

**Commissioning Strategy for Looked After Children
in Wiltshire 2008-13**

Purpose of Report

1. To present the 5 year strategy for commissioning placements for Looked After Children in Wiltshire. The Commissioning Strategy Report is attached as Appendix 1.

Background

2. The Scrutiny Group reported on contracted out placements for Looked After Children and reported to Cabinet in 2006. The reports recommendations have been taken into account in developing the strategy.
3. Other important drivers in developing the Strategy have been the introduction of the Care Matters agenda currently going through Parliament as the Children and Young People's Bill 2007. The Government has continued to focus on the need to raise standards and improve outcomes for Looked After Children by introducing Care Matters, an ambitious programme covering every aspect of the needs of children in care focusing the Every Child Matters five key outcomes.
4. The original commissioning strategy for Looked After Children was in effect the Placement Strategy endorsed by elected members in 2003.
5. The main elements of the 2003 placement strategy have been implemented. These include:–
 - Prevention of children coming into care through family crisis through the operation of the Crisis Intervention Service.
 - The development of high quality adoption support services.
 - Strengthening Family Placement teams and the increase of fostering allowances and support to foster carers in leading a small net increase of in-house foster carers since 2004.
 - Improved contracting with external providers, both in fostering and residential service providers.

6. However, there have also been major challenges facing the service including:-
- Growth in numbers of Looked After Children and Young People (holding at around 300 in early 2007 but a marked rise from October 2007 to a new high of 340 at the beginning of May 2008).
 - Failure of Sedgemoor to deliver 30 solo placements to avoid the use of residential placement wherever possible and then going into liquidation.
 - Delay in the contract with Quarriers becoming operational because of registration issues.
 - Budgetary pressure because of the continuing high cost of external placements particularly placements in children's homes .

These challenges have been or are in the process of being addressed.

7. The new Commissioning Strategy 2008-2013 for Looked After Children in Wiltshire is primarily concerned with placement choice and stability, and builds on the positive performance of our in-house fostering and adoption services.
8. Its main features include: -
- Sustaining preventive work for children on the edge of care.
 - Developing short breaks for disabled children and their families.
 - Maximising the use of Family and Friends carers.
 - Extending placement choice for children for whom adoption is the plan and increasing capacity for adoption support services.
 - Extending in-house capacity for fostering young people with challenging behaviour and complex needs by developing an in-house "solo" fostering scheme.
 - Ensuring sufficient capacity of independent reviewing officers to extend service to all Looked After Children including those on Short Breaks.
9. The strategy was approved by Cabinet in December 2007 pump priming investment has been agreed and included in the placement budget this year £80,000 for the solo fostering scheme and £132,000 to develop the adoption service in order to realise savings in the long term.
10. Further funding is available from the ring fenced grant for implementing the Care Matters agenda the table on page 5 of the strategy provides a summary of investment and savings over a 5 year period.

11. In summary, developments will require an annual investment of £292,000 to realise annual savings of £180,000 in years 2008-2010 and savings of £480,000 in years 2011-2013. The savings will be accrued initially from a reduction in expenditure on independent fostering agency placements. Once the solo fostering scheme has been developed and is operational, further substantial savings should be made by reducing the use of external residential children's placements.

Progress in implementing strategy :

Preventive services

12. Care Matters recognises the importance of providing support to disabled children and their families and has made funding available for the development of short breaks service. Wiltshire's share of the funding this year is £60,000 and a multi agency group is considering proposals to use the funding to make a positive difference this year.
13. We have continued our Crisis Intervention Service to avert placements when families are in crisis and the service continues to be effective. Of the children currently looked after 22 have adoption as the plan and are already in placement or are matched. Once adoption orders have been made there will be a significant impact.
14. There is a national trend in rising numbers of younger children in care and earlier intervention. While it is still integral to our strategy to avoid children entering care wherever it is safe and possible, research findings demonstrate that delaying entry into care when children are suffering abuse or neglect can have long term effects which mean that when they do enter the care system it becomes so much harder to make a satisfactory placement.
15. An analysis of 30 children entering care between October and January 2008 showed that 18 of these children were fewer than 8, and 7 of those were babies under a year old. All were in care proceedings; in other words the threshold of significant harm had been met. Moreover as younger children their care plans would not involve them remaining in care long term; if permanence with family could not be achieved then permanence by means of adoption would be the preferred option.

Adoption Service

16. It is planned to appoint a County Adoption Manager by the end of August this year and that additional Adoption Social Worker posts will be in place by the end of September. The County Adoption Manager will have oversight of the progress of children for whom adoption is the plan in order to avoid any unnecessary delay in the adoption process.

Solo placements

17. Since the improvement in support to foster carers over the past 5 years, Wiltshire has had more success in recruitment of carers including skilled carers who have been able to manage placements of young people with challenging behaviour. Consequently Wiltshire are planning to develop our own solo scheme to reduce the use of expensive residential placements.
18. We plan to advertise for two dedicated Family Placement Officers to develop the scheme and recruit and train skilled foster carers for this scheme. We aim to recruit foster carers by the end of 2009.

Quarriers Contract

19. There were initial delays but both children's homes provided by Quarriers are currently full. Quarriers have purchased a third property so that they can progress our shared aspiration to have smaller children's homes on a more domestic scale to enable better matching of young people with similar but conflicting needs.

Main considerations for the Council

20. Care Matters has amplified our responsibilities as corporate parents to provide good services for children in care which improve their life chances and outcomes. Placement choice and stability is the foundation for improved health and education services and providing a secure basis for a positive transition to adulthood.
21. The Commissioning strategy for Looked After Children is the foundation for the next five years for securing high quality stable placements supported by health and education services.

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Unpublished documents relied upon in the production of this report:
Environmental impact of the recommendations contained in this report: