



Children's Social Care Staffing Levels

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That Council Cabinet should protect Family Support staffing levels when considering future revenue budgets.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

- 2.1 The 2006-07 budget saw a reduction in the funding of Family Support. The commentary report to the 16 January 2006 meeting of the former Social Care and Health Commission said:

The key issues affecting the 2006/07 budget in the children and family services include:

- provisions for increased costs of externally purchased placements in addition to £300k for shortfall in current number of looked after children in foster care
- £758k for new pressures such as from ongoing costs of CLA, in-house fostering allowances whilst making budget savings of £713k through managing vacancies, efficiency savings and deletion of 6 fte community care worker and family support worker posts

- 2.2 This package was an understandable result of the Member-endorsed search for savings to a) *specifically* help offset the higher expenditure on greater numbers of looked after children and b) *generally* help set a balanced budget for the Council overall. However, the Sub-Commission consider that reductions in the capacity of community care and family support services may result in an increase the numbers of looked after children and therefore compound rather than help cure the budget problems.

- 2.3 The problem for the Council is that, compared to children who live with parents or other relatives, almost all looked after children are expensive to support and, unless a successful return home is achieved within 6 weeks, those aged over 5 are likely to need that financial support until 18. In house foster care is usually the least expensive of the care options, but for a 14 year old those costs will probably be borne for 4 years, or for an 10 year old it would be for 8 years. Almost any alternative to in house foster care would be more expensive.

- 2.4 A compounding problem is that the Council's pool of foster carers is finite. This means that marginal increases in the total of looked after children are extremely expensive as the knock on effect is greater use of the considerably more costly independent fostering agencies. As a financial comparison, the costs of increases in the total of looked after children this might be seen as akin to the gearing effect on the council tax of marginal local authority expenditure above government endorsed thresholds.
- 2.5 The Sub-Commission receives a regular report from the Corporate Director for Children and Young People which provides with statistical information on Children Looked After. As well as the overall total, the data shows the numbers placed in different settings.
- 2.6 A safe reduction in the number of looked after children has long been a Council policy goal. Yet as with many other authorities the numbers looked after have tended to rise. On 1 August 2006 the total number of Derby's looked after children was 390, an increase of 20 compared to the snap shot on 22 July 2005 when the total was 370. In defying expectations it also breached the budgets constructed around those expectations. For example Annex E to the draft **2005/06** revenue budget included:

This is ... a planned profile for the use of externally purchased services at the beginning and end of the financial year as follows

Placements

	Start of year position	End of year position
Independent Fostering		
Agencies	40	34
Disabled	9	10
Agency Residential	7	7

- 2.7 That reduction was not achieved in 2005/06 and for 2006/07 the IFA budget was raised to fund 40 places. However, the Commission was informed, on 24 July this year that for 2006/07 'an overspend of £372k is expected for the total LAC budget mainly due to IFA use – 49 placements against a budget for 40'.
- 2.8 The key purpose of Family Support is that, if successful, it improves parenting skills and so prevents the need for a child to become looked after. Because of grading family support workers are significantly less expensive to employ than social workers. The value-for-money of family support/community care workers has increased as they have taken on more responsibilities – to make a comparison, it is similar to how the NHS has given tasks to nurses that previously were the preserve of doctors.
- 2.9 Family Support is not a panacea. It may be provided intensely and over time but not succeed in raising the parents to the threshold of being good enough. In this case the child will become (or remain) looked after. It is also possible that without Family Support interventions that some parents will improve through their own efforts and/or with informal help from close relatives.

- 2.10 That conceded it is the case that Family Support frequently does makes the difference between a child being able to be raised by their parents or becoming (or remaining) looked after. A reduction in staffing capacity means either less time being spent with families or fewer families being helped. Because the costs of looking after a child for the Council are so great, it only requires a small change to the LAC totals to trigger significant overspends, as paragraph 2.7 shows. The shortage of in house foster carers means that the placement of just 4 extra children in expensive IFAs equals the savings generated by reducing the relatively inexpensive family support service by 6 whole time equivalent staff.
- 2.11 A further role of the same staff is to prepare reports for Children Act court proceedings regarding the skills of parents and where appropriate their capacity to improve. Shortage of community care/family support workers causes a back log. It is open to the courts to overcome that by commissioning independent reports but then recharging the cost of these to the Council.
- 2.12 Taking these factors together, the Sub-Commission consider adequate funding of family support to be case of 'invest- to-save'. These sentiments will be included in the forthcoming report on the Looked After Children topic review. This discrete report is being provided to Cabinet now, whilst it is possible to influence the development of the 2007/08 revenue budget

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Background papers:	None
List of appendices:	Appendix 1 – Implications

IMPLICATIONS

Financial

1. The average costs are as follows:
 - Family Support Worker (excluding travel costs) = £27k. Add £2k for travel costs.
 - Social Worker (excluding travel costs) = £32k. Add £2k for travel costs.
 - In-house foster placement = £15k (£3.6m/240 placements)
 - IFA = £43k (£2.1m/49 placements)

Legal

- 2 None directly arising.

Personnel

- 3 None directly arising. This report arises because of the 2006/07 budget reduction of 6 wte in family support and community care workers.

Equalities impact

- 4 None directly arising.

Corporate Priorities

- 5 The proposed change relates to **deliver excellent services, performance and value for money**.