

Report

Cabinet

Part 1

Date: 14th October 2020

Subject **Expectation of reduction in the number of children who are looked after**

Purpose To ensure Cabinet Members are fully sighted on the expectations from Welsh Government for Children's Services and the challenges this poses.

Author Sally Jenkins

Ward City wide

Summary The First Minister has prioritised a reduction in the numbers of children who are looked after across Wales. In May 2019 a report was presented to Cabinet focussing on the plan submitted to Welsh Government and the proposed actions to meet the expectation of a reduction. The report highlighted the potential challenges this presents more widely across the Council.

This report is an update in terms of both the continued expectations of Welsh Government and the actions of Children's Services in Newport

Proposal **To update Members in respect of the Welsh Government expectation of a reduction in children looked after numbers across the Council including work with partner agencies e.g. the Public Services Board**

Action by Sally Jenkins

Timetable Immediate

This report was prepared after consultation with:

- Children's Services staff
- Cabinet Member for Social Services

Signed

Background

The First Minister proposed in his manifesto a reduction in the numbers of children who are looked after across Wales as a priority for his government. The First Minister carried this manifesto proposal into government and all Local Authorities were required to submit a template to Welsh Government outlining how they proposed to reduce their numbers of children who are looked after. The completion of the template followed on from a number of meetings and discussions across the sector with Welsh Government officials. All Local Authorities were visited by Welsh Government and presented the local challenges with the support of the then Statutory Director, the then Chief Executive and the Cabinet Member.

The First Minister continues to be concerned that the numbers of children who are looked after in Wales are per ten thousand significantly higher than in England. The implications for the children of Wales are that they are more likely to be removed from their family care and brought up within public care. The outcomes for children in care are well documented and while it is recognised that poorer outcomes are in very large part a result of early childhood experiences prior to becoming looked after the challenges of good public care and the need to support families to care well are evident throughout social care research. While short term risk can quickly be managed by removing children from the family home the long term implications of managing the risk in this way are additional costs and a failure to provide sustainable solutions.

Working towards reducing the numbers of children who are looked after is challenging for all agencies but the current trajectory of ever rising numbers is untenable both in terms of the outcomes for children and the costs across the public sector. Early intervention and prevention to avert the need for children becoming looked after is preferable in terms of both cost avoidance and potentially better outcomes. Working collaboratively across the Council and with partner agencies is more likely to achieve successful prevention and divert children from becoming looked after.

Over the past eighteen months Local Authorities have submitted quarterly updates to Welsh Government. Since March 2020 Local Authorities have been required to submit weekly updates to Welsh Government including the numbers of looked after children and were required to present additional information in August 2020. On a National basis the numbers of looked after children have continued to rise. An analysis of the information reveals that across Wales while fewer children came into care during the year 2019/20 fewer children left care so overall there has been an increase in numbers.

The most recent quarterly report, the most recent weekly data return and the August additional information are appended to this report.

Children's Services are the lead part of the Council in working to support the most vulnerable families and manage risk for children and young people across Newport. Every week the Local Authority receives at least 120 referrals which progress to some form of intervention. Of those 120 at least 25 will require a formal investigation with Social Services staff alongside colleagues in health and police. There are clear themes for the most vulnerable families including domestic abuse, substance misuse, poor parental mental health and the challenges of poverty. For Children's Services the task is to manage the presenting risk and then to support families wherever possible for children to remain at home. When that is no longer safely possible then Children's Services will intervene to provide the best possible care away from the family. During the period of the lockdown there was a very short period when Children's Services saw a reduction in referrals. However, by the end May referrals had returned to pre Covid levels and in fact have continued to rise.

Discussions with other agencies have taken place since the previous report to Cabinet including a presentation to the Public Services Board. The challenge of a shared understanding of risk across agencies continues to exercise all working with children. In a recent submission to the Gwent Children and Families Partnership Board the following were highlighted as areas where work is needed across agencies.

- Shared management of risk
- Shared responsibilities
- Shared priorities
- Shared multi disciplinary policies and procedures could underpin joint assessment / joint plans /joint commissioning

These gaps lead to daily issues for staff across agencies. For example work with the Police often raises differences in approach in terms of children as victims and the need to seek greater work with perpetrators or with health where there are considerable differences in views as to the funding needed to support children.

Throughout the past eighteen months Children's Services staff have worked to establish particular work strands to maximise support for families to safely remain together. With a combination of grant funding from the Welsh Government Intermediate Care Fund and a redirection of existing Children's Services resources the following have been established

- Family Group Conferencing – across Children's Service families are supported to find their own solutions. A Family Group Conference is an independently facilitated meeting with all the relevant family members who are then supported to find ways to address challenges in the family and provide care and support to prevent children coming into care. This is a Nationally evaluated programme which has a history of considerable success.
- Baby and Me – a small team of social workers, health staff and family support staff work with families from very early in pregnancy. The midwifery team refer at the 12 week booking appointment and an intensive package of support is then provided including the Baby Steps group programme, daily visiting when the baby is born and support in all areas so housing , substance misuse, benefits, emotional health, antenatal care and so on. The families referred are at very high risks of their babies being removed at birth. Early indications are that this intervention is proving very successful.
- Mediation – we have introduced mediation workers to focus on two areas firstly at the front door so where there are difficulties particularly in families with older teenagers we provide immediate mediation and crisis work while the second area is working with families of older children who have been in care for lengthy periods of time and negotiating to see if children could now they are older safely return home
- Family and Friends – a team has been established specifically to support extended families who care for children. The team is supporting families where children are cared for either on the basis of a Special Guardianship Orders or where family members have been approved as foster carers. The emphasis is on finding family members to care for children into adulthood safely and without the need for them to become looked after.

All of these resources are now in place and have been welcomed by families. Channelling through to a long term reduction in the numbers of children in care will take time. The cautionary note is that despite the resources available the events of the past 6 months will inevitably impact on the pressures and the strains on families. The links between family income, poverty and family breakdown are well documented.

Over the past eighteen months the numbers of children in care in Newport has remained largely stable. Currently there are 385 children in our care. During the past eighteen months the highest at any one point has been 396 while the lowest has been 378. Even at the higher figure this is below the Welsh average. Of these children currently 22 are with us as a shared arrangement with parents. This group of children are mainly children with very complex needs in terms of disability. 22 as Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children. The other 341 are all subject to court orders and thus the decision for them to be in our care has been overseen and agreed by the family court. We continue to work with a further 140 children on the Child Protection Register as well as about 2,200 children each year using a Care and Support Plan.

On 24.09.2020 after the body of this report had been prepared the Deputy Minister wrote to all Local Authorities to update on the data and the Welsh Government plans linked to the reduction strategy. This letter is included as an Appendix with this report.

There are no decisions arising from this report. Children’s Services will continue to report regularly against the template to Welsh Government and will continue to work with all partners and take shared appropriate steps to address how to reduce the numbers of children who are looked after in the City.

Financial Summary

The proposals for Welsh Government are funded from with the core Children’s Services budget.

Risks

Risk	Impact of Risk if it occurs* (H/M/L)	Probability of risk occurring (H/M/L)	What is the Council doing or what has it done to avoid the risk or reduce its effect	Who is responsible for dealing with the risk?
Continued rise in numbers of looked after children	H	M	The proposals in the Welsh Government template lay out mitigation. Discussions are taking place to widen the scope for involvement in responsibility for reducing the numbers of looked after children	Head of Children’s Services

Links to Council Policies and Priorities

The work outlined in the Reduction template is part of the wider work of Children’s Services which has been developed to support the delivery of the Council’s Corporate Plan and is focused on

Resilient Communities
Aspirational People

The Corporate Plan sets out the meeting of the Well Being Objectives. “Supporting children to remain safely with their families” is within Well Being Objective 3 – To enable people to be healthy, independent and resilient.

Options Available and considered

Not applicable

Preferred Option and Why

Not applicable

Comments of Chief Financial Officer

There are currently no direct financial implications arising from the report however, any reductions in the numbers of looked after children should eventually benefit the overall council budget. The work strands mentioned in this report are proving successful in terms of outcomes for children and families but it will take time for these improvements to materialise into savings given the complexity that surrounds the current situation.

The Council has invested significantly in this area to keep up with growing demand, which the action plan recognises and is the case nationally. The balance between ensuring adequate funding levels to ensure these services are operating at safe levels and the affordability of this is increasingly challenging and very tight. The sustainability of on-going investment similar to recent year's levels would pose a considerable financial risk to the Council and other services in light of other pressures on the budget and low funding levels, which will need to be kept under regular review.

Comments of Monitoring Officer

There are no specific legal issues arising from the report, which provides an update on actions taken during the past 18 months to meet the Welsh Government priority for reducing the numbers of children in care. There has been a continuing emphasis on early intervention and prevention, to avoid taking children into care, but this remains challenging and has to be balanced against the Council's statutory safeguarding duties under the Social Services and Well-Being (Wales) Act 2014 and the increasing risk of satellite litigation and claims in "non-removal" cases.

Comments of Head of People and Business Change

This report outlines how the Council plans to reduce the number of looked after children in its care. The proposals are closely linked to sustainable development and wellbeing principles with an emphasis on early intervention and prevention and working collaboratively with partners to manage risk and enable children to remain safely with their families, with the aim of achieving better long-term outcomes for children. The improved wellbeing outcomes will benefit children themselves, their families and wider society and will also alleviate financial pressures on public services. There are no direct human resources implications to this report however cultural change will be required within the Council. It is noted that the report explains that achieving a long term reduction in the numbers of children in care will take time and that despite the resources now in place the events of the past 6 months will impact on the pressures and the strains on families and could increase family breakdown in the shorter term.

Comments of Cabinet Member

The Cabinet Member has approved the report for consideration by cabinet.

Local issues

Not applicable

Scrutiny Committees

None

Equalities Impact Assessment and the Equalities Act 2010

The Equality Act 2010 contains a Public Sector Equality Duty which came into force on 06 April 2011. The Act identifies a number of 'protected characteristics', namely age; disability; gender reassignment; pregnancy and maternity; race; religion or belief; sex; sexual orientation; marriage and civil partnership. The new single duty aims to integrate consideration of equality and good relations into the regular business of public authorities. Compliance with the duty is a legal obligation and is intended to result in better informed decision-making and policy development and services that are more effective for users. In exercising its functions, the Council must have due regard to the need to: eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment, victimisation and other conduct that is prohibited by the Act; advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a protected characteristic and those who do not; and foster good relations between persons who share a protected characteristic and those who do not. The

Act is not overly prescriptive about the approach a public authority should take to ensure due regard, although it does set out that due regard to advancing equality involves: removing or minimising disadvantages suffered by people due to their protected characteristics; taking steps to meet the needs of people from protected groups where these differ from the need of other people; and encouraging people from protected groups to participate in public life or in other activities where their participation is disproportionately low.

There is no decision linked to this report hence a FEIA will be completed as and when necessary.

Children and Families (Wales) Measure

Although no targeted consultation takes place specifically aimed at children and young people, consultation on planning applications and appeals is open to all of our citizens regardless of their age. Depending on the scale of the proposed development, applications are publicised via letters to neighbouring occupiers, site notices, press notices and/or social media. People replying to consultations are not required to provide their age or any other personal data, and therefore this data is not held or recorded in any way, and responses are not separated out by age.

Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015

Report writes need to indicate how they have considered the five things public bodies need to think about to show they have applied the sustainable development principle put into place by the Act. You will need to demonstrate you have considered the following:

- Long term: the importance of balancing short- term needs with the need to safeguard the ability to also meet long – term needs
- Prevention: How acting to prevent problems occurring or getting worse may help us meet our objectives
- Integration: Consider how the proposals will impact on our wellbeing objectives, our wellbeing goals, other objectives or those of other public bodies
- Collaboration: have you considered how acting in collaboration with any other person or any other part of our organisation could help meet our wellbeing objectives
- Involvement: The importance of involving people with an interest in achieving the wellbeing goals, and ensuring that those people reflect the diversity of the City we serve.

Throughout this report the core principles of the WFG are referenced and interwoven. This is clearly a long term proposal which seeks to embed preventative working as a way to ensure good outcomes for citizens. Integration with other elements of the Council and public bodies is key to the success of the proposal. Working in collaboration with families and partner agencies is vital and drives this plan. Throughout Children's Services we are looking for new ways to fully involve and engage children, young people, parents and carers this plan is key to that work.

Crime and Disorder Act 1998

Section 17(1) of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 imposes a duty on the Local Authority to exercise its various functions with due regard to the likely effect of the exercise of those functions on, and the need to do all that it reasonably can to prevent, crime and disorder in its area.

Consultation

Comments received from wider consultation, including comments from elected members, are detailed in each application report in the attached schedule.

Background Papers

Template attached

Dated:
05.10.2020