

Date of meeting:	09 December 2024
Title of Report:	Children's Services Update
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:	Vivien Lines (Project Consultant, CSC Improvement)
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Your Reference:	
Key Decision:	No
Confidentiality:	Part I - Official

Purpose of Report

This report provides an update on and response to the Quarter 1 Financial Monitoring Cabinet Report presented in August 2024. The Quarter 1 Monitoring Report identified a budget variation of £4.692m forecast overspend related to placement costs of children in Plymouth's care. A first children's services update was provided to September Cabinet as recommended in the Quarter 1 monitoring report and further update reports are being presented to each subsequent Cabinet meeting. This is the fourth update report.

Recommendations

To note the report.

Relevance to the Corporate Plan and/or the Plymouth Plan

Keeping children, adults and communities in Plymouth safe.

Implications for the Medium-Term Financial Plan and Resource Implications:

The report relates to MTFP commitments for the cost of care for children in our care.

Financial Risks

There are significant financial risks to the Council from pressures in this area as set out in the paper.

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 paper addresses risks to the organisation.

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If some/all of the information is confidential, you must indicate why it is not for publication by virtue of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 by ticking the relevant box.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>						
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
A	Briefing report							

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Please list all unpublished, background papers relevant to the decision in the table below. Background papers are unpublished works, relied on to a material extent in preparing the report, which disclose facts or matters on which the report or an important part of the work is based.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>						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Sign off:

Fin	CH.2 4.25.0 49	Leg	N/A	Mon Off	LS/00 0031 97/23 /LB/2 8/11/ 24	HR	CS.24 .25.02 8	Assets	N/A	Strat Proc	N/A
Originating Senior Leadership Team member: David Haley (Director for Children's Services)											
Please confirm the Strategic Director(s) has agreed the report? Yes											
Date agreed: 27/11/2024											
Cabinet Member approval: Councillor Jemima Laing (Deputy Leader, and Cabinet Member for Children's Social Care, Culture and Communications)											
Date agreed: 28/11/2024											

1. Background and context

1.1 The approved Council budget for Children, Young People and Families in 2024/25 is £59.975m of which £36.725m is allocated to the placement costs for children in the care of Plymouth Local Authority. The Children, Young People & Families Service is currently reporting an overspend at Month 7 of £6.991m against a total budget of £59.975m. Of this variance, £4.453m is directly linked to the fostering and residential placement costs of children in care provided by the independent sector and unregistered settings.

1.2 At the end of October, 58 children in care were living in children's homes or in other residential care homes at a total cost of £17.871m per year (a variance to budget of £2.623m).

1.3 The placements where children live, current numbers and cost are shown in the table below.

Type of Placement	Estimated Numbers	Existing Budget £m	Month 6 Forecast £m	Actual Numbers Month 7	Month 7 Forecast £m	Variance to Month 6 £m	Variance to Budget £m
External Residential	50	15.248	17.683	58	17.871	0.188	2.623
Unregistered	6	3.387	5.419	7	5.806	0.387	2.419
External Fostering	158	9.251	8.880	146	8.88	0.000	-0.371
In-House Foster Care	126	2.855	2.855	132	2.855	0.000	0.000
In-House Connected Carers	42	0.952	0.952	51	0.952	0.000	0.000
External Supported Living	41	3.758	3.540	44	3.540	0.000	-0.218
Other Placement Settings - Children in Care	65	1.274	1.274	79	1.274	0.000	0.000
TOTAL CHILDREN IN CARE	488	36.725	40.604	517	41.178	0.575	4.453

1.4 Currently we have 8 young people cared for in unregistered arrangements. Three young people are in rented accommodation with a staff team, two are in CQC registered provisions which are meeting their needs well, two are in 28 day activity placements which are never OFSTED registered and one is in a Children's Home which is meeting their needs well and is in the final stage of OFSTED registration.

1.5 There are placement offers for two of the young people, both who are in rented accommodation, and they will move into registered provisions by the end of November 2024. An expression of interest from a 28 day provision is being explored for one young person, working towards a move into a registered provision in December 2024. One young person will be 18 on 7th December and one young person will cease to be in an unregistered setting when their current Children's Home achieves registration. This leaves three young people who will remain in unregistered arrangements, one of whom we continue to search for a registered children's home and two in CQC registered provisions, which are meeting their needs well, so we are not currently planning for them to move.

1.6 Unregistered Placements can cost on average £12,000-£16,000 per child a week, although in some cases have cost over £29k per child p/week. Our current forecast spend to the end of the year for unregistered placements is £5.806m. Any reduction in this placement type will result in substantial budgetary reductions in future years.

1.7 Eleven percent of children in care are currently placed in residential settings. This is stubbornly high and includes one 6 year old one 8 year old, two 9 year olds and four 10 year olds where foster

placements could not be identified for them despite national searching. A key reason for the forecast budget overspend at the end of October continues to be that we are experiencing significant challenges finding fostering placements for children in residential settings who are ready to move onto a family setting. Children transitioning from residential care are likely to need experienced, specialist foster carers and there is a limited number of this calibre of carers available in Plymouth and across the country. Twenty children in residential placements are now identified as ready to move into a fostering setting but despite extensive local and national searches and conversations with off-framework providers, no suitable foster carers can be identified for most of these children at this time leading to children remaining in high-cost residential placements for longer than they need to. The shortage of foster carers is a national issue.

- I.8 Foster For Plymouth, our in-house fostering service, has identified family placements for two children currently in residential care and introductions are progressing well for their moves early in the New Year. One child has been matched with foster carers from an Independent Foster Agency and introductions are also progressing well ahead of a move in the New Year when the carers are available should things continue to progress well.
- I.9 In response to the challenges finding foster placements for children we have increased our recruitment activity, support and remuneration to foster carers who join Foster for Plymouth as outlined in the detailed report to Cabinet in November and are seeing an increase in applications as a result. We are also working with local Independent Fostering Agencies to support them to increase local capacity in line with the needs set out in our Sufficiency Statement. Since April 2024, 6 more children have been placed with Foster for Plymouth Foster Carers and 12 less placed with Independent Fostering Agency Foster Carers.
- I.10 In October we experienced an increase in forecast spend on placements as a result of five children moving into higher cost placements in unplanned ways. Analysis of these children demonstrates that these children have been subject to repeated referrals and assessments prior to coming into care and when they do come into care, the children experienced several placement moves which are increasingly costly.
- I.11 The audit identified the following characteristics;
- There had been significant involvement by professionals in all of the families throughout the children's lives with repeated assessments but limited support to help with families to make changes needed.
 - Physical abuse was a factor for all of these children, three of the four were also subject to significant neglect and domestic abuse.
 - Children were in their teenage years when they came into our care and the children came into care with experiences that had impacted on their ability to form secure attachments with their carers.
 - All of the children experienced placements moves whilst in our care including;
 - Experiencing a number of high-cost residential placement as a result of foster carers being unable to meet their needs.
 - Experiencing a number of foster placements but becoming stable with an experienced foster carer who sadly became suddenly seriously unwell resulting in the children having to move.
 - Having very complex needs requiring specialist high-cost resources including for displaying serious harmful sexual behaviour and as a result of an adoption breakdown.
- I.12 In line with the strategic priorities in our three-year transformation plan, over the last 12 months we have moved more of our Targeted Help teams to deliver early help and preventative interventions to ensure that we can reach children and families at the earliest opportunity, provide intensive support packages and reduce the need for statutory interventions. As a result, we are already seeing an increase in the number of families receiving targeted help and a reduction in the number of families receiving a statutory social work intervention. Audit work confirms that decisions and support provided is appropriate and is preventing need from escalating and reducing the impact of cumulative

harm on children over time, minimising the likelihood of a need for a high-cost residential placement in the future.

- I.13 Between April 2024 and October 2024, the number of referrals received by statutory social work service reduced from 305 to 215 and at the same time the number of children receiving a targeted help intervention increased from 184 to 269.
- I.14 Service redesign and practice improvements are leading to more assertive and earlier decisions for children where statutory help is needed reducing the stop start interventions with families that have been the experience for too many families, including the children in this audit sample.
- I.15 Increasing our capacity to provide support earlier will not have an immediate impact for those children that have already suffered from repeated patterns of harm, and we will continue to work with these children and their families to mitigate the impact of their experiences.
- I.16 Audits evidence that our social work practice is improving, assessments are more robust and social workers and team managers are making better and more confident decisions for children at risk of significant harm in a timelier way.
- I.17 Specific improvements include;
- Our family hubs and the offer from our Children’s Centres to better meet need in local communities.
 - A strengthened early help offer with partners, including through emerging pilots in targeted areas of Plymouth.
 - Implementation of an integrated Front Door to ensure families get the right help when their needs are first identified.
 - The Targeted Help Teams have been implemented within our front door alongside our MASH and Initial Response Teams to provide intensive and focused support to families at the earliest opportunity.
 - Simplifying the pathways between Early Help, Targeted Help and Statutory Support to ensure families are better supported when statutory teams no longer need to be involved and ensure that change is sustained.
 - Implementing a partnership workforce development programme for Domestic Abuse and assessment and care planning with all social workers and managers attending refreshed training covering the fundamental expectations of practice in these areas.
 - Implementing the tools developed by our Plymouth Safeguarding Children Partnership to improve partnership approaches to child sexual abuse, neglect, domestic abuse and adolescent exploitation.
 - Providing training to social workers on holding Family Network Meetings and ensuring these are held with all families they work with at an early point to ensure that family and community resources are maximised in the support plan that is developed for a family and to sustain change when practitioners are no longer involved.
 - Delivery of a Leadership and Management Development Programme setting expectations of managers regarding the quality and oversight of practice, and to develop their performance management and financial skills.
 - Strong senior management oversight through weekly panels chaired by the Service Director for children who are at risk of care, at risk of moving into high-cost placement and of those children with plans to step down from residential.
 - Delivery of the Family Homes for Plymouth Children Programme to ensure children have access to the right family placement to meet their assessed needs from when they first come into care and to ensure that residential provision is only used when it is needed and is high quality, value for money and close to Plymouth.
- I.18 This audit supports the need to ensure that families are provided with the right help when difficulties first emerge, to intervene in a timely and effective way when problems become more complex and to ensure the right placement, stable care and active care planning for children and young people when they do need to be in our care.

- I.19 A lack of skilled and experienced foster carers for these children to provide them with stability and rebuild attachments from when they first came into care is leading to children experiencing a number of moves, including into high cost and unregistered settings.
- I.20 The lack of suitable family placements is leading to some children experiencing residential placements and to children remaining in residential settings for longer than they need. In addition, the pressure on the placements system is leading to some children being placed in very high-cost residential and unregistered settings. This is a national issue.
- I.21 In response to the high cost of residential placements and to ensure that when children do need residential placements, they are close to Plymouth, high quality and value for money, the Council is moving ahead at pace to develop our own residential provision.
- I.22 Cabinet has approved a business case for two three bedded residential children's homes to be opened in Plymouth and for a feasibility study to create a second residential and short breaks home for children with complex health needs and disabilities (Downham House is our residential children's home that already provides for children with complex learning disabilities).
- I.23 Capital investment to get started has been approved and the Council's project and property teams have developed a project delivery plan this week. We are learning from other Local Authorities that are already running residential provision and are working in partnership with health and education. We will be putting in a bid to the Government's recently launched Complex Needs Capital Investment Programme.
- I.24 Properties are being viewed for the two children's homes and architects appointed to conduct the feasibility work needed to determine the suitability of an existing Council building, Colwill Lodge, for the residential short breaks home for disabled children.
- I.25 Everything, including staff recruitment and preparation for Ofsted registration, is being lined up so that we can get the first two homes in place as soon as we possibly can. We do not want to stop there and are ambitious to grow our provision further in the future.

2. Conclusions

The evolving nature of children's needs and predicting the specific timing and requirements for their placement in our care remains a challenge. Additionally, the scarcity of family homes for children and young people adds uncertainty to our ability to transition a child from a residential setting to a family when we would like this to be achieved for the child. The improvements we are making to increase the number of carers who Foster for Plymouth and the development of in-house residential provision for children is a key development as part of an overall approach to support more children to live in families close to Plymouth.