

## **Safe and Strong Communities Select Committee**

**26 September 2017**

### **A review of children's services for children on the edge of care – Scoping Report**

#### **Recommendation**

1. That the Select Committee considers this Scoping Report for a Scrutiny Review and agrees the Terms of Reference and arrangements for a review of children's services for children on the edge of care.

#### **Report of Scrutiny and Support Manager**

### **Summary**

#### **What is the Select Committee being asked to do and why?**

2. It has been proposed that the Committee consider undertaking a review to investigate why more children are entering care in Staffordshire, the impact that this has on the Council and the mechanisms in place to prevent children from coming into care – looked after children (LAC).

3. The cost of children coming into care places a significant and increasing financial burden on the Council at a time of significant financial challenge.

4. The Council has a number of mechanisms in place to prevent children coming into care. The Committee is asked to consider these and to make recommendations to the Cabinet Member on any improvements that could be made. To take this forward, the Select Committee is asked to consider and agree the Terms of Reference and arrangements for the review, as proposed in this report.

5. Members are asked to indicate if they wish to participate in this review.

### **Report**

#### **Background**

6. In Staffordshire, the number of LAC was 1009 as at the end of June 2017, showing an increase of 34 over the year. In June 2017 there were 595 children subject of a Child Protection Plan, which has increased from 563 in May, but was down overall and below statistical neighbours' average. The number of Children in Need cases has increased slightly in June from 2914 to

2946, but is down overall and below statistical neighbours' average. The number of Early Help 'open' family cases has increased steadily over the same period.

7. The LAC rate in Staffordshire is stable at 58.9 per 10,000 of the 0-17 population at the end of June. This remains lower than the published West Midlands rate (74.7) at the end of December 2016, but we have seen an upward trend over the past few months.

8. However, the Head of Families First reported to the MTFs Working Group in 2016/17 that there was a projected overspend of £3.5m in the LAC budget. He reported that there were a significant number of initiatives in train to prevent those 'on the cusp of care' from coming into the system and various projects were showing positive outcomes (see paragraph 10).

9. Performance figures on the numbers of looked after children and the performance of the Looked after Service area are regularly reported to the Corporate Parenting Panel (non-public meeting). Wider performance is also reported each month to the Children's Improvement Board. No recent scrutiny has taken place by the Safe and Strong Communities Select Committee.

## **Terms of Reference for the Scrutiny Review**

### **Scope**

10. The purpose of this scrutiny review would be for Members to understand why children are entering care in Staffordshire. The following key factors have been identified:

- Behavioural problems
- Risks of Child Sexual Exploitation
- Gang Related involvement
- Substance/alcohol misuse of the child and or parents/carers
- Lack of full time educational placement (part time timetables, exclusions, SEN/PRU)
- Emotional/mental health issues- child -parent/carers
- Domestic violence
- Housing issues
- Financial hardship
- Risk of abuse: neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse.

11. To understand what work is being done by the Council and partners to impact on the numbers entering care.

12. To consider the current mechanisms that the Council has in place to prevent children coming into care – referred to as children ‘on the cusp of care’ and to make recommendations.

13. The Council has the following schemes in place to prevent children coming into care and arrangements could be made for Members to learn more about these:-

- Intensive Prevention Service;
- Breathing Space;
- Short Breaks Unit,
- Intensive Family Support Service (Drugs and Alcohol project)

14. Members may wish initially to interview lead officers from the Independent Reviewing Officer Service (Caroline Dunn/Claire Cartwright); Accommodation Panel (Vonni Gordon), the Independent Placements Overview Panel (Deborah Ramsdale) and SSU County Managers to discuss the systems and processes that are in place before a child is admitted into care. Members are advised also to interview Sarah Rivers (Head of the Virtual School) to advice on the educational issues/needs of children entering the care system and Liz Kelay on the placement needs and costs of children entering care. The Cabinet Member is particularly keen for Members to be aware of the factors around children coming into care who were not previously known to the Council. Members may identify others that they wish to interview during the course of the review e.g. representatives of partner organisations and these arrangements will be made as required.

### **Review Arrangements**

15. The Committee is advised to appoint a Working Group of Members to undertake this Scrutiny Review and to appoint a Chair to lead the review.

16. The Committee/Working Group will be provided with a strategic overview of the LAC Service at the beginning of the review.

17. Desk top research on mechanisms in place to prevent children coming into care in other local authority areas would be undertaken by the Scrutiny and Support officers.

18. Members of the Working Group will determine the information and evidence they require to address the Terms of Reference. It is recommended that Members undertake an Inquiry Day to which lead officers could be invited to present details of the services for which they are responsible. Members may wish to ask for details of anonymised case studies to assist them in understanding this matter. Members may wish to consider if they wish to invite any others to participate in this Inquiry Day. The Inquiry Day will be held in public.

## **Timing**

19. With Members' agreement it is proposed that the Inquiry Day be held in October. This will enable a final report to be produced as part of Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) Working Group considerations, if appropriate.

20. To expedite this matter, the draft scoping report has been shared with the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People and he is in agreement. The Working Group will be expected to produce a final report, containing any recommendations they may wish to make for submission to the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People and/or other body.

21. An Executive Response to any recommendations will be requested.

## **Intended Outcome**

22. The aim would be to provide a draft report on the outcome of the Inquiry Day and research to be presented to the Committee 11 December 2017 and then to the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People for an Executive Response. The report would capture the findings from the background research and Inquiry Day and it is intended that this would be an objective assessment of the findings that could lead to further improvements in the service. The report would be prepared by the Scrutiny and Support Manager.

## **Key Objectives**

23. The key objectives are:-

- To understand why children are coming into care in Staffordshire
- To understand how children coming into care is managed in Staffordshire, including current and anticipated future demand on the service, impact on children and families and financial impact;
- To examine the current mechanisms that the Council has in place to manage the numbers of children coming into care;
- To review what mechanisms there are to manage children coming into care in other local authorities;
- To learn about issues and challenges and how they are being managed;
- To identify if any improvements can be made to our current arrangements.

## **Lines of Enquiry**

24. It is proposed that an initial meeting of the Working Group be set up in late September/early October and the Working Group decide what information they require, who they would like to invite to the proposed Inquiry Day and develop a questions they would like to ask invitees. This would not prevent additional questions being asked on the Day but would enable a report on common issues to be written.

### **Link to Strategic Plan**

25. The County Council's Business Plan 2017-18 is based on seven commissioning priorities including Resilient Communities - "Build a joint approach to reducing demand for high cost services through addressing root cause", Enable people to access the appropriate intervention at the right time" and "Ensure effective safeguarding for most vulnerable in our communities".

### **Link to other Scrutiny Activity**

26. There has been no previous specific scrutiny on this area of work.

### **Community Impact**

27. The Committee will be expected to consider the implications of work, or proposed action, on the subject under review and to make reference to implications including those below in their final report:

- Equalities and Legal
- Resource and Value for Money
- Risk
- Climate Change.

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**Appendices/Background papers – none.**