



Cyngor Castell-nedd Port Talbot
Neath Port Talbot Council

Valuing our children's future

Children & Young People Social Care Strategic Plan 2023-26

Gwasanaethau Cymdeithasol, Iechyd a Thai
Social Services, Health & Housing

www.npt.gov.uk

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Introduction

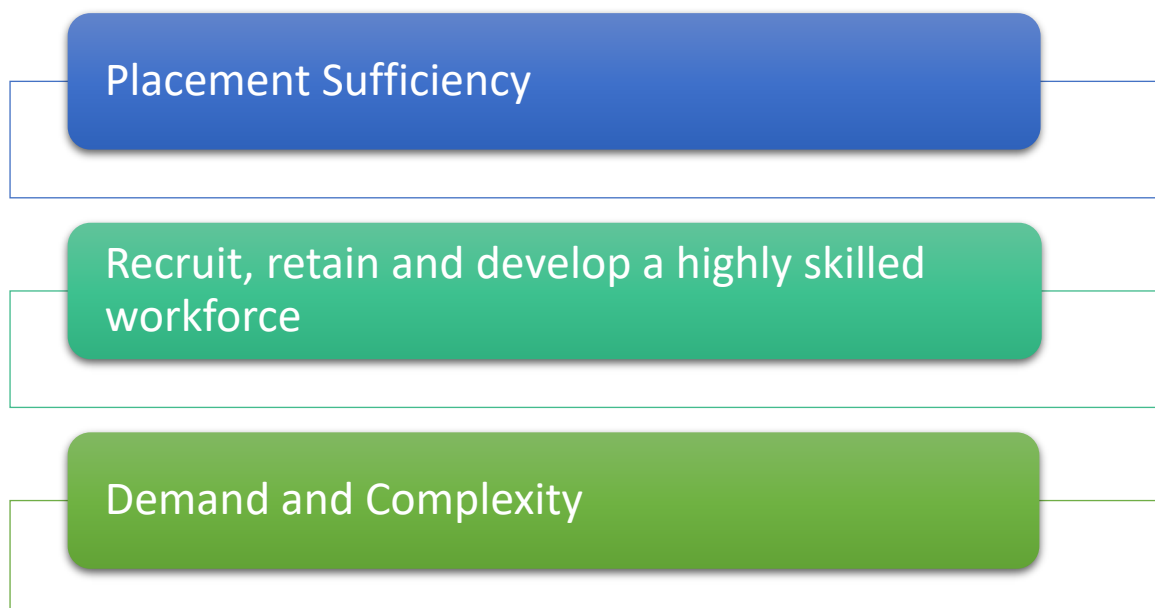
Since we published our NPT Plan for Children and Young People Services in April 2019 we have faced challenges as a society not experienced by this generation: the Covid-19 pandemic that swept across our nation; a war in Ukraine; and a cost of living crisis.

We want everyone to have an equal opportunity to be healthier, happier, safer and prosperous, and for Neath Port Talbot to be a place where *“All of our children and young people have the best start in life, so they can be the best they can be”*.

We want to put an emphasis on building safe and resilient communities that promote people’s strengths, and ensure we intervene early to prevent needs from increasing.

Our aim is to create an environment that works for all children, young people and families. Where we work together to co-create and co-produce and commission services for children, young people and families to ensure they get the right support at the right time. The Covid-19 pandemic taught us that communities and families know what they want and how to create change at an individual, family and community level and we will continue to take their lead.

These are the main challenges that this plan seeks to address:



Our Approach – Outcome Focussed Practice

We work in a strengths based way with families and communities, based on these principles:

- Collaborative conversations
- Empowering the voice of the child, the family and the community
- Relationship based
- Outcome focused: what matters
- Whole family focus
- Transparency
- Reflection
- Trauma Informed

These principles are about building on the foundations of wellbeing, for further information about our approach please see the [Outcomes Framework](#).

Consultant Social Workers

We have a skilled and dedicated Consultant Social Worker group who lead on areas of practice across the service. They use research to inform practice and are champions in areas of expertise. They also contribute to training and upskilling the workforce.

Engagement and Participation

Our approach is about what matters to children and families and to understand the impact we have and the difference we make we have a dedicated Strategic Lead for Participation and Engagement. Listening to the voice of the child is paramount in all the work we do, we also promote Children's Rights through the development of Children's Rights Champions across the service by working to the articles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

Background – Responding to Changing Demand

We are an ambitious Council and there is much we want to achieve to make sure children and young people get the best possible start in life, the right support when they need it, and have positive life experiences.

Children's needs are best met by their own families if this can be safely supported. Helping families stay together is a key focus of Children's Services. Early intervention and prevention services can reduce the number of children and young people reaching the threshold for care and needing to become care

experienced, or support them to return safely to their families in a timely manner.

We must manage risk effectively with families that are approaching the threshold for care, and work to ensure we only provide care to those children who need to be looked after outside of their family, and are supported to remain in the family home when it is safe to do so. We will provide a range of interventions which support families to make changes whilst always ensuring that children and young people are kept safe and ensure that the plans for care experienced CYP are regularly reviewed.

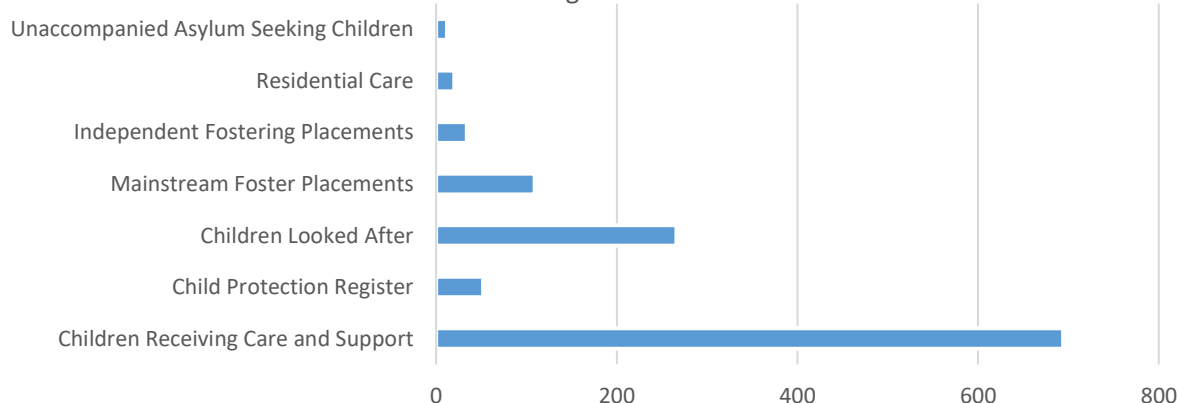
National Context:



Local Context:

There are more than 142,000 people living in NPT. It is estimated that around 28,200 of those are under 18 years of age – a level (about 20%) in line with the Wales average. The Council spends more than £23.3 million, about 6.9% of its total budget, on Children’s Social Care. We know that NPT, like other local authorities across Wales, are facing financial challenges. Increasing demand and tightening budgets will put added pressures on services. The number of children in NPT is projected to decrease over the next decade as the birth rate falls. But future demand for social care cannot be simply linked to population projections.

At the beginning of January 2023 there were 1,272 children, or about 4.5% of the under 18 population in NPT, receiving some level of support from the Council’s Children and Young Person’s Services. This includes:



Placement Sufficiency

Where people live, the quality of their home and who they live with and near, is important to children and young people. Providing loving and caring family homes in NPT for children and young people who are looked after is a fundamental part of what we do. We want safe, stable and caring places to live so children and young people can get the most out of life, so they can thrive and be independent.

We believe that the best place for a child is with a loving family. We will work with families to help them stay together, but we also know that there is a need for foster placements to provide safe and stable environments for some. It's all about getting the right service at the right time.

As the needs of NPT's children who are looked after vary, so must the provisions of placements on offer, which means that the service should ensure recruitment of a wide ranging pool of carers, some of whom are able to support older children, short- or long-term placements, sibling groups, overnight short breaks (respite care) and parent and child placements.

When children need to be looked after by the Council, NPT has a responsibility as Corporate Parent to ensure that those children are placed in the most appropriate setting as this impacts their outcomes and ability to thrive.

For most children who are looked after by the Council, a fostering placement in a family environment is most appropriate, but we recognise that for a small proportion of children a residential setting will be most appropriate for their specific needs, and can be especially effective in providing a stable and secure environment in which children can progress and thrive.

Family reunification

When children and young people come into our care our priority is securing their protection from harm. However, wherever possible, we are committed to ensuring they are able to leave our care and be reunited with their families where it is safe and appropriate to do so. Early and robust care planning ensures we work with families proactively and explore options for children and young people's safe return home.

We have also forged better links with the judiciary and the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS), including working on accelerated discharges. This applies where the position has changed since the making of a

care order and where families now only require universal services, with the agreement of the local authority, the parents and their extended family.

Residential to fostering

Wherever possible, we want children and young people in our care, to live with foster carers, rather than in a residential home. While for some, depending on their individual needs and circumstances at any given time, it may be best for young people to live in a residential children's home. However, we believe that everyone has the right to grow up in a family environment, and that, in principle, this is best for them and their life chances. The sufficiency of suitable foster carers should never be a reason why any young person is not benefitting from a supportive family environment. In this context, we want to be able to support more young people to be able to move from residential to fostering homes safely and sustainably. Overall, we want to see the number of young people living in a residential home decrease therefore we will focusing on recruiting 'step down' foster carers to be able to support children and young people to transition from residential care to foster care when appropriate to do so. Should we be able to successfully recruit then we will immediately see the positive outcome of this. Our Step-down foster carers will be matched with CYP already identified who are in residential care. This would only cost if we were able to recruit and should we recruit this would result in instant significant savings given how cost effective this is compared to residential care.

So we will keep under review the needs and interest of all children and young people living in residential care settings to ensure that this continues to be the most appropriate place for them to live.

And we will review our use of residential provision both in and out of county in line with Welsh Government's aim to eliminate profit-making provision for children who are looked after. This is having an immediate impact on an already challenging placement market with some providers making the decision to pause planned developments and/or withdraw from offering placements to Welsh children.

Residential to step down in-house residential provision

We believe that children and young people who are placed in residential care would be best placed within the local area closer to the family, friends and communities they come from. Currently all of our residential placements are commissioned externally. Therefore we are seeking to develop a small three bed step-down residential provision which will follow a trauma recovery model (TRM) to achieve better outcomes for our children and young people.

By operating this service in house we will be benefiting from increased control which will result in improved quality and achievement of personal outcomes. It will also enable us to develop and innovate the service model to flex in line with changing needs of local children. We can also benefit from shared learning and development with our existing Hillside Secure Children's Home including opportunities to explore economies of scale and joint cost savings (e.g. shared visiting commissioned services). This provision is anticipated to be cost neutral but we will have guaranteed availability of local beds for local children, therefore strengthening placement sufficiency.

Fostering

For children and young people who are looked after by NPT, where family reunification, adoption or special guardianship is not a viable option, we want them to live in loving and caring fostering homes, where they are safe, protected and able to be themselves. We want to meet the individual needs of the children and young people living with fostering families, including their racial and cultural needs, learning style, age and stage of development and abilities. In this way they are homes that not only provide a roof over their heads, but instead they equip and enable young people to thrive in all areas of their lives.

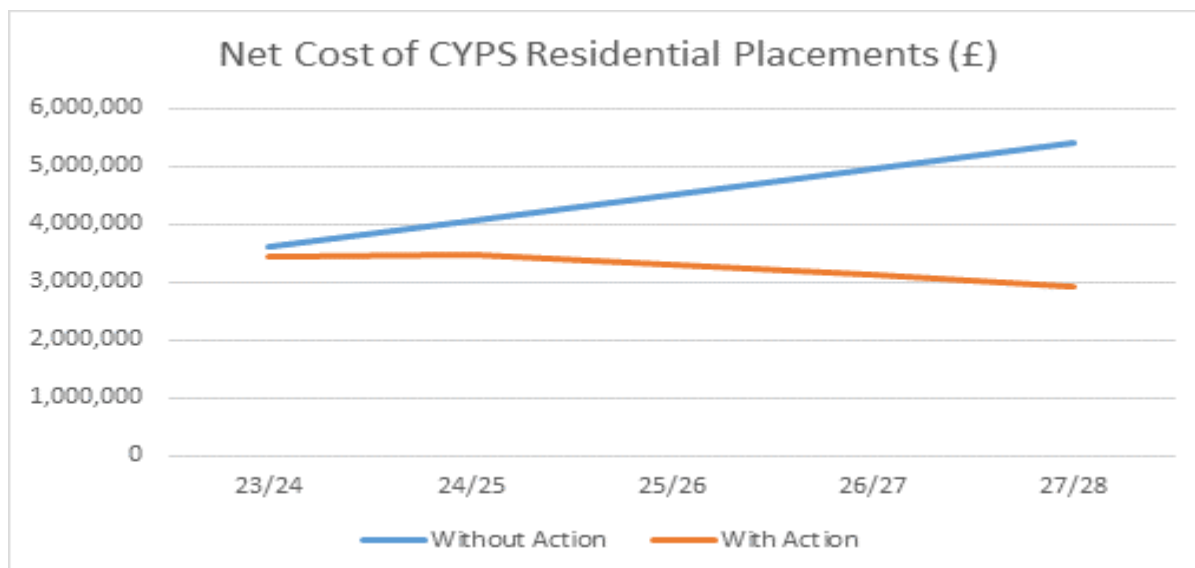
But there is currently a lack of sufficiency within fostering. We have an aging population of foster carers and in the last 2 years we have seen a reduction of 20%. We need to maximise the fostering offer as a whole inclusive of in-house services and the Independent Fostering Agencies. We need to increase the number of short and long-term foster carers for older children and for short break foster carers. This includes the development of Foster Plus which focuses on children and young people with complex needs. We have developed our in-house therapeutic and outreach services to focus on placement stability and step-down from residential care. Our aim is to grow our own local market and still have the advantages of utilising the regional frameworks as and when required.

Care Leavers

For young adults, moving out of home is an important milestone on the transition to adulthood, this can be even more challenging for our care leavers. Having the right accommodation and support available to care leavers provides the foundations to achieving positive outcomes. Some of our young adults continue to live in foster placements in a "when I'm ready" arrangement, some will move on to supported accommodation and others to independent living.

Financial Pressures

The key financial pressure when considering placement sufficiency are residential placements which has increased. Without the planned developments highlighted above our residential placement will likely increase facing the service with increasing financial cost pressures.



How will we strengthen placement sufficiency?

- Over the next 6 months we will review our fostering retention and recruitment strategy to ensure that there are carers approved to meet the needs of the children and young people looked after by Neath Port Talbot
- Over the next 6 months we will also review our residential accommodation needs
- Ensure that only those young people who need to remain looked after are looked after, to ensure that their voice is heard and that their plans are subject to regular reviews
- Develop a clear set of guidance around Pathway Plans, whilst strengthening practice for Care Leavers
- Over the next 12 months we will review and develop the accommodation and support needs of our care leavers in line with the Housing Strategy
- Over the next 12 months we will review and strengthen Youth Homelessness processes, resources, and strategies, in line with the Housing Strategy
- Support young adults to move out of the family home in a planned way

- Over the next 6 months we will review the regional multi-agency Transition Policy for children and young people to ensure it is making a difference to the experience of young people in transition; and make sure we are meeting the objective with a clear comprehensive and robust process in place to guide the transition of all young people from Children's to Adult Services
- Over the next 6 months we will map, identify and develop accommodation and care needs for young people aged 14-18. Within 12 months all accommodation needs mapped for young people aged 14 - 18. Identify unmet accommodation models to inform commissioning cycle/development of model of accommodation and care in the community

Recruit, retain and develop a highly skilled workforce



When social workers have the tools and time to do their job well, it makes a huge difference to children's and families' lives. We want a valued, supported and highly-skilled social worker for every child and family who needs one.

Workforce stability is crucial for practitioners' ability to build relationships with children and families. Social workers should have access to high-quality training and continuous support throughout their career, and their wellbeing should be a priority for leaders and the Council. We have worked to create a safe and productive environment to work in. We have kept case loads at a manageable level as we acknowledge the complexities of the CYP and families that we are supporting.

Together we will review, reflect, learn from and build on our experiences of working with children, young people and families so we can continually improve the support we are able to offer and create a learning culture.

It is important to understand, plan for and meet future demand and the individual needs of children. We want children, young people and families to be supported by a workforce that is resilient, confident and competent.

Financial Pressures

We aim to continue investing our social workers by being competitive and attractive in relation to recruitment and retention by exploring the potential of a pay supplement (currently known as a market pay supplement). This will help to reduce the need to employ agency staff within our workforce.

How will we do this?

- Continue to develop Consultant Social Workers to support practitioners and embed evidence based practice
- Work closely with universities and other organisations to enhance the quality of practice and promote employment opportunities
- Continue to develop leaders by investing in accredited courses and the corporate leadership development programme
- Promote and create opportunities for staff to progress through succession planning; such as building on our successful “grow your own” social worker initiative
- To continue to enhance and embed the learning culture across Social Care
- Support the health and wellbeing of our employees by the development of the wellbeing sub-group and focussing on wellbeing within supervision
- Attract, retain and develop workforce stability by continuing to offer a market supplement
- Continue to work regionally and nationally to promote the positive value of working in social care and to attract, retain and develop workers in NPT.

Demand and Complexity

For the majority of children, the best place for them to be is at home with their family, some families may need support to be able to do this. We provide specific and targeted support to families who are facing particular challenges resulting from social harms, poverty and inequality, domestic abuse, substance misuse, mental health conditions, as well as learning disabilities. Over the past few years the Local Authority has experienced a significant increase in demand from the front-door through to placement sufficiency. This demand has been compounded by years of austerity and the consequent reduced funding provided to public bodies, a pandemic, a cost of living crisis, and a war in Ukraine all of which have increased complexity.

Early intervention and prevention

We work collaboratively with families to build resilience and prevent problems escalating by providing early offers of help and support. We continue to invest in supporting families at an earlier stage through the strengthening of support services and the recruitment of a full time principal officer with responsibility for prevention and family support. We work in partnership with our colleagues in adult services to ensure that we respond to challenges such as the current cost of living crisis and ensure that families have access to support when they need it. We provide family focussed support by working in partnership with families and building on strengths, we do this in the following ways:

Team Around the Family (TAF)

Our team around the family support families who require short term support and without support at this stage are likely to require more intensive support in the future. TAF are able to support with parenting, behaviour management and emotional wellbeing.

Family Support Services

- FAST – Our edge of care service works intensively with families in a timely manner offering support to families to ensure that children remain cared for by their family through the provision of support to parents, carers and children
- Working Together Service – This Service prides themselves on the ability to develop and maintain positive relationships with families which will

enable them to make and sustain positive changes in their lives with a focus on improving and maintaining home conditions

- Practice Support Worker Team – This team offers parenting support and direct work with children and young people
- Specialist staff to support parents with a learning disability
- Substance misuse services – This team supports parents experiencing challenges with alcohol and substance misuse and support them with harm reduction or abstinence

Young Carers

Young carers are identified by way of assessment in our Single Point of Contact Team and are referred to the Youth Service for support. This support can include 1:1 support or group activity where they are able meet with other young carers in similar circumstances.

Parent Advocacy Network (PAN)

The West Glamorgan Parent Advocacy Network is a regional collaboration which aims to support parents who are experiencing and have experienced of the child care and child protection system.

Commissioned Services

We commission a range of family support services such as family group conferencing and advocacy services. To ensure we commission the right services to meet the needs of our local children, young people and families, we undertake a variety of service needs analysis and service quality reviews.

Care and Support for Children and Young People

We want to make sure that children, young people and families have the support they need, so that children and young people have the best start in life. For those who need care and support (including advice) our aim is to ensure the right information, advice and assistance is available to ensure families stay together.

In childhood and into adolescence, the single most common factor for children who develop the capacity to overcome hardship is having at least one stable and committed relationship with a caregiver. For most children and young people, the family provides the basis for this essential stability, where families struggle with providing this stability we endeavour to strengthen relationships for the child by finding this in extended family or community networks, with the assistance of our partner agencies.

For young adults, moving out of home is an important milestone on the transition to adulthood. People with social care needs, such as autism, learning disabilities, or a physical disability, are no different. For some young people this will mean a fully independent place and for others this will be living with other people. In addition, for those young adults transitioning out of the family home, the young person and parent need to be involved in the conversation. Both need to feel confident that the young person will be able to live well.

We have continued to invest in support services which has supported a continued reduction in CYP subject to child protection plans and those becoming looked after. This has ensured better outcomes for our CYP.

Children with Disabilities

We provide support to children with disabilities and their families, this can include information, advice and assistance through to behaviour support and time away from home for short breaks at a specialist provision. The demand is growing in this area therefore over the next 12 months we will be reviewing this provision. We are also developing our Neuro-diversity disorder (NDD) strategic plan.

Youth Justice Service (Early Intervention and Prevention)

The Youth Justice Service (Early Intervention and Prevention) is incorporated within Children and Young People Services. Our aim is to support young people and their families who are involved in, or on the fringe of, offending or anti-social behaviour. Integral to this is their safety and well-being, ensuring they remain protected from harm and exploitation, whilst balancing their risks with the impact on victims of crime and their communities. It is our objective to improve outcomes for our young people in all areas of their lives in order to achieve their potential and to make a successful transition to adulthood.

Strengthening support to pupils who are on reduced timetables and/or excluded

Within NPT secondary schools the rate of pupils who are permanently excluded is increasing and attendance rates are decreasing. The impact of these trends on Children and Young People Services (CYPS) is noticeable and has resulted in:

- Family breakdown resulting in foster care and residential placements;
- Family crisis with parents asking their child to be placed away from the family home;
- Increased use of CYPS resources to support children and their families;

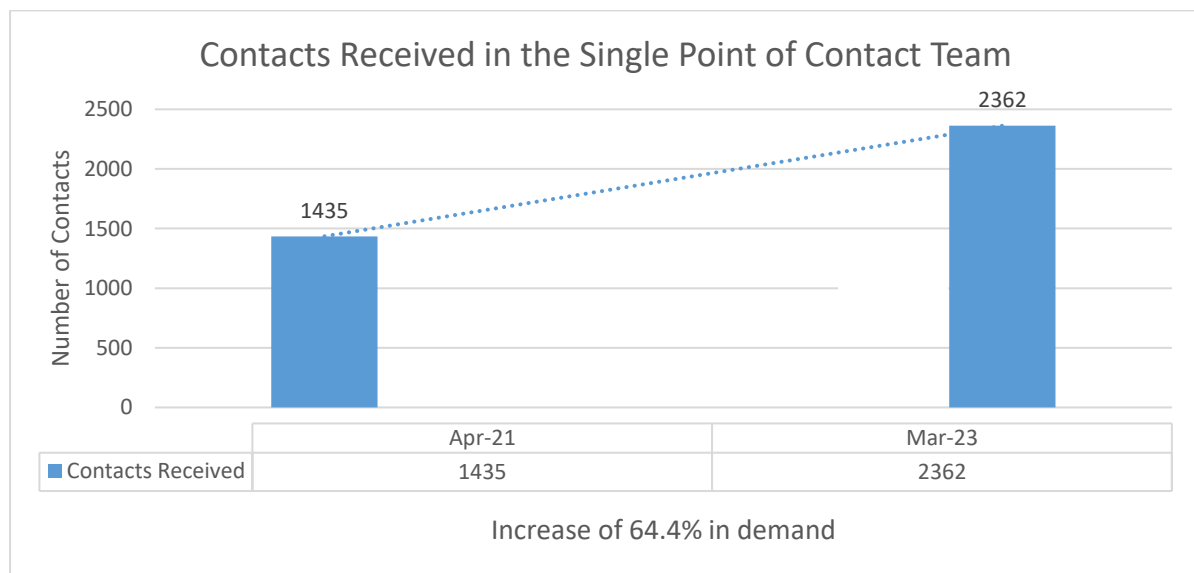
- Increased use of commissioned support services during school time hours.

Currently when a young person is on a reduced timetable or is facing exclusion there should be a Pastoral Support Plan (PSP) in place which is designed to support them when school based strategies have not been effective. The number of NPT children who are looked after/open care & support cases are over-represented within the overall population placed on a PSP.

We believe that by creating a centralised Family Support Team dedicated to support pupils on PSP and are open to CYPS would enable a person centred and strengths based approach. This will also generate considerable cost savings by preventing the need to deliver high volume packages of support which are often commissioned from high cost services.

Demand Pressures

We continue to see an increase in contacts received in our Single Point of Contact Team and it is essential that the required resources are in place to ensure that this area of our service is effective and prevents some cases escalating into statutory services.



How will we respond to demand and complexity?

- Strengthen opportunities for early offers of help to ensure vulnerable children and their families are having access to community based support services at the earliest opportunity

- Continually review and develop specialist services in response to complexity
- Capture the voice of the child/family in care and support plans
- Ensure we work together with families in an outcomes focused way
- Making documents accessible and written in plain language for families to understand
- Further embed children's rights across Children & Young People Services and increase the use of children's rights champions
- Continue to strengthen the transition arrangements for children with complex needs between Children and Adult Services
- Develop our response to adolescence, to include the development of a transitional safeguarding pathway
- Strengthening regional and partnership working
- Having an IT system that supports our practitioners
- Continue to learn through our Quality Assurance Framework

Conclusion

In order to ensure the continued safety and wellbeing of the children, young people and families we support, we require the Council's investment in the following:

- Market Supplement to remain in place
- Investment in two permanent social workers and one support worker for the Single Point of Contact Team to manage the continued increase in demand
- Investment in five Step Down Professional Foster Carer Placements (costs would occur should we recruit and would be on the basis of spend to save against the residential budget)
- Two year pilot on creating a Family Support Team to support children and young people who are on reduced timetables and/or facing exclusion from education
- We have secured capital funding for a semi-independent provision for Care Leavers and are currently mapping out start-up costs.
- We are seeking to secure WG capital funding to develop a small transitional children's care home, we are currently mapping out our start-up costs.

This plan sets out our current thinking and understanding of what can affect children, young people and families, and the types of things we can do to offer support. It is a working document based on assumptions which may change over time. As such we will review the plan on a regular basis to ensure we continue to meet the challenges faced by those who need us most.