

Looked After Children briefing for JAR

Looked After Children

Context

Over the past 3 years East Sussex has on average looked after around 460 children with this figure remaining fairly constant. The pattern of care has changed, in that looked after children (including 16-18 year olds) are increasingly staying longer in stable permanent placements. However, in the latter months of 2006/7 the number gradually reduced to 445 on 31 March.

The profile of the looked after children population is as follows:

| | |
|---|----------|
| Gender | % |
| Boys | 55 |
| Girls | 45 |
| Legal Status | |
| Care Orders | 78 |
| Voluntary Arrangements | 20 |
| Other Orders | 2 |
| Ages | |
| Under 1 | 8 |
| 1 – 4 | 12 |
| 5 – 11 | 32 |
| 12 -17 | 48 |
| Ethnicity | |
| White | 88 |
| Black | 3 |
| Dual heritage | 9 |
| Placements | |
| Fostered | 76 |
| Of these: | |
| In-house carers | 74 |
| Independent agency foster carers | 14 |
| Kinship foster carers | 12 |
| Pre-adoption | 7.5 |
| Residential (including special schools) | 8 |
| Placed with parents | 7 |
| Other | 1.5 |
| Care leavers | |

Around 170 care leavers are receiving support services from our youth support teams; around 30 are aged 19+

Corporate Parenting

The County Council takes its corporate parenting responsibilities very seriously. In the past 5 years there has been significant investment in the in house fostering service, which has been transformed into a high performing service, recruiting around 30 new foster carers per year. Our residential strategy is to close 2 x 8 bedded children's homes and replace them with 4 smaller group homes; 2 new high quality homes (1 for 4 boys and 1 for 5 girls) opened in August 2006, with 2 other 4 bedded homes scheduled to open in October 2007.

A rigorous permanence policy with robust tracking processes has been in place since 2003, whereby our goal is to achieve permanence for all looked after children aged under 11 on admission to care. Their care plans and matches with permanent carers are presented to 2 adoption and permanence panels (one for the east and one for the west of the county). Outcomes are continuing to improve year on year as more children experience stability in our care.

In recognition of the importance of educational attainment, a Better Education for Children in Care Strategy (BECCS) was launched in partnership with schools in 2003. As a consequence, there has been a dramatic improvement in GCSE performance in the past 3 years.

East Sussex has signed up to the Healthy Care Standard for looked after children and completed a healthy care audit in 2006. There is a Healthy Care Standards action plan in place to take forward the priority areas identified by the audit. There is excellent joint working with designated nurses and CAMHS clinicians for looked after children.

Offending by looked after children has been an area of concern, but a robust strategy is now in place, with restorative justice increasingly well embedded in our children's homes. Levels of offending are reducing gradually.

Participation of looked after children is highly valued. Through Xpress Advocacy, they meet regularly with the Deputy Director in Straight to the Top sessions. They have made presentations to the Corporate Parenting Panel and train staff, including the senior management team, in Total Respect. Significant changes to practice (eg process of LAC reviews, matching and introducing children to foster carers) have been made as a result of listening to the children's experiences.

Structure

The Children's Services Department has recently undertaken a significant reorganisation to implement Every Child Matters and created an integrated looked after children's service in October 2006. This service consists of social work teams responsible for child care planning, all regulated provider services, looked after children's nurses and CAMHS clinicians, and an education support team. This is a multi professional, child centred service which functions by building a team around each child. 90% of looked after children have a qualified social worker; the remaining 10% (children in settled placements) are allocated to children's caseworkers, supervised by senior practitioners. A number of teenagers aged 16+ are allocated to specialist personal advisers.

The integrated looked after children's teams are responsible for child care planning for looked after children whose care plan is or is very likely to be permanence outside their families. The remainder of LAC are the responsibility of the family support and youth support teams, where the focus of work is successful reintegration back to their

families or the provision of independent options for older teenagers. The specialist disabled children's service works with 32 looked after children.

The service for care leavers is within the youth support teams. This ensures that the range of support available to all young people can be accessed quickly by care leavers (eg specialist Connexions advice and support; under 19s substance misuse service), according to their needs and circumstances. All care leavers have personal advisers who begin working with them at their rising 16 review and can continue to work with them until the age of 21 or 24 if in higher education.

Key Achievements

Permanence

- Robust parent and child assessments are in place achieving earlier planning and intervention for young children.
- The adoption service has been a high performing service over the last 5 years with at least 8% of looked after children being adopted each year.
- 84 children have been matched with permanent foster carers over the past 3 years.
- Placement stability has improved year on year – in 06/07 8.8% children experienced more than 3 placements.
- Promotion of kinship care has produced good outcomes for a significant proportion of looked after children.
- The Adoption and Children Act has been fully implemented with a 'no detriment' policy for foster carers to promote adoption and special guardianship for children in their care.
- 4 children were made subject to special guardianship orders to their former foster carers in 2006/7, with several more applications currently before the courts.

Settings Inspections

- The inspection of the Fostering Service (December 2006) achieved an overall 'excellent' judgement.
- Inspection judgements in relation to our children homes remain good and have shown continuous improvement in the past year.

Education

- A strategic multi-agency group for education (BECCS), with elected member representation, drives performance in relation to attainment and attendance for looked after children. We had our best ever performance in GCSE results in 2006.
- The bursary scheme has been expanded for 07/08 to extend support across all key stages, and for gifted and talented children.

Health

- The Healthy Care Standards Steering Committee monitors the Healthy Care Action Plan through 4 sub groups. Key improvements in 2006/7 have been a single referral CAMHS pathway for looked after children, and screening for those looked after children who are at risk of substance misuse by the Under 19 Substance Misuse Service.
- Performance on annual health assessments and dental checks has been above 86% for the past 5 years and continues to be a key priority for joint working.
- The East Sussex strategy for children and young people's emotional and mental health identifies LAC as a priority group for services

Offending

- The strategy to reduce offending of looked after children is fully embedded with effective joint working with YOT Prevent and Deter Team leading to a reduction in LAC offending (9.8% in 2006, and currently under 9%)

Needs of ME Children

- A robust campaign to recruit more minority ethnic (ME) carers has led to increased pool of 9 ME carers over the last 2 years. A significant number of training events for staff and carers has increased awareness and skills in meeting the needs of ME and dual heritage children.

Participation

- Participation and involvement is through Xpress Advocacy. Children are positively encouraged to use the complaints procedure and to take up the support of independent advocates. Increased participation by young people has contributed to significant service developments, such as the allotment project, a looked after young person in the Youth Cabinet, the significant contribution by young people to the regional Care Matters consultation process and successful bidding for the Youth Opportunity Fund.

Care Leavers

- Care leavers' performance continues to improve; for the past 3 years over 70% of care leavers have been engaged in education, employment and training at age 19.
- Over 90% of care leavers aged 19 remain in touch with the department, and over 90% are in suitable accommodation at age 19.

Corporate Parenting

- Corporate Parenting Panel has been expanded to 7 members in recent years and meets quarterly where members scrutinise all performance and policy issues in relation to LAC. Members are involved in regular visits to all the children's homes and all key events involving LAC and foster carers. Corporate parenting is being strengthened with districts and borough councils in relation to leisure activities and extending the range of housing options for care leavers.

Quality

- Robust quality assurance systems are in place: independent reviewing officers (timeliness of LAC reviews improved to 90% in 06/7), quarterly reports on performance to the social care management team, regular file audits by managers, monthly off line Regulation 33 visits to the children's homes that are reported to the Corporate Parenting Panel. The operations manager for LAC has oversight of quality assurance and performance for **all** LAC.

Value for Money

- Best value remains a high priority. Continued investment by the council in the fostering service has increased the numbers of LAC placed with in house carers and has reduced reliance on the independent sector, achieving better outcomes as well as driving down costs. East Sussex has contributed to the regional commissioning arrangements for fostering and residential placements and is in the process of cross regional tendering for independent fostering and residential placements.

Key Areas for Development 2007/08

- Increased participation of children and young people in their reviews, especially 5-7 year olds.
- Continue to enhance safeguarding arrangements for LAC placed with parents.
- Earlier identification, assessment and treatment for those looked after young people who are at risk of substance misuse.
- Increase in Tier 2 CAMH work with children first entering care
- Reduction in teenage conceptions of looked after young people and care leavers.
- Increased employment options for care leavers.
- Expansion of range of accommodation options for care leavers, in partnership with district and borough councils.
- Continue to improve take up of foundation stage education.
- Implementation of Care Matters, particularly in relation to the virtual head teacher and children in care council.