

PRESSURES ON CHILDREN'S SERVICES

Purpose

1. To provide an update to Members on the pressures and challenges being faced by local authority Children's Services.

Background

2. Over the last decade the number of children in the care system in Wales has risen, with a 25% increase in children looked after and a 32% increase in children placed on the child protection register compared with 10 years ago. This increase in demand has been reflected in the expenditure on Children's Services - between 2007 and 2016 the revenue expenditure on children's and families' services has increased by 51%. This increase has brought spend on children's and families' services in line with that of expenditure on both adults under 65 and on older people, with children's and families' services now making up a third of social services expenditure.
3. The most significant area of spend within children's and families' services is in relation to services for Looked After Children, which has seen a 66% increase in expenditure over the same period of time. This increase in spend demonstrates the commitment that has been made by local authorities to meet the demands being placed on services by the rising numbers of looked after children. However, this is becoming unsustainable, with most local authorities now anticipating significant overspends on their children's services budgets for this year.
4. The Early Intervention Foundation's latest analysis, 'The cost of late intervention: EIF analysis 2016', puts the cost of late intervention in England and Wales at almost £17 billion a year, £6.2 billion of which falls directly on children's social care. However, Councils have found it increasingly difficult to invest in the early help services that can prevent children entering the social care system, and help to manage needs within families to avoid them escalating.

Pressures being faced by Children's Services

5. Below are four key areas which identify some of the significant pressures being experienced in relation to children's services in Wales:

6. Workforce

- 6.1 Child and family social work is challenged by high turnover and vacancy rates and a reliance on agency staff, with demand for permanent, experienced workers outstripping supply (with children's social work now on the national occupational shortage list). The number of individuals wishing to train as social workers has fallen with colleges experiencing gaps in social work degree courses.
- 6.2 The nature of social work with children and young people is increasingly complex and focused on the most complex child protection, often with children and young people who have experienced significant trauma from their earliest years. This is particularly challenging for those less experienced social workers, with the knock-on effect being that more people leave the profession earlier. Experienced social workers leaving the profession impacts on the quality of services since it is through experience that workers develop the expert knowledge and analytical skills that are vital elements of complex child protection work. Similarly, less experienced social workers often do not have the range of knowledge or skills to comprehensively plan for or directly deliver services to move on children with very complex needs.
- 6.3 Continuity of relationships for service-users can be compromised by high staff turnover and can exacerbate the issues children and young people face, making it more difficult for social workers to build effective relationships with children and their families. This increases particularly the stresses for children in long term foster care and/or residential care. A criticism frequently made by looked after children is that they see so many different professionals come and go when they would like to see stability and continuity in their relationships.
- 6.4 These workforce issues have meant that for some authorities the use of agency staff has been hard to avoid when trying to recruit experienced staff. This can further destabilise teams, since agency workers have the apparent flexibility to leave difficult situations. Those workers who remain can become more unsettled and may look to leave themselves. Parts of Wales have seen particular challenges in retaining staff when better rates of pay have been offered in other areas. For example, some authorities have reported losing staff, particularly across the border, to other local authority children's services placed in special measures who are able to offer better pay as a way of recruiting experienced staff to help improve performance.

7. External demands and complexities

- 7.1 We are seeing unprecedented pressures on families for a range of reasons. Cuts to those services that previously kept people's heads above water have meant more families are finding their way through to even more expensive child protection services. The on-going introduction of welfare reforms and a decade of austerity has amplified the challenges for families.

- 7.2 As with the rest of the UK the declining emotional well-being and increasing poor mental health of children and young people, whilst not fully understood, impacts directly on the need for family support as does the increasing number of children being presented with behaviours which families struggle to manage.
- 7.3 Recent high profile scandals have increased our understanding of the likelihood of risk of child sexual exploitation (CSE) and the wider understanding of the imperative to act to protect children and young people at risk of sexual exploitation has increased referrals. We have seen an increase in the number of initiatives that are aimed at early identification and intervention such as the Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) 2015 Act, the evidence based work in respect of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), Flying Start and Families First. One impact has been a resulting increase in referrals made to Children's Services as a result of earlier intervention.
- 7.4 Local authorities continue to face a challenge in sourcing health services to offer sufficient priority to the emotional and mental health needs of children in care and care leavers. There has been a long standing disconnect between the access threshold applied by Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and the presenting emotional resilience needs of looked after children and care leavers. The issue of looked after children and care leavers' rights to an appropriate range of provision to meet their psychological and emotional health needs, when they need it and for as long as they require it, including the transition into adulthood, needs to be urgently addressed.

8. Placements

- 8.1 The majority of children who are looked after are cared for by foster carers. Many children access positive care in residential care and across local authority and agency providers there are committed, enthusiastic and positive carers providing both foster care and residential care.
- 8.2 However, the increasing complexity of cases and the growing numbers of children are negatively impacting on both the availability of appropriate placements and the cost of placements. An ageing foster carer population and the increasing costs of providing residential care has a significant impact on the sector. Despite the initiatives of the National Fostering Framework, the work of the Welsh Government Residential Task and Finish group, the commitment of local authority placement teams and the work of the Children's Commissioning Consortium Cymru (4Cs) the shortage of appropriate placements for looked after children is a significant concern.
- 8.3 The pressure of the cost of placements is exacerbated by the difficulties in placing children within or near to their home local authority and the lack of consistency in outcomes for children. The cost of residential placements is

similarly stretched with significant variations. The current lack of placements is contributing to a position where a provider's market is able to charge opaque rates with placements being currently purchased by Welsh local authorities ranging from £2,500 - £16,000 per week. The desperation of local authorities to secure placements has led to children being placed across the UK and an increasing risk that planning for placements becomes lost in the need to place a child anywhere at that point in time.

9. Legislation and work with the Courts

- 9.1 Although recent years have seen a stabilising of overall numbers of looked after children in Wales a number of authorities are reporting substantial increases in the number of looked after children in their care which continues to place significant pressures on budgets. The last few years have also seen a substantial increase in the number of care applications that have been made, with a significant increase in the number of children subject to care proceedings, rising from 1,371 in 2015-16 to 1,642 in 2016-17. Despite this increase cases in Wales were completed in an average of 24.5 weeks compared to an England and Wales performance of 27 weeks. The completion of cases within the timescales and all the concomitant work places substantial demands not just directly on Children's Services but also on the legal teams within local authorities.
- 9.2 The total number of children involved in public law proceedings in 2016-17 was 3,012, an increase of 17% on the previous year. Public law applications have increased over the past three years, with a 24% increase since 2014-15. The main driver in public law work is Section 31 (care) applications. Section 31 applications are made to the court by a local authority where it has significant concerns about the safety or welfare of a child, which saw a 25% increase on the previous year. These issues as well as the expectations from the judiciary continue to add to the pressures and burdens being placed on children's services staff, as well as coming with significant costs attached.
- 9.3 Of those applications coming before the courts the majority are deemed to be sound applications by both the court and CAFCASS. An enduring criticism of the courts however is that the local authority should have sought orders earlier with a perception that the local authorities are failing children by not commencing proceedings.

Local Authority Responses

10. Local authorities are looking at different ways of mitigating the additional costs arising from these pressures including the use of reserves and additional funding to support the development of preventative 'Edge of Care' Teams. Local authorities have also revisited their prevention strategies as well as their LAC strategies in recent years. This has been a necessity, not only to face the increase in LAC population but also increasing financial pressures facing local

authorities and more latterly in order to plan for and implement the Social Services & Well-Being (Wales) Act 2014.

11. Considerable investment has been put into support teams which work directly with children and young people and their families to work at levels of need at intensive and remedial intervention levels. Most of these work with families to try to prevent children coming into care, work with families to return children home within weeks of becoming looked after as well as working with rehabilitation plans for those children who have been in long term care.
12. The development of the National Adoption Service for Wales, the collaborative of all 22 local authority adoption services, has placed a focus on improving adoption support services so that the on-going needs of this group of children, rooted in their early childhood experiences but often unmitigated by their care experience, can be met. Research has demonstrated that within the cohort of children placed for adoption in Wales in 2014-2015 47% had experienced 4 or more Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) before they were placed. This places them at the highest risk of later life impact and compares to just 14% of the general population. It is likely that there is a comparable level of ACES in the other groups of children whose needs we seek to meet.
13. Welsh Government has provided additional funding towards Children's Services in this financial year in the form of the £1m St David's Day Fund to help support care leavers to progress towards independence and a further £8m as a result of consequential funding from the UK government's March budget support work to prevent children from entering care and improve outcomes for those leaving care. However, this funding has been made available for specific pieces of work and to support new initiatives identified as part of discussions at the Ministerial Advisory Group on Children.

Conclusion

14. The reasons why children become looked after and their needs while in the care system are complex. Children who are looked after will have experienced forms of loss, abuse and neglect prior to entering the care of the local authority. We know that outcomes for Looked After Children (LAC) do not compare favourably with other children. They are less likely to achieve good educational qualifications, have greater health and housing needs, are more likely to become involved in substance misuse and come into contact with the criminal justice system.
15. Councils are doing their best in very difficult circumstances but services are rapidly becoming unsustainable and nearing breaking point. Councils have done everything they can to respond to the growing financial crisis in children's social care, including reducing costs where they can and finding new ways of working. However, they are at the point where there are very few savings left to find without having a real and lasting impact upon crucial

services that many children and families across the country desperately rely on.

16. Urgent action is required to reduce the number of families relying on the children's social care system for support, otherwise this gap will continue to grow. The reality is that services for the care and protection of vulnerable children are now, in many areas, being pushed to breaking point. The huge financial pressures councils are under, coupled with the spike in demand for child protection support, mean that the limited money councils have available is increasingly being taken up with the provision of urgent help for children and families already at crisis point, leaving very little to invest in early intervention.

Recommendation

17. Members are asked to note and comment on the contents of the report
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