Children and young people living away from home

Introduction

Children who do not live within a secure family environment are at risk of achieving poor outcomes and failing to achieve their potential. This often includes children who could be either:

- Looked after children taken into care from Luton families and in home placements either in Luton’s boundaries or in other areas of the country, and for whom the Council is responsible for ensuring and being assured of their care.
- Looked after children placed with carers in Luton by other local authorities who remain responsible for their care.
- Care leavers, who are young people who are transferring from being a looked after child to being an adult and responsible for their own care
- In private fostering arrangements.

Adverse health and wellbeing needs and outcomes for looked after children and care leavers can be significant, with an increased risk of mental, behavioural and emotional problems and often at least one physical health need. They are more likely to have speech, language, social and emotional attachment problems, bedwetting, soiling, coordination difficulties and vision problems. They are twice as likely than those not in corporate care to develop drug and alcohol problems, mental health issues and other unmet health needs. Females who have been in care have a significantly higher risk of a teenage pregnancy and are at greater risk of child sexual exploitation. Looked after children therefore often have quite considerable needs and require additional support to help them achieve their potential.¹

At the end of March 2014, there were 68,840 looked after children and young people in England, the majority of whom were placed for reasons of abuse or neglect (55%). Three quarters of looked after children and young people were in a foster placement, while 12% were cared for in residential accommodation (secure units, children's homes and hostels).²

Risk factors and vulnerable groups

HM Treasury³ found that children in families experiencing five or more of the following issues were significantly more likely than other children to be excluded from school; enter care, or come into contact with the criminal justice system:

- Mental health problems.
- Disability.
- Substance misuse.
- Domestic violence.
- Financial stress.
- Neither parent in work.
- Teenage parenthood.
- Poor basic skills.
- Poor housing.
For some children and young people, care will be the best option for their secure health and wellbeing. The quality of services available to support families and help them to make the changes that will allow the child to live at home safely and identifying which children should enter care is a difficult decision, and factors which contribute to a child being more likely to enter care include:

- Parental abuse or neglect, or poor parenting due to parents’ own needs such as poor mental health, a severe disability, or substance misuse.
- High conflict with their families.
- Significant conduct problems, making them difficult for their parents to manage and putting them at risk.iv

**What is the evidence base?**

Services to support children living away from home are heavily led by legislation and associated guidance, and councils have a specific duty to these children as their corporate parents. The Children Act 1989, The Care Standards Act 2000 and accompanying regulations and guidance provide the legal framework for providing services to looked-after children and young people. Additionally the Family Justice Review (2011); Public Law Outline (2013); National Adoption Action Plan (2013) and the increased Government funding for adopter recruitment and adoption support have influenced local Council’s responses.

The Department of Education has produced a number of statutory guidance document for looked after children in order to safeguard children and young people including:

- Designated teacher for looked after children.
- Roles and responsibilities of directors of children’s services.
- Promoting the education of looked after children.
- Working together to safeguard childrenv.

NICE has produced a quality standard (QS31) defining the best practice for the health and wellbeing of looked after children and young people from birth to 18 years and care leavers and tailored resources for corporate parentsvi.

**Local picture**

**Looked after children**

In 2013/14, 180 children became looked after and under the care of the local authority, an increase on previous years. A further increase is anticipated in 2014/15 (170 children became looked after in the nine months to 31 December 2014).

At 31 March 2014 there were a total 397 looked after children (74 per 10,000 population) in Luton (Figure 53). This is slightly higher than the national average and statistical neighbours, but Luton’s rate has remained relatively stable since 2010-11 compared with an increasing trend nationally. This rate is largely in line with expected levels based on the level of deprivation in Luton.227
Mapping the originating address of looked after children in 2013\textsuperscript{viii} showed that the children were largely (but not exclusively) mirroring the areas of greatest deprivation and over 80% of children coming into care were in rented accommodation and/or in households receiving benefits and/or overcrowded households.\textsuperscript{viii}

Abuse and neglect and family dysfunction were the two main reasons why children in Luton became looked after (Table 27).
Table 27: Reasons for becoming looked after

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Luton (%)</th>
<th>Stat Neighbour (%)</th>
<th>England (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abuse or neglect</td>
<td>59.0</td>
<td>64.5</td>
<td>55.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child’s disability</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents illness or disability</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family in acute stress</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family dysfunction</td>
<td>24.0</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>19.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socially unacceptable behaviour</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low income</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absent parenting</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: DfES Children looked after in England (including adoption and care leavers) year ending 31 March 2014.

There has been a reduction in the number of children becoming looked after due to absent parenting, largely as a result of fewer unaccompanied asylum seeking children. However, the proportion of children becoming looked after due to a child’s disability is twice the England average.

The Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act (LASPO) 2012\textsuperscript{ix} required all remanded young people be treated as ‘looked after’ with financial responsibility passing to local authorities. In 2013/14 there were 14 young people in Luton in this category, all male, 50% of whom were already looked after children at the time of their remand.

Following the Laming report\textsuperscript{x} in response to the death of Victoria Climbie, regulations relating to private fostering were amended and strengthened by The Children (Private Arrangements for Fostering) Regulation 2005\textsuperscript{xii}. Private fostering arrangements can be a positive response from within the community to difficulties experienced by families, but privately fostered children remain a diverse and potentially vulnerable group of children who tend to be under-reported and hard to identify by many local authorities. Luton had fewer than 5 known about privately fostered children at 31 March 2014, and there has been little change in numbers over the past three years, in line with other authorities.

Age, gender and ethnic breakdown

The key ages when children become looked after are babies (0 years old), age 5 and age 16 (Figure 55 and Figure 56). Reasons for children aged 16 and 17 years coming into care are less likely to be due to abuse or neglect and are usually due to absent parenting, family dysfunction or the family being in acute stress a national issue which is more pronounced in Luton. It is expected that a major factor for children aged 16+ coming into care will be the Southwark judgement\textsuperscript{xii} which has realigned the housing responsibilities for homeless 16 and 17 year olds.
Figure 55: Number of children coming into care.

![Number of children coming into care](image)

Source: The council Childrens Services.

Figure 56: Looked after children by age group, 2013/14.

![Percentage of children looked after by age group as at 31 March 2014](image)

Stat Neighbour = Comparator Areas.

Source: DfE Children looked after in England (including adoption and care leavers) year ending 31 March 2014.

The age profile of all looked after children at 31March 2014 mirrors the national profile, with one in five children coming into care being under 5 years of age, 41% are under 10 years old, and 59% over 10 years old. However, in recent years the age profile has changed with babies coming into care again mirroring a national trend likely to be due to earlier identification of risk, particularly during pregnancy.

The ratio of male to female children coming into care is 53:47% respectively. The ethnic origin of Luton’s children in care was:

- 61% white.
- 12% mixed origin.
- 11% Asian.
- 10% Black.
- 5% ‘Other’ ethnic group.
- 2% information not recorded.

Compared with the ethnic profile of Luton’s children as a whole there is underrepresentation in the Asian ethnic group and overrepresentation from the White ethnic group. There was no unaccompanied asylum seeking children reported in Luton during 2013/14.

**Placement sufficiency**

As at 31 March 2014, 77% of the 397 children in care were placed within the Luton area. Of these 59% were placed locally within the borough; 18% were placed in neighbouring areas and 22% were placed at a distance more than 21 miles from home. The vast majority of looked after children live in family based care\(^1\) with just 3% in specialist residential placements.

The reasons for placing children away from Luton include:

- Their safety.
- For adoption.
- To live with family members or carers who had moved away.
- Highly specialist placements.
- A suitable placement in Luton was unavailable at the time of need.

A total of 165 children ceased to be looked after in 2013/14. The rate was higher than comparator or England averages and has shown little change over the last three years. Almost half (48.5%) of children returned home, more than the England average of 33.8%. The proportion ceasing to be looked after due to adoption was low (3%), half that of the England average (6.1%); however, there were more children were adopted in 2014/15. Almost a fifth (24%) of children ceased to be in local authority care for other reasons.

**Outcomes**

Health assessments, dental checks and immunisations are all key indicators for assessing looked after children’s health. In 2013-14 health assessments were completed for 87.5% of looked after children, dental checks were completed for 71.8% and 78.2% of looked after children had up-to-date immunisations. There were 10 (3.9%) looked after children in 2013 who had a substance misuse problem compared with 3.6% in statistical neighbours and 3.5% nationally.

All looked after children between the ages of 4 – 16 years should have a strengths and difficulties questionnaire (SDQ)\(^{iii}\) which assesses the emotional and behavioural health of children. During 2014 of the 217 eligible children, 122 (56%) questionnaires were completed and the average score of 14.1 (meaning slightly raised difficulties) was marginally higher than the previous year indicating increasing levels of difficulties and needs.

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\(^1\) Foster carers, family / friends; supported lodgings or adopters.
The percentage of looked after children achieving 5 GCSEs grade A-C was 13.8% which was less than national average and statistical neighbours and significantly worse than non-looked after children in Luton.

**Care leavers**

It is important to ensure that young people have accommodation when leaving care to improve their outcomes and chances of making a successful transition to independence and adult life. Most (88%) care leavers were in suitable accommodation in 2013/14, compared with 78% nationally. In Luton 14% were in higher education compared with 6% nationally.\(^{27}\)

**Missing children and young people**

Since April 2013 police forces have agreed new definitions of ‘missing’ and ‘absent’ in relation to children and adults reported to the police:

- **Missing**: anyone whose whereabouts cannot be established and where the circumstances are out of character, or the context suggests the person may be the subject of crime or at risk of harm to themselves or another.
- **Absent**: a person not at a place where they are expected or required to be.

**Children missing from home**

It is estimated that up to 10,000 children per year go missing from care\(^{16\mathrm{a}}\) and around 3,000 young people repeatedly go missing from care in England each year\(^{15\mathrm{a}}\) (representing approximately 4.5% of the looked after children population). If this estimate was applied to Luton, 18 looked after children may repeatedly go missing every year. Throughout 2013/14 and in 2014/15 year to date, the number of children who are missing at any one time is less than 5, but this may be the result of under-reported. During the period 1 April to 7 October 2014, 12 children had repeatedly gone missing from care.

The majority of all missing children are aged between 13 and 16 years of age, the highest number being at 15 years of age. Of the 431 reported missing incidents in Luton between April to December 2013 there were 5 who were victims of crime whilst absent and 21 who were involved in crime.

**Children placed in Luton by other local authorities**

Local authorities who place their looked after children with carers or children’s homes in Luton are required by legislation to inform Children’s Social Care, Education and Health services. Notification when these children arrive and move back out of the local area is not always made and therefore understanding the numbers of children from other local authorities can be a challenge. There are mechanisms to capture information, for example by liaison with providers in Luton and mailshots to all local authorities requesting information. As of 31\(^{\mathrm{st}}\) March 2014 there were 145 looked after children from other authorities placed in Luton.\(^{16\mathrm{a}}\) Of all children looked after living in Luton, 38% were the responsibility of other authorities which is in line with comparator authorities and the England average (39%).
What is being done locally?

The Luton Children and Young Peoples Trust Board has identified looked after children’s as a priority in the Children and Young People’s Plan. Luton’s Children in Care Strategy 2013-2015 identifies objectives which reflect the key issues impacting the lives of looked after children and care leavers:

1. Support for children to remain with or safely return to their families.
2. Provide and commission the right mix of placements.
3. Improve outcomes, maximise the children’s potential and celebrate achievements.
4. Plan effectively to promote stability and permanence.
5. Consulting with and involving children, young people, families and carer.
6. Promote positive transition into adulthood including enabling care leavers to live with their former foster carers up to the age of 21 (“stay put”).

The council is leading on a collaborative framework agreement with Central Bedfordshire Council and Bedford Borough Council to promote and deliver better choice, access and quality of foster placements. The council has identified the need for more local placements and support.

A new local strengths and difficulties questionnaire (SDQ) pathway was launched in November 2013 to improve the pathway for children who need additional support through child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) to improve emotional and mental health outcomes. The health needs of children in care are identified through their statutory health checks and assessments. Two new partnership pathways have been developed - a health assessment pathway and a strengths and difficulties pathway. These have been implemented to improve partnership working and services to looked after children. Luton Clinical Commissioning Group has commissioned a full time nurse to provide a health service for looked after children and care leavers up to the age of 21 or 25 if in full time education. Work is currently underway to improve coordination across this pathway.

For children in care with specific emotional health needs, referrals can be made to the MALT (Multi Agency Liaison Team) which provides intensive support including early intervention and CAMHS.

Luton’s virtual school for children in care provides a focus on the education needs of all children of statutory school age who are in care. The virtual school supports schools, foster carers and social workers through training and advisory support. It also oversees the provision of the statutory Pupil Education Plan (PEP) and Premium Plus funding and support for looked after children.

The 16+ Homeless and care leaver’s service provides 110 places for young people. This includes two mother and baby units providing 15 places. Approximately 50% are for homeless people including homeless young people aged 16+.

Perspective of the public/service users

National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS) provides an Independent Visiting, Mentoring and Advocacy Service for looked after children in Luton. Luton has a looked after children council, the Young People’s Panel, made up of young people in care and care leavers who advise the Council on improvements that should be made to the local care system. Key themes which came out of the Young People’s Panel Action Plan include:
- **Choice**: improving placement choice and children/young people’s opportunity to meet prospective carers prior to placement.

- **Information**: improving information for looked after children and care leavers about key professionals and how to contact them; review and refresh the ‘Pledge’ (a set of local authority commitments to looked after children).

- **Participation**: improved participatory and statutory reviews; Improve consultation with parents of looked after children.

- **Family and sibling contact**: children and young people want more unrestricted, informal contact with siblings; ensuring contact arrangements do not impede on children / young people’s current social activities and education.

- **Readiness for independence**: improved support and readiness for leaving care; improved arrangements for savings, long term savings and access to bank accounts.

The panel has created a ‘pledge’ of what is expected, which has been implemented across Luton.

**Priorities**

1. Services should focus on supporting children to remain with, or safely return to, their families and take action to reduce the increasing demand on services’.

2. The Council and its partners should provide/commission the right mix of short and long term placements and work together to support improved outcomes for looked after children in all areas of their health, wellbeing, learning, safety, and economic well being.

3. The Council and its partners should provide services and support to promote positive transition of care leavers into adulthood, including enabling care leavers to live with their former foster carers up to the age of 21.
References

1 Department for Education and Department of Health Promoting the health and wellbeing of looked after children DfE and DoH 2015.


3 Cabinet Office Families at risk review: background on families with multiple disadvantages HM Treasury 2007


7 Analysis of Children in Care 2013 – research report for Corporate Parenting Board


15 Taylor J et al Children who go missing from care: A participatory project with young people as peer interviewers NSPCC 2012 Available from: http://www.nspcc.org.uk/globalassets/documents/research-reports/children-missing-from-care-report.pdf?_t_id=1B2M2Y8AsgTpgAmY7PhCfp%3d%3d&t_q=3000+children+go+missing&_t_tags=language%3aen%2csiteid%3a7f1b9313-bf5e-4415-abf6-

xvii Website of Luton’s Children’s Trust

xviii The council’s Sufficiency Strategy action plan (unpublished)
