

Wiltshire Council

Children's Services Select Committee 24th November 2011

Preventing Children and Young People from entering the care system

Purpose of Report

1. Over the past year the number of children in care in Wiltshire has increased although there has been a slight dip in the last couple of months. This report outlines the work being undertaken to prevent children and young people from entering the care system and assisting with a return home if this is appropriate. The report is for members to note.

Number of children in care

2. The table below notes the number and rate per 10,000 of children in care at 31st March for the last 5 years. It also includes the average English rate for the same period. In this period in Wiltshire, the numbers of children in care have risen. The English average rate per 10,000 has also risen although there was a brief standstill period 2007-2009.

Number of children in care 31st March

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Wiltshire numbers	295	335	340	355	385
Wiltshire rate per 10,000	29	33	33	35	38
English average rate per 10,000	55	54	55	58	59

3. Over the past few months there has been a slight dip in numbers. It is too early to assess whether this is a downward trend. This is illustrated in the table below.

Number of children in care at end of each month

	April 2011	May 2011	June 2011	July 2011	August 2011	September 2011	October 2011
Number of children in care	400	400	400	404	401	388	385

Understanding demand

4. Work is regularly undertaken to understand trends and patterns and the reasons why children and young people enter the care system. This includes:
 - An audit of all children and young people who came into the care system for the 6 month period from December 2010 to June 2011.

- An audit of a sample of cases where children and young people are looked after under Section 20 (voluntarily accommodated) rather than through Care Orders.
5. Both these audits found that there were 2 main groups of children and young people entering the care system:
 - Under 3 year olds where there were child protection concerns.
 - Over 13 year olds where relationships within the family had broken down.
 6. Final reports on the 2 audits are due to be presented to the Children in Care Commissioning Group in December 2011 and recommendations will inform the final Children in Care Commissioning Strategy for 2012 to 2015.
 7. As part of the review of the Children in Care Commissioning Strategy, work is also taking place on a detailed analysis of historic patterns and trends on children in care placements to ensure that any change to anticipated demand is picked up early.

Learning from Research and Good Practice

8. Ofsted recently published a report which analyses a small sample of local authorities in order to learn how services can successfully support young people who are at risk of entering care to remain living at home. This study emphasised the importance of a focused intervention approach, for example, Solution Focused Therapy, within services set up to specifically prevent children coming into care. The Centre for Excellence and Outcomes has also published research and good practice studies. The lessons learned will inform the commissioning priorities and plans outlined in the new commissioning strategy.

Edge of Care and the Sufficiency Duty

9. The Council now has a Sufficiency Duty to ensure an appropriate supply of local placements. This is a general duty placed on a local authority to take steps to secure local accommodation which meets the needs of children in care. The duty also includes children on the “edge of care”. Edge of care refers to services and arrangements which prevent children and young people from entering the care system and which can assist with a return home.
10. The Children in Care Commissioning Group has established a short term “task and finish” group which is focusing on ensuring compliance with the Sufficiency Duty.

Edge of Care analysis

11. The Sufficiency Duty Task Group has been analysing existing services and arrangements which either prevent children and young people entering the care system or assist with a return home. The key services are summarised below.

11.1 Adoption Support Service

There are now about 22 children matched for adoption each year, this has increased over the last 5 years and we aim to increase the number year on year. There are currently 69 active adoption support cases managed by the adoption support coordinators. Wiltshire has far fewer breakdowns of historical adoptive placements than the national average. Most placements that break down are of adolescents. Wiltshire Adoption Service continues to develop a range of support services to sustain adoptive placements particularly when the adopted child reaches adolescence.

11.2 Specific fostering schemes

- Family Link is a family-based short breaks scheme used for disabled children. Family Link prevents disabled children and young people from becoming full-time looked after by sustaining families to be able to cope. Family Link could receive referrals for respite care from any Children's Team, moving towards a Support Care model.
- Parent(s) and Child placements. There has been an increase in requests for carers who can provide care to babies alongside one or both parents. Where these placements are successful, it keeps the parent(s) together with their child and may remove the need for the child to become looked after.
- Kinship care. Kinship care covers Family and Friends care, a range of legal arrangements whereby a child or young person is living with a connected person. On the 24th October 2011, a snapshot of Looked After children in foster placements with a relative or friends was 54 (14.10%). A meeting was recently convened to look at eligibility criteria for Section 17 support (including financial) to informal family and friends carers to avoid children becoming looked after.
- Private Fostering. This covers families making private arrangements with others to care for their children. If children are identified as children in need under Section 17 then they or the carers may be entitled to support depending on their circumstances. There is currently an awareness raising campaign about Private Fostering for public/professionals in Wiltshire.
- Respite (short breaks). Short breaks are part of a continuum of services which support children in need and their families and prevent them being looked after full-time.
- Short-term placements. The most frequent type of care required for a wide range of children including babies, primary age children and teenagers. These are Looked After children/young people but on a temporary placement rather than permanent where the aim includes, where possible, the prevention of long-term local authority care.

11.3 Housing Options Service

Housing Options workers will refer to the Host Family Scheme and supported accommodation under the Southwark Judgement, which obliges children's services to provide accommodation and support to all homeless 16 and 17-year-olds whose family support networks have disintegrated. Workers will also try to mediate in an attempt to return the young person home. Housing Options Workers are now working closely with DCE in an attempt to support the family unit and avoid the young person being evicted.

11.4 Supportive Lodgings

The aim of the Supportive Lodgings scheme is to provide a range of accommodation options for young people 16+ when they leave local authority Foster Care. Supportive Lodgings may be focused on prevention of homelessness at a time of crisis or may be one of a number of services providing more settled supported accommodation for young people.

11.5 Host Family scheme

This scheme helps young people aged 16/17 to find temporary emergency housing if they are at risk of being homeless. It is usually for a maximum of 3 weeks whilst support staff help the family to resolve issues so the young person can return home.

11.6 Integrated Youth Service

The Youth Offending Service stabilises young people in the community and through good care planning, the need for young people to go into care decreases.

Motiv8 is the substance misuse/harm reduction service working with tier 2 and 3 offenders. Motiv8 contributes to edge of care as workers may support parents who can't cope with young people at home and with young people themselves who aren't coping at home.

ROLAC (Reducing Offending of Looked After Children) is a panel approach managing Looked After children who are offending. This work stabilises placements.

The Risk Management Panel now works with individual young people who are engaged in risky behaviour or otherwise vulnerable.

11.7 Family Group Conferences (FGC)

Wiltshire is in the final stage of the tendering process for a new FGC service which can be used where there is a risk of a child or an adolescent coming into care. Family Group Conferences engage immediate and broader family members/friends in developing a plan to solve difficulties. FGCs are a key way of working with a family as an alternative to a planned route into care.

11.8 New Family and Parenting Support Service

We are currently tendering for a new service designed to work with families with complex needs but who do not meet the social care threshold. This earlier intervention is trying to prevent families needing social care support. The service will also act as a step-down for those coming out of Social Care but where some continuing support is needed. The service will be operational from April 2012.

11.9 Social Care Family Support including the Crisis Intervention Service (CIS)

The CIS is a supplementary resource between daytime fieldwork provision and the Emergency Duty Service. CIS provides intensive support to prevent family breakdown and avoid the need for children and young people having to be looked after by the Local Authority. Social Care Family Support Services (which now incorporates the Family Intervention Project workers) provide support and intervention for families at risk of breakdown or where breakdown has occurred and support is needed to rebuild family relationships. We are currently reviewing this area of work to ensure that all family support services, including the pilot work referenced below (12) are aligned.

11.10 Support for children with disabilities and significant special educational needs

The local authority also provides a range of inclusion support services for children and young people, for example, Behaviour Support, help for those with physical impairments and sensory difficulties. These services are important in ensuring that children and young people are able to continue to be educated within Wiltshire. A breakdown in the school placement for a child with a disabilities/significant special educational needs can lead to the family requesting an educational/residential placement.

11.12 There are also services provided by other organisations that have an impact on the numbers of children and young people needing to be looked after. For example, the Outreach Service (part of the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service provided by Oxford Health) works with young people with challenging behaviour who find it difficult to engage with traditional clinic-based mental health services.

11.13 Arrangements and orders

Arrangements and orders are alternatives to care where the child or young person is not Looked After by the Local Authority.

Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) and Residence Orders (ROs)

SGOs are intended to provide a legal option for permanence for children who cannot grow up with their birth families. SGOs can be an alternative to children and young people becoming Looked After. ROs are an order providing where a child should live, for example in cases where parents separate. They are also a

way of providing someone who is not a legal parent of a child with parental responsibility. SGOs and ROs quite often go to Family and Friends.

Complex Families Community Budgets pilot

12. In October, Wiltshire became one of 50 local authorities in the 2nd phase of the national Community Budgets pilots focusing on families with multiple needs. The scope of the project is being finalised but it will include a focus on increasing the number of children and young people remaining with their families. The project will build on our existing 'Think Family' work and will further develop:

- Improved access arrangements for families with complex problems – a new multi-agency system for managing referrals when child and families have complex and specialist needs.
- A clear process for prioritising and managing access to services which will prevent children and young people from entering the care system (if this is appropriate), assist with a return home if this is possible, and work with families to enable them to better protect their children from harm.
- A better range of services for families with complex problems, for example, a clearer focus on support for adolescents at risk of entering care.

This is a 'whole system' project that will have a multi-agency focus, including links with adult services (particularly around substance misusing parents and those with mental health problems), and have a particular focus on earlier intervention.

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Background Papers

None
