

CABINET - 25 NOVEMBER 2014

PROGRESS REPORT ON PLACEMENT STRATEGY FOR CHILDREN IN AND ON THE EDGE OF CARE 2013-16

Report by Director for Children's Services

Introduction

1. The Placement Strategy was approved by Cabinet in July 2013. All parties endorsed the need to place our "riskiest and most vulnerable children closest" and agreed to release significant capital funding to develop a residential pathway to prevent children being placed out of county unless they required uniquely specialist settings. The strategy was seen as a major contributor to the efficiency agenda given the authority's significant spend on external placements. Following that approval the work required to start delivering the strategy was split into four major streams: residential homes build; delivery model for edge of care and residential provision; re-commissioning of young people's supported housing; and fostering and adoption reform. A Placement Strategy Implementation Board was set up with representation from all key partners.
2. A first progress report was presented to informal Cabinet in November 2013. It recognised that delivering the Placement Strategy has raised the need for a significant cultural and practice shift both within the authority and with key partners around managing risk and vulnerability within county. It raised the need to respond much more flexibly to those children on the edge of care and change the culture of always bringing children into care full time. In order to realise this, the new assessment centres are being set up to offer part time respite alongside intensive family interventions to allow a permanent return home. All staff will have both an edge of care and residential role to ensure that children are supported both into and out of the care pathway. Qualified social workers and managers within these teams will assume case holding responsibility where they need to lead on risk management supported by a multi-agency therapeutic team. This therapeutic team will have oversight of edge of care, intensive adolescent fostering, residential provision and potentially young people in the supported housing pathway to ensure that Oxfordshire's most risky and vulnerable children and young people receive a consistent response.

Residential (build)

3. Phase 1 build consists of the 6 bed Assessment centre in Thame and the 4 bed move- on home in Didcot which both have a scheduled opening date of December 2015. Didcot is progressing well through the planning phase with an expected favourable outcome and the build due to commence in January 2015. The planning meeting concerning the Thame site is taking place on 1st December. Highways issues have been now resolved for Thame but both the town and district council have asked for further information to be provided about site selection given the location of the site outside the area defined in their local development plan. They are also seeking reassurance that land around the site will not be redeveloped.
4. Phase 2 build consists of the 6 bed Assessment Centre in Eynsham and 4 bed move on home in Witney which both have a scheduled opening date of June 2016. Two public meetings have been held in Eynsham. Regular meetings with the local community will be set up to foster a good working relationship. Work on the Witney site has reached the mid-stage gateway and local members have been briefed with a public consultation meeting to be arranged in December. County and District Councillors championing of the new residential provision has been critical in shaping local opinion.

Delivery Model

5. A meeting has taken place between OCC, CCG and Oxford Health to discuss the implementation of the delivery model recommended by the clinicians. While there is broad support for the model, there is no additional funding available from health services and in order to implement the health element of this model, current health provision for children looked after and those on the edge of care needs to be reviewed. It was agreed that the needs of the Placement Strategy would be considered during the review of the CAMHS service which is due to be completed by April 2015. Until the extent of health input is confirmed there is on-going work to implement the other elements of the model.
6. Staff consultation has been on-going with the Family and Placement Support Service over proposals for the team to work both within the residential centres and with families and children on the edge of care. The consultation is due to end in November 2014, with the new structure being implemented during January 2015. A training plan for residential and edge of care workers and the other multi-agency staff working within the new centres has been developed.
7. Elsa Torres, Deputy Head at Gillotts School, is now working as the Placement Strategy lead for schools for two days each fortnight. She will be working alongside the Placement Strategy Board to ensure all schools are engaged with

the therapeutic delivery model. She will help develop more creative educational packages for those on the edge of care and in care who are currently disengaged from schools. We are already piloting educational provision for four such young people at Hill End. She will also be working alongside the Vulnerable Learners Team to challenge schools that are struggling to manage risk and vulnerability without the use of exclusion.

Supported Housing Re-commissioning

8. Tender submissions from providers are currently being assessed and will be signed off for award of contracts by the Director for Children's Services in early November 2014. Total budget for pathway commissioning is £2.46 million and this provides 219 beds. There has been a disappointing response in terms of bids from new providers which may be down to the difficulty in securing buildings within Oxfordshire. This issue will need to be reviewed after contracts have been awarded.. Negotiations with providers have deepened understanding of the need for significant changes in the current delivery model due to the increasingly complex needs of young people. There will be more emergency provision, greater flexibility in the pathway to avoid eviction and better preparation for shared living by providing shared move-on accommodation at affordable rents.
9. As part of this re-commissioning process, the local authority's in-house fostering service is recruiting and approving at least 8 hosts for a Supported Lodgings Scheme. Seven potential hosts have already been identified and two are being currently assessed with the expectation that this provision will be available from April 2015. This Scheme will offer the same terms and conditions as those offered to foster carers providing on-going support to looked after children under the "Staying Put" scheme.

Fostering and Adoption Reform

10. On 13 October 2014, there were 521 Looked After Children. 343 (66%) of whom were in foster placements, 249 (73%) of whom were with Oxfordshire's own foster carers. However, 94 children were placed in Independent Fostering Agencies and 88 were in residential accommodation, including our own homes. 80 were placed out of county and not in neighboring authorities, a rise from 71 at the start of September. The rise in demand highlights the importance of succeeding in delivering the aims of the fostering and adoption strand of the Placement Strategy.
11. Oxfordshire's Family Placement Team work hard to recruit, train, support and manage foster carers and there are currently 301 foster carers registered with the authority. While Oxfordshire compares favourably with its neighbouring authorities in terms of its recruitment and retention of carers, the number of

carers has remained constant over the past few years whilst the number of children entering care has increased, (11% increase over the last six months). An increase in foster carers is needed to improve placement choice and enable us to match children with in house foster carers in Oxfordshire. In particular we need to recruit more carers for sibling groups, adolescents, disabled children and children requiring long term placements.

12. The Placement Board has recently acknowledged that there needs to be a radical change in recruitment of foster carers to relieve the pressure on the agency placement budget and ensure there are exit pathways for those leaving the new assessment centres who cannot return to family members. A new priority needs to be promoted both across the council and outside with key partners, business and the community. To deliver the placement strategy we need to make Oxfordshire the **"most fostering friendly county in the country"**.
13. In order to achieve this ambition the following actions and initiatives are being proposed:
 - a) Gain cross party political support for our ambition to make Oxfordshire the most fostering friendly county in the country
 - b) Championing foster carers, not just throughout the local authority but also with key partners particularly in Health, Schools, the Police and Probation where existing staff may have the skills to foster the more challenging groups.
 - c) A strategy to engage business and community groups in driving the recruitment and retention of foster carers led by the Leader, Chief Executive and elected members. Particular focus to be given to campaigns that set recruitment targets with the Churches, the University and other business and community groups that want to partner with the Local Authority in driving forward recruitment.
 - d) Fostering to be given a higher profile on the intranet and media opportunities sought as part of Communications Strategy.
 - e) Establishing a recruitment and publicity campaign similar to the one developed to increase the number of army reservists.
 - f) OCC-wide staff briefings about fostering, the recruitment process and the importance of valuing foster carers and the resource that they provide.
 - g) New financial incentives (perhaps provided by a local business) for those who introduce their friends to fostering to be paid at the point of approval. This could greatly expand the current system of rewarding existing foster carers with £250 when they recommend people who are subsequently approved as carers.
 - h) Increasing the paid leave allowance by 5 days for OCC staff who foster and working with partners in health, TVP, district councils and business to make a similar commitment

- i) Exploring, with district councils, giving a Council Tax discount to foster carers who foster for OCC
14. In response to concerns that the amount Oxfordshire pays its foster carers was contributing to the challenge of recruiting carers, a review of those payments has been undertaken. The review concluded that Oxfordshire's payments to carers (which include a maintenance allowance and a fee element) were comparable, and in some cases higher than the other local authorities considered. While our payments to carers for children aged 0-4 years, are lower than many authorities, our payments for adolescents with the highest needs are above those of other authorities. In addition, the review found that many carers report that financial reward is not their main driver for becoming, and remaining, a foster carer, while support is an important factor. Following consultation with the Fostering Service it was agreed that it would be more appropriate to invest in the recruitment and support of foster carers, rather than altering the current fee structure.

Impact of the Adoption Reform Grant

15. The additional staff employed through the Adoption Reform Grant have enabled the number of households approved for adoption to nearly double over the past three years, with 40 households being approved in 2013/14 compared to 21 in 2011/12. Similarly the number of children adopted has nearly doubled in the last 4 years from 24 in 2010/11 to 44 in 2013/14. In order to sustain performance and meet demand we will continue to require an additional 20 adoptive placements per year. Oxfordshire has maintained outstanding performance in terms of the timeliness.
16. In addition, the Grant has enabled 73 children to be allocated family finders (42 of whom are on Placement Orders), and 30 to be formally linked for adoption in the first six months of 2014/15. While there are currently 10 children on Placement Orders with no potential match at present, staff have worked really hard to reduce the numbers of children waiting and this has only been possible due to the increase in resources allocated to Family Finding.
17. The increase in number of children achieving permanency is positive but it is increasing demand for, and take-up of, adoption support services. Adoption and Permanence Support helpdesk calls rose from 271 in 2012/13 to 481 in 2013/14. Assessments of Need for families where there had been adoption, residence and special guardianship orders rose from 29 to 50 in the same period. Oxfordshire currently has good adoption support services as highlighted by Children's Minister, Edward Timpson, which contribute to the low rate of adoption breakdowns. These services have been strengthened with funding from the Adoption Reform Grant. For 2015-16 we are able to carry

forward £300K towards the overall cost of the additional posts and expenditure which totals £362K annually.

18. We are currently supporting 147 children on Special Guardianship Orders (SGOs) allowances. SGOs are a relatively new order dating from 2006, and thus we expect the total number of children on this order to continue to rise until the first set of children on SGOs reach maturity (about 2024). The current budget for Special Guardianship allowances is currently predicting an overspend of £360K. We expect the total number of children on this order to rise until the first set of children on SGO's reach maturity by about 2024. The £0.9m of budget pressures re Fostering and Adoption have been identified in the Service & Resource Planning process.

RECOMMENDATION

19. The Cabinet is **RECOMMENDED** to endorse the initiatives set out in paragraph 13 of this report.

JIM LEIVERS
Director for Children's Services

Background Paper: "Placement Strategy for children in and on the edge of care",
Cabinet 16 July 2013

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