

Children's Services

Strategy to Safely Reduce the Numbers of Looked After Children

2020 – 2025

**SOCIAL
SERVICES
DIRECTORATE**

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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

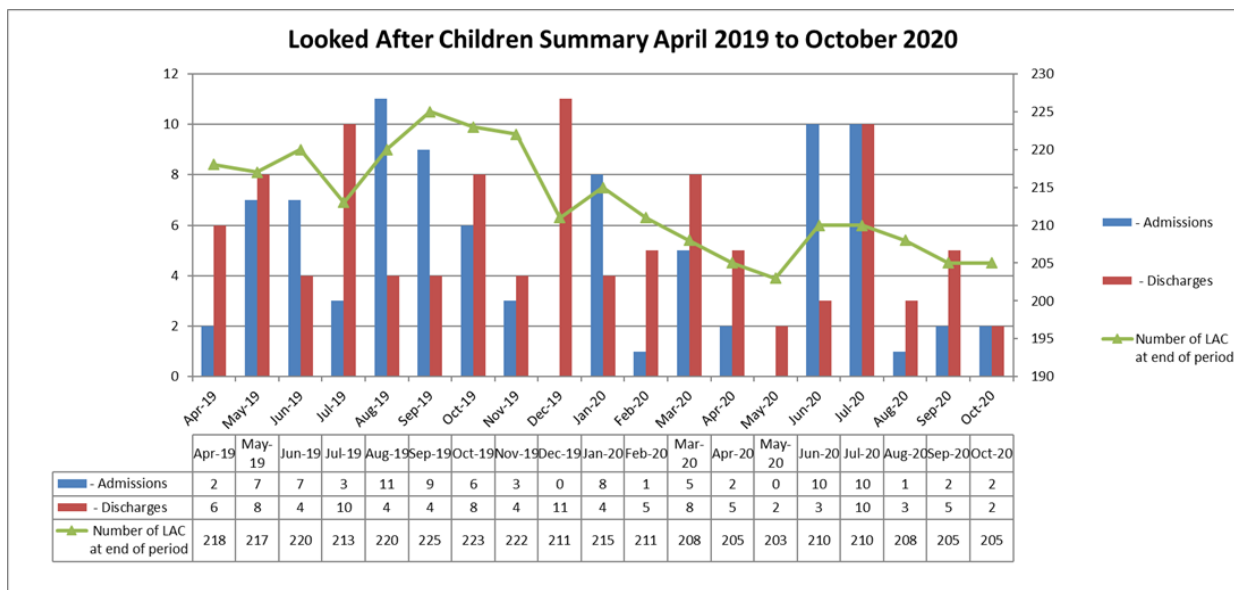


Figure 2 demonstrates the journey children's services has been on over the past 3 years in relation to the total number of children looked after. At its highest we had 237 children looked after in July 2018. The lowest number was 203 in May 2020.

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

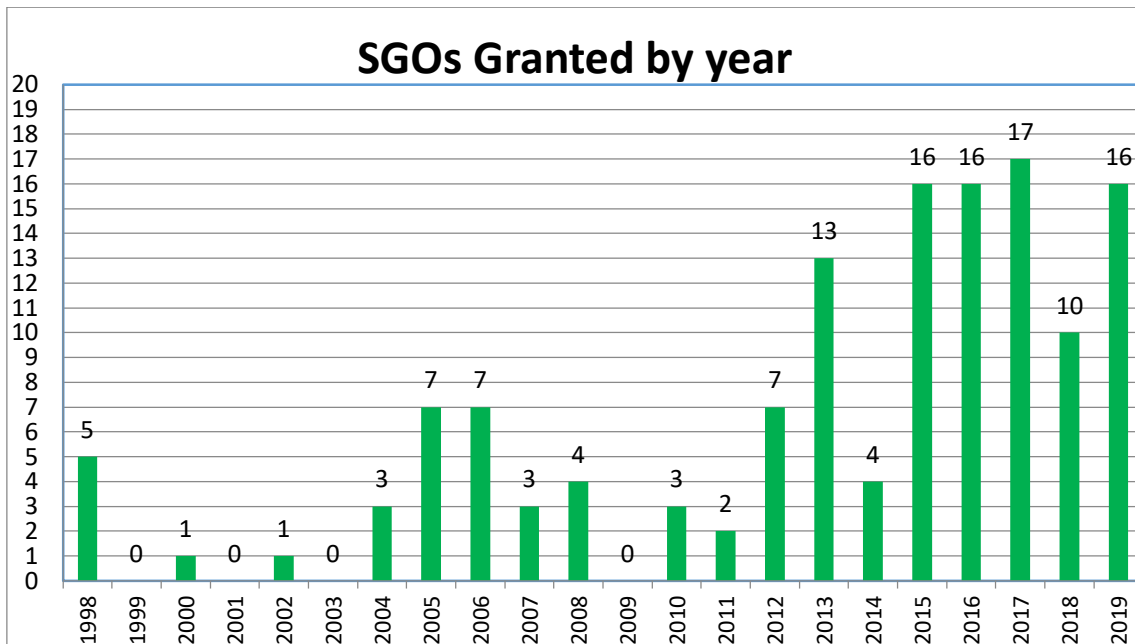


Figure 6 above shows a consistent increase in use of Special Guardianship arrangements as an alternative to children coming into the care of the Local Authority. While the numbers of children subject of SGO is growing in Blaenau Gwent, the SGO support team is now vital in supporting these placements 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



Appendix 2
Supporting Change



Appendix 3
Blaenau Gwent



Appendix 4
Overview of Progress



Appendix 5 2020-
2025 CLA reduction