

Meeting:	Children and young people scrutiny committee
Meeting date:	Tuesday 1 December 2020
Title of report:	Update on reducing the number of children looked after (CLA)
Report by:	Assistant director safeguarding and family support

Classification

Open

Decision type

This is not an executive decision

Wards affected

(All Wards);

Purpose

To provide an update on the reduction strategy to reduce the number of children looked after (CLA). To include an update on cases that had been identified for Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) or reunification.

Recommendation(s)

That:

- (a) The committee reviews the progress in reducing the numbers of children in care and determines any recommendations it wishes to make to the executive to secure further reductions.**

Alternative options

1. There are no alternative options to the above recommendation; it is a function of the committee to review action taken in connection with the discharge of any functions relating to children and young people which are the responsibility of the executive and make reports or recommendations to the executive.

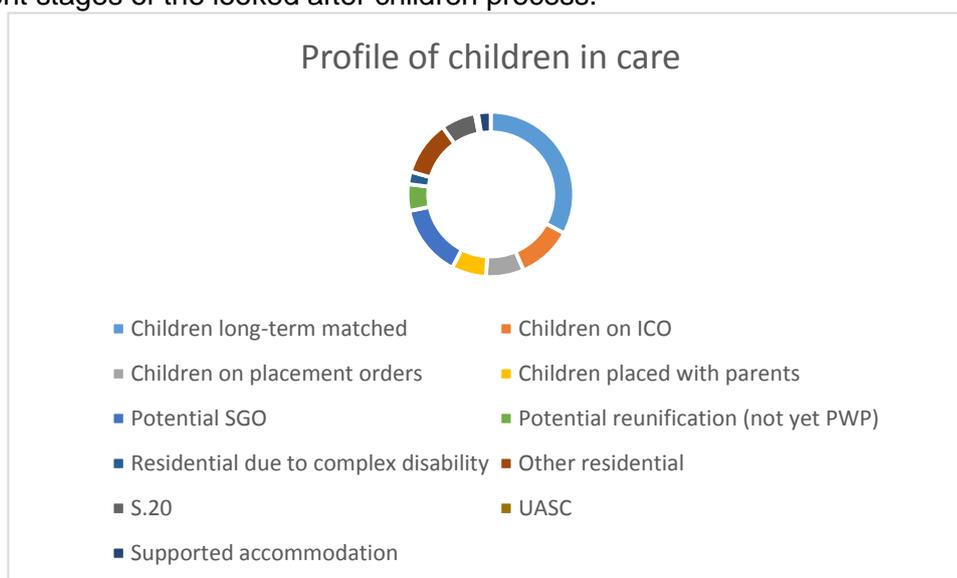
Key considerations

2. The looked after children reduction strategy was last reported on to the children and young people strategy committee on Monday 25 November 2019. This report is to provide an update on progress and developments in reducing the number of looked after children in Herefordshire during the last twelve months.
3. At the end of October 2019, the number of looked after children in Herefordshire stood at 350, 95 children per 10,000. As of 2 November 2020, this figure stood at 336, 93 children per 10,000. Despite this reduction, the number of looked after children in Herefordshire remains above that of regional, England and statistical neighbours.

	Looked After Rate (per 10,000) according to the Local Authority Interactive Tool (LAIT), 2019	Number of Looked After Children Herefordshire should have to be in line with comparators
West Midlands	82.00	296 children
England	65.00	235 children
Statistical Neighbours	54.44	196 children

4. There have been considerable efforts during the last twelve months to move children out of the looked after system, by way of discharge of care orders, either by application for Special Guardianship Orders (SGO), or by reunification to parents.
5. From November 2019 to end October 2020, 32 children have had their care order discharged.
 - 11 children have been reunified to the care of their parents.
 - 21 Special Guardianship Orders have been granted.
 - As of 6 November 2020, there are a further 17 cases in proceedings, and a further 3 cases with legal services.
 - There are a further 16 cases expected to be with legal services by the end of January 2021.
6. In April 2020, the edge of care service, known as ECHO became operational. Since April 2020 the edge of care team have worked with 14 families (14 children) on the “edge of care”. To date 12 children have not come into care. One child came into care following the death of his father, and one child has come into care a short time after the involvement of the team ended.
7. Since April 2020 the edge of care team have worked with 14 families (24 children) with a care plan of reunification. So far 19 children have been supported to return to their parents’ care with a decision for a sibling group of 3 children that they should remain in care as parents were not able to show that they had made sufficient changes. Two children are having increased family time with a plan to return home over the next month.

8. In April 2020, the family support service was reconfigured, with 9 family support workers moving to work in the assessment service, to enable families to access family support at a much earlier stage where social care intervention is warranted, the aim being to prevent presenting issues escalating.
9. The diagram below shows the different cohorts of children in care as at the end of October 2020. Since December 2019, reporting on the activity to reduce the numbers of looked after children is completed and provided a monthly basis. These reports detail the numbers of children who are looked after, and report on the numbers of children at different stages of the looked after children process.



10. The October 2020 report on looked after children, “Looked After Children reduction update 2 November” is attached to this report as Appendix 1. This report is produced at the end of every month to provide an overview of activity and progress in reducing the numbers of looked after children in Herefordshire. The looked after children reduction update, 2 November 2020, should be read in conjunction with this report.
11. Reducing the number of looked after children by enabling children to exit the looked after system where it is safe and appropriate to do so is one element of the approach required to reduce looked after children numbers. It is recognised that this is a whole system issue, and needs to be addressed via a number of changes in practice and approach across all parts of the children and families service.
12. One of the key aims within Children and Families services, as articulated in the leadership pledge is to ensure all steps are taken to enable children to live within their family network and ensure children do not become looked after until all viable options have been considered.
13. To this end, considerable extra resource has been deployed into the Early Help service, to enable children to receive a service at the earliest opportunity, to prevent problems escalating. The numbers of early help assessments have risen over the last 12 months, evidencing intervention at this early stage.

14. On 21 September 2020, the early help hub became operational, functioning alongside MASH, enabling the right help to be provided at the earliest opportunity to children and families, the aim being to prevent escalation.
15. An early help strategic group, with the strap line of “the right help at the right time” has been established, chaired by the Director of Children’s Services, to promote a culture of early intervention across all agencies.
16. Re configuration of Children’s Social Care family support services concluded in April 2020, with 9 family support workers moving from the court and child protection service to the assessment service, to enable families to access family support at the point of assessment and/or being identified as requiring a child in need plan. This is to promote intervention at the lowest level possible, wherever safe to do so, again, with the aim of preventing situations escalating, then requiring more intensive and statutory social care intervention.
17. The domestic abuse hub, as approved by the Herefordshire Children’s Safeguarding Partnership in August 2020, is now operational, providing a response to lower level domestic abuse incidents, which have required a police response in the previous 24 hours.
18. Early and review permanence planning meetings are now established, which consider whether there are family members who could offer permanent care to a child should proceedings conclude a child cannot be cared for by birth parent/s. The number of children living with kinship foster carers has increased from 61 on 31 December 2019 to 71 on 30 September 2020. This is despite the increase in SGO’s that have been granted to kinship carers during this period. These children are more likely to exit the care system via an SGO than those placed with general foster carers.
19. Additional family support resource within the court/child protection service to promote and support the above has been agreed, and there is indication this is beginning to become embedded, as outlined in the Looked after children reduction update 2 November 2020 detailing outcomes for subject to care proceedings in October 2020.
20. A review of care plans of looked after children, completed in April 2020 identified delay in progressing long-term matching decisions. This was addressed immediately. 38 children have been long-term matched with their foster carers. Systems are now established to ensure that this delay does not reoccur.
21. Work with adoption central England (ACE) regional adoption agency has taken place to promote the foster to adopt approach, to enable adoption where this is the required care plan for a child following care proceedings to be achieved in a timely manner, and avoiding changes of placements, for what are in most cases, very young children or babies.
22. The roll out of the social work model signs of safety commenced in December 2019 with initial introductions to this relationship and strengths based model of social work intervention. Full five day training for social care and family support practitioners is now well underway, with an emphasis on working alongside families, focus on family strengths and support networks, to keep children within their family networks wherever it is safe to do so.

23. There are 43 children in residential care. Of the children and young people living in residential care there are 23 who are placed because no suitable foster placement could be found. A project group to reduce the number of children placed in residential care has been established and is being led by the Director of Children's Services, and Assistant Director safeguarding, and family support. .
24. In response to the number of children who are in residential care, we have amended the Herefordshire Intensive Placement Support Service (HIPSS) scheme, This scheme, which provides support to foster carers providing placements for children and young people moving from residential care, has been changed so that existing approved foster carers can offer placements when previously this was only an option for specifically approved HIPSS foster carers. It is anticipated that this change will enable more children and young people who have a care plan of foster care to be able to move to a foster placement. So far two fostering households who have current vacancies have expressed an interest and have been matched with children. HIPSS have commenced a period of training with the carers with a view to the children moving by end of November and early December.
25. Monthly meetings between AD safeguarding and family support, head of service for looked after children, and children's joint commissioning manager are commencing end November 2020 to review approaches to identifying appropriate foster placements for children in residential care who require this service.

Community impact

26. In accordance with the adopted code of corporate governance, Herefordshire 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. To support effective accountability the council is committed to reporting the progress on action completed and outcomes achieved
27. 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 work 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.
28. It is a council priority to 'keep children and young people safe and give them a great start in life.' A priority within the Corporate Parenting strategy is to reduce the number of looked after children recognising that Herefordshire's numbers of looked after children in care is too high. This would enable resources to be focused upon those children who need to be in care and enable those who do not need to be in care to enjoy family life without intervention from social workers.
29. A key principle of the leadership pledge adopted by senior leaders within the children and families directorate is to support children and young people to remain with their families and networks where they can be cared for safely within a loving and stable environment. (Appendix 2 Signs of leadership: Our pledge)

Environmental Impact

Further information on the subject of this report is available from
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30. Herefordshire Council provides and purchases a wide range of services for the people of Herefordshire. Together with partner organisations in the private, public and voluntary sectors we share a strong commitment to improving our environmental sustainability, achieving carbon neutrality and to protect and enhance Herefordshire's outstanding natural environment.
31. Whilst this is a decision on back office functions and will have minimal environmental impacts, consideration has been made to minimise waste and resource use in line with the Council's Environmental Policy.

Equality duty

32. Under section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, the 'general duty' on public authorities is set out as follows:
33. 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.
34. 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. We continue to make sure that, as our improvement plan is implemented, we pay due regard to equality legislation.
35. The Children Looked After reduction plan supports the council in its overall duty to promote equality. In particular, the implementation of the plan continues to improve the outcomes of children and young people, by ensuring their diversity factors are assessed and assisting children and young people and their families to access services to meet their needs.

Resource implications

36. None associated with the recommendation. If the committee determine any recommendations, the executive will consider the resource implications of implementing these when formulating their response.

Legal implications

37. 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

38. 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.
39. 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. The costs of children being looked after can vary considerably, dependent on whether a child is placed in in-house fostering, independent fostering services via a fostering agency, or in a residential setting. High cost of placement for looked after children presents a risk to both budget setting and budget management.
40. There is a risk that, in maintaining children at home in neglectful and unsafe circumstances, children can suffer significant harm. The need to maintain children at home must be balanced against their safety both immediately, but also in the long term.

Consultees

41. None

Appendices

Appendix 1 - The looked after children reduction update, 2nd November 2020

Appendix 2 - Signs of leadership : Our Pledge

Background papers

None identified

Please include a glossary of terms, abbreviations and acronyms used in this report.