Review of the Council’s Strategy for Looked after Children

Torfaen County Borough Council
Whilst there is evidence of positive initiatives which are improving services for children and families, current arrangements are not comprehensive and may not be sustainable and the Council does not have an integrated and holistic approach to reducing the numbers of Looked after Children.

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Summary

1. The Assembly Government has given priority to vulnerable children, including Looked After Children. There are core aims for all children with recognition that vulnerable children are likely to need additional support. All Children and Young People’s Partnership Boards have been required to produce a single Plan for Children and Young People, (2008–2011), which provides a multi-agency plan for responding to local needs and priorities for their area.

2. There is national recognition that the numbers of Looked after Children in Wales have increased in recent years and this is associated with increasing expenditure on specialist placements. Consequently, the reduction in the numbers of Looked After Children and the associated costs is relevant for a number of councils in Wales.

3. The number of children looked after by the Council was averaging at approximately 180 children per year but this number increased during 2008 to a total of 206. Since this peak in October, the number has gradually reduced and was 196 at the time of this review. Torfaen has been successful in reducing the numbers of children in specialist residential placements.

4. There is no children’s home in Torfaen as the Council’s preferred approach is to use foster care. If there are no appropriate Council placements to meet children’s needs, then placements have to be bought from third parties in the private sector. The Council had been losing local foster carers to private agencies and other local authorities for some years. In 2007, Members agreed to uplift the rates paid to foster carers and funded additional support. This investment has contributed to an increase in council foster placements. There are still some difficulties in retaining a full range of foster carers.

5. The Council has taken some actions in assisting members in their role as corporate parents under the Children Act 1989, but there is no Corporate Parenting Panel.

6. The Wales Audit Office on this project focussed on assessing whether the Council have an effective strategy and a sustainable and costed plan that will lead to a reduction in the number of looked after children. We concluded that whilst there is evidence of positive initiatives which are improving services for children and families, current arrangements are not comprehensive and may not be sustainable and the Council does not have an integrated and holistic approach to reducing the numbers of Looked after Children.

7. We came to this conclusion because we found that:
   - the Council has preventive services but these are not yet integrated and comprehensive;
   - fostering and externally commissioned services have improved but the Council lacks a range of appropriate accommodation and support options to reduce the numbers of Looked After Children;
• positive partnership processes exist but there are issues with some aspects of partnership working;
• there is awareness of the importance of Looked after Children within the Council but currently there is no integrated and holistic approach which is resulting in reducing the numbers of Looked after Children; and
• the Social Care and Housing Service has achieved a balanced budget in recent years but there are increasing pressures and the sustainability of current arrangements is uncertain.

8. This assessment was based on evidence gathered from a wide range of staff and we gratefully acknowledge the positive response and co-operation from all staff during the course of our work.

Recommendations

9. The Council should:

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The Council has preventive services but these are not yet integrated and comprehensive

The Council provides services which are focussed on prevention and early intervention

10. The Council views preventative services as important in both ensuring positive outcomes for children and families and as a means to maximise cost savings to its budgets in the long term. There is access to preventative services within Children’s Services and funding for preventative services under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989 is included in team budgets. Preventive services can include:
   - parenting education; such as the Family Links and the Incredible Years courses;
   - home care support;
   - play schemes; and
   - support for families provided by Family Aides.

11. The Referral and Assessment team, which has first contact with families, makes most use of Section 17 funding. There are considerable resources provided to vulnerable families, sometimes using council services and sometimes using services provided by the voluntary sector; e.g. the Families First early intervention service. The Children with Disabilities Team also uses preventive services, such as respite care. Staff report that these services are valued by families and that they assist in preventing family breakdowns.

12. There is one integrated social services, education and voluntary agency preventive project, which was established in 2006. The Schools Multi-Agency Referral Team Torfaen, (SMARTT) project is located with three primary schools, and provides low-level support. The aim of the service is to provide multi-agency professional support to assist parents in dealing with children whose behaviour is causing concern. The Team is providing advice to parents through drop-in sessions at primary schools. The service also responds to referrals from staff. The original three-year funding for this project is due to end in 2009 and the service was being evaluated at the time of this review to decide on the future of the service. This evaluation can assist in identifying lessons for future integrated working.

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1 Under section 17(1) Children Act 1989, local authorities have a general duty to provide a range and level of services appropriate to the children in their area who are 'in need' so as to safeguard and promote their welfare and, so far as is consistent with that aim, promote their upbringing by their families.
13. The Community Safety Service is also involved in providing services to assist vulnerable families and there is potential to further develop this. To date, this work has not been co-ordinated with other preventive services for children and families. There have been recent discussions about bidding for external funding for a pilot project that would involve Community Safety, Social Services, Education, Adult Education and Bron Afon Housing Association, who manages the former Council housing stock in Torfaen. Certain families are likely to be known to each of these agencies and there is a wish to provide effective and co-ordinated early intervention. Funding will be sought from charities and it is hoped that the social enterprise partners may be able to contribute resources.

Preventive services have been reduced by court requirements and are not comprehensive

14. Although the preventive services provided are valued, staff report that there is a need for a more comprehensive preventive approach.

15. There was a dedicated Family Support Team which focused on preventive work but this has been re-assigned as a Family Assessment Team to respond to the court requirements for assessments. The Family Support Team was created to provide preventive services, on a group and individual basis, for vulnerable children/young people and families. The Team, working from a Family Centre, aimed to support children and families and to reduce the likelihood of children becoming Looked After.

16. There are increasing pressures on Children’s Services as a result of additional requirements imposed by the Family Courts. The Council was paying external specialists to undertake assessments required by the courts, but this was taking considerable resources. The re-assignment of the Family Support Team has reduced expenditure on external specialists but is taking resources from preventive services. This is acknowledged by the Council that whilst the re-focussing of the teams activities is having financial benefits it has also reduced the level of family support work.

17. Family Aides and Community Support Workers were originally appointed to focus on providing direct support to vulnerable families and so reduce the risk of children becoming Looked After. However, there has been a reduction in the time these staff are able to give to preventive services as a result of court requirements. The increase in court-directed supervised contact is done by Family Aides and Community Support Workers which consequently reduces the time they can spend on preventive work.
18. Staff in Children’s Services commented that they are having increased demands to work with vulnerable parents. For example, parents with learning disabilities, mental health and substance misuse issues. They explained that currently there are no systems in place to respond in an holistic way to these families needs. They identified the need for:

- strengthening joint working with adult services to work with vulnerable families in an holistic way; and
- additional family support/education and training tailored to meet these families needs.

19. The importance of strengthening integrated support to vulnerable families has been identified by the Assembly Government and is included in the Proposed Children and Families Measure. Guidance on this is due to be issued shortly.\(^2\)

20. There are financial restrictions on funds for preventive work as underspends in team budget are sometimes removed from team budgets and redirected into central funds. This only happens because of the pressures on the Council budget, but it has reduced the resources available for preventive work.

**Fostering and externally commissioned services have improved but the Council lacks a range of appropriate accommodation and support options to reduce the numbers of Looked After Children**

**Fostering and externally commissioned services have improved**

21. There have been significant improvements with the Council’s fostering service over the last two years. The Council was paying foster carers significantly below the rates paid by private agencies and neighbouring authorities. This contributed to a loss in the numbers of in-house foster carers and an increasing reliance on other providers. The Council has sought to address this through an increase in fee levels, increased out of hours support, regular thank you events and long service awards. This package of improvements has resulted in an increase in the number of foster carers with the demand for foster placements for young children being met in-house.

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\(^3\) The Assembly is inviting councils to bid to establish three pilot projects in Wales providing integrated family support. A budget of £1.8 million over three years is available for the successful pilot projects.
22. An innovative service, the Multidisciplinary Intervention Service Torfaen, (MIST), has been established in Torfaen. Its purpose is to reduce the numbers of Looked After Children with complex needs who are placed in specialist residential placements outside of Torfaen. The service is jointly commissioned and funded by the local authority Children’s Services and Education departments, Torfaen LHB and Gwent NHS Trust. The team is hosted by Action for Children and comprises:

- the team manager, who is a qualified Community Psychiatric Nurse with experience in CAMHS;
- a part-time Consultant Psychologist;
- a teacher;
- a social worker;
- a youth worker;
- a community support worker; and
- a therapeutic, professional foster care service that is dedicated to the project.

23. The MIST service work with the whole family in an holistic way, based on attachment theory and providing a “team around the child”. The service began by focusing on the 15 most complex young people in specialist residential placements outside of the county. All but four have now successfully returned to Torfaen. The Service has also worked with young people who were likely to be moved out to residential placements and these young people were accommodated with the dedicated foster care service. There has been an independent evaluation of MIST and this has provided positive messages about the effectiveness and successful outcomes of the service. This service was established with pump-priming funding as an invest-to-save project and it has delivered the intended outcomes.

24. A more recent innovation which has the potential to improve commissioned services is the creation of the South East Wales Improvement Collaborative (SEWIC). This is a consortium of 10 local authorities in South Wales, including Torfaen. Funding has been provided from the Social Services Improvement Agency to support this initiative. The Collaborative intends to:

- improve the commissioning of specialist residential and fostering placements;
- achieve more effective outcomes for young people in the placements;
- use the influence of bringing together a group of purchasers to bring down the costs of placements; and
- improve value for money.
25. Cardiff Council is currently piloting a different approach to buying independent sector placements. They are specifying the outcomes that are wanted for the young person and inviting independent providers to tender for the placement. The next stage is to develop a verification system for independent agencies. After this piloting work, there are plans to fund a joint commissioning unit via SEWIC, initially focusing on the verification of providers. This will cost £32,000 per Council. The consortium approach is intended to both improve the suitability of placements for young people and to reduce the costs of placements. In addition the Council has a draft Commissioning Strategy for Children’s Services which it is looking to finalise in 2009/10.

The Council lacks a range of appropriate accommodation and support options to reduce the numbers of Looked After Children

26. Although there have been significant improvements with the in-house fostering service, not all placements can be met in-house and there are some issues with keeping foster carers. The in-house service is operating on a fee-paying basis, as compared to a professional basis with carers only paid during a placement and not on a salary. The rates paid to in-house carers are £5 below the National Fostering Network recommended rates. Consequently, the recruitment of foster carers has been most successful for those people who see fostering as an additional commitment rather than as a career. This is appropriate for placements for young children, where their needs are relatively straightforward, but it is more challenging for placements of teenagers with complex needs who can present difficult and uncooperative behaviour. In some cases, these increased expectations placed on foster carers have resulted in them no longer continuing with this role.

27. Between 1 April 2008 and November 2008 there have been 71 Looked After Children Placement moves, 19 of which were placement breakdowns. This indicates that the Council does not yet have a range of accommodation and support options to meet the range of needs of children aged over 11 years or to reduce the numbers of Looked After Children. There is a need to develop a wider range of fostering services which could include placements for teenagers with complex needs, shared care working alongside families and outreach work.
28. There is a shortage of Supported Lodgings in Torfaen. These are intended for older teenagers and offer placement with a family on a lodgings basis, which gives more independence to the young person than a foster placement, but still provides a family environment. There are only two Supported Lodgings placements in Torfaen and this means that there are limited options to assist vulnerable young people who need accommodation. These lodgings are important services for care leavers, vulnerable teenagers and for mother and baby placements. They can provide a supportive family environment, which is easier for young people to manage than living independently. This can assist young people to move on successfully to independence. Torfaen is clear that the impetus for children to move out of Foster Homes is given a lower priority recognising that some young people need the stability of this environment for as long as possible.

Positive partnership processes exist but there are issues with some aspects of partnership working

Positive partnership processes exist

29. There is clear support for the work of the multi-agency teams, MIST and Torfaen Young People’s Support Service, (TYPSS). Torfaen Young People’s Support Service takes a holistic approach to meeting the needs of vulnerable young people aged 16 to 21. TYPSS recognises that vulnerable young people generally have multiple needs which are often inter-related and require the services of more than one professional or agency. The team includes careers advice as well as health, education and social work professionals. Staff commented very positively on the value and effectiveness of these teams. There was a clear and consistent message about their wish for more multi-agency work. Multi-agency working is seen as the most effective way of providing the "team around the child" model and staff felt that this approach is effective and works well.

30. The LHB and Gwent NHS Trust and the MIST team provide a monthly Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) Clinical Forum consultancy service for staff and this is valued by Children’s Service social workers and team managers. Staff report that this service assists them in their work with children.

31. There is also a multi-agency Vulnerable Children’s Panel which meets to consider complex cases and requests for placements. Staff report that this is helpful in bringing together different skills and knowledge and helps inform care planning for children.
There are issues with some aspects of partnership working

32. Staff reported that there are increasing demands to meet the emotional and mental health needs of children and young people. There is recognition in the Children and Young People’s Plan that there is a need to improve support for disabled children, including those on the Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and those with mental health difficulties. However the difficulty in accessing therapeutic services has an impact on preventive work and on the support for Looked After Children. There is a CAMHS service provided by Gwent NHS Trust. Whilst this is able to assist some young people there are concerns by Children’s Services staff that the service is not fully supporting preventive work. The key issues are:

- there is a long waiting list for access to services, currently 8 months, and children’s health is likely to deteriorate during this time which increases the likelihood of them becoming Looked After;
- Looked After Children have to go through the same waiting list, even if they have urgent needs for therapeutic support, which can contribute to placement breakdown;
- the service is not available to those on the ASD as this is not classed as a mental health issue. (ASD is not included in the 2007 LHB Review of the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service). This review heard of a young person with ASD who had to be placed out of county to meet his needs;
- the service offered is clinic-based, which is problematic for some young people who prefer to access the service in a non-medical setting;
- if two appointments are missed, the young person is excluded from the service and has to start again to request the service;
- social workers reported that they were not consistently notified when a young person they are working with is excluded from the service; and
- the service only offers individual therapy for children and young people and does not provide family therapy.

33. The difficulty in having prompt access to CAMHS services is having an impact on the two Child Care Management Teams. They need to use their Section 17 Children Act 1989 budget, for preventive services, to fund specialist therapeutic services when children need services which they cannot access in a timely way from the local CAMHS services. A further complication is that the problems in accessing services are a disincentive for staff to make referrals and this means there is not an accurate picture of need for the service.

34. There are ongoing issues about the use of Continuing Health Care (CHC) funding for children which is resulting in the council meeting the majority of the placement costs for children. CHC can potentially be used to

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4 Torfaen Children and Young People’s Plan 2008-2011; page 52.
contribute to specialist fostering or residential care for Looked After Children and children with disabilities. This fund is managed by the LHB. There is not an agreed protocol for sharing costs with each case is dealt with on an individual basis. The Council is making applications for CHC funding for children to the LHB but very few applications are approved. Staff reported that sometimes applications made for young people are rejected when they are aged under-18 but accepted after they are reassessed as adults.

35. This difficulty in accessing CHC resources has restricted opportunities for shared funding of specialist placements for children. The Budget Monitoring report on Out of County Children’s Placements costs for October 2008 shows that 5.7 per cent of placements are funded via CHC at a cost of £181,027 for Health costs for Looked After Children and Children with Disabilities out of a total forecasted cost of £3,172,979.

36. There is a Trust-funded Primary Mental Health Team which could potentially assist social workers in working with parents with mental health problems, but this service was not mentioned by social work teams. The Primary Mental Health Team only provides a consultation service and does not provide direct support or care services. Awareness of the service is low with no staff interviewed highlighting the potential work of the Primary Mental Health Team although the purpose of this team is to “provide consultation, signposting and training to Tier One (non specialist) professionals working with children and young people.”

37. The Council is prioritising discussions with the LHB around CAMHS, Continuing Health Care and the Legacy statement but it is difficult to conclude these matters due to the uncertainty created by the reconfiguration of health services.

38. The Police Public Protection Unit is shared with Monmouthshire County Council. Staff attend Child Protection Conferences when needed but can only attend Strategy Meetings on certain days and do not attend Child Protection reviews. Children’s Services staff try to arrange meetings to achieve police involvement whenever possible, but there are restrictions on the service as police availability is shared between the two councils.

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5 Review of use of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) by GPS and Tier one professionals in Torfaen, paragraph 6.1.3
There is awareness of the importance of Looked after Children within the Council but currently there is no integrated and holistic approach which is resulting in reducing the numbers of Looked after Children.

There is awareness of the importance of Looked After Children within the Council.

39. The Council has provided advice to members to assist them in their role as corporate parents under the Children Act 1989. The Corporate Parenting Handbook, “Corporate Parenting: a guide for council members in Torfaen” was published in 2005, although the Council is proposing to publish an update in the summer of 2009. The open letter at the beginning of the current handbook refers to the importance of the role of corporate parents, saying it is arguably the most important role of a council, and that the Council has a legal and moral duty to provide the level of support, care and protection any good parent would give to their children, including promoting their health, education, social and emotional needs.  

40. Members have also been involved in annual events with Looked After Children and young people. Reports have been provided to members about Looked After Children, including information about placements costs. A recent report was presented to the Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee which provided members with:

- an overview of the philosophy behind the term “corporate parent”;
- a summary of the legislative requirements;
- an update on the performance of the council against national performance indicators; and
- a case study about a Looked After Child.

41. This report also recommends that regular information should be provided to Members to enable adequate scrutiny and challenge. This recommendation is consistent with the advice provided by the Assembly Government and the Welsh Local Government Association in their publication on corporate parenting.

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7 Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee; 22.10.2008.
42. The Council has positively used its role as an employer to support Looked After Children. Work placements for Looked After Children in school are offered in Council services. An after-care employment scheme has been developed to offer full-time employment. Access to these opportunities is co-ordinated through the TYPSS team. These initiatives have increased the opportunities for Looked After Children and care leavers to gain useful experience and, in some cases, to move on to long-term employment with the Council. This has also been identified as good practice with other councils visiting Torfaen to learn more about these schemes. The Council is considering further developments of this service including a mentoring scheme to provide opportunities for Looked After Children and care leavers to be mentored by senior officers and potentially elected members.

43. The Council is providing a person-centred approach to its planning for children and young people by using priority outcome indicators in the Torfaen Children and Young People’s Plan. This is intended to sharpen the focus on individuals and to clarify responsibilities. This approach has the potential to assist in coordinating activities and resources to achieve identified and person focussed outcomes.

44. There is recognition of the importance of communication between Education staff and Children’s Services staff about Looked After Children. Teachers regularly attend the review meetings of Looked After Children and social service managers have recently introduced regular liaison meetings with local schools. Staff report that there are regular meetings between Inclusion and Education Welfare staff to identify pupils who are experiencing difficulties, including Looked After Children.

45. The Housing Service is aware of the housing problems of young single homeless people and care leavers. A detailed needs mapping exercise was completed in 2006/07 and found that:

- 174 vulnerable young people presented as homeless or at risk of homelessness, including 57 young people aged 16 and 17;
- there was a high link with mental health issues;
- 50 per cent of the young people had a social worker;
- £348,707 was spent in placing homeless persons out of county during 2006/07 and much of this relates to young people.9

46. Services are being provided to respond to needs:

- There are eight Floating Support units dedicated to this client group.
- Twelve young and vulnerable people received support from the tenant support scheme and three more were on the waiting list.
- A new hostel for homeless 16-19 year olds was built and was opened in March 2007. Whilst it was intended that young people would stay for a relatively short time and then move into permanent homes we found that young people are staying longer in the hostel and a waiting list is now operating to access the unit.

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There is no integrated and holistic approach which is resulting in reducing the numbers of Looked After Children

47. The Council has not established a Corporate Parenting Panel, as indicated as good practice in guidance from the Assembly Government and the Welsh Local Government Association. More than half of the Members of the Council were newly elected in May 2008. Training for Members about their corporate parenting duties was being planned at the time of this review. There is not yet a corporate forum for Members to monitor information and have an overview about vulnerable and Looked After Children in Torfaen.

48. This review evidenced that there is a need for better co-ordination and integration with schools to assist vulnerable children and Looked After Children. Although there is recognition of the educational needs of vulnerable children and Looked After Children in the Children and Young People’s Plan, it is not clear how improved outcomes are to be delivered. Two examples of this are provided:

- It is recorded that 45 per cent of Looked After Children left school without an approved external qualification and the local target has been set to reduce this to 1 per cent and 0 per cent in 2010, with the responsibility given to the LEA, Head teachers and Governors. But it is not clear how this significant improvement is to be achieved.

- The Children and Young People’s Plan recognises the need to improve the attainment levels of pupils in Torfaen. The Plan records that: “current pupil performance at Key Stages One, Two and Three in Literacy, Numeracy and Science is poor and reflects a downward trend.” The impact of these poor results is reflected in the higher than average number of young people in Torfaen aged 16 and over who are not in education, employment or training and this is recognised as target for improvement in the Plan.

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10 If this were my Child: a councillor’s guide to being a good parent. WLGA and Assembly Government. 2005
11 Torfaen Children and Young People Plan 2008-2011, page 22
12 Torfaen Children and Young People’s Plan 2008-2011, page 16-17
13 Torfaen Children and Young People’s Plan; page 23
49. This review has found that there can be difficulties in ensuring timely and appropriate educational support for vulnerable and Looked After Children and that there are gaps in information about children’s needs. Children’s services staff identified the need for further support services to be provided to children and young people who are having difficulties in schools. There is recognition that children with additional learning needs are more likely to be referred for Social Services involvement and are more vulnerable to becoming Looked After. There is research evidence that stability in school is associated with stability in a child’s placement, whether with family or carers. The Children and Young People’s Plan says that children with additional learning needs should have those needs met.\(^\text{14}\) However, there is only limited data regarding the progress and attainment of pupils with additional learning needs. (This is identified as a development area in the recent Action Plan.)\(^\text{15}\) Also, there is not a combined database which records children who are Looked After and who have special educational needs/additional learning needs and so it is difficult to quantify the numbers of children in this situation.

50. There are an increasing number of children in Torfaen with ASD/Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and this is reflected in the referrals to Social Services, but there is not a co-ordinated service response to this need. Information gathered in this review indicated that the identified number of children in the school population with ASD/ADHD used to be 0.3 per cent a number of years ago but this has increased to 2.5 per cent of the schools population. Children’s Services staff are aware of this through the referrals that are received but report difficulties in accessing Education Psychologist services to respond to these difficulties. Pupils with ASD/ADHD are not included in the categories of work for the Inclusion Service. There is an ASD Support Officer in Torfaen, but their focus is on transition. Health services will provide a diagnosis for ASD/ADHD but there is no central register of children with these conditions and there is limited support for families post diagnosis. There is a strong possibility that some of the children in specialist placements have ADHD and ASD.

51. There are opportunities to significantly strengthen the coordination between Children’s Services, schools and the Education Service. For example, there is no separate funding to support Looked After Children and so additional support is dependent on the availability of resources in schools. This can affect the education of children and we identified one Looked After Child who waited over two months for a school placement.

\(^{14}\) Torfaen Children and Young People’s Plan 2008-2011, page 17
\(^{15}\) Torfaen CBC Action Plan – Additional Learning Needs, Social Inclusion and Support Services, paragraph 94
52. The Council has made a significant investment in providing the hostel for young people, but some staff speculated that this environment may not be the best way of helping all young people to move successfully to independence. Other accommodation options, such as continuing foster care placements until the young person is able to move to independent living or supported lodgings were thought to offer a family environment which could be more beneficial and give greater stability.

53. There is a well-established Youth Service in Torfaen and Children’s Services staff would like greater access to youth services for young people they work with. There is potential for closer working with this service to increase the opportunities for young people. There are not yet clearly established liaison arrangements to improve access to this service.

54. The Council has coordinated the work on the Children and Young People’s Plan, involving other agencies, and has produced a very detailed and ambitious Plan. However, it does not include a specific reference to reducing the numbers of Looked After Children.

55. As well as education and housing services, other Council services are also relevant to the wellbeing of children and young people such as:
   - leisure services which can help physical health and self-esteem;
   - public transport services can help young people to travel safely and access services; and
   - adult education services can provide positive learning experiences for parents, such as improving basic skills.

56. There is not yet effective integration across council services to work together to reduce the numbers of Looked After Children. There are sources of information to assist in strengthening integration. For example, the Dartington report on refocusing Children’s Services advises a steering group to ensure effective coordination. The Audit Commission report on Children’s Services in England includes a useful self-assessment toolkit. Although this refers to Trust Boards, as established in England, the questions can assist local authorities to assess their performance and identify development areas.

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The Social Care and Housing Service has achieved a balanced budget in recent years but there are increasing pressures and the sustainability of current arrangements is uncertain

The Social Care and Housing Service has achieved a balanced budget in recent years

57. The Council has shown a positive commitment to Social Care and Housing and has supported the service in achieving a balanced budget. The total budget for Social Care and Housing is £40 million. In 2006/07 and 2007/08, Children’s Services were able to draw on underspends in Community Care to balance the budget. In 2007/08, Members agreed to use Council reserves to support Children’s Services and this is likely to be used during the financial year 2008/09. The Council has also protected Social Care and Housing from having to find the same level of efficiency savings as have been required of other departments.

58. The budget-setting process is helpful in maintaining budgetary control but does not stimulate a review of financial commitments. Budget setting is based on the previous year’s expenditure, with adaptations for new pressures. This gives predictability, but there is potential to consider financial modelling and zero-based budgeting as exercises to check and confirm financial commitments.

59. The Social Care and Housing Department is committed to working on a three-year plan but recent budget settlements within the Council have been extremely challenging and this has to be managed from a whole Council perspective. The Council intends to introduce a medium-term financial plan but this will not happen until April 2010.

There are increasing pressures and the sustainability of current arrangements is uncertain

60. There are pressures on the budget related to Looked After Children:
   - Costs related to children’s placements take a large part of the total Children’s budget. The Budget Monitoring report for October 2008 shows that expenditure on Out of County Placements for Children is £2.4 million, out of a total budget for Children services of £10,751,317, some 22 per cent of the budget.
   - Costs related to Looked After Children have contributed to overspends in Children’s Services as highlighted in Overview and Scrutiny Committee reports.¹⁸

¹⁸ Children and Young People’s Overview and Scrutiny Committee; 22.07.2008. paragraph 7.2.
• The numbers of Looked After Children in Torfaen are higher than average for the population size.

61. There are increasing pressures related to social workers caseloads and recording requirements which are impacting upon services. For example:

• There are increasing demands on staff and the workload review has identified that additional staffing resources are required. Managers have reviewed caseloads and believe that five additional staff are required to provide the service within the guidance on caseloads following the Laming Inquiry.¹⁹

• The introduction of the Integrated Children’s System has increased the time spent by social workers undertaking office based tasks as they now upload all data onto the system themselves; previously administrative staff assisted with this. The potential opportunities for Smarter Ways of Working are currently being considered. One example is the provision of laptops, but it is uncertain if these can be funded due to limited resources, even though they should contribute to longer-term savings.

• The national financial problems are likely to increase the pressures on all local government expenditure and the overall financial climate is likely to result in tight Revenue Support Grant settlements. This will place increasing pressures on the Council budget.

62. In summary, although there has been tight financial control on the budgets and financial assistance given to Social Care, the Council is facing increasing pressures in a difficult financial climate.

¹⁹ The Victoria Climbie Inquiry, chaired by Lord Laming. HMSO. January 2003