

Children in Care (Corporate Parenting) Report

Considered at the Children and Families Scrutiny Committee Meeting on 5 March 2015

As effective corporate parents, we should want the same for children in care as we would for our own children: to achieve their academic potential; adopt healthy life styles; have the opportunity for employment and live in safe and positive environments. We need to act as “pushy parents”.

1. Current Data on Children in Care

There were 496 children in care at the end of January 2015, down from 508 at the end of November but slightly up from January 2014 (489). However, comparatively, Gloucestershire’s rate of Children in Care per 10,000 remains lower than statistical neighbour (42.3), South West (51) and England (60). Our current rate (January 2015) is 40.5

Placement stability has been improving since August 2014, 12.2% of children in care changed placement 3 times or more at that time, 9.9% of children did so as at the end of January 2015. The number of children who have had three or more moves has reduced from 40 to 31.

Of all the children who have been in care for at least 2.5 years (134 children), 67.9% (91) have been in the same placement for at least two years. Current performance is ahead of the target of 65%.

Fewer children are moving as frequently, and more are staying in a stable placement for longer. The recent improvements are significant compared to the last 4-5 years when Gloucestershire remained in the region of 13-14%. The current performance has improved by almost a third. The latest available reported national average is 11% (2013/14) and our statistical neighbour group performs at an average of 12%.

Most of the children with 3 or more moves are in the older age groups: 11-15 and 16+. We have been focusing on securing suitable placements for a small group of young people with complex and challenging behaviours. There has been a cohort of young people who have engaged in high level risk taking behaviours such as drug and alcohol misuse leading to committal of serious criminal offences. The courts have remanded a number of young people into our care and we have had difficulty sourcing appropriate provision locally at short notice. We have also had to place several young people who have been at risk of sexual exploitation to ensure their safety and protection.

The proportion of children returning to care remains at a stable level - 14.9% in the last 12 months.

There is a positive trend for children leaving care to be reunified with their families. In the 12 months to the end of January 2015, 32% of children have returned to their families (up from 15% at the end of 2013-14). And similarly, more children leave care to move into a permanent adoptive placement (19.3% for the 12 months to the end of January)

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Academic performance of children in care at Key Stage 2 was strong with 70% achieving the expected level of progress. However, of the cohort of 30 young people in care in Year 11 only 2 (6.7%) achieved 5 A*-C including English and maths. 23 (77% of the cohort) had SEN and 6 were not entered for any examinations. The Virtual School is working hard to ensure that the current Year 11 cohort receive all the support that they can (see below).

2. Children in Care Biennial Online Pupil Survey 2013

104 children and young people, aged 8-18, completed the survey in school, supported by their designated teachers. 29 (28%) were from the primary phase, 68 (65%) secondary and only 7 (7%) were over 16 years old. 104 children is a relatively small number sample, therefore there needs to be some caution in drawing conclusions (particularly the case for 16+). This CIC online survey will be repeated in 2015.

The majority of CIC (93%) are positive about their current placement (they feel safe, are happy, like their carers and “it’s a nice house”). None thought it was not at all the right place for them but 3 (7%) thought it was not quite right (too far from friends and family and/or they don’t like their carers). The majority report they are happy (90% primary and 69% secondary), able to eat healthily at their placement (90%), do enough exercise (82%), get enough sleep, have people to turn to for help, enjoy (73%) and try their best (84%) at school and are good at making and keeping friends (83%). A minority report that they are not confident about their future (15%) and think it is likely that they would become unemployed (18%).

97% report they know they have a social worker, 78% say they are getting enough help from their social worker and 95% say their reviews work well. However 31% feel they do not see their social worker enough and 25% report it is quite difficult or very difficult to get in touch with their social worker. There has been an increase in the number of young people who report they know about having a care plan (66% compared to 46% in 2011) and 79% of these think their care plan is working well. A number of CIC do not know how to make a complaint to the Council about their care (80% primary and 60% secondary), do not know what an advocate is (80% primary and 80% secondary), or do not fully understand their contact arrangement with their family (32% primary and 24% secondary).

Whilst the majority of CIC report more positive behaviours than the county OPS cohort, it is important to remember that a minority of CIC report negative behaviours and experiences. In order to improve interventions to address this, the OPS for Children in Care in 2015 will trial a survey where young people can be individually identified. This will allow communications, interventions and care planning to be targeted and tailored to the young people who report negative experiences.

3. The Corporate Parenting Group

3.1 Background

In 2013 the council reviewed the role and remit of the Corporate Parenting Panel which was previously comprised entirely of elected members and acted largely as an additional scrutiny function. In 2013 it was felt that account needed to be taken of the breadth of agencies who share corporate parenting responsibility, including health providers and commissioners; all

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education providers; police; youth support; youth justice and the private and third sectors. A new Corporate Parenting Group was established with the role of ensuring that children in care have good outcomes and local partners provide strong leadership and act collectively as champions.

3.2 Membership

Membership of the Group includes the lead cabinet member for children and young people and two other county councillors, representatives from primary and secondary schools, a District Council Chief Executive, senior representatives from health and the police and the University of Gloucestershire, the Director for Children’s Services, Director: Children’s Safeguarding and Care, Director: Education, Learning and Libraries, Service Leader for Children in Care

3.3 Activities

In order to carry out their champion role it was agreed that this Group should not confine itself to formal meetings but where possible should engage directly with teams supporting children in care as well as hearing directly from children and young people themselves. Several members of the group have visited teams including the Participation Team, Children in Care under16 team and the post 16 team. These visits have not only demonstrated members’ commitment and willingness to learn from staff working with children in care but they have added to councillors’ understanding of the challenges. Some members have attended the children in care council and attended celebration events, such as the Virtual School’s Awards evening where they presented awards and have also attended other activity events for children and young people such as “Fun in the Sun”.

3.4 Major agenda Items

i. Annual Report from the Independent Reviewing Officer

The group found the report useful and agreed that monitoring of the recommendations should be overseen by the Commissioning Director: Children and Families in conjunction with the Corporate Parenting Group.

Recommendations:

That the Corporate Parenting Group:

1. Ask the Director of Children’s Services to report on the progress of the specific project for returning children home from care and provide assurances that this will contribute to positive outcomes for children.
2. Ask the Director of Children’s Services to review the increase use of Section 20 arrangements to accommodate children under 10 years of age, and to seek reassurance that this is not leading to drift for children in care.
3. Ask for a report on the number and type of adoption placements being made and the number of reasons for disruptions that happen. In addition the Group asked for a more in-depth view of what support and advice might be required.

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4. Ask for a report regarding the stability of children's placements and the number of and reasons for children having three or more placement moves within a twelve month period.
5. Ask for information regarding the TACS project to see what outcomes have been identified to date, particularly in relation to the Family Drugs and Alcohol Court and the success (or otherwise) of parents in addressing their drug/alcohol problems in a timely manner.
6. Consider how it might become more involved with children in long term care arrangements – possibly by looking at situations of individual children (after obtaining permission from the children themselves).

ii. **The Children in Care Diagnostic**

The Diagnostic aims to give a better understanding of the impact we are having on the lives of Children in Care.

iii. **“Aspirations for Children in Care and Care Leavers 2013-16”**

This document, which sets out four key aspirations, will be monitored by the Corporate Parenting Group:

Key aspirations

As a child in care I will:-

- a. know what to expect when I come into care, am in care and when I leave; feel that I shape my own care plans; influence service development and have someone as my own contact
- b. have help to establish really positive, significant relationships; my plan will meet my needs, provide stability, and tell my life story
- c. be supported, to enjoy the best possible start; be healthy and maximize my capabilities; taking control over my life
- d. be prepared and supported to grow into a successful adult; respecting the help and processes this involves

4. Corporate Parenting Pledge

The Corporate Parenting Pledge commits elected members to actions such as receiving information related to children in care in their divisions, challenging their local schools and acting as champions for children in care in their local communities and with local businesses. This has been signed by 44 out of 53 members.

5. Children in Care Champions

The Lead Cabinet Member for Children and Young People provides an update report to all members at every Full Council Meeting, drawing their attention to key information about the performance of children in care and events which members can attend.

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Three county councillors agreed to act as Champions for Children in Care: Cllrs Stan Waddington, Brian Oosthysen and Joe Harris.

6. Participation

The council's Participation Team supports children in care and care leavers to voice what is working well and what areas need to be improved, either in their own lives or in the way that services are developed. Through the engagement of Ambassadors, the team uses a variety of mechanisms including;

- 11-16's and Post 16's Forums who share what they discuss with the Children in Care Council
- Engagement Events – fun filled sessions where children can take part in a variety of activities and share their views and ideas
- Voice Magazine - sent to all children in care 11 years and over four times a year
- Facebook page for 11-16's Forum members to hear about opportunities to engage
- Mind Of My Own – self advocacy app to help young people express their views, wishes and feelings and prepare for meetings
- Mystery shopping – feedback from young people via telephone calls and face to face meetings carried out by Ambassadors
- 'My Journey' – a tool designed by young people to help children and social workers create a child friendly version of their care plan

The team uses 'You saidwe did' statements to evidence what has been achieved. Some examples of what has changed as a result of hearing the voice of children in care and care leavers are:

- Children in Care Council members told us that they don't like to be called LAC. From now on all communication and correspondence will use the term Children in Care. Services, strategies and policies have been amended to reflect this.
- Post 16 Forum members said they would welcome the opportunity to join the Fostering Panel. A young person joined the panel in March 2014 and attends on a regular basis.
- Young people told us they would like the opportunity to be involved in training social workers and foster carers. Ambassadors have lead training for practitioners on the engagement of children and young people in assessment and planning. Training for foster carers has been designed and delivered by Ambassadors who presented Forum member's ideas about what makes a good foster carer. The Isolation DVD produced by children in care was shown to full council in 2013.

As well as employing Ambassadors to work alongside officers, the team is currently hosting a young person in care on a Trainee Programme. At the end of the placement in March, it is hoped that the young person will become the team's Apprentice Business Administrator.

7. The Virtual School

The Virtual School provides support and professional challenge to schools, social workers and foster carers. The school's focus is on raising aspirations, celebrating achievement, coordinating additional learning opportunities and ensuring that schools use the Pupils Premium Plus for Children in Care to improve academic progress. The Virtual School monitors the quality of the Personal Education plan which records the needs identified for the Pupil Premium Plus. The role of School is to monitor and narrow the progress gap between Children in Care and their peers and to ensure good attendance. The Virtual School works with other partners to ensure that they have received training to understand how to support children in care with educational progress, these include Designated Teachers, Governors, Social Workers, foster carers and IRO's. The Virtual School also works closely with the School Admissions team to ensure that children in care have education placements that are timely and appropriate. A programme of interventions is in place to raise aspirations, support mental health and well being as well as support for key subjects such as English and maths.

8. Championing employment and work experience opportunities for children in care and care-leavers

The Chief Executive of the Council personally championed the provision of work experience for children in care leading to the initiation of the "Work it Out" project. Over the last year there have been 73 referrals to source work experience, not all of these have been successful due to young people's needs and engagement but all who do engage are found a placement.

Each summer the council offers a week of paid employment to raise expectations and make the connection between working hard and earning money. Last year 25 young people took part. A Care Leaver who had a work experience placement in the Finance team has now been employed by the council on a permanent contract. Another care leaver was placed with a vehicle bodyworks specialist and was offered full time employment and training.

Although some Children in Care and Care-Leavers have applied for apprenticeships in the council, none have been successfully appointed. A "Preparation for work programme" is being developed. This 12 week incentivised programme will help young people to develop key employment skills over a longer period of time within a team for 3-5 days a week.

9. Care Leavers

Currently there are 312 Care Leavers. This number will continue to rise over the next three years. Support for Care Leavers is delivered by the Post 16 Service part of the Youth Support Team contracted through Prospects Services. The Youth Support Team is a fully integrated young people's service that provides support with housing, education and training, health (sexual health, physical, mental health, speech and language, and substance misuse) and offending behaviour as well as encouraging vulnerable young people to access positive activities. Care Leavers are allocated a dedicated Social Worker or Leaving Care Worker and can also receive support from the wider Youth Support Team.

The focus is on supporting young people make a successful transition into adult life. There have been a number of recent updates to statutory guidance for Care Leavers broadly linked to the government's Care Leaver strategy.

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- The Government has recently updated the statutory guidance for Care Leavers enabling them to remain in their foster placement under a Staying Put arrangement until they are 21. Just over 11% (35) of our Care Leavers are in a Staying Put arrangement. There is a steady growth in this area and improved outcomes for young people who remain with their foster carers.
- DfE strengthened guidance on local authority duties to support Care Leavers aged 21-24 who want to return to education or training making it clear that we should support Care Leavers to overcome barriers that may prevent them from returning to education or training. We have made good progress in this area and we are supporting 23% (72) of Care Leavers aged 21+ to overcome barriers and access education or training.

Young people are accredited for participation in events such as the 5 day Tall Ship challenge. Those who took part described this as a life changing event pushing them to learn new skills and exposing them to needing to work as part of a wider team to navigate a Tall Ship as well as cooking and maintaining life on board.

Additional financial support is given to Care Leavers when they complete higher education to support them in their next phase of life. Three Care Leavers graduated from university last year.

10. Future Developments

Sharon Davies, the new Service Leader for Children in Care has been appointed. This provides an opportunity to further strengthen and enhance Corporate Parenting within the council. In consultation with the CiC council, forums and Ambassadors, Sharon will ensure there is the right membership and representation on the Corporate Parenting group. Children and young people will be more involved in shaping the agenda and ensuring there is a more “participative style” to the meetings with children in care identifying their top three priorities and “Must Do’s” so that the Corporate Parenting Group can harness its talent and troubleshoot as pushy parents to tackle thorny issues and help develop services that are responsive to children’s needs. A conference is being planned for the Autumn, which will be led by young people. This will help to reinvigorate Corporate Parenting and remind us all how effective we can be if we harness our talents as pushy parents!