

CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE- 18 JANUARY 2016

REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES

PLACEMENT COMMISSIONING

Purpose of report

1. The purpose of this report is to set out the recent actions taken with regard to the commissioning of placements for children in the care of the County Council.

Policy Framework and Previous Decisions

2. The County Council has a duty to provide sufficient placements of sufficient quality for children in its care. This means that placements should be commissioned to meet the assessed needs of those children and those placements should be in keeping with regulation and with the preferred policy of the County Council.
3. The County Council's current policy, 'Choices for children and young people' was agreed by the Cabinet in December 2013 and is attached at Appendix 1. It sets out the importance of and preference for commissioning family based care when children need to be in the care of the County Council, and in particular that the preferred supplier of family based care is the County Council's own fostering service.

Background

4. The number of children in the care of the County Council compares favourably with both our statistical neighbours and with the all England position. In particular this means that far fewer children are in the care of the County Council than in comparator councils and that we have one of the lowest rates in England. The chart below sets out the comparative position.

	LAC per 10,000 population 31 March 2015
Leicestershire	35.0
Statistical Neighbours	47.8
England	60.0

5. During 2015 the number of children in care has remained broadly the same but there has been a notable difference in the needs of the children that have come into care. In particular there has been a sharp rise in the number of children aged 12 to 15 years with significant behavioural and emotional needs or where they are at risk of sexual exploitation. This has meant that commissioning placements for those children has been difficult because of the complexity and significance of the challenges of those children. As a result those placements have been significantly more expensive.
6. This has coincided with a time where the County Council's fostering service is addressing the changing profile of foster carers in the county. In particular there are a significant number of foster carers of retirement age, some of whom are therefore leaving the service. This has placed additional challenges on the ambition to provide more foster carers at this critical time.
7. As a result the placement budget has a forecasted overspend for 2015/16 of £7.9m

Action Taken

8. A number of steps have been taken to address this pressure as part of the departmental transformation programme as set out below.

Recruitment of LCC foster carers

9. The recruitment of a net increase in the number of foster carers is a priority. This is both because high quality family based care is the best place for children to live and grow up and because the County Council's fostering service offers a good service at an economical cost. In order to drive the achievement of a net increase in foster carers those people who apply to the County Council are tracked through the assessment and approval process leading up to the point when a child is placed with them. By 31 December 2015 there was a net increase of 8 foster carers and the trajectory is on course for the target of a further 4 foster carers by 31 March 2016, making an overall net increase of 12.

Level 6 foster carers

10. In order to enhance the scope and abilities of the County Council's fostering service a new type of carer has been introduced that will be recruited to have the skills and experience to look after young people with complex needs. This scheme, called at this design stage, the Level 6 carers scheme, will attract higher payment levels to the carers and will be supported by staff available round the clock. It is anticipated that the first of these new carers will be able to have a child in placement early in 2016. The introduction of this scheme will mean that fewer children will be placed in high cost residential care.

Decision making and management arrangements

11. The managerial arrangements regarding children's cases where there is a possibility that they might come into care have been reinforced. The intention with this approach is to ensure that there is improved consistency of approach to decision about whether a child can be supported at home or should come into care. This is co-ordinated through a weekly meeting that considers children in those situations.

Review of costly placements

12. The 27 most expensive children's placements and the extent to which these are meeting the child's assessed needs have been reviewed. This review, where it has been appropriate has reduced the costs of some placements in a number of different ways, such as ensuring that there is more appropriate sharing of placement costs with NHS commissioners, and by re-negotiating the costs in six of the highest cost placements with the providers.
13. In a similar vein the contracts with some other longer term arrangements for cohorts of children have been re-negotiated to reduce costs.

Children's Home closure

14. There is a linked report to Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee which is reporting on the progress so far with the consultation about the closure of one of the County Council's children's homes.

A new model of care

15. In the medium to longer term there needs to be a significant shift away from a reactive model that encompasses recent placement commissioning toward a more planned approach based on good quality data analysis and an understanding of trends. This will improve the situation further but will not remove the volatility of this service area entirely.

Conclusions

16. Although the number of children in the care of the County Council has remained stable and among the lowest in England the costs associated with these placements have risen significantly during 2015/16. This is associated with an unexpected higher number of children aged 12 to 15 years coming into care who required specialist placements. A range of short medium and long term actions are underway to mitigate the rising costs, as set out in paragraphs 8-15 above.

Circulation Under Local Issues Alert Procedure

None.

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List of Appendices

Appendix A – Choices for Children and Young People 2013

Equality and Human Rights Implications

17. All of the children who are or might become children in the care of the County Council are likely to be disadvantaged by virtue of their life experiences. It is therefore important that careful consideration of their equal opportunities is always made. Fundamental to this is the oversight of their individual care plans by the social workers and independent review officers for their case. In relation to any changes to policy, practice or procedure in this area an Equality and Human Rights Impact Assessment (EHRIA) will be completed. This has already been commenced in relation to the consultation about Greengates children's home.