

SCRUTINY REPORT

OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY BOARD

30 APRIL 2013

SAFEGUARDING PRESSURES

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SAFEGUARDING AND SPECIALIST SERVICES**

PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1. To present to the Overview and Scrutiny Board an update on the financial pressures of the Safeguarding and Specialist Service and the measures which are being taken to mitigate these pressures.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

2. A strategy to reduce costs and influence the rising numbers of looked after children has been developed and is being implemented within a context which recognises that the only long-term solution is to reduce the numbers of looked after children by developing effective early help.

BACKGROUND AND EXTERNAL CONSULTATION

3. The Safeguarding and Specialist Service continues to be under sustained pressure from increasing numbers of looked after children and children requiring protection plans; as of the 2 April 2013, the numbers were:

Child Protection	272	85.65 per 10,000
Children Looked After	374	117.77 per 10,000

4. Whilst Middlesbrough's numbers are high, the most recent regional information on safeguarding and children looked after identifies that the regional safeguarding average has increased by 10.6% and the regional children looked after average has increased by 5.9%. Middlesbrough has seen an increase of 5.3%, whilst Stockton, Durham and Redcar & Cleveland have seen increases of over 10%.
5. Whilst it is difficult to forecast a time when these numbers will reduce, the Council's position is not sustainable in the long term, from both a financial and a resource perspective. Within Wellbeing Care and Learning, detailed work has been undertaken to estimate growth and demand. Within Safeguarding

and Specialist Services, the most significant areas of pressure are services for children with disabilities and children looked after placements.

6. A range of measures have and are being introduced to reduce the costs and ultimately to reduce the numbers of children looked after. In the short to medium term, the main focus will be on reducing costs, as the strategies to reduce numbers will take longer to implement and even longer to see a reduction in numbers.

Increasing In-house Fostering Services

7. A key strategy to reduce costs and increase flexibility is the campaign to recruit more foster carers. The Fostering Service currently supports and maintains 80 foster families; this number has remained remarkably stable as new carers have been recruited to replace foster carers who have retired and resigned.
8. The Fostering Service has been set the target of creating 40 new foster families by March 2014, a 50% increase. This is a significant increase and a step change from current recruitment. To achieve this, the Service has invested heavily in television advertising to cast a wider recruitment net. The TV campaign over Christmas and the New Year generated a large number of enquiries, which in turn has seen an increase in the number of applications. To date, 183 information packs have been requested; of these, 31 enquiries have been closed, the balance are being followed up, in preparation groups or proceeding to assessment.
9. Whilst the fostering campaign has been pitched at recruiting new foster carers, we are planning a further recruitment drive in May and in the autumn, focusing on carers who can provide placements for family groups, teenagers and children with special needs.

Reducing the Cost of Current External Placements

10. The Wellbeing Care and Learning Commissioning Team is currently undertaking a review and challenge of the cost of current external placements; there are strong indications that there will be savings on the cost of some placements.
11. At the same time, the Commissioning Team is recommissioning a new contract with independent fostering agencies, with the aim of reducing costs and securing more favourable terms and conditions around solo placements, family/sibling groups and long-term fostering arrangements.

Increase Capacity in Five Rivers Children's Homes

12. The Service is currently negotiating with Ofsted and Five Rivers to increase the capacity in the three children's homes from 11 to 13 beds. This plan will become operational in the autumn when the Council resumes control of the three homes.

New Contracting Arrangements for Dedicated Residential Beds

13. The Council has secured a favourable contract with an independent provider to provide four residential beds that are exclusively available for Middlesbrough children. At full occupancy, this arrangement has the potential to save the Council at least £200,000 over what would usually be committed to the equivalent number of beds over the course of a year.
14. There is an added advantage that this home is local to Middlesbrough, thereby avoiding unnecessary time spent travelling to support the placements.

Develop In-house Residential Provision for Disabled Children

15. The Council is actively exploring potential properties with a view to developing a small 3-bed residential unit for children with disabilities. This initiative will reduce the overspend on expensive out of Borough residential placements, which can cost the Council £600 per week for one placement.

Problematic Young People

16. The Safeguarding Service receives many referrals from the carers of teenagers who request that their children are “taken into care”. To address this problem, a Youth Team has been created to specifically focus on preventing young people from being received into care. This team will reduce the number of young people who need to be accommodated, which will in turn reduce the pressure on the placements budget.

Developing Alternatives to Care

17. The Safeguarding Service has developed a crisis response service from within existing resources which can be brought together at short notice to prevent family groups or individuals becoming looked after.
18. The service can support children in their own home whilst their parents/carers are, for example, in hospital or detained by the police, whilst alternatives to care with alternative family members are explored. This arrangement can buy a couple of days to explore options and avoid children becoming looked after.

CONCLUSIONS

19. This report has described a number of short to medium term options which will contribute to a reduction in placement costs and a reduction in children looked after numbers. Developing an early help strategy will inevitably have the most significant long-term impact on the rising number of looked after children. For this to be achieved it will require a significant shift in the way services are managed and risk is contained across all agencies working within Middlesbrough. An early help strategy was launched in October 2012. Whilst implementation of the strategy is in its infancy, it is already clear that there are other ways of managing situations and risk without needing to accommodate children.

20. This strategy will require resources and commitment to work in a different and more effective way to produce better outcomes for children and their families.

FINANCIAL, LEGAL AND WARD IMPLICATIONS

21. There are significant implications for the Council's budget if the continued increase in children looked after numbers continue to increase. Whilst the measures that are described within this report will mitigate costs, a significant change in culture across all services within the town is required.
22. There are no specific legal or ward issues.

RECOMMENDATIONS

23. The contents of this report are noted.

REASONS

24. To provide Members with detailed information to support the report that was presented at Overview and Scrutiny Board on the 14 March 2013.

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