

**BUDGET & FINANCE SCRUTINY COMMITTEE, JOINT MEETING WITH
CO-OPERATIVE & COMMUNITIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**Minutes of a meeting of the Budget & Finance Scrutiny Committee held at
6.30pm on Tuesday, 3rd September 2013 in Meeting Room 3, Darby House,
Telford.**

PRESENT: Councillors S. Reynolds (Chair), N. Dugmore, R. Evans, A. Jhawar, A. Lawrence, A. McClements, C. Mollett, J. Pinter, G. Reynolds, J. Seymour, J. Thompson, K. Tomlinson and Co-optee R. Williams.

Also attending: Cllr. W. McClements (part), Cabinet Member Finance & Enterprise; Cllr. H. Rhodes, Cabinet Member Customer Services, Libraries & Transport; A. Astley, Assistant Director Customer & People Services; L. Higgins, Benefit Service Delivery Manager; S. Jones, Scrutiny Officer.

BFSC-14 MINUTES

RESOLVED – that the minutes of the meetings of the Budget & Finance Scrutiny Committee held on 2nd July 2013 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman.

BFSC-15 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Cllrs. K. Austin, S. Bentley, N. England, K. Guy and co-optees J. Ellis and F. Robinson.

BFSC-16 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The Chair reminded members that members who were private landlords had declared an interest and abstained when the Local Council Tax Scheme proposal had been to Full Council. It was unlikely that the discussion at this meeting would include issues relating to private landlords but relevant members should be mindful of the eventuality.

BFSC-17 WELFARE BENEFIT REFORM UPDATE

The Chair invited remarks from Cllr. W. McClements as he had to leave the meeting early for a prior engagement. Cllr. McClements said Discretionary Housing Payments were on budget and the Crisis Assistance was below budget so the current budget position was quite positive.

The Assistant Director (AD) welcomed the opportunity to return to scrutiny following members' earlier engagement in the development of the welfare benefit reform policies. Some issues would need to go back to Cabinet and the hope was to seek scrutiny support for the recommendations. The Benefit Service Delivery Manager (SDM) then gave a detailed presentation on the impact of policies:

1. Council Tax Support

- Council Tax Benefit (CTB) had been abolished and local authorities given discretion to design their own local Council Tax Support (CTS) scheme from April 2013 i.e. moving from a standardised national system to one with local variations.
- There was a projected £3.1m shortfall between the amount paid out in CTB in Telford and Wrekin and the amount paid to the authority for payment of CTS. The whole deficit had to be realised from the 10,742 working age claimants because pension age claimants were protected under national rules. Locally, people with a severe disability or in receipt of war disablement payments were also protected. The CTS was ratified by Council on 22nd November.
- The five main changes were:
 - Blanket 21% reduction in support for working age non-protected customers
 - Savings consideration reduced from £16k to £6k
 - Minimum £2.50 payment award
 - Abolition of second adult rebate (inequitable and low numbers affected)
 - Maximum period of backdated payments reduced from 6 months to 1 monthThere had been extensive consultation before final proposals were presented.
- The CTS scheme also allocated £65k to assist people unable to pay because of genuine financial hardship. As of 31st August there had been 175 applications; 168 had been approved; £9,850 (15.15%) of the budget had been committed. The main reason for non-approval was where customers had applied for both CTS assistance and Discretionary Housing Payment (DHP), and where one form of assistance was sufficient, awards tended to be made from DHP which is ring-fenced national funding to conserve the Council-funded CTS money.
- The number of summonses issued in July 2013 had increased by 918 compared to the same month last year. Summonses are issued for debt of £70 or more. Because of the small amounts collectable it could take a few months to accrue this level of debt so the picture was only starting to emerge.
- The reduction in CTS, and increase in properties liable for Council Tax, meant the amount of collectable Council Tax had increased by £5m overall. An additional £1.7m had been collected compared to the same point last year. Collection rates were showing a downward trend (April 2013 was 0.21% behind last year; August was 0.99% behind last year). So, although collection rates were down, more had been collected in real terms.
 - Cllr. W. McClements asked what the collection rate would be if all the first time Council Tax payers were taken out. The figures were not to hand at the meeting, but the SDM said that new payers accounted for the majority of the dip in collection rates.
 - Cllr. W. McClements reminded members that £600k provision had been made for bad debt and if the rate dipped it would eat into this. The AD assured members this would be monitored - all correspondence sent to customers was aimed at stopping summonses by encouraging customers to contact the

Council, and if a summons was issued it triggers action to agree repayment of the debt. It was too soon to speculate about how many people genuinely would not pay and this would be monitored over the coming months.

- Cllr. Seymour asked what proportion of the non-collection related to empty properties. The SDM did not have the figures to hand but said this did not seem to be a significant problem or trend, and the removal of discount from empty properties accounted for part of the additional £5m collectable CT.
- Cllr. A. McClements wanted to know how many actual summonses had been issued in July 2012 and 2013 to put the increase in context. The AD said this could be provided by the Revenues Service Delivery Manager after the meeting.
- The team had pro-actively telephoned people affected by the reduction and a range of flexible payment options were offered to encourage people to pay. A big Direct Debit campaign had been reasonably successful. Text reminders were being tried with an encouraging message to “please talk to us”. People identified as genuinely struggling were helped with top-up applications.
- DCLG had confirmed there would be no further transitional funding so it was likely that authorities which had not reduced CTS in year 1 would do in year 2. This was born out be feedback from authorities at a recent conference in London. Telford & Wrekin had not applied for the transitional grant because it left too great a deficit.
- Schemes introduced by authorities in year 1 fell into 4 categories:
 - Scheme 1: No change - no flat-rate cash cut (28%)
 - Scheme 2: Moderate change - flat-rate cash cut of 8.5% (33%)
 - Scheme 3: Large increase - flat-rate cash cut of 20% (14%)
 - Scheme 4: Severe increase - flat-rate cash cut >20% plus other significant change (21%)

This showed just under $\frac{3}{4}$ of authorities had introduced a less generous CTS scheme than the previous national scheme. The AD said that some authorities in Schemes 1-3 were struggling and looking at further reductions to survive.

- Cllr. S. Reynolds asked about feedback from other authorities on the impact of CTS. The SDM said that where known, none had seen a drastic reduction in collection rates and that collection was generally of an acceptable level which was similar to the picture in Telford & Wrekin. Cllr. A. McClements asked if there were any differences by type of authority and the SDM said there were no noticeable patterns.
- Cllr. W. McClements remarked that if the vast majority of non-payers were new payers then we would need to wait to see how the picture panned out. The AD said there was a need to change the culture so people got used to paying something. Cllr. W. McClements said he felt the 0.99% additional drop in the collection rate sounded reassuring and the AD agreed that this was better than had been expected. It was possibly helped by the fact that the Council had used encouragement and not taken a heavy-handed approach to first time payers.

- The CTS scheme for 2014/15 had to be ratified by Council in January 2014. Any proposed changes would require another formal consultation. Conclusions were still being drawn, but at this early stage it was felt that the level of reduction introduced was acceptable. The welfare benefit reforms would take time to bed in, and changes to housing benefit would have an impact, but on balance it was felt the safest option was not to make any changes to the scheme but allow it to remain in place for 2014/15 to bed in. A recommendation would be taken to Policy Review to retain the existing scheme with no change.
 - Cllr. W. McClements told members that work was also being done to look at how assistance could be cross-fertilised between areas to maximise resources. The AD said the Crisis Assistance fund was not ring-fenced so if the budget was under-spent it could be used to help other areas.
 - Cllr. A. McClements said that scrutiny had been concerned about the risk of over-spend of the Crisis Assistance fund. The AD felt that it had been a good decision to pass responsibility for crisis assistance to local authorities because they are in a better position to manage it more effectively.
 - The AD said that it would be helpful the recommendation to have support from scrutiny when it comes to Cabinet.
 - Cllr. Lawrence asked whether the funding for CTS would reduce in future years and Cllr. W. McClements replied that it would be reduced by a % rate and the reduction would need to be absorbed by the scheme. The AD pointed out that after a general election there may be changes to national policies in terms of protections and entitlements of pensioners.

Cllr. W. McClements left the meeting.

2. Discretionary Housing Payments

- DHP is funded annually by the Department of Work & Pensions (DWP). Funding is ring-fenced and under-spend goes back to DWP. The fund is to assist people at risk of serious financial hardship or loss of their home by topping-up housing benefit.
- DWP had increased funding for Telford & Wrekin from £102k for 2012/13 to £356,911 for 2013/14 to allow for the welfare reforms. The people most likely to need DHP were those affected by the social sector size criteria (“bedroom tax”).
- 2,613 households in Telford and Wrekin were affected by the bed-room tax, a very high % compared to other authorities, so this was a particular issue locally. Of these households:
 - 2,136 had one spare room and would lose an average £13pw (£56pm)
 - 477 had 2 or more spare rooms and would lose an average of £24pw (£104pm)
 - 1,463 (56%) of all affected households are only entitled to a one bedroom property.
 £2.5m less would be paid in housing benefit in the borough because of the

bedroom tax.

- A key change was the length of awards. In the past, top-ups tended to be short-term, but this year there were people who could not find a solution quickly (e.g. finding one-bedroom accommodation) and they may need to be awarded DHP for up to 12 months.
- The DHP Policy was approved by Cabinet in February 2013. The local policy included consideration of DHP for:
 - up to 3 months before the birth of a child if the spare room is needed for the child
 - longer term awards for under-occupation where suitable alternative accommodation cannot be found because of disability or illness
 - up to 3 months for foster carers between placements or longer during a placement if the shortfall cannot be found.
- DWP then introduced national concessions in March for:
 - disabled children unable to share a room
 - adults with a dependent in the armed services on operations but not in barracks
 - up to 52 weeks for foster carers with a foster child in the house or between placements.

These cases would be subsidised from DWP mainstream benefit funding and not by local authority DHP awards.

- There was a discussion and some concern about the fact that concessions were made for dependants in the armed services on active duty but not in barracks. Cllr. Seymour said it made sense to disallow rooms if the dependent had chosen to leave home and live in barracks.
- Cllrs. S. Reynolds and Tomlinson asked about concessions for children at university. The SDM clarified that if the intention of the student was to reside at home during the holidays and to reside at home after finishing the course, the extra room is allowed. If the student does not intend to return home during the holidays and does not intend to reside at home at the end of the course, the extra room is disallowed. In reality, this is difficult to police.
- In 2012/13 there were 462 DHP applications and £105k had been awarded. Since April 2013 there had been 660 applications, mostly in April. Officers had anticipated a huge increase, but even so the deluge swept them off their feet! There was an initial back-log but all applications had now been dealt with. £128k of the £356k budget had been committed which was about right at this point, and with two thirds of the pot remaining it was felt manageable within budget over the year. Applications had slowed to around 10 per week. Of the 660 applications, 523 had been successful and 137 refused.
 - Cllr. Seymour asked whether after the initial spike in April the monthly total had been consistently lower. The SDM confirmed this was the case, and although the numbers were higher than in previous years they were still considered manageable within budget.

- Cllr. Dugmore asked how 10 applications per week compared to last year and the SDM said last year there had been about half the number so numbers were high.
- Cllr. Tomlinson asked why the trend had increased and the SDM said 83% of applications were from people affected by the bedroom tax.
- Cllr. Tomlinson asked what the service's expectations had been and the SDM said it had been an unknown – they had expected an increase but just not so many so early on – and this could be due to social landlords encouraging tenants to apply up-front. Cllr. Dugmore said the publicity campaign could have had an impact and Cllr. S. Reynolds pointed out that the high percentage of people in the borough affected by the bedroom tax would increase numbers. The SDM agreed that there had been a lot of promotion to encourage applications and clearly people had listened. The AD emphasised that there were tight eligibility criteria and the team make consistent decisions so people were dealt with fairly. She assured members that applications were not refused for budget reasons – they were only refused if the applicant did not meet the criteria or the team was satisfied they could afford to make up the benefit shortfall themselves.
- Cllr. S. Reynolds asked what checks were done on applicants. The SDM explained that applicants must provide a detailed breakdown of income and expenditure. The team analyses this in detail to see where money is spent and what it is spent on – fuel, food, mobile phone contracts etc. The first step is to proactively help the person manage their budget, for example seeing if savings could be made on mobile phone or cable TV contracts, better value food, branded goods etc. If they are then still unable to afford their rent, they may be awarded DHP. Sometimes there was a solution but it could not be implemented straightaway in which case the applicant may be awarded a short-term top-up until they could put budget savings in place e.g. termination of contracts.
- Cllr. A. McClements wanted to know if a similar spike was expected next April. The SDM said that awards go across year-end so applicants would not need to re-apply for the new financial year and with numbers settling down it was unlikely they would see a similar spike next year.
- Cllr. Lawrence wanted to know how people had responded to assessments and decisions. The SDM said that people had reacted surprisingly well. Concerns about aggressive behaviour had not materialised. The assessment is honest and tough and they make no bones about it - and if people cannot afford to stay in their house they are told they will have to move. Most people accept the changes as sensible.
- Cllr. Tomlinson wanted to know if most applicants were visited. The SDM said that up until April everyone had been visited, but post-April there were too many applications to visit everyone so they had spoken to people on the telephone. These were long and detailed conversations to get to the heart of matters. Now the team was on top of the back-log, they had more capacity make home

visits especially if people were re-applying.

- 409 of the 523 successful applications had been short-term awards (3-6 months).
 - 36% were to give customers a chance to look for suitably sized accommodation
 - 37% were to allow people to adjust their finances
 - 17% were customers actively pursuing work to enable them to fund the shortfall
 - The remainder were for a variety of reasons

Based on FOI requests, “Insider Housing” magazine found Telford & Wrekin had the highest percentage increase in DHP of all English authorities. Many of the initial short-term awards were starting to expire and we were now starting to see re-applications from people who had not been able to find suitable smaller accommodation. This information was shared with the Housing Strategy Team (Assistant Directors of Family & Cohesion Services and Development, Business & Housing) to inform planning decisions.

- Data from Wrekin Housing Trust to the end of July showed that of around 2500 tenants affected by the bedroom tax 265 had moved into other homes. There were around 20,000 households registered on Choose Your Home with around 1,000 properties becoming vacant each year. There were around 550 more WHT tenants in arrears than at the start of April, equivalent to around £90k so there was clearly a problem with tenants not paying rent. To re-house all WHT households affected needing a one-bedroom property would take 10 years based on current vacancy rates, and this did not take account of new tenants coming on stream.
 - Cllr. S. Reynolds wanted to know if there had been any evictions. There had not been any yet, but by September there may be. No matter how much people want to move, they can’t because there is nowhere for them to move to. In Telford and Wrekin it would take 10 years churn to get people into the right sized accommodation, in Shropshire it would take about 3 years, which showed this is a particular problem for Telford & Wrekin.
 - Cllr. Tomlinson asked whether the government had considered policy variations for different authorities. The SDM said the Council had lobbied government on local parameters and that one size does not fit all but there were no known plans to change national policy.
 - Cllr. Tomlinson had heard about cases where she thought people had been declared bankrupt so they did not have to pay back-dated arrears unless they found a job and she felt this was a disincentive to finding work. The SDM could not respond as the particulars of the cases were unclear, but said that as far as he knew if a person was declared bankrupt, bad debt was written off, but he thought it was unlikely that people on benefits could claim bankruptcy. In any case, the danger would be that landlords (e.g. WHT) need to collect rent and if it is written off then the landlord could go bankrupt.
 - Cllr. Dugmore felt that WHT and other RSLs should be encouraged to build more one bedroom properties, but he did not see planning applications for smaller properties coming forward. The SDM said RSLs tended to have a strategy of building family homes which did not support the welfare reforms. The AD said there could be a business opportunity here and the RSLs as

commercial operators would see this but it may take time for development to come through. Cllr. Thompson said a lot of smaller properties had been auctioned off by RSLs in the past, but he thought they should retain them for people affected by the welfare reforms to move into. The SDM said perhaps the benefit changes would influence RSLs in a different direction. Cllr. Tomlinson said she had heard one RSL say that a high concentration of one bedroom properties in one area could create problems and they had moved to family homes.

- Cllr. Seymour knew of a resident who wanted to move from a 3-bed to a 2-bed house because of the reduced subsidy, but they had not been able to move because of the shortage of 2 bed properties. She felt the greatest demand now seemed to be for 2 bed properties and the demand for 3 bed properties had reduced. The SDM said that some authorities had reported having larger family homes which they were unable to fill, but this hadn't happened here. WHT's rent arrears policy was that tenants in arrears are not moved while they are in arrears which means that the arrears grow. Members expressed consternation about this.
- Cllr. Seymour wanted to know if RSLs were doing all they could to direct people to support before arrears build up. The SDM said that WHT certainly did and many of the referrals in April had come from them. WHT was very proactive in safeguarding tenants. The other RSLs were also proactive, although they had comparatively fewer tenants.
- 148 families in the borough were affected by the overall benefit cap. The DHP policy did not include top-ups for shortfalls from the benefit cap because government considered these families to have significant income and a decision had been made that the local DHP policy should not undermine government intentions. Visits had been made to the majority of families, and officers were satisfied that the majority had sufficient income to meet the shortfall in benefit, with the exception of 2 families who were genuinely in need and at risk of homelessness. Exceptional short-term awards have been granted to the 2 families and this will be reflected in the report to Cabinet. The AD emphasised that the exceptional cases involved children and had the families been made homeless the cost to the Council would potentially be much higher and the impact on the children greater.
 - Cllrs. S. Reynolds and McClements both said that children safeguarding issues must be considered and the AD said Council policy was to keep children safely at home.
- Overall, the DHP policy was felt to be working well and the budget manageable.

3. Local Crisis and Resettlement Assistance

- The Local Crisis and Resettlement Assistance Policy (LCRA) had started on 2nd April following the abolition by DWP of the Crisis Loans and Community Care Grant elements of the Social Fund. This was a new responsibility and policy for the Council so there had been some nervousness because it was an “unknown”.

- DWP had awarded £448k programme funding to Telford & Wrekin for 2013/14. This was a reduction on what had been paid out in the borough through the Social Fund although it was generally acknowledged that the Social Fund had been open to abuse. £88k had been ring-fenced as a contingency to support partners and the remaining £400k was profiled over the 12 months.
- To the end of July there had been 329 applications and 238 awards had been made. Officers were managing the budget tightly and only approving expenditure for those most in need.
 - Cllr. S. Reynolds wanted to know if the scheme had remained cashless. The SDM said it definitely had. If people were in genuine need, appropriate assistance is provided but not one single cash payment had been made. Around a third of applications had been withdrawn early on when they had been probed. Some applications had been pursued until people found out that they would not get cash and had then withdrawn. Some did not go forward because a better or more sustainable solution had been found e.g. working with Jobcentre Plus to unlock sanctions, although that could be quite difficult.
- Key assistance included gas and electricity meter credits, fridges, cookers, beds and washing machines. Vouchers were issued for small amounts (£10-£30) for gas and electricity credit to tide people over until their next benefit payment. Vouchers could be e-mailed to a local library or collected from the Council office and had a 2 hour life so the person had to take it to a newsagent within the time limit and with proof of ID. This limited opportunities to sell the vouchers on. Good quality, good value used furniture and white goods were provided whenever possible. There were four main suppliers (Chairs & Spares, Bailey's Reuse, AW Appliances and Reviive) but they were only able to meet about two thirds of the demand, so around one third of goods were procured new from the best value retailers – Argos was the cheapest. New goods were only provided as a last resort. Beds and mattresses were provided new for quality and hygiene reasons.
 - Cllr. Lawrence asked whether the Council could buy in bulk from suppliers and store goods until they were needed. The SDM said there had been discussions with Chairs & Spares about whether goods could be kept solely for the Council but it was difficult because they could not cut off supply to the public. Cllr. Lawrence said he thought there must be a way for the Council to build up its own stock and hold in reserve to cut costs. The SDM said there were also issues with electrical appliances needing to be tested and approved, and Cllr. Lawrence said that goods could be bought PAC tested and that they could be supplied as part of the Crisis Assistance scheme or sold on. The AD said that once the scheme had been up and running for a while, they could have a look at this, and the SDM said that they had had no idea what demand would be at the start of the scheme.
 - Cllr. Tomlinson said there were a lot of working, re-usable items (fridges etc.) taken to the tip and suggested it may be worth looking at this – for example having a collection service and spreading the message by word of mouth. The SDM said Reviive has a collection service and also had a contract with WHT for

property clearance (tinned food was donated to the Food Bank) so perhaps they could do something. There were some serviceable items that people just wouldn't take, even in crisis, like non-flat screen TVs. Cllr. Tomlinson suggested more could be done to promote donations.

- Some items had been provided which were not within the initial scope of the policy, such as clothing, bus tickets, house removal, carpets, a vacuum cleaner and skip hire.
 - Members questioned the justification for providing some of these items, and officers gave some scenarios to explain the circumstances which members agreed were all valid reasons and brought home the very human stories behind the black and white information.
- A decision had been made not to include food parcels within the remit of the scheme because it would replicate the work of the Crisis Network and Food Banks which were managed by the CAB. The Food Banks sourced mainly from voluntary donations but the Council had contributed £281 for essentials like nappies and baby food if there was a shortage of donations. £19k of the contingency budget for partners had been committed as a contribution to the Food Bank Co-ordinator post. To date, the Crisis Network had provided food parcels to 1,699 households which was phenomenal, and had helped reduced demand on the Council.
 - Cllr. Tomlinson said she had received a letter from the Food Bank asking for the £1000 community chest funding to be donated to the Food Bank and she wanted to know if this was a sign that they were struggling to meet demand. The AD said perhaps they were looking at getting charity status to enable them to apply for funding, and the SDM said so far the Food Bank has survived on donations and perhaps this was a sign that they were proactively preparing for the future in case donations dried up.
 - Cllr. Seymour wanted to know what checks were done on people asking for food parcels and whether the CAB had similar checks to the Council. The SDM said he could not say definitely but his understanding was that there were no criteria. Cllr. McClements said the Co-operative & Communities Scrutiny Committee was interested in scoping some work with the Crisis Network / Food Bank / Credit Union to see if there was anything useful for scrutiny to look at. Cllr. G. Reynolds clarified that from a meeting with the manager of the Crisis Network, her understanding was that there were no checks for the first parcel, but if the person re-visited they were signposted to the CAB to do checks.
- There had been no demand for the emergency out of hours service, fronted by the Council's Emergency Duty Team, even over the bank holiday, so the service had reverted back to the standard Monday-Friday, 8.30am-5.15pm. Arrangements for over Christmas were being considered.
 - Cllr. Tomlinson pointed out that this may change if there was a bad winter and people were affected by the cold. The SDM said that they had forecast greater demand in the winter so the budget profile had been weighted to the colder

months and they would review whether demand moved to weekends or evenings/ nights. The AD said there was already an out of hours service for children, and they would monitor to keep an eye on this.

- Cllr. Tomlinson said she was concerned about people who were ill or old and frail and the SDM said they had anticipated an increase in demand and bigger payments over the winter months because vulnerable people may need round the clock heating.
- A number of other Council areas supporting vulnerable people purchased personal items for people in crisis or at risk and where it was expedient for the Council to do this. Work was being done with each of these teams to align policies and consolidate procurement through the LCRA scheme. This would make this type of spending easier to control and monitor and would release the funding currently spent by service areas to invest elsewhere or save.

This concluded the presentation and the Chair thanked officers for a comprehensive report. There were then a number of questions and comments as follows:

- Cllr. Seymour asked about the level of crisis assistance funding in the future and the AD replied that the grant had been allocated for two years (2013/14-2014/15) but we don't know what funding there will be for the third year and there was no certainty.
- Cllr. A. McClements said it had been an excellent presentation. She felt success was due to getting out and talking to people. She reminded members that the two scrutiny committees had worked together on the development of the policies, and their work had been nominated for a Good Scrutiny Award. As part of that review she had met the Chief Executive of the Wrekin Housing Trust who had given good feedback on the partnership working between the Council and the Trust.
- Cllr. A. McClements proposed that the Committees support the recommendation that the CTS scheme remain in place for 2014/15. She gave her thanks to officers and said they seemed to have thought through so many things that other people may not have thought about and she felt the report was good news and she was confident that people were being supported.
- Cllr. Tomlinson asked about the impact on staff capacity and morale. The SDM said workload was something they had no control over but one of the biggest impacts was the emotional toll. The team were working with people in really genuine need and this had an emotional impact.
- Cllr. Tomlinson asked how staff were supported with this. The AD did regular floor walks, and the SDM had regular meetings with the team. Some staff were comfortable dealing with customers face to face in First Point and others were more comfortable supporting people on the telephone, so managers try to facilitate staff preferences and skills. The SDM said the team was small – only 6 staff – and they had to make some difficult decisions, but the team was absolutely fantastic and they had embraced change and taken it to their hearts and they worked incredibly hard to help people and were very creative in finding solutions.

- Cllr. Dugmore said he found it very reassuring that officers knew their brief so well.
- The Chair referred to Cllr. A. McClements proposal that the Committees support the service's recommendation to Policy Review and Cabinet and sought members' agreement. All members were in agreement, but Cllr. Seymour said that if the situation changed the Scrutiny Committees would like to be alerted. The Chair agreed there should be a further update to scrutiny and the AD suggested a good time would be at the end of the financial year and she would be happy to share an update then.

Cllr. Rhodes, the Assistant Director and Service Delivery Manager left the meeting.

The Chair then confirmed again with all members that they agreed with supporting the recommendation for the retention of the CTS scheme and asked members who disagreed to make their views known, and all members affirmed support. It was agreed that the Scrutiny Officer would draft a response to be circulated to members for approval.

Cllr. McClements reminded members of the Co-operative & Communities Scrutiny Committee that a meeting would be convened shortly to consider the report and recommendations on the review of the Employee Commission and Co-operative Values and to discuss further work related to the welfare reforms, possibly around the credit unions. Members of the Co-operative & Communities Scrutiny Committee then left the meeting.

RESOLVED: - that the Committees support the recommendation to Policy Review and Cabinet of the retention of the Council Tax Support scheme subject to approval of the final wording of the response to be drafted by the Scrutiny Officer.

BFSC-18 WORK PROGRAMME AND CHAIR'S UPDATE

Members of the Budget & Finance Scrutiny Committee remained for the final item.

The Chair updated members on items for the work programme:

- Members had been invited to the Audit Committee meeting for the item on Capital Receipts at 6.00pm on 17th September. The item would be held in exempt session. Members were asked to submit questions in advance by Friday, 6th September so officers could address them in the report at the meeting. This was to focus the discussion not to stifle debate and members would be able to ask any questions on the day. Mr. Williams said he would not know what questions he would ask until he heard the information presented at the meeting.
- Cllr. Evans' meeting with Jonathan Eatough, Assistant Director Law, Democracy & Public Protection about Single Status had been delayed until 4th September.
- The July Cabinet Financial Monitoring Report had been circulated. Members should consider the report and forward suggestions of issues for the Committee to

look at.

- The Committee had been told that reports on generating commercial income would go to Cabinet in September. The Scrutiny Officer would forward relevant reports for members to identify issues for scrutiny.
- The next meeting would be on 22nd October to receive and update on the Cost Improvement Plan. Outstanding information from the June meeting would be requested again for this meeting. The Securing Permanency reports would be circulated quarterly for information and the next was due in September and would be circulated as soon as available.
- Dates had been circulated to members for meetings in December-February for scrutiny of the budget proposals. Some adjustments may need to be made nearer the time depending on the dates of Cabinet meetings and the Chair asked members to be flexible. The Chair suggested holding an informal meeting when the proposals were published for the committee to agree lines of questioning and which cabinet and officers they wanted to meet during the process and there was general agreement for the idea.

The meeting ended at 8.25pm.

Chair:.....

Date:.....

Safeguarding and Early Help - Cost Improvement Plan 13/14

Position As At - August 2013

A number of targets were set and included within the Council Budget Strategy for 13/14. The table below shows progress against these targets at the end of August 2013

Most significant actions completed Since Start of Plan (Sept 2012)

- Social Worker (SW) recruitment drive has resulted in a reduction of Agency SWs from 14.5 to 7 as at 30/08/13
- Successful participation in phase 2 of Step Up to Social Work campaign has resulted in recruitment of high calibre candidates to commence jobs in Sept
- Young Persons in residential care whose needs could be met in foster care or supported lodgings identified; 2 have already moved, 8 more planned by October
- Resource Allocation Management Panel (RAMP) has been established to manage (reduce) admissions to care
- Contract Carer identified, first placement made in May
- Securing Permanence Group established which will be used to develop options for reducing the average time spent in care (11 below)
- Improvement in timeliness of approving foster carers, and improved conversion rate of enquiries to approvals

Actions in progress

- Phase 3 candidates for Step Up to SW recruited
- Phase 2 of work to identify YPs who could move from residential care
- Discussions with partners re intensive fostering option for young offenders as alternative to residential care
- IEWM to review the fostering service has been received and recommendations are being delivered as part of the service action plan.

Actions for next month

- Commence discussions with potential candidates to return from external residential care to re-provided Jigsaw accommodation (Queensway)
- Identify fostered children who would benefit if their carers applied for Special Guardianship Orders

No.	Description	Target No.	Forecast No.	Variation on No.	Target Saving £k	Achieved £k	Variation on £k	Increase in demand £k	Comments
Objective 1 - Recruitment & Retention									
1	Reduce no. of agency social workers (April 13)	6	7.5	1.5	300	275	25		At the end of August there were still 7 Agency SWs (target 6); however the caseloads of 2 SW on maternity leave have been absorbed. The rise has been caused by significant staffing issues in the CiC team, recruitment activity should reduce the numbers to 5 by September. Reconfiguration of SW teams (Nov onwards) should enable us to achieve the midyear target of 2 soon after xmas
2	Reduce no. of agency social workers (Sept 13)	2	5	3					
3	Reduce no. of agency social workers (end of March 14)	0	0	0					
Objective 2 - Placement Strategy									
4	Reduce no. in residential placement (April 13)	40	45	5					
5	Reduce no. in residential placement (March 14)	32	45	13	911	752	159		Early success in identifying number of CiC to step-down from high cost residential placements in line their care plan. Five YPs have moved.
6	Reduce no. in residential placement (March 14 with 1 contract carer)	30	45	15	114	89	25		Contract carer identified and in place. One high-cost residential placement placed with internal contract carer for 9 months.
	Cost avoidance due to contract carer					55			Since May 2013 Carer has second placement, resulting in avoided additional turnover costs in year of £55k.
	Demand - new admissions to residential							1,016	It has not been possible to avoid 12 new external residential placements since 01/04/13. Some of these children were already in placements and have transferred to Residential.
Objective 3 - Review Approach/Strategy for Reducing CiC									
7	Children in Care (CiC) total no. (April 13) (baseline band 300-310 (306 actual))	300	320	20					
8, 9 & 10	CiC total no (end of March 14)	294	317	23	556	84	472		Savings from external fostering placements reviewed and progressed through Resource Allocation Management Panel (RAMP), where 5 children been supported to leave care and were not part of original step-down numbers. Small saving arising from reduction in number of children subject to a child protection plan. Target savings from this objective are now included in objective 8 due to the difficulty in capturing the savings information.
	CP plan reduction - Dec 12 baseline (April 13)	9	18	9					
	CP plan reduction - March 13 baseline (end of March 2014)	21	21	0					
11	Average time spent in care reduced by (weeks)	6	not known as at April 2013						
	Demand from new admissions							380	Despite RAMP it has not been possible to avoid admissions of 62 children to care since 01/04/13, although 60 have left care.
Objective 4. Utilise Commissioning Approach									
12	New Commissioning Approach – Target Saving 13/14	-	-		317	114	203		Driving down placement costs and relating JIGSAW contract. JIGSAW contract is full year saving based on 4 beds occupied (2 block and 2 spot). Further savings are currently being investigated regarding any out of county returners to Jigsaw (using spot bed provision) and review of high cost external fostering placements.
	Total Saving by 31/3/14				2,198	1,370	883	1,396	
	Overall Saving by 31/03/15				3,392				

Children in Care Monthly Performance Dashboard

August 2013



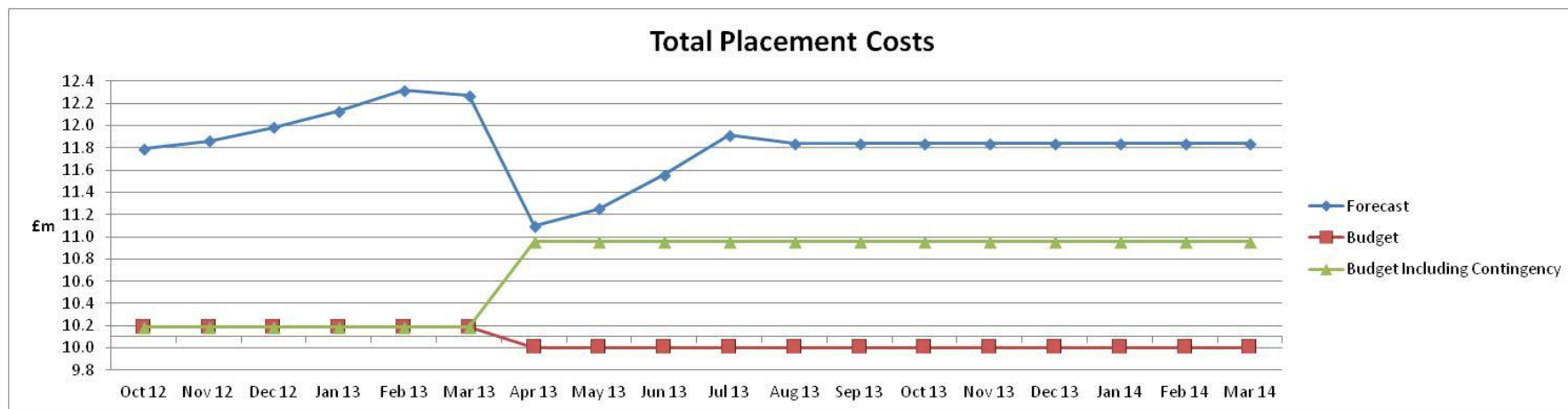
Key examples of progress on delivery of cost improvement plan

Obj 1- Recruit SWs, reduce use of Agency staff; The 5 step up students have been recruited to SW jobs, 4 will be registered from Sept/Oct. Telford staff helped selected step up students for cohort 3. A scheme for progression from SW to SSW should be agreed by the end of Sept. At the end of August there were still 7 Agency SWs (target 6); however the caseloads of 2 SW on maternity leave have been absorbed. Reconfiguration of SW teams (November onwards) should enable us to achieve the midyear target of 2 early in the new year

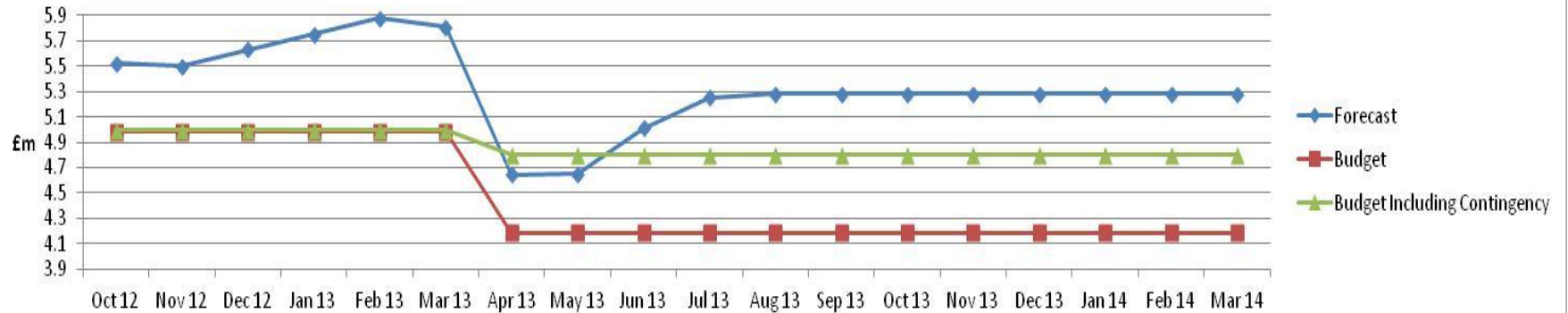
Obj 2-Reduce residential and external fostering placements 2 YPs in residential care whose needs could be met by foster or supported accommodation placements moved in March, 8 more by October. 8 more (4 disabled children) will become 18 before April 2014. Whilst this, and the increasing proportion of children fostered internally, is very positive, it has not been possible to avoid 12 ext residential and 16 ext fostering placements since 01/04/13. The new lower cost Jigsaw provision starts in Oct 2013. Partnership discussions to provide intensive foster placements have begun

Obj 3-Reduce numbers of CIC; Resource Allocation Management Panel -chaired by an Assistant Director, to scrutinise potential and recent admission and make sure support is in place to maintain children at home wherever possible or return them swiftly if this can be achieved safely. Despite some very creative packages it has still been necessary to admit 62 children since 01/04/13. The functioning of RAMP is being reviewed to focus attention on cost reduction for expensive placements as well as “Step Down” in type of placement

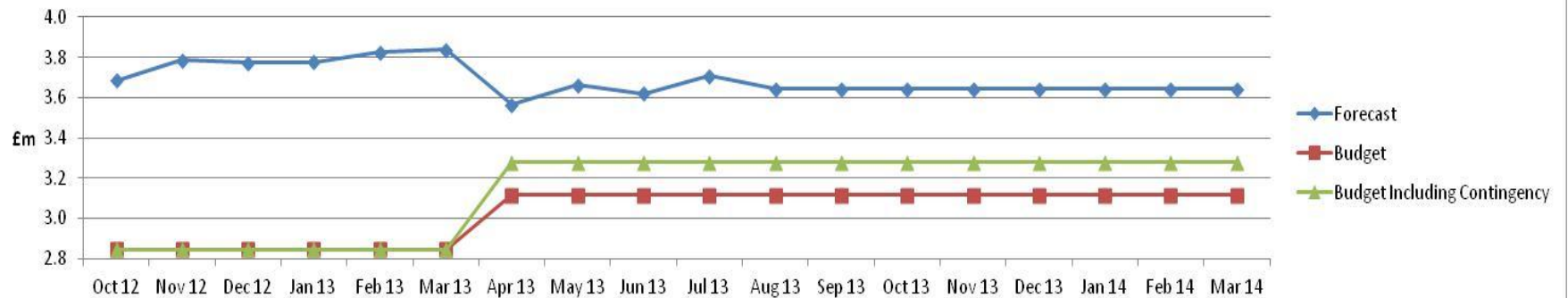
Obj 4- Better procurement and Service redesign; Regional commissioning activity has reduced the unit costs of residential and external fostering placements. We have received the final report from IEWM to review the delivery model for fostering. Model to improve support vulnerable pregnant women who have previously had children placed in care is under development. Changes in Family Connect and collaborative working with and between the various SW teams are enabling the Community Social Work team to move closer to intended remit of the majority of time being spent on providing advice and consultation to other Lead Professionals rather than holding a full caseload



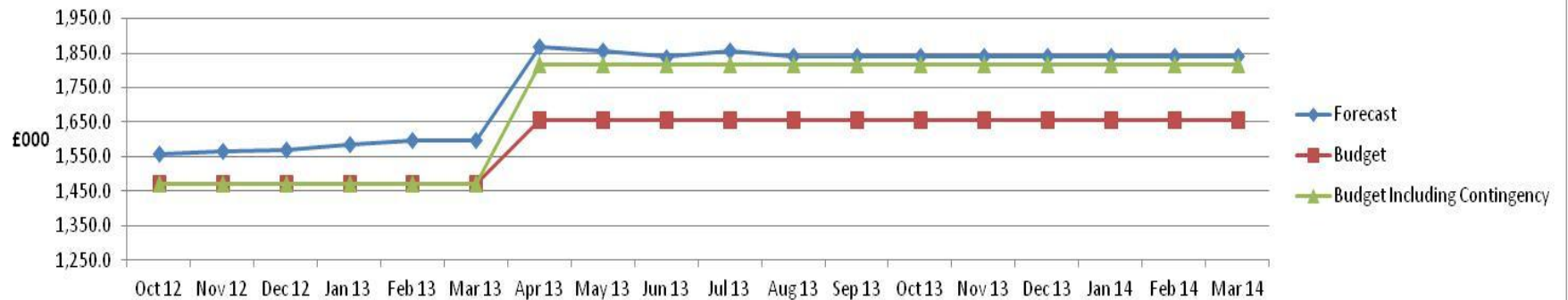
Residential



External Fostering

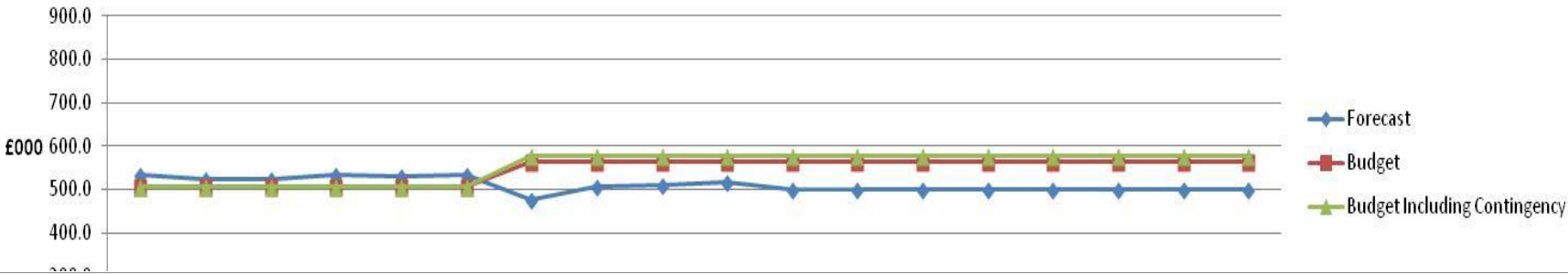


Internal Fostering

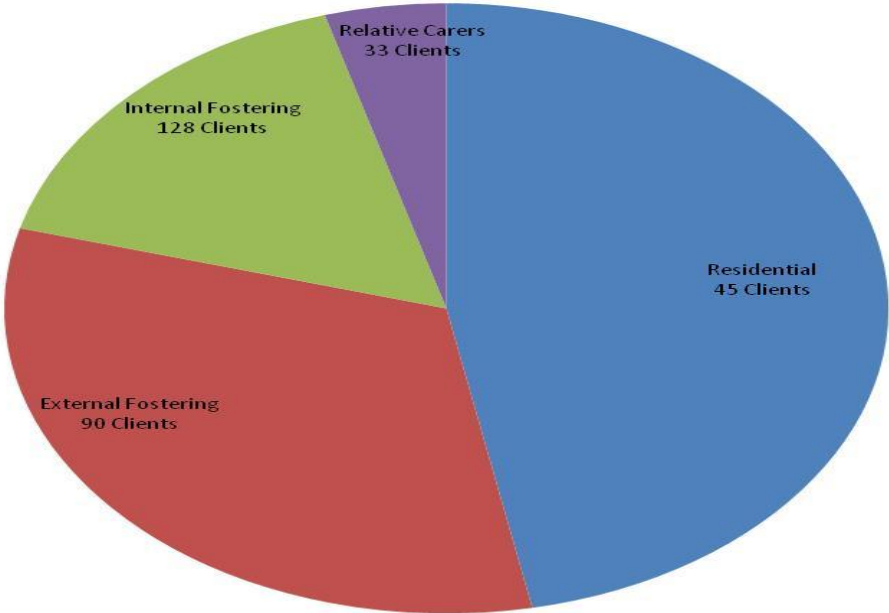


Placement Cost Analysis – Year 2013/2014

Relative Carers



Total Cost of Placements 2013/14



VACANCY AND RECRUITMENT INFORMATION 31/08/13

Staff Vacancy and Recruitment Statistics August 31st 2013.

Team	Establishment			Vacancies			Agency Social Worker			Notice Given (Resignation, Retirement, Maternity & Adoption leave)			Job Offer Accepted			Long Term Sick > 3 Weeks			Maternity Leave or secondment			NQS in post							
	TM	ASWP	SSW	SW	TM	ASWP	SSW	SW	TM	ASWP	SSW	SW	TM	ASWP	SSW	SW	TM	ASWP	SSW	SW	TM		ASWP	SSW	SW	SW			
Emergency Duty Team	1	0	4.5	0	0	0	0.5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0			
Children in Care Team	1		3	6.5	0		2	1	0	0	2	0		0	1	0		1	1	0		0	0	0	0	2			
Family & Friends Fostering	1		1	5	0		0	1	0	0	0	0		0	1	0		0	1	0		0	0	0	0	1			
Mainstream Fostering Team	1	1	1	6.48	0		0	1	0	0	0	0		0	0	0		0	0	1	0	0	0	0M	0	1			
(Central) ACMTeam	1		2	5	0		0	0	0	0	0	0		0	0	0		0	0	0		0M	0	0	0	2			
(North) ACM Team	1		2	5	0		0	0	0	0	0	0		0	0	0		0	0	0		0M	0	0M	0	3			
(South) ACM Team	1	1	2	5	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1			
Child Protection Team	1		5	3	0		2.8	1.8	0	3	0M			0	0	0		0	0	0		0	0	0	0	0			
Safeguarding Duty Team/ Family Connect	1	0	1	4	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0		0	0	0		0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0			
Community Social Work Team	1		4	2	0		0	0	0	0	0	0		0	0	0		0	0	0		0	0	0	0	2			
DCT - Inclusion and support	1		0	1	1		0	0	0	0	0	0		0	0	0		0	0	0		0	0	0.5	0	0			
DCT	1	1	0	4.6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0		0	0	0		0	0	0		0	0	0	0	3			
	12	3	25.5	47.6	1	0	6.3	5.8	0	4	3	1	0	0	6	0	0	1	4	0	0	0	0	3	1	0	0	3	14

Key

ACM Assessment and Case Management

SSW withdrew application after being offered job in CIC

DCT Disabled children Team

Reconfiguration will reduce some SSW posts and replaced by SW which are easier to recruit to

Safeguarding Service

Family and Cohesion

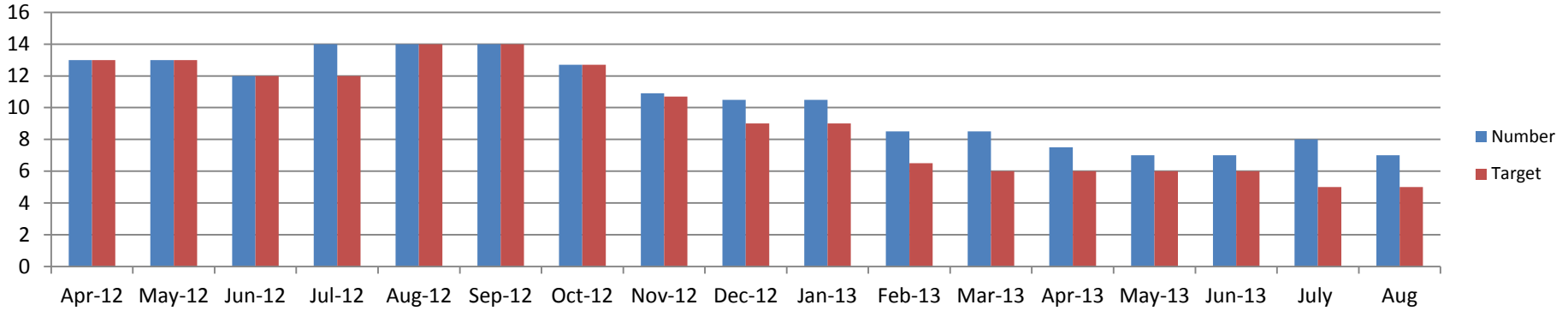
Improve the recruitment and retention of SW staff to reduce the numbers of agency SWs (Objective 1)

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	Apr-13	May-13	Jun-13	July	Aug
Number	13	13	12	14	14	14	12.7	10.9	10.5	10.5	8.5	8.5	7.5	7	7	8	7
Target	13	13	12	12	14	14	12.7	10.7	9	9	6.5	6	6	6	6	5	5

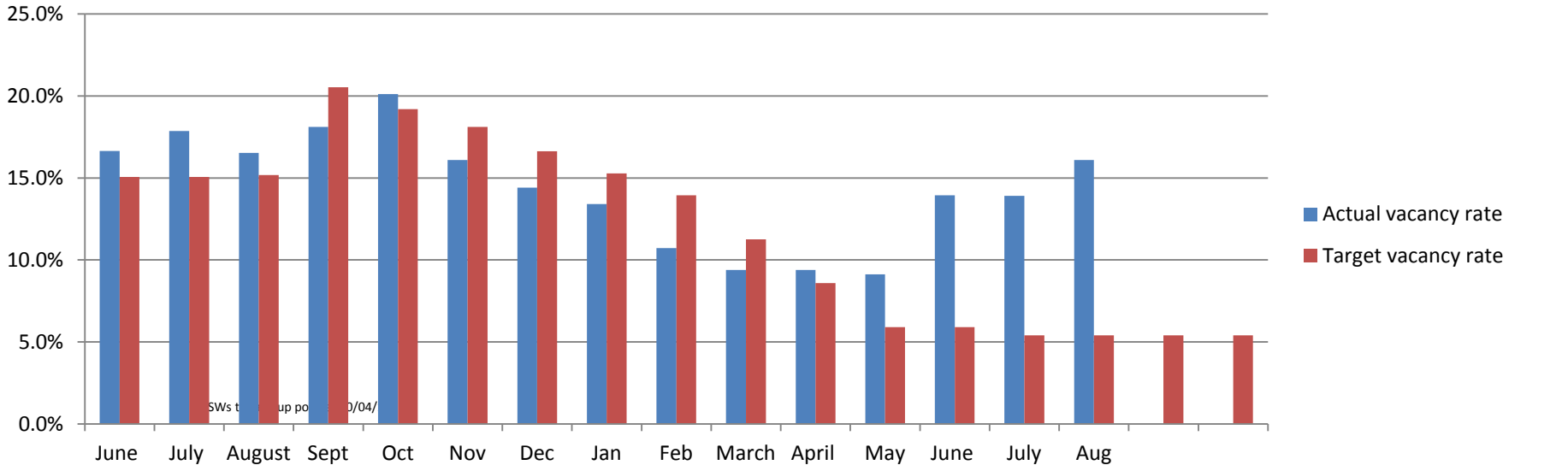
Increase in Agency SWs - 1 in the Helpdesk (impact of Ofsted) 1 in CIC team (impact of longterm sickness and Ofsted)
 Increase in Agency SWs - 2 in CIC team, remodel of service

01/07/2012, targets reset
 01/07/13 - targets reset



	April	May	June	July	August	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	March	April	May	June	July	Aug
Actual vacancy rate	15.1%	16.5%	16.6%	17.9%	16.5%	18.1%	20.1%	16.1%	14.4%	13.4%	10.7%	9.4%	9.4%	9.1%	13.9%	13.9%	16.1%
Target vacancy rate	15.1%	15.1%	15.2%	20.5%	19.2%	18.1%	16.6%	15.3%	13.9%	11.3%	8.6%	5.9%	5.9%	5.4%	5.4%	5.4%	5.40%

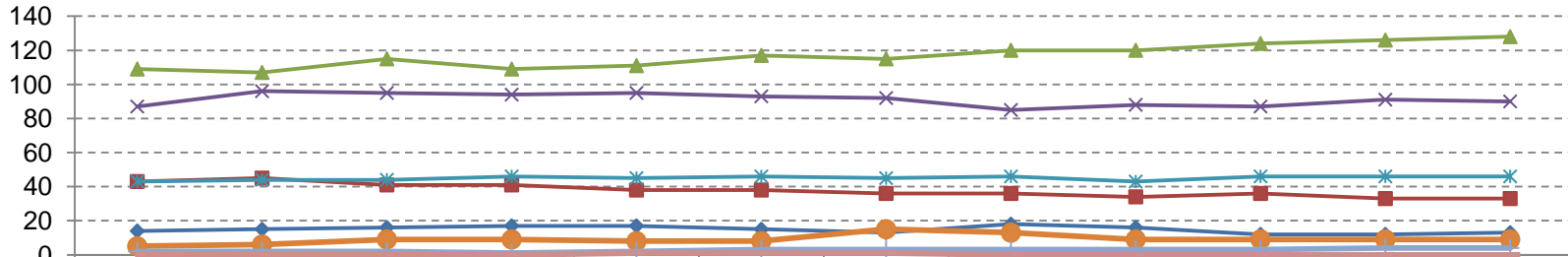
2012-13 Target not met as 1SSW withdrew during March
 5 Step up SWs recruited
 5 job offers accepted



Improve the recruitment and retention of SW staff to reduce the numbers of agency SWs (Objective 1)

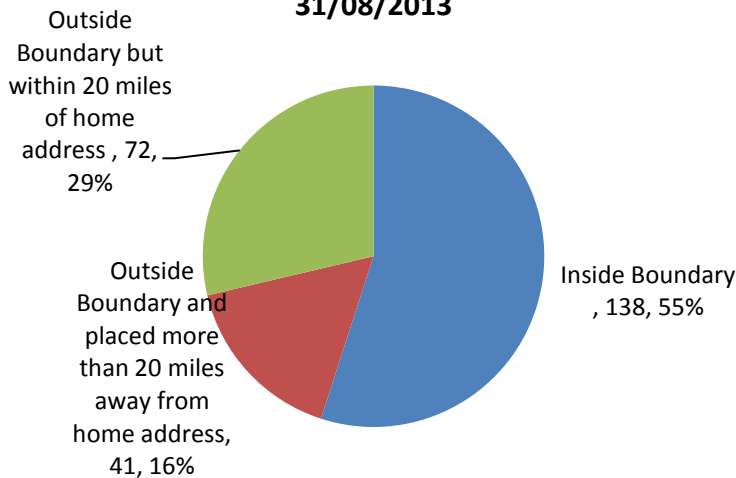
Number of Children In Care / Supportive Accommodation at Month End by Placement Type

(Rolling Year Data shown on graph)



	30.09.12	31.10.12	30.11.12	31.12.12	31.01.13	28.02.13	31.03.13	30.04.13	31.05.13	30.06.13	31.07.13	31.08.13
Placed for Adoption	14	15	16	17	17	15	13	18	16	12	12	13
Q1 - Rel/Friend	43	45	41	41	38	38	36	36	34	36	33	33
Q2 - Local Auth Carer	109	107	115	109	111	117	115	120	120	124	126	128
Q2 - Agency Carer	87	96	95	94	95	93	92	85	88	87	91	90
Residential Placements	43	44	44	46	45	46	45	46	43	46	46	46
P1 - Placed with Parents	5	6	9	9	8	8	15	13	9	9	9	9
P2 - Supportive Lodgings	2	2	2	1	2	3	3	3	3	3	4	4
R5 - YOI or Prison	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	0

Children placed in foster care by distance from home - 31/08/2013



Overall 78% (251/323) of our looked after children are placed in foster care, including relative/friend carers. At the same point last year the number of children placed in foster care was 235 out of a total of 299 children in care (78.6%).

At 31/08/2013, 128 children were placed with Telford & Wrekin foster carers which is an increase of 25 children from the same point last year. This represents 39.6% of children being placed with internal carers as a % of all children in care (128/323).

Compared to the same point in 2012 there has been a 24.7% increase on children placed with internal carers. (103 in 2012 compared to 128 at July 2013).

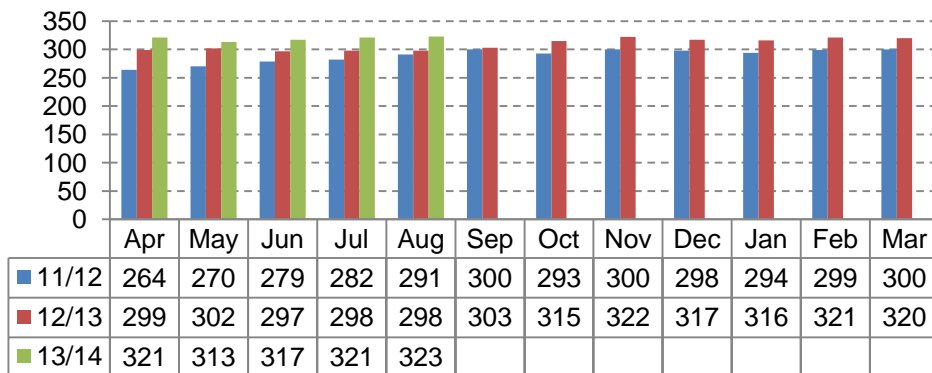
The pie chart to the left shows the children placed in foster care (including LA foster care, agency and relative/friend placements) by distance from their home address. 83.7% (210/251) of children in foster care are placed within 20 miles of their home address, 55% (138/251) of these children were placed within T&W boundary. 16% (41/251) are placed over 20 miles away from their home address. This mirrors the situation at the same time last year.

13 Children are currently placed for adoption.

Ensure there are sufficient placements to meet need and reduce the numbers in residential care and external Fostering (Objective 2)

Number of Children In Care at Month End

(Please note: these figures were accurate at the time of reporting, however may vary slightly due to changes in recording)



New Children In Care Episodes by Age Group and by percentage of new CIC population

Age Group	01/04/2012 - 31/03/2013	As % of new CIC	01/04/2013- 31/08/2013	As % of new CIC	Forecast based on new to date
Under 1	31	27.2%	19	30.6%	46
1-4 Years	22	19.3%	15	24.2%	36
5-9 Years	19	16.7%	7	11.3%	17
10-15 Years	35	30.7%	20	32.3%	48
16+ Years	7	6.1%	1	1.6%	2
Total	114	100%	62	100%	149

During 2011/12 the average number of children in care was 289. During 2012/13 the average number of children in care monthly was 309. This was a 6.9% increase, although it should be noted that there was a decrease of 22% in children admitted to care between 2011/12 to 2012/13. Since 1 April 2013, one young person has been remanded to care. Based on the forecast to date, this would be a 30.7% Increase, 114 in 2012-13 to 149 currently forecast in 2013/14.

Period of care end reason	Cessations between 2012-2013 by age at end date							Cessations between April – August 2013 by age at end date						
	Under 1	1-4 Years	5-9 Years	10-15 Years	16+ Years	Grand Total	As % of all cessations	Under 1	1-4 Years	5-9 Years	10-15 Years	16+ Years	Grand Total	As % of all cessations
E11 - Adopted – application unopposed	1	9	0	0	0	10	10.3%	0	1	0	0	0	1	2%
E12 - Adopted, consent dispensed with	0	12	0	0	0	12	12.4%	1	5	1	0	0	7	12%
E4 - Returned home to live with parents (no order)	5	10	6	12	0	33	34.0%	3	5	4	13	2	27	45%
E41 - Returned home - Residence order	1	2	0	0	0	3	3.0%	1	0	0	1	0	2	3%
E43 - Special guardianship order made to former foster carers	0	0	1	2	0	3	3.0%	0	2	0	0	0	2	3%
E44 - Special guardianship order made to carers other than former foster carers	0	1	0	0	0	1	1.0%	0	0	0	0	0	0	0%
E5 - Independent arrangement with formalised support	0	0	1	0	21	22	23.0%	0	0	0	0	13	13	22%
E7 - Transferred to adult social services	0	0	0	0	4	4	4.1%	0	0	0	0	1	1	2%
E8 - CLA ceased for any other reason	2	1	2	1	3	9	9.2%	0	0	1	2	2	5	8%
E9 - Sentenced to custody	0	0	0	0	0	0	0.0%	0	0	0	0	2	2	3%
Grand Total	9	35	10	15	28	97	100.00%	5	13	6	16	20	60	100%

Reduce the numbers of children in care (Objective 3)

Unit costs – 31/08/2013

Placement Type	Children in Care at 31.03.13	Weekly Unit Cost 2012/13	Children in Care at 30.06.13	Weekly Unit Cost 30.06.13	Children in Care at 31.07.13	Weekly Unit Cost 31.07.13	Children in Care at 31.08.13	Weekly Unit Cost 31.08.13
Placed for Adoption	14	N/A	11	N/A	12	N/A	13	N/A
Relative/Friend Carer	36	413	36	£425	33	£409	33	£412
LA Carer	114	416	125	£431	126	£451	128	£452
Agency Foster Carer	94	£821	87	£841	91	£846	90	£841
Residential Placements	45	£2,910	46	£2,784	45	£2,685	45	£2,684
Placed with Parents	14	N/A	9	N/A	9	N/A	9	N/A
Supportive Lodgings	3	N/A	3	N/A	4	N/A	4	N/A
Other Placement	0	N/A	0	N/A	1	N/A	1	N/A
TOTAL =	320	£888*	317	£853*	321	£858*	323	£862

- Unit Cost for Local Authority Carer and Relative Friend Carer calculation revised at 31.10.2012.
- Unit costs for these both placement types now include an apportionment for overheads.
- Overheads relate to both the Social work Fostering team, management and other associated support costs.
- Residential Placement Unit cost reduction from 12/13 to 13/14 relates to savings from re-tender of Castle Care contract at Jigsaw.
- * The Total weekly unit cost is calculated by dividing the full year forecast (including above overheads) for all placements by the total number of weeks forecast for all placements.

Reduce costs through better procurement and service redesign (Objective 4)

Performance Area	Target	August 2013	Benchmarking Data	Status and Comments	2012/13	Good performance direction
% of LAC aged 10-16 in foster placement or placed for adoption	Target 82%	77.5% (93/120)	No benchmarking data available	4 of the children not in foster care in this cohort are in residential schools, 1 is in a secure unit, the other 22 children are placed in homes or hostels.	81.6 (93/114)	Higher = Better
Number of looked after children adopted during the year as a percentage of the number of children looked after 6 months plus at month end	Target 10%	3.0% (8/273)	WMG Q3 Avg – 7.0%	There are currently 13 children placed for adoption.	10% (27/268)	Higher = Better
Adoptions within best interest timescales	100%	100% (8/8) 8 children have been adopted as at 31/08/2013	All England Avg – 11/12 – 74.0% SN Avg11/12 - 72.0% WMG Q3 Avg- 62.75%	Timescales from decision making through to placing children from adoption and being adopted are very positive.	100% (23/23)	Higher = Better
Increase in numbers of children placed with internal carers	20 additional children placed with internal mainstream carers	13 additional children since 01/04/13	Not Available	As at the end March 2013 there were 115 children placed with mainstream carers (36% of all CIC), as at 31/08/13 there were 128, (39% of all CIC).	14 (rise to 115 from 101)	Higher = Better
Reduction in numbers of children placed with external foster carers	15 fewer placed with external carers	2 less since 01/04/13 See comment	Not Available	As at the end March 2013 there were 92 children placed with external carers, as at 31/08/2013 there were 90. (Target is not mirror image of increase in internal carers due to step downs from residential, placement changes as a whole would need to be looked at in order to appreciate the change in placement types, this is highlighted within the weekly finance report)	Increase of 18 (from 74 to 92)	Lower = better
% of children with 3 placements plus in the year (this includes repeat episodes of care)	Target 10%	3.1% (10/323) Rolling Year 01/08/12 – 31/08/13 9.6% (31/323)	All England Avg – 11/12 – 11.0% SN Avg11/12 – 9.6% WMG Q3 Avg- 9.6%	As at the end of August 2013, 10 children have had more than 3 placements in the year, this is an increase. It is also an increase from the same point in 2012 when only 2%, 6/298 children had 3 or more placements within the year.	10.3% (33/321)	Lower = Better
CIC for 2.5 years with same placement for 2 years	Target 75%	76% (88/116)	All England Avg – 11/12 – 68.6% SN Avg11/12- 70.0% WMG Q3 Avg – 68.5%	As at the end of August, 88 young people who had been in care for 2.5 years had been in the same placement for 2 years. This is slightly lower than the same point last year when 77.7% (80/103) children had been in the same placement for 2 years. This remains a positive outturn.	77.3% (85/110)	Higher = Better

Placement Information 2003-2012

As at 31st March	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6	2006/7	2007/8	2008/9	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13
Number of Looked after Children	195	190	200	230	230	251	270	269	300	320

Children in Residential Placements	42	45
Children in External Fostering	90	94
Children in Internal Fostering	101	114

NOTES:

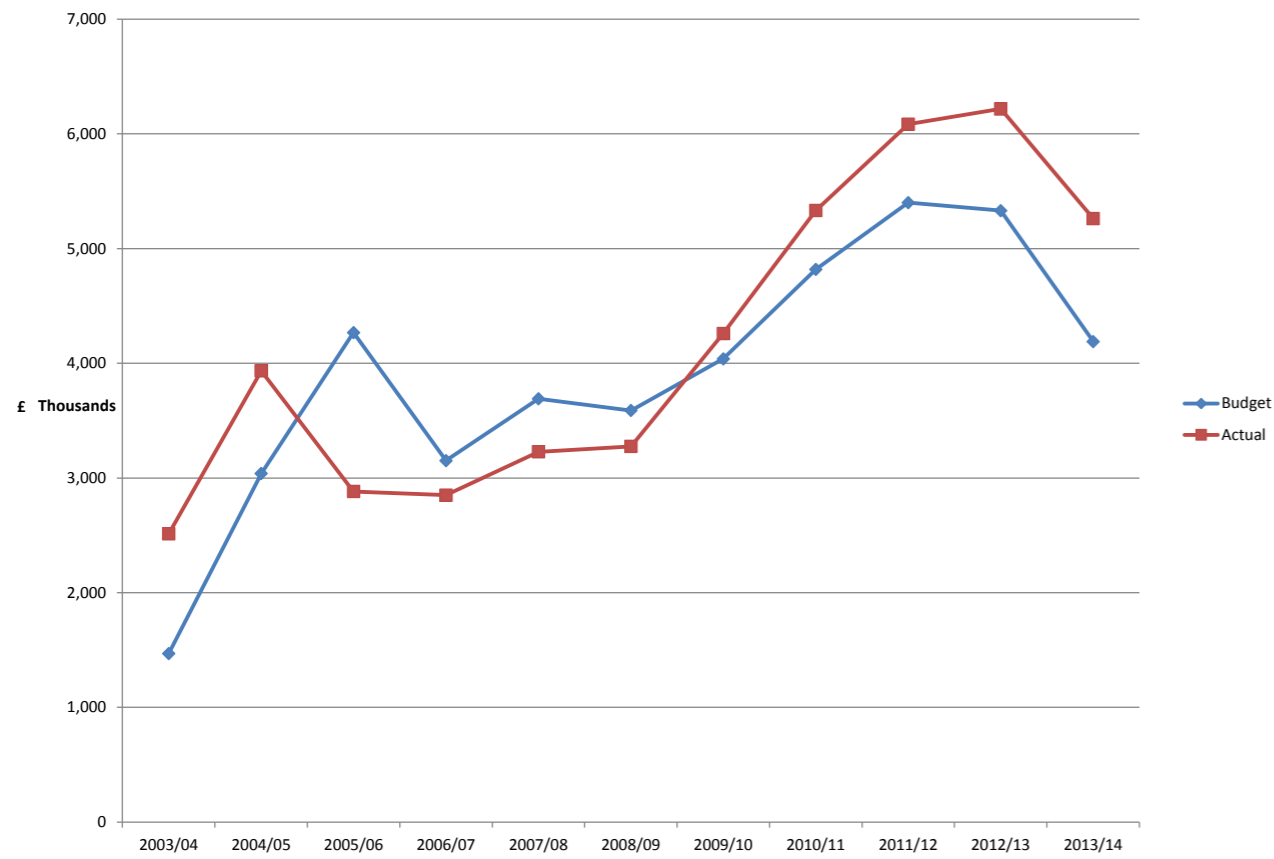
Financial figures include central overhead charges. Dashboard reports do not include these overheads.

2005/6 - 2007/8 Increase in numbers of CIC - improved early assessment arrangements which identified increased complexity of need

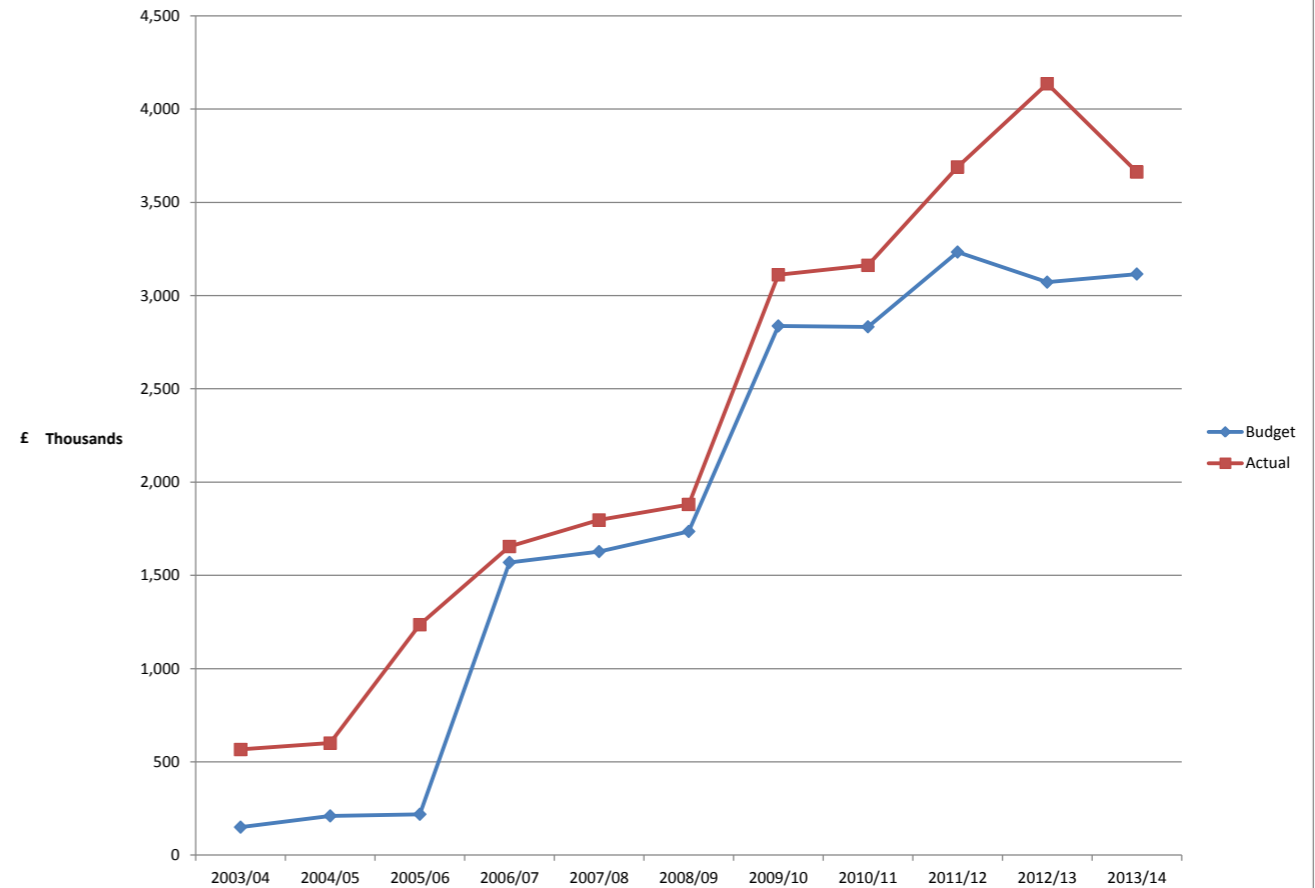
2008/9- 2009/10 Increase in numbers due to impact of Baby P

2010/11- 2012/13 Increase in numbers - children staying in care longer due to higher complexity of need including some large sibling groups

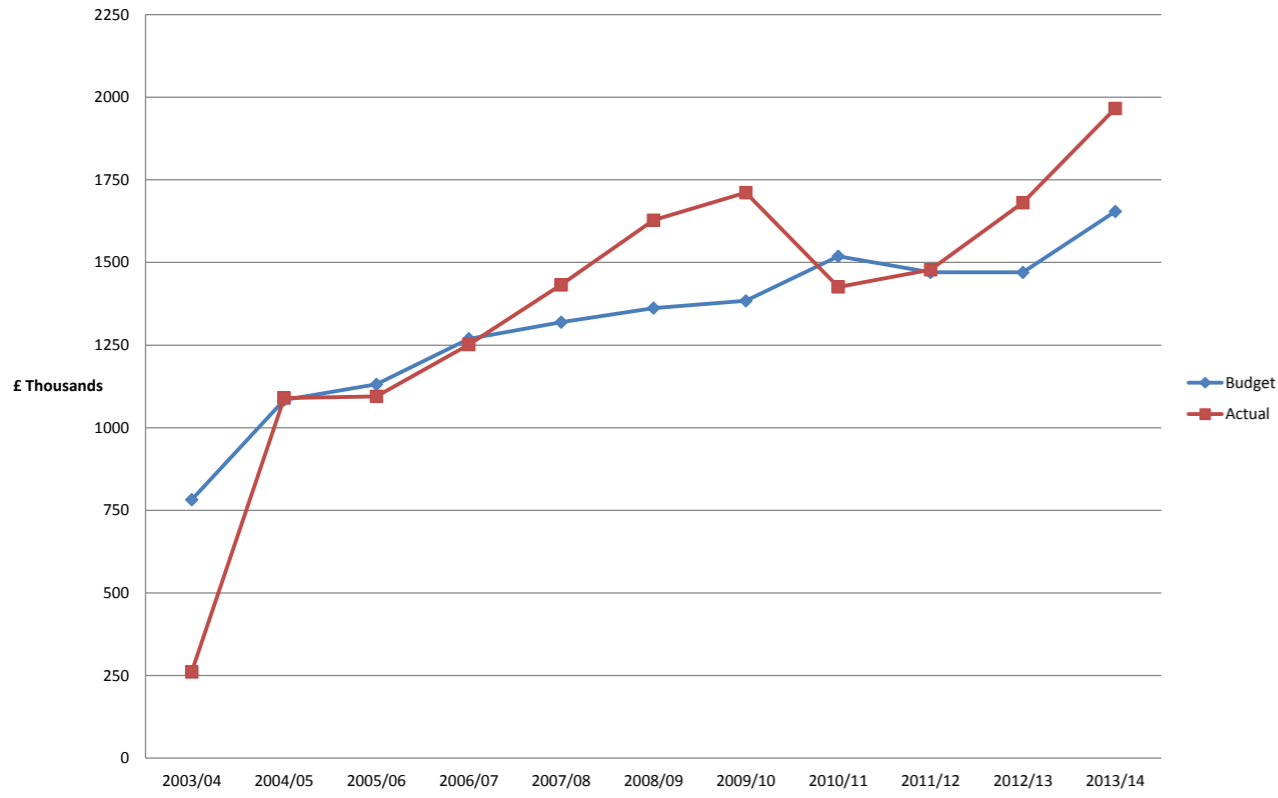
External Residential as at September 2013



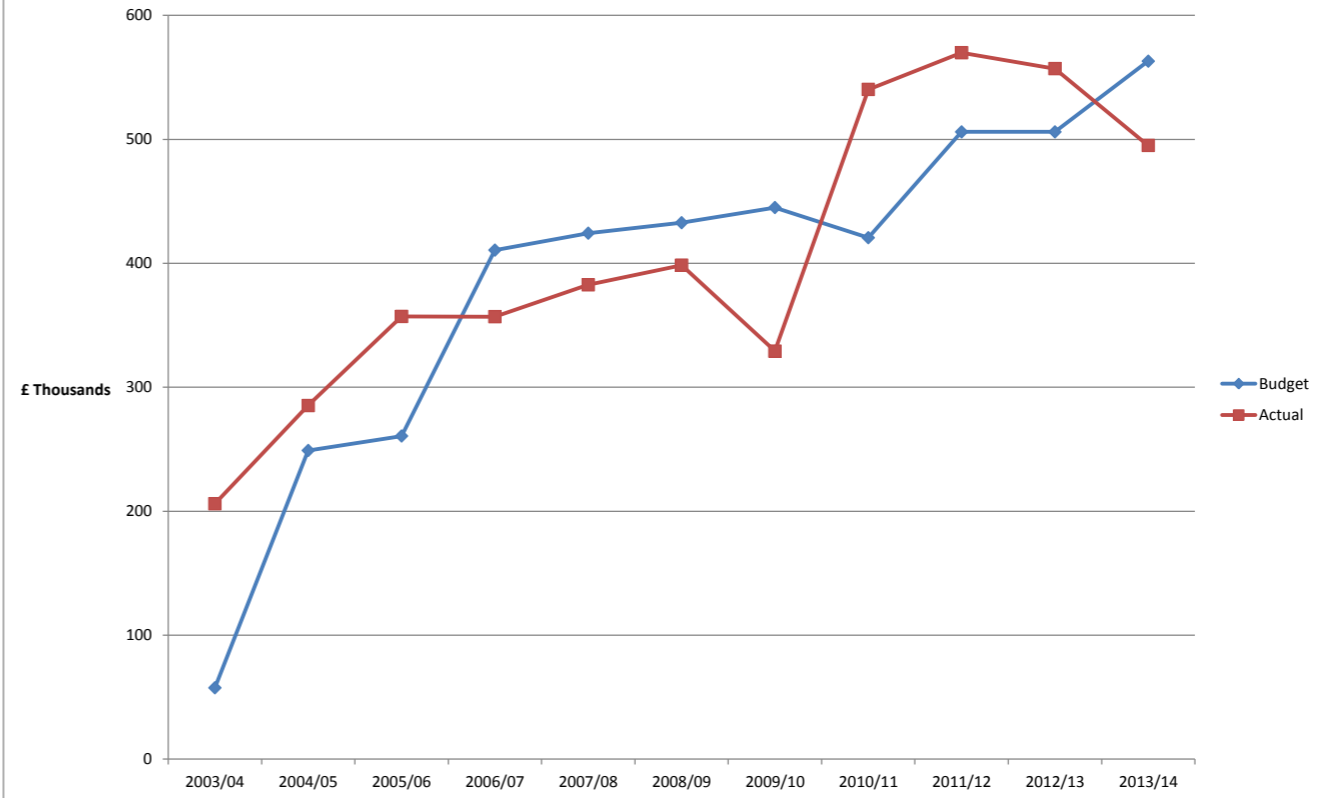
External Fostering as at September 2013



Internal Fostering as at September 2013



Relative Carers as at September 2013



Total Placements as at September 2013



Budget Scrutiny Committee 22/10/13

Securing Permanence Group

1. Background

The group is tasked with improving the quality of social work practice and processes associated with ensuring that children in care are placed with permanent carers as soon as possible. This is a completely new initiative which continues to develop in terms of the specific information gathering and tracking processes.

The group have continued to meet on an almost monthly basis. The standing group consists of the Social Care SDMs across Safeguarding with attendance of the Business Manager for Data Support, with legal advice being sought as appropriate.

2. What we have learnt

There has, to date, been a focus upon children subject of a Placement Order for 9 months or longer as per the Terms of Reference. There has been consideration of the overall plan for the child, ensuring that there are clear timescales in place and that there is evidence of progress through actions. The following has become evident:

- Whilst part of the cohort, and continuing to be subject of Placement Orders, it was apparent that a number of the children were placed within their Adoptive Placement and were awaiting confirmation of a Hearing Date for the Adoption Order to be made. In other cases a hearing date had been confirmed and was imminent.
- There was evidence of effective planning in terms of determining that adoption was no longer the appropriate plan for the child and in many cases the care plan change to securing permanence via long term fostering had been ratified at a Child in Care Review. The application to revoke the Placement Order in these cases is more variable in terms of timeliness of approach.
- Children's cases continue to be tracked and scheduled to be reviewed on a regular basis and targets set to ensure clarity of arrangements and to avoid drift regarding planning etc

The group have also reviewed the small group of children subject of Care Orders who are placed at home with their parents. To date the following is evident:

- From the information shared parents are clear as to requirements set out in the Local Authority arrangements and what is required in terms of achieving a good enough level of care would look like to discontinue the order.
- The Local Authority is seeking to revoke Care Orders where appropriate. Whilst being the most appropriate plan for the child there will be associated savings in terms of Social Worker and Independent Reviewing Officer time and capacity.

3. Further Activity underway/planned

In terms of progressing the targets for 2013 the following progress has being made:

- The group are currently in the process of agreeing timescales and identifying a pathway to support the process of revocation of Placement Orders where the child's care plan has changed from adoption (September 2013).
- The pathway for securing external adoptive placements for harder to place children has been reviewed and arrangements are in place for earlier approval for funding and closer joint progress monitoring by Telford and Joint Adoption Managers
- The group are currently reviewing the children subject of Care Orders who have been in care for 12 months or longer. A number of children (22) have been identified as being potentially suitable to be formally matched with their current long term carer and reduction targets are being set.
- The cohort of children placed at home, have been considered, it was apparent with the information presented there was a clear plan for each child, with applications being made to discontinue with the Care Order in 2 of the cases.
- There is ongoing work being undertaken in terms of meeting the target for children exiting care via Special Guardianship Orders (SGO's) .and a number of children who might benefit have been identified and the policy is being reviewed with a view to encouraging take-up

4. Contribution to the Cost Improvement Plan

A number of the activities will contribute to the achievement of cost improvement plan and council savings targets.

- More and speedier adoption reduces fostering costs, even where it is necessary to pay £27k for an external placement for children who are more difficult to place. Annual cost avoided for one child placed for adoption is a minimum of £16k.
- More and speedier SGOs produces a small net saving, as the majority of costs transfer from the placement budget to the SGO allowances budget.
- A reduction in the number of CIC would enable a strategic review of capacity

Jo Britton
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Sept 2013