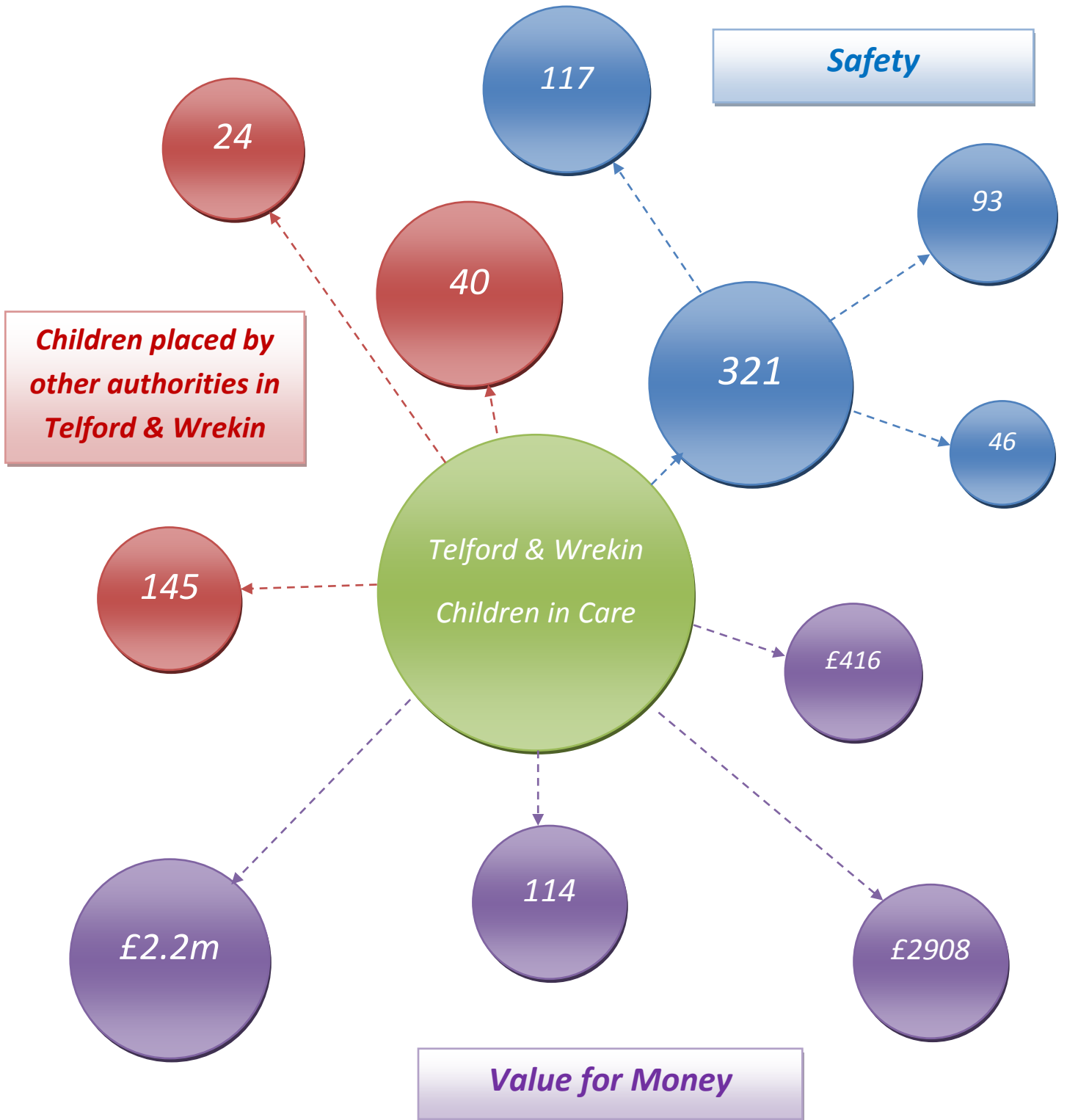


# Children & Young People Scrutiny Committee Report into the Children in Care Placement Strategy

'It's not just about the numbers'



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## Executive Summary

For the past eight months the Children & Young People Scrutiny Committee has been looking closely at the Council's children in care placement strategy. In particular the Committee focused on:

- Whether current policies, procedures and practices keep children and young people in the Council's care safe?
- If Council's strategy and processes for care placements offer the best value for money?
- What responsibility, if any, does the Council have for children placed in care in the borough by other local authorities?

The Committee has taken evidence from foster carers, social workers, an Independent Reviewing Officer, senior Council officers, the Cabinet member, the Chair of the Telford & Wrekin Safeguarding Children Board and the Police. Visits to children in residential care were postponed but it remains the Committee's intention to meet these young people. The reasons for the delays helped bring home the reality of the complex needs of these vulnerable young people. Our recommendations are the culmination of many hours of investigation, fact finding and discussion.

It is clear to the Committee that in terms of the main lines of enquiry the current strengths of the Council are:

- The decision to appoint a full-time Director of Children's Services has greatly strengthened the Council's systems and processes for ensuring that children in the care of the local authority are safe and well looked after. The lines of accountability are now much clearer and the capacity for further improvements enhanced.
- Joint working with other partner agencies, particularly the police, is a strength and a model for other local authorities to look at.

The recent creation of a cost improvement plan for safeguarding and children in care is to be welcomed as is the formation of a senior, member led monitoring group that will meet monthly to review its progress.

**There were however some areas that we felt could and must be strengthened which are set out in detail in the report and we have made a number of recommendations aimed at addressing the issues raised.**

### Summary of Recommendations

#### 1. Members' responsibilities as Corporate Parents

In light of the recent Ofsted inspection and findings, the Committee feels that that the time is right to further strengthen the Council's commitment to children's safety and well-being by ensuring that all elected members are fully briefed on their role and responsibilities as Corporate Parents.

The Committee **recommends:**

**That the Council holds regular briefings (annual or biannual) for all elected members on their responsibilities as Corporate Parents and that Councillors'**

**attendance or non-attendance at these briefings is published on the Council's website on an annual basis.**

## **2. Quality Assurance of Systems and Processes**

Members are not satisfied that the Quality Assurance of reporting systems and processes is sufficiently rigorous or robust. Concerns relate to insufficient rigour in the QA of care plans on a regular basis to check that statutory visits are happening and children are progressing in terms of their health, safety, wellbeing and educational attainment.

The Committee **recommends:**

- a. That the system for recording and monitoring visits and outcomes is reviewed, and a new framework developed which is more robust but simpler to use and more effective for monitoring the progress of the children and young people.** (Refer to section p. 14 quality assurance of systems and processes.)
- b. The Council should review its current systems for reporting on the arrangements to complete statutory return interviews for young runaways and bring forward a report to the Children & Young People Scrutiny Committee within 6 months of the publication of this report.**

## **3. The Role and Independence of the Independent Reviewing Officers**

- Members feel there is a lack of independence and rigour in the existing IRO arrangements. There is a potential conflict of interest for IROs in providing independent challenge to the service in which they are line-managed.
- The National Association of Independent Reviewing Officer Protocol for the Management of IROs recommends that if possible the service should not be located within children's services.

The Committee **recommends:**

- a. That the current review of the IRO service should consider the management arrangements and the option of moving the service into the Scrutiny Team, consistent with scrutiny's role in providing objective review and challenge.**
- b. That the Independent Reviewing Officer Annual Report is presented at a joint meeting of the Scrutiny Committee and the LSCB as a matter of routine, with an interim 6 monthly report provided to the Scrutiny Committee. This should include information about the outcomes of quality assurance audits in relation to the organisation, conduct and recording of reviews.**

## **4. West Midlands Framework Contracts for Residential and Agency Foster Care and the Jigsaw contract**

- Members are not convinced that the high number of providers (144 residential care providers and 42 fostering agencies) on the regional framework contracts puts the participating authorities in a strong position to negotiate strongly on costs.
- Members are also concerned that the proposed use of the Jigsaw houses will not offer value for money unless used to their full capacity.
- Members also need to be assured that the Council has a process in place for the on-going quality assurance of providers on the framework.

The Committee **recommends:**

- a. **That the rationale for the number of providers on the framework contracts is reviewed to establish whether more favourable contracts could be negotiated by working with a smaller number of quality providers when the contracts are re-tendered.**
- b. **Within 6 months of the Jigsaw residential care contract being awarded and started, officers report to the CYP Scrutiny Committee on how it is delivering better outcomes for children in care and offering better value for money.**
- c. **That there is an officer at the Council responsible for proactively monitoring Ofsted and other agency inspection reports of providers used by the Council to help build intelligence which can inform future placement decisions.**

## **5. Financial Management and Reporting (the Dashboard)**

- Members are concerned about the lack of clarity in how the cost of internal care is calculated and reported on the Children in Care Performance Dashboard.
- It is essential that the actual cost of internal care is accurate so that financial monitoring and management are robust.

The Committee **recommends:**

- a. **That the cost of internal care reported on the Children in Care Performance Dashboard is a true cost i.e. it includes the cost of the carers' fees and allowances, the Family Placement social worker and other associated costs.**
- b. **That each element is shown separately so there is transparency in how the figures are calculated and confidence that they are accurate.**

## **6. Care of children placed in Telford & Wrekin by other authorities**

- Members heard from the West Mercia Police Force Lead for Missing Persons that Telford & Wrekin is ahead of the game regionally on reduction strategies.
- Neither the placing authority, nor the care home, has a statutory duty to notify the police when a child moves into the home.
- At a conference of children's home providers in Shropshire, 40 children were identified that the police had not previously known about. A similar event has not taken place in Telford & Wrekin.

The Committee **recommends:**

- a. **That the Council works with the Police to accurately identify the location of all the external children's homes in Telford & Wrekin.**
- b. **The Council organises a provider conference - similar to the one held by Shropshire Council - within the next 12 months. This would encourage co-operation between police and providers, and the Council should give all providers information about support services they could access to help the children in their care.**

## Our Objectives

**In looking at the children in care placement strategy, the Committee focused on three key lines of enquiry.**

**1. Whether current policies, procedures and practices keep children and young people in the Council's care **safe**?**

The Committee's aim was to seek assurance that Telford & Wrekin's systems and processes keep children as safe as possible, and that robust quality assurance is in place. There was a particular focus on children living outside the borough because members wanted to know whether they were at greater risk from being "out of sight, out of mind".

**2. Does the Council's strategy and processes for care placements offer the best **value for money**?**

The financial impact of increasing numbers of children needing to be taken into care meant there was an overspend on care placements. Whilst this is a necessary expenditure, we wanted to know what was being done to reduce costs and how the Council is ensuring that the money that is spent delivers best value in terms of cost and outcomes for children in care.

**3. What responsibility, if any, does the Council have for **children placed in care in the borough by other authorities**?**

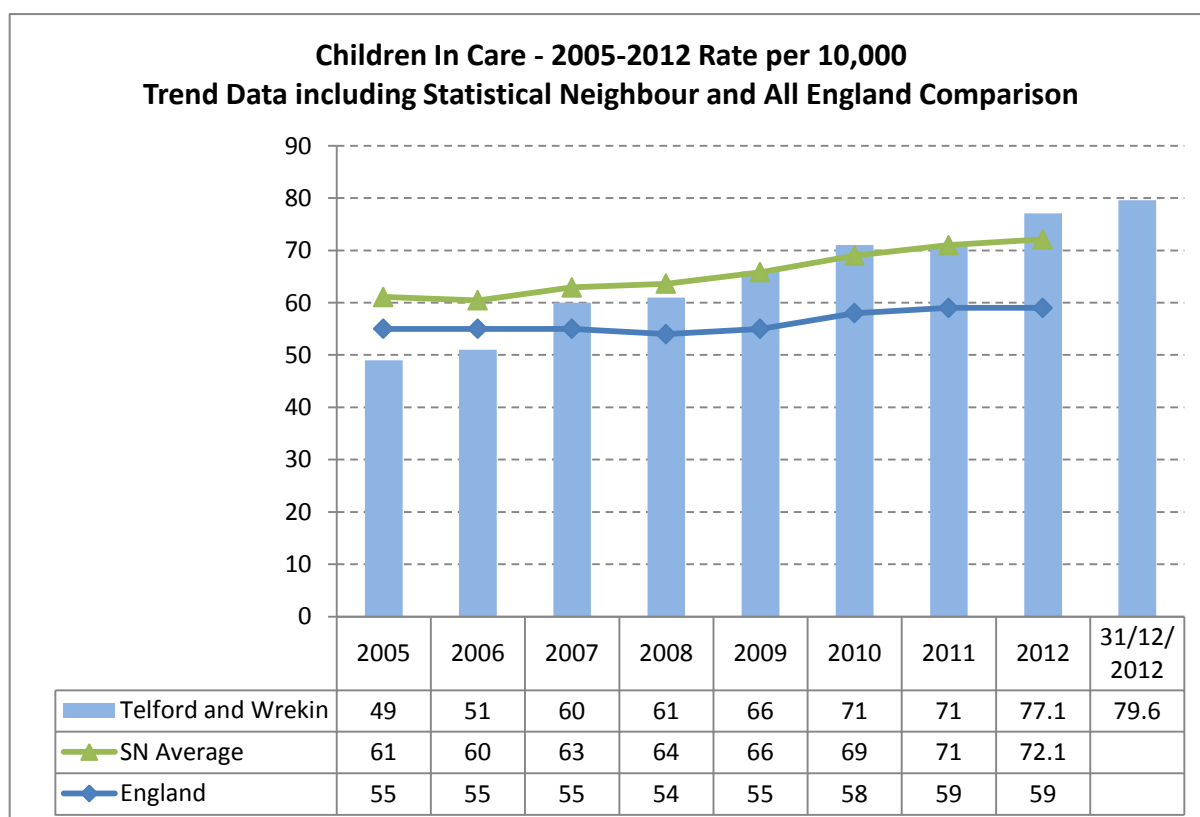
There are 24 private children's homes in Telford & Wrekin looking after children placed by other authorities. These children are living and attending schools in our borough – just as children in Telford & Wrekin's care are living in other authority areas - and we wanted to find out what shared responsibility there is for these children.

Evidence was taken from a wide range of witnesses including the lead Cabinet member, senior officers, the Chair of the Telford & Wrekin Safeguarding Children Board, the lead senior officer for Missing Persons at West Mercia Police Force, social workers, an Independent Reviewing Officer, foster carers and children in residential care outside the borough. The Committee also considered a number of written reports. A full witness and evidence list is included at the end of this report. The information provided in the following sections focuses on the key findings and is by no means an exhaustive account of all the work carried out.

## The National Context: not just a Telford & Wrekin issue

**The challenge for local authorities in meeting the needs of children in care is part of a national pattern.**

- The national picture has been one of an upward trend in the number of children coming into care over recent years. There was a significant uplift following the high profile Climber and Baby Peter cases, and since 2008 financial pressure on families as a result of the recession has no doubt contributed to rising numbers. The trend rate of children in care per 10,000 of the population is illustrated in the table below. The impact of the introduction of the welfare benefit reforms remains to be seen but may increase financial pressure on some households.



- Local Authorities have a statutory duty to protect vulnerable children at risk of harm or neglect and all elected members have a shared responsibility as Corporate Parents for the children in the authority's care. The question they should ask is "Would this be good enough for my child?"
- Some recent high profile cases of child sexual grooming and exploitation – including one locally - provided an important background to the work of the scrutiny Committee's review and highlighted the particular vulnerability of girls in the care system - including those in homes remote from the placing authority - and failures in the system to protect these young people.

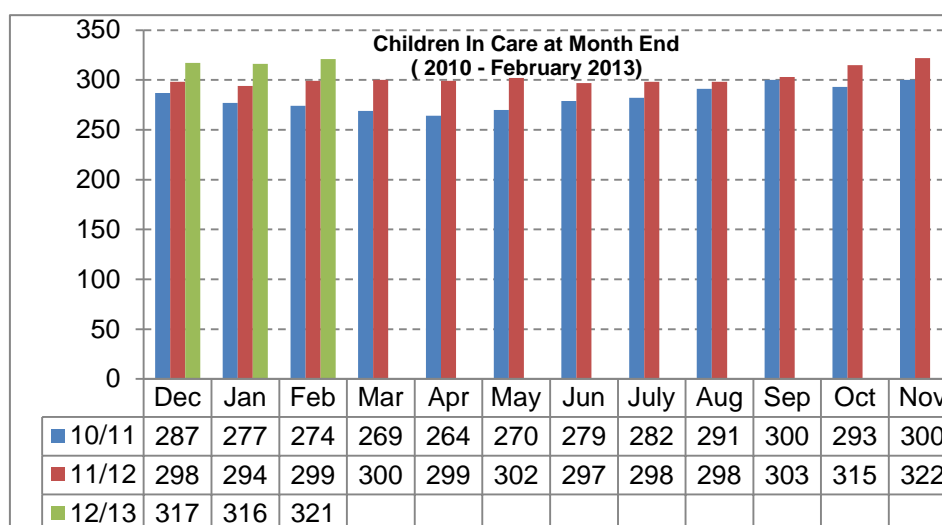
## The Local Context: “It’s not just about the numbers”

The cover of this report provides a snap shot of local children in care data relating to the Committee’s three key lines of enquiry.

### Safety

321

At the end of February 2013 Telford & Wrekin had **321** children in care. At the same time in 2012 there were 299 and in 2011 there were 274. There was a 7.4% increase in the monthly average number of children in care between Feb 2012-Feb 2013 compared to the same period in the previous year. The table below shows the trend in the numbers over the last 3 years.



117

Of the 321 children in care, **117** (36.4%) were placed with a local authority foster carer which is a slight increase on the same point last year (32.7%).

93

**93** of the 321 were placed with agency foster carers.

46

**46** (14.3%) were in residential placements. There was an increase of 6 residential placements between March 2012 and February 2013.

### Value for Money

£2.2m

**£2.2m** is the overspend on care placements in 2012/13 against a base budget of £10.2m. The base budget for safeguarding in 2012/13 was £18m and there was an adverse variance of £3.1m. A one-off contingency of £930k has been created for children’s safeguarding for 2013/14 with the Early Help and Safeguarding Cost Improvement Plan projected to deliver £2.2m savings.

£2908

**£2908** was the average weekly unit cost of residential care in February 2013. Although only 14.3% of all children in care were in residential care, residential placements accounted for almost half the total spend on care placements in 2012/13. In 2011/12 the average weekly unit cost was £3,493 and unit costs had reduced as a result of the regional framework contract.

144

There are **144** residential care providers on the regional residential framework contract. The contract was established in May 2012 for two years.

£416

**£416** was the average weekly unit cost of internal foster care in February 2013. Calculation of the cost was changed in October 2012 to incorporate overheads relating to the social work fostering team, management and other associated costs which is more in line with the equivalent agency costs.

### Responsibility for children placed by other authorities in Telford & Wrekin

24

There are **24** privately run children's homes in Telford & Wrekin where children placed by other authorities live. **Telford and Wrekin has the third highest** concentration of privately run children's homes by local authority area as a proportion of population, behind Rochdale and Shropshire.

40

At a conference for children's home providers in Shropshire, the police identified **40** children living in the homes about whom they had not previously been aware.

145

As of 10<sup>th</sup> May 2013 there were **145** children from other authorities in care placements in the borough that the Council has been notified about.

Whilst the numbers present one picture, it must be remembered that behind every statistic there is a vulnerable child in need of help or protection and the Council has a statutory duty of care as Corporate Parents for these children.

Prior to the scrutiny review, there had been an Ofsted inspection of safeguarding and looked after children's services which had judged the overall effectiveness of looked after children's services as Adequate.

## **How is Telford & Wrekin Council meeting the challenges from the national and local context?**

- Appointed a Director of Children & Family Services in May 2012. Ofsted judged Leadership and Management to be 'Good' and commented on the strong commitment from the authority to embrace change.
- Reconfigured children's services with a focus on providing targeted early intervention and preventative services delivered jointly with partners. Family Connect has been launched as a single point of referral and access to children's services with the intention of providing appropriate and proportionate support at the right time. Ofsted commented in the strength of partnerships and the Council and partners' good ambition for joint services, and joint working with the Police is a particular strength.
- Established a Safeguarding and Early Help Cost Improvement Plan as a framework for improving performance and driving down costs. Implementation of the Plan is backed by monthly financial monitoring meetings attended by Cabinet members and senior officers, including the Managing Director. The Chairs of the Children & Young People and Budget & Finance Scrutiny Committees have been invited to attend the meetings to observe the process.
- Developed a Commissioning Strategy focussed on increasing the number of internal foster carers and driving down costs with collaborative framework contracts established with other West Midlands authorities for residential and agency foster care.
- An Improvement Plan is in place to address the recommendations made by Ofsted.

## Our key findings and recommendations

This section summarises the key findings and recommendations related to each key line of enquiry.

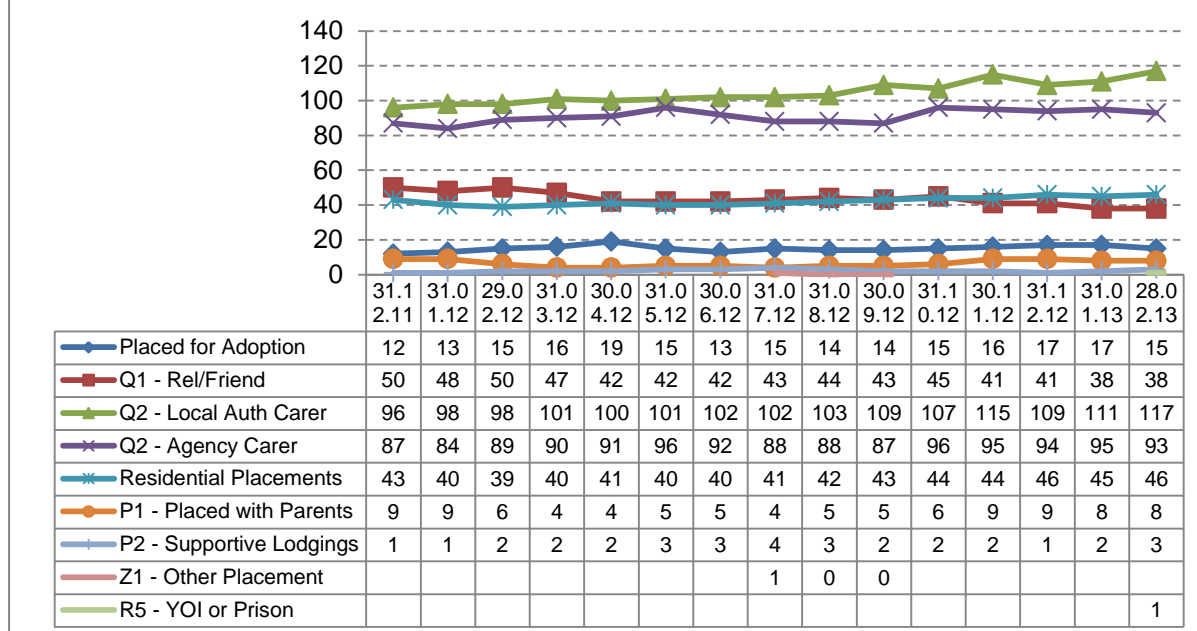
### Safety

#### What we learnt

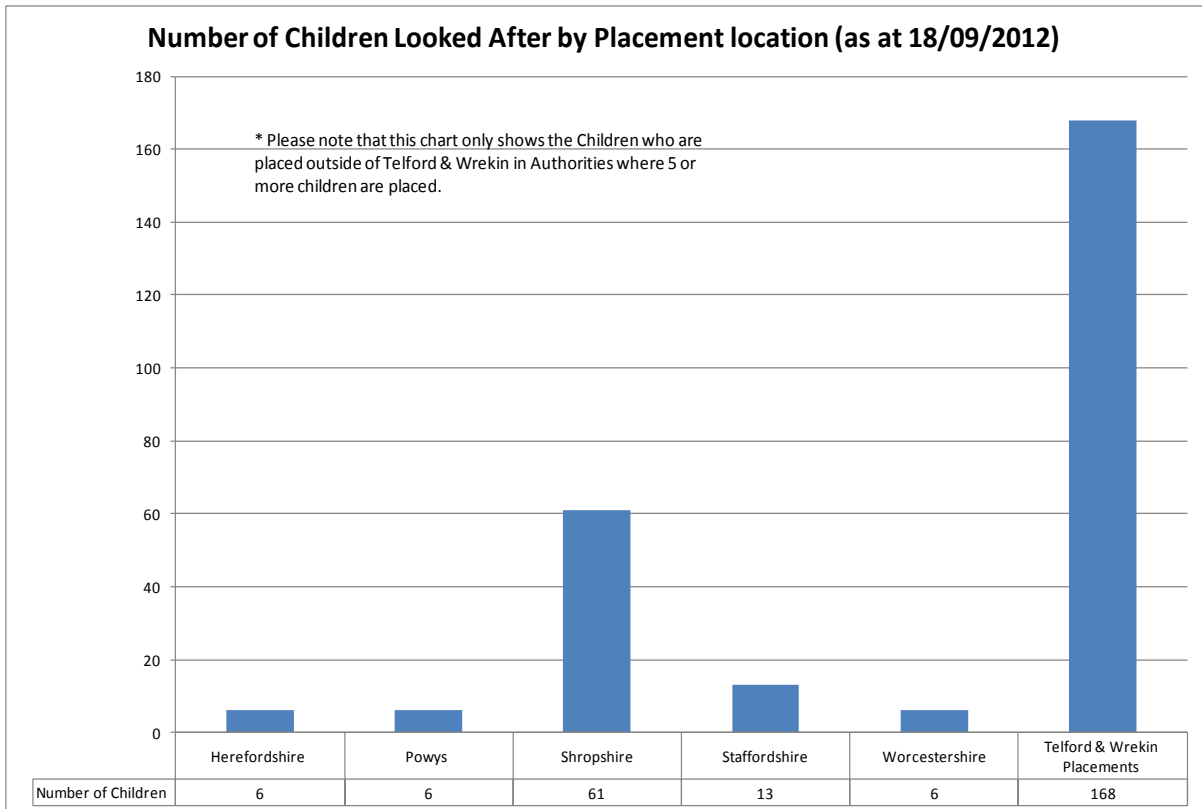
- The review started as the Ofsted report of safeguarding and looked after children's services was published in August 2012 with the overall judgement for looked after services rated as "Adequate". There are positive messages in the report: Leadership and Management and Ambition and Prioritisation are rated as "Good" and there are favourable comments about partnership working and the approach to developing joint services although it is acknowledged that the service reconfiguration is in early days and it is too soon to measure the effectiveness. However, quality of provision was rated inadequate which is an obvious matter of concern for the Committee. In December 2012, members reviewed the Improvement Plan to address Ofsted's recommendations. The areas requiring immediate remedial action had been addressed and progress had been made on the areas to be addressed within three months. Members agreed the early progress was good but the redesign of the social work team required to address some of the issues was still in the planning stages and the Committee would continue to monitor this.
- An important starting point for the review was to understand the **placement process** and the rationale for placement decisions as this underpins the first two lines of enquiry. The needs of the child and sibling groups are assessed against a complex range of criteria to determine the type of placement and location needed. Factors assessed include presenting and historic behaviour, placement history, ethnicity, disability, bail conditions, siblings, age, special educational needs, transport needs, physical and mental health needs, contact with family, gender, and locations preferred or to avoid - all these need to be taken into account in the matching process. The foster carer's own family has to be considered, for example if the young person to be placed is presenting with challenging or inappropriate sexual behaviour which may present a risk to the carer's own children. The Committee was presented with some scenarios which illustrated the highly complex nature of some care placements, particularly involving sibling groups with different needs, and that it is not always possible to source an internal placement and a wider search is necessary. Where safety is concerned, there can be good reasons why children are placed outside the borough.

The internal foster care register is always checked first and external placements (agency foster care or residential care) are only made if an internal foster placement matching the needs of the child cannot be found, or if foster care is not suitable for the child. All external placements are approved at Assistant Director level or above. External care (agency foster care or residential care) is purchased from Jigsaw for residential care, or from providers via framework agreements with final decisions made by the social worker. The mix of placement types is illustrated in the table below.

### Children In Care / Supportive Accommodation at Month End by Placement Type (based on a rolling year)



- In terms of children placed out of the borough, **Ofsted noted that the number of children placed out of area remains higher than comparators** and that there are some children whose needs could be met closer to home. As of 18<sup>th</sup> September 2012 there were 125 (of 302) children placed outside the Telford & Wrekin boundary. Of these, 85.83% were within a 50 mile radius of their home address, 7.87% between 50-100 miles and 6.3% over 100 miles. Overall, 61.7% of all looked after children were placed within the Shropshire county boundary. The types of placements included internal foster carers (where carers live outside the boundary or had moved and the children had moved with them), agency foster care, residential homes, hostels, and a small number with friends/relatives, hospital, residential schools or a secure unit. The policy is to place children as close to home as possible unless there are safety reasons for the child to be placed at a safe distance from home. Placement locations are always sought to minimize disruption to the child's education. Of the 65 children placed in the Shropshire authority area, most continued to go to school in Telford and Wrekin. Of the 85% within a 50 mile radius of home, some were still attending school in Telford and Wrekin.



- Members explored the **quality assurance of providers** on the regional residential framework contract. There had been a tender process and providers had been put through a comprehensive and rigorous quality assurance process which included financial and insurance validation, Ofsted reports and the Councils' own quality evaluation which had involved young people. All Ofsted reports are uploaded to the West Midlands database and providers must update the database with any new judgements. The latest judgements are checked before a placement is made, and the social worker may visit a home prior to placement to check the unit is suitable for the child in terms of the other young people there. Providers must have an "Outstanding" or "Good" rating to be included within the framework contract. If a provider's rating is downgraded to "Unsatisfactory" or worse while a child is placed in the home, the Ofsted findings and the home's response to recommendations are considered to determine what course of action to take. If a home has failed an inspection, the home is visited to find out what happened and what actions have been put in place to address the issues, and progress against the action plan would continue to be monitored. Depending on the nature of the findings, the child would not be moved if this created unnecessary disruption unless Ofsted had suspended the service or the Council considered the placement unsafe. No further placements would be made until standards had improved. In addition to statutory inspection reports, the West Midlands authorities share quality intelligence between themselves.
- A key concern was to seek assurance that the **statutory visits** to children in care are happening especially as this was an issue flagged up by Ofsted. The statutory requirements for visiting children in care apply to all children regardless of location, and members were assured by officers that the visits are carried out. The statutory minimum is to visit within one week of placement, then at 6 weekly intervals during the first year although visits are likely to be more frequent in the early days of a placement or if needed by the child. There is clear guidance on the purpose of the visits and the social worker must write up a report for each statutory visit. However, evidence provided by the foster carers was that the statutory visits did not always happen and this is cause for

concern. Ofsted also found that non-qualified workers are case managing looked after children and as a result the Council is not always meeting the minimum statutory requirements for visiting children in their placements.

- Members were interested in the **systems and quality assurance of visit reports and care plans** and met two members of the social work team – an Advanced Practitioner and Social Worker – to hear views from the front line. The social workers gave an overview of a “typical” week and, using examples, described how and when visits are made, the type of issues discussed, the system for recording visits, how actions are followed up and how care plans are reviewed. An anonymised example of a visit report was also provided. The Committee would like to put on record their praise for the commitment and dedication of the social workers in a service area that is both challenging and often under media scrutiny. The pressure of case loads was clear with the social workers regularly working long hours (there was an example of a sensitive issue being dealt with in the evening after a long day working out of the borough) which gave rise to concern, echoing Ofsted, about capacity issues and the structure of the social work team is currently under review. Moreover, there was evidence of a lack of rigour in the systematic quality assurance of visit reports and monitoring of care plans to ensure the children are making progress. In addition, the foster carers remarked that they had never been visited by a social worker who was being supervised, shadowed or overseen by a senior colleague. The Committee has made a recommendation about the Quality Assurance of systems and processes so there are simple measures, consistently applied, to monitor how children are progressing and made the following suggestions for consideration:
  - a) Members suggested a category based system (health, PEP, statutory visits, contact, provision, etc.) with a RAG rating and comment for each category, a section for additional information and with automatic prompts to flag up where action is required. There should be a parallel RAG rated self-assessment system for foster carers and children in care which can be cross-referenced with the social worker’s assessment to flag up any areas of mismatch. The reporting mechanism must be simple so that reports can easily be pulled off, cross-referenced and tracked. High level data can be shared with partners.
  - b) There must be systematic and regular Quality Assurance of care plans. This could be a regular spot-audit of a random sample of plans. Plans should be checked for compliance with statutory visits and to review social worker visit records to check that issues raised are being acted on and outcomes are improving. Advanced Practitioners should also observe newer qualified social worker visits.The systems and processes implemented will continue to be monitored by scrutiny.

- **Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs)** have a key role to play in the assurance of the Council’s services for looked after children. Telford & Wrekin has 5 (4.4 FTE) IROs. Their primary task is to ensure that the care plan for the child fully reflects the child’s current needs and that the actions set out in the plan are consistent with the local authority’s legal responsibilities towards the child. IROs have two separate functions: chairing child conference reviews and a newer role to monitor the child’s case on an on-going basis. IROs should bring an outside perspective and provide independent challenge to the authority. Concerns about the quality of services should be raised with senior managers and if a dispute cannot be resolved the IRO has the power of referral to CAF/CASS. At Telford & Wrekin the IROs report to the Safeguarding & Corporate Parenting Service Delivery Manager and upward to the Assistant Director Children’s Safeguarding. An audit system for care plans had been put in place in April 2012 but this still appeared to be immature and the Committee was given no concrete examples of where robust challenge had been made which gave rise to some concern. A review of the IRO arrangements is currently underway following Ofsted’s concerns about capacity issues and the dissemination of outcomes from IROs.

- Members had a very productive meeting with **foster carers** to find out how the systems and processes work from their point of view. The Committee would like to place on record its thanks to the carers who took the time to meet them and indeed to all of the authority's foster carers for their invaluable contribution in looking after children in the Council's care. The carers spoke about the training which the Council provided and their involvement in recruitment activity and suggested they could play an even greater role in the Skills for Fostering sessions. The carers spoke very highly of their social worker although in the past they had experienced inconsistencies in communication. In addition to the issue of statutory visits (referred to above), the carers reported there were sometimes delays in receiving placement paperwork and documents and this had, on occasion, hindered care such as medical treatment.
- A key part of keeping children in care safe is preventing and dealing with **missing episodes** and more information about this is included later in the report. A "Missing Children Processes for Telford & Wrekin" has been developed setting out the procedures and protocols to be followed in the event of children and young people going missing and the Police acknowledged that Telford & Wrekin is leading the way regionally with this work. Members feel the Council is an exemplar of good practice in this area and Ofsted also reflected on the effective arrangements for monitoring children missing from care under the governance of the Local Safeguarding Children Board sub-group.

In 2009 DCSF published statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care. Under the guidance, local authorities are responsible for carrying out **Return Interviews** within good practice guidelines of 72 hours of the return of the child. The interviews should identify and deal with any harm the child may have suffered, understand and try to address why the child or young person went missing and try to prevent it happening again. The Council has applied the Children's Society criteria for Return Interviews – for example those missing longer than 24 hours, those missing 2 or more times, children with mental health issues, those at known risk of harm or exploitation – and are set out in the document. An Ofsted report on Missing Children published in February 2013 found that in nearly all the 10 authorities inspected the limited evidence of effective return interviews undermined the capacity of professionals to learn more about the reasons and risks attached to children-missing episodes. Locally, the Police have said it would be helpful for them to know if the return interviews are happening, how many are done and moreover for relevant intelligence from the interviews to be shared with them.

## Our recommendations

### 1. Members' responsibility as Corporate Parents

In light of the recent Ofsted inspection and findings, the Committee feels that that the time is right to further strengthen the Council's commitment to children's safety and well-being by ensuring that all elected members are fully briefed on their role and responsibilities as Corporate Parents.

The Committee **recommends:**

**That the Council holds regular briefings (annual or biannual) for all elected members on their responsibilities as Corporate Parents and that Councillors' attendance or non-attendance at these briefings is published on the Council's website on an annual basis.**

## 2. Quality Assurance of Systems and Processes

Members are not satisfied that the Quality Assurance of reporting systems and processes is sufficiently rigorous or robust. Concerns relate to insufficient rigour in the QA of care plans on a regular basis to check that statutory visits are happening and children are progressing in terms of their health, safety, wellbeing and educational attainment.

The Committee **recommends**:

- a. **That the system for recording and monitoring visits and outcomes is reviewed, and a new framework developed which is more robust but simpler to use and more effective for monitoring the progress of the children and young people.** (Refer to section p.14 quality assurance of systems and processes.)
- b. **The Council should review its current systems for reporting on the arrangements to complete statutory return interviews for young runaways and bring forward a report to the Children & Young People Scrutiny Committee within 6 months of the publication of this report.**

## 3. The Role and Independence of the Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs)

- Members feel there is a lack of independence and rigour in the existing IRO arrangements. There is a potential conflict of interest for IROs in providing independent challenge to the service in which they are line-managed.
- The National Association of Independent Reviewing Officer Protocol for the Management of IROs recommends that if possible the service should not be located within children's services.

The Committee **recommends**:

- a. **That the current review of the IRO service should consider the management arrangements and the option of moving the service into the Scrutiny Team, consistent with scrutiny's role in providing objective review and challenge.**
- b. **That the Independent Reviewing Officer Annual Report is presented at a joint meeting of the Scrutiny Committee and the LSCB as a matter of routine, with an interim 6 monthly report provided to the Scrutiny Committee. This should include information about the outcomes of quality assurance audits in relation to the organisation, conduct and recording of reviews.**

## Value for Money

### What we learnt

- The care placement base budget for 2012/13 was £10.2m and with an overspend of £2.2m at year end. The base budget for safeguarding in 2012/13 was £18m and there was an adverse variance of £3.1m. A one-off contingency of £930k has been created for safeguarding for 2013/14 with the Early Help and Safeguarding Cost Improvement Plan projected to deliver £2.2m savings.
- A **Cost Improvement Plan** has been created to improve performance and drive down costs in safeguarding. The Plan sets out key performance and savings targets under four thematic objectives with specific actions to achieve the targets. Members welcomed the Plan as a framework for action but, as did the Budget & Finance Scrutiny Committee, acknowledged that the savings targets are challenging given the historic overspend in this area and the upward trend in the number of children coming into care. The Budget & Finance Scrutiny Committee will be monitoring progress on the Cost Improvement Plan closely and the Children & Young People Scrutiny Committee will join up on this.

- The **Children in Care Monthly Performance Dashboard** is a key document used for monitoring care cost trends against budget and is reported to the monthly Cabinet/senior officer financial monitoring meetings as well as to scrutiny and other Council fora. Scrutinising the data it was found that the internal foster care costs reflected the carer fees and allowances but excluded the equivalent overheads in the fostering agency fees. This was remedied in October 2012 when the associated social worker, management and administration costs were incorporated enabling a more accurate and fair comparison to be made between internal and external foster care unit costs.
- The **average weekly unit cost of care** by placement type in February 2013 were:

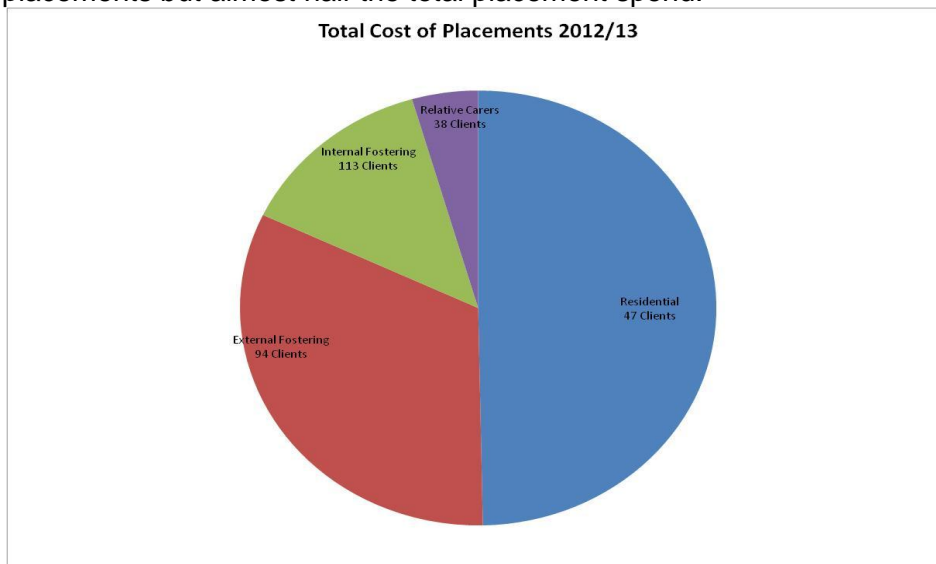
Placement Type	Children in Care at 31.03.12	Weekly Unit Cost 2011/12	Children in Care at 31.12.12	Weekly Unit Cost 31.12.12	Children in Care at 31.01.13	Weekly Unit Cost 31.01.13	Children in Care at 28.02.13	Weekly Unit Cost 28.02.13
Placed for Adoption	16	N/A	17	N/A	18	N/A	15	N/A
Relative/Friend Carer	47	N/A	41	£399	41	£385	38	£411
LA Carer	101	N/A	109	£420	109	£422	113	£416
Agency Foster Carer	90	£798	94	£808	94	£821	94	£796
Residential Placements	40	£3,493	46	£2,923	45	£2,928	46	£2,908
Placed with Parents	4	N/A	9	N/A	8	N/A	8	N/A
Supportive Lodgings	2	N/A	1	N/A	2	N/A	3	N/A
Other Placement			0	N/A	1	N/A	0	N/A
<b>TOTAL =</b>	<b>300</b>	<b>*£832</b>	<b>317</b>	<b>£878*</b>	<b>318</b>	<b>£884*</b>	<b>317</b>	<b>£882*</b>

From this it is clear that the chief ways of reducing care costs are:

- To reduce the number of children coming into care
- To increase the number of foster placements with internal carers and reduce reliance on agency carers and residential care
- To reduce the number of residential placements
- To reduce the unit cost of external care (residential and agency foster care)
- **Reducing the number of children in care.** There has been an upward trend in the number of children coming into care as illustrated earlier in this report. There has been a thorough-going reconfiguration of children and families services structured around early intervention and prevention and delivered through multi-agency partnerships. Family Connect has been launched as the single point of referral and the approach is to deliver early appropriate and proportionate support to avert the need for high cost interventions and potentially reduce the need to take children into care. There are some encouraging stories although the service is relatively new and it will take time for any impacts to filter through to children in care placements but members are supportive of the approach, recognising at all times that the safety of children must come first.
- **Increasing internal foster carers.** The main focus of the Commissioning Strategy is to increase the number of internal foster carers (weekly unit cost **£416**) and reduce reliance on agency care (weekly unit cost **£796**). The Committee looked at recruitment activity over the previous 18 months and were encouraged by the positive work that was starting to show significant gains. The challenge of recruiting

foster carers is a national one, and the market is competitive with many private fostering agencies. Much work had been done to raise awareness, to target marketing at people with the characteristics of good carers and to streamline the recruitment process so good prospects are not lost to competitors. The number of children placed with internal foster carers shows an upward trend, increasing from 96 (of 300) in November 2011 to 117 (of 321) in February 2013. It was felt a net gain of 14-18 households (some would offer more than one placement) would go a significant way to redressing the balance between internal and agency foster care. Nineteen applications were in the pipeline to be presented to foster panel by the end of April. Losses from retirement and de-registrations would reduce the net gain, although losses tended to be dormant households. Retention strategies seemed to be effective with no losses to private agencies over the period. Overall progress was good with the number of children placed with internal carers rising more steeply than the number placed with agencies (illustrated on the table on page 13).

- **Reducing the number of residential placements.** Residential care (weekly unit cost £2908) is by far the most expensive type of care accounting for 14.5% of placements but almost half the total placement spend.



This is a key target in the Cost Improvement Plan and is the area which would have the greatest impact on savings. The placement process described earlier in this report emphasised that there will always be a need for residential care for children with complex needs unsuitable for fostering, but the Committee identified several strands of work which should help reduce the number of residential placements.

- All residential placements must be approved at Assistant Director level or above and decisions are challenged to ensure there are no more cost effective alternatives which would meet the child's needs.
- The early intervention and prevention work described above has the potential to reduce the need to take children into care in the first place
- The drive to increase internal foster care capacity should reduce the risk of children being placed in residential care because of a lack of foster care provision and create added capacity to move children who are ready from residential to foster care
- Actions in the Cost Improvement Plan to recruit contract foster carers to look after children with more complex needs who may otherwise need residential care
- The establishment of the Resource Allocation Management Panel and the Securing Permanency Group will give an added focus to progressing children so those who are suitable and ready can be to move from residential to foster care

more quickly. The Budget & Finance Scrutiny Committee will monitor the impact of the Securing Permanency Group on costs.

- **Reducing the unit cost of residential and external care.** As part of the Commissioning Strategy, collaborative framework agreements have been set up with other West Midlands authorities for residential and agency foster care. These have driven down the average unit costs of both types of care.
  - The sub-regional foster framework agreement was set up in April 2011 with 42 providers. There was an immediate weekly saving of £2,294.67 on 55 placements moving from the old to the new arrangements. The full year effect was analysed after 12 months, and for the 44 children still in placements with providers on the framework there was a total saving of £86,424. Further analysis of new placements showed that overall, the projected annual saving of £100k was achieved as a result of the framework agreement.
  - The regional residential framework agreement was set up in May 2012 with 144 providers on the framework which has brought general price reductions across the residential providers. There was an immediate weekly saving of £3,379 from moving contracts across to the new arrangements equating to an annual saving of £175,708 assuming the children remained in the same placement.
  - In addition to the regional framework contract, there are currently 4 residential beds at Jigsaw commissioned by the Council on a block:spot ratio of 3:1. The Committee considered the January Cabinet report on new arrangements for the Jigsaw houses which will increase residential bed capacity from 4 to 8. A procurement process is currently underway and weekly care fees of around £2,300 are anticipated (compared to the current average weekly unit cost of the block contract for Jigsaw of £2,900 per week) with a projected annual saving of £83k. The ratio of spot to block beds will be reversed to reduce financial risk to the Council. The planned future use of the 2 remaining Jigsaw houses was one as a resource centre and one potentially to provide boarding accommodation for children at the Jigsaw school. It was hoped that the new arrangements would also go some way to addressing the issue of the high number of children placed out of the borough by increasing local capacity and members were anxious to ensure that the Jigsaw units are used to their full capacity to deliver value for money.
  - To complete its due diligence, the Committee considered an appraisal of the option of a Council owned and run children's home. This set out the legislative requirements, benchmarked costs, risks and benefits. On balance members agreed that the minimal cost savings were outweighed by the risks and that the Council should continue to procure placements through the framework contract and at Jigsaw.
- Reliance on **agency social workers** had also put pressure on the budget. Agency staff cost, very roughly, around twice the permanent staff and vacancy and recruitment information is monitored on the Dashboard. Attracting qualified social workers is a national issue, and members were assured to hear about the Council's good work on recruitment, retention and workforce development strategies. The nurturing "grow your own" approach seemed to be effective, with Advanced Practitioners appointed to mentor and develop newly qualified and less experienced staff and it was hoped the Council would be able to attract some of the good quality skills coming through the Step Up to Social Work programme. At an update in January, the Committee was delighted to hear that there were no vacancies for Social Workers and only a small number of Senior Social Worker vacancies remained unfilled and that Telford & Wrekin has built a reputation as a good employer. The impact on reducing the number of agency social workers is shown in the table below.

Numbers of Agency SWs												
Month	Apr-12	May-12	Jun-12	Jul-12	Aug-12	Sep-12	Oct-12	Nov-12	Dec-12	Jan-13	Feb-13	Mar-13
Number	13	13	12	14	14	14	12.7	10.9	10.5	10.5	8.5	
Target	13	13	12	12	14	14	12.7	10.7	9	9	6.5	6

Increase in Agency SWs - 1 in the Helpdesk (impact of Ofsted) 1 in CIC team (impact of longterm sickness and Ofsted) 01/07/2012, targets reset

December 2012 Agency Team Manager necessary to cover Maternity Leave in Child Protection Team - new TM will take up post 02/04/13

Month	Number	Target
Apr-12	13	13
May-12	13	13
Jun-12	12	12
Jul-12	14	12
Aug-12	14	14
Sep-12	14	14
Oct-12	12.7	12.7
Nov-12	10.9	10.7
Dec-12	10.5	9
Jan-13	10.5	9
Feb-13	8.5	6.5
Mar-13		6

- The Committee considered **reciprocal arrangements with other authorities**, for example whether a social worker from the authority where a child is placed could carry out statutory visits to save on costs. Social workers put forward strong arguments against this. Care orders are made by the court to Telford & Wrekin Council and the Council holds parental responsibility for the child and it was felt the risks of ceding responsibility to another authority which may work in a different way were too great. A key concern was that it would mean a change of social worker for the child when Telford & Wrekin is striving to reduce the number of social worker changes so that stable relationships can be built. The ability of the social worker to build relationships with local partners to support the child would be compromised and there are also risks around the transfer of case information.

## Our recommendations

### 4. West Midlands Framework Contracts for Residential and Agency Foster Care and the Jigsaw contract

- Members are not convinced that the high number of providers (144 residential care providers and 42 fostering agencies) on the regional framework contracts puts the participating authorities in a strong position to negotiate strongly on costs.
- Members are also concerned that the proposed use of the Jigsaw houses will not offer value for money unless used to their full capacity.
- Members also need to be assured that the Council has a process in place for the on-going quality assurance of providers on the framework.

The Committee **recommends**:

- That the rationale for the number of providers on the framework contracts is reviewed to establish whether more favourable contracts could be negotiated by working with a smaller number of quality providers when the contracts are re-tendered.**
- Within 6 months of the Jigsaw residential care contract being awarded and started, officers report to the CYP Scrutiny Committee on how it is delivering better outcomes for children in care and offering better value for money.**
- That there is an officer at the Council responsible for proactively monitoring Ofsted and other agency inspection reports of providers used by the Council to help build intelligence which can inform future placement decisions.**

## 5. Financial Management and Reporting (the Dashboard)

- Members are concerned about the lack of clarity in how the cost of internal care is calculated and reported on the Children in Care Performance Dashboard.
- It is essential that the actual cost of internal care is accurate so that financial monitoring and management are robust.

The Committee recommends:

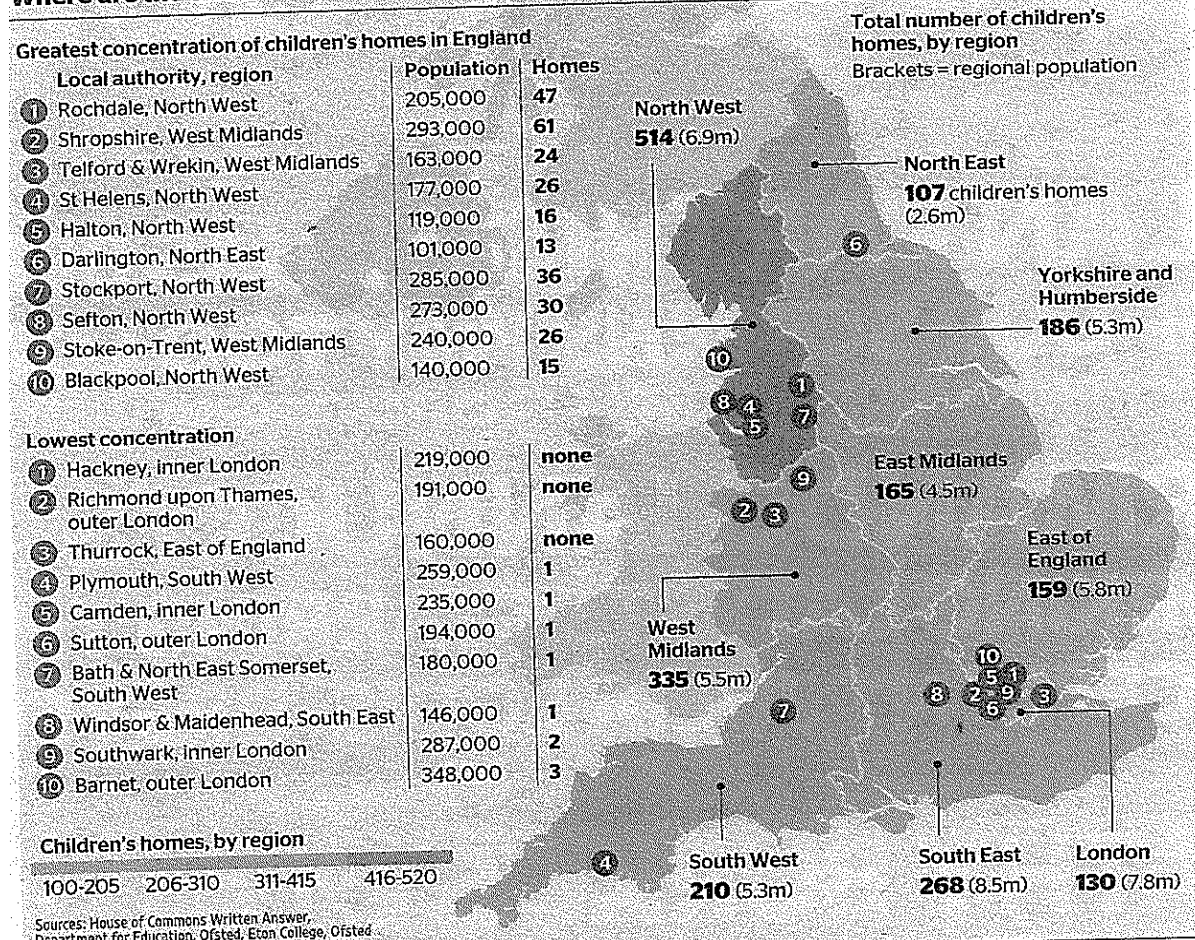
- That the cost of internal care reported on the Children in Care Performance Dashboard is a true cost i.e. it includes the cost of the carers' fees and allowances, the Family Placement social worker and other associated costs.**
- That each element is shown separately so there is transparency in how the figures are calculated and confidence that they are accurate.**

## Responsibility for children placed by other authorities in Telford & Wrekin

### What we learnt

The Council has no statutory duties for children placed in children's homes in Telford & Wrekin by other authorities. Nonetheless, there are children living and at school in the borough and members and wider society must share a sense of responsibility for these young people. There are 24 private children's homes in the borough. An article by Andrew Norfolk in The Times on 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2012 which is shown below reported the authorities with the highest and lowest concentration of children's homes per head of population – with Telford & Wrekin having the third highest concentration after Rochdale and Shropshire.

### Where are the children in care?



As of 10<sup>th</sup> May 2013, there were 145 children on the Council's record of children placed in the borough by other authorities. The accuracy of the record depends on the notification arrangements of the placing authority and there have been instances of children coming through the out of hours service or police missing person notifications that the Council had not been notified about.

We were fortunate to have Detective Inspector Philip Shakesheff, force lead for Missing Persons, West Mercia Police attending one of our meetings to discuss the issues and responsibilities for the Police in relation to missing children in care.

Children in care are three times more likely to go missing than other children. There are around 327,000 missing person reports nationally each year. It was estimated that around two thirds of missing people were not reported. In the in the West Mercia Police area there were around 6,500 missing person reports.

In Telford & Wrekin in 2012 there had been:

- 1446 missing persons reports
- 408 of these were missing children reports covering 178 individual children (the same children had been reported missing between 2 - 51 times).
- 208 were for missing reports for children in care covering 66 individual children. The number represented a small number of children who go missing often
- The number of repeat reports in Telford & Wrekin was between 7 and 51 and this was split between children placed by Telford & Wrekin and children placed by other authorities.
- Of the top 10 highest reporting premises in Telford & Wrekin, there were 9 and 30 reports in 2012. Work with homes was showing success – for example the top reporting home (30 reports) had made over 220 reports in the previous year.
- Performance data for 2012/13 (projected from actual to date) compared to 2011/12 showed a reduction in the rate of repeat missing reports (156 fewer repeats) and a reduction in the number of missing children in care reports. reports between 2011 and 2012.
- The majority of children who go missing are aged 13-16 and there are a whole range of reasons for them to go missing – only a very small minority is due to sexual exploitation.

DI Shakesheff highlighted the effectiveness of partnership working and joint strategies to reduce the number and repeat episodes of missing children reports as evidenced in the data and Members were pleased to hear that from the Police's point of view Telford & Wrekin Council is leading the way regionally on missing persons' strategies and in particular the development of the missing person's protocol.

The key point is that the police **need to know where children are to keep them safe**. Local authorities have a duty to notify another authority when they place a child in their area, but there is no similar duty to notify the local Police. A provider conference had been held in Shropshire and all 62 children's care home providers had attended. This had identified 40 children that the Police had not previously been aware of. Providers had responded positively and instigated further work with the police and productive on going relationships had been established.

## **Our recommendations**

### **6. Care of children placed in Telford & Wrekin by other authorities**

- Members heard from the West Mercia Police Force Lead for Missing Persons that Telford & Wrekin is ahead of the game regionally on reduction strategies.

- Neither the placing authority, nor the care home, has a statutory duty to notify the police when a child moves into the home.
- At a conference of children's home providers in Shropshire, 40 children were identified that the police had not previously known about. A similar event has not taken place in Telford & Wrekin.

The Committee **recommends:**

- a. That the Council works with the Police to accurately identify the location of all the external children's homes in Telford & Wrekin.**
- b. The Council organises a provider conference - similar to the one held by Shropshire Council - within the next 12 months. This would encourage co-operation between police and providers, and the Council should give all providers information about support services they could access to help the children in their care.**

## Final remarks

**Overall members feel that the direction of travel is good but that there is still much to be done.** The authority has some key strengths which are highlighted in this report but there are areas where the journey is just starting and the impact of planned activity remains to be seen. Actions in the Improvement Plan to address Ofsted's recommendations and the implementation of the Cost Improvement Plan are key areas which the Children & Young People and Budget & Finance Scrutiny Committees will continue to monitor closely. Our review highlighted some specific areas of concern and we have made recommendations aimed to address these.

The Ofsted report on the Council's fostering service coincided with the conclusion of our work and although the Committee will be reviewing the findings and action plan, these are not within the scope of this review.

As part of the review, Andrew Mason Chair of the Telford & Wrekin Safeguarding Children Board attended some of our meetings including giving a presentation about the Board and its work. This has strengthened the relationship between the Board and Scrutiny, and this is something that will be developed in the future.

Last, but by no means least, we would like to acknowledge the dedication and hard work of all the officers we met during the course of the review, and in particular the contribution of the Assistant Director of Children's Safeguarding for her leadership in developing the Council's safeguarding service and for all her time and help in contributing to this review.

## **Members of the Committee**

Cllr. Mike Ion (Chair)

Cllr. Stephen Burrell

Cllr. Gill Green

Cllr. Jayne Greenaway

Cllr. Jackie Loveridge

Cllr. Alan Mackenzie

Cllr. Malcolm Smith

Cllr. Chris Turley

Co-opted members:

Dr. Shaukat Ali –HE representative

Austin Atkinson – Catholic Diocesan representative

Roger Aveley – Town & Parish Council representative

Sue Harris – Primary Head Teacher

Emma Ofori – Secondary Parent Governor representative

Stephen Rayner – Anglican Diocesan representative

Mel Ward – Primary Parent Governor representative

## **Scrutiny Officer**

Stephanie Jones

## **Acknowledgements**

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- Foster Carers
- Advanced Practitioner for the Family Placement team, Children in Care team and EDT
- Independent Reviewing Officer
- Social Worker, Children & Family Services
- Cllr. Paul Watling, Cabinet Member Children, Young People & Families
- Detective Inspector Philip Shakesheff, Force Lead Missing Children, West Mercia Police
- Andrew Mason, Chair Telford & Wrekin Safeguarding Children Board
- Laura Johnston, Director Children & Family Services
- Karen Perry, Assistant Director Children's Safeguarding
- Clive Jones, Assistant Director Family & Cohesion Services
- Jim Collins, Assistant Director Education & Skills
- Vivian McKay, Group Manager Commissioning, Procurement & Brokerage (CYP)
- Maria White, Service Delivery Manager Child Protection & Assessment
- Steve Hosking, Cohesion Group Manager
- Angela Yapp, Service Delivery Manager Fostering and Children in Care

## **Evidence considered**

The Committee considered a range of written and verbal reports including:

- Verbal evidence from questioning witnesses as recorded in the minutes of meetings.
- Ofsted report on the inspection of Safeguarding and Looked After Children Services
- Children's Services improvement Plan (response to Ofsted recommendations)
- Children in Care Commissioning Strategy and Sufficiency Duty
- Quality Assurance Arrangements for residential care providers
- Children in Care Monthly Performance Dashboard (July 2012 – February 2013)
- Education performance for children in care KS2 and KS4 compared to Telford & Wrekin and national averages 2007/08 – 2011/12
- Presentation on Telford & Wrekin Safeguarding Children Board

- Missing Children Processes for Telford & Wrekin (Protocol)
- Presentation from West Mercia Police on missing children in Telford & Wrekin
- Report on the Recruitment of Foster Carers for Telford & Wrekin
- Safeguarding / Early Help Cost Improvement Plan
- Cost options for internal residential care home provision
- Article by Andrew Norfolk, The Times, 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2012
- Care Placement Procedure flowchart
- Number of providers on residential framework by Tier
- Value for Money in children in care commissioning and an analysis of savings made through the regional framework contracts for residential and agency foster care
- NAIRO protocol for management of Independent Reviewing Officers
- DCSF IRO Handbook
- Cabinet report on the Use of Jigsaw Houses

Report prepared on behalf of the Committee by Stephanie Jones, Scrutiny Officer, telephone 01952 383114.