

Committee: **Social Services Scrutiny Committee**
Date of meeting: **5th November 2020**
Report Subject: **Update on Strategy to Safely Reduce the Numbers of Children Looked After**
Portfolio Holder: **Cllr John Mason, Executive Member Social Services**
Report Submitted by: **Damien McCann, Corporate Director Social Services**

Directorate Management Team	Corporate Leadership Team	Portfolio Holder / Chair	Audit Committee	Democratic Services Committee	Scrutiny Committee	Executive Committee	Council	Other (please state)
17.9.20	22.10.20	23.10.20			05.11.20			

1. Purpose of the Report

The Purpose of this report is to update the Social Services 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 The end of 2015 saw a significant increase in the numbers of children looked after. The numbers continued to increase at a steady rate peaking at an all-time high of 237 in July 2018.

2.2 Blaenau Gwent recognised the need to develop a 3 year “Safe Reduction in Children Looked After (CLA) Strategy” which was implemented in 2017.

2.3 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.

2.4 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.

2.5 Since the implementation of this strategy 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 the performance section 6.1 of this report.

2.6 Welsh Government has also recognised the need to safely reduce the number of children coming into care and has identified this as a priority area. In light of this Integrated Care Fund (ICF) grant money was allocated to each local authority in Wales via the Regional Partnership Boards in April 2019 to invest

in, and develop services to safely reduce the numbers of children coming into care.

2.7 The following services were developed as a result of this ICF grant funding

- Family Group Conference / Meeting service
- Support to Special Guardians
- Enhance resources in our Supporting Change Team
- Enhance the Young Person's Mediation Service

Details of how these services have performed are included under the performance section of this report 6.1.

2.8 The Blaenau Gwent Safe CLA Reduction Strategy has been independently evaluated by Worcester University. This evaluation was completed just prior to the COVID 19 lockdown. The strategy is in the process of being reviewed and refreshed. This work will provide a detailed overview of the progress made under each of the 3 objectives over the past 3 years and refresh the actions required to continue to deliver these 3 objectives. It is hoped the review will be completed by the end of 2020 provided the department does not have to deal with a second wave of COVID 19 in which case the focus will revert to prioritising service delivery.

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

4. **Evidence of how does 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; and
- To promote and facilitate new ways of delivering health and social care involving key partners and our communities.

The Safe CLA Reduction plan provides evidence that the Local Authority is delivering the requirements under the Social Service and Wellbeing Act in relation to the following areas:

- **Voice and control** – putting the individual and their needs, at the centre of their care, and giving them a voice in, and control over reaching the outcomes that help them achieve well-being.
- **Prevention and early intervention** – increasing preventative services within the community to minimise the escalation of critical need.
- **Well-being** – supporting people to achieve their own well-being and measuring the success of care and support.
- **Co-production** – encouraging individuals to become more involved in the design and delivery of services.

5. Implications Against Each Option

5.1 Impact on Budget

Figure 1

	Budget 20/21	Forecast 20/21 Q1	Favourable/ (adverse)
Children’s residential placements	2,403,250	2,363,581	39,669
Foster Parent Payments In house	1,650,690	1,650,623	67
Independent Fostering Agencies	1,686,930	1,606,711	80,219
Legal Costs	381,620	781,319	(399,699)

5.1.1 Figure 1 shows the position at the end of Qtr 1 in relation to the budgets connected to our children looked after. It is important to note the residential budget is forecasting an underspend at this time. This is due to the numbers of children in residential care reducing from 18 in 2019 to 13 in September 2020. The work of the My Support Team (MyST) and our 14 plus Team has led to this decrease of numbers in residential care to foster care and in some cases returned home to parents. It should also be noted that the costs of the MyST has also been achieved by the savings made in the residential budget, as a separate budget line of £300,000 has been created to meet the costs of that team.

5.1.2 It is also important to recognise the underspend in the independent fostering agency budget line. This demonstrates we are becoming less reliant on independent fostering providers and finding more local placement solutions with our local authority foster carers or family members

5.2 Legal

Children's Legal Services in Blaenau Gwent is currently 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. The Head of Service receives monthly information on the number of court applications for section 31 care orders. Year to date we have made the same number of court applications as this time last year, 10 to date. This demonstrates this area of work has (to date) not increased this year.

Prior to the COVID 19 lockdown the Head of Children's Services and the Head of Legal Services started exploring the possibility of neighbouring authorities providing our legal support. This work came to an abrupt halt but will need to be restarted when possible.

5.3 Human Resources

Maintaining a stable workforce is key to achieving the objectives of the safe CLA Reduction Strategy. Just prior to COVID 19 Children's Services had 10 social work vacancies across the various teams. This had a significant impact on the workload on the Teams. A combination of Blaenau Gwent staff finishing their secondments on the Degree in Social Work Course and appointing 3rd year SW degree students who had their final year placement in Blaenau Gwent, has resulted in nearly all these vacancies being filled. A package of support is in place for this new cohort of staff, who, report (even in the throws of a pandemic) they feel very supported and safe in their practice.

6. Supporting Evidence

6.1 Figure 2

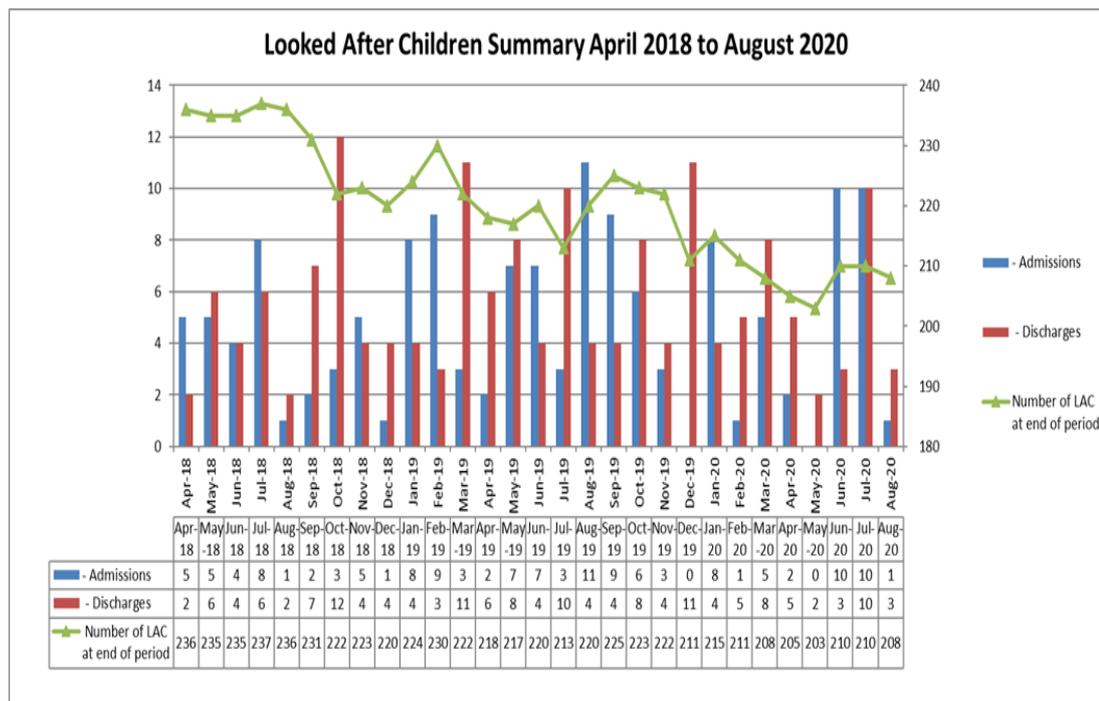


Figure 2 demonstrates the continued slow but steady decline in the numbers of children looked after in Blaenau Gwent during the implementation of the Safe CLA Reduction Strategy. It is interesting to note the significant decrease in numbers at the beginning of 2020, reaching a low of 203 children in care in May 2020. As a department we continue to be committed to reducing these numbers further over the lifespan of the new/refreshed strategy.

The performance information below evidences the positive impact service developments have achieved as a result of the ICF grant money, in relation to reducing the numbers of children looked after.

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.

Mediation service (*service active from October 2019*) – mediation services were offered to 24 children and young people and their families with 22 children supported to remain with their birth family (one became looked after and one moved into independent accommodation)

SGO support team (*service active from September 2019*) – staff within the team completed 5 SGO assessments for 8 children ending care episodes and 2 SGO assessments for families preventing 2 children to become looked after. 51 families (Special Guardians and children in their care) received support from this team since September 2019. At 31st March 2020 in Blaenau Gwent there were 118 children subject to an SGO. 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 3

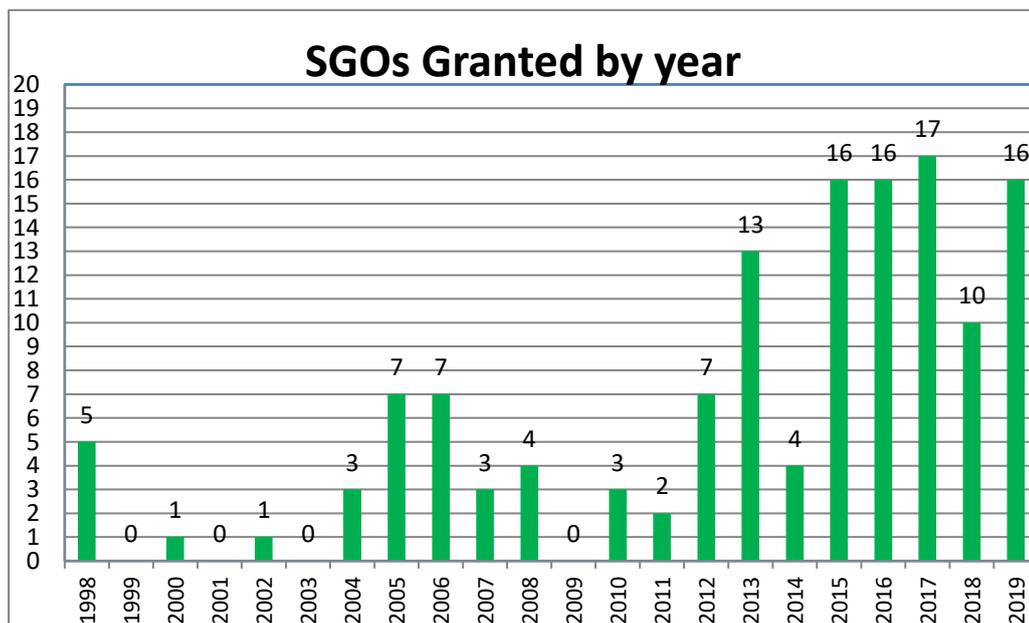


Figure 3 above shows a consistent increase in use of Special Guardianship arrangements as an alternative to children coming into the care of the Local Authority. While the numbers of children subject of SGO is growing in Blaenau Gwent, SGO support team is becoming vital in supporting these placements on long term by preventing family breakdown and children returning into the care system.

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

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 and individual feed-back was offered as follows:

Family Group Conference:

“I was very happy with the support; the meeting couldn’t have gone any better.”

“The Family group conference was very good in that it brought the family together and enlightened their understanding of the risks and how they can support. There are so many strengths in this family and I believe if they work together the children will have better outcomes.”

13 year old *“things are better because of what we have spoke about and I will listen more and communicate”*

Professional - *“well planned and executed family group conference – workable family plan developed to enable child to return home”.*

Parent – *“I feel a lot more confident now a plan has been put in place”*

Social Worker – *“The family were able to leave the FGC with a safety plan in place to ensure all family members had a plan to keep her safe and to communicate with one another, which is something they have not been able to do until now”*

SGO support team

“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"

Enhanced Edge of Care

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: *"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"*

6.4 Thinking for the Long term (forward planning)

The initial Safe CLA Reduction Strategy was a 3 year strategy and is due to end this year. It is recognised that the refreshed strategy needs to be longer term in recognition of the significant work required to continue and maintain the downward trend in numbers of children looked after. Therefore, the next strategy will be a 5 yrs.

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. However, the refreshed strategy will focus heavily on improving our partners understanding of the 3 objectives that sit under this strategy and the part they need to play to achieves its success.

6.7 Integration (across service areas)

As above.

6.8 EqIA

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. It has not been identified that this strategy will have a negative impact on those with protected characteristics.

7. **Monitoring Arrangements**

- 7.1 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

- *N/A*