

Looked after children and care leavers

Headlines

Children and young people come into care for a variety of reasons including physical harm, neglect, sexual abuse, parental substance misuse and issues regarding a parent's mental health or learning disability which prevents them from providing 'good enough' care to their child.

The LAC population within Kirklees increased by two thirds since 2006 with the highest increase in 1-10 year olds and in 16-17 year olds. In 2006 4 in 5 of the 334 (LAC) were white, by 2010 the total number of LAC had increased to 563 but the proportion of white children had reduced to 2 in 3 (64%).

Social care referrals increased by 20% and care proceedings increased by 46%. There are a number of reasons for this significant volume growth, including heightened public awareness, generated in part by the national media attention which is paid to high profile cases (such as the Baby Peter case in Haringey, and the Matthews case in Kirklees). In addition, the significant investment into SureStart Children's Centres within Kirklees in recent years has increased the contact which staff within the wider partnership have with young children which, in turn, has led to increases in the numbers of referrals to social care.

This growth creates an increased role for the council as corporate parent to increased numbers of looked after children. Corporate parenting is a term which is used to describe the legal duties which the council has for the care of children and young people who it looks after, when it is deemed that, for a wide range of reasons, they cannot be cared for within their own family network

Issues for local partnerships in Kirklees include:

- Low educational attainment of looked after children within Kirklees.
- Choice of local and suitable placements for looked after children is limited.
- Limited therapeutic intervention available in a timely manner to meet the emotional needs of looked after children, including the need to provide support to children when placements in foster or adoptive care break down.
- Limited accommodation options for those aged over 16 locally.
- Care leavers over represented in the NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) group, having less access and/or take-up of educational, training and employment opportunities, affected further by the recession in terms of the availability of jobs.

Why is this group important?

Children and young people are classed as being 'looked after' if they are in local authority care by virtue of a care order under Section 31 of the Children Act 1989 or accommodated under section 20 of the Children Act 1989. In the former, the local authority share legal responsibility with the child's parent(s). For the latter, legal responsibility remains with the child's parent(s). This applies to children and young people from birth to the age of 18. Young people over the age of 16 can request to be accommodated by the local authority.

Looked after children and young people can live with foster carers, in residential care, with family members or friends who are approved as foster carers and with their birth parents while subject to a care order.

What significant factors are affecting this group?

The looked after population within Kirklees has increased by two thirds from 334 in 2006 to 562 in 2010 with the highest increases in 1-10 year olds and 16-17 year olds¹. There are a number of reasons for this. The aftermath of Baby Peter's death (Peter Connelly died in August 2007, aged 17 months after sustained abuse), and the Matthews case in Kirklees, have contributed to an increase of 20% in social care referrals and an increase of 46% in care proceedings, locally and nationally. This was noted by the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS)².

In addition, changes in childcare legislation - primarily the introduction of the Adoption and Children Act 2002 - have resulted in an increase in the number of children, particularly young children, placed with friends and family foster carers, lengthening the period of time they are in the care of the local authority. This is a trend both locally and nationally³.

The complex and varied needs of our looked after population is a considerable pressure in identifying suitable longer term, local placements for children and young people. This test of the council's ability, with its partners, to meet the sufficiency duty requiring local authorities to secure, so far as is practicable, sufficient accommodation for looked after children within their local authority area.

Added to this is the high level of support needed to sustain placements, which includes the need for timely therapeutic support for both the child and his or her carers. Absence of this support adds to the risk of placement breakdown, changes in care givers and schooling which adversely affect any looked after child's ability to have their needs met by the five Every Child Matters Outcomes.

Many of the children placed for adoption have complex needs and many have suffered considerable trauma or abuse before being placed, occasionally resulting in challenging behaviour and complex attachment issues. In an increasing number of cases, this results in these young people re-entering the care system in their early to mid-teens, requiring therapeutic placements and support.

Within Kirklees, the educational attainment of looked after children is lower than the national average, which is linked to instability in placements, poor attendance before coming into care and a range of learning, behavioural and emotional needs. Across all pupils in Kirklees the percentage achieving five A* to C grade GCSEs, including maths and English, at Key Stage 4 is 50% for England¹. Among local looked after children it was only 31%. This lower educational attainment means more looked after children leave school not in education, employment or training (NEET).

Which specific groups are affected most?

Ethnicity

In 2006, 4 in 5 of the 334 LACs were white but while the total number of LACs had increased to 583 by 2010, the proportion of white children had reduced to 2 in 3 (64%). So while the number of white LACs had increased by 35% the number of non-white LACs had nearly doubled (191%).

Slightly more females are LAC 55%, compared to 49% overall.

Families

Although children from all demographic groups become looked after, many LAC particularly come from families on low incomes, living in poor housing, with limited support networks, victims of domestic violence, misusing alcohol and drugs and families where there are issues regarding mental health and learning disability.

Teenage parents

Children of teenage parents are more likely to become looked after and looked after children are more likely to become teenage parents.

Where is this causing greatest concern?

As the rate of increase in looked after children is highest in non-white groups the areas with high non-white populations should be areas of greatest concern.

Views of looked after children and care leavers⁴

Looked after children and care leavers in Kirklees have said that they would like to:

- Have more choice with regard to placements. This is a particular issue for those aged over 18 who request to remain with their foster placement and/or would like more options in terms of taking the step from foster or residential care to living independently.
- See more of their parents, siblings and extended families.
- Have more support with their schoolwork from their carers.
- Have more employment opportunities within the council and with partner agencies.

What could commissioners and service planners consider?

This growth in the number of referrals to social care creates an increased role for Kirklees Council as corporate parent to looked after children. Corporate parenting is a term used to describe the legal duties of the council for the care of children and young people it looks after, when it is deemed that, for a wide range of reasons, they cannot be cared for within their own family network.

The limited service provided by the child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) is a significant factor affecting placement stability for looked after children, increasing the need to secure costly external placements to ensure the level of therapeutic input for children with attachment issues.

There is also a need to consider the draft statutory guidance regarding:

- Securing sufficient accommodation for looked after children.
- Planning Transitions to Adulthood for Looked After Children which is to be implemented in 2011.
- Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations Guidance.

References

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2. CAF/CASS Quarterly performance reports 2009 -2011.
http://www.cafcass.gov.uk/publications/care_demand_statistics.aspx
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4. Revans, L. Looked-after children's participation in their reviews. Community Care [Online] 14 May 2010.
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