

Looked after children and care leavers

Headlines

The number of “looked after children” (LAC) in Kirklees has continued to increase significantly since 2006 to 640 in March 2012.

There are more looked after boys than girls compared with the Kirklees population and 3 out of 4 are white, which reflects the overall Kirklees population.

The rate of growth is much higher in non-white children (148% since 2006) than white children (92%).

Social care referrals and care proceedings continue to increase locally and nationally because of heightened public awareness, generated in part by the national media attention which is paid to high profile cases. In addition, recent legislative changes have increased the requirements on Local Authorities to accommodate young people.

Only 7% of LACs in Kirklees achieve five A* to C grade GCSEs, compared with 62% of all pupils in Kirklees.

This continued growth in the looked after children population together with poor outcomes for looked after children creates an increased role for the council as corporate parent.

Why is this issue important?

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 phrase “Looked After” is a specific legal term which refers to children and young people 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. The age range is 0-18.

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.

The looked after population within Kirklees has increased from 334 in April 2006 to 640 in March 2012. The number of “looked after children” (LAC) in Kirklees has continued to increase significantly since 2006 with the highest increase in the age groups 4-5 and 16-17.

Children and young people who are “looked after” are vulnerable as a result of their difficult experiences. They have a range of needs and additional support is required to help these children and young people achieve their potential. Adults who were LAC are over represented in prison, are over represented in those receiving support from mental health services, can fail to achieve their potential educationally and as a result have a higher chance of being not in employment⁵. The Local Authority and its partners have a legal responsibility for looked after children and care leavers. The Kirklees Children’s Trust has identified LAC as a priority in the Children and Young People Plan.

What significant factors are affecting this issue?

Social care referrals and care proceedings continue to increase locally and nationally².

The reasons for this volume growth include:

- Heightened public awareness, generated in part by the national media attention which is paid to high profile cases.
- Recent legislative changes that have increased the requirements on Local Authorities to accommodate young people.
- Changes in childcare legislation, primarily the introduction of the Adoption and Children Act 2002, resulting 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 council is required to ensure that there is sufficient local accommodation to meet the needs of looked after children, i.e. the council’s ability, with its partners, to meet 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 their 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.

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 adoption breaking down and these young people 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, in 2012 was 62%. Among local looked after children it was only 7% (1 in 14). This lower educational attainment means more looked after children leave school not in education, employment or training (NEET).

This continued growth in the looked after children population, together with a national focus on the poor outcomes for looked after children, creates an increased role for the council as corporate parent.

Which groups are most affected by this issue?

Gender

Boys are more likely than girls to be looked after. They represent 49% of the overall population aged under 18 but 55% of the looked after children.

Ethnicity

In April 2006, approximately 80% of the 334 LACs were white. The total number of LACs has increased to 640 by March 2012 of whom 74% are white. The percentage of non-white LACs has increased significantly over the period: black children by 200%, dual heritage by 168% and Asian by 141%. So while the number of white LACs has increased by 92% the number of non-white LACs has increased by 149%.

Families

Although children from all demographic groups become looked after, many LACs typically 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. ¹

Teenage parents

Children of teenage parents are more likely to become looked after and looked after children are more likely to become teenage parents. ¹

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 local people

Looked after children and care leavers in Kirklees have said that they would like to⁴:

- 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?

Issues that require particular attention by local partners in Kirklees include:

- Providing effective help at an early stage which might prevent a child or young person becoming LAC.
- Improving the educational attainment of looked after children.
- Increasing the choice and scope of placements within Kirklees.

- Ensuring therapeutic intervention is available in a timely manner to meet the emotional and psychological needs of looked after children, including the need to provide support to children when placements in foster or adoptive care break down.
- Extending the limited service provided by the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) as it 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.
- 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 and are affected further by the recession in terms of the availability of jobs and opportunities.
- The growth in the number of referrals to social care creates an increased role for Kirklees Council as corporate parent to looked after children.
- Arrangements for providing a seamless service for young people over the age of 18 who then receive services from adults' providers which include emotional and mental health support, good housing, employment, skills and education opportunities.

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

- Securing sufficient accommodation for looked after children.
- Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations Guidance.

References

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4. Revans L. Looked-after Children’s Participation in Their Reviews. Community Care [Online]. 14 May 2010. Available from:
<http://www.communitycare.co.uk/Articles/2010/05/14/114502/looked-after-childrens-participation-in-their-reviews.htm>
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