

People Scrutiny Commission

6th December 2023



Report of: Vanessa Wilson, Director of Children and Education Transformation

Title: Children and Education – Our Families Programme Update on Demand Pressures

Officer Presenting Report: Vanessa Wilson, Director of Children and Education Transformation

Recommendation:

For the People Scrutiny Commission to note the report and provide comment and feedback on opportunities to manage the demands to mitigate further against the financial challenges Children and Education face due to national and local picture.

The significant issues in the report are:

1. Continuing financial pressure and challenges that Children and Education are facing as outlined at Cabinet 5th September [Finance Exception Report](#)
2. Our Children and Education Transformation programme known as Our Families is looking to mitigate increasing demands both national and local regarding to children/young people placements, and the difficulties in recruiting and retaining Foster Carers how the Children and Education transformation programme known as Our Families to mitigate against further deterioration.
3. The current social care market across the UK remains. This has left local authorities hamstrung in their efforts to find suitable and affordable placements in children's homes or foster care.
4. It is recognised that the national and local picture will not change soon, and any recovery plans being delivered within 24/25 will only ensure that the current pressure does not deteriorate further, enable savings in 24/25 and long-term sustainability.

1. Summary

- 1.1 Children and Education services are operating in a complex and challenging environment, balancing the tension between delivering essential improvements, managing demand pressures and Medium-Term Financial Plan savings delivery.
- 1.2 The urgency of Children and Education transformation programme known as ‘Our Families’ correlates to the current improvements required now and in the long-term, the financial position, delivering our statutory duties, performance, increasing demands on services and long-term sustainability of the directorate. The programme is a whole system change by a "relentless focus on doing things well, coupled with innovation".
- 1.3 The General Fund is currently forecasting a risk adjusted overspend of £12.1m, 2.5%, on the approved budget of £483.5m as outlined at Cabinet 5th September [Finance Exception Report](#). This reflects a deterioration of £12.1m in the period. Children and Education account for this new pressure.
- 1.4 The Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) revised budget, including amounts recouped by the Education and Skills Funding Agency for Academies, is £452.3m against which it is forecasting an £18.7m (4.1%) in-year deficit. This is primarily driven by High Needs spend increases in EHCP assessments and need. This in-year forecast overspends, when combined with the prior year’s carried forward deficit of £39.7m, brings the forecast total accumulated carried forward in to 2024/25 deficit £58.3m.
- 1.5 Key challenges of our current financial pressures align to the national challenges and local picture as outlined below are associated to workforce recruitment and retention; cost of placements of children, young people; lack of local provision; home to school travel and education health care plans as outlined in Special Education Needs and Disability performance report. Further information around costs, trends, performance data and opportunities are outlined in Appendix A.
- 1.6 It is recognised that the national and local picture will not change soon, and Our Families Programme plans being delivered within 23/24 and 24/25 will only ensure that the current pressure does not deteriorate further, enable savings in 24/25 onwards and long-term sustainability.

2. Context

2.1 Our Families Programme:

Our Families Programme brings together all change activity within Children, Families, Safer Communities, Education and Skills, covering both Dedicated Schools Grant and Non-Dedicated Schools Grant (General Fund). [Our Families Programme](#) was approved at Cabinet 6th June. The overview of the programme, its governance and focus is outlined in Appendix A.

The programme will design effective services with, and for, children, young people and families; and efficiency of delivery will improve as a result through a whole system change.

There is a systemic relationship between the programme areas of focus and deliverables because greater stability will not be achieved by focusing on one area alone.

There are three angles from which we are approaching the challenge:

- DEMAND – tackling the number of children, young people and families that need our support and reducing the level of cost and need through alternative models and initiatives.
- SUPPLY – how we organise our resources and commission to respond to that demand and, within that.
- WORKFORCE – how we organise and support our staff to deliver the most effective and timely response to children, young people and families.

The key outcomes being:

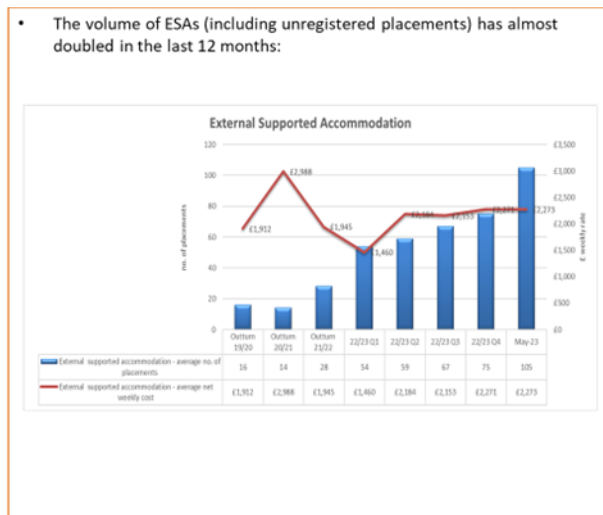
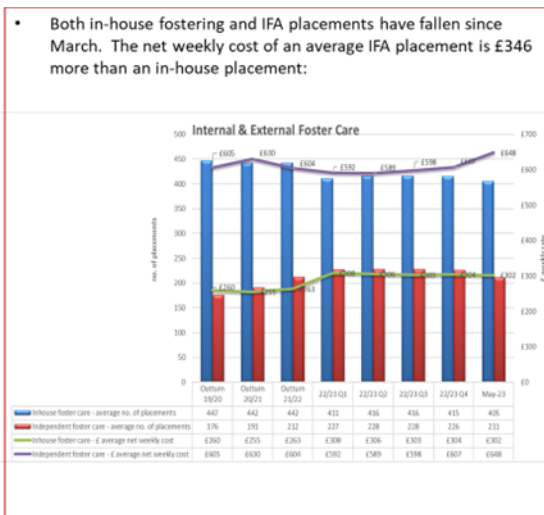
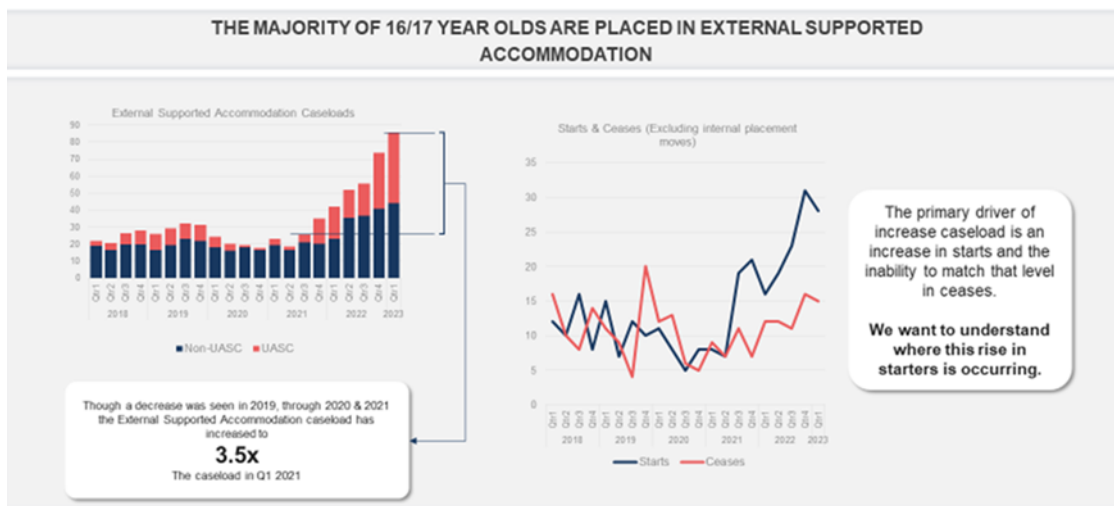
- Delivered sustainable, long-term improvements to our services, including improved governance, quality assurance, compliance, practice and performance.
- Secured better value for money through a balanced budget by addressing the drivers for the increase in spend and future-proofed the service against increasing demand.
- Resources are deployed efficiently and effectively, with decisions on service development informed by insight, quality and cost analysis.
- Developed more effective working relationships with parents, carers, families, key stakeholders and partners.
- Strengthened the capacity and capability of our workforce - developing the workforce to deliver a children/young persons centered approach.

2.2 Local Challenges for Bristol – Placements

- 2.2.1 Our vision for children and families in Bristol is that they get the right help at the right time. We are committed to working with families and children in need to support them to stay together where this is safe and, in the child's, best interest to do so. Where care becomes necessary, we will explore options for living with wider family and friends' networks wherever possible. As Corporate Parents, we hold high aspirations for the children and young people in our care and as a Council are committed to being effective, caring and ambitious corporate parents.
- 2.2.2 We have a statutory duty under Section 22G of the Children Act 1989 to ensure that sufficient accommodation is available in our area to meet the needs of children in care. In taking steps to secure sufficient accommodation, the local authority must have regard to the benefit of having a range of accommodation and providers capable of meeting different needs.
- 2.2.3 There are currently 752 (October 2023) children in care (CiC) and this figure is predicted to rise to up 790 children by the end of 2023/4. We are already struggling to find placements to meet the needs of our most complex children, and this will be further compounded by the increase of children in care. As a result of the severe sufficiency shortage a number of children have had to be placed in high-cost unregistered provision this year.
- 2.2.4 The cost of external residential care is increasing, driven by increased staff costs and inflation and also by high levels of profit. Lack of sufficiency nationally has led to the market dictating

costs because local authorities have no choice but to place wherever there is a viable offer, even when that placement is at a distance from the child’s home and networks and where the placement requires very high resources to agree to the placement.

2.2.5 Over the past 3 years we have had an increasing percentage of children in care placed at 20 miles or more away from home from 21% in 2019/20 to 25% in July 2023, the national performance for this measure is 17%. For our children in external children’s homes, this figure rises to 70%. There has also been an increased reliance on using residential placements with placement numbers up from 45 in April 2020 to 62 in July 2023.



2.2.6 DfE data shows that the South-West region has just 7% of all Children’s Homes and 6% of places, making it the joint lowest region nationally, alongside London. Market shaping tells us that the cost of accommodation in Bristol is a barrier and providers are looking for more collaborative ways of working with us such as jointly funded homes.

2.2.7 An emerging problem has also been a small number of children whose needs are too great for providers to manage. These children are those with the greatest trauma, often presenting with very high self-harm or with particularly challenging behaviour. No regulated care offer is available because of these risks and hybrid arrangements for care and management are being

commissioned short-term at high cost and high reputational risk.

- 2.2.8 The budget forecast pressure in Children’s services is primarily in the placements budget due to the increasing number of very high-cost placements and continued reliance on External Residential and Supported accommodation (ESA).
- 2.2.9 Bristol performs well in having care leavers living in suitable accommodation, but there remains a housing challenge in the city particularly for young people with more complex needs, increasing numbers of children placed far from home where it is not in their best interests all of which we are seeking to address in the housing recommissioning programme which will be presented to the council this autumn. In addition, despite all efforts, Bristol has a lack foster carers to meet the needs within the system.
- 2.2.10 Our Children’s Homes Sufficiency project as part of the wider Our Families Programme outlines some of proposed mitigations for 24/25 to address the ongoing high demands and needs. Appendix A

2.3 Local Challenges for Bristol - Foster Carers

- 2.3.1 Children in our care hold a unique and special place amongst other vulnerable groups in Bristol. Children in Care are truly children of Bristol as they are the only group where Bristol City Council holds parental responsibility for them and legally acts as their parent. We hope to offer our children of Bristol the same as we might hope for our own children. A home in Bristol full of love and care where there are opportunity to be loved, to have fun, to make mistakes and to grow up and contribute to our city as an well rounded adult.
- 2.3.2 Although some of our children have the opportunity to grow up in Bristol not all do and some must live very far away from their home, family and all that is familiar to them. Not only as a parent is this not what we hope for our children in addition it causes us as a local authority a significant financial burden. Independent foster agencies and residential settings cost significantly more that local in house foster care or our own Children Home provision. Therefore, not only is this not what we want for our children our sufficiency challenges contribute significantly to the challenging budget position of Bristol City Council.
- 2.3.3 Section 22G of the Children Act 1989 imposes a statutory duty on local authorities to ensure that sufficient accommodation is available in their area which meets the needs of Looked After Children. In taking steps to secure sufficient accommodation, the local authority must have regard to the benefit of having a range of accommodation and providers capable of meeting different needs. Section 22G (5) provides that accommodation providers include local authority foster carers.
- 2.3.4 Over the last few years, we have seen an increase in children placed in external residential accommodation due to lack of foster carers or retaining current foster carers, compounded further by a drained and tired system that was already at breaking point, but the cost-of-living crisis is pushing those on its frontline to the point of giving up. So, the only alternative is

residential; children with complex needs either new to care or previously in foster care which has broken down through sudden dysregulation of child.

- 2.3.5 Our Foster Carer Sufficiency project as part of the wider Our Families Programme outlines some of proposed mitigations for 24/25 to address the ongoing high demands and needs. Appendix A.

3. Policy

Theme 1: of the Corporate Strategy 2022-27 is Children and Young People with the top-level aim of achieving “a city where every child belongs and every child gets the best start in life, whatever circumstances they were born in to”. Our Families Programme seeks to deliver against the following priorities in the theme:

- Child friendly city - Children and young people are supported by the city, their community, and the council to have the best possible start in life. They can reach their full potential and are kept safe from and supported to overcome violence, abuse, and other adverse childhood experiences, whatever the circumstances of their birth.
- Supported to thrive - Children and young people are supported by the city, their community, and the council to have the best possible start in life. They can reach their full potential and are kept safe from and supported to overcome violence, abuse, and other adverse childhood experiences, whatever the circumstances of their birth.
- Intergenerational equality - Lead city-wide approaches to tackling the root causes of structural inequality, breaking cycles of disadvantage, poverty, and trauma across generations to improve health and life opportunities.

This is supported by the Belonging Strategy. The over-arching vision of the strategy is supported by four pillars which will deliver on the intentions of the Bristol One City Plan, the Bristol Corporate Parenting Strategy, the Bristol Children’s Charter and the Bristol Equality Charter.

The programme contributes to the Health and Wellbeing Strategy working with communities, children and families, schools, early years which in turn impacts on demand management. Furthermore, the programme contributes to the ILACS improvement action plan.

4. Consultation

a) Internal

Cllr Asher Craig, Portfolio Holder for Children, Education & Equalities

Corporate Leadership Board

Delivery Executive

Our Families Programme Board

Mayor’s Strategic Board

Cabinet Board

Finance Task Group

Consultation with staff will take place during Autumn 23 as part of the changes to the operating model.

b) External

Mandate of programme approved at Cabinet 5th September 23 [Finance Exception Report](#).

Savings formed part of the budget process for 23/24 Full Council 21st February 23 [Budget 23/24](#)
Key policy changes due to take place 23/24 as part of the programme: Short Breaks, Home to School Travel (HTST) and High Needs Block Top Up Funding being consulted externally between September and December 23.

Parents/Carers forum invited to workshops as part of the redesign work for HTST.

5. Public Sector Equality Duties

- 5a) Before making a decision, section 149 Equality Act 2010 requires that each decision-maker considers the need to promote equality for persons with the following “protected characteristics”: age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation. Each decision-maker must, therefore, have due regard to the need to:
- i) Eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct prohibited under the Equality Act 2010.
 - ii) Advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and those who do not share it. This involves having due regard, in particular, to the need to --
 - remove or minimise disadvantage suffered by persons who share a relevant protected characteristic;
 - take steps to meet the needs of persons who share a relevant protected characteristic that are different from the needs of people who do not share it (in relation to disabled people, this includes, in particular, steps to take account of disabled persons' disabilities);
 - encourage persons who share a protected characteristic to participate in public life or in any other activity in which participation by such persons is disproportionately low.
 - iii) Foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and those who do not share it. This involves having due regard, in particular, to the need to –
 - tackle prejudice; and
 - promote understanding.
- 5b) [Equality Impact Assessments](#) completed for all validated savings within the programme as part of the 23/24 budget process. Equality Impact Assessment approved at Full Council 21st February 23. Any new proposed savings will have an Equality Impact Assessment.

Appendices:

Appendix A – Mitigations for Children’s Homes Sufficiency and Foster Carer Sufficiency

LOCAL GOVERNMENT (ACCESS TO INFORMATION) ACT 1985

Background Papers: [Sufficiency Strategy Update Feb 2023.pdf \(bristol.gov.uk\)](#)