

Terms of Reference for the inquiry into placements for looked about children

Context

The Children Act 1989 requires local authorities to safeguard and promote the welfare of children within their area. This includes a requirement to provide accommodation where the child's parent or guardian is unable to do so. Shropshire Council thus becomes the corporate parent of these 'looked after' children.

In September 2017 there were 319 children and young people looked after by Shropshire Council. This figure has increased steadily in recent years, mirroring an increase nationally since 2008. Of these, 178 of these were in placed with foster carers registered with the council, half of which were placed with friends and family (known as connected carers). There were also 39 children and young people in external foster placements. 65 children and young people were placed in residential children's homes, of which five lived in homes run by Shropshire Council. The remaining children and young people were placed with their parents, in pre-adoption placements or living semi-independently in the community.

	Number	Typical cost per week*
Fostering	217	
Independent Foster Agency	39	£850
Fostered by Shropshire Council	178	
Connected Care (friends and family)	92	£450
Council registered foster carers	86	£450
Residential Care	65	
External	60	£3,000
Shropshire Council	5	£3,000

**costs are illustrative and subject to fluctuation*

Although every child should receive the type of care that is best for them, it remains an inescapable fact that there are very large differences in cost for different types of care. It typically costs Shropshire Council £450 a week to place a child with foster parents, compared to a typical cost of £850 a week for a placement arranged by an independent fostering agency. However either option is considerably cheaper than residential care, which is on average £3,880 a week.

Although it is important to look at ways to reduce the cost of care, it is absolutely crucial that the council is able to find suitable accommodation for its looked-after children. This is becoming increasingly difficult for all local authorities, as demand for both foster and residential care is growing faster than the supply of placements. This means that the council, particularly when seeking emergency placements, has to reply on 'spot' purchases of care, which are especially costly.

Objectives

In order to improve outcomes for looked after children, as well as reducing the cost of care to the local authority, this inquiry aims to provide recommendations to the council that may:

- examine ways to reduce the council's reliance on spot purchasing residential care, thus reducing costs;
- learn from best practice in other local authorities; and
- explore alternatives to placing looked after children in private residential care homes outside the county.

Information required

The committee will need a thorough understanding of arrangements in Shropshire, and how they compare to arrangements in other local authorities.

- profile of looked after children and young people in Shropshire
 - age, gender
 - geographic and
 - outcomes (health, education, offending)
- profile of care in Shropshire
 - types of care used
 - placement length
 - placement durability
 - cost of care
 - comparisons with other local authorities
- foster recruitment good practice from other local authorities
- schemes to reduce reliance on spot-purchasing residential care
- alternatives to residential care

Methods to be used

- hearing from:
 - Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People
 - Director of Children's Services
 - Service Manager for fostering and adoption
 - other local authorities
- desktop research into:
 - rates of children becoming looked-after children
 - edge of care and early help in other local authorities
 - achieving permanence
 - alternative ways to pay for residential care
 - alternatives to residential care

Timescales

Following the success of recent work scrutinising Environment Maintenance Grants, we propose to carry out the scrutiny in a one-day workshop with a discrete task and finish group. This will require considerable planning by members and officers in advance of the workshop.

The committee has asked to receive a final report and proposed recommendations following the one-day workshop.

Inquiry work programme

Topic	Method	Officer	Date
Background information; including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • profile of looked after children and young people in Shropshire; and • profile of care in Shropshire 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Briefing note in advance of meeting • Presentation and questions 	Danial Webb/Lisa Preston	
The cost of care in Shropshire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Briefing note in advance of meeting • Presentation and questions 	Danial Webb/Lisa Preston	
Residential care in Shropshire	Presentation and questions	Lisa Preston/Jo Rocke	
Case study: highly-skilled foster carers Herefordshire and Dudley	Presentation and questions	Herefordshire Council	
Case study: bridging the gap between foster and residential care North Yorkshire?	Presentation and questions	TBA	
Recommendations	Chair-led discussion	Group chair	