

| | | | |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|---|
| Item No 8 | Classification: Open | Date: February 3 2009 | Meeting Name: Corporate Parenting Committee |
| Report title: | | Reducing the Need For Children To Enter Care | |
| Ward(s) or groups affected: | | All | |
| From: | | Strategic Director of Children's Services | |

RECOMMENDATION(S)

1. That the Corporate Parenting Committee consider the draft Strategy (Appendix 1) and suggest further proposals they may wish to include.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

2. A reduction in the need to bring children into the care system has long been an ambition within Children's Social Care. Historically outcomes for Children who have been looked after have been poor. Attempts to reduce the numbers of LAC have been implemented across the country with mixed levels of success. Southwark has seen a decline of nearly 100 children in a 3 year period. The routes for children into the care system are varied and complex and it is very difficult to make generalisations about causes or the activity needed to prevent children coming into care or indeed what works in terms of sustaining a return home. This summarises a range of activities which are being deployed in Southwark which form a strategy to reduce the need for children to enter care.
3. In 2007, the DSCF launched the Green Paper (Care Matters) and focussed part of this on the need to prevent children becoming looked after. Chapter Two of the Green Paper outlined a number of proposals the government have been considering in relation to activity preventing the need for children to become looked after. If they do become looked after the intention is to address the historically poor outcomes that were often their fate. The key components of the strategy are:
 - Encouraging Local Authorities to analyse and manage their corporate relations more proactively.
 - Improve parenting support
 - Proposals for newly based family interventions for older children and young people.
 - Improvements for the arrangements of short break care
 - A new framework for enabling children to live with their wider family.
 - Developments which will support the early intervention/prevention agenda
 - (DFES 2007 Care Matters – A Time for Change (Page 30)).

KEY ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

4. In Southwark, this ambition has been translated into a strategy designed to provide the basis for an approach which ensures that only those children who need to be removed from their parents, and have no family to care for them, enter the care system. It identifies a number of key elements which must be addressed for the strategy to be effective. These range from: the need for data analysis to inform the strategy; services to support children within their families such as Family Group Conferences and the Alternatives to Care Team; through to services which secure more permanent outcomes for those who cannot return home. Key elements of the strategy include:

Data Analysis

5. Critical to development of an effective strategy is the need to understand fully the population of children becoming looked after and also the movement within the care population. This requires a dynamic model which can give a sense over time of the changes and fluctuations in the care population. Static figures and headline rates are not sufficient tools for managing the complexities in the care population. Ongoing data analysis will need to be carried out to ensure that commissioned services reflect the changing need. This will need to be undertaken on an annual basis to chart the changing trends in admissions, age, ethnicity and needs of children entering and staying in care.
6. For example, the past two years has witnessed a significant reduction in the number of unaccompanied asylum seeking young people in care, as a result of a shift in national policy. There are now fewer admissions of older children, and therefore a need to adapt service provision to take this into account.

Whole Systems Approach

7. Those Councils that have achieved the most success in reducing their care population usually have support at all levels within the local authority and from key partners. The first stage in developing the strategy therefore is to seek the support of Members, other Council departments, and then key strategic bodies including Young Southwark and the Southwark Safeguarding Board.

Developing a Family Support Strategy

8. Southwark has a number of projects and initiatives to support children within their families. However these lack a strategic approach, and effective evaluation of their effectiveness. Work is currently underway to develop a family support strategy which will strengthen families and reduce the need for children to come into care.
9. Southwark's Joint Area Review identified that an important weakness for Children's Services was the failure to develop an effective methodology for evaluating its many initiatives. One of the criteria which preventative services such as the Parenting Strategy should be judged on, is the extent to which they are able to safely support children within their families and reduce the need for entry to care. This will contribute to a more robust analysis of the impact of services, and can provide measurable outcomes.

10. It is vital that this approach includes more integrated service delivery with Adults Services, and adopts the “Think Family” methodology advocated by the Department of Children Schools and Families. This recognises the importance of mental health, substance misuse, learning disability, and other Adults Services working closely with Children’s Services to support children within their families.

Reviewing Long-term Placements

11. A number of authorities have had success in reducing the number of children in care by encouraging long-term foster carers to apply for an adoption order or special guardianship order. While there may be a cost associated with providing ongoing financial support to such families, there would also be a significant reduction in the social work resource needed to support such placements. These resources could then be redeployed to address the needs of children on the cusp of care.

Cost Effectiveness

12. The cost of having a child in care is significantly higher than keeping them at home and often does not result in better long-term outcomes. The right strategy, correctly implemented will ensure that the local authority targets their resources on those children who need to be in care, while providing effective support services for those who could, with additional help remain at home. This is not only good practice, which can secure better outcomes, but in the long-term it is a more cost effective. Although care numbers in Southwark have been reducing steadily over the last two years, the borough still has one of the highest rates of care in London. Given that resources in specialist children’s services are spent disproportionately on children in care, there is a compelling case to develop a strategy which can reallocate resources to provide more support to children within their families.

Policy implications

13. The strategy is in line with the CYPP ambition to reduce the number of children in care, while recognising the need to provide high quality family support services.

Community Impact Statement

14. The implementation of this strategy could have a differential impact on a diverse community. It is important that implementation should be closely monitored to ensure that all communities are able to benefit equally. The CLA population is monitored to identify possible trends in admissions, which may be influenced by the way legislation, guidance and policy is applied locally.
15. An Equalities Impact Assessment will be undertaken to explore more fully how the strategy may affect Southwark’s diverse community. For example the strengthening services to reduce the care population could have a disproportionate affect on different communities. It is therefore important to consider fully, how the initiatives embodied in the strategy are accessible to all sections of the community.

Resource implications

16. The Strategy sets out how the Council and its partners can work more effectively

together to reduce the need to bring children and young people into care. The implications of this for local practice and service delivery can currently be met within existing resources.

Consultation

17. The Strategy sets out how the Council and its partners can work more effectively together to reduce the need to bring children and young people into care. The implications of this for local practice and service delivery can currently be met within existing resources. As set out above, implementation of the strategy should also deliver a more cost effective service as further resources are released to provide more support to children within their families.

Strategic Director of Legal and Democratic Services

18. There are no legal implications arising from this report.

Finance Director

19. Comments of the finance director are included in the body of the report.

AUDIT TRAIL

| | | |
|---|------------------------|--------------------------|
| Lead Officer | Rory Patterson | |
| Report Author | Rory Patterson | |
| Version | Final | |
| Dated | January 23 2009 | |
| Key Decision? | No | |
| CONSULTATION WITH OTHER OFFICERS / DIRECTORATES / EXECUTIVE MEMBER | | |
| Officer Title | Comments Sought | Comments included |
| Director of Legal and Democratic Services | Yes | Yes |
| Director of Finance | Yes | Yes |
| Executive Member | Yes | Yes |
| Date final report sent to Constitutional/Community Council/Scrutiny Team | January 23 2009 | |