

REPORT TO: Education and Children's Services Committee

MEETING DATE: 19 March 2024

BY: Executive Director, Education and Children's Services

SUBJECT: Belonging to East Lothian

1. PURPOSE

- 1.1 To update Committee on the progress of the joint work across Education and Children's Services to meet the needs of our children and young people within East Lothian and where possible in their own communities, and to seek to avoid having care and Education needs met outwith the authority.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1. The Committee is asked to:
- i. Note the overall positive progress made by Education and Children's Services to avoid placements outwith the authority and meet the needs of our young people within East Lothian
 - ii. Note the planned joint next steps.

3. BACKGROUND

CHILDREN'S SERVICES

- 3.1 Children's Services provide statutory children's social work interventions for children, young people and their families in East Lothian.

Our joint work with Education focusses on early support and our commitment to the Promise is evident as we support more children to belong in their families and communities. This is shown in the gradual reduction of children becoming looked after which has reduced from 237 in 2020/2021 to 166 in January 2024.

- 3.2 For a number of years, referrals to children's social work have increased and while less children are requiring care out with their family, the needs of children and young people have grown in complexity and risk since the COVID-19 pandemic. We are pleased with our Promise focused

developments, however, there continues to be some children and young people who cannot remain safely with their family.

- 3.3 Due to local resource challenges, this has resulted in more children and young people requiring an external fostering or residential placement. This is expensive and there is clear evidence that external placements do not always result in positive outcomes for the majority of children. Especially as they become separated from their family, networks, and communities.
- 3.4 Our vision to improve outcomes for children and young people underpinned the whole service redesign of Children's Services undertaken in 2020/2021. This involved a complete restructure of children's social work to ensure that the right staff were in the right place to reduce the number of children who require care out with their families. In turn, we believed that this would reduce the demand for external placements.
- 3.5 In line with The Promise, we are able to evidence that despite month-on-month referral increases, Children's Services has reduced the number of children who are looked after and we have slowed down the rate of children moving into external residential care. We are also steadily bringing young people back to East Lothian.
- 3.6 Children's Services are working closely with the Education service to strengthen our Belonging to East Lothian approach. We need to ensure that there are sufficient care and Education opportunities for children who cannot reside safely with their families and acknowledge there are a number of interlinking factors impacting the availability of such resources:
 - Local and national fostering recruitment crisis.
 - National Transfer Scheme for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children.
 - Local and national housing crisis, including lack of supported accommodation for care experienced young people.

EDUCATION

- 3.7 The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was felt by all children and young people but particularly by those experiencing social and economic disadvantage.
- 3.8 This, coupled with the effects of the current cost of living crisis, has resulted in a small yet significant proportion of children and young people who are struggling to attend school or engage in prolonged periods of meaningful learning when there.
- 3.9 Our approaches to Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) in East Lothian Council are robust and through the Child Planning Framework, children and young people are able to access a range of supports at

school level and at wider local authority level through such provisions as the Single Point of Access, the Educational Psychology Service and Exceptional Needs funding.

- 3.10 We are also able to provide supports through partnerships with third sector providers.
- 3.11 Whilst these supports are effective at meeting the needs of most children and young people, there are some children and young people for whom they are having limited impact.
- 3.12 The reasons for this are complex and in many cases understanding this complexity requires a high level of expertise and multi-agency perspectives.
- 3.13 In these cases, the solutions are often not to be found in trying to access additional supports for a child or young person but rather in a multi-agency, solutions orientated dialogue and the formulation of SMART targets to improve wellbeing.
- 3.14 Continuous self-evaluation and our commitment to keeping The Promise, along with the ambitions set out in East Lothian's Corporate Parenting Plan to ensure that families are supported to stay safely together at home, have identified Early Intervention and as a key objective of the Transforming Services for Children Programme. As a result, in early 2023, a short life working group was created. This group brought together a number of Council and partner services working with children, young people and families across the authority.
- 3.15 Through this self-evaluation and joint-working, a Child Planning Framework – Locality Team (CPF–LT) pilot was created covering the Preston, Seton and Gosford area of East Lothian.

KEY SUCCESSES, SUMMARY OF PROGRESS AND NEXT STEPS

- 3.16 Children's Services continue to use Signs of Safety as our practice model. This is a strength and safety led approach to support families to find their own solutions to problems, using detailed safety planning and networks of support.
- 3.17 Driven by The Promise, the Children's Services workforce is actively changing the way we deliver social work and there is evidence of significant practice changes, allowing more risks to be managed in local communities.
- 3.18 We continue to develop our outreach service and have three workers available flexibly over seven days to support children, young people and families at risk of breakdown.

- 3.19 We have commissioned Action for Children to deliver a new intensive outreach project for young people at risk of external or secure care. This is also available over seven days and has already resulted in positive early results in preventing accommodation.
- 3.20 We have worked closely with finance and will be presenting a report to Cabinet in March 2024 to seek approval for an increase to the East Lothian fostering fee. If approved, we will relaunch our fostering recruitment campaigns with a view to attracting more local people with the skills to look after our most vulnerable children.
- 3.21 We are piloting a new approach to provide supported accommodation for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Young People. Two properties are being developed with visiting support. This will free up three vacancies in Lothian Villa and provide a more suitable and needs led care approach for the young people seeking asylum.
- 3.22 Housing and Children's Services are reviewing and refreshing our supported accommodation offer across East Lothian to ensure that we have enough capacity to support young people moving on from care and for young people at risk of homelessness. This will allow young people to have appropriate, supportive options when they are ready to leave care and avoid children remaining in care placements longer than they need to.
- 3.23 Children's Services are fully committed to meeting the needs of children and young people within their own communities. We will continue to focus on preventing accommodation when children are safe and loved and increasing the capacity of internal care resources so that children can remain in their own communities.
- 3.24 Working alongside Education is an essential part of Belonging to East Lothian. Our joint efforts to increase placements, services and support for children and young people will help us to improve early intervention and ensure sufficient local resources for the small number of children who require significant, targeted support. Our joint efforts to improve early intervention and prevention are also a crucial component of Belonging to East Lothian.
- 3.25 CPF-LTs are an integral part of East Lothian Council's approach to GIRFEC through the Child Planning Framework. They are part of a continuum of support to facilitate multi-agency, solutions orientated discussions around the wellbeing of identified children and young people.
- 3.26 The CPF-LT draws on the multi-agency expertise and capacity within the locality. This includes, but is not limited to, senior school leaders, Children's Services colleagues, youth work partners and Education Support Officers with expertise in inclusion and wellbeing. It is not a resource allocation group.

- 3.27 The CPF-LTs work in partnership with children and young people and their parents/carers to ensure: choice, full agreement with and understanding of the process and that their views are actively sought and form an integral part of all discussions and the ensuing recommended targets.
- 3.28 It is anticipated that children and young people referred to their CPF-LT will be at the additional level of the Child Planning Framework.
- 3.29 There are also referral criteria including children and young people having active child plans and having had a minimum of two child planning meetings. This is to ensure that the CPF-LT does not replicate existing GIRFEC mechanisms but provides a continuum of support at the right time.
- 3.30 Through tracking and monitoring procedures, data collected about the nature of the individual referrals will inform patterns of need and provide quality assurance around the Child Planning Framework.
- 3.31 To complement the work being undertaken in the Preston Seton Gosford area by Connected Communities, this locality was selected as the first locality to pilot the CPF-LT. The first meeting of the CPF-LT was in April 2023.
- 3.32 To ensure consistency of membership and the richness of discussions, meeting dates are arranged one year in advance. CPF-LT meetings will take place every eight weeks during term time.
- 3.33 An initial evaluation of the process at Preston Seton Gosford was undertaken and the following strengths were noted:
- general consensus that the model and processes are effective
 - the opportunity to bring people together for purposeful multi-agency discussions
 - greater awareness of community supports available
 - an important part of the early intervention and prevention strategy (now known as Belonging to East Lothian)
 - improving understanding of patterns of need and where to target resources
 - a supportive structure for staff to ensure that they are not 'missing anything' in meeting the wellbeing needs of their most vulnerable learners
 - the administrative support funded through the Strategic Equity Fund is critical to ensuring the good order of the process
 - helps to inform Children's Services about possible referrals and levels of thresholds for support
 - the thresholds for referral to the CPF-LT (active Child & Young Person plan, minimum of two child planning meetings and referrals to services such as Single Point of Access) are considered appropriate

- 3.34 To date CPF-LTs, have now also been established in Tranent and North Berwick, with plans to expand to the remaining localities before summer 2024.
- 3.35 During the school session 2023/24 all locality areas will be supported to establish their own CPF-LT. These will be established on a rolling programme to support a ‘test of change’ model which allows for learning and refinement of the process.
- 3.36 Further work is planned to develop supports specifically relating to children and young people with Social, Emotional and Behavioural Needs

4. POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The reporting of performance and the planning for improvement is a statutory duty placed on the education authority. The annual publication of a Progress Report and Improvement Plan demonstrates the Council’s commitment to fulfilling this duty.

5. INTEGRATED IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 5.1 The subject of this report does not affect the wellbeing of the community or have a significant impact on equality, the environment or economy.

6. RESOURCE IMPLICATION

- 6.1 Financial – none
- 6.2 Personnel - none
- 6.3 Other - none

7 BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 7.1 None.

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