

Appendix 11

Children's Safeguarding & Family Support – Continuous Improvement Plan

Introduction:

Councils spent £11.1bn on children's social care in 2021/22, an increase of 41.6% in real terms since 2009/10. Local authorities nationally have routinely overspent on their children's social care budgets for the last 9 years. By 2021/22, 46% had overspent by at least 20% and 10% of local authorities by at least 40%. As a result, acute social care has been prioritised at the expense of other children's services. This is unsurprising given that between 2009/10 and 2021/22, spending on children in care rose by 49.4%, while spending on children's centres and on children under five fell by 73.4%.

Spend is being driven up by the exponentially rising costs of residential care, while at the same time, local authorities are becoming over reliant on expensive agency staff due to the first decline in the numbers of children's social workers in a decade. Cases have become more complex, there are clear sufficiency challenges, and the sector lacks the funding or policy changes needed to tackle the scale of problems being realised.

Children's residential care accounts for over a third of spending on children in care. Between 2015/16 and 2021/22 the amount spent on residential care has increased by 66.2%, including a 14.6% increase in 2021/22 alone. Supply constraints and higher demand, exacerbated by the government withdrawing unregulated accommodation for under 16-year-olds in 2021, are pushing up costs. The situation is so dire that the Department for Education has categorised the risk of market failure in children in care placements as "critical to very likely" during 2023/24.

Our continuous improvement plan is very much focused on reviewing and re-modelling services and finding new and innovative ways of doing more for less. Whilst doing so, our foremost priority is to promote the wellbeing and safeguarding of vulnerable children and young people, in line with our statutory responsibilities.

Local Challenges:

- Telford and Wrekin has an increasingly growing population with the population size having increased by 11.4%, from around 166,600 in 2011 to 185,600 in 2021. This is much higher than the overall increase for the West Midlands (6.2%) and England (6.6%). There has been an increase of 8.3% in children aged under 15 years.
- In Telford and Wrekin, 15.6% of the population was income-deprived in 2019. Of the 316 local authorities in England, Telford and Wrekin is ranked 60th most income-deprived. Of the 108 neighbourhoods in Telford and Wrekin, 29 are among the 20% most income deprived in England.
- Demand for Children's Social Care is higher than it has been for the last five years with the referral rate per 10,000 children in Telford and Wrekin at 543. Whilst this is higher than the West Midlands, it is lower than both our statistical neighbours and all England rate.
- As of 1 April 2023 the rate of looked after children per 10,000 child population was 108.77 against a West Midlands rate of 91.5, England rate of 71.28 and statistical

neighbour rate of 76.7. The Telford and Wrekin rate has decreased considerably since this point and is now 103.73 (as at 24/11/2023).

- The longer-term Covid legacy impact has resulted in some parental concerns being left unaddressed for extensive periods, which has contributed towards negative impacts for children and reduced family resilience.
- Demand pressures have resulted in services prioritising young people and families in crisis, rather than preventive and early help services.
- There are increased complexities in the needs of many of our children and families.
- Increased demand and rising unit costs, particularly for looked after children, is a substantive issue for children's social care. Care Market costs have significantly increased above inflation with workforce being a challenge.
- There is a lack of adequate accommodation across the system but there is also a lack of local accommodation which has negative consequences for children, i.e., leading to them being moved far from family and wider kinship networks. 45% of our looked after children are placed out of borough with 19% placed more than 20 miles from their home.
- Accommodation for children with complex and specialist needs is the scarcest; there are no secure children's homes in the West Midlands.
- The government withdrew the use of unregulated accommodation for under 16-year-olds from September 2021. While intended to improve the quality of children's homes through better oversight, this has placed extra demands on the system. This pressure will intensify given the decision to extend this to 16- and 17-year-olds from October 2023. Research suggests that the Department for Education (DfE) has allocated £123m to cover the impact of these changes over the next three years, but when taking account of demand growth, it is estimated that the total cost to local authorities could be nearly three times this.
- National foster carer shortage – both in terms of recruitment and retention.
- Workforce availability across health and social care. The most important factor in retaining social workers is high caseloads with issues related to being overworked were those most cited by people considering leaving the sector.
- In December 2021 the National UASC Transfer Scheme (NTS) was made mandatory to ensure more equitable distribution of new arrivals across the country. In August 2022, the NTS rate was increased from 0.07% to 0.1% of a LA's child population and, in a push to end the use of hotels to accommodate UASC, the ten-day transfer deadline was reduced to five working days. This has had a significant impact in Telford and Wrekin, with numbers now at 42 (having more than doubled over recent years); making up 9.72% of our overall looked after children population. Many have suffered complex trauma and need additional support.
- We continue to see evidence of the ripple effect felt by our children's services stemming from external factors beyond our control as a local authority. Some of the factors are mentioned elsewhere in this report, such as housing, the cost-of-living crisis and challenges faced by other partner agencies. Education, schools and pressures in the health service have a significant impact on children, and their families, as well as detrimentally on children's services.
- Child sexual exploitation, child criminal exploitation and county lines gangs.
- There is significant evidence relating to the increasing poor emotional wellbeing and mental health needs of children, and their parents and carers, plus a body of national policy and service provision to both prevent and tackle this.

- There are also challenges and pressures on the education and SEND system (including the high needs block of funding) which are of equal concern.
- In Telford and Wrekin, the highest of all starters in both 2021-22 (35%) and 2022-23 (21%) were aged 0-1. This is an age group where early help, parenting programmes and effective pre-proceedings work can have a significant impact on outcomes for families. In 2022-23, 59% of new entries into care were aged 11+ which is an age group where early help, edge of care, child exploitation and diversionary services can have a considerable effect in avoiding care.
- There are an increasing number of young people aged 16-17 presenting as homeless. This is another key area of focus with the development of a Telford and Wrekin Joint Housing Protocol.

Our Operating Model

Our approach to delivering children's services is to ensure that every child has the right to grow up in their birth family, where it is safe for them to do so, and in their best interests. This principle is grounded in Article 8 of the Human Rights Act 1998 – right to a Private Family Life. Where it is not possible, our aspiration is for them to reside within their family or relational networks.

Therefore, the lens of our practice when working alongside families is first and foremost how we can support parents to make this happen. We consider how we can aid the capacity of birth parents to make changes to their parenting to meet the needs of their child or children, utilising professional support complemented by a framework of support available from their extended network of family and friends.

This includes involving extended networks at the earliest stage in terms of identifying support to enable parents to care for their child/children, identifying who could care for their child/children in a crisis or if the situation became unsafe for the child to remain in their parent/s' care and any support that may be required to enable this to happen. As well as ensuring that the child/children/young person maintains meaningful links with people that are important to them.

This is reflected within our Family First Strategy and overarching practice framework which outlines our relational approaches when working alongside children, young people and their families, and our commitment to this approach.

DFE's Strengthening Families, Protecting Children Programme: Family Safeguarding

Telford and Wrekin Council applied and were successful to join the DFE's Strengthening Families, Protecting Children Programme, where £84 million has been invested over 5 years to support up to 20 local authorities to improve work with families and safely reduce the number of children entering care by adopting one of three successful models developed elsewhere.

Family Safeguarding was developed by Hertfordshire County Council in 2015, where it has delivered a radical impact in improving outcomes for children and their families whilst also significantly reducing demands and costs for the county. The model has been independently evaluated as being very effective, has been complimented by Ofsted and is being replicated

by local authorities across the country. Key to its success is the initial intensive support provided to both children and the adults in their families.

The Family Safeguarding Model is predicated on multi-disciplinary joint children and adult teams. The model will therefore be implemented by building on the skills mix of our current Children's Social Work teams by adding community-based mental health staff, domestic abuse specialists and substance misuse workers.

The new model went live in Telford and Wrekin in July 2021. There is ongoing embedding of the Family Safeguarding Model which is already seeing a reduction in re-referrals into children's social care.

Family Hubs

Telford and Wrekin was one of 75 LA's eligible for Government funding to implement a family hub model having been pre-selected in LA rank order using the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Indices. Family Hubs are very much focused on the importance of giving families the support they need recognising that all families need support from time to time to help their babies and children thrive, whether that's from friends, family, volunteers, or practitioners.

The ambition is for every family to receive the support they need, when they need it. Family Hubs enable all families to have access to the information and tools they need to care for and interact positively with their babies and children, and to look after their own wellbeing. They look to improve join-up between state and non-state services and take a whole family approach better supporting families to access the help they need. Evidence is clear that identifying risks early and preventing problems from escalating leads to better long-term outcomes.

Family Group Conferences/Family Conversations

Families are offered the opportunity to engage in a family group conference. The ethos of this is to recognise the strengths that are evident within the family and how these can be built upon to support in meeting the needs of the child/young person, supporting them to resolve difficulties using their own knowledge and skills which is complimented by professional support.

Linked to this we also offer family conversations to enable the extended relational network of a child/young person to be able to voice their opinions; sharing their knowledge and expertise to devise a family plan to meet the child/young person's needs and to help keep them safe. Family meetings need to occur at the earliest stage to support parents caring for their children, but also as a mechanism for identifying who could care for the child in a crisis or be considered to care for the child if it is not safe for them to remain at home with their parents. The meetings also seek to identify any barriers for family members/extended networks being able to care for a child/young person and provides an opportunity for support to be provided early with an aim to mitigate any difficulties identified.

NSPCC Reunification Practice Framework

When a child is being cared for by the local authority we will continually review if it is in the child's best interests to return to the care of their parents or be placed within their relational network and identify the support that would be required.

If a child is subject to a Care Order and is placed at home with his/her parents under Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010, the local authority will keep the arrangement under regular review and seek to revoke the Care Order at the earliest opportunity once assessments show that the parent/s have been able to make and sustain positive change.

In 2019-20, the NSPCC Reunification Practice Framework was introduced in Telford and Wrekin's children's services. It was reported in our 2020 Ofsted inspection that we have "A highly effective and creative service [that] successfully assists children, especially older children, to remain with their birth family, or supports a return to their family wherever it is safe to do so... Families are supported to ensure that changes are sustainable, avoiding the need for further care episodes and reducing the need for further statutory involvement. Exit strategies are carefully planned to ensure that families can sustain change themselves."

Family Solutions

The Family Solutions service includes Family Group Conferencing and works to achieve several key outcomes that feed into the cost improvement plan.

Our services refer to Family Solutions when it is considered that a child is perceived to be at the 'edge of care' or at risk of becoming looked after.

Family Solutions also support children and young people to stepdown from residential to foster placement, providing clear stepdown plans and working with all involved to ensure that there is robust planning to achieve successful transition and prevent placement breakdowns. The remit of this offer is now broader, with support for some of our older young people to transition to semi-independent living arrangements and support for reunification plans, with the whole team trained in and championing the NSPCC reunification practice framework.

Systemic Practice

We are now in the seventh year of embedding Systemic Practice in to make system changes to the way we work with children and young people. The systemic practice model is family-focused, and strengths-based, to build families and/or young people's capacity to address their own problems more effectively.

We have delivered whole service implementation of the systemic practice model. The practice model enables our workforce to work intensively with families to empower them to solve their own problems and change behaviours instead of referring out to others.

The Systemic Team also deliver systemic PODs to support both families and practitioners which ensures consistency with our relational and systemic approach and avoids the need to commission high-cost therapy externally.

Family Networks

Family Networks Pilot through the Department for Education as part of the programme launched to transform children's social care. This pilot is designed to help keep more children in loving and stable family homes where it is safe to do so. The purpose of this pilot is to find transformative ways to involve wider family members with funding to support parents so that children and stay at home with their families. The pilot will conclude in March 2025.

Together4Children

We continue to be part of the Together4Children Regional Adoption Agency (RAA) as a partnership between Shropshire Council, Staffordshire County Council, Stoke-on-Trent City Council and Telford & Wrekin Council. The RAA delivers a range of functions, including:

- Recruiting and assessing adoptive families;
- Finding families for the children from our region who need adoptive families;
- Providing adoption support services to adopted children, their families, birth families and adopted adults.

In-house Fostering Strategy

As corporate parents our ambition is to recruit and retain the best foster carers to provide the best possible care for our looked after children. Our “in-house” foster carers are central to our aims to secure the best possible outcomes for children in our care.

We have increased both the support provided and financial incentives to our in-house foster carers, aiming to reduce future costs of the service by increasing the number of in-house options, as well as ensuring that in-house foster carers have the financial resources to provide the best care possible for children in their care.

This has enabled the authority to become financially competitive in the foster care market and has ensured that existing foster carers remain with the borough. We are also holding family finding events and focusing on targeted recruitment campaigns for foster carers able to care for sibling groups and fostering plus placements.

We have also:

- Introduced the Mockingbird Model. Mockingbird uses an extended family model, in the form of ‘constellations’ which consist of a ‘hub’ home and several ‘satellite’ homes nearby. The specially recruited and trained hub home carers offer respite care, peer support, regular joint planning and social activities. Because of its structure, Mockingbird helps alleviate the sense of isolation foster carers can feel and offers immediate practical support - similar to that a non-fostering family might receive from friends and relatives.
- Further developed our marketing strategy, with a dedicated resource to make the Telford and Wrekin fostering brand more visible across the borough.
- Reviewed our recruitment processes to ensure that the service responds swiftly to all enquiries and visit all potential new carers as soon as they express an interest in becoming a foster carer for Telford and Wrekin.
- Developed our support offer to Foster Carers which includes access to therapy to promote wellbeing and improve placement stability for our children and young people.
- Worked with colleagues from across the Council to look at additional ways to support our in-house fostering service to support our carers to care for children and young people with disabilities or additional support needs, e.g. through adaptations and housing offers.
- Enhanced focus on Family and Friends foster care.

Commissioning and brokerage of care and placements

We are in the process of implementing the Valuing Care tool to existing commissioning and brokerage processes and practice – with a focus on home finding and provider management. The aim is to demonstrate an alternative approach to finding care which better meets need and provides better value, by more clearly and accurately describing the child's need and focussing on strengths and aspirations.

As part of this we will be looking to identify opportunities for changes to care, support and placements (inc. step down, reunification, permanence, alternative level of support, engagement with health). We are also delivering an intervention which uses the 'Family Values' approach to improve, develop and strengthen foster carer recruitment and retention.

Child and Family Ambassador Volunteer Scheme

The service is currently reviewing the Telford and Wrekin Children's Volunteering Strategy: The Child and Family Ambassador (Volunteer) Scheme and its role in supporting service delivery and increasing support to children and families. There are clear savings to be made from using volunteers and providing additional capacity for demand and supporting exit strategies for practitioners.

Reducing Parental Conflict

Following our successful application to the Reducing Parental Conflict (RPC) Workforce Development Grant, a Reducing Parental Conflict partnership conference was held in February 2022 to raise awareness and knowledge and enhance skills around Reducing Parental Conflict. We have also developed and implemented a bespoke intervention tool kit and introduced experts' 'Specialist Relationship Champions' across the Partnership to be a point of contact to share good practice and knowledge. We have also enhanced practitioner training completed by Relationship champions.

Investment in specialist Criminal Exploitation Team

We have invested in our CATE team and have commitment to complete all recommendations following on from the Independent Inquiry Report.

Improved collaboration

Participation and consultation is embedded as standard practice with children, families, carers and staff, including the introduction of the Dandelions Group - our Parent Participation experts.

Practitioner recruitment and retention

Introduction of a Social Work Progression Framework to better support our Social Worker recruitment and retention.

Summary

The ongoing development of our Children's Services Improvement Programme aims to ensure that families experiencing complex and multiple difficulties will receive accessible co-ordinated support at the time that they need it. Targeted and specialist interventions are offered to children, young people and families with existing risk factors and vulnerabilities in order to reduce the severity of problems that have started to emerge and prevent problems escalating.

We want to achieve good outcomes for all children and families in Telford and Wrekin, as quickly and effectively as possible. Ensuring good outcomes for vulnerable children requires a strong collaborative approach between all agencies and a culture of mutual support and challenge. We will continue to promote integrated working across all tiers of need and evaluate service provision to ensure they are meeting our objectives.

The aim is to continuously review, appraise and prioritise change activity to deliver corporate and departmental objectives. Within this will be the oversight of our high-level change programme plan focused on identifying and delivering opportunities across the child's journey to improve outcomes and reduce costs.