

**Education & Children's Services
Overview & Scrutiny Committee**

11 October 2016

**Update on Recommendations of 2014 Looked After Children
Working Group**

Ward(s) All

Portfolios: Children's Services

Executive Summary:

The report gives and update on the progress against the recommendations of the 2014 Looked After Children Working Group.

Reason for Scrutiny:

In 2014 the Children and Young People's Scrutiny Panel identified the opportunity to investigate service for Looked After Children. The findings were that services for Looked After Children had improved on previous years, however there was further work to be done. There were six recommendations for further work.

Recommendations:

Scrutiny Panel note the content of the report and progress made to date.

Background papers:

Looked After Working Group report 2014

Resource and legal considerations: None

Citizen impact: None

Environmental impact: None

Performance management:

There are statutory responsibilities for Looked After Children and current performance management scrutinises compliance with these statutory obligations

Equality Implications: Not applicable

Consultation: Not applicable

Contact Officer: Debbie Carter
Assistant Director: Social Care and Safeguarding
01922 652756
debbie.carter@walsall.gov.uk

Report

In 2014 Children and Young People's Scrutiny Panel received a report from the Looked After Children's Working Group. This report gives an update on the recommendations of the 2014 report.

Recommendations:

1. That the Interim Executive Director continue to review all Looked After Children to ensure that the level of support proffered is appropriate to their needs;

The Interim Executive Director left in 2014 and was replaced by David Haley. The current Assistant Director has established a regular monthly LAC tracking forum which she chairs. The purpose of this forum is to review the progress of plans for all Looked After Children and provides a regular update and insight into the work with Looked After Children. The Executive Director receives regular reports from the Assistant Director the support that Looked After Children receive. In addition there is a month performance board which provides robust scrutiny.

That the Children's and Young People Scrutiny and Performance Panel closely monitor:-

i. the ongoing work to reduce the number of Looked After Children where appropriate;

Nationally the numbers of Looked After Children have continued to rise; steadily increasing over the last eight years as reported in the recent DFE report. This trend has been reflected to some extent in the local statistics with there being 629 looked after children in March 2014, 605 in March 2015 and 625 in March 2016 and currently 636.

Work is on-going to monitor and appropriately reduce the numbers of looked after children however nationally and locally it presents a continuous challenge. Locally it has been recognised that there are significant challenges in relation to domestic violence, substance misuse and parental mental ill health and the impact that this has on the safety and well being of children and young people. Currently there are focused pieces of work being undertaken to ensure that admissions to care are

appropriate and that discharges from care happen in as timely a way as is possible. In parallel we are working on reducing Social Workers caseloads to enable more direct work and developing a more systemic model of practice to support both with maintaining children appropriately in their home environments but also to enable appropriate and timely return home when an admission to care is appropriate in the short term. Bespoke methodologies are being implemented to support our work with children, young people and their families', this includes restorative practice and the NSPCC Re-unification model.

ii. the work to reduce the cost of placements through more effective and efficient purchasing arrangements;

- a. As of April 2016, the new West Midlands regional Independent Fostering Framework (IFA) went live. This is an approved number of IFA providers who have submitted set pricing for a range of fostering situations (standard, sibling, long-term, solo costs). This framework follows on from the previous that had expired in March 2016. As pre-existing placements are transferred onto the new framework terms and conditions, all 14 WM local authorities' members are able to re-value the weekly costs / charges and apply either the pre-existing or new framework rate, whichever is to the best advantage of the council. Any new, future placements will be charged at the new framework rates.

After the transfer of 163 IFA foster placements (individual children), the costs for this cohort has decreased by approx. £250,000. This figure may vary slightly due age banding changes, some children coming of age (leave care) in the year and placement moves.

- b. The WM regional Residential Framework will be re-tendered in the next two years and the same best value transfer opportunity as the IFA placements transfers will be sought out in 2017. Currently there are 35 external residential placements.
- c. Regional Children's Commissioning officers are now looking at the possibility of shared block purchasing of local residential providers. This could offer Walsall with access to more local units / beds, again, at a prescribed better rate. For example, 3 LA's (group) will commit to purchase beds from a 4 bed unit in the Black Country. The group will share out the beds keeping more children local and within 20 mile radius.
- d. Revised procedures for supervised contact are now operational. The quantity, frequency and timescale of a child's need for contact is now more robustly pre-planned and post-reviewed. This will bring about a reduction in delivered hours that will equate to a reduction in costs. Through this more proactive planning

process, only necessary and meaningful contact that clearly evidences benefit to the child's welfare will be funded.

3. That the Interim Executive Director (Children's Services) be requested to establish whether it would be feasible to tailor the role of agency staff to deal with children in need and child protection cases which would enable permanent workers to work with Looked After Children, to ensure consistency for children and young people;

Agency workers are employed in all part of children's social care, with the highest proportion in the Safeguarding Family Support Service where the CiN and CP work is held. Most children within the Corporate Parenting Service benefit from having a permanent social worker already. It would not be feasible or appropriate to tailor the role of agency staff to work with children in need or children in need or protection. The reason for this is that some children's needs change and escalate requiring them to become LAC and it is important to maintain consistency of worker. Also there is more turnover of agency staff and this could lead to disrupted relationships with Looked After Children.

4. That, once fully implemented, details of the new organisational model be circulated to all Members of the Council so that they are fully aware of systems in place, together with key contact details which will assist them in their role as Corporate Parents;

The new structure was implemented in September 2014 and is working well in most areas of the service. However there is a consultation underway to review the management structure within Safeguarding Family Support Service, Cooperate Parenting Service and the Children with Disability team post of Senior Practitioner which is feedback we have received from staff exiting the service. This proposal will stream line supervisory and management arrangements. In addition social workers' caseloads are starting to reduce and there is revised recruitment and retention strategy to start to reduce the reliance on agency workers.

5. That the Children and Young People Scrutiny and Performance Panel consider adding a review of the new organisational model for children's services to the work programme for the 2014/15 municipal year;

No, the review was taken forward as an operational matter and reported to the Portfolio Holder.

6. That the Interim Executive Director continues to take all possible action to ensure the timely appointments to vacant senior positions, including appointments to those currently interim, which will provide the leadership stability to continue to drive forward sustainable improvements for children and young people.

David Haley was appointed as the permanent Director of Children's Services in September 2014. Since December 2015 all of the established Senior Manager roles

in Children's Specialist Services are permanent appointments, which have helped to give the necessary consistency and stability to lead sustainable improvements for children and young people.