

Meeting:	Children and young people scrutiny committee
Meeting date:	Thursday 29 November 2018
Title of report:	Scrutiny working group update on looked after children cost reduction
Report by:	Chair of children and young people's scrutiny committee

Classification

Open

Decision type

This is not an executive decision

Wards affected

(All Wards);

Purpose and summary

To review progress towards delivery of the Looked After Children Reduction Strategy.

Scrutiny committee resolved on 5 February 2018 to establish a scrutiny working group consisting of Councillor CA Gandy and Councillor A Seldon to receive updates and scrutinise progress against the objective of reducing the number of looked after children and realising those savings agreed as part of the revenue budget 2018/19.

This report is to provide an update to Children and Young People's scrutiny committee from the working group on the progress to date of the looked after children's reduction strategy.

Recommendation(s)

That:

Children and young people's scrutiny committee review progress made in delivering the looked after children's reduction strategy and determine any recommendations it wishes to make to the executive regarding further action to secure further improvement.

Alternative options

1. There is no alternative to the recommendations, it is a function of the committee to make reports or recommendations to the executive with respect to the discharge of any functions which are the responsibility of the executive.

Key considerations

2. Children should only be looked after if there is no safe alternative and achieving permanency for children outside of the looked after system by supporting them to return home to their parents care or to be cared for under a Special Guardianship Order are key ways of achieving this. This work was developed in September 2017. The medium term financial strategy for the Children and Families directorate contains savings target of £500k for the 18/19 financial year associated with reducing the costs incurred in supporting and working with looked after children. A key part of this work looked at the relatively high number of looked after children compared to statistical neighbours and then develop a strategy to appropriately reduce that number. The strategy acknowledged that the number of children in care in Herefordshire is significantly higher than those of our statistical neighbours and that there is no evidential reason for this due to the demography of our population.
3. There were up to 80 children identified who *may* be able to leave the looked after system because they could be safely supported to return to their parent's care or their carers supported to apply for a Special Guardianship Order (SGO). A plan to assess the individual circumstances of each of these children to determine whether or not it would be in their best interests to leave the care system was developed. If the assessment concluded that this was the right plan for the child further work would be required to achieve the plan. It was recognised that even where leaving the looked after system was the right plan for the child this would not be achieved in every case because many aspects of achieving this are outside of the council's control. For example, an SGO can only be granted on the application of a carer. There are many reasons why a carer may not wish to apply for an SGO such as concerns about financial support, managing contact between the child and their family, specialist support for themselves as carers and the child. Also only a Court can revoke a care order or grant an SGO and they will only do so if they believe such an order to be in the best interests of the child. The details of this plan are set out in Appendix 1.
4. A business case was agreed to fund two agency Social Workers for the looked after children's team to support this work. There have been difficulties in recruiting and retaining these Social Workers. Since November 2017 there has been one worker in post however there have only been two workers in post for approximately 4 months and the second post is vacant at this time. Efforts to recruit to this post are ongoing.
5. Progress on the strategy is reported bi-monthly to senior leaders and councillors, including the scrutiny working group. The Director for Children and Families and Head of Service for looked after children have met with working group members to discuss this report bi-monthly. The most recent update report for September 2018 is attached at Appendix 2. During the course of these meetings the working group has been kept informed of the progress made by the service and discussed the LAC reduction strategy. No recommendations from the working group have been made to date. It is open to the committee to determine whether the working group continues to meet.

Community impact

6. In accordance with the code of corporate governance Herefordshire Council must ensure that it has an effective performance management system that facilitates effective and efficient delivery of planned services. The council is committed to promoting a positive working culture that accepts, and encourages constructive challenge, and recognises that a culture and structure for scrutiny are key elements for accountable decision making, policy development, and review.
7. It is a council priority to 'keep children and young people safe and give them a great start in life.' The delivery of the corporate parenting strategy contributes to the council achieving its ambitions in key strategies in the corporate plan, health and wellbeing strategy and children and young people's plan.
8. A priority within the Corporate Parenting strategy is to reduce the number of looked after children recognising that Herefordshire's numbers of children in care is too high. This would enable resources to be focussed upon those children who need to be in care and enable those that don't to enjoy family life without intervention from social workers.

Equality duty

9. Under section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, the 'general duty' on public authorities is set out as follows:

A public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to -

- eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;
 - advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
 - foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.
10. The public sector equality duty (specific duty) requires us to consider how we can positively contribute to the advancement of equality and good relations, and demonstrate that we are paying 'due regard' in our decision making in the design of policies and in the delivery of services. As this is a progress report, we do not believe that it will have an impact on our equality duty.

Resource implications

11. None associated with the recommendation. If the committee determine any recommendations the executive will consider the resource implications of implementing the recommendations when formulating their response. The medium term financial strategy identified savings of £500k for the 18/19 financial year. To date £47k has been achieved through the work to reduce the number of looked after children by 80. The savings available from SGOs have been less than anticipated in year as allowances are paid for two years after the SGO is granted, meaning there is a time lag in the reduction of costs. However, the overall savings achieved against this saving target are £384k and it is projected that the total £500k will be achieved by the end of the financial year. This saving has been achieved by:

	£000s
SGO	12
Step down in placement to kinship	79
Reunification	123
Adoption	95
Other placement step downs	75
Total savings	384

12. It is recognised that this saving has been overtaken by the high cost of meeting the needs of looked after children during 2018/19 which has resulted in a much higher projected spend than has been budgeted for.

Legal implications

13. None associated with the recommendation. If the committee determine any recommendations the executive will consider the legal implications of implementing the recommendations when formulating their response.

Risk management

14. Children should only be looked after when this is in their best interests and the risks justify the level of intervention by social care. The impact for children of being looked after outside of their family when they could be supported to live with their family is profound as is the long-term involvement of social workers if a child could be cared for under the auspices of an SGO.
15. The annual cost of looked after children is significant with an average cost per annum of £51,000 for each child. Therefore ensuring that the right children are looked after is critical.

Consultees

16. None

Appendices

Appendix 1 – LAC reduction report

Appendix 2 – LAC reduction report – 30th September 2018

Background papers

None identified