

ROTHERHAM BOROUGH COUNCIL

1	Meeting:-	Corporate Parenting Panel
2	Date:-	2nd July 2014
3	Title:-	Looked After Children Service – Improvement Plan 2014 -2015
4	Directorate:-	CYPS

5. Introduction

- 5.1 Children become looked after by the Local Authority, either because an interim or full Care Order is made by the Family Proceedings Court [section 31 of the Children Act 1989] or through a voluntary agreement between the child's parent/s and the local authority [Section 20 of the Children Act 1989].
- 5.2 The threshold for applying to the court for a Care Order is that the child is suffering significant harm in the care of his or her parents and that all efforts to address this with the parents have so far failed. Care proceedings generally take up to a year to conclude, although recent legislation and guidance is aimed at reducing this to six months in the majority of cases. Proceedings can result in the child returning home, the child being placed with relatives or the child being placed in a long-term foster placement, a residential placement, or being adopted.
- 5.3 Children and young people are looked after under section 20 when they are either at significant risk in the care of their parents [but where a return home is likely following further work with the family], or where the relationship between the parents and the child/young person has irretrievably broken down and, or, there are no family members available to look after the child.
- 5.4 In Rotherham there is a robust procedure for agreeing threshold decisions for taking a child into care with decisions only agreed at Service Manager and Director level and through the Multi Agency Support Panel.
- 5.5 The 391 children currently looked after by RMBC are managed in teams across the CPYS service. Care proceedings are generally commenced in the Duty or the Children in Need teams. Children with significant disabilities and their siblings are managed by the Children with Disabilities Team.
- 5.6 There are currently two dedicated Looked After Children Teams. Cases are transferred to LAC at the conclusion of assessment and/or proceedings where reunification, placement with wider family or adoption has been ruled out. The LAC Teams currently have 217 cases allocated within the teams. The remaining x cases are held in the North and South Locality and the Children with Disabilities Teams.

6 Background

- 6.1 Between November 2013 and March 2014 a comprehensive review was conducted of Children and Young Peoples Services, led by an independent consultant, Steven Gauntley. The review considered aspects of the child's journey from initial contact through children in need, child protection and looked after children system, focusing on the experiences of the child or young person and the effectiveness of the help and protection offered. The review team analysed performance data, reports and management information and interviewed key managers and staff.
- 6.2 The review examined the work of the two specialist Looked After Children's Teams particularly in relation to assessment and planning; the experiences and progress of children looked after and achieving permanence in a timely manner; the quality of social work practice; robustness of management oversight; planning and review; multi-agency working; risk assessment; the capacity to make and sustain changes in practice and IT systems.
- 6.3 The review was shared with staff through Action Learning Sets in March 2014 and made a number of recommendations for improvement under the themed heading of Practice; Performance; Management Oversight and Systems.
- 6.4 The report was well received by managers who reported that the exercise helped them understand the need for additional capacity to manage the service and focus the direction of the service improvement plan. The Action Learning sets enabled LAC staff to develop a clear understanding of what is required of them to improve the service for Looked After Children. The findings apply across the LAC teams and Locality Teams as they apply to children from the point they come into care as well as to children who are placed permanently with carers.

7 Looked After Children Service Improvement Plan 2014 – 2015

- 7.1 The Looked After Children Service Improvement Plan is based on the findings and recommendations of Steven Gauntley's report, and is linked to the Looked After Children's Strategy and the new Ofsted inspection framework.
- 7.2 The improvement plan was devised with input from the LAC managers and involves key personnel across the department including the Independent Reviewing officers; The Get Real Team; Looked After and Adopted Children's Therapeutic Service and Business Support.
- 7.3 Progress in implementation is monitored by the Performance & Quality Team in conjunction with the Service Managers and Team Managers. An officer meets with managers monthly to confirm and challenge the quantitative and qualitative evidence that demonstrates that progress has been made and that the changes are having the required impact and outcomes.
- 7.4 The improvement plan is a dynamic process which also identifies areas where further work is required. Areas identified for further attention are - Contact and Rehabilitation; Child Sexual Exploitation; Children Missing and Absent from Care; consultation with children and young people; integration of the LAC and Leaving Care teams.

8 Progress to date

- 8.1 To increase management capacity and oversight of the Improvement Plan, an experienced Interim Service Manager was appointed for three months pending the return of the Service Manager previously employed by Action for Children from maternity leave. Following the Action Learning Sets carried out as part of the review, a series of team meetings communicated the Improvement Plan and set out the practice changes required. Monthly learning sets started in April and are planned for the next six months; topics include – inspection readiness; Improving Attainment and Understanding the Key Stages in Education; Child Sexual Exploitation; Direct work with children and Life Story Work.
- 8.2 Good use of management information is driving improvements in practice and ensuring that the statutory requirements are met. The data set is scrutinised on a weekly basis; deficits are addressed individually with workers. Notable improvements are that all children have up to date Care Plan, PEP's and Health Plans. The position with regard to statutory visits is improving with most children having a statutory visit carried out and recorded on the system within the required 12 weeks. The improvement in performance has been achieved by rectifying systems issues and offering social work staff protected time to bring recording up to date.
- 8.3 The LAC teams are committed to going beyond the statutory minimum requirement and will increase the frequency of visiting to six weekly because this will facilitate better relationships between LAC children and their social workers leading to an increased awareness of the child's wishes and feelings, better planning and ultimately better outcomes for LAC children.
- 8.4 The Statutory Visiting and Care Plan forms have been reviewed to raise the quality of recording, ensure that the child voice is heard and streamline recording.
- 8.5 The increased management capacity as a result of the appointment of an Interim Service Manager from May 2014, and filling a vacant Team Manager post in March 2014 has resulted in better management oversight and the ability to consistently carry out monthly staff supervision. Supervision on all LAC cases is recorded every quarter. A reflective challenging approach is being adopted aimed at improving outcomes for children.
- 8.6 There is an increased emphasis on auditing as a means of addressing practice issues. In the course of the LAC review auditing was carried out on the 10 children placed at furthest distance from Rotherham and the learning themes have been feedback to the team. A further 27 cases are in the process of being audited by the returning Service Manager, who is currently working part time.
- 8.7 There is an increased emphasis on capturing and recording the voice of the child in all care plans and assessments and in statutory reviews. The role of the Independent Reviewing Officer in challenging practice has been

strengthened with an increasing use of the Dispute Resolution process. Meetings have taken place between the LAC managers and the IRO's in order to improve communication and to clarify roles and responsibilities in improving outcomes for children.

- 8.8 The LAC team is committed to ensuring that all children achieve permanent, stable homes with safe, secure caregivers and understands that this stability will allow them to form strong attachments which will both help them recover from earlier trauma and develop resilience and confidence in the future. A backlog was identified in progressing permanency for LAC children placed with Independent Fostering Agencies which has been addressed and thirty two cases are booked for matching consideration by the Fostering Panel Chair by the end of July. The process will now be extended to LAC children placed with in-house foster carers.

9 Initial impact and feedback from staff

- 9.1 This has been a period of rapid change for the LAC staff group. A number of social workers left the team and five new workers transferred in from Action for Children; three new social workers have been recruited and will join the service at the beginning of July. Staff have recognised the need to change, although the changes have resulted in an increase in their workload because a concerted effort was required to bring the service up to the required standard. Staff welcomed the increase in staffing through recruitment to bring the team up to establishment which allowed caseloads to be reduced to 18 thereby allowing them the capacity to improve the service offered to LAC children.
- 9.2 The recruitment of an additional team manager to bring the team managers up to establishment has enabled managers to follow through the changes which are detailed in the Improvement Plan. Managers are positive about the changes and have high aspiration for LAC children. They are committed to the LAC improvement plan and see it as a useful means of maintaining a strong focus on improving the life chances of LAC children and care leavers

10. Recommendations

That Corporate Parenting Panel:

6.1. Note the information provided and the progress being made.

6.2. Comment on and contribute to the Improvement Plan as summarised above.

9. Risks and Uncertainties

- 9.1. Failure to take action to address the identified weaknesses in our Looked After Children service risks reputational damage to the local authority via poor inspection reports, poorer outcomes for children and young people, and increasing pressure on the budget as a result of high levels of placement breakdowns and disruptions and the escalating costs associated with children who have frequent changes in placement.

10. Policy and Performance Agenda Implications

Looked After Children and Leaving Care are both key elements of the revised OFSTED inspection framework. The improvement plan is based on similar rationale that OFSTED would adopt as part of their inspection process.

It is important that we continue to evidence improvements for our looked after children and that the service provides a level of service and quality that we would expect for our own children.

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