

TITLE OF REPORT: Reducing the Number of Children Requiring Care

REPORT OF: Sheena Ramsey, Chief Executive

Purpose of the Report

1. To ask for agreement of the new 'Reducing the number of children requiring care' strategy and to recommend that the Council adopt the Strategy as part of the Council's policy framework.

The strategy development has been led by Children's Social Care and Early Help services in collaboration with a broader range of stakeholders with responsibility for the wider determinants of children's social care.

Background

2. We will deliver the commitments in this strategy using a number of other approved linked strategies, policies and plans which are key to helping us to reduce the number of children who need our care. These include our Early Help strategy for Gateshead, our Education Strategy and our Looked after Children and Care Leaver Strategy.
3. We will also achieve greater success by working together with our partners to reduce the number of children in Gateshead who become in need of our care. We will do this through the existing strategic partnership arrangements in place via the Gateshead Health and Wellbeing Board and the Gateshead Safeguarding Partnership.
4. The strategy has three main objectives; keeping families together safely, Developing enough and affordable high-quality placements options and achieving permanence quickly. The strategy is summarised by an action plan which highlights how the objectives will be achieved including working with multi agency partners.
5. During 2017-18 the Council and partners signed up to the strategic approach and pledges to "make Gateshead a place where everyone thrives".
6. In January 2022 the Council had 465 children and young people in need of care outside of their family homes, this is an increase of over 10% from the same period of 2020. This demonstrates that the need for a strategy to reduce the amount of children and young people requiring a placement in care. As of March 2022, this number has increased to 484.

7. We want children and young people residing in Gateshead to receive the opportunity to thrive and implementing this strategy aims to achieve this.
8. Our vision for health and wellbeing in Gateshead is 'Good jobs, homes, health and friends.' We intend to reduce inequalities and improve health and wellbeing for people living in our communities through the 6 aims of our Health and Wellbeing Strategy.
9. There will always be some children who, for a variety of reasons, are unable to live with their parents or within their family network safely. For those children our duties and responsibilities, as corporate parents, are well understood.
10. We know that COVID 19 has impacted on accessibility to service and increased isolation for families and we have observed an increase of families requiring social care intervention with complex needs.
11. As part of the transformational review work Children Social Care and Early Help services will be seeking the support and engagement of corporate colleagues to develop our collective response to children who require early help interventions and statutory services with the ambition of diverting children from care.

Proposal

12. Agreement is sought for the Reducing Number of Children Requiring Care Strategy as set out in appendix 2.

Recommendation

13. Cabinet is asked to approve the Reducing the Number of Children Requiring Care Strategy and recommend it to Council for adoption as part of the Council's policy framework.

For the following reasons:

- i. This strategy supports the strategic priorities of Children Social Care and Early Help to reduce the number of children who need our care
- ii. To achieve the vision and aims of the Health and Wellbeing strategy, in particular, giving every child the best start in life and enabling all our children and young people to achieve their best outcomes.
- iii. Our approach to Social Work, Gateshead CAN, is central to this strategy as Social Work is one of our greatest asset in achieving a reduction in the numbers of children coming into care and leaving care.
- iv. Our approach to Social Work practice is not limited to one model or 'way to do it'. Gateshead CAN is an overarching systemic and strengths-based approach, which recognises the interrelationships between Context, Action and Narrative.

APPENDIX 1

Policy Context

1. The proposed strategy supports the Council's Thrive strategic approach. We will deliver the commitments in this strategy using a number of other approved linked strategies, policies and plans which are key to helping us to reduce the number of children who need our care. These include our Early Help strategy for Gateshead, our Education Strategy and our Looked after Children and Care Leaver Strategy.
2. We will also achieve greater success by working together with our partners to reduce the number of children in Gateshead who become in need of our care. We will do this through the existing strategic partnership arrangements in place via the Gateshead Health and Wellbeing Board and the Gateshead Safeguarding Partnership.

Background

3. Within a national context that has seen an increase of children in care rise by 65% in the North East between 2009 and 2019 over a 10 year period. In Gateshead the increase in looked after children since March 2018 alone has been significant at 10.4% to the end of June 2020, we know that this figure has continued to increase.

Consultation

4. The Cabinet Member for Children and Young People has been consulted.

Alternative Options

5. There are no clear alternatives to achieve a reduction in the children requiring care other than the services outlined in the strategy action plan.

Implications of Recommended Option

6. **Resources:**
 - a) **Financial Implications** – The Strategic Director, Resources and Digital confirms implementation of this strategy will not have any additional financial implications for the Council. It is envisaged that having an effective strategy to reduce the number of children requiring care will reduce the requirement for placement thus saving money.
 - b) **Human Resources Implications** – There are no HR implications. The services required to support this strategy are already in place.
 - c) **Property Implications** - There are no property implications.
7. **Risk Management Implication** - This strategy will be put in place alongside robust assessments in relation to children and their families to ascertain the need for a care placement.

8. **Equality and Diversity Implications** - This strategy is applicable to all children and families who reside in the Gateshead area.
9. **Crime and Disorder Implications** – This strategy does not have crime and disorder implications.
10. **Health Implications** – By reducing the number of children requiring care this will have a positive impact on the health of children and families. The emotional wellbeing within families will increase as families stay together.
11. **Climate Emergency and Sustainability Implications** - None
12. **Human Rights Implications** - A strategy to reduce the number of children means more children residing at home in line with their right to a family life.
13. **Ward Implications** – No specific implications.