



Committee and Date
Performance Management Scrutiny Committee

Item

1 March 2023

Public

Performance Report for Children’s Social Care

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Cabinet Member (Portfolio Holder):	Kirstie Hurst-Knight		

1. Synopsis

Performance Scrutiny Committee has requested that a detailed analysis of our Children Looked After numbers is reported to the Committee.

In addition an updated position on the Recruitment of Qualified Social Workers has been requested.

2. Executive Summary

2.1. Analysis of Children Looked After (CLA) in Shropshire.

2.2. The Shropshire Plan highlights the need to tackle inequalities for the people of Shropshire, including children and their experiences of harm and compromised parenting. The aim of the plan is to deliver the right services and support that meet the needs of children, young people, adults and families in the right place, at the right time. By doing this we can reduce the impact of trauma on children and ensure they grow up in safe families, loved and cared for. Sometimes to achieve this for children a child has to come into the care of the local authority. This can be short term whilst assessments are completed and work undertaken with the family, so the child can return home, or they come into longer term care and live with extended family (connected carers), foster carers or in children’s homes. Some younger children are adopted. Children’s Social Care & Safeguarding role is to undertake the assessments and work to determine which is the right plan at the right time for the child.

2.3. Over the last 3 years we have seen the numbers of Children Looked After increase significantly, 1st April 2020 we had 399 children in the care of Shropshire council, as at 20th February 2023 we have 664.

- 2.4. This report to Performance Committee aims to detail the position of the children looked after by Shropshire and to provide a detailed breakdown of the plans in place for them. In addition it details placement type and demonstrates the plans in place to progress the plans for children.
- 2.5. The report details the challenges faced in the placement market, the role of our internal residential provision. Finally the actions being taken by Children's Social Care and the wider system partners, in particular Early Help, to impact the support provided to families.
- 2.6. The second section of the report updates Performance Scrutiny Committee on the situation in relation to Social Worker Recruitment.

3. Recommendations

- 3.1. That Performance Committee endorse the range of measures in place to address the challenge relating to the numbers of looked after children.
- 3.2. That Performance Committee recognise the progress in addressing the issues of social worker vacancies and endorse the ongoing work to continue to address.
- 3.3. That Performance committee request an update on progress in 6 months (or when suitable) in relation to both Children Looked After numbers and social worker recruitment.

Report

4. Risk Assessment and Opportunities Appraisal

(NB This will include the following: Impact on Children and Vulnerable Adults, Risk Management, Human Rights, Equalities, Community and other Consultation)

- 4.1. The report details the council's position in relation to the statutory duty towards vulnerable children who are assessed to be at risk of significant harm. Where this is the case we have a responsibility to look after them and consider legal intervention to keep them safe. In making applications to court the child's vulnerability is considered along with an analysis of the impact of harm on them. Human Rights law and issues are considered as part of Court Proceedings with the social work team having legal advice from Legal Services.

5. Financial Implications

- 5.1. The financial impact of the cost of residential placements and the cost of Agency Social Workers, resulting in considerable overspends for the Council is addressed in the relevant budget reports for Cabinet. There is a significant pressure and the mitigations detailed in next steps in this report aim to manage those mitigations.

6. Climate Change Appraisal

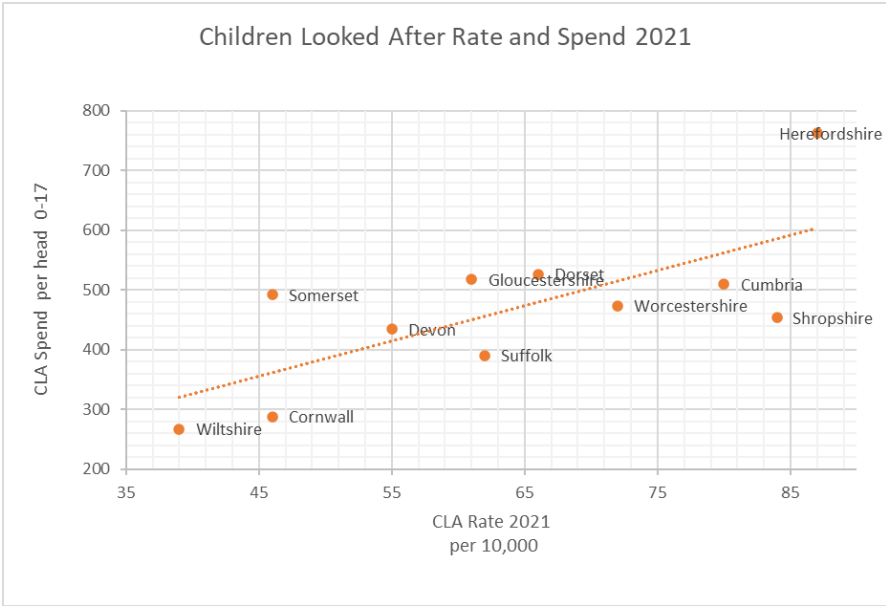
- 6.1. There is considerable energy and fuel consumption involved in delivering the service across the county, visiting children, including those placed out of Shropshire. It is not often viable to use alternatives such as public transport. The use of pool cars is promoted.

7. Background

Children Looked After (CLA)

- 7.1. As stated, over the last 3 years we have seen the numbers of Children Looked After (CLA) increase significantly. On 1st April 2020 we had 399 children in the care of Shropshire Council, as at 20th February 2023 we have 664.
- 7.2. As at Quarter 3 our rate per 10,000 was 114 with 670 CLA, including 73 Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children. The England Average rate is 70 /10,000. The rate of CLA compared to County Statistical neighbours is high, although more comparable. Those that benchmark lower have high spend of early intervention and family support services.
- 7.3. Over the past 3 years a lot of work has been undertaken to understand the reasons behind the increase. Using data, audit and case studies and benchmarking data (both the regional comparator group and County comparator group). These reasons are summarised as:
- Increase in children aged 0-5 where parents have not accessed early help services before serious concerns arising. Increase in significant harm through non-accidental injury.
 - Increased number of families with large sibling groups, where severe longstanding neglect is the presenting issue.
 - Shropshire has been receiving Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) from the mandatory National Transfer Scheme.
 - Increase in parents presenting with complex issues of mental health, drug & alcohol use and domestic abuse.
 - During Covid the increase in children coming into care in the region impacted on court capacity and we experienced delays in completing care proceedings and discharge applications.
 - Complexity of court proceedings has led to extended durations of the court timetabling.
 - The unavailability of support services for many months over a 2+ year period meant that families were not able to get the help and support to make the changes needed in a timely way. Where changes were possible for a family it has been important that we enable them to do so and this has resulted in some delay for children.
 - In 2020 there was no dedicated family support service in the structure to work with families whose children were at risk of coming into care. Funding had been agreed develop one but the start was delayed due to Covid 19 lockdowns. It become operational in April 2021.

In October 2022 the Local Government Association undertook a benchmarking exercise of the council’s spend against certain criteria, compared to County Statistical Neighbours. It identified that despite the higher rate of CLA our comparative spend was lower than average.



The graph above maps the 2020/21 spend on CLA against the CLA rate in 2021¹ producing a “line of best fit”. As can be seen, on the graph Shropshire sits below the “line of best fit” which suggests the Council is spending less than would be statistically expected for your CLA rate. The formula and actual numbers in 2021 suggest actual costs might be expected to be in the region of £586 per head of population 0-17, rather than the actual cost of £453 per head, equivalent to nearly £8m less. The lower spending in Shropshire than statistically expected may be due to good commissioning practice or a result of some children with lower complex needs placed into care in the absence of alternative and lower cost support.

This analysis included the question above asked by the report writer. In fact the number of family and connected carers and Special Guardianship Orders is higher, both of which are among the most cost effective options for supporting children to achieve permanence outside of their birth family.

Breakdown of our current children looked after cohorts:

As at February 20th 2023, 667 Children Looked After:

AGE:

0-4	162	
5-9	156	
10-14	186	
15+	163	(includes 51 UASC)

Legal Status:

Interim Care Order (in Court Proceedings)	161
Care Order (long term looked after)	361
Children with a plan for Adoption	35

¹ LAIT produced September 2022

Children looked after with parents' consent 110

Children on a Care Order, placed with parents 68

These figures demonstrate that 84% of the children that are in the care of Shropshire are subject to a legal order where the Family Court has deemed that the threshold of significant harm has been met and that an order is required to ensure they are safe.

Of the 110 children who are looked after with parental consent (section 20) some are children with additional needs and disabilities and others are where a plan for reunification is in place, or they are unaccompanied asylum seeking children (51).

This breakdown evidences the serious nature of the harm children experience, that decisions to bring children into care are based on the need to safeguard them and that clear evidence of this harm informs the decision. The threshold for intervention, the right service at the right time, is appropriately applied. There have been a few occasions where practitioners have persisted to try and keep children with families, to try and support and create the change needed, and the courts have criticised the social worker for not removing them sooner.

Children Looked After by Placement Type: as at 16th Feb

Foster Care Short Term	177
Foster Care Long Term	65
Relative/Friend carer not LT	137
Relative / Friend Carer Long Term	47
Foster to Adopt	15
Placed for adoption	7
Parent & Baby Residential	2
NHS Placements	2
Residential placements in house	8
External Residential	53
Supported Board & Lodgings/ alternative	82
Semi Independent Accommodation	48
Independent Living	11

These figures demonstrate that the majority of children are placed in foster care placements. Either internal carers, including family and friends, or Independent Fostering Agency Placements.

Challenges in the Placement Market:

However, we have 5 very young children (10 and under) who are currently in residential placements as there are no foster placements available, nationally, that can meet their needs. There is a national shortage of foster carers and the shortage for Shropshire has measures in place to try and address (see section on actions in progress.)

In addition, there is a national shortage of residential placements, with in the region of 40 referrals for each bed that is becoming available. The costs are increasing significantly for each bed available. Current quotes are regularly £6.5k - £10k per week.

Since April 2021 we have had family support service called Stepping Stones, it is based on a Shropshire model developed from The No Wrong Door project developed in North

Yorkshire. The service works with both the children and the parents in the family, and involves extended family and friends in support networks. The aim is to keep children at home and work to resolve issues. Where children need to be become looked after then of course they will be.

Starts and Ceases:

In 2022/2023 to end of Quarter 3 165 children started to become looked after, and 104 have exited care. The starts include 73 Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children, which we have no option but to take under the mandatory scheme.

So to date this year, we have exited more children than we have taken into care by the end of Q3 (without UASC).

Stepping Stones Since April 2022 the first phase of Stepping Stones has effectively worked with 98 children to either prevent them coming into care or enabling them to step out of care. This has resulted in a stabilisation of the increase in number of children becoming looked after. We have remained just above or below 660 for most of this year.

Stepping Stones Activity April 2022 to date:

Avoidance of higher cost placements	5
Avoid Child become looked after	49
Move to independence accommodation	1
Placement stability maintained	4
Reunification back to family	36
Step down from residential to foster care / home	3
Grand Total	98

Plans to Exit Children from being Looked After.

There are a number of ways that children can cease to be looked after:

They become 18.

The Care Order is discharged by the Court, following a LA or parent application.

The Court makes a Special Guardianship Order (family foster care/foster carers convert)

Child is Adopted.

In 2023 the projections for children to exit being looked after are:

Becoming 18 in 2023 - 18

Care Order – placed with parents:

18 ICO so plan yet to be determined by the Courts

16 children not yet been placed 12 months (although one of these is being progressed)

12 'active' discharges- statements being prepared.

24 children whose plans for discharge are 'in progress'- assessments being completed.

10 children where this is not the right time to consider revocation- may be unsettled/ parent struggling/risks re-emerging.

Special Guardianship Orders:	
With legal awaiting application	3
In assessment (16-24 weeks)	13
In early stages	4

Projected to progress in next 12 months: 14

Adoption:

Placed for adoption – adoption application will be made	7
Have a plan for adoption – matching on progress	35

This means there are plans are in place for 132 children’s plans to leave care in the next 12months.

Plans in Place to address the issues leading to a child becoming looked after:

Early Help: Children coming into local authority care is a system issue. When agencies work together well at the earliest opportunity to support families there are opportunities to catch issues early and to enable families to work to solve their issues. Data and Audits have shown that many children who become looked after have had no intervention from Early Help services, both universal and targeted. A recent review of Early Help, completed by an Independent Reviewer has identified areas of development to improve the access and availability of early help services to families and supporting agencies, especially schools. An action plan responding to the recommendations is being developed and implemented.

There are 2 projects currently being piloted to develop multi-agency responses to families and enable families to gain access to help and support at the earliest opportunities. The North West Test and Learn site is developing community engagement opportunities as well as multi-agency approaches working together to support families.

Compass Help & Support Team (CH&ST) commenced in mid-September 2022. It is a small team of Family Support Workers based alongside Compass (Childrens Social Care Front Door) who respond to families who are in urgent need of practical support. They respond, help and then support them to access universal and Early Help services that can help them at the earliest opportunity. Early indications are that it is having an impact on the number of referrals into Children’s Social Care that require an assessment (decreasing).

Practice development in pre-court work (Public Law Outline). Following the Ofsted Inspection Report in March 2022, an area of development in practice has been to strengthen the offer of support and work with families who are at risk of court proceedings being issued and children becoming looked after. The pathway has been strengthened and links with Stepping Stones to undertake direct work with the whole family, to create positive change in parenting capacity and address parental issues as well as any issues with the children.

Stepping Stones has been given additional funding to upscale the project to 3 times its current size, increasing the breadth of its impact. Since funding was agreed all the new posts have been recruited to and the full new service will be operational from 1 April 2023

(it has been developing and growing since October 2022). The aim is to target working with 3 cohorts of children:

- Families with children 0-5, especially babies and where parents have had children removed before.
- Children on the edge of coming into care and reunification home where they have been looked after.
- Stepping down children from high-cost residential placements to either our internal children's homes, foster care or returning them home.

There are aspirational targets attached to the project, based on the positive impact seen to date.

Internal residential provision has been developed to give a wide offer to children who need care and support, from short breaks, to short to medium term care, as they will return to family or foster care, long term therapeutic homes, and due to open next month is new home for 16 + young people to prepare for living independently in the community. That will focus on bring children who live in placements out of county back to live in Shropshire and to rebuild their local links.

In November 2022 agreement was given to significantly increase foster carer fees and allowances, to enable us to grow number of fostering households who can meet the needs of Shropshire Children. An advertising campaign was launched in January 2023 and has had a positive initial response. Fostering Assessments take at least 6 months so it will be June/July before we start to see the new capacity coming through.

The Courts are focused on progressing cases through in a timely and effective way and supporting to try and prioritise discharge and adoption hearings so that we can conclude children's plans to end their period in care.

The accumulative impact of each of these measures will start to have a positive impact on families lives, in particular getting help and support in early, so that issues do not escalate to the point where children are at risk of significant harm.

In addition, the Government has recently published a consultation about its response to the Care Review by Josh McAllister. The proposed CSC Framework 'Stable Homes; Built on Love' has been published and looks at the role of Early Help, Early Help Family Hubs, the role of Child Protection and how family's needs can best be met. The outcome of this will inform service development moving forward.

Part B:

Social Worker Recruitment Update, February 2023

As Members are aware we have had a high number of agency staff last year contributing significantly (£1.8 m) to the Childrens Social Care overspend on staffing costs.

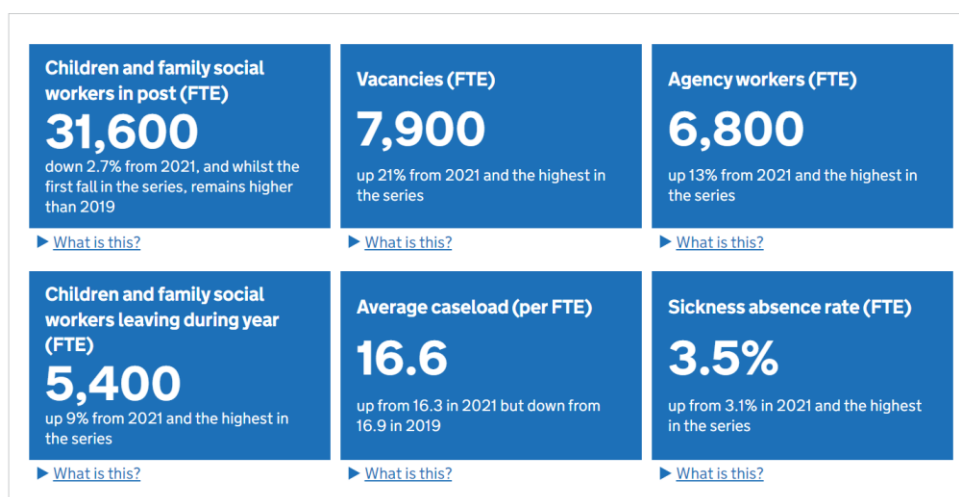
As the work undertaken in the service is all of a statutory function, qualified social workers are required to undertake the work and there is a regional and shortage of experienced and qualified social workers.

NATIONAL CONTEXT

Official statistics published 23rd February 2023 (<https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-s-social-work-workforce/2022>) showed that, "in 2022, the number of children and family social workers fell for the first time since the series started in 2017. This has likely contributed to increases in the number of vacancies (a series high), agency worker employment (a series high) and average caseload. The sickness absence rate also increased in 2022 (another series high)."

The latest results from the Children's Services Omnibus showed that, of the third of local authorities who responded, a majority cited recruitment and retention to be a key challenge. Additionally, there were no Step Up to Social Work graduates in 2022, since the training programme delivers a new cohort of qualified social workers in alternate years. The reported difficulties in recruitment and retention and the lack of newly qualified Step Up graduates helps to explain the fall in the number of children and family social workers in 2022."

Headline facts and figures - 2022



LOCAL CONTEXT

As highlighted above, in line with most local authorities in the UK, Shropshire is experiencing significant recruitment challenges in respect of permanent and agency Social Workers. Shropshire has some more specific barriers to recruitment due to the size and rural nature of the county and the associated travel time and costs – this impacts upon our ability to attract staff who fear the financial implications and on retention, as from Exit Interviews we know that leavers often cite the impact of travel time & cost on their ability to manage their caseload.

We do know, from staff surveys, feedback and our OFSTED inspection, however, that once staff are recruited – be that as agency or permanent, they often report feeling safe and supported by their managers and team and by the wider culture set by senior leaders, they value the training and development opportunities offered. This is despite all teams in Shropshire having high caseloads and the additional pressure of travel time/distance

In the absence of success from targeted National recruitment campaigns we have sought to focus on converting agency staff to our permanent workforce. By working closely with Human Resources and Finance to define the offer and benefits of being a permanent

member of staff the Principle Social Worker and Service Managers have worked with long standing agency workers to talk to them about becoming permanent.

AGENCY WORKER CONVERSIONS

Since July 2022, **11 agency social workers have converted to permanent contracts.**

Agency social workers cost the local authority on average £78,000 per year, as opposed to permanent staff who on average cost £48,000 per year. Therefore, the approximate savings for these 11 social workers converting to permanent is £330,000 per year.

Additionally, **2 agency Team Managers** have converted to become permanent (1 to a Team Manager post, 1 to an Operational Manager post), at a cost saving of a further approx. £60,000.

These conversions have been achieved through the efforts of individual Team and Service Managers and, in November and December 2022, our HR colleagues met with most (not all accepted appointments) of our agency social workers to discuss in detail the benefits of becoming permanent.

Following these appointments 4 social workers converted, bringing the total to 11 and a further 3 have shown serious interest however have not yet completed the necessary application form. All remaining agency social workers are approached by the Principal Social Worker on a regular basis to discuss conversion and only 2 have been clear that they would not consider becoming a permanent worker for any local authority.

In the absence of experienced permanent social workers, our agency workers are vitally important in order for our services to operate effectively and meet out statutory requirements. However, where there are concerns regarding poor performance, agency workers are given opportunities to improve and, if unable to do so, are given notice.

Agency social workers cover vacancies as well as maternity leave, long term sickness, secondments to other posts. In September 2022 23 had 47 Agency Social Work Staff as of 20 February 2023 we have 34, a reduction of 13.

PERMANENT RECRUITMENT

Since July 2022 to date, we have appointed 9 permanent social workers, including 5 newly qualified social workers who will complete their Assessed and Support Year in Employment (ASYE) with Shropshire.

In February 2023 the first cohort of Social Work Apprentices completed their Degree course and all have successfully qualified as social workers. Of the 8 Apprentices in this cohort, 2 have decided not to complete their ASYE with Shropshire Children's Social Care (1 moving to a local authority closer to her home address, the other has moved to a post in Adult Services).

The remaining 6 Apprentices will move into 6 social work vacancies from across the service, into one team to undertake their ASYE as a cohort in an Academy model (being run as a pilot to see if there is an impact on their ASYE experience and retention post their qualifying year.)

Nationally and locally, there is a trend emerging of social workers leaving the profession within 2–3 years of qualification. It is our belief that this pilot model will ensure that, at the

end of their ASYE, these practitioners will be experienced and robust enough to be able to move into the second year of employment with confidence, thereby more likely to be retained in employment in the local authority and in the profession.

At the end of April 2023, our 4 Step Up to Social Work students will be completing their qualifying course and all 4 have been offered posts within our service from 4 vacant social work posts.

LEAVERS

Since July 2022, 8 permanent social workers have left their employment with Shropshire. All have cited different reasons in Exit Interview, however common themes are:

- Travel time between home visits (and associated costs)
Higher rates of pay elsewhere (particularly from our closest neighbour, Telford & Wrekin)
- Career development – most recently 3 social workers have left to join project teams (in social care and Health) where they will receive on the job training in a specific therapeutic model and associated qualification. 2 of these workers expressed a desire to return to Shropshire once they have achieved this qualification.

7.4. Actions taken to address Recruitment and Retention of qualified social workers.

There is a robust workforce strategy that focuses on ensuring that the right conditions to support staff are in place. We have invested in Supervision training for managers and staff as well as support flexible working. Have a linked grade progression scale for social workers who want to progress and develop.

There is an extensive training and development offer that Social Workers access.

We have a retention payment in place that Social Workers can commit to 2 years and receive £5000.

We have developed Stepping Stones as a project to work alongside social workers to support them in working more intensively with families.

There is a Market Forces payment proposal being considered, that has had to be developed alongside Adult Services.

Case loads remain a barrier for us to permanently recruit social workers. Caseloads across the service are high and complex and this impacts on social workers stress and quality of life. This is a serious challenge for Shropshire to address, as with high caseload numbers combined with the demands of travel time, social workers can be overwhelmed by the workload expectations.

8. Conclusions

8.1. This report seeks to give assurance to Performance Committee that whilst the numbers of children being looked after are high and of concern, that they are the

right children being looked after at the right time, with the right service (placement) that meets their needs, in line with the Shropshire Plan.

- 8.2. It also seeks to assure Committee that the right actions and activity are in place to address the issue of getting support in at the earliest opportunity to families so that risks can be prevented from escalating.
- 8.3. That whilst there is an issue, nationally, regionally and locally, which means there is a shortage of qualified social workers, Shropshire is doing all it can to make us an employee of choice for skilled & experienced social workers.
- 8.4. It is projected that when all of the initiatives start to have their own impact for families and communities, the impact will start to show in the number of children being at risk of harm and needing to be looked after by the council.

List of Background Papers (This MUST be completed for all reports, but does not include items containing exempt or confidential information)
LGA Childrens Benchmarking Analysis. ‘Stable Homes; Built on Love’ Government consultation on the proposed new CSC Framework.
Local Member:
All Members
Appendices
None