

Children, Young People and Families Scrutiny Panel



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| Date of meeting: | 10 October 2024 |
| Title of Report: | Family Homes for Plymouth Children |
| Lead Member: | Councillor Jemima Laing (Deputy Leader, and Cabinet Member for Children's Social Care, Culture and Communications) |
| Lead Strategic Director: | David Haley (Director for Childrens Services) |
| Author: | Temi Salimon (Service Director for CYPF) |
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| Your Reference: | Click here to enter text. |
| Key Decision: | No |
| Confidentiality: | Part I - Official |

Purpose of Report

This report provides a progress report on the programme that has been established to transform our practices with children who are at risk of coming into care and to improve practice, placement sufficiency and outcomes for children and young people to ensure more children in care are looked after in family homes close to Plymouth.

Recommendations and Reasons

- I. It is recommended that the programme is noted.

Alternative options considered and rejected

- I. None

Relevance to the Corporate Plan and/or the Plymouth Plan

Keeping children and adults in Plymouth safe.

Implications for the Medium Term Financial Plan and Resource Implications:

Placement costs currently create a significant financial pressure for the Council.

Financial Risks

Placement costs currently create a significant financial pressure for the Council.

Carbon Footprint (Environmental) Implications:

None

Other Implications: e.g. Health and Safety, Risk Management, Child Poverty:

** When considering these proposals members have a responsibility to ensure they give due regard to the Council's duty to promote equality of opportunity, eliminate unlawful discrimination and promote good relations between people who share protected characteristics under the Equalities Act and those who do not.*

The programme is designed to keep children safe in family settings, or other settings when this is required, close to Plymouth.

Appendices

*Add rows as required to box below

| Ref. | Title of Appendix | Exemption Paragraph Number (if applicable) <i>If some/all of the information is confidential, you must indicate why it is not for publication by virtue of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 by ticking the relevant box.</i> | | | | | | |
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| A | Briefing report title | | | | | | | |

Background papers:

*Add rows as required to box below

Please list all unpublished, background papers relevant to the decision in the table below. Background papers are unpublished works, relied on to a material extent in preparing the report, which disclose facts or matters on which the report or an important part of the work is based.

| Title of any background paper(s) | Exemption Paragraph Number (if applicable) <i>If some/all of the information is confidential, you must indicate why it is not for publication by virtue of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 by ticking the relevant box.</i> | | | | | | |
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Sign off:

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| Originating Senior Leadership Team member: David Haley | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Please confirm the Strategic Director(s) has agreed the report? Yes Date agreed: 27/09/2024 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Cabinet Member approval: Councillor Laing approved via email Date approved: 27/09/2024 | | | | | | | | | | | |

1. Introduction

This programme has been established to transform our practices with children who are at risk of coming into care and to improve practice, placement sufficiency and outcomes for children and young people when they do need to be in our care because they cannot be safeguarded in their own family and friends' network.

The Local Authority's Sufficiency Duty, as set out in the Children Act 1989, requires the provision of the right number and types of placements, at the right time, to meet the needs of children in care. This can include adoption, fostering, residential, support for young people in the community, secure accommodation and specialist mental health placements. In Plymouth we are not currently meeting this duty.

To enable attachments to form and to support healthy development, we believe that children and young people in care should grow up in a family setting with foster carers. Exceptionally, residential children's homes can be appropriate for highly traumatised children or older young people who struggle to manage relationships and behaviours in a family home and those with the most complex needs. Residential children's homes can enable a young person to make progress with their emotional and behavioural needs in order to enable a planned move back into a family setting.

Plymouth City Council is committed to placing children in care in settings that are as close as possible to their home area to enable them to maintain family and friendship relationships (where positive), access their social worker, maintain their school placements and access local health and therapeutic services, to support good outcomes. This also enables a more supported and local transition to independence.

A growth in demand has been seen in relation to children and young people in care with complex needs and high risk-taking behaviour as a result of experiences of childhood neglect, trauma and disrupted attachments that have gone unmet. In addition, these children often have additional communication needs and have become disengaged from education.

Whilst we are making progress in increasing the number of children placed with our own foster carers, over recent years a lack of in-house fostering growth in line with demand has led to a higher proportion of Plymouth children being looked after with Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) carers. IFAs have also struggled to recruit sufficient carers to meet the needs of children in care in recent years and a lack of fostering growth overall has led to an overuse of residential care for some children and young people and consequently resulted in a small number of children being in unregulated settings. We have not been ambitious enough for all children placed in residential care to ensure they move back to families in a timely way leading to a net increase over time in the number of children in residential care impacting on outcomes for these children and a significant cost pressure for PCC.

PCC has become reliant on the independent sector for a significant volume of fostering and residential provision. At the same time, the independent sector has demonstrated that it is not able to provide sufficient high-quality and value for money placements to meet the needs of our young people.

2. Context Analysis

The impact of generational neglect, mental health issues, alcohol/substance misuse, and poverty in Plymouth has significantly increased the demand for children's services. We have made investments in early help and are beginning to see positive impacts from this. However, there are still families that are harder to reach, with multi-generational patterns leading to complex needs for children. Some of these children have required intensive support and planning to keep them safe, which has resulted in them becoming looked after. For children with very complex issues, higher cost experienced foster carers and needed. In some instances, a period in residential care have been necessary to ensure their safety.

Residential care is never our long-term solution for a child, we want children to grow up in a family in Plymouth, but for some of our complex children, it has been necessary to keep them safe.

The complexity and cost of current placements have posed challenges. Many of the children were already in high-cost, complex placements at the time of our initial forecasting. Their needs have continued to

become more complex despite our best forecasting and wrap-around support. As a result, some children have had to be moved to more costly provisions that can respond to their needs.

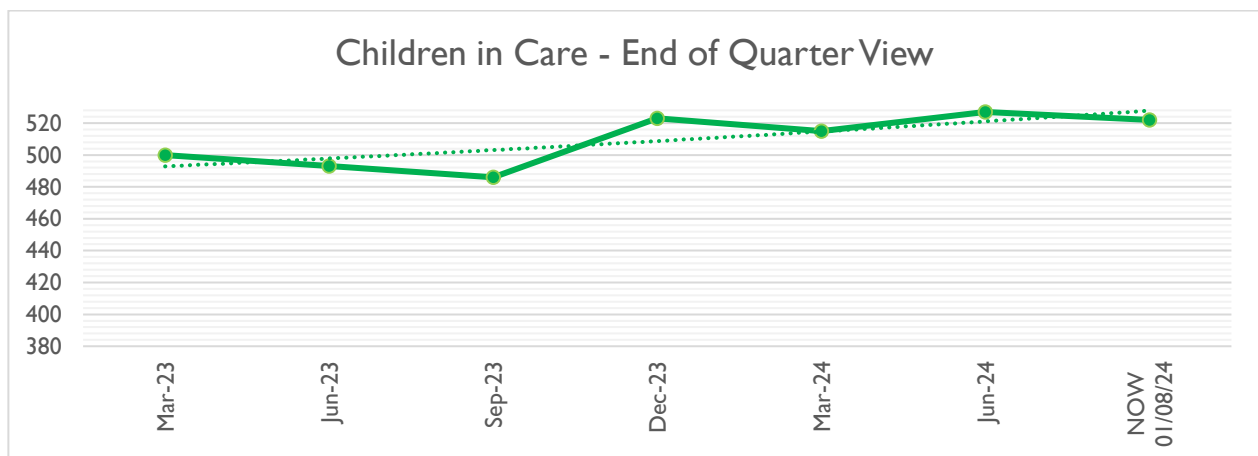
There are real demand/market challenges with residential providers, this is a business for providers we have had to respond to their market supplements, increased packages whilst we have forecasted these are independent business and this can change/fluctuate. Factors such as the national increase in numbers of children in care, market failure and the impact of increased regulation have impacted on the independent sectors ability to meet sufficiency. These providers know for our children we have no other choice but to use them. We are building our brokerage and commissioning relationships to strengthen our approach and challenge this.

We are currently on a three-year improvement journey, with efforts focused on changing cultural and old practices to enhance the effectiveness and throughput and improve outcomes and life chances for our children and young people.

While we have made progress, particularly in the first year, the full benefits of these changes will take time to materialize.

3. Needs Analysis

The number of children in care continued to rise through last year but has stayed more stable in recent months.



As a result of some delayed decision making in our MASH which was identified last summer, there were a high volume (360) of delayed assessments in our Initial Response Teams during the autumn of 2023. These assessments were completed by January 2024. The level of need for the families in this cohort who were waiting for their assessments to be completed was underestimated and as a result of this we currently have 30 additional children in care at this point in the year than budgets were set for. This includes 36 children who are part of large sibling groups who came into our care between January and May as a result of serious neglect and family complexities including parental substance misuse and mental health. The cost of care for these children creates a significant financial pressure in 2024/25.

Since January, 112 children have come into care and whilst 10 have already returned home this had led to the number of children in care in our Children's Social Work Service rising from 157 children in January to 155 currently. At this point in time 10 have been identified as being likely to remain in our care and this number may rise as assessments are completed. 47 children currently have a plan to be returned home once the required changes are achieved within the family.

The increase in numbers of children coming into care has been compounded by a delay in final hearing dates for children subject to legal care proceedings. The national target for care proceedings is 26 weeks but we currently have 78 children who are over 50 weeks. We are working closely with the local judiciary to get final hearing dates scheduled so that decisions (including adoption decisions) can be made for these children.

4. Cost Pressures

In addition to the volume pressure highlighted above, the current financial pressure has been compounded by an increasing cost pressure in our children's placements.

As a result of their changed circumstances and an increase in the complexity of their needs, a number of children who were in care in September 2023 experienced unexpected placement moves increasing the cost of their care. Several of these children moved from already high-cost placements (£5,800 per week) to very high-cost placements (£11,000 per week). This increased the placement spend significantly. When the modelling work was undertaken the average cost of residential care was £5,848 p/week, it is now £6,182 p/week as a result of a further deterioration in sufficiency locally and nationally.

We continue to be very challenged with placement sufficiency, experiencing a shortage of both fostering and residential provision. Whilst we have recently achieved an increase in fostering recruitment activity this is behind where we projected it would be. This has impacted so that we have a higher than projected number of children in residential placements, including some young children. Many of these children are ready to step back into families however foster families are not available for them.

In addition, there are a significant cohort of children who are in high-cost residential care when this is not their plan. Of our children currently in mainstream residential care;

- One is 6 years old.
- Eight are 10/11 years old.
- Sixteen are 12/13 years old.
- Eighteen are 14/15 years old.
- Seven are 16 years old.

It is much harder to step older children who have experienced trauma and disrupted attachments into family care. We need to ensure these children are supported to move into foster homes at the right time, or into 16+ semi-independence provision where this is more suited to their needs.

As a result of increased numbers of children in care, increased complexity of need and worsening sufficiency we have also seen an increase in the number of children placed in unregulated settings (not registered by Ofsted). 9 children are currently placed in unregulated settings at an average weekly rate of £12,376 – 2 of which have been costing the Authority over £40k p./week and with a total annual forecast spend of £5.808m.

5. Programme Objectives

There are two dynamics in the system. Firstly, we need to ensure that the right children are in care by ensuring effective support is provided to families when problems emerge to enable children to remain within their families and where children cannot be safely cared for at home ensure that all alternative arrangements within their extended family and friends network are explored.

Secondly, when children cannot remain safely within their family and friends network, we need to be able to provide a care placement which enables the needs identified in the child's care plan to be well met which for the majority is to be in a family home. Failure to place a child in the right placement often results in the child failing to make good progress, placement breakdown and/or manifestations of distress in the child.

Our programme of work to ensure children in care have a home that meets their needs and that children grow up in families wherever possible is called 'Family Homes for Plymouth Children.' It has several elements:

- Improving practice to keep more children at home and utilising family options when children do need alternative care, including further developing the use of family led decision making models to build family capacity so that children can remain cared for within their friends and family network.
- Recruiting more foster carers for our in-house fostering service, 'Foster for Plymouth' and supporting more of our carers to be able to look after children with more complex needs or challenging behaviours.

- Using an evidence-based approach to 'STEP' agreed children from residential settings to foster placements in a timely, managed and supported way.
- Growing the local independent sector market for both residential and foster care.
- PCC considering becoming a direct provider of residential care.
- Strengthening our brokerage function so we maximise our capacity to identify the right placement at the right price for all children from when they first come into care.
- Supporting children who have been in care for some time to be reunified with their families when it is identified that there have been significant changes in the family.
- Ensuring we are getting value for money from our placement spend.
- Maximising contributions from partners for eligible children with more complex needs.



6. Key Milestones

6a. Foster for Plymouth Growth

So that more of our children in care can live with our foster carers close to Plymouth, we are:

- Introducing an improved offer for our foster carers based on what our foster carers told us at the 2024 Foster Carer Summit. The offer covers both financial and practical support alongside practice improvement work for our workforce which foster carers will be part of delivering.
- Ramping up our marketing and recruitment work to attract new carers, including being part of the South West Regional Hub and having an increased presence with community groups, faith groups, businesses and partners across Plymouth to widen the understanding of fostering and encourage applications to foster from diverse experiences and communities.
- Improving our support to carers to enable them to care for children with more complex needs, including those stepping out of residential, including through introducing a 'Mockingbird' model of support, emergency foster care model and a model for the bespoke package of support for young people stepping out of residential.
- Planning an annual Foster Carer Summit to uphold our commitment to review the support and retention offer regularly with our foster carers.

6b. Market development

To improve the range of high-quality residential placements and foster care closer to Plymouth we are:

- Strengthening how we work with fostering and residential providers in the region and elsewhere, in line with the objectives set out in our Sufficiency Strategy to support them to develop more provision in Plymouth.
- Improving our brokerage capacity so that we maximise available placements local to Plymouth for our looked after children.
- Looking at options for Plymouth City Council to become a provider of residential care across a number of types of provision including short breaks for disabled children, short term intervention to return young people back home and longer term residential children's homes for children with complex needs.

6c. STEPPing children from residential care to family settings

So that we realise our commitment to children growing up in families, we are:

- Utilising the evidence-based BERRI Tool (which evaluates children's needs by understanding behaviour, emotional wellbeing, risk to self and others, relationships and Indicators of psychiatric or neurodevelopmental conditions) to inform our assessments and identify children and young people who are ready to step out of residential care into family settings and to ensure that this happens a timely way.
- Meeting weekly as a management team, alongside the weekly Children's Resource Panels, to review progress of the identified children and young people, review any children or young people who have moved into residential and review the circumstances of those previously not deemed ready to step out so as to ensure that the searches for family based care happens without delay.
- Ensuring our care planning for children supports children to be cared for in a family home.
- For our older young people who are in residential children's homes, this includes consideration of moving into supported accommodation to prepare for independence or focus on a transition to adult services.

6d. Reunifying children with their birth families and wider networks

To ensure we identify opportunities for children to return to their birth families when they have been in our care for some time and this can be achieved safely, we are:

- Supporting children to maintain lifelong links with their birth families.
- Making sure that we continuously review changes in children's circumstances that may make reunification possible.
- Refocusing our Targeted Help offer to provide intensive assessment and support to enable more children to return home from care to their birth families.

6e. Value for money from our placement spend

To ensure we are getting value for money from what we spend on placements for children in care we are;

- Reviewing all high cost packages to ensure children need and are benefitting all elements of the care plan that is being funded for them.
- Ensuring we maximise contributions from partners for eligible children and young people with complex health and education needs.

7. Programme outcomes

The planned outcomes of the programme are;

- Fewer children will be in care.

- More children will be looked after by kinship of connected carers.
- More children will be looked after in foster care, and a higher proportion of children in foster care will be in placements provided by Foster for Plymouth.
- Fewer children will be looked after in residential settings and when they do need to be this will be time limited to achieve specific outcomes which support a child to move into a family setting.
- Children will be provided with the right setting to meet their need from when they first come into care leading to improved placement stability.
- Children will be looked after close to Plymouth.
- The average cost of care will reduce.