

North Lanarkshire Council

Report

Education and Families Committee

approval noting

Ref AG/MF

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Close to Home – Improving outcomes and strengthening provision.

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Executive Summary

Over recent years there has been a growth in the demand for and use of external residential and fostering placements for children and young people experiencing care, with the majority of external residential placements also involving educational provision. There has also been a consistently high demand for external educational day placements both for children and young people with complex needs and those with emotional and behavioural challenges.

The majority of external provision is based out with North Lanarkshire. Whilst undoubtedly some children and young people gain some benefit from aspects of external provision there is a growing concern that for most this does not improve and in some circumstances actually compromises longer term outcomes and in particular presents challenges in relation to retaining strong community and family connections and at key transition points. The relatively high cost, in particular of external residential provision, has also contributed to significant overspends in both ASN and social work placement budgets. With the average cost of external placements generally higher than alternative in-house options this is not best value and also creates opportunity costs in reducing capacity to spend on early intervention.

This picture presents a challenge to both the aspiration of the service and the Plan for North Lanarkshire and drives a need to rethink our approaches to planning and support for this cohort of children and young people.

This report updates both on actions taken to date and those proposed going forward to more effectively manage demand and to enhance local capacity. It sets out linkages with other key stands within the Programme of Work and seeks agreement on a number of key changes required to embed new practice with the principle aim of improving outcomes for some of our most vulnerable young people but also facilitating a shift in expenditure and investment to local and more tailored supports.

Recommendations

Committee is asked to :

- (1) Note the information and interdependencies highlighted in this report and endorse the aims of the *Close to Home* initiative.
- (2) Note the specific system changes, outlined in para 2.8, required to support this area of work, specifically to:
 - (i) Establish a single service budget portfolio and a revised mechanism for approval of external placements
 - (ii) Create a budget mechanism which allows an individual budget to be identified to support short term preventative or rehabilitative interventions and tailored supports, effectively allowing conversion of a proportion of potential placement spend on the principle of 'funding following the child'
- (3) Agree the further actions proposed including the expansion of Family Group Decision Making, addressing the need for children's advocacy in respect of educational issues and the creation of a post requiring care experience to support this work and the wider implementation of the Independent Care Review within North Lanarkshire

The Plan for North Lanarkshire

Priority	Support all children and young people to realise their full potential
Ambition statement	(7) Enhance collaborative working to maximise support and ensure all our children and young people are included, supported, and safe

1. Background

- 1.1 Current purchased independent provision covers a number of categories of placement. This includes secure and residential placements with the majority including educational provision within the same facility, independent fostering placements and educational day placements. The number of children and young people supported within such placements fluctuates within any year however over 2019/20 averaged: 18-20 residential placements, including secure; 55-60 independent foster placements and 48-50 educational day placements. There are currently separate panel mechanisms for approving residential school and educational day placements and internal arrangements within social work for decision-making on secure care and independent foster care arrangements reflecting both the specific legislative requirements around secure and the emergency nature of some placement requests.
- 1.2 Recent increases in the use of independent sector placements have contributed to an increase in spend on this area from 6.2 million on 2017/18 to 8.6 million in 2019/20. In addition annual transport costs for external educational day placements are around 500k.

- 1.3 North Lanarkshire has five small local authority children's houses and registered fostering, adoption, continuing care and supported care services as well as intensive services supporting both those children and young people on the edges of care and those experiencing kinship and foster care. There are a relatively high number of specialist ASN schools (13) and a range of further ASN provision, comprehensively reviewed last year with actions to enhance provision currently being taken forward. As previously reported to Committee we have also a new and innovative virtual school offering both direct and indirect support aimed at improving both educational and wider outcomes for children experiencing care. There is therefore a strong base available on which to build local supports and provision and a reasonable concern around the increase in number of children and young people requiring to access external provision.
- 1.4 A workshop held within the service identified a number of key challenges within our practice, processes and provision with analysis and discussions with key managers suggesting that the growth in the use of external and independent sector placements over the recent period has been driven both by demand and supply side factors but that there is in addition an impact on service cultures arising from staff responses to the normalization of external placement which has the potential to act to sustain current placement patterns.
- 1.5 Demand side factors include the increase in the number of children and young people presenting with complex needs, in particular those diagnosed or assessed as having neuro-developmental conditions. Alongside this there has been an increase in younger children who have experienced significant trauma who have difficulty sustaining foster placements or engaging in education some of whom present challenging or self-harming behaviours fuelling a demand for 'therapeutic placements'. Demand also arises for placements for older young people who display significantly challenging or risk-taking behaviours. There is a clear interdependency of demand across education and social work with the breakdown or lack of provision or engagement with education placements often a trigger for the breakdown in care arrangements and vice versa. Whilst there are currently no young people accommodated within secure accommodation it is notable that 4 of the 5 children placed in secure accommodation over the previous year were either without or fully disengaged from educational placements at the point of admission.
- 1.6 As reported previously to Committee there has also been an overall growth in the number of children and young people experiencing care, in particular in those living with kinship carers and whilst for many children this supports relatively good outcomes there are also small but significant number of children impacted by breakdowns in these arrangements.
- 1.7 Supply side issues impacting on the capacity of local provision over the same period have included a reduction in the numbers of in-house foster carers, principally through retiral and/or conversion to adoptive, permanent placements or continuing care placements without an equivalent level of recruitment of new carers into the service. The capacity of local children's houses to accommodate new placements has also been impacted by the positive commitment to continuing care, reducing turnover as more young people remain in placement post 16, significantly impacting also on the profile of the houses. Finally there remain challenges in delivering sufficiently flexible and individualised supports to meet the educational needs of some children in both mainstream and ASN settings.

- 1.8 Analysis of current external placements suggests that there is not a clear enough focus on desired outcomes and that placements are made with insufficient attention to potential pathways back whether to local placement, mainstream education or even home. There is also often very limited involvement or attention to children's views in decision-making around such placements. When independent placements are also geographically outside the local authority area it can be harder to wrap appropriate support around the placement and to maintain important family and sibling contact. Children can also lose wider connection with their home community creating an effective cliff edge at key transition points and additionally when external providers invoke a 28 notice period, a situation which has arisen on 6 occasions over the last year. For those children and young people attending external educational day placements there can also be a loss of connection and for some the adverse impact of long daily journeys.
- 1.9 This picture is out of line with the aspirations of the Plan for North Lanarkshire and also with the aspirations of the recently published Independent Care Review and its *Promise* to children and young people which places significant emphasis on intensive family support for both families and carers, promoting meaningful and loving relationships for children experiencing care and support to sustain family, and in particular sibling contact, keeping siblings together where possible. The *Promise* also places importance on limiting the number of transitions experienced by children and significantly a much greater voice for children and young people in decisions which impact on them. All areas which will be given greater emphasis in view of the the planned incorporation of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child into Scots Law. The growth in the use of external educational placements also runs contrary to the direction of travel set by the recent comprehensive review of ASN provision in North Lanarkshire moving towards a presumption of mainstream and inclusive education. Finally the current pattern of provision does not support the council's capacity to address the inequalities highlighted by recent Nuffield Foundation research which demonstrated that children living in the 10% most deprived areas in Scotland were 20 times more likely to be subject to statutory child welfare interventions.

2. Report

- 2.1 Work undertaken to date to reflect on the challenges outlined has identified a number of improvement actions underpinned by the fundamental need for a much more integrated response to this cohort of children and young people both at the point where concerns arise about the ability to meet needs through internal provision and earlier in their journey.

Action to Date

- 2.2 A number of actions have already been taken forward to manage the demand for external provision including:
- A range of activity through the Virtual School including the co-ordination and provision of tailored supports to sustain and/or re-engage children and young people in education and to provide alternative individual education plans for children and young people most at risk of exclusion and placement breakdown which might otherwise lead to a request for residential school.

- A focus on reviewing plans for those children currently in external and independent sector placement with a view to identifying opportunities to work towards a return to local provision. It is vital that this work is carefully planned with appropriate attention to children's rights, wishes and relationships, timing of potential moves and to relevant statutory decision-making processes including that of the Children's Hearing System. For some children and young people sufficient lead in time is also required to create alternative internal options.
- Additional scrutiny of requests for external placement by Senior Managers, albeit to date without the formal implementation of new processes.
- A continued focus on strong permanence planning, building on our engagement with PaCE the Permanence and Care Excellence programme to ensure that there is no unnecessary delay particularly for those children who may benefit from adoption, alternative long term family options including those who may be able to return home with appropriate supports.

2.3 In addition a range of actions have been taken to address challenges relating to internal capacity including:

- The development and launch of a new recruitment campaign aimed at attracting more foster carers, supported carers and prospective adopters. <https://foster-adopt.scot/>
- The reconfiguration of arrangements to assess and support kinship carers with the launch of a dedicated service aimed both at improving the quality of planning for children in kinship and the support to carers to reduce the chances of placement breakdown. (The launch of this service has been deferred from April to July 2020 due to the impact of the current COVID19 on recruitment and planning process)
- In reach support from the social work community alternatives team to the SEBN sector with a particular focus on sustaining educational placements.
- In reach from the virtual school and psychological services staff to the children's houses with a focus both on enhancing staff ability to support educational engagement and outcomes and, in one house, a test of change working with residential staff to create a nurture focussed and trauma informed environment.
- A limited reconfiguration of our children's houses to support better matching of provision to young people's needs, in particular allowing one house to focus its resource primarily on younger children most of whom have experienced previous placement breakdown.
- Early exploration of the contextual safeguarding approach to support staff confidence and practice in responding to young people who may be involved in risk-taking behaviours or exposed to a range of risks within their community and networks.

Early Progress

- 2.4 Whilst it is too early to measure the impact of some of these measures there have to date been some encouraging indications of positive progress. These have included success for the virtual school in supporting individual children whose needs and behaviours may previously have led to placement breakdowns and requests for external provision. No new residential placements have been made since August 2019 with four young people leaving external residential placements over this period. There have also been no young people in secure care since October 2019 (excluding young people serving a sentence). There has been a positive initial response also to the recruitment campaign for carers with assessments progressing for 9 potential adoptive families and 6 potential foster families progressing and further preparation groups planned. Additionally the number of children and young people currently placed in independent fostering placements has also stabilised after rapid growth over the past two years.

Interdependencies

- 2.5 Ultimately success in our ambition to support all of our children and young people close to their homes and communities is closely linked with those other programmes of work within the service's work plan which support a shift towards prevention, early intervention and improving outcomes for our most vulnerable children through strengthening families. There has been an overall increase in the number of children and young people who experience care (are looked after) over the past three years and whilst the majority of this growth does relate to children and young people cared for in kinship arrangements, clearly we would wish to reverse this increase over time and to support more children achieve positive outcomes without the need for formal care. Important in achieving this will be the progress of work to strengthen GIRFEC pathways and the development of integrated cluster wellbeing teams. More specifically there will be the need to build on the 'Transforming Pathways' pilot work to support better targeted responses to children and young people on the 'edges of care'.
- 2.6 Other parallel developments integral to the success of '*Close to Home*' include the expansion of Family Group Decision Making to maximise the use of natural networks to support children whether to support rehabilitation, kinship arrangements, avoidance of formal care or simply to maintain and strengthen family connections. To ensure this model is used more routinely will require an increase in the current resource of two workers through a phased expansion, initially recruiting a further two staff. Also vital to building capacity locally will be the development of Additional Support and Wellbeing bases within the cluster model. Finally it will be important that the shaping of new services and supports addressing mental health, wellbeing and resilience is sufficiently flexible and sensitive to the particular needs of children with additional support needs and those experiencing care.

Future priorities

- 2.7 In addition to continued work on areas outlined above a range of additional action is required in order to reduce the use of external placements. This needs to include further analysis of the cohort of children and young people in external day placements and pathways to these placements. Further work will also be undertaken to identify how support to carers can be further developed to support both the sustainment of care arrangements and to make it more attractive to care for North Lanarkshire.

2.8 It is clearly neither possible or ethical to simply close the door to external placements or to initiate moves for children and young people back to local provision without due consideration of their needs, wishes, alternative options and the timing of any change. Close to 40% of children and young people cared for through independent fostering arrangements have also either been permanently linked with their carers or are in the permanency planning process meaning they are expected to remain there into young adulthood, There also remain specific circumstances when external provision is appropriate including in respect of secure care, which may also be mandated through a court process. It is proposed however that a number of systems changes are now made within the service to support the reduction in the use of external provision and the *Close to Home* programme through a fully integrated approach. This will involve:

- (i) Establishing a single service budget portfolio for external placements
- (ii) Establishing a single two stage system for approval of planned external placements, bringing together the functions of current JCG and the separate arrangements within education and social work for external day placements and specialist independent fostering. This will involve a consultative panel who, where appropriate, will make placement recommendations to the Head of Education (South) and Head of Children, Families & Justice Social Work.

It is recognised that emergency situations will require decision-making out with this process in particular in relation to care and secure placements where there may be protection issues. In these situations the use of external provision will need approval by the relevant 3rd tier manager eg Manager Children and Families. There are also separate arrangements for permanency planning framed by legislation and guidance, In all such situations there should however remain a focus on an integrated approach, for example ensuring education and health needs are considered within any emergency plan, and that there is clarity on the purpose of the placement,

- (iii) Establishing a mechanism which allows the creation of an individual budget using SDS principles either to support a short term family based plan which avoids admission to care or supports rehabilitation to family or to an alternative community resource, by allowing the conversion of some spend which might otherwise be used to support a high cost placement to preventative spend/monies based on the principles of the funding following the child.
- (iv) Finally and crucially further work will be undertaken to ensure a much stronger focus on the voice of the child or young person within these planning processes. This will be supported by consideration of the need for additional advocacy in respect of education issues and the creation of a specific development post requiring care experience to support both this work and the wider response to the Independent Care Review,

3. Equality and Diversity

3.1 Fairer Scotland Duty

The actions outlined in this report aim at strengthening local provision to benefit children with additional support needs and children experiencing or on the edges of care and their families who often experience multiple disadvantage and as noted at paragraph 1.9 are significantly more likely to experience poverty. These actions therefore support the council in its Fairer Scotland duty

3.2 Equality Impact Assessment

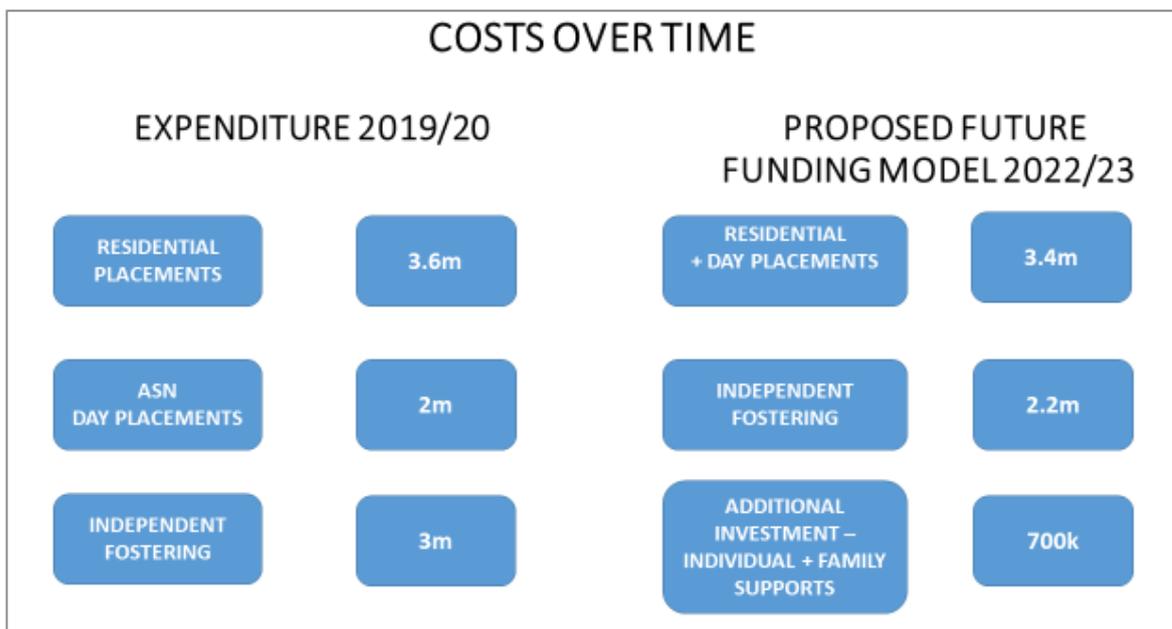
The measure outlined in this report are anticipated to have a positive impact in particular on children and young people with additional support needs.

4. Implications

4.1 Financial Impact

The proposals outlined within this report will be delivered within the allocated budget incorporating linked savings and CSP commitments.

The planned reduction in expenditure on external provision will require to be phased and supported by reinvestment of some spend in family support. Given the complexities involved more detailed planning will be undertaken on this however the following graphic provides a sense of the shift envisaged over the next three years.



4.2 HR/Policy/Legislative Impact

Proposals relating to establishment changes will be progressed through the Workforce Steering Group in line council policy. Changes proposed are informed by the council's duties under the Children (Scotland) Act 2014 and will support the council deliver on intentions of the Independent Care Review

4.3 Environmental Impact

None with the exception that a reduction in out of authority day placements would have a positive though minor impact on the council's carbon use.

4.4 Risk Impact

There is a risk to achievement of the desired outcomes should the service be unable to grow internal capacity as anticipated or should the planned investment in family support be insufficient to moderate the overall demands for care provision. Contract inflation with respect to external provision is also largely out with local control and there is therefore a risk that unanticipated or excessive increases may impact on the achievement of financial targets. There is also the possibility that restrictions on service delivery or movements between households/settings related to COVID 19 may compromise or slow elements of the work plan described in this report although continued efforts will be made to minimise this.

5. Measures of success

- 5.1 More children and young people are supported to remain with family or to retain strong family connections
- 5.2 More children experiencing care or with additional support needs experience positive destinations
- 5.3 Children and young people's voices are consistently heard within placement planning processes
- 5.4 Reduction in placement transitions
- 5.5 Reduction in the use of external provision

6. Supporting documents

- 6.1 Corporate Parenting Strategy and Improvement Plan
[EF_00114 Corporate Parenting Strategy and Improvement Plan.pdf](#)
- 6.2 Independent Care Review: the promise
https://www.carereview.scot/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/The-Promise_v7.pdf



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