to a Member's question regarding hot and frozen meals, the Director of Social Services said the service provided both hot and frozen meals, often hot meals during the week and frozen meals at the weekends. Potentially an additional service such as sandwiches could be introduced in the future.

A Member enquired if hospitals had been approached to promote this service to patients being discharged. The Director of Social Services said the service was currently in the process of rebranding and marketing, however, the

pandemic had slowed this process down, but social workers were promoting the delivery of an in-house service. When patients were discharged from hospital they were offered community meals rather than obtaining meals from the private sector.

A Member felt that rebranding was a good idea to make it more commercial and could encourage those people who could afford to pay to take up the service and raise revenue. The Director of Social Services said there was a need to be competitive with the private sector, but at this point in time the focus was to identify the full costs to run the service and look at opportunities to develop the service going forward and be much more commercially aware of the market to be successful.

In relation to resilient budget monitoring a Member enquired if the use of electric vehicles had been explored with the Community Services Directorate. The Director of Social Services confirmed that discussions had taken place and would be further explored when the opportunity arose to change the vehicles, but this would depend on costs as the service was in deficit.

A Member commented that it was good to see the increase in the service and referred to capacity to deliver meals at a reasonable time and at an increased level to balance the budget. The Director of Social Services said that once there was a balanced budget they could then look to further increase the number of meals delivered and potentially employ additional staff and increase the number of delivery vehicles so that meals could be delivered at a reasonable time. The aim was to first balance the budget then try to increase the uptake of meals again to get to a surplus. With the possibility of the number of meals decreasing following Covid, the Director said that at this point in time the service was managing with the existing staff and workload. Seasonal reductions would be monitored and planned into the budget to continue to run the service and if possible to expand the service going forward.

A Member referred to care home complexes spread around the borough and enquired if engagement with residents of the complexes could be undertaken to encourage groups of people to buy into the service as a

	<p>number of meals could be delivered to one central location. Consideration could also be given to discounts on the number of meals ordered. The Director of Social Services said that options for developing the service were being explored such as a sandwich service that people may want in addition to the meal they received.</p> <p>In response to a Member's question regarding operating the service as a business in its own right, the Director of Social Services said that consideration had been given to move the service to a social firm model at some point in the future but the service was running at a deficit at the moment and it could be a couple of years before the service was in a comfortable position to go down this route.</p> <p>A Member referred to the cash flow forecast and enquired regarding the central costs figure. The Director of Social Services explained that it was difficult to become a commercial organisation with these central costs which included legal services, accountancy, financial and organisational development services. Moving to a different type of model such as a social model or to get a third sector organisation to run it as a business then that could provide the opportunity to reduce those central costs in particular.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1; namely that Members scrutinise the report and evaluate the recommendations for the long term forward planning of the service (section 6.4).</p>	
No. 7	<p><u>USE OF CONSULTANTS</u></p> <p>Consideration was given to the report of the Corporate Director of Social Services which was presented to provide Members with the information requested, relating to expenditure incurred during 2018/2019 and 2019/2020 on the use of consultants to support, supplement and complement the work of Officers across the Council.</p> <p>The Director of Social Services spoke to the report and highlighted the main points contained therein, which included the advantages of engaging consultants for short periods of time which could be an effective use of Council's resources.</p>	

	<p>A Member commented that it was good to see that consultants were only used where required and not just for the sake of it, he felt that the Council should look to its own staff before engaging consultants. With regard to consultants for complaints he felt these figures should not be included in the Appendix as they were required by the Welsh Government.</p> <p>With regard to Stage two complaints a Member enquired if these could be carried out via a partnership approach with other local authorities. The Director of Social Services said this had been done on occasion but the difficulty was that Stage two complaints could be a considerable amount of work and when approached sometimes other local authorities were unable to undertake the work due to capacity issues at the time.</p> <p>With regard to complaints against the Directorate a Member commented that it was essential to investigate complaints properly to achieve a suitable outcome for the complainant and the Directorate as the complaint could end in a lengthy court case where the costs to the Authority could be greater than the costs of the initial use of consultants. The expert advice provided by consultants in areas such as Adoption was invaluable and he felt that legal advice provided in most cases was money well spent to protect the Authority.</p> <p>The Chair echoed these comments and said that it was a transparent report with the consultant fees deemed to be necessary.</p> <p>The Committee AGREED to recommend that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1; namely the use of consultants be noted.</p>	
No. 8	<p><u>FORWARD WORK PROGRAMME – 11TH MARCH, 2021</u></p> <p>Consideration was given to the report of the Chair of the Social Services Scrutiny Committee.</p> <p>The Chair advised of a proposed change to the agenda items, and after a brief discussion;</p>	

	<p>The Committee AGREED that the report be accepted and endorse Option 1; namely that the report on Living Independently in the 21st Century Strategy be postponed and a report on the Safe Reduction of Children Looked After Strategy be presented to the meeting on the 11th March, 2021.</p>	
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Agenda Item 5

Executive Committee and Council only

Date signed off by the Monitoring Officer: N/A

Date signed off by the Section 151 Officer: N/A

Committee: **Social Services Scrutiny Committee**

Date of meeting: **17th March 2021**

Report Subject: **Revised Safe Reduction of Children Looked After Strategy 2020- 2025**

Portfolio Holder: **Cllr John Mason, Executive Member Social Services**

Report Submitted by: **Tanya Evans, Head of Children's Services**

Reporting Pathway								
Directorate Management Team	Corporate Leadership Team	Portfolio Holder / Chair	Audit Committee	Democratic Services Committee	Scrutiny Committee	Executive Committee	Council	Other (please state)
4.2.21	x	24.02.21			17.3.21	14.04.21		

1. Purpose of the Report

The purpose of this report is to present the refreshed Safe Reduction of Children Looked After Strategy 2020-2025.

2. Scope and Background

2.1 In response to the rising numbers of children coming into care in 2017 Children's Social Services recognised the need to develop a 3 year "Safe Reduction in Children Looked After Strategy". This 3year strategy has now come to an end however the good work to continue reducing the numbers of children coming into care needs to continue, hence the need to review and refresh the strategy.

2.1.2 The refreshed strategy has the same three clear objectives which are: -

1. To support families to stay together;
2. To manage risk confidently and provide support at the edge of care;
3. To provide affordable high quality placements.

2.1.3 As with the last strategy each of the objectives has a number of actions aligned to them and these actions are embedded in our business planning process which is reported on a quarterly basis.

2.1.4 The 2017- 2020 strategy was independently evaluated by Worcester University. The report highlights a number of key findings. These findings acknowledge the considerable work already undertaken in relation to this strategy. It concludes that the strategy and its underpinning objectives are broadly appropriate at the current time. The report highlights areas of progress towards meeting the objectives and the considerable challenges related to taking the strategy forward, not least in relation to developing and sustaining a stable, highly trained workforce and creating and sustaining a range of high quality, flexible local placements.

- 2.1.5 The report offers twenty main recommendations grouped around six themes:
1. Strategy development;
 2. Workforce issues;
 3. Partnership working;
 4. Placement capacity;
 5. Interventions;
 6. Strategy implementation.
- 2.1.6 The recommendations have been considered and have been translated into actions under the 3 objectives which underpin the refreshed 2020 -2025 Strategy.
- 2.1.7 In summary the evaluation stated the Authority has identified an effective approach to the safe reduction of looked after children within the Borough. However, continued concerted action will be needed in order to build on and improve the work already undertaken and to meet the considerable challenges identified.
- 2.1.8 The refreshed strategy is embedded within this document and covers the following
- Significant service developments during 2017 – 2020;
 - Performance Information 2017 -2020;
 - Overview of progress made on objectives 2017 – 2020;
 - 2020- 2025 CLA reduction strategy action plan.

3. Options for Recommendation

3.1 Option 1

Members are asked to scrutinise the report on the Children's Services reviewed Safe Reduction of Children Looked After Strategy and contribute to the continuous assessment of the effectiveness of the directorate by making appropriate recommendations to the Executive Committee.

3.1.2 Option 2

Accept the report as provided.

4. Evidence of how this topic supports the achievement of the Corporate Plan / Statutory Responsibilities / Blaenau Gwent Well-being Plan

- 4.1 The implementation of the safe Children looked After reduction strategy supports the following priorities for social services under the corporate plan
- To intervene early to prevent problems from becoming greater;
 - To work with our partners including Aneurin Bevan University Health Board and neighbouring authorities to deliver integrated responsive care and support;
 - To promote and facilitate new ways of delivering health and social care involving key partners and our communities.

5. ***Impact on Budget (short and long term impact)***

- 5.1 The Strategy has had an impact not only in reducing the number of children needing to be bought into care but also on the budget pressure on the Social Services Directorate and the Council. The table below shows the positive impact on budget by showing the Childrens Services Budget / Outturn and Over/under spend from 2016/17 onwards

	Budget	Outturn	Overspend
2016/17	9,386,570	11,932,760	2,546,190
2017/18	11,757,760	12,523,229	775,469
2018/19	12,606,045	13,566,700	960,655
2019/20	12,960,360	12,884,866	Underspend 75,494

It is hoped the continuation of the strategy will enable children's services to manage their budget in future years.

5.2 ***Legal***

- 5.2.1 No applicable to this report

5.3 ***Human Resources***

- 5.3.1 Not application for this report except to note that this strategy would not have seen the success so far without the hard work and dedication of the children's services workforce.

6. ***Supporting Evidence***

6.1 ***Performance Information and Data***

See data contained in the refreshed strategy document is attached as Appendix 1.

6.2 ***Expected outcome for the public***

- 6.2.1 The successful implementation of the safe CLA reduction strategy will lead to more positive outcomes for children on a number of levels. It will prevent children coming into care in the first place due to the work under the strategy. For those children who do come into care they will have more local placement choices enabling them to maintain attendance at their local school and contact with family and friends.

6.3 ***Involvement (consultation, engagement, participation)***

- 6.3.1 There is extensive involvement with the children and families we work with. Their views are gathered through a number of avenues including:

- The National Youth Advocacy Service;
- Formally seeking their views following interventions from the supporting change team;
- Formally seeking their views at each review of their plan.

6.4 ***Thinking for the Long term (forward planning)***

- 6.4.1 This refreshed strategy is not a 5-year strategy which lays out the longer term plans to continue to reduce the numbers of children looked after.

6.5 ***Preventative focus***

- 6.5.1 A large part of the safe CLA reduction strategy has a preventative focus

6.6 ***Collaboration / partnership working***

- 6.6.1 A number of the actions under the safe CLA reduction strategy rely on partnership working. Senior managers and staff have good working relationships with our partners which will support us in achieving the actions.

6.7 ***Integration(across service areas)*** As above

6.8 ***EqlA***

- 6.8.1 The safe reduction of children becoming looked after involves supporting and engaging with children and families covered by protected characteristics from the Equality Act 2010.

7. **Monitoring Arrangements**

- 7.1 The safe reduction strategy is in the process of being independently evaluated. The outcome of this is expected in Qtr 4 of 19/20. The actions aligned to the 3 objectives under the strategy are incorporated under the children's services business plans. Progress on actions is reported quarterly and contributes to the Directors Annual report.

Background Documents /Electronic Links

- *Appendix 1 – Strategy to Safely Reduce Numbers of Children Looked After*

Children's Services

Strategy to Safely Reduce the Numbers of Looked After Children

2020 – 2025

**SOCIAL
SERVICES
DIRECTORATE**

VERSION CONTROL

Version number:	2	Date Written:	August 2020
		Date Approved:	
Status:	Final	Date of Issue:	
		Review Date:	
Approved by:			
Author:	Tanya Evans		
Supporting documents:			
Equality Impact Assessment	Approved by:		
	Date:		
	Dates reviewed:	Outcome of review:	
Change history	August 2020		

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1. INTRODUCTION

A strategy to **safely** reduce the numbers of children becoming looked after in Blaenau Gwent has been in place from 2017-2020. This document is an updated version of that original strategy. It will present a review of the strategy to date, and outline actions required of the refreshed strategy which will run from 2020 – 2025.

In 2013 the All Wales Heads of Children's Services commissioned Cordis Bright to undertake research into the differences in the looked after children population across Wales. The research identified 5 areas that can help reduce numbers of looked after children. These were:

- - Strategy and Leadership
- - Prevention and Early Intervention
- - Approach to practice
- - Partnership working
- - Information and intelligence about performance

Children's Services in Blaenau Gwent have undertaken significant work in relation to these 5 areas which has supported the positive progress made.

Interestingly the Cordis Bright research concluded there was no 'magic number' for the rate of children looked after that would help a local authority calculate whether numbers are 'too high' or 'too low'. This is because the number of children looked after in a local area is a result of a complex interaction of demographic and socio economic trends as well as factors connected to the way the Local Authority leads, organises and deploys its services for vulnerable children and families.

As a Social Services Department we strive to:

- Promote independence
- Minimise dependency
- Only intervene when necessary

This strategy strives to embed those principles in practice which in turn drives change in the way we deliver services to ensure the best possible outcomes for the children and families we work with.

In 2017 Welsh Government established a Ministerial Advisory Group to improve outcomes for children. The programme is split into three key areas for action. These are

1. Safely reduce the number of children in need of care.
2. Making sure there are sufficient placement options of a high quality for children who are looked after or are leaving care.

3. Supporting children who are looked after to have the best possible journeys through care and into adulthood.

The First Minister of Wales, Mark Drakeford has highlighted the increasing numbers of children looked after in Wales as a priority area. In April 2019 Welsh Government established a Children Looked After Technical Group, to work co-productively with Local Authorities to develop an approach to manage this priority area. The technical group met with representatives from Blaenau Gwent and reported back their satisfaction in the approach being taken to safely reduce the numbers of children looked after.

2. LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK

The Social Services and Wellbeing Act 2014, The Children Act 1989, Adoption and Children Act 2002, Children Act 2004 provides the legislative and regulatory framework which underpins this strategy.

3. PURPOSE

The Purpose of this strategy is to achieve three key objectives. These are: -

1. **To support families to stay together** and reduce the need for children to be looked after by ensuring a focus on early intervention and prevention across all service provision for children, young people and their families.
2. **To manage risk confidently** and provide support at the 'edge of care' by making sure that need is accurately assessed, resulting in the right children being accommodated at the right time. This includes supporting families to avoid children becoming accommodated unnecessarily and by making private arrangements within their wider family networks.
3. **To provide and commission a flexible and affordable mix of high quality placements** that meets the diverse range of children's needs.

4. SIGNIFICANT SERVICE DEVELOPMENTS DURING 2017 - 2020

It is important to capture the service developments which have occurred over the past 3 years as they have all played a part in achieving the 3 objectives set out in this strategy.

Families First

Families First underwent a restructure which was implemented in April 2017. The drivers for this change included the need for qualified professionals to provide more intensive support to the family support workers delivering interventions to prevent needs from escalating. This resulted in a social work qualified Team Manager being appointed, along with other social workers and a psychology post.

The University of Worcester were commissioned to undertake an evaluation of the restructure 12 months after it was in place. The evaluation sought to determine:

- the extent to which changes in design have improved the efficiency and effectiveness of the model; and
- to provide recommendations related to further development of the programme.

There are a number of significant findings from the evaluation study undertaken in May 2018 which highlight aspects that are going well within the programme, as well as areas for future development. The recommendations have been taken forward. The Evaluation report can be found under **Appendix 1**.

Information Advice and Assistance

In response to the requirements under the Social Services & Wellbeing Act 2014, Blaenau Gwent Children's Services developed an Information, Advice and Assistance Service (IAA). This service provides one front door in relation to all referrals relevant to children's social services.

Early in 2019 a review of this service highlighted the high volume of referrals coming into the IAA service and that the additional responsibilities placed on IAA far outweighed the staffing ratio within the service. This resulted in poor screening within the team leading to a disproportionate number of referrals entering statutory services to meet needs instead of being redirected to preventative services.

The review identified a need to increase staffing capacity in the IAA Team in order to sustain a front door provision that not only met the requirements of legislation but ensured safe decision making, provided an efficient and effective service to the citizens of Blaenau Gwent and promoted staff wellbeing.

Approval was given in November 2019 to appoint a temporary (until March 2021) full time Team Manager, full time Support Worker and full time Contact Customer Service Representative in the IAA service. This has enabled the service to carry out its statutory functions more effectively and has ensured that the decisions made on referrals into children's services have been responded to in a timely manner and prioritised the needs of children requiring statutory intervention. It has also provided capacity to enable an early response to those referrals not meeting the criteria for statutory intervention, and prevented need from escalating by involving prevention and early intervention services.

Supporting Change Team

A significant element to the success of the safe CLA reduction strategy was to establish the Supporting Change Team. The remit of this team is to intensively work with families to prevent children coming into care by adopting an outcomes/strengths based approach to practice. The team was initially established on a temporary basis in January 2018. In September 2019 the council agreed to establish it permanently based on an evaluation report by Worcester University (**Appendix 2**) which evidenced the positive impact this team had made in supporting children to remain with their families and in turn evidence cost avoidance for the Local Authority.

My Support Team (MyST)

In the summer of 2018 a bid was made via the Children and Families Partnership Board for Integrated Care Fund (ICF) grant money to develop a Gwent wide approach in developing a joint multi-disciplinary intensive **therapeutic fostering service** for children looked after. As Torfaen and Caerphilly already had a MyST in place the partnership board agreed Blaenau Gwent and Monmouthshire should be the next authorities to develop this service. It was already well evidenced by Torfaen and Caerphilly how MyST had improved outcomes for children looked after with complex needs and how it had made savings and created cost avoidance for the Local Authorities

In September 2018 the development of a joint My Support Team (MyST) was agreed by Blaenau Gwent council.

The MyST became operational in the Spring of 2019. It provides a multi-disciplinary intensive **therapeutic fostering service** for children looked after. The team work intensively with children currently in residential care with the aim of bringing them back to live closer to Blaenau Gwent and be placed with foster carers or family members. The team also works with those children in care who present with complex needs and are at risk of going into residential care, to prevent this from happening.

The Blaenau Gwent/ Monmouthshire MyST has had a significant impact on preventing children in Blaenau Gwent going into residential care and as a result of their interventions reduced the numbers of children in residential care from 18 to 13 as at August 2020.

Integrated Care Fund (ICF)

In February 2019 the Gwent Regional Partnership Board sent a letter to all partners informing them they had received formal communication from Welsh Government regarding the Priority areas for the integrated care fund.

A new priority area for 19/20 and 20/21 was “**Children at risk of becoming looked after, in care or who are adopted**”

Due to the expectations that regional approaches should be developed, the Gwent Heads of Children’s Services worked together to develop and submit a joint bid for this money. The

bid included the development of **4** regional approaches, delivered locally, with the clear aim of safely reducing the numbers of children becoming looked after. These 4 approaches were:

1. To implement a **Family Group Conference / Meeting service** within each of the five Local Authority areas using a regional service model to be delivered on a local level.
2. Deliver a consistent **Gwent wide ‘offer’ of support to Special Guardians.**
3. To **enhance each Local Authorities Edge of Care Team** (known as Supporting Change Team in Blaenau Gwent) to include **psychological support, education support and a Community Connector.**
4. To deliver a **Young Person’s Mediation Service** aimed at ages 14 years and above.

These new services have all been in place since October 2019. These newly established services have already had a significant impact in meeting the objectives of this safe CLA reduction strategy. If the grant funding is stopped by WG this will have an impact on the positive progress made to date.

Outcomes/strengths based approach to practice

Over the last 3 years Children’s Services have undertaken a significant programme of training in the outcomes based approach to practice. Supporting the culture shift to outcomes focused practice is one of the priority areas identified for service improvement by Social Care Wales. This approach puts people at the centre of their care and support planning. All Staff have received mandatory training which is in the process of becoming embedded in the culture within the service. From February 2019 this culture shift is being supported by dedicated mentors in every team who meet each month to share good practice and promote reflective thinking sessions within their teams.

Independent Evaluation of the 2017 – 2020 CLA reduction strategy

Worcester University was commissioned to undertake an independent evaluation of the CLA reduction strategy in order to inform future strategy development and implementation. **(Appendix 3).**

The report highlights a number of key findings. These findings acknowledge the considerable work already undertaken in relation to this strategy. It concludes that the strategy and its underpinning objectives are broadly appropriate at the current time. The report highlights areas of progress towards meeting the objectives and the considerable challenges related to taking the strategy forward, not least in relation to developing and

sustaining a stable, highly trained workforce and creating and sustaining a range of high quality, flexible local placements.

The report offers twenty main recommendations grouped around six themes:

1. Strategy development
2. Workforce issues
3. Partnership working
4. Placement capacity
5. Interventions
6. Strategy implementation

The recommendations have been considered and have been translated into actions under the 3 objectives which underpin the refreshed 2020 -2025 Strategy.

In summary the evaluation stated the Authority has identified an effective approach to the safe reduction of looked after children within the Borough. However, continued concerted action will be needed in order to build on and improve the work already undertaken and to meet the considerable challenges identified.

5. PERFORMANCE INFORMATION 2017 - 2020

Safely reducing the numbers of children looked after depends on a whole systems approach within every team within children's services. Therefore, it is important to scrutinise performance information across all the functions of the department and not just focus on the numbers of children in care.

Children Looked after Performance information

Figure 1: Children Looked After population broken down into placement types.

	Jan 2015	Mar 2019	Jul 2020
Total CLA	134	230	214
Total Placed with Parents	9	44	53
Total with Kinship Carers	11	37	42
Total placed with BG Carers	68	79	72
Total Placed with IFA Carers	26	25	19
Total Placed with Prospective Adopters	11	23	10
Total in Residential Placements	5	17	13
Total in Independent Living Placements (16 and 17 Year olds)	4	5	5

It is important to understand the different circumstances within which our children are looked after. **Figure 1** demonstrates this picture and how it has changed since 2015. The areas highlighted in yellow demonstrate the circumstances in which there has been an increase in the number of children looked after in Blaenau Gwent.

Children placed with parents has seen a large increase. There are a number of reasons for this. The Public Law Outline process which determines how a case is managed prior to and during the court process changed. This led to an expectation that all court cases would be completed within a 26-week timescale. This reduced the time to test safeguarding arrangements out during the court timescales leading to a higher number of care orders being issued for children placed at home with parents when a lesser order could be more appropriate if more time was given. Also the department is managing more risk so in a number of cases it is right for the local authority to share parental responsibility with the parents to ensure children's needs are met and they continue to be safeguarded.

The numbers of children placed with kinship carers has also significantly increased. This increase has been driven by case law which states if the local authority has, for safeguarding reasons been instrumental in placing children with extended family members, then these children must become looked after. Significant work has been done locally to produce practice guidance for social workers to empower parents to make an informed decision thereby making it possible to support a private family arrangement without the need for the children to become looked after.

The final yellow area in Figure 1 highlights the increase in the numbers of children in residential care. Again there are a number of reasons for the increase in numbers since 2015, not least the complexity of children's needs. However, some children have been placed in residential care due to foster placements not being available. This situation is not unique to Blaenau Gwent. It is recognised by Welsh Government and the 22 local authorities there is a national shortage of foster carers. It should be noted that the reduction in children in residential care has coincided with the MyST team becoming operational.

Figure 2: Total number of children looked after, admissions / discharges

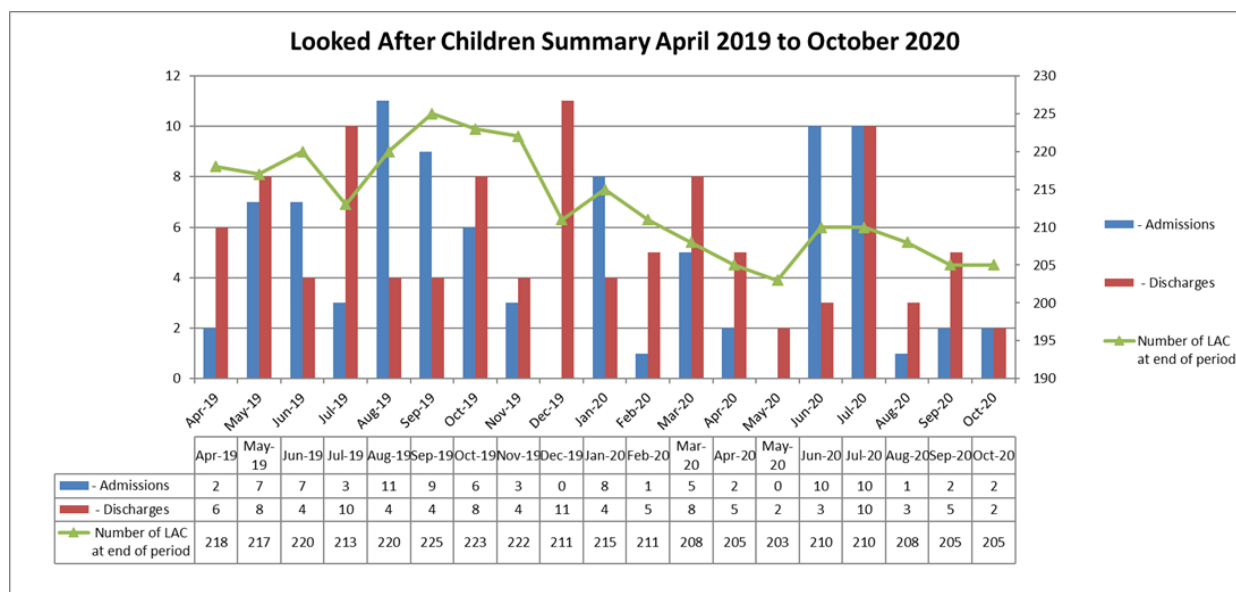


Figure 2 demonstrates the journey children's services has been on over the past 3 years in relation to the total number of children looked after. At its highest we had 237 children looked after in July 2018. The lowest number was 203 in May 2020.

It is clear to see the numbers of admissions and discharges in and out of care over this time period. The discharges from care can be for a variety of reasons. A child may return home, have their care order revoked whilst living with their parent, they may become adopted or they may become subject of a special guardianship order.

The admissions and discharges in and out of care are carefully scrutinised by the Head of Service and service managers each month. This provides reassurance that everything has been done to prevent a child coming into care and for those who are in care they exit as soon as possible if appropriate.

Supporting Change Team Performance Information

The following information is provided in respect of the work undertaken by the Supporting Change Team since its launch in December 2017.

Figure 3 Number of children supported to remain living with their family network during the period 01/01/2018 to 31/07/2020

	Total Number of Children who received a service from SCT	Total Number of children supported to remain living within their family network
	(Excluding children who were re-referred into the service)	
Year One	140	99
Year Two	137	104
Year Three	74*	67*
Total number of children	351	270

* Data from 1st January 2020 to 31st July 2020

The figure of 270 above does not include the 37 children supported to return home to their family network from care (see data below). If this was included in the data it would show, 307 out of a total of 351 children have been supported to live within their own family network, preventing the need for a Local Authority care provision.

As was predicted, year two saw an increase in the number of re-referrals into the service. The Team acknowledges that relapse is part of the cycle of change and that for a number of families they will go through the change cycle a number of times before sustained change is made. In recognition of this, the Team have now adopted an open door policy where families can receive non-intensive, telephone support beyond the 12-week intervention stage, with a view to hopefully reduce the number of re-referrals into the Team.

Figure 4: Number of children supported to return home within their family network from care in the period 01/01/2018 to 31/07/2020

	Total Number of Children who received a service from SCT	Total Number of children supported to return home within their family network from care.
Year One	140	18
Year Two	137	17
Year Three	74*	2*
Total number of children:	351	37

*Data from 1st January 2020 to 31st July 2020

What is evident from the data is that there has been a reduction in the number of children referred into the service where support is needed to rehabilitate a child from foster care back into the care of their birth family. Evidence from the Placement Team indicates that requests for Connected Person Assessments has increased, as social workers are demonstrating a greater commitment to keep children within the wider family network. Once placed with the wider family member, a referral is often made to the Supporting Change Team to support a rehabilitation back to the birth parents and a Family Group Conference is often utilised to support care planning for these children.

Figure 5: Number of children entering the care system in the period 01/01/2018 to 31/07/2020

	Total Number of Children who received a service from SCT	Total Number of children entering the care system.
Year One	140	20 + 3 children who remained in care
Year Two	137	10 + 4 children who remained in care
Year Three	74*	6 + 1 child who remained in care*
Total number of children	351	36 + 8 children who remained in care

* Data from 1st January 2020 to 31st July 2020

It is recognised that not all children can be prevented from entering the care system and that some families are not able to make positive changes despite the risk of their children entering care. Motivation to change remains a key indicator in regards to whether an intervention is likely to be successful or not and the Team utilise the Bruce Thornton Motivation to Change Tools to assess a person's level of motivation. While it is possible to promote motivation to change, it remains extremely difficult to influence change where motivating factors are external or where a person is unable to recognise the need to change. For these children, the Supporting Change Team has supported the Local Authority in making decisions around longer-term care planning outside of the family network.

Of the 8 children who remained in care following an intervention by the Supporting Change Team, 3 children received a service to try to prevent a breakdown in the placement where the outcome was positive for all three children; 1 child received a service to prevent the risk of escalating to residential care where the outcome was achieved and 4 children received a service with the view to rehabilitating home which unfortunately resulted in the children remaining in foster care.

The information above clearly demonstrates the part this team has played in supporting the CLA reduction strategy

Integrated Care Fund Grant Performance Information

As stated under the significant events section of this strategy this grant money became available to the local authority in February 2019. The grant was used to develop new and existing services with the aim of safely reducing the number of children looked after.

The following provides evidence of how this has been achieved.

1. **Family Group Conference** (*service active from July 2019*) – held a total of 37 Family Group Conferences for 37 families with 68 children. Out of the 68 children subject of a Family Group Conference: 52 were prevented in becoming looked after, 8 were already looked after and were rehabilitated into their birth families and 8 children became looked after.
2. **Enhanced Edge of Care** – The new Community Connector, Education Support Worker and part time psychologist funded through ICF were aligned in the Supporting Change Team. During FY 2019/2020 this team delivered services to 175 children to prevent them coming into the care of the Local Authority and 23 children being rehabilitated from care to their birth family.

Education Support Worker - Feedback from Teacher: *“(Child) is doing amazing! She's going to all her lessons, working well in class, going to her red card detentions if she's late to school, I hardly see her now if I'm honest. Before when there was an issue she would have roamed around the school looking for me and probably truanted. The pastoral team were saying this morning how incredible she is working and behaving at the moment and hardly hear her name any more. “*

Psychologist – feedback from social worker: *“The consultation gave me some reflective space and helped me to see the bigger picture of what is really going on in the family. It gave me insight into things I wouldn't necessarily have thought about without the psychology consultation. It gave me a focus of the work needed with the family and children and a plan for me to follow”*

3. **Special Guardianship Support Team** (*service active from September 2019*) – staff within the team have completed 5 SGO assessments for 8 children resulting in them no longer being looked after and 2 SGO assessments for families preventing 2 children becoming looked after. 51 families (Special Guardians and children in their care) have received support from this team since September 2019. As at the 31st March 2020 there were 118 children subject to an SGO in Blaenau Gwent. Most of these families receive support and/or financial assistance from the Local Authority in order to maintain these placements on a permanent basis.

Figure 6: Special Guardianship Orders Granted

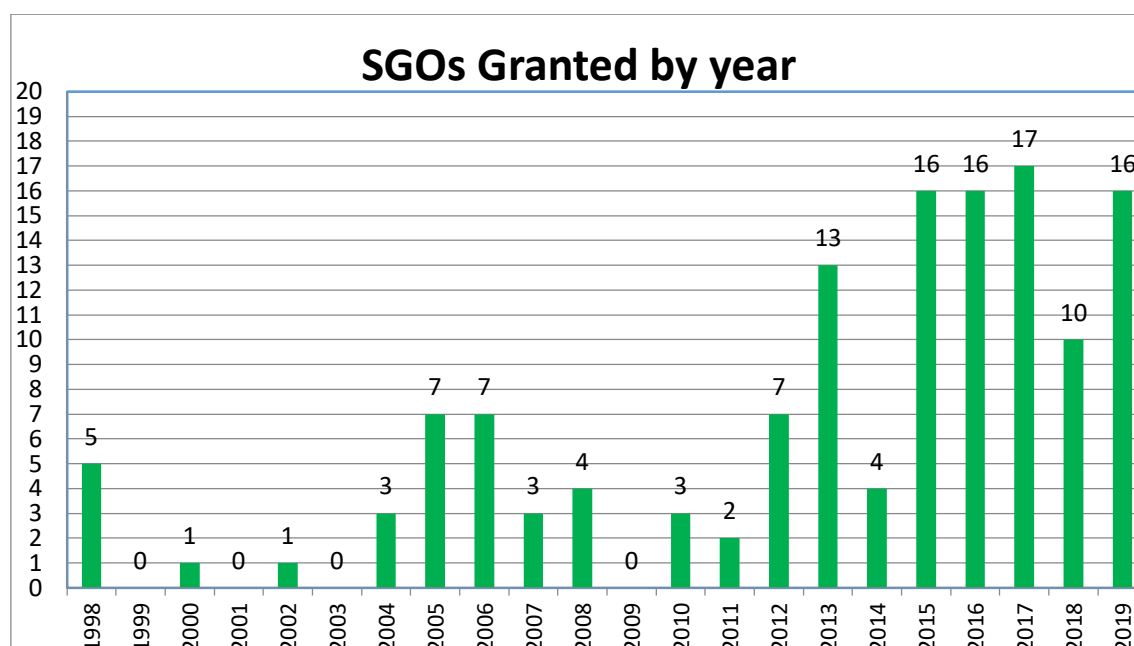


Figure 6 above shows a consistent increase in use of Special Guardianship arrangements as an alternative to children coming into the care of the Local Authority. While the numbers of children subject of SGO is growing in Blaenau Gwent, the SGO support team is now vital in supporting these placements on a long term basis by preventing family breakdown and children returning into the care system.

SGO Support Team - Feedback

"I'm feeling much more positive now that I have been referred for some support, thank you so much you have been very helpful"

'I think the service is fantastic, it is so reassuring to know someone is there when you need them. This should I have been set up years ago.'

'It is lovely to know that there is a service, it can feel isolating after you are granted the Special Guardianship Order.'

"It's nice to know people are willing to listen and nice to have the support around us"

"It's a comfort to know someone is there if I'm honest during these times [COVID 19- Pandemic]"

"Thank you, it's very reassuring to know the support is there, thank you for continuing to work and help us"

"Thank you for everything you're doing, feel like finally the girls are getting the support they need"

4. Mediation worker

To deliver a **Young Person's Mediation Service** aimed at ages 14 years and above across the five Local Authorities adopting a regional service model that is delivered locally in each Local Authority area. The proposed service model will

work with young people and their families where conflict has led to the young person either leaving or being asked to leave their home. The service will provide young people with the opportunity to talk about their worries and concerns and assist them to explore available options and retain control over their lives

My Support Team (MyST) Performance Information

The My Support Team became operational in May 2019. The team has been funded by ICF grant money which will cease in April 2021. However, the council agreed to create this team on a permanent basis based on the evidence provided from other local authorities that the approach taken by this team improved outcomes for children looked after and in the longer term would make savings by children not needing residential care due to the support MyST offered.

When MyST became operational Blaenau Gwent had 18 children in residential care. As at August 2020 we had 13 children in residential care. This is a direct result of the intensive support that MyST offer children and foster carers. This has led to both improved outcomes for those children and a reduction in the overspend in the residential care budget.

MyST have worked with **8** children. **6** of these children have moved out of residential care, (however 1 has returned)

The **5** children that moved out of residential care, moved to live with foster carers.

The other **2** children have been supported to remain with their foster carers and prevented from going into residential care

MyST also provide practice consultations to Social Workers and Foster Carers when they are struggling to understand and support a child whose needs are starting to become complex. These consultations provide advice and guidance in managing emerging complex needs by trying new approaches when managing various risks/behaviours.

As at 30th September 2020 MyST have provided **29** practice consultations to staff, foster carers and birth parents

MyST – Feedback -

- **BG Young Person** – “I like having someone there, just for me, and I like being a part of MyST. It has been helpful (and very difficult) to talk about my feelings. I’d prefer to see my worker out of school so that we have more time together”
- **BG foster carer** “working alongside MyST and being in weekly contact with the team has allowed me to share my knowledge and ideas and I feel like a valued person within the child’s support network. I feel listened to and that my skill set as a foster carer is appreciated

- **BG Young Person** – “I like having someone there, just for me, and I like being a part of MyST. It has been helpful (and very difficult) to talk about my feelings. I’d prefer to see my worker out of school so that we have more time together”
- **BG foster carer** “working alongside MyST and being in weekly contact with the team has allowed me to share my knowledge and ideas and I feel like a valued person within the child’s support network. I feel listened to and that my skill set as a foster carer is appreciated

Placement Team Performance Information

A significant part of this strategy is to ensure we can provide a range of good quality placements when children do need to become looked after.

Figure 7: Enquiries to foster by year and month 2015 – 2020

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Jan	4	1	2	3	8
Feb	7	3	7	0	6
March	3	2	2	3	0
April	5	0	1	1	0
May	1	2	3	2	3
June	2	2	0	4	1
July	6	0	2	5	7
Aug	4	1	0	1	3
Sept	3	3	2	3	3
Oct	2	5	1	6	
Nov	4	1	0	0	
Dec	5	0	0	3	
Total	46	32	20	31	

Figure 7 shows a varied picture in the numbers of enquires the authority has had in relation to fostering over the past 5 years. Decreasing numbers of local authority foster carers is a national issue. A significant amount of work has been done via the Ministerial Advisory Group to improve outcomes for looked after children to understand the reasons why this is the case and strengthen the local authorities position in attracting foster carers. The work already completed includes the development of a national performance framework in relation to fostering and the creation and adoption of a national learning and development pathway for foster carers. Also the development of **Foster Wales** which is a local authority owned national approach to recruiting foster carers. Foster Wales requires significant investment if it is to be successful, WG are currently being lobbied to identify and support with this investment.

Clearly this is an area of work that will need attention in the revised strategy.

6. OVERVIEW OF PROGRESS MADE ON OBJECTIVES 2017 - 2020

This information is contained in **Appendix 4**. An update on progress has been given in relation to each action under the 3 objectives.

7. 2020 - 2025 CLA REDUCTION STRATEGY ACTION PLAN

The new action plan can be found under **Appendix 5**. The actions under each of the 3 objectives have been refreshed.

8. CONCLUSION

This Strategy sets out how we will deliver our commitment to families to stay together, to manage risk confidently and ensure when children do need to be looked after we have a wide range of placement options to meet these needs.

This Strategy simply outlines what is required of Children's Services over the next 5 years. The challenge is delivery of the actions that sit under the 3 objectives included in the document that will make the difference. The work will require a continued, coordinated Council wide effort.

The Children's Services Departmental Leadership Team (DLT) will be tasked with overseeing the delivery of the strategy, monitoring the impact on children and their families and driving forward the focus on reducing the numbers of children coming into care.

The Actions required to deliver this strategy will be contained within the Children's Services Annual Business Plan. Progress against each action will be reported quarterly through the DLT.

We will continue to review and refine the strategy as our evidence base builds over coming months/years; as our thinking evolves, so will this strategy. As a result, this strategy and the associated action plan will continue to be live documents, regularly updated and reviewed.



Appendix 1 Final
Evaluation report R&R



Appendix 2
Supporting Change



Appendix 3
Blaenau Gwent



Appendix 4
Overview of Progress



Appendix 5 2020-
2025 CLA reduction

Agenda Item 6

Executive Committee and Council only

Date signed off by the Monitoring Officer: N/A

Date signed off by the Section 151 Officer: N/A

Committee: **Social Services Scrutiny Committee**

Date of meeting: **17th March 2021**

Report Subject: **Update on Progress of the My Support Team**

Portfolio Holder: **Cllr John Mason**

Report Submitted by: **Tanya Evans, Head of Children's Services**

Reporting Pathway								
Directorate Management Team	Corporate Leadership Team	Portfolio Holder / Chair	Audit Committee	Democratic Services Committee	Scrutiny Committee	Executive Committee	Council	Other (please state)
4.2.21	9.2.21	24.02.21			17.3.21	14.04.21		

1. Purpose of the Report

The purpose of this report is to provide an update on the work of the My Support Team for the period January 2020 - January 2021.

2. Scope and Background

2.1 After the establishment of a joint My Support Team (MyST) between Blaenau Gwent and Monmouthshire in May 2019, a first report was presented to Scrutiny in February 2020 regarding the activity of this new team between May -December 2019.

2.2 For member's information, MyST provides a multi-disciplinary intensive **therapeutic fostering service** for Children Looked After. The Team work intensively with children currently in residential care with the aim of bringing them back to live closer to Blaenau Gwent and be placed with foster carers or family members. The Team also works with those children in care who present with complex needs and are at risk of going into residential care, to prevent this from happening.

2.3 In the summer of 2018 a bid was made via the Children and Families Partnership Board for Integrated Care Fund (ICF) grant money to develop a Gwent wide approach in developing a joint multi-disciplinary intensive **therapeutic fostering service** for Children Looked After. As Torfaen and Caerphilly already had a MyST in place the Partnership Board agreed Blaenau Gwent and Monmouthshire should be the next authorities to develop this service. It was already well evidenced by Torfaen and Caerphilly how MyST had improved outcomes for children looked after with complex needs and how it had made savings and cost avoidance for the local authorities.

3. Options for Recommendation

3.1 Option 1

For scrutiny members to accept the report and acknowledge the positive work MyST has undertaken in demonstrating good outcomes for our children looked after and the positive impact the work of the team has had on the Children's Services budget.

Option 2

For scrutiny members to contribute to the continuous assessment of the effectiveness of the directorate by making appropriate recommendations to the Executive Committee whilst acknowledge the positive work MyST has undertaken in demonstrating good outcomes for our children looked after and the positive impact the work of the team has had on the Children's Services budget and recommend to Executive any future additional work required.

4. Evidence of how this topic supports the achievement of the Corporate Plan / Statutory Responsibilities / Blaenau Gwent Well-being Plan

The work of the MyST supports the achievement of the following priorities for social services under the corporate plan:

- To intervene early to prevent problems from becoming greater;
- To work with our partners including Aneurin Bevan University Health Board and neighbouring authorities to deliver integrated responsive care and support;
- To promote and facilitate new ways of delivering health and social care involving key partners and our communities.

The My Support Team was also a key part of the Safe Reduction of Children Looked after Strategy 2017- 2020 and will remain a significant part of the new strategy for 2020-2025.

5. Implications Against Each Option

6. *Impact on Budget (short and long term impact)*

6.1 During the past 12 months (January 2020 – January 2021) the MyST successfully moved 4 children from residential care into foster care.

6.2 The costs relating to these children are as follows:

Figure 1

	weekly residential costs	Current costs
Child 1	£4,250	£983 (IFA carers)
Child 2	£5,671	£450 (BG foster carers 1:1 scheme)
Child 3	£4,000	£352 (BG foster carers)
Child 4*	£4,750	£177 (family / kinship carers)

*Child 4 moved from residential care to family care where he remained for 8 weeks (April-June 2020); however, the step down happened during COVID 19 pandemic and unfortunately the family placement became unmanageable in the absence of school provision and other community services. Child 4 moved into another residential provision, but maintained contact with his family and remains open to MyST for further work.

It should be noted that throughout the COVID 19 pandemic, MyST has continued to provide direct interventions to young people during lockdown, including 24 hours on call and managed risky complex situations and young people. All four children mentioned above were stepped down from residential care during extremely difficult conditions (three of them in the first lockdown period and one during the summer of 2020).

6.3 Figure 1 demonstrates the savings made due to the change of placement for the 4 children who have moved from residential care to foster care or back to family.

6.4 This has had a positive impact on the Children's Services budget which is projecting an overspend Q3 20/21 of £468,285. A note of caution must be made as this situation could change if other children are admitted to residential care during the remainder of the financial year.

7. ***Risk including Mitigating Actions***

7.1 **Risk 1**

Increase in the numbers of children being placed in high cost residential placements which doesn't always achieve good outcomes for the children

7.2 **Mitigation**

- The continued work of MyST to reduce the numbers of children currently in residential care and continue to prevent children entering residential care will help to mitigate against this risk.

8. ***Legal*** N/A

9. ***Human Resources***

9.1 As Monmouthshire is hosting the MyST, there will be no implications for Blaenau Gwent Organisational Development department.

10. **Supporting Evidence**

10.1 ***Performance Information and Data***

10.2 As previously mentioned, the MyST became operational in May 2019. In May 2019 Blaenau Gwent had 18 children in residential care. In January 2021 we had 12 children in residential care. There was, also, one child in secure accommodation who moved on 18th January 2021 into supported care leaving accommodation. MyST has been supporting this transition.

10.3 The following information outlines three key areas of work undertaken by MyST between January 2020-January 2021:

1. Numbers of Blaenau Gwent children the team have supported to move out of residential care;

2. The numbers of Blaenau Gwent children the team have supported to prevent going into residential care;
3. The number of Blaenau Gwent practice consultations undertaken.

10.4 **Numbers of Blaenau Gwent children the team have supported out of residential care.**

Since January 2020 MyST has successfully worked with 4 children to move them out of residential care into foster placements. At the heart of this work is the relationship the MyST workers build with the children and their support networks. The small numbers the MyST work with at any one time allows their work to be very intensive, providing 24/7 support to the child and their carers. It is this intensive support that has enabled **3 children to move successfully in a planned way into foster care and 1 child to be placed with family members** (albeit this arrangement lasted only for 8 weeks).

The MyST is also working with **1 other child** who is currently in residential care who has a plan to move back into the care of birth family. This plan will take some time to realise but good progress is being made. The MyST continues working with **2 other children** who accessed residential care following intensive intervention being offered to remain with family or in foster care. One child was placed in foster care and then with family and supported by MyST for 18 months before escalating to residential care. Another child moved in with family for 8 weeks but returned into residential care due to pressures under COVID 19 pandemic. Both children remain open to MyST and benefit of intervention with a purpose to step down into foster care when it's safe to do so and they are ready for transition.

10.5 **The numbers of Blaenau Gwent children the team have supported to prevent children going into residential care**

Since January 2020 MyST has worked intensively with **4 children** whose foster or family placements were at high risk of breaking down. If the placements had broken down the only option for these children would have been residential care. Providing hands on intensive 24/7 support to the child and foster carers has enabled these placements to remain stable, enabling the child to remain local and continue in the same schools and maintain contact with their family and friendship groups.

10.6 **The number of Blaenau Gwent practice consultations undertaken**

MyST provide practice consultations to Social Workers and Foster Carers when they are struggling to understand and support a child whose needs are starting to become complex. These consultations provide advice and guidance in managing emerging complex needs by trying new approaches when managing various risks/behaviours. For the past 12 months MyST has provided **22 practice consultations to staff, 2 ongoing consultations** related to children currently in residential care with very complex needs and **25 consultation sessions for foster carers**. The feedback has been very positive.

The views and feedback from the children and young people, foster carers and professionals experiencing the service is critical to evidence the improved outcomes for our children looked after. Examples of the comments received are below:

- **BG Young Person 2** – *“My worker (MyST) helps me to talk about my feelings and worries. He helped me to get back home with my Dad after moving with many other families before. He knows me better than I know myself and he even knows when I’m not telling the truth”.*
- **BG Young Person 2** – *“I enjoy being visited by MyST and talking to him (MyST worker). I feel he really cares about me and knows me. He has learned about my interests and what’s important to me. He listened when I said about moving out of residential to foster care as I was ready for this move for a long time.”*
- **BG foster carer** *“I feel so happy that I’ve spoken to you and less overwhelmed”* (FC clinic); *“Nice to be able to discuss and get other ideas and know we’re not on our own with it.”* (FC clinic)
- **BG therapeutic foster carer** *“I find the support from MyST extremely beneficial. After speaking with the MyST worker, I come down from feeling very anxious about things that are taking place with the child in placement. This give me strength and confidence in my fostering role. I will contact MyST for advice and want this support to continue”*
- **BG parent** – *“Mum was really positive about MyST on call and in particular she was really positive about when MyST worker acted as Appropriate Adult.”*
- **BG Social Worker 1:** *“I was provided with some helpful suggestions about developing a pathway/building the bridge technique between the current placement and the new placement which will help with the transition. It’s helpful to draw on other professional’s knowledge and expertise so I will look forward to our consultations in the future. There may be times when we are unintentionally raising anxieties, so it’s helpful to have the opportunity to check that out and adapt our interventions. It was reassuring to have some positive feedback on my practice as a social worker supporting child A.”*
- **BG Social Worker 2:** *“I have found joint working with MyST crucial to the success of the placement”*

11. **Expected outcome for the public**

11.1 The work of the MyST work to achieve the following outcomes for children:

- Children placed closer to home which will enable sustained relationships with their families and friends;

- Increased placement stability;
- Improved school attendance;
- Improved emotional wellbeing.

11.2 ***Involvement (consultation, engagement, participation)***

As part of the ongoing monitoring there will be consultation with the children and young people, foster carers and staff receiving a service from MyST

11.3 ***Thinking for the Long term (forward planning)***

The development of the service outlined in this report is aimed at enhancing and improving services for children looked after and young people in the longer term. Bringing children closer to home will enable them to form local support networks and communities which will no doubt benefit them into the future.

11.4 ***Preventative focus***

MyST aims to improve outcomes for children who have experienced multiple Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) and who have the most complex and challenging needs. If successful MyST interventions will reduce the use of expensive and sometimes ineffective out of area placements. MyST works in close alignment with the Gwent-wide attachment service, to achieve psychologically-informed environments, including an ACEs-informed workforce.

11.5 ***Collaboration / partnership working***

MyST is an excellent example of how the Children and Families Partnership is working together to improve outcomes for children and young people who present with complex needs.

11.6 ***Integration (across service areas)***

MyST engages with the whole support network around the child. This includes school, youth workers and any community activities/clubs. The work undertaken to date by MyST has evidenced very close working relationships with schools both inside and outside of Blaenau Gwent.

MyST has delivered virtual training to staff in the Placement Team and have recruited two therapeutic foster carers in Blaenau Gwent.

12. **Monitoring Arrangements**

12.1 The following will monitor the MyST arrangements:

- The Children and Families Partnership Board;
- The Regional Partnership Board;
- The Regional MyST Steering Group;
- The Project is included as part of the action plan in the Blaenau Gwent Children Looked After reduction strategy which will be monitored on a quarterly basis.

Agenda Item 7

Executive Committee and Council only

Date signed off by the Monitoring Officer: N/A

Date signed off by the Section 151 Officer: N/A

Committee: **Social Services Scrutiny Committee**

Date of meeting: **17th March 2021**

Report Subject: **Children's Services response to vulnerable children during the COVID-19 pandemic**

Portfolio Holder: **Cllr John Mason, Executive Member for Social Services**

Report Submitted by: **Tanya Evans Head of Children's Social Services**

Reporting Pathway								
Directorate Management Team	Corporate Leadership Team	Portfolio Holder / Chair	Audit Committee	Democratic Services Committee	Scrutiny Committee	Executive Committee	Council	Other (please state)
4.2.21	9.2.21	24.02.21			17.3.21			

1. **Purpose of the Report**
 - 1.1 The purpose of the report is provided Members with information on how Children's Social Services supported vulnerable children since the COVID-19 pandemic started in March 2020.

2. **Scope and Background**

- 2.1 This report will provide information on how children's services changed the way in which services have been delivered throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, how we worked with partners and as a region to ensure a consistent approach was taken.

3. **Options for Recommendation**

- 3.1 The Report has been considered by the Corporate Leadership Team.

Option 1

Members are asked to scrutinise the report on the Children's Services response to the COVID-19 pandemic and contribute to the continuous assessment of the effectiveness of the directorate by making appropriate recommendations to the Executive Committee.

Option 2

Accept the report as provided.

4. **Evidence of how does this topic supports the achievement of the Corporate Plan / Statutory Responsibilities / Blaenau Gwent Well-being Plan**

Childrens Services response to COVID-19 links to the following key priorities in the Corporate Plan:

- To intervene early to prevent problems from becoming greater;
- To promote and facilitate new ways of delivering health and social care involving key partners and our communities;

- To put effective safeguarding arrangements in place to protect people from harm.

5. **Implications Against Each Option**

5.1 ***Impact on Budget (short and long term impact)***

Welsh Government established an Emergency Hardship Fund to support councils during the pandemic. Children's services were able to access this to fund fixed term support worker posts to support the work of the social work teams in the early days of the pandemic. The costs of these fixed term posts were fully met by the hardship fund.

5.2 ***Risk including Mitigating Actions***

5.3 ***Legal***

There are no legal implications within the report, but already there have been a number of reviews undertaken by different bodies and it is likely in the future there may be a public enquiry into the overall handling of the Coronavirus in Wales.

5.4 ***Personnel***

There are no personnel issues within the report other than to say it is important that we recognise the work of all the front line care staff including foster carers and their supervisors /managers who have, as always, pulled out all the stops to ensure services were maintained and the children and families of Blaenau Gwent continued to be supported.

6. **Supporting Evidence**

6.1 ***Performance Information and Data***

6.1.1 When the first National local down was announced on the 23rd of March 2020 the Gwent Heads of Children's Services met to discuss and agree a regional approach to service delivery during the COVID 19 period.

6.1.2 This approach was informed by guidance which had been issued up until that point by, CAFCASS Cymru, the Court Service, and the Heath Board. The approach has continued to be reviewed as new guidance has been issued in particular from Welsh Government who issued their first set of guidance on the 21st of April 2020.

6.1.3 The following information provides information on how services have been delivered in each of the service areas in Children's Services throughout the pandemic.

6.1.4 **Information Advice and Assistance** – This service has continued to provide a timely response to all referrals into Children's Services without disruption. There was a small decline in referrals during the first 2 weeks of the pandemic however referral rates have remained as we would expect them ever since.

- 6.1.5 **Families First** - As this service was not deemed critical due to being a preventative service, at the beginning of the pandemic some of the staff were redeployed to the social work and supporting change teams to ensure there was enough staffing capacity to continue service delivery to our most vulnerable children in the Authority. These staff have since returned to their substantive posts as the pandemic did not lead to high levels of staff being off at any one time due to COVID 19. Throughout the pandemic Families First has continued to deliver preventative services. In the early stages they RAG rated their caseloads to ensure those who were most in need continued to receive face to face visits. The team quickly adapted to using social media and other IT platforms to keep in contact with families and offer support.
- 6.1.6 **Flying Start** – In the early stages of the pandemic some Flying Start support workers were redeployed to adult services to support with home care duties due to high levels of need. Also Health Visitors connected to the programme were redeployed by the Health Board to front line hospital services. These staff have since returned. Flying Start staff have continued to engage with children and families using social media, in particular their face book page which provided daily advice and activities for parents at a very challenging time. They also provided activity packs to families in the initial lockdown. The staff do provide face to face visits when the need is established.
- 6.1.7 **Early Year's Child Care and Play Team** – this team has played a crucial role during the crisis. They have worked closely with colleagues in Education to ensure school/child care provision was available for keyworker staff and the most vulnerable children in the borough. The Early Years and Child Care Team has provided significant support to child care providers during COVID-19 which has played a large part in 64% of providers remaining open throughout the crisis.
- 6.1.8 **Social Work Teams** – These teams are responsible for providing services to all children in need of care and support, children on the child protection register, our children looked after, children with disabilities and our care leavers. At the start of the pandemic all Team Managers RAG rated their caseloads and only those identified as red received face to face visits. These visits were undertaken in line with the regional home visit guidance developed, which was based on advice from Public Health Wales and Welsh Government. When the initial lockdown ended face to face visits were offered to all open cases to the social work teams and this has remained the case to date to prevent needs from escalating. The teams have also used social media to support and keep in contact with children and families which has worked very well for some.
- 6.1.9 To be clear if a child was deemed at risk then this child would always be seen face to face to ensure they were safe. We have continued to see children who are on the child protection register face to face for their statutory visits and we have continued to work face to face with children and families where there is a high risk of them coming into care.

- 6.1.10 The various meetings required under the Wales Safeguarding Procedures have continued to take place but by virtual means. This has seen greater participation of partners as we share the same IT platforms, however some children and families initially struggled to engage which was not acceptable to the department as family engagement is crucial to this process. Steps have been taken to involve families via telephone conferencing and a plan is in place to start inviting families into the offices to participate in meetings when COVID restrictions allow.
- 6.1.11 **Children Looked After** – All children looked after have continued to be seen in line with statutory requirements. When these visits have been undertaken face to face the necessary risk assessments have been done and protective PPE measures undertaken. We have kept in contact with some of our children virtually using WhatsApp which has worked very well for all involved. All of our children looked after who live in Blaenau Gwent have been offered education placements throughout the pandemic. This has been a crucial resource and supported placement stability. We also ensure that each child had access to IT equipment to make sure they could access on line learning and our education coordinators have offered individual support to those children with additional needs.
- 6.1.12 **Family Time (contact)** – During the first few weeks of the initial lockdown all face to face contact between children looked after and their families was stopped. However, as new guidance was issued by Welsh Government we quickly moved to a position of starting this again as it is so important for the wellbeing of our children. All the necessary risk assessments are in place and protective measure being taken to minimise any COVID 19 risks.
- 6.1.13 **Foster Carers** – Throughout the pandemic the placement team has continued to support our Blaenau Gwent foster carers. Face to face visits have been undertaken when necessary to support vulnerable placements but a lot of support has occurred by keeping in touch via phone or WhatsApp. Regular letters have been sent to foster carers keeping them updated and a regular newsletter has also been sent out offering advice on how to manage various aspects of care during the pandemic. Foster carers have been consulted twice via questionnaires during the pandemic and the feedback is very positive about the level of support they have received from the department. Fostering assessments have continued to be undertaken and foster panels have continued to meet virtually
- 6.1.14 **Adoption** – Adoption assessments have continued throughout the pandemic all be it virtually with final home visits being made face to face. Adoption training has moved to virtual delivery and feedback from adopters has been very positive. Children have continued to be placed with adoptive parents following well-structured guidance developed by the National Adoption Service.
- 6.1.15 **Emergency Out of Hours Service (EDT)** – The service continues to operate as normal although staffing levels at the Gwent EDT service are

reviewed daily and staff from across the wider Gwent area have been identified to support as and when required.

- 6.1.16 **Working with Partners** – As previously mentioned the Gwent Heads of Children's Services have work very closely together to ensure the children's social services being delivered throughout the pandemic have been consistent across Gwent.
- 6.1.17 The Regional Safeguarding Board continued to meet virtually and increased its frequency to monthly to ensure safeguarding data was monitored and partner agencies could share intelligence on emerging safeguarding issues in the region. The board led on raising awareness of the need to report safeguarding concerns across the region and lobbied Welsh Government to take a national approach to this which was forthcoming.
- 6.1.18 Within Blaenau Gwent we have worked very closely with our Health Visiting colleagues. We have enabled health visitors to use the flying start hubs (prior to the 2nd lockdown) to undertake routine health check under the Health Child Wales Programme due to access to GP surgeries being restricted.
- 6.1.19 We have worked extremely closely with education colleagues to ensure all vulnerable children in Blaenau Gwent were identified and then offered school hub placements. We have increased the numbers of social workers in Families First who are aligned to the schools to support when needs have been identified and take steps to prevent them from escalating.
- 6.1.20 We have continued to work with the third sector to support vulnerable families in relation to a number of issues. In particular working with Phoenix Domestic Abuse Service when dealing with domestic violence, Llamau when dealing with mental health issues and GAVO who sit on our Children and Communities Grant (CCG) Steering group which is responsible for seeking to address the support needs of the most vulnerable children and adults in our communities through a range of early intervention, prevention and support mechanisms.

6.2 ***Expected outcome for the public***

The work Children's Social Services has been doing during the outbreak of COVID-19 has been to ensure we minimise the harm of COVID-19 and to keep people as safe as possible from contracting this virus whilst continuing to deliver services to those who have required our help and support.

6.3 **Involvement (consultation, engagement, participation)**

The service has had to work at speed to try and ensure our communities safety against contracting the virus and has often had to make decisions without the consultation or engagement of the public which has often been as a result of implementing Welsh Government and Public Health Wales guidance at pace. If at all possible we have tried to consult with children and families who are in receipt of services.

- 6.4 **Thinking for the Long term (forward planning)**
Children's services are still in part in the responsive phase, however there is a need for reflection on how we have responded to this pandemic in order to inform and shape the recovery phase in the future. Despite the changes we have needed to make to service delivery we have still been able to take forward planned service developments.
- 6.5 **Preventative focus**
Children's Services have tried to be proactive to prevent the spread of COVID-19, we have continued to make contact with vulnerable children and families throughout the pandemic as well as continued to visit where it has been necessary and safe to do so. This has been to try and prevent the spread of the virus but also ensure people are able to continue to manage during the lockdown period.
- 6.6 ***Collaboration / partnership working***
In many cases responding to the pandemic has strengthened joint working at local, regional and national levels, with more agile and responsive decision making and action planning being enabled. Relationships with providers have been strengthened by the continual dialogue, with local authorities, and others, supporting homes with the provision of advice and updates, and sharing learning.
- 6.7 ***Integration (across service areas)***
Health and Social Care have had to work closely together to reduce the potential harm of the Coronavirus outbreak for the public, this has included working in an integrated way to ensure we protect and safeguarding vulnerable individuals during these unprecedented times.
- 6.8 ***EqlA (screening and identifying if full impact assessment is needed)***
There is not a requirement for this report to undertake an Equality Impact Assessment.

7. **Monitoring Arrangements**

- 7.1 This report is a one off report to reflect on the work undertaken by Children's Social Services since March 2020 since the start of the Coronavirus outbreak within Blaenau Gwent. If and should there be a further outbreak of the virus then we would bring a further report back to identify how and what we were able to do to continue to support our most vulnerable children to continue to get the care and support they require.

Background Documents /Electronic Links

- N/A

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Agenda Item 8

Executive Committee and Council only

Date signed off by the Monitoring Officer: N/A

Date signed off by the Section 151 Officer: N/A

Committee: **Social Services Scrutiny Committee**

Date of meeting: **17th March 2021**

Report Subject: **Forward Work Programme: 22nd April 2021**

Portfolio Holder: **Cllr John Mason, Executive Member Social Services**

Report Submitted by: **Cllr Steve Thomas, Chair of the Social Services Scrutiny Committee**

Reporting Pathway								
Directorate Management Team	Corporate Leadership Team	Portfolio Holder / Chair	Audit Committee	Democratic Services Committee	Scrutiny Committee	Executive Committee	Council	Other (please state)
x	x	24.02.21			17.03.21			

1. **Purpose of the Report**
 - 1.1 To present to Members the Social Services Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme for the Meeting on 22nd April 2021 for discussion and agreement.
2. **Scope and Background**
 - 2.1 The Scrutiny Work Programmes are key aspects of the Council's planning and governance arrangements and support the requirements of the Constitution.
 - 2.2 The topics set out in the Forward Work Programme link to the strategic work of the Council as identified by the Council's revised Corporate Plan, corporate documents and supporting business plans.
 - 2.3 Effective work programmes are essential to ensure that the work of scrutiny makes a positive impact upon the Council's delivery of services.
 - 2.4 The Committee's Forward Work Programme was agreed in September 2020, recognising the fluidity of the document to enable the Committee to respond to urgent and emerging issues, and included timescales when reports will be considered by the Committee. The work programme is managed and implemented by the Scrutiny and Democratic Officer under the direction of the Chair and Committee.
 - 2.5 The forward work programme for the forthcoming meeting will be presented to Committee on a 6 weekly cycle in order that Members can consider the programme of work; request information is included within the reports, as appropriate and / or make amendments to the work programme.

3. **Options for Recommendation**

3.1 **Option 1:** The Scrutiny Committee consider the Forward Work Programme for the meeting 22nd April 2021, and

- Make any amendments to the topics scheduled for the meetings;
- Suggest any additional invitees that the committee requires to fully consider the reports; and
- Request any additional information to be included with regards to the topics to be discussed.

3.2 **Option 2:** The Scrutiny Committee agree the Forward Programme for the meeting 22nd April 2021, as presented.

Background Documents /Electronic Links

- Appendix 1 – Forward Work Programme – Meeting on 22nd April 2021

Social Services Scrutiny Committee Forward Work Programme

Dates / Deadlines	Scrutiny Topic	Purpose	Lead Officer	Executive / Council Meeting
Thursday 22nd April 2021 Deadline: 6 th April 2021	1. Living Independently in the 21 st Century Strategy	Performance Monitoring Members to be informed of the progress made against the priorities within the strategy	Alyson Hoskins	Executive information
	2. Regional Partnership Board Update	Performance Monitoring Members to be informed of the decisions taken by the Regional Partnership Board	Damien McCann	Executive
	3. Domiciliary Care	Performance Monitoring Members to be informed of the work undertaken around domiciliary care provision	Alyson Hoskins	Executive Information

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