

Children and Families

Social Work Strategy

Fife Council

Contact for Enquiries

Stuart Booker
Executive Support Officer,
Education & Children's Services

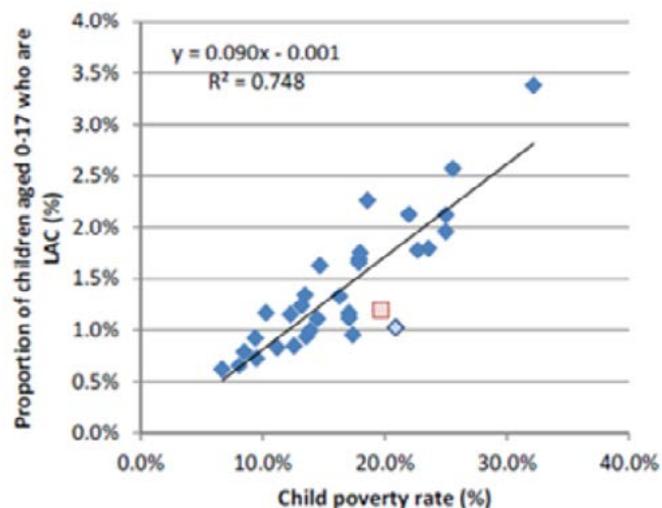
Fife Council approved a Children and Families Strategy in January 2015. This was informed by a range of evidence, including: a qualitative evaluation of the Children and Families Social Work Service, benchmarking with other local authorities, and a detailed analysis of available data.

This brief note provides an overview of the development of the strategy, its impact and ongoing development.

The context of the strategy

Analysis of the data for looked after children showed that there is a strong relationship at local authority level between the rate of child poverty and the proportion of children who are formally looked after.

The scatterplot below shows the relationship between levels of child poverty and the number of looked after children at local authority level.



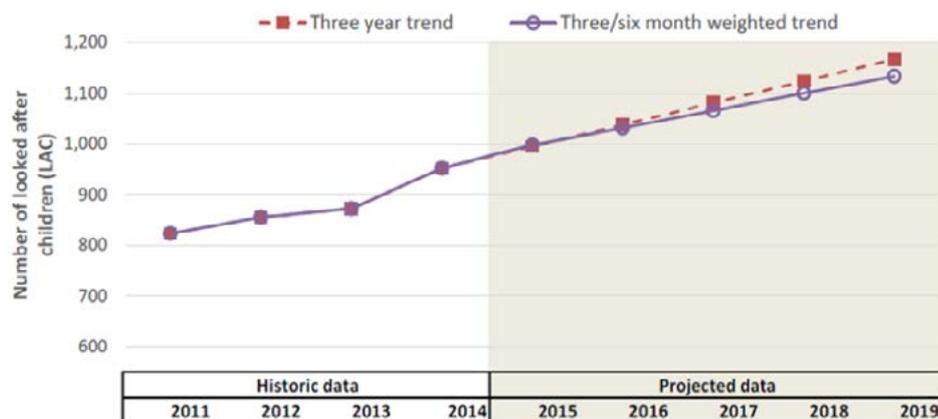
The red square shows the data for Fife. It was clear that Fife continued to have a relatively low number of looked after children, given Fife's relatively high levels of child poverty.

Benchmarking was undertaken with North Lanarkshire (shown by the blue diamond). North Lanarkshire had the lowest number of looked after children in Scotland, allowing for levels of child poverty.

However, despite the relatively low number of looked after children in Fife, numbers had been increasing rapidly for a number of years. This was creating significant operational pressures on the service and was leading to a recurring overspend of the service budget.

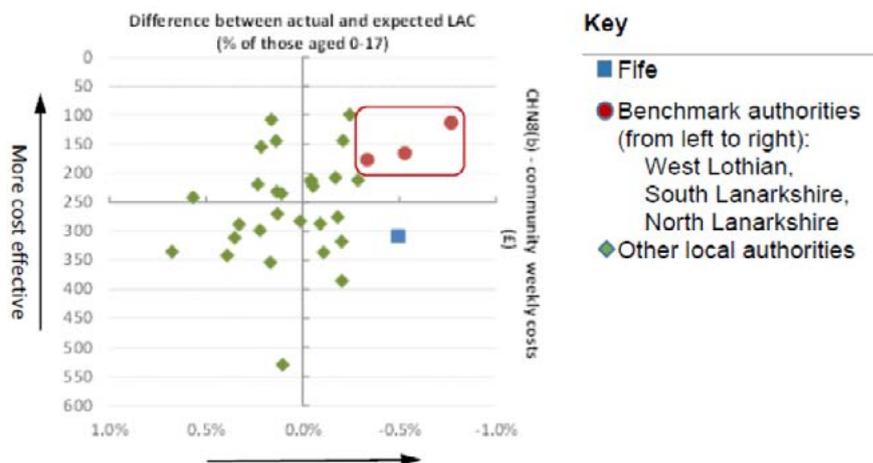
If trends were to continue then there would be an increase of over 200 looked after children within five years.

This was plausible, as this number of looked after children would still be broadly in line with the Scottish average, allowing for levels of child poverty.



Developing the strategy

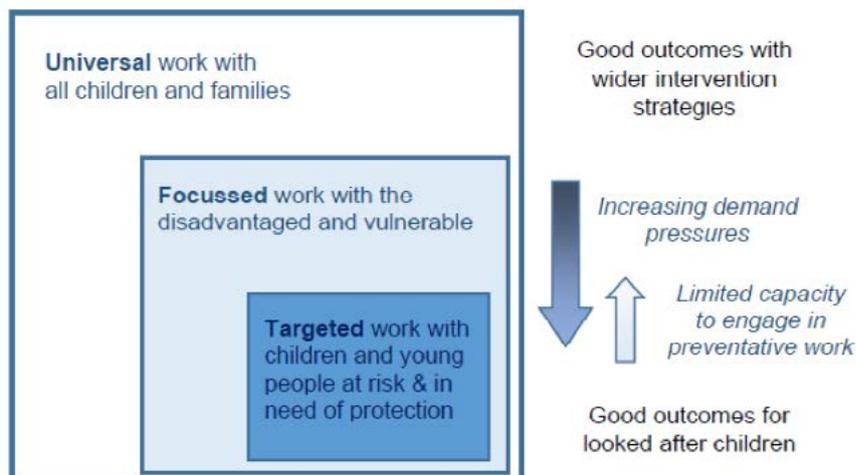
A key aim in developing the strategy was to ensure that positive outcomes were maintained, at the same time as improvements were achieved in the delivery of services. To this end, a range of benchmark authorities were identified. These were similar to Fife in terms of size, demographics, etc. However, they were each achieving broadly similar outcomes in a more cost effective manner.



A range of qualitative evidence was used to develop an understanding of the underlying challenges facing the Children and Families Service. These provided a view that was consistent with the evidence emerging from the quantitative analysis of available data.

It was clear from the available evidence that there was a limited capacity to engage in preventative working with families.

This was creating a negative spiral of increasing demand, an increasing reliance of high-cost placements, and a further diminishing of the capacity for preventative working,



The Children and Families Strategy

The strategy aimed to address the significant challenges arising from the service's limited capacity to engage in preventative working. To achieve this, it was recognised that the service would need:

- To build capacity, by increasing staffing to match the levels seen in benchmark authorities
- To strengthen preventative working, by focusing the use of increased capacity on the development of preventative working with partners across children's services in Fife
- To improve cost-effectiveness, by reviewing the commissioning of external provision

The immediate impact of the strategy

The paper that set out the Children and Families Strategy, in January 2015, set out a number of key outcomes by which the success of the strategy would be measured.

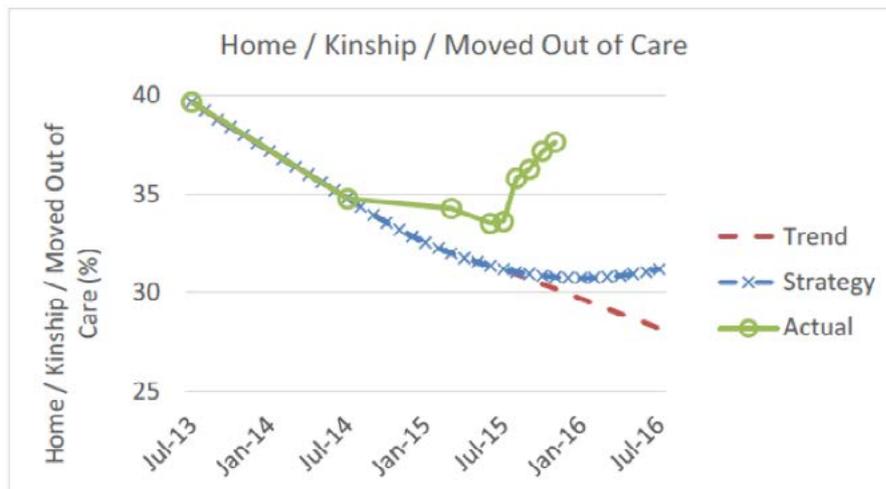
One of these was to reverse a significant and sustained decline in the proportion of looked after children who were being cared for in a home or kinship setting. This decline had arisen from the negative spiral that had beset the service:

- an increasing demand arising from an increasing incidence of family crises,
- an increasing reliance on increasingly expensive purchased placements
- a continually diminishing capacity for preventative working.

Some work to address these challenges began as the strategy was being developed and understanding of underlying issues improved. These addressed some "process" issues that had been identified. Work began in earnest in early 2015, after approval of the strategy by Fife Council, supported by recruitment of a number of new social workers to the service.

This helped to create an immediate impact on outcomes. The immediate improvements achieved not only helped to reverse the previous, significant and sustained decline in the use of home/kinship settings for

looked after children, but also exceeded the targets set out in the original strategy paper.



The ongoing impact of the strategy

Implementation of the strategy has continued since 2015, in line with the implementation plan set out in the original strategy paper.

This approach has helped to halt the previous increasing trend in the number of looked after children.

Table: Number of looked after children reported in the Children Looked After Statistics annual return to the Scottish Government.

| | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 |
|-----------|------|------|------|------|-------|------|------|
| No of LAC | 823 | 855 | 872 | 952 | 1,020 | 981 | 979 |
| Change | - | 32 | 17 | 80 | 68 | -39 | -2 |

A range of measures reflect the improvements achieved in preventative working across the Fife children’s services partnership over the period of the strategy. These include:

- a reduction in the number of children on the Child Protection Register;
- a reduction in the proportion of children on a Child Protection Order (this was significantly higher than the Scottish average before development of the strategy, but has been broadly in line with the Scottish average since 2016).

The success of the Children and Families Strategy has allowed the service to manage its use of purchased placements over recent years, helping the service to deliver a balanced budget.

The strategy has also been featured as a Case Study in the Best Value Assurance Report on Fife Council (published in May 2018).



Next steps

The introduction – and increasing use – of kinship care orders has significantly altered the landscape within which the original Children and Families Strategy was developed. As a result, it has become increasingly difficult to monitor implementation of the strategy against the original plan, and against the targets set out within it.

Furthermore, as the strategy has been successfully implemented, Children and Families Social Work has become increasingly engaged in preventative working with families, including a wide range of work outwith a formal care setting.

In order to ensure that the outcomes continue to be improved in this changing context in a cost effective way, a new review is to be undertaken of the Children and Families Service. This will assess the impact of the strategy to date and inform a refreshed strategy to meet the demands of Fife's current context.

Further information

Secs 1-3: paper to Executive Committee, Fife Council, 13 January 2015.
http://publications.fifedirect.org.uk/c64_AgendaandreportsEC130115-WITHOUTPINKPAPERS1.pdf

Sec 4: paper to Education, Health & Social Care Scrutiny Committee, Fife Council, 15 March 2016.
http://publications.fifedirect.org.uk/c64_AgendaandPapers150316LM.pdf

Sec 5: paper to Education & Children's Services Committee, Fife Council, 7 November 2017.
http://publications.fifedirect.org.uk/c64_PDF-EDCH-071117.pdf

Best Value Assurance Report on Fife Council: Accounts Commission, 24 May 2018
<http://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/report/best-value-assurance-report-fife-council>