

Looked After Children in Cambridgeshire: budget “savings” information note

David Plank

Overall comment

According to the County Council, the budget for Placement of Looked After Children in 2012/13 was £16.781 million a year – cash; with 479 children and young people in care (i.e. “looked after”). (On another basis it was nearer to £20 million when other provisions are taken into account.) Had this budget increased in cash terms by 2 per cent a year to allow for increases in costs such as the national minimum wage, without any allowance for growing numbers, the budget would have been £18.528 million approx. by 2017/18. In fact, the budget for this year is £14.431 million, 14 per cent less in cash terms than in 2012/13, while the number of Looked after Children is now 688 (47 per cent more, as at May 2017). The placements budget per looked after child/young person was £35,033 in 2012/13, and is now £20,975 (down 40 per cent).

Even if the CYP Committee’s current request to increase the Placements budget to £17.344 million is granted, the cash available would still be only £0.563 million more than five years ago (3.4 per cent more), with nearly 220 more children and young people in care now than then (47 per cent more). The placements budget per child and young person in care would still be significantly less – £25,209 as against £35,033 (down by 28 per cent). Efficiency improvements alone could not maintain the quality of care given this level of reduction, particularly when the preventive and supportive services have been cut even more at the same time. Services now are significantly less well equipped to meet individual need than they were. The County Council has statutory parental responsibility for these children and young people.

[Source: Looked After Children – Demography, Appendix 3, pages 132 – 136, Children and Young People Committee, 11 July 2017]

The impact of the reductions is spelled out in the following extracts from my three social care reports for The Cambridge Commons. Because the County Council has steadfastly not evaluated the effects of its budget decisions, the external assessor has to rely on Council reports. It is noticeable that officer reports have become more and more focused on the achievement of budget reductions and less on the quality of care those budgets allow.

2014/15 and 2015/16 budgets

Extracts from “Social Care: From Crisis to Catastrophe”, DP/TCC, September 2015 [Pages 10 – 11]

The ... officer in charge emphasises that: “Delivering the level of savings required to balance the budget becomes increasingly difficult each year.”

The high level of officer concern is further underlined throughout the covering report (to C&YP Committee) in statements such as:...

Children & Young People's Services:

"The most significant challenge in developing plans to deliver the sizeable savings required ... is that the demand for services from people who are eligible ... continue at a level that exceeds the available budget ... we are seeing an increased child population and acuity of need creating demographic pressure. Services at all tiers are experiencing high levels of demand with caseloads increasing, including a slow but noticeable increase in Looked After Children and an increase in children with statements of Special Educational Need. We are also seeking to identify savings that are over and above the £27.15m that has already been achieved by Children & Young people's Services over the previous three financial years." [2012/13 to 2014/15]

[Comment: This is in the same report that proposed recurrent savings of £2 million a year in the budget for children and young people in care in 2015/16, with an additional £1 million in 2016/17 (out of a total budget of £18 million). In total the 2013/14 to 2015/16 budget savings in this service (i.e. for Looked After Children) amount to £8.55 million a year by 2016/17. According to official statistics, the number of children looked after in care at 31 March 2014 was 500, compared with 470 a year earlier, a figure which had remained fairly stable since 2010.

EXAMPLES of the 2014/15 and 2015/16 savings are given in ... (Annexes One and Two) ... together with descriptions taken from officer reports to councillors and, separately, my comments.

Annexe One, pages 19 - 20, 2014/15 budget

E. Looked After Children Savings (£)	-1,759,000	-1,292,000	£3,051,000
	2014/15	2015/16	Recurrent per year

Description: ". . . will be delivered through the delivery of Children's placement strategy, which is . . . whole system change to reduce the risk of children entering care, reduce the length of time children are in care and reduce the risk of children returning to care . . . the strategy also focuses on reducing the unit cost of care through market management and development of in-house provision."

Comment: The number of looked after children (i.e., in care) in Cambridgeshire is going up not down; and the preventive support and intervention services essential to achievement of the aims of the Children's Placement Strategy are being reduced. Therefore, the main, if not the only contributor to achievement of this saving is reduction in the more costly specialist residential and foster placements. These serve the

needs of children and young people with the greatest emotional and other needs - due to often chaotic and dysfunctional family circumstances, including domestic violence and abuse. In-house provision is often not suitable for children with these complex needs.

This saving significantly reduces the level of support and care experienced by the most disadvantaged children and young people in our community. This is even more so when the large additional Looked After Children savings in the 2013/14 and 2015/16 budget are taken into account - in total amounting to £8.55 million a year by 2016/17. The total effect of the savings in this area is addressed under Saving 2K in Annex Two. It concludes that we are *seriously failing* our most vulnerable children and young people.

Annexe 2, pages 32 - 33, 2015/16 budget

2K. Looked After Children Savings (children and young people in care)	- 2,000,000	- 1,000,000	3,000,000
	2015/16	2016/17	Recurrent per year from 2017/18

Description: "Reducing the total spend on placements for looked after children ... *will have an impact on all children's services*" (my emphasis). See also the CFA senior officer's comments on children's & young people's services as a whole ... - [reproduced above, page 1].

Comment: The senior officer's comments indicate a very high level of concern at the risks for children & young people and their families. This saving is additional to Saving E in Annex One (see above); the comments made there apply here as well - even more so given the size of this further reduction.

Total savings in support to Looked After Children (from the examples in Annexes One & Two):

Altogether the 2014/15 and 2015/16 savings amount to £6.05 million a year by 2016/17. Together with the £2.5 million saving made in this service in 2013/14, no less than *£8.55 million* a year will have been removed by 2016/17. This is a very large reduction. It is difficult to identify a precise figure with which to set it in context. However, the total net budget in 2014/15 for Looked After Children Placements, where virtually all the reductions are being made, was £15.6 million (after the 2013/14 and 2014/15 savings of £4.26 million a year were made). So, in crude terms, since 2013 the placements budget will have been cut from nearly £20 million to £11.3 million a year by 2016/17 (44 per cent). These vital budgets are experiencing very large proportionate reductions at the same time as the number of Looked After Children is going up. The already poor life chances of our most vulnerable children and young people are being damaged.

The "placements" which have been most reduced are in specialist residential homes and specialist foster homes for the children and young people with the most serious emotional and behavioural difficulties and distress; often associated with dysfunctional, chaotic or abusive family backgrounds. These young people deserve a break. They are not getting it now.

According to official statistics, the number of Looked After Children in Cambridgeshire at 31 March 2014 was 500 compared with 470 a year earlier, a number that had remained fairly stable since 2010. In 2014/15 the Looked After Children placement budget was overspent by £1.5 million. This is a service under huge pressure - but not as much as the unfortunate young people at the sharp end of it - for them the rough end of the stick has become even rougher.

About 60 per cent of looked after children have emotional and mental health problems and the main reason for entering care is abuse or neglect (in 62 per cent of cases). There is great concern nationally at the significant proportion of looked after children who end up in custody, become homeless, or experience mental ill health or substance abuse - not assisted by the historically inadequate after care provided by local authorities, notwithstanding their statutory duties in this regard. The Prison Reform Trust has just announced an independent review of the links between care and custody given the large over-representation of looked after children in the criminal justice system. The Trust reports a recent survey of 15-18 year olds in young offender institutions which found that a third of the young men and 61 per cent of the young women said they had spent time in local authority care - despite fewer than 1 per cent of all children and young people in England being in care. These savings also need to be placed alongside large reductions in NHS spending on child and adolescent mental health services amounting nationally to £80 million per annum over the last four years including £35 million in the last year alone. We are seriously failing our most vulnerable children and young people. This is unconscionable in so vital an area of our public responsibility.

2016/17 budget

Extract from "Social Care: The Silent Catastrophe", DP/TCC, January 2016

Additional savings for *children and young people in care* of £7.2 million a year on specialist residential and fostering placements - on top of the £8.5 million a year already made - requiring a reduction of the number in care from 570 to 453 over 5 years; and \. . . reducing Education Support for Looked After Children [i.e., children in care] to minimum statutory responsibility" thus reducing "support for these vulnerable groups" and requiring "personal education plans . . . (to)be developed and monitored by the social worker rather than a Virtual School teacher." Already reduced life chances will be even further reduced; and the feasibility of reducing the number in care by more than a hundred

over 5 years seems at the least dubious when it has increased by a hundred over the last two.[Page 7]

[And by way of context] And \. . . further significant reductions of £3.8 million a year in *preventative services for children, young people and their families in difficulty* - including in 2017 \. . . a significant reduction in the number of Children's Centres', meaning that \. . . significant parts of the county will not receive the current Children's Centre offer'. It is also proposed that early help is further reduced including complete removal of the budget to support reduction in teenage pregnancies; with further reduction of the vestigial remains of the devastated youth service which would remove support to apprenticeships and job finding for vulnerable young people.

2017/18 budget

Extract from "Social Care: The Catastrophe Continues", DP/TCC, February 2017 [pages 10 - 11]

And then there are the children and young people of Cambridgeshire. Social care, after all, is not solely about adults or about the impact of inadequate social care on the NHS. Large cuts have been made in relevant budgets since 2013/14 ... For example ... In the budgets up to 2015/16 provision for specialist residential and fostering placements for children and young people in care was reduced by £8.5 million a year, with a further £7.2 million planned from 2016/17. Unsurprisingly, this further saving has not been fully achieved as the number of children in care increased to 631 as at October 2016, nowhere near the 453 planned for 2021 through improved "edge of care" practice. As a result, £3 million a year is having to be put back into these services - but this is having to be found by making other savings in social care services.

It may be small comfort but at least the Community Impact Assessments for children and young people do state the risks more clearly (than for adult social care savings). For example, negative impacts of the "Looked after Children Savings" include: "The LA will be managing higher levels of risk with children expected to remain in dysfunctional homes for longer periods of time with exposure to greater risk than previously considered acceptable"; "The expectation will be that children with disabilities remain at home and in local schools and this may result in family breakdown"; "More 16+ young people will be expected to remain within their families with the possibility of more NEET and sofa surfing." [Not in Education, Employment or Training] Equally worrying is the Strategy's apparent continued reliance on reducing the number of children in care to 453 by 2020/21. [A/R.6.213, 238 & 239 - saving £653,000 in 2017/18 rising to £1.335 million a year by 2020/21]

These harsh realities undermine the upbeat, rose tinted tone of the Community Impact Assessments for savings in adult care services. It may be no surprise that unattributed informal

feedback from care staff seems different. "They've given up" - not on providing services but on seeing any light at the end of the tunnel - and "all they do is assessing ... assessing, assessing, assessing ..." Compare this heartfelt expression of fettered response to human need with the true definition of what social care is meant to be as given in my report, "Social Care: From Crisis to Catastrophe" - Annex Four, "What is social care?". [Reproduced below for children and young people in care] The helping hand we should be offering to our most vulnerable neighbours is at risk of becoming a turned back.

"What is social care?" Extract from Annexe Four of "Social care: From Crisis to Catastrophe", DP/TCC, September 2015

Children and young people: "In care"

Think of yourself as a child or young person without your birth parents, who may be around but are not able to bring you up now or at all; and think of what a parent does or is expected to do. Think of yourself as having been in this situation from birth, a very young age or from an older age - with brothers and sisters or not, having been treated well or not, emotionally disturbed or not, abused or not, perhaps distrustful of adults but wanting affection, as all of us do - perhaps never having had it - but maybe still having feelings for your birth parents, good, bad or both, having abilities often unrecognized, sometimes feeling frustrated or angry, etc.

What help do you need to grow up reasonably safe, secure in yourself, healthy, fit for adult life - or at least to have a chance of this?

Many or most of the following help and actions are likely to be required.

- A place to live of your choice following assessment of your needs, as well as your wishes, and informing/advising you - temporary or permanent, which is your home, is secure and supportive, which you trust and trusts you, provides the basics of a reasonable life, treats you with respect and pays regard to you as an individual of worth, helps you to develop, looks after your health, addresses your problems and issues in a responsible way/setting boundaries to what is expected and what is not, never giving up on you notwithstanding your behaviour at times, even if temporary provides a degree of permanence and continuity for you, helps you to form trusting relationships with others, stands up for you and is honest with you, helps you prepare for the future - and is capable of doing these things in sometimes very adverse circumstances
- Supports you in your present school or arranges admission to a different school that suits you, participates appropriately in your school career/ represents you with the school as needed, attends parents evenings - helps you to make the most of your education -

progressing to further or higher education where this is right for you

- Ensures your protection if you are at risk and is close enough to be likely to know if you are
- Helps you to be healthy and fit, ensuring you have the full benefit of the NHS and that you are accompanied or otherwise supported in doing so
- Supports your participation in sport if you wish - and other activities, cultural or otherwise
- Helps you to learn for and about life in the round, as well as for work
- Helps you to do the things you really like or most want to do - fostering your talents and interests
- Helps you to prepare for adulthood and live independently - with all this entails, practical and emotional
- Where appropriate, working with your birth parent(s) to re-establish / maintain your relationship with them; if it is best for you, helping you to live with them again
- Keeps a watchful and caring eye on you, ensuring you do not get overlooked or lost in the system no matter what, monitoring your progress, finding out what is important to you and what you want to do
- Monitors the place where you live to make sure it is good/suitable for you, taking issues up as needed and making sure they are dealt with
- If necessary and with your agreement, changing the place where you live to one more suited to you
- Support and advice if you get into trouble - being accessible enough to know if you do; being an "appropriate person" if you are seen by the Police, arranging representation if needed
- Makes sure you are referred for specialist assessment and advice when needed
- Helps you prepare for leaving care and supporting you when you do

This is not meant to be comprehensive but to give a flavour of what social care is in the widely varying circumstances of children and young people in care (looked after children in the social care jargon). It takes place in the context of a wide range of agencies, but the linchpin is the local authority social care department. [Pages 41 -42]

Performance report to Children and Young People Committee, 11 July 2017:

"In Children & Families Services, the Looked After Children (LAC) Placements budget is forecasting an overspend of £273k. This is as a result of some previously planned savings targets now being considered undeliverable. There is a further underlying pressure on the LAC Placement budget of c.£2.9m currently. The forecast overspend assumes that £2.9m of the corporately held demography and demand budget will be allocated to the LAC Placement budget, subject to GPC approval, to assist with bringing the underlying pressure down to a more manageable level. "

“Of the Children and Young People Performance Indicators, four are green, five are amber and four are red. The four red performance indicators are: 1. Number of children with a Child Protection Plan per 10,000 population under 18 2. The number of looked after children per 10,000 children; ...”

“After spending £16.52m in 2015-16, the Looked After Children (LAC) placement budget for 2016-17 was set at £12.51m. This proved to be an overly ambitious and unrealistic budget expectation, as demand actually increased rather than fell during 2016-17 with final spend totalling £16.66m. The budget expectation had been set on the basis of a strategy for reducing the numbers of looked after children.

- The strategy did not take account of national trends of the growth of looked after children which showed a 5% increase nationally during 2015/16.
- Whilst the objectives were in themselves sound, there had been insufficient activity and/or lead-in time to realise the ambition
- The numbers of children proposed to be removed from the system was neither desirable nor deliverable
- The budget had been gradually reduced since 2012 in the face of continued increases in numbers of looked after children

By May 2017, there were 688 Looked After Children in Cambridgeshire, the highest level for at least 5 years but in line with East of England average.

After budget changes agreed for 2017-18, including a re-investment of £3m (A/R.4.021) as well as further demography and savings, there is currently £14.4m available for LAC placements this year. Given patterns of expenditure and that demand has continued to rise following the detailed consideration of the LAC budget in the Autumn, this budget remains insufficient to respond to the demand that is evident. There is currently budget available for the equivalent of 292 external placements, whereas there were actually 346 external placements in May.”

Prepared by David Plank
22 August 2017