

Background

Following publication of the Independent Care Review just before the Covid-19 pandemic started in February 2020, Dundee City Council Children and Families Service has led an ambitious partnership programme of transformational change in the way we provide support to children and young people at risk of being provided with alternative care and in formal care arrangements.

Under Our Promise to Care Experienced Children, Young People and Care Leavers 2020-23, this wide-ranging programme has involved the strategic implementation of multiple actions designed to reduce requirements for alternative care; re-balance the profile of care towards local family-based arrangements; improve wellbeing, attainment and post-school destinations; and reduce costs.

Our data illustrated that the city has some stark poverty related challenges and that we incurred much higher overall costs for care experienced children and young people than most other local authority areas. This has been due to fewer being in Kinship Care and internal Foster Care and more in external Foster Care and external residential care, with 9% of our care experienced population constituting £13m or 33% of total costs.

Implementation

Our efforts to generate transformational change have been organised and delivered at pace under the 5 inter-dependent foundations of People, Family, Care, Scaffolding and Voice. Some key themes have included partnership initiatives across the system in universal, targeted and specialist support; capacity, competence and confidence building across the partnership workforce; and measures to optimise existing community and family assets.

People

Our workforce development has included Trauma Informed Practice training across the partnership workforce; a mental health capacity building model in Together to Thrive; generic and specialist risk assessment training; a new Domestic Abuse post to provide specialist advice; and Team Manager involvement in routine self-evaluation. Over the same period, Social Work support rated as Good or better has markedly improved:

- Assessments rated Good or better increased from 68% to 96%
- Child's Plans rated Good or better increased from 42% to 85%
- Chronologies rates Good or better increased from 50% to 78%
- Overall practice rated Good or better increased from 58% to 93%

Family

To enhance universal support, a What Matters 2 U initiative informed by place-based and community empowerment approaches has been introduced initially in 2 locality areas. A Fast-Online Referral Tracking system has also been introduced to enable timely access to support, alongside new services such as school counselling. A new Functional Family Therapy programme targets support to families with teenagers at risk of entering care.

- The number of children and young people on the Child Protection Register reduced from 76 to 49 and the proportion with domestic abuse concerns from 50% to 39%
- The number of young people aged over 11 years who were provided with alternative care reduced from 31 to 20.
- The total number of children and young people requiring alternative care reduced from 442 in 2021 to 429 in 2023.

Voice

The Council and NHS Tayside implemented new Practice Guidance which places the voice of families at the centre of decision-making in key meetings. A new Champions Board model was introduced, led on the development of a new Child Protection Charter and have started to attend a Columba 1400 Leadership Academies. Social Work introduced MOMO to enable children to express their views.

- 71% of pupils in sites where the Practice Guidance was being implemented had their views heard, compared to 35% across other sites.
- On Columba 1400, a facilitator said: 'Your hopes for this week were to become a better leader and make friendships . . . you have achieved them with flying colours!'
- On MOMO, a Social Worker said: 'It's been a good tool and the main child I use it with enjoyed it – she liked the pictures and getting to choose her own answers'.

Care

The Council established a new Kinship Care Team and although the recruitment of internal Foster Carers has been a challenge, with a 16% national reduction in approved carers over the last 7 years and a 4.8% reduction in the last 12 months, we have partnered with the Vardy Trust to invest in an 'ideas to action programme' to develop solution focused responses.

In our Young Person's Houses, 5 out of 6 houses received Care Inspectorate grades of Good or Very Good in annual inspections and one was inspected over several categories to receive grades ranging from Adequate to Very Good. To enhance capacity, the Council funded the opening of a new house to support younger children aged 6-11 years and is re-provisioning another to provide supported accommodation to care leavers.

In schools, a new MCR Mentoring programme supported 267 care experienced children in the last 12 months. A designated Youth Employability Service worker supported 72 care experienced young people and 53 progressed into further education, training or employment. To sustain support after leaving school, an Aftercare Team provided holistic support to 78% of eligible young people and remained available to others.

- Over the last 12 months, the number of children and young people in Kinship Care have increased from 108 to 125

- In the last 8 months, the number of children and young people in external residential care reduced from 43 to 32 involving £7m of cost savings
- On their MCR Mentor, a young person said: 'My mentor goes to great lengths to support me, supports me with studying techniques and helps with applications'.
- Care experienced pupils achieving SCQF Level 5 or above increased from 70% to 76% and SCQF Level 6 or above from 32% to 52% in 2020-21 and 2021-22
- Positive destinations increased from 71% in 2019-20 to 100% in 2020-21 and 83% in 2021-22

Next Steps

The Council and partners are committed to data-driven continuous improvement and the next iteration of Our Promise outlines a range of new actions, including leading on the strategic deployment of new Scottish Government Whole Family Wellbeing Funding; developing a consistent edge of care offer; targeting additional support to children and young people in Kinship Care; and implementing revised Social Work Practice Standards.