

NAME OF COMMITTEE	Care Scrutiny Committee
DATE OF MEETING	26 November 2020
TITLE OF ITEM	Looked After Children and Young People
PURPOSE	An overview of matters relating to care services for children and young people
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CABINET MEMBER	Councillor Dilwyn Morgan

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to provide an overview to the Scrutiny Committee of the situation in the field of looked after children in the Council, to set the context of the current policy and to draw attention to the manner the service has responded to ensure consistency during the Covid period to maintain support and a service for this cohort of children and young people being looked after by the Council.
- 1.2 At the end of September 2020, 294 children were looked after by Gwynedd Council. The members will be aware that the Council has a statutory responsibility as corporate parents for each of these children and young people, and therefore there is a responsibility to ensure that they get the best opportunities in life to thrive and to develop like any other child. Each child needs to be considered as "If this were my child..."
- 1.3 Children become looked after for a variety of different reasons, but in the vast majority of cases the decision to bring children into care is based on incident(s) of significant harm to them in the care of their parents. This means that children have suffered physical, sexual, emotional abuse and/or negligence. There are also examples now of teenagers becoming looked after by us due to their own behaviour, meaning they put themselves in danger and self-harm, suffer abuse by being sexually exploited or by being drawn into offending (e.g. 'county lines'). In the majority of these cases, keeping these young people safe is extremely challenging, and the ability of parents to do this is compromised to the extent where there is no choice but to bring them into care to do our best to keep them safe.

The Current Situation

- 2.1 The Council implements its corporate parenting responsibility through a social worker and a manager in the Children and Supporting Families Service, and the Corporate Parent Panel is responsible for ensuring that the multi-agency services offered to looked after children is of high quality, is accessible and meets their needs. Our ambition for looked after children is to:
 - Provide safe, stable homes for them to thrive and develop
 - Work with our partners to ensure the best possible outcomes for each child looked after by us
 - Support families to stay with each other and to look after their children safely
 - Return children to live with their parents when safe to do so
 - Provide a wide range of appropriate, suitable and local placements
- 2.2 As noted above, 294 children (156 families) were being looked after by Gwynedd Council at the end of September 2020, which is an increase of 11% from September 2019. 27 children were looked after for the first time between April and September 2020. 24 left care during the same period, either by returning home, quashing their care orders, moving to live independently, being adopted, or becoming subject to a Special Care Order to their carers. The vast majority of the children who

become looked after are the subject of a Care Order which is an order through the court which gives the Council parental responsibility. This responsibility is shared with the parent, and collaboration with the parent is crucial to ensuring that the needs of the children are being met. At times, the Council must make decisions that are contrary to the wishes of the parent for the welfare of the children, and a Care Order gives the Head of Service authority as the designated person on behalf of the Council to make these decisions. Some examples of the type of decisions include giving a child consent to receive medical treatment if the parent refuses; going on holiday abroad with his/her carers and preventing contact with some individuals. Birth parents only lose their parental responsibility through adoption.

2.3 As seen in Appendix 1, which provides members with details of the information, the majority of looked after children in Gwynedd still live with their own families either through a Care Order and a Placement with Parents arrangement, or they are placed with extended members of their families who are registered as foster parents.

2.4 There has been a substantial increase over the past five years in the number of care cases living at home with their parents (see Appendix 1). These cases are high risk as significant harm has been proven; however, there is recognition that it is possible to work closely with the parents to change the behaviour to look after their children appropriately. It means that children are not removed from their homes, but that additional safety measures are required to ensure that the placement in their homes is safe. They are subject to the same review, visiting and support arrangements as any other looked after child living with foster parents or in residential care.

2.5 Our most valuable resource is the foster carers that have registered for general fostering. Without them, we would not be in a situation to offer stability or safe homes for over 100 children in Gwynedd. They are very special families who open their doors and lives to children who have suffered trauma, and who work with us as a service to identify their needs to ensure that they gain access to the services they need in order to develop. They play an essential part in the lives of these children, whether it is a long-term placement throughout their childhood, a short-term placement, respite care or a placement that prepares children to move to permanent placements, for example adoption.

2.6 Within our own fostering resources - known as general fostering - 72 placements have been registered, with the capacity of offering placements for 139 children. 60 other foster placements that look after 96 children are extended family placements, from grandparents to aunts and uncles, and older siblings. Between April and October 2020, nine additional family placements were registered for 15 children, and four general fostering placements were registered, which currently offer care for seven children. We regularly look for innovative and new ways of recruiting foster carers, and take a full part in the work that takes place nationally under the National Fostering Framework.

2.7 Currently, there are 21 children and young people in residential care as they have complex and intensive needs that cannot be met within a foster placement. These needs include matters such as inappropriate sexual behaviour; self-harm and dangerous behaviour; sexual exploitation, severe disabilities and behaviours beyond the parents' control that endanger the welfare of the young person. Finding a suitable placement for this cohort of children is extremely challenging. They are placed in units outside Gwynedd, as well as outside Wales as they have very specific needs.

2.8 At times, the ability to find a suitable residential placement is impossible, and the service must make a decision to establish a plan to look after the child themselves, staffed 24 hours by our own workers. This is fundamentally unlawful and is considered as an unmanaged placement. As a result, we are required to inform the Social Care Inspectorate of the placement, and we must report on the progress of finding another placement for the young person on a weekly basis. These are high risk cases for our workers and for the Council, and are very difficult decisions to make due to the vulnerability of the situation. There is a possibility of criminal prosecution by undertaking these placements, but doing so is the last resort after failing all other options. Ultimately, the child or young person is now our responsibility, and he or she must be looked after no matter the professional implications for individuals who make the decision. In the last five years, we have completed seven such arrangements. Fortunately, none of these are long-term placements, and we have been able to find a residential placement in order to end the unmanaged placement.

Plans to reduce the numbers of looked after children

3.1 As a service, our main aim is to keep families together, but there are occasions where children need to become looked after. There has been a steady increase in numbers in Wales over the past years. We are very aware of this increase in Gwynedd, and it is extremely important that we as a service implement plans to reduce the number of children becoming looked after. We as a service are completely clear that the number of looked after children in Gwynedd need to be looked after due to the factors that have led to the need for the Council to intervene to safeguard them. Additionally, as a result to a full review of the Children Service in Gwynedd published at the beginning of 2019, the statement of the Social Care Inspectorate notes that the service goes the extra mile to ensure the safety of children and young people, and that we do everything within our ability to ensure that children are able to stay with their families. The Inspectorate published a national overview report in 2019 which noted that they did not discover any looked after children in Wales that should not be looked after, and that there was no evidence to show that there are children in the system who should not be there.

3.2 The above, of course, gives local authorities assurance that the right decisions are being made to safeguard children, but at the same time fully appreciates that the number of looked after children is unsustainable in the long-term, and that it should be ensured that resources and services are available to support families to look after their own children safely.

3.3 Mark Drakeford, First Minister, announced at the beginning of 2019 that reducing the number of looked after children was one of the Government's policy priorities, and local authorities were required to set a numerical target to reduce the numbers in order to be able to measure success against this target. As a result, Welsh Government was informed that Gwynedd Council would not set a numerical or percentage target in relation to reducing the number of looked after children. The principle for these grounds is the authority's commitment to ensuring that children are safeguarded. The corporate and political expectation of the Children Service is that we continue to make the right decisions for children based on the need and risk. In accordance with the vision, the Council is committed to avoiding setting targets as we know from experience that they are not an effective way of working. Our purpose is to ensure that things improve through appropriate and suitable practice, and not through compliance by reaching targets. This means that we focus on improving practice, understanding the service demand, on continuous improvement and removing barriers in order to achieve the best for children. This is the current standpoint in Gwynedd in relation to the requirement to set a target to reduce the number of looked after children.

COVID-19 Situation

4.1 Covid-19 brought new challenges for the children service. Ceasing operation was not an option, however decisions needed to be made very swiftly to agree on the new way of working and practising to deliver our statutory responsibilities. The entire workforce fully accepted the challenge and there was no impairment whatsoever on the availability of our workforce during the period.

4.2 The following changes had to be undertaken swiftly:

- Moving everyone from the offices to work from their homes
- Ensuring that every staff member has access to full PPE in order to continue undertaking home visits when required to do so, e.g. child safeguarding investigations
- Putting arrangements in place for looked after children to have contact with their parents over the internet, e.g. Facebook, WhatsApp, Teams, etc. rather than having face-to-face contact
- Closing the respite unit for disabled children, Hafan y Sêr, and putting arrangements in place to support some families in the community, taking into consideration the requirements of the lockdown restrictions
- Ensuring that statutory visits for looked after children and children on the child protection register either take place virtually or at the home, depending on the risk level
- Collaborate with the Education Department to ensure that children with the greatest needs gain access to the schools as vulnerable children
- Undertaking looked after children reviews virtually
- Ensuring that practical support is available for foster parents, especially where individuals had to self-isolate
- Establishing a helpline outside working hours for foster carers
- Giving evidence in court cases over a digital platform

4.3 Since the end of the lockdown, we have:

- Continued to visit homes and see children face-to-face to deliver statutory responsibilities in the field of safeguarding and looked after children
- Re-opened the respite unit, Hafan y Sêr, for two children/young people at the time thus far
- Recommended face-to-face contact between looked after children and their parents within the Covid-19 restrictions
- Continue to ensure that our workforce has access to full PPE

4.4. Generally, we have fulfilled our responsibilities, but in different ways to usual. There is no doubt that there has been immense pressure on the workforce and managers, and there is some concern about the impact of this period and the pressure on the emotional welfare of a number of our staff. We continue to work from home in accordance with the expectation, but this is becoming increasingly difficult in a field that depends on formal and informal personal contact with colleagues and teams. We now see the impact of this on individuals, and are putting arrangements in place to mitigate some of the matters, for example, ensuring that no worker has to give evidence in court from his/her own home without the support of a manager; strict health and safety arrangements are in place, especially when a worker enters a risky situation to ensure that they are safe and feel alright following a difficult visit, and ensuring that very regular contact is made with all workers on manager and Management Team level.

Marian Hughes,

16 November, 2020.