

Meeting of:	<b>Healthy Living and Social Care Scrutiny Committee</b>
Date of Meeting:	<b>Tuesday, 03 December 2024</b>
Relevant Scrutiny Committee:	Healthy Living and Social Care
Report Title:	Children and Young People Services Annual Placement Review
Purpose of Report:	To outline the actions taken within Children and Young People Services during 2023/24 with regards to placement provision for Children Looked After (CLA) and the priority actions for 2024/25.
Report Owner:	Director of Social Services
Responsible Officer:	Operational Manager – Children Looked After
Elected Member and Officer Consultation:	Head of Children and Young People Services Operational Manager, Accountancy
Policy Framework:	This report is consistent with the Policy Framework and Budget
<p>Executive Summary:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This report outlines the actions taken within Children and Young People Services during 2023/24 with regard to placement provision for Children Looked After (CLA), the priority actions for 2024/25 and progress against those actions.</li> <li>• Where children and young people cannot be supported to remain within their immediate families and need to become looked after, the Council seeks to provide a range of suitable placements.</li> <li>• Formal kinship fostering arrangements will be explored as the preferred alternative arrangement where it is necessary for the Local Authority to share parental responsibility or intervene in managing risk and protecting children.</li> <li>• Where a child’s needs cannot be adequately met through kinship arrangements, the majority will have their needs met best in a substitute family, preferably with in-house foster carers and, if not, with Independent Fostering Agency carers wherever possible living within the Vale of Glamorgan.</li> <li>• Residential care placements will be made only where the complexity and challenge of a child or young person’s needs mean they are unable to live within a family setting or where a young person is subject to a Court Ordered Secure/Remand.</li> </ul>	

## **Recommendations**

1. That Scrutiny Committee scrutinise the contents of the report (attached at Appendix 1).
2. That Scrutiny Committee receives a further Annual Placement Review report in December 2025.
3. That the report is referred to the Learning and Culture Scrutiny Committee.

## **Reasons for Recommendations**

1. To provide Members with an opportunity to exercise oversight of this key statutory function.
2. To ensure Members are aware of any changes on an annual basis.
3. To ensure Members from Learning and Culture Scrutiny Committee have an opportunity to consider the matters in this report which relate to their portfolio areas.

## **1. Background**

- 1.1 Resource management in children's social care is inherently problematic. This is particularly the case in the area of children's placements. Local Authorities face considerable challenges in managing their overall children looked after populations, finding appropriate placements, meeting children's support needs and ensuring the most effective use of placement resources.
- 1.2 The number of children with complex needs is increasing and meeting these needs within appropriate placements places pressure on budgets. This cohort of children relates both to those with challenging and complex behaviour and to those with disabilities. Some individual placements are very expensive. The cost of placements for children with complex needs can exceed £400k a year.
- 1.3 In Children and Young People Services, the major financial issue is the continuing pressure on placements for children looked after. This is the Division's most volatile budget and the one most dependent upon levels of service demand which are not within the Council's direct control. Following the COVID-19 pandemic and the Cost of Living Crisis, demand across all areas of key activity has increased significantly.
- 1.4 Given this context, it is essential that the Council has in place a coherent Strategy for meeting the needs of children within allocated resources. The Corporate Strategy for Children in Need of Care and Support 2024 to 2028 outlines how the Council will meet a number of key objectives, two of which relate directly to children looked after. These are:
  - To provide and commission a flexible and affordable mix of high quality services that meet the diverse range of children's needs.
  - To give children clearly planned journeys through care.

## 2. Key Issues for Consideration

- 2.1 Officers have analysed the financial position, the demand for placements and spending patterns and a report is attached at Appendix 1. It demonstrates the volatility of the placement budget and the significant impact individual children's needs can have on overall expenditure.
- 2.2 Key influences include the increasing complexity of children's needs; the Welsh Government "When I am Ready" policy which extends the time children can remain in foster placements beyond the age of 18; the use of remand placements where Local Authorities have become responsible for the costs of looking after children who are not allowed to live at home while they are the subject of criminal proceedings; the significant impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and Cost of Living crisis; the UK Government's National Transfer Scheme for unaccompanied asylum seeking children, and the Welsh Government's Eliminate agenda.
- 2.3 With the exception of the increase in placement commitments, the Children and Young People Services Division has made good progress in delivering the actions in the current Corporate Strategy. Appendix 1 highlights the considerable activity undertaken to date in response to the challenges associated with children's placements, the workstreams for current year and progress thus far.

## 3. How do proposals evidence the Five Ways of Working and contribute to our Well-being Objectives?

- 3.1 It is essential we recognise the importance of balancing short-term needs with the need to safeguard our ability to also meet long-term needs. Children looked after have their short and long term needs regularly reviewed through Children Looked After reviews. Permanency plans for children are in place by the second Children Looked After review.
- 3.2 Children and Young People Services work to the four integrated objectives of the Corporate Strategy for Children who need Care and Support namely:
  - **To support families to stay together** and reduce the need for children to be looked after, by focusing on services which intervene early and prevent greater need arising across all provision.
  - **To manage risk confidently and provide support at the 'edge of care'** by making sure that need is accurately assessed, resulting in the right children being accommodated at the right time. This includes supporting families to avoid children becoming accommodated unnecessarily and by supporting sustainable family arrangements within their wider family networks.
  - To provide and commission a flexible and affordable mix of high-quality services which meet the diverse range of children's needs.
  - **To give children clearly planned journeys through care** which remains focused on achieving care and support plans, prevents drift, enables them to

be reunited with family and friends where possible, to have stable placements and to exit the care system positively.

- 3.3** The Council and its partners are committed to involving those in receipt of its services and recognising protected characteristics. In the context of children and young people, this means involving children, young people, their families, carers and their support networks in co-producing plans that can effectively meet identified needs. It means taking a strength-based approach that recognises the resources that exist within families themselves and empowering families to support themselves and to achieve change where this is necessary. It also means involving children and families in decision making, including the need to transparently articulate risks that may prevent the achievement of goals that the child or family are hoping for, and where possible managing risks confidently.
- 3.4** Children and Young People Services work collaboratively with a range of services to meet the needs of children looked after. The children's Placement Panel is a multi-agency panel made of members from Social Services, Education and Health. The Panel's role is to consider if threshold for care is met, ensuring all alternatives are robustly considered. They will also consider any requests where a higher tariff placement is sought, i.e. any move from internal to external fostering or fostering to residential care and oversee plans for rehabilitation.
- 3.5** Acting to prevent problems occurring or getting worse is central to the work of Children and Young People Services and is the first of our four objectives within the Corporate Strategy, recognising the significance of us being able to collectively provide the right services at the right time and prevent escalation of need.

## **4. Climate Change and Nature Implications**

- 4.1** There are no Climate Change and Nature Implications as a direct result of this report.

## **5. Resources and Legal Considerations**

### **Financial**

- 4.1** The Social Services Directorate is committed to achieving a balanced budget. For 2023/24, the overall external placement budget for children looked after was overspent by £2,389,973. This year in 2024/25, as at 20.10.24, we are forecasting an overspend of £3,462,798. This reflects the increasing costs of residential placements and the complexity of young people placed in residential placements, alongside an increase in the number of young people placed in independent fostering placements.

### **Employment**

- 4.2** There are no employment implications associated with this report.

### **Legal (Including Equalities)**

**4.3** There are no direct legal implications associated with this report.

### **5. Background Papers**

Previous Annual Placement Review reports to Healthy Living and Social Care Scrutiny Committee: 5<sup>th</sup> November 2023; 6<sup>th</sup> December 2022; 9<sup>th</sup> November 2021.

**Vale of Glamorgan Council  
Children and Young People Services  
Annual Placement Review**

October 2024

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**1. Purpose**

The purpose of this report is to outline the actions taken within Children and Young People Services during 2023/24 with regard to placement provision for Children Looked After (CLA), to outline our plans for 2024/2025 and progress against those plans thus far.

**2. Context**

This area of activity and expenditure is a very challenging and often volatile one in all Local Authorities. It is difficult to anticipate a number of key factors including:

- how many and which children will enter care each year;
- what type of placements they will need;
- how many children will cease to be looked after;
- the impact of case law and changes in government regulations.

To plan as effectively as possible, the Management Team in Children and Young People Services continuously analyses external and internal influences to anticipate the likely impact in the Vale of Glamorgan.

Some of the high-profile external influences pertinent to this area are as follows:

- **Children with Complex Needs**

In common with other Local Authorities, the Vale of Glamorgan has experienced an increase in the number of children with especially complex needs, and the rising costs associated with meeting these needs within appropriate placements continues to place pressure on budgets. This cohort of children relates both to those with challenging and complex behaviour and to those with disabilities.

Children and young people with challenging and complex behaviours sometimes cannot continue to be supported within foster placements and

require admission to residential care. In certain circumstances these placements will be specialist (for example, where a child is displaying sexually harmful behaviour) and/or require the provision of additional staffing to manage risks associated with the child's behaviour. Placements of this type can cost over £400k a year.

There is evidence of increasing demand for support for older disabled children and young people. Families often manage to cope when children are younger, but some of them find it increasingly difficult to do so as the children grow and may become more challenging or aggressive. Some young people with disabilities require 24-hour care and support which can be met only in a residential school setting, usually until they reach the age of 19. This represents a significant long-term demand on resources in coming years as the average annual cost of such provision is on average £250,000 per year (ranging from £150,500 – £450,000 per year).

- **The Welsh Government's 'When I Am Ready' scheme**

The 'When I Am Ready – Planning Transition to Adulthood for Care Leavers' scheme aims to promote better support by extending a young person's transition to adulthood within a supportive family and household environment. Young people are now able to remain with their foster carer beyond the age of 18 until their 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, or until they feel able to leave for independent living before that age. Since the scheme was implemented in April 2016, we have had 83 young people in 'When I Am Ready' placements. This year we expect a further five to remain in 'When I Am Ready' placements.

This scheme will continue to have an impact upon the Fostering Service as children remain in placements for longer, which in turn increases the overall demand for foster care placements. It is a priority for the Council to recruit and retain foster carers who are able and authorised to foster children from birth to the age of 21.

- **Remand Placements**

Following the Legal Aid Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012, Local Authorities became responsible for the costs of young people under the age of 18 who are remanded into Young Offenders Institutions (YOI), Secure Children's Homes (SCH) and Secure Training Centres (STC). Before April 2013, the Ministry of Justice paid for all YOI remands and two thirds of SCH and STC remands. The costs of a remand placement are £215 per night for a YOI, £660 per night for a SCH and £600 per night for a STC. If a young person is considered vulnerable, it is most likely they will be remanded to a SCH or STC.

It is difficult for us to predict how many young people may be remanded into custody or for how long. There were two young people remanded in 2023/24 and one to date in 2024/25.

- **COVID-19 Pandemic and the Cost-of-Living Crisis**

Since the commencement of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, we have experienced significant increases in demand across all areas of key activity. This is a common picture across Wales and a nationally recognised challenge.

The complexity of issues has also increased, including higher and worsening levels of neglect, family crises, and more issues affecting the emotional wellbeing and mental health of both children and their significant adults. COVID-19 is not the single cause of the issues, but we have seen them worsen over this period.

Whilst we have passed through the pandemic, we are seeing an enduring impact, including the appearance of delayed trauma for children and families. The impact of the Cost-of-Living Crisis is also significantly impacting families, adding to the complexity of needs and increasing required levels of support.

- **National Transfer Scheme**

From December 2021, the Home Office has mandated Local Authorities across the UK to receive Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC). The majority of these children arrive in Kent on small boats crossing the English Channel. Once these children have been processed in Kent and allocated to a Local Authority, we have five days to receive them and identify a placement for them.

Many UASC we receive are aged between 16-17 years but are “age disputed” which makes them difficult to place alongside other children in foster care. Therefore, the majority UASC received by the Vale of Glamorgan are placed in 24 hour supported accommodation at an average cost of £2,000 per week.

Since December 2021, the Vale of Glamorgan has received 36 UASC through the National Transfer Scheme. We are expecting a further 20 UASC in the next three cycles this year.

- **Welsh Government’s Policy Commitment to Eliminate Profit**

Welsh Government have made a policy commitment that public money invested in the care of children looked after does not profit individuals or corporate entities.



It will become law when the Health and Social Care (Wales) Bill is passed in March 2025, with the following implications:

April 2026

- Prevention of new bodies registering unless they are not-for-profit entities.
- Existing for-profit entities can still operate through the transitional arrangements but cannot vary registration of its services or place of operation.
- Local Authorities must secure sufficient placements of own or not-for-profit models.

April 2027

- Local Authorities will have to seek WG approval for for-profit placements.
- Regulations will prevent any remaining for-profit providers in Wales from taking English LA placements.
- Regulations will prevent for-profit providers from approving new foster carers.

The Eliminate agenda creates an inherent requirement for all Local Authorities to have clear sufficiency plans in place to enable us to move away from externally commissioned care.

There are clear challenges in how this will be achieved, and national discussions remain focused on this expectation and the growth in local provision that will be required, including the level of Welsh Government funding that each Local Authority will need if this level of growth is to be achieved.

### **3. Aim and Objectives**

The current Corporate Strategy for Children in Need of Care and Support identifies how the social care needs of children, young people and their families will be met within the resources available to the Council and our key partners during the period 2024 to 2028.

The scope of this Strategy covers four key objectives. These are:

- a. To support families to stay together and reduce the need for children to be looked after, by ensuring a focus on early intervention and preventative action across all service provision for children.
- b. To manage risk confidently and provide support at the 'edge of care' by making sure that need is accurately assessed, resulting in the right

children being accommodated at the right time. This includes supporting families to avoid children becoming accommodated unnecessarily and by making private arrangements within their wider family networks.

- c. To provide and commission a flexible and affordable mix of high-quality services that meet the diverse range of children's needs.
- d. To give children clearly planned journeys through care.

These objectives are underpinned by the following key principles:

- i) The responsibility for meeting the needs of children and young people looked after or at risk of becoming looked after rests across all services for children, including statutory and independent providers.
- ii) The majority of children are most likely to thrive and achieve good outcomes if they are cared for within their own families.
- iii) Preventative services and early intervention to support children in need and their families should be provided to give them every chance to stay together.
- iv) Where children cannot be supported within their immediate family, families will be supported to make private arrangements within their wider family and friendship networks and, where necessary, to make these arrangements permanent through the use of Child Arrangement Orders and Special Guardianship Orders
- v) Formal kinship fostering arrangements will be explored as the preferred alternative arrangement where it is necessary for the Local Authority to share parental responsibility or intervene in managing risk and protecting children.
- vi) Where a child's needs cannot be adequately met through the arrangements described in principles iv) and v), the majority will have their needs met best in a substitute family, preferably with in-house foster carers and, if not, with Independent Fostering Agency carers wherever possible living within the Vale of Glamorgan.
- vii) Residential care placements will be made only where the complexity and challenge of a child or young person's needs mean they are unable to live within a family setting or where a young person is subject to a Court Ordered Secure Remand.

- viii) Placements should be local to enable children and young people to remain in their communities, maintain their networks and minimise disruption in their lives.
- ix) All Looked After Children of statutory school age should receive appropriate education provision regardless of their placement and ability to access school. Providing appropriate support to enable engagement in education is just as important as finding suitable care placements for Looked After Children.
- x) Placements should support a positive transition to independence, adulthood, education, employment, training, and where applicable, resettlement back into the community from custodial settings.

#### 4. Placement Profile

- Activity Update

The below table provides information about the number and nature of placements on a quarterly basis during 2023/24.

Month Starting	Total CLA	Residential Care	Internally Provided Foster Care	Friends and Family Foster Care	Externally Provided Foster Care	Other
Mar -23	321	14	69	149 104 kinship 45 PWP	68	21 12 adoption 9 hostel/independent living 0 secure unit
Sept-23	342	15	62	158 109 kinship 49 pwp	80	27 10 adoption 17 Hostel/independent living 0 secure
Jan-24	347	18	60	159 113 kinship 46 pwp	92	18 7 adoption 10 hostels/independent living 1 Secure
Mar-24	344	18	60	156 110 kinship 46 pwp	90	20 7 adoption 11 hostels/independent living 2 secure unit
Oct-24	363	19	65	165 117 kinship 48 pwp	85	29 9 adoption 18 hostels/independent living 2 secure unit

- (1) Friends and Family Foster Care (also known as Kinship Care) refers to circumstances where a family friend or relative has come forward and offered to care for a looked after child, and they have undergone rigorous checks and an assessment of their suitability to do so. The friends or relatives are approved as foster carers via the Local Authority Fostering Panel. We can see from the table above that the number of kinship fostering arrangements have increased over the past 18 months. There was a more significant increase in children placed with kin between March 2024 and October 2024. However, we continue to see a steady rise in the number of children placed with kinship carers.
- (2) Placement with Parents refers to circumstances where a child looked after is subject of a Care Order is placed with one or both parents with a degree of delegation of parental responsibility for decisions about the day-to-day care of the child, whilst parental responsibility is shared with the Local Authority to ensure the child's welfare and safety. These arrangements are subject to checks and formal placement agreements and are sanctioned by the Court and the Local Authority. There has been a slight increase in Placement with Parents arrangements over the past 18 months.

The CLA population increased between 2016 and 2019 from 193 to 282, an increase of 89. However, between March 2019 – March 2020 the CLA population decreased by 23 from 282 to 259. During the past four years (March 2020 – March 2024), we have seen another significant increase in the CLA population by 104.

This increase correlates with the increased demands we have seen as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the Cost-of-Living Crisis. The largest increase is seen in internal (mainstream and kinship) and external foster placements. This reflects a national upward trend in demand for foster placements and decreasing capacity.

The table overleaf provides data on the actual numbers of children looked after in neighbouring authorities over the last five years. At the time of writing, figures for 2024 were unavailable (taken from [statwales.gov](http://statwales.gov)).

CLA @	Cardiff	Merthyr Tydfil	Rhondda Cynon Taff	Vale of Glamorgan
31.3.23	1057	173	626	322
31.3.22	1040	177	655	289
31.3.21	990	195	695	285
31.3.20	940	205	710	259
31.3.19	870	200	645	282

The majority of children looked after in the Vale of Glamorgan are in foster care provided by in-house carers and family and friends (kinship carers). The breakdown of the CLA population confirms the Council's strategy to return children to placements within Wales and, where possible, within the boundary of the Vale of Glamorgan.

Of the nine children who currently remain out of Wales, one is placed in a secure unit and one in a specialist residential school. Seven are placed in IFA's, two of the seven are UASC and a further three are a sibling group who needed to remain together. It is hoped that five of these young people can be returned to the area once appropriate accommodation is identified.

There has been an increase in the number of children placed in externally provided foster care from 68 in March 2023 to 85 in October 2024. This increase is a trend we have seen in previous years from March 2020 where there were only 36 children placed in IFAs, to March 2021 where there were 53. This reflects the increasing demand on foster care and continues to be a target for reduction in future years.

The number of children requiring residential care has remained relatively stable, with an increase of 5 over the past 18 months. There were on average 18 children whose additional complex needs required this type of provision during the year. We are aware of the increasing complexity of need amongst the children we are currently supporting. In addition to this, we have seen costs for residential placements increase significantly.

- **Placement Budget**

<u>Placement Description</u>	<u>Budget 23/24</u>	<u>Actual Spend 23/24</u>	<u>Variance 23/24</u>	<u>Budget 24/25</u>
Joint Budget - CLA Childrens Residential Placements	3,228,278	5,179,380	-1,951,102	3,228,278
Non CLA Childrens Residential Respite Placements	25,250	0	25,250	25,250
LA Joint Agreements - 4C's	19,681	31,412	-11,731	19,681
Secure / Remand	19,103	47,708	-28,605	19,103
Remand YOI 16-18	55,046	8,856	46,190	55,046
Childrens External Placement - IFA	3,912,812	4,545,157	-632,345	4,336,522
YJ Grant	-16,866	-12,024	-4,842	-16,866
WG Grants 23/24	-540,265	-459,842	-80,423	-540,265
Reserve to fund IFA	-400,000	-400,000	0	0
Savings Target Residential Placements 2023/24	-200,000	0	-200,000	-450,000
Other Income -Internal and LA's Bodies Grant, UHB income	0	-317,673	317,673	0
<b>Totals</b>	<b>6,103,039</b>	<b>8,622,974</b>	<b>-2,519,935</b>	<b>6,676,749</b>

The table relates to the external placement budget and provides information regarding budget and actual spend.

For 2023/24, the overall external placement budget for children looked after was overspent by £2,519,935. The current external placements budget is forecasting to overspend this year (2024/25) by £3.5m.

As of October 2024, we have 21 young people in residential care (2 in secure units, 3 in residential schools and 16 in residential children's homes) and we have 85 young people in IFA (external fostering) placements.

##### **5. 2023/24 Activity Undertaken**

During 2023/24, a number of initiatives were implemented to address the key issues/objectives in this area.

## External Placement Audit

Actions undertaken	An audit by the Multi-Agency Placement Panel of all children placed externally during the year, either in residential care or with independent fostering agencies, with a remit to confirm suitability of placement and where alternative provisions may be appropriate.
Impact: Service	Three children being considered for a planned move back into area, one child identified as potential move to supported independent living.
Impact: Financial	Potential savings if three children identified for planned move into area of £4,000 per week.  Potential savings for one child to move to supported independent living of £4,400 per week.
Lessons Learnt	Outcomes from the Audit have been monitored via the Placement Panel. Another external placement audit has been arranged for next year.  Increasing the availability of lower cost placements within Wales and the Vale of Glamorgan, and matching children to these placements, where this is appropriate to meet their needs, has the potential to significantly reduce costs. These reductions, however, will only have an impact on the overall budget if we can successfully manage the number of new placements coming in, use alternatives to care where this is appropriate and maximise our use of internal resources where accommodation is required.

## Internal Foster Carer Recruitment Strategy

Actions undertaken	The Vale of Glamorgan is now part of Foster Wales along with the other 21 Local Authorities in Wales and our regional partner is Cardiff City Council. Together with Cardiff and Foster Wales we have completed several recruitment activities. Local recruitment campaigns have coincided with the National campaigns and have focused on local foster carers. Further recruitment activity is planned for the year ahead and currently there is a second media campaign with local and national TV advertisements.
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Impact: Service	From 1st April 2023 to 31st March 2024, we have approved 6 new mainstream foster carers, and 29 kinship foster carers. So far this year up to October 2024 we have approved 3 new mainstream foster carers and have a further 6 in assessment and are on target to recruit 9 by year end. The number of kinship assessments continue to increase, and we have approved 16 new kinship carers this year up to October 2024.
Impact: Financial	The costs associated with internal and external foster care placements vary according to the needs of the individual child looked after. In addition, the skills of the foster carer and the number of children placed with them will cause the payment to internal foster carers to vary. However, the cost differential between external and internal provision equates to £391.60 per week/ £20,363 per annum per placement on average. Therefore, a reduction in our use of external placements by increasing our internal provision will provide savings.
Lessons Learnt	Growth within the Fostering Service will support us to meet the demands of the looked after population in future years. Alongside our own foster carer recruitment project, we continue to work with the Foster Wales looking at possible collaboration for regional marketing and recruitment.

### Developing Local Residential Provision

Actions undertaken	<p>Partnerships with Action for Children and Llamau to develop two local residential homes; one four bedded home and one two bedded home.</p> <p>The two homes are now open, with the four bedded Action for Children home opening in the last quarter of 2023/24 and the two bedded Llamau home opening in quarter two of 2024/25.</p> <p>During 2025/26, we plan to open a further two, two bedded homes in partnership with Llamau, in response to Welsh Government Eliminate agenda. This will take the total number of residential beds available in the Vale of Glamorgan to ten.</p>
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Impact: Service	These homes will assist us in placing children locally and returning children to their local area where this is in their best interests.
Impact: Financial	It is forecast that the placement costs for these homes will be less than purchasing from the independent sector. In addition, there will be savings on social workers time and transport costs. However, in the short term we are having to incur costs during the registration of these homes and transitioning and matching children to the available placements.
Lessons Learnt	The need for increased local provision, set up costs and revenue. It has been identified that we will require a further one two bedded specialist residential unit in the next two years.

### Joint Budget

Actions undertaken	Establishment of a joint budget between Children and Young People Services and Learning and Skills to meet the education and social care costs of residential placements for children with highly complex needs who are looked after by the Council. It was endorsed by Cabinet as a pilot scheme for one year from 1 <sup>st</sup> July 2013 and a report recommending continuation was presented to Cabinet on 30 <sup>th</sup> June 2014 and approved.
Impact: Service	Prior to the joint budget, the process for determining the allocation of costs to each funder could be difficult and time consuming. These arrangements for agreeing contributions to the overall cost of specific placements did not assist effective planning for the children concerned. Under the new arrangements, where a child has been identified as being eligible for funding from the joint budget, all the costs of caring for the child and meeting their needs are charged to that budget.
Impact: Financial	The joint budget for 2023/24 was £3.512 million. The budget holder is the Head of Children and Young People Services, who takes responsibility for monitoring and reporting the position of the budget. The budget overspent during 2023/24 and is forecast to overspend by £2.7 million this financial year (2024/25).

Lessons Learnt	Establishment of the joint budget has been successful in removing the need to determine funding arrangements on an ad hoc basis. There is a need for rigorous management of the budget, to ensure there are no overspends. The relevant Directors and the Head of Finance will monitor the budget on a quarterly basis.
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CLA Reduction Project Board

Actions undertaken	<p>Since 2019, the Division has set annual reduction intentions which were previously monitored by WG. The aim is to safely reduce the CLA population by discharging Care Orders, increasing the number of Adoption Orders, increasing the number of non-Care Order outcomes in care proceedings and preventing children from becoming looked after.</p> <p>For the initial two-year period we achieved our intentions and safely reduced the number of CLA from 282 in March 2019 to 259 in March 2020.</p> <p>Significantly in the context of COVID-19 and its associated impact for families, demand increased across all service areas and the numbers of children returned to pre pandemic levels in March 2021 (285).</p> <p>Positively, the increase between March 2021 and 2022 was minimal (289), albeit not decreased, but we experienced real challenges in 2022/23 and the population of CLA increased further to 322 children. This trend has continued and as of March 2024 we have 344 CLA. Decisions to receive children into care are not taken lightly and relate wholly to the need to safeguard their welfare. Alternatives to care are robustly considered in our multi agency placement panel and always pursued where this is possible.</p> <p>Whilst it's clear to see that more children have required intervention to keep them safe, over the past three years we have still achieved 21 discharges of Care Orders, 30 Adoption Orders, 14 non-Care Order outcomes in care proceedings and 19 children stepped down from pre-proceedings. Without these achievements, the CLA population would be considerably higher.</p> <p>The Division are alert to the need to maintain progress in the above areas, at the same time as seeking to</p>
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	reduce the numbers of children being received into care where it is safe to do so.
Impact: Service	These children are no longer looked after and able to lead more normal lives, without high levels of state intervention. Monthly statutory social work visits are no longer required, nor the statutory review of their cases by an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO), freeing staff capacity for other essential work.
Impact: Financial	<p>Nine of the discharges of Care Orders were as a result of either mainstream or kinship foster carers obtaining SGO's. For those in receipt of fostering allowance before the looked after status of the children ended, they are now in receipt of SGO allowances at the same rate, less child benefit payments which they are now entitled to claim directly. Rates vary from £160-£210 per week according to the age of the child.</p> <p>For the two children who were previously looked after by a foster carer this will equate to a saving of approximately £4000 – £5,500 per annum.</p> <p>The most significant 'saving' is in qualified staff time, which is easily absorbed by existing and new demands for Social Services intervention with children and families assessed as in need of support.</p>
Lessons Learnt	SGO applications are now given much more consideration as a means of achieving permanence for children unable to live with their birth families. This policy position will continue to be applied where it appropriately meets the needs of the child. This supports the Division's focus is on discharging Care Orders where it is safe and appropriate. We continue to plan the discharges of Care Orders where appropriate to do so.

The above actions describe how the Division is seeking to deliver overall objectives within this area of work. The result is more robust processes to manage a volatile area of demand and associated expenditure.

In the coming years, the Division will build on these actions (whilst maintaining and enhancing them) in order to continue to manage service demands.

## **6. Actions in 2024/25**

The following actions were identified based on the Division's analysis and are important to manage the associated risks and issues. In line with the overall objectives for this workstream, the following activities are underway:

- To reduce the use of independent fostering placements by increasing the availability of in-house placements, which includes a target of eight newly recruited foster carers per year.
- To develop an emergency fostering scheme including the approval of peripatetic foster carers, enabling children to be cared for on a one-to-one basis where their needs cannot be met in a foster home. Our pool of peripatetic carers is increasing, and we have just completed the refurbishment of a local house that will provide a stable base for these emergency arrangements.
- To manage the movement into and out of residential care, managing the numbers coming in and the length of stay.
- To develop our own local residential provision in partnership with the third sector to assist us in placing children looked after locally in lower cost residential placements where possible. As noted above, two third sector homes have now opened, with a combined capacity of six beds. Two further 2 bedded homes are in development, which will increase the overall bed capacity to ten.
- To step children down from residential to foster care where appropriate.
- To continue to identify opportunities to discharge Care Orders for children placed with parents and kin.
- To develop our own accommodation for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Works have just commenced to refurbish what will be our assessment unit. A further two properties will be sourced to provide move on accommodation.

These actions will continue to be informed by national and regional developments and are central to the Vale of Glamorgan's Eliminate plans currently being discussed with Welsh Government.

Progress against these actions will continue to be reported to elected members as part of existing reporting arrangements.