

Committee: **Social Services Scrutiny Committee**

Date of meeting: **28th November 2019**

Report Subject: **Progress on the Implementation of the Safe Reduction of Children Looked After Strategy 2017- 2020**

Portfolio Holder: **Councillor 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)
8.11.19	12.11.19	19.11.19			28.11.19	18.12.19		

1. Purpose of the Report

1.1 The Purpose of this report is to update Scrutiny Committee on the progress made in relation to the implementation of the Safe Reduction of Children Looked After Strategy 2017-2020.

2. Scope and Background

2.1 Prior to the end of 2015 the numbers of children looked after within Blaenau Gwent had remained stable since 2008 at a rate of between 135-145 within any 12-month period.

2.2 The end of 2015 saw a significant increase in the numbers of looked after children received into foster care. Since that time the numbers continued to increase at a steady rate peaking at a high of 237 in July 2018. Since this time the Local Authority has seen a very slow but steady decrease in the numbers of children becoming looked after. More detailed analysis of this can be found under section 6.1 of this report.

2.3 The First Minister has highlighted the increasing numbers of children looked after as a priority area for action in Wales. As a result, a Children Looked After Technical Group was established this year to inform Welsh Government’s approach and engage with local authorities on this issue. This work culminated in a national learning event held by Welsh Government to enable local authorities to share best practice and ideas on how to reduce the numbers of children coming into care in Wales.

2.4 In response to the rising numbers of children coming into care, Children’s Social Services in Blaenau Gwent recognised the need to develop a 3 year “Safe Reduction in Children Looked After Strategy” which started to be implemented in 2017.

- 2.5 The Strategy has 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.
- 2.6 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 quarterly basis.
- 2.7 This strategy is in the process of being independently evaluated by Worcester University. The outcome of this evaluation will inform the new Safe Reduction of Children Looked After Strategy which will succeed the current one which it due to end in the Summer of 2020.
- 2.8 Scrutiny committee in July 2019 were fully updated on progress under each of the 3 objectives under the strategy. This report will focus on progress made since July 2019.
- 2.9 A significant development has been the allocation of Integrated Care Fund (ICF) grant money via the Regional Partnership Board given directly to Children's Services for a new priority area for 2019/20 and 2020/21 for "**Children at risk of becoming looked after, in care or, who are adopted**".
- 2.10 There was an expectation that regional approaches to this new priority should be developed, as such the Gwent Heads of Children's Services worked together to develop and submit a joint bid for this money.
- 2.11 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 are:
1. To implement a **Family Group Conference service** within each of the five local authority areas using a regional service model to be delivered on a local level.

In response to this Blaenau Gwent has:-

Recruited two full-time members of staff to undertake Family Group Conferencing (FGC) for all child and families open to Social Services under a Care and Support Plan where it is felt a Family Group Conference would be beneficial. The Family Group Conference Service is established in the Supporting Change Team.

2. Deliver a consistent **Gwent wide 'offer' of support to Special Guardians** to both assist them in their caring role but also to assist the Courts in having a viable alternative to adoption and long term fostering.

In response to this Blaenau Gwent has:-

Developed a small Special Guardianship Team consisting of two qualified social workers and one support worker. The team aim to offer similar support services to Special Guardians as we offer to foster carers.

3. **To enhance each Local Authorities Edge of Care Team (known as Supporting Change Team in Blaenau Gwent)** to build on the work already being done to prevent children entering the care system by adopting a regional service model that ensures each team benefits from the following additional resources:
 - (a) dedicated support of a **Consultant Psychologist** for advice, consultation and to improve care planning. **Education support.** We know that children who do not attend school and present with challenging behaviour at home are more likely to be those who become Looked After.
 - (b) Create the children's equivalent of a **Community Connector**. The purpose would be to positively engage young people with local clubs/interests/activities with the aim of reducing the risks of engaging with risky behaviours and create more stability across the context of safeguarding in adolescence.

In response to this Blaenau Gwent has:-

Established an Education Support Service in the Supporting Change Team with one full time support worker being appointed to the role to offer Education Support for children and families open to the Supporting Change Team. Also one full time support worker has been appointed to the role of Community Connector based in the Supporting Change Team. In terms of recruitment for the psychologist role, the job has been advertised on two separate occasions with no applicants. Work with health continues to recruit to this role.

4. 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.

In response to this Blaenau Gwent has:-

Recruited a mediation support worker on a part time (18.5 hours) basis. The mediation support worker post has been incorporated into the 14+ team aiming to work preventatively with young people and families to reduce youth homelessness through intensive mediation support. Equally the post aims to work towards rehabilitation when homelessness has been experienced.

The 4 approaches outlined above have a role to play in supporting the safe reduction of children coming into care.

The benefits of these 4 approaches should be clearly evidenced by the end of Quarter 4 of 2019/20.

3. **Options for Recommendation**

3.1 **Option 1**

- Consider the information contained within the report and accept the report

Option 2

- Consider the information contained within the report and provide comment on any amendment or recommendations for Executive Committee.

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

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)**

Figure 1

Budget forecast for Qtr 2 for 2019/20

	Budget 19/20	Forecast 19/20	Favourable/ (adverse)
Children's residential placements	2,655,430	2,819,921	(164,491)
Foster Parent Payments In house	1,626,000	1,844,032	(218,032)
Independent Fostering Agencies	1,714,930	1,322,421	392,509
Legal Costs	353,730	641,031	(287,301)

Figure 1 shows the budget positions in relation to placement and legal costs for our children looked after. Children's Services has undertaken a number of internal budget virements to offset the forecast overspends in relation to these

budgets. At the end of Qtr 2 Children’s Services is forecasting a £150k underspend.

It is important to note that the Council made the decision to direct the Social Care and Workforce and Sustainability pressures 2019/20 grant of £761k to meet cost pressures within Children’s Services to support while prevention work started to impact.

5.2 Legal

Children’s Legal services in Blaenau Gwent are currently being provided by an independent law firm. This is due to continued difficulties in recruiting Local Authority Child Care Solicitors. Over the past few years the legal budget has been significantly overspent due to the number of court applications made. As can be seen from 5.1 this overspend continues. However the number of Section 31 applications Blaenau Gwent have made to the court during from April – September 2019 are the same as 2018 which demonstrates this area of work has to date not increased this year.

5.3 Human Resources

No issues relating to this report at this time

6. Supporting Evidence

6.1 Performance Information and Data

Figure 2

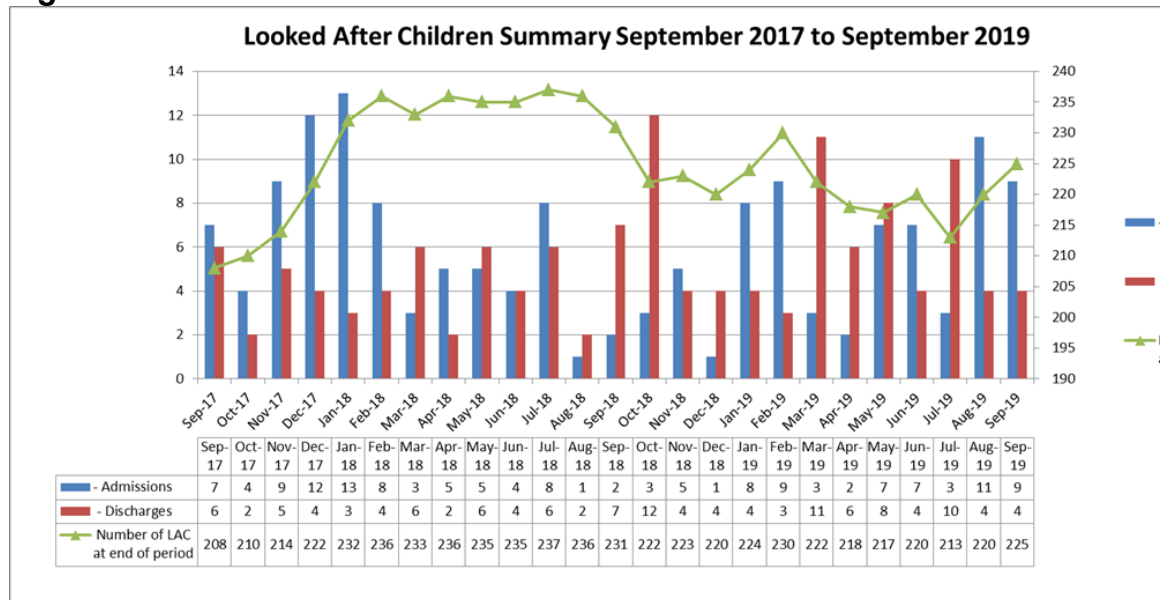


Figure 2 shows the journey in relation to the numbers of children becoming looked after and the admissions and discharges month by month.

The overall picture continues to show a very slow reduction in the numbers of looked after children in Blaenau Gwent.

August and September did see an increase in the numbers of children becoming looked after. The Head of Service with Service Managers have scrutinised these admissions to care and are satisfied all of these admissions where necessary, the majority for safeguarding reasons.

Of the numbers admitted during August and September there were 4 sibling groups of 3 which would have an impact on the rise in numbers. Of the children admitted to care during August and September, 7 of them have been placed with family members, it hoped at the end of their care proceedings they will not remain in the care system but either return home to their parents if it is safe enough, or stay permanently with extended family members under alternative legal arrangements other than a care order, therefore removing them from the looked after system.

It is important to comment on the work of the My Support Team (MyST) which has been in operation since June 2019. It is early days however good progress is being made in relation to reducing the numbers of children in residential care. In May 2019 we had 18 children in residential care. In October 2019 we have 14 children in residential care and 1 child in secure accommodation. The MyST have also prevented a number of children entering residential care. A full report on progress made by the team will be presented to scrutiny in Qtr4 of 19/20.

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

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)***

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)***

The CLA reduction strategy is 2 years into its 3 year lifetime. An independent evaluation is underway which will shape an amended strategy by June 2020

6.5 ***Preventative focus***

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

6.6 ***Collaboration / partnership working***

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. ***EqlA(screening and identifying if full impact assessment is needed)***

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