

Service Pressures Action Plan**Looked After Children (LAC)**

Over the past five years the County Council has seen a significant growth in its LAC Population, which has risen 36% (from 375 in March 2012 to 510 in March 2017) and now stands at 533. Many other authorities are experiencing similar pressures with the Local Government Association (LGA) reporting 75% of Councils overspending and a cumulative pressure of £600 million. Even with the rise the County Council's overall comparative rate remains low, however its use of residential care is high which, given the very large cost of these kinds of placement, is one of the main drivers for the increase in expenditure in this area. A Care Placement Strategy is being developed as part of the Transformation Programme with the aim of more effectively managing the main aspects of the Looked After Children's System to where possible impact upon demand and reduce costs. The main aspects are detailed below.

Develop specialist Edge of Care Services to reduce the necessity for care, and to support step-downs from care.

The service provides a range of early help services and works with families where there maybe a risk of children having to come into care. These services are presently being reviewed and there is a need to strengthen the links with social care services to provide a combined service, which is more targeted at the highest risk families. This will enable a more intensive engagement with families to be developed enhancing the present offer with the potential to increase the number being diverted from having children removed into care and also to be able to offer a more comprehensive support package to allow children to be returned to families where appropriate to do so.

Strict gatekeeping by Senior Managers to authorise and monitor high cost placements.

All high cost placements have to be authorised by the Director or an Assistant Director.. Weekly meetings are being held chaired by the Director to monitor all residential placements in order to avoid drift and ensure children only remain in these very expensive placements as long as there is a need for them to do so.

Enhanced systems and greater challenge to Health to contribute to placements costs.

Many of the children coming into care have health needs. Where children remain local they can often access local health services, however this is not always possible or desirable. This is particularly the case of those with complex needs requiring high cost placements where Health will on occasions contribute to part of the cost of a placement. New procedures have been introduced to provide greater efficiency and are ensuring a more consistent and equitable apportionment of costs is being achieved. The potential exists to build on this to achieve a pooling of resources to provide further efficiencies.

Grow the in-house fostering service as a direct alternative to more expensive Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) placements

In-house foster placements cost on average £15k less than an equivalent IFA placement. Plans are in place to significantly grow the in-house service to reduce the need for the use of more costly IFA placements. This is now starting to have an impact with over 70 new families at various stages of recruitment. Extra staff resources are being taken on to complete the required assessments due to the increased take up and 15 new fostering families will become available in the next three months. An experienced fostering manager is now working with the service to further refine business processes and develop a comprehensive business plan to maintain and enhance the growth over the forthcoming period.

Establish specialist family based services as a direct alternative to residential care.

Specialist services have been developed by other Councils using experienced foster carers supported by a dedicated multi-disciplinary team of professionals. These services have worked with very challenging children at high risk of going into residential care or assisting children to leave residential care and have been shown to be effective. By providing a family based alternative not only is there a direct benefit for the children to be within a more normal situation with potentially better long term outcomes but also a significant cost saving. The intention is to commission this kind of service for Leicestershire to become operational in 2018/19.

Establish more 16 Plus Supported Accommodation.

As looked after young people move towards independent living it is possible to meet their needs within a semi-independent setting. This provides a degree of support but also promotes more self care in preparation for full independence. The service is keen to expand the scope of these kinds of placements which provide a cost effective solution for some young people but not all. A Framework of approved Providers has recently been established to ensure we are achieving good quality best value in the placements.

Extend the use of Adoption including for older children and those with disabilities.

The service had stopped recruiting Adoptive Parents although this has now recommenced and very positive results have been achieved with over 40 families expressing an interest or being assessed. This number exceeds Leicestershire's requirements, providing the option to offer the surplus to other authorities at a cost sufficient to provide some financial contribution to the adoption teams overall operating costs.

There is now greater emphasis on recruiting to provide adoption as an option for those children with more challenging needs including children with disabilities who have previously not been considered appropriate for adoption. If successful this approach would allow more children to leave care providing them a better long term option and well as potentially reducing some cost pressures.

Operate more robust contracting arrangements to manage costs pressures and ensure contract compliance.

Children and Family Services commission over £40 million of services mainly as placement costs. Previously these were not centralised and overseen by various managers. A strengthened single Commissioning Team has now been established which is providing an enhanced level of scrutiny of both individual placements and service contracts ensuring best value is being achieved. The service is now fully engaged with regional frameworks used to manage costs with providers and is about to lead a regional development to establish a new framework for SEND Placements. This team is also actively engaged with reviewing the Department's commissioning strategies.

Review the commissioning strategy for residential and independent foster care including our continuing role as a provider.

At present all residential and IFA placements are spot purchased. Given the pressures in the market it is getting increasingly difficult to find placements in this way and more emphasis now needs to be placed on alternative models. This could involve approaches such as block purchase of placements, partnership with providers to develop or manage services on the Councils behalf, partnerships with neighbouring councils etc. A review of this area is about to commence led by the Director which will report in the autumn.

Children with Disabilities Team.

Since 1st March 2017 the number of residential placements supported by this team has risen from 15 to 27 an 80% increase. This has been one of the major factors in the financial pressures which have occurred over the same period within the placements budget. Most of the placements have involved adolescents with defined disabilities who have associated very challenging behaviours which families are finding increasing difficulty in managing within the home environment. The service now has a new management team and we are in the process of developing a discrete strategy to address the limitations of the local service offer with the aim to increase the range and intensity of the support we can offer to families as an alternative to residential. This is particularly important given most families remain committed and are often distressed by not being able to keep their children at home. Whilst this will not be a possibility for all children we believe there is potential to significantly extend what we offer in more cost effective ways. The new strategy, which will be available in the autumn, will be based upon similar principles to those adopted by the SEND Strategy which is starting to have a positive impact and with which there will be an overlap given some children are within both services.

Paul Meredith
25th August 2017.

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