

Committee: **Executive Committee**

Date of meeting: **22nd September 2021**

Report Subject: **Update on Strategy to Safely reduce the numbers of children looked after**

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) |
| 8.7.21 | | 07.09.21 | | | 22/07/21 | 22/09/21 | | |

1. Purpose of the Report

The Purpose of this report is to update the Executive Committee on the progress made in relation to the implementation of the Safe Reduction of Children Looked After Strategy 2020 – 2025.

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 “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 The initial 3year strategy came to an end in 2020 and was replaced with another updated 5-year strategy with the same 3 objectives highlighted above.
- 2.6 Since the implementation of the 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.

2.7 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.

2.8 The following services were developed in March 2019 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

2.9 These additional services alongside the existing teams have contributed to the slow but steady progress made in reducing the numbers of children looked after within Blaenau Gwent.

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

3.2 The Social Services Scrutiny Committee on the 22nd July 2021 supported Option 1 of the report.

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

4.1 The implementation of the Safe Reduction of Children looked After 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.

4.2 The Safe Reduction of CLA Strategy 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 | Outturn 20/21 | Favourable/ (adverse) |
|------------------------------------|-----------------|------------------|--------------------------|
| Children’s residential placements | 2,592,186 | 2,041,704 | 550,482 |
| Foster Parent Payments In house | 1,622,690 | 1,681,623 | (58,942) |
| Independent Fostering Agencies | 1,714,930 | 1,719,750 | (4,820) |

5.2 Figure 1 shows a significant underspend in our children residential budget at the end of 20/21. This is a result of the hard work of the 14 plus Team and the My Support Team in reducing the numbers of children in residential care and working to prevent children entering residential care.

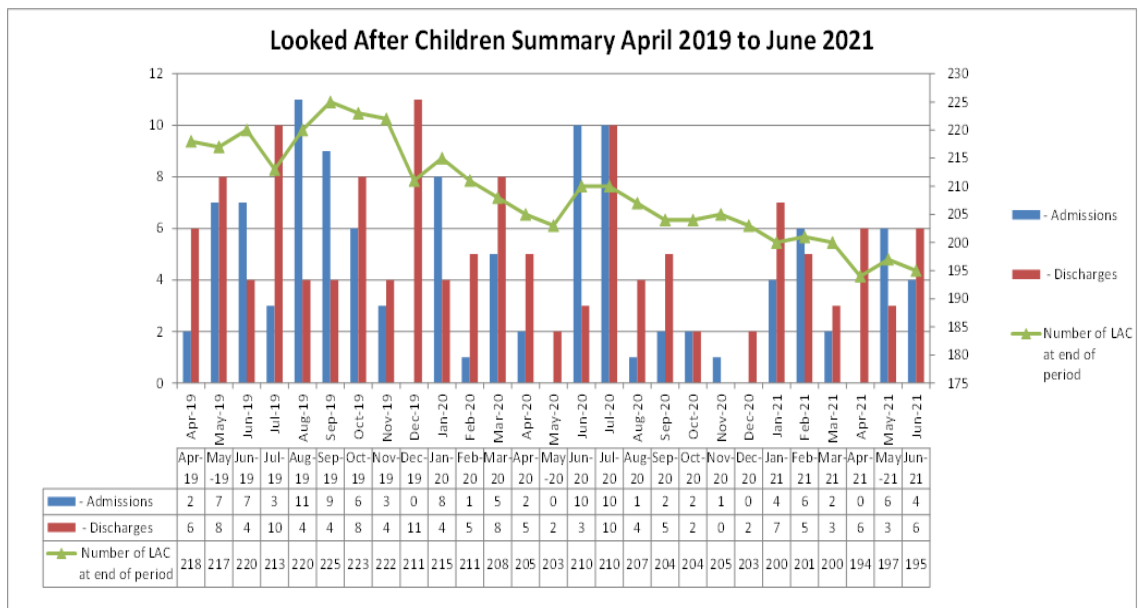
5.3 Human Resources

Maintaining a stable workforce is key to achieving the objectives of the Safe Reduction of CLA 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 Social Work degree students who had their final year placement in Blaenau Gwent, has resulted in nearly all these vacancies being filled.

However, we have a number of vacancies again across the 4 locality Social Work Teams in particular which is causing pressure points.

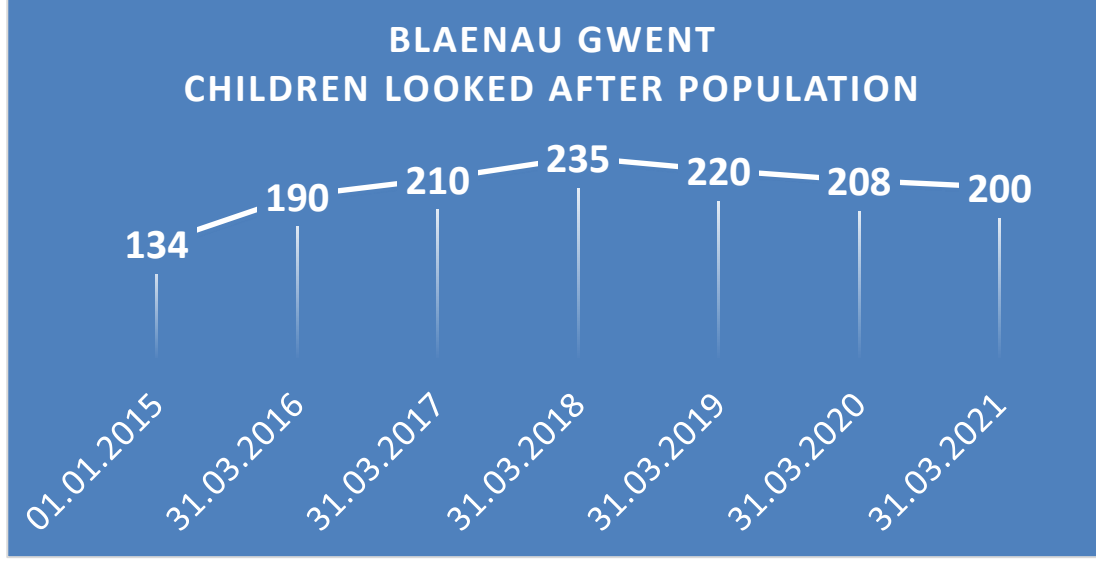
6. Supporting Evidence

6.1 **Figure 2**



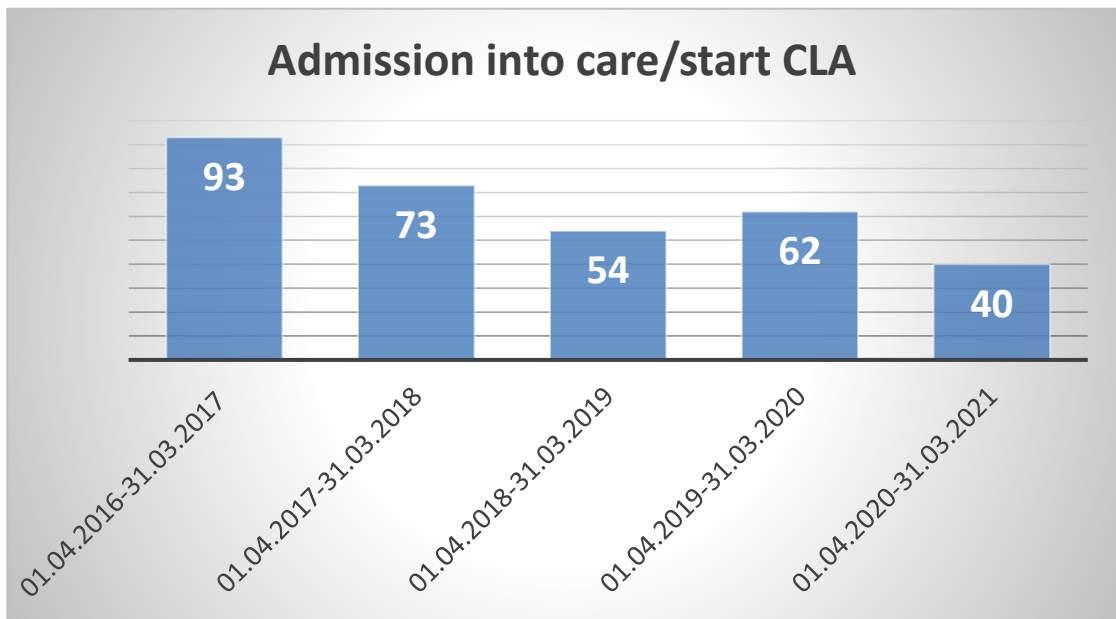
6.2 Figure 2 demonstrates the continued slow but steady decline in the numbers of children looked after in Blaenau Gwent

6.3 **Figure 3**



6.4 Figure 3 shows the total numbers of children looked after each year from 2015 – 2021. The first Safe Reduction of CLA Strategy was implemented in 2017 and took approximately 12 months before the positive effects were seen by the numbers of children looked after beginning to decrease.

6.5 **Figure 4**



6.6 Figure 4 shows the numbers of children entering care from 2017 to 2021. We would always want to see a decrease year on year of the children coming into care. This has happened over the past 5 years except 19/20 when we saw a slight increase in numbers compared to the previous year.

6.7 **Figure 5**

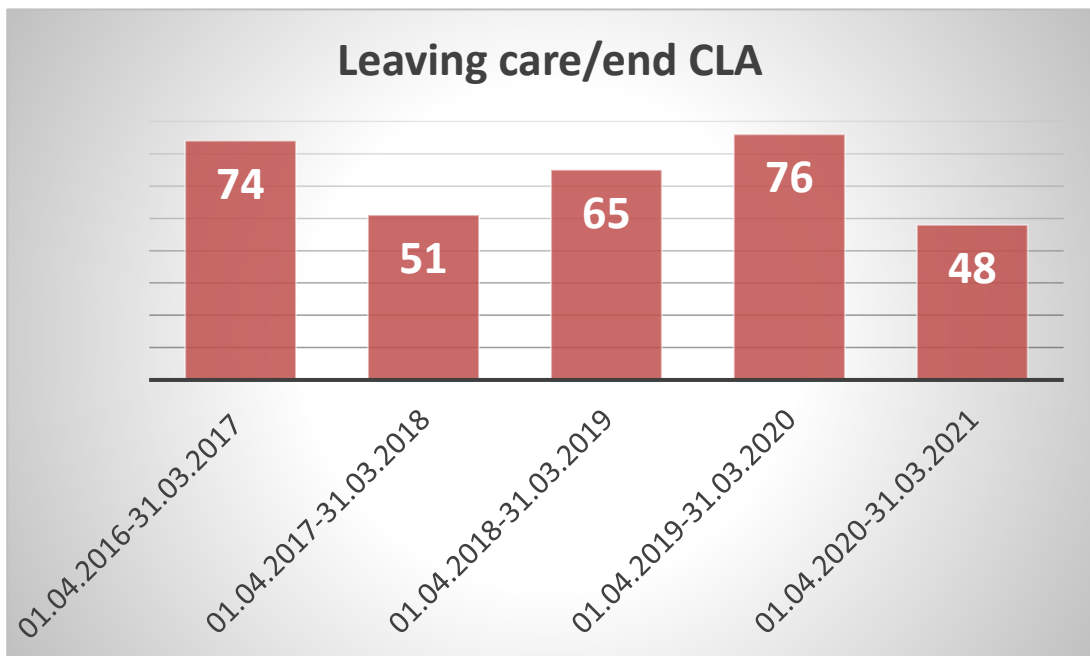
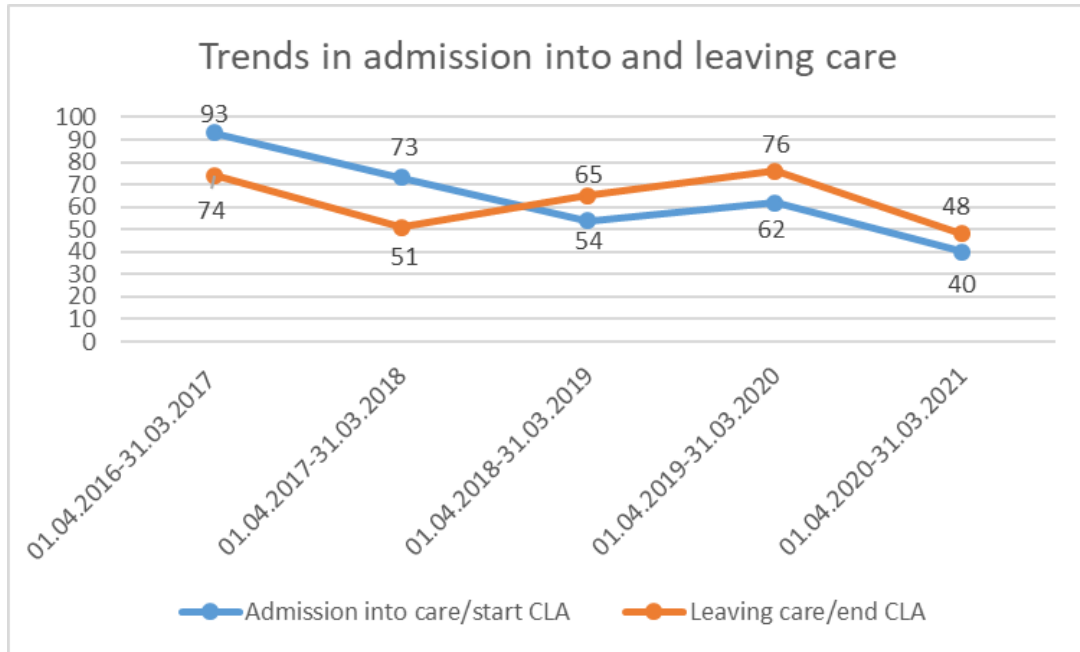


Figure 5 shows the number of children leaving care. Ideally we would want to see the numbers of children leaving care increase each year. This was the trend from 2017–2020, however the numbers leaving care reduced during the pandemic. This could have been for a number of reasons including staff having to prioritise RED rated cases during the pandemic and so they would not have

been focused on returning cases to court to revoke care orders, plus plans to rehabilitate children home to parents would have slowed down due to the periods of lockdown and government restrictions.

6.8 **Figure 6**



6.9 Figure 6 clearly shows the correlation between admissions into and discharges out of care. The positive tipping point came in 2018 /19 which was the second year into the initial 3 year Safe Reduction of CLA Strategy. This saw the change in more children leaving care than entering care. This is a trend that we will strive to maintain over the next 5 years.

6.10 It is important to recognise that the success of the Safe Reduction of CLA Strategy is dependent on a whole service approach. The robust preventative interventions delivered by Families First and Flying start prevent needs from escalating into statutory services. The Information, Advice and Assistance Team provides robust screening and initial assessment of all referrals ensuring the appropriate action is taken to meet needs. All of the Social Work Teams work exceptionally hard to keep families together and work with families using a strengths based approach.

6.12 **Expected outcome for the public**

The successful implementation of the Safe Reduction of CLA 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

- 6.13 ***Involvement*** (*consultation, engagement, participation*)
There is extensive involvement with the children and families we work with and individual feed-back was offered.
- 6.14 ***Thinking for the Long term*** (*forward planning*)
The refreshed 5 yr strategy is longer than the initial 3 yr strategy in recognition of the significant work required to continue and maintain the downward trend in numbers of children looked after.
- 6.15 ***Preventative focus***
A large part of the Safe Reduction of CLA Strategy has a preventative focus
- 6.16 ***Collaboration / partnership working***
A number of the actions under the Safe Reduction of CLA Strategy rely on partnership working. Senior managers and staff have good working relationships with our partners which will support us in achieving the actions. The refreshed 5 yr strategy focuses 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.
- 6.17 ***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 Director's Annual report

Background Documents /Electronic Links

N/A