

SCRUTINY REPORT

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD

16 OCTOBER 2012

SAFEGUARDING PRESSURES

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SUMMARY

1. This report provides supplementary information to questions raised by Members relating to predicted placement overspends.

INTRODUCTION

2. The Safeguarding social work service is facing significant pressure as levels of activity outstrip current capacity. There continues to be an upward trend in the numbers of looked after children and child protection plans; there are currently 370 looked after children and 305 children and young people who are the subject of safeguarding plans. The increased numbers of looked after children have resulted in a subsequent pressure on both foster and residential placements. Half of the children and young people in foster care are placed with independent fostering agencies and between a third and a half of looked after children are placed further than a 30 minute drive of Middlesbrough.

EVIDENCE AND DISCUSSION

Independent Fostering Agency Budget Pressure of £824K

3. Whilst there has recently been a small decrease in the number of looked after children, overall there continues to be an upward trend. There are four key factors which have had an impact on these numbers.
 - (i) The number of large sibling groups accommodated within Middlesbrough.
 - (ii) Case Law which determines the status of "Connected Persons", family and friend carers.
 - (iii) Case Law which states that young people who have been in custody are deemed to have been looked after.

- (iv) The national shortage of adopters, which means that despite 'best efforts' there are a significant number of children for whom adoption is not an option and they are placed with foster carers, often in independent fostering agency placements at a significant cost.

In-house Fostering

4. There is a £80,000 pressure on the in-house Fostering Budget, as the service attempts to accommodate as many children and young people with in-house foster carers.
5. The Council views the expansion of the in-house fostering scheme as an important component of a strategy to reduce overall placement costs. The Mayor will lead a drive to recruit more foster carers and the Chief Executive has taken the operational lead in a cross-departmental initiative to recruit more foster carers, which will include:
- Targeted multi media advertising campaigns
 - Developing a fee/salary based foster carers scheme
 - Flexible use of budgets to provide specific packages of care for children
 - Encouraging current Council staff to consider fostering as a career option.

Children's Agency Residential Schools

6. There is an anticipated pressure of £780,000 on the Children's Agency Residential Budget. A review of the Council's Residential Strategy has taken place and a number of preferred options will be presented to the Safeguarding Project Board later this year. Whilst this strategy will not produce immediate savings, the Cost Prediction Model indicates that there will be significant savings on this budget in 2013/14, with more modest savings in 2014/15.

Five Rivers Contract

7. The Council currently has a contract with Five Rivers to provide three residential homes in Middlesbrough. This contract is due to end and an extension is currently being negotiated to ensure that the young people's placements within the homes remain stable.
8. There is a wider tendering exercise underway and conversations are taking place with a number of potential providers, including Five Rivers. The conversations are seeking to establish whether there would be any interest in providing a range of residential options for Middlesbrough.

Adoption Team Budget

9. The Adoption Service faces considerable challenges in providing adoption placements for children. Both locally and nationally, there is a shortage of adopters prepared to adopt older children over the age of six, particularly boys, sibling groups of three children or more, children who were born opiate dependent, as well as children who may be at risk of the effects of foetal alcohol syndrome or blood borne infections.

10. The Adoption Team continues to recruit new adopters and is very successful at encouraging adopters to take subsequent siblings of their adopted child.
11. The financial pressure relates to the fees that are paid to other agencies and Local Authorities when Middlesbrough purchases external adoptive placements at a cost of £20,000 - £25,000 per child, per placement. The Council is actively seeking to recruit in-house adopters and it is also lobbying central government about the high fees for placements.

CONCLUSIONS

12. This report has been prepared in response to a request for further clarification about budget pressures from the Overview and Scrutiny Board. The paper demonstrates that whilst there continues to be pressures, there are measures in place to address them.