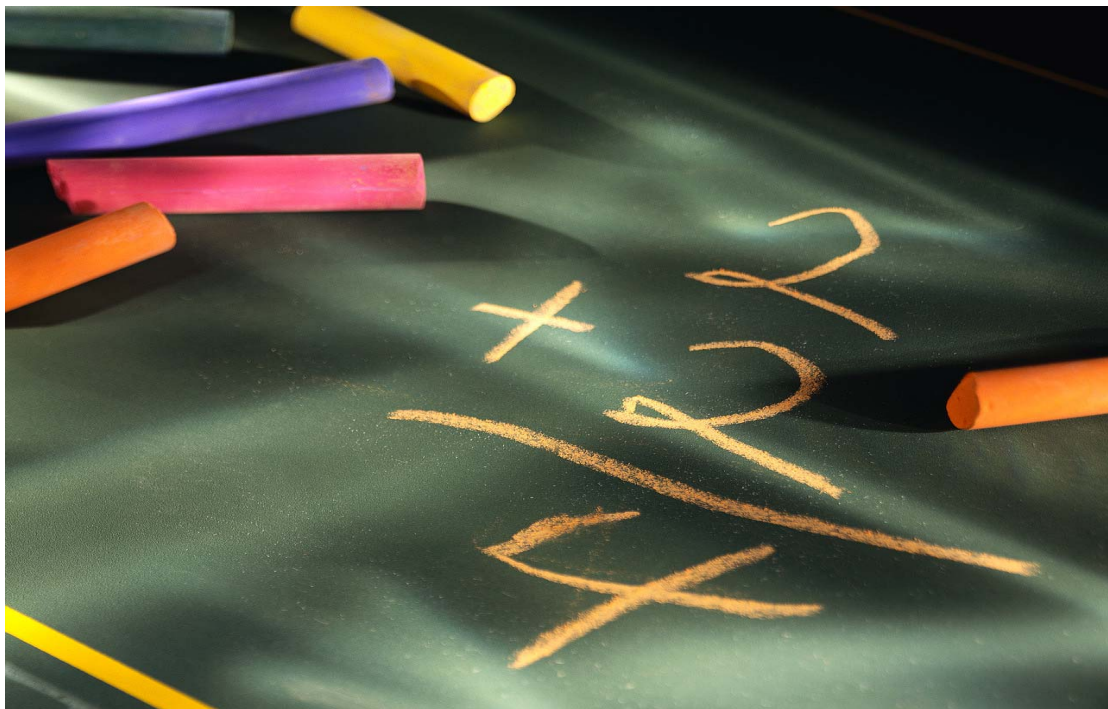


A+dding Value?

A Scrutiny Report about Improving the Educational Achievement of Looked After Children in County Durham

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



**Scrutiny Sub-Committee for Strong,
Healthy and Safe Communities**

5 June 2006



Making a difference where you live

“We are all on a ladder of life. Most of us have a ladder which has a steady upwards incline, and although we may occasionally be faced with wind or rain, generally the climb is in fair conditions. On the way, we gain attainments – GCSEs, Degrees and professional qualifications and we continue the climb. Going up the ladder odd rungs may be loose or worn, but we are doing the climb in broad daylight and can spot the hazards.

It’s different for some others, and Looked After Children would be part of this. Their ladder does not have a steady incline. In fact, it may be perpendicular or, at other times, flat on the ground. Rain and wind are an almost constant companion, except when the climb is in glaring sunshine or in the dark. Rungs may be worn, broken and missing and in the conditions, never seen, until the person climbing the ladder is upon them. Attainment is something that other people have time for.”

Submission by a County Council Senior Social Worker

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यदि आप इरा सूचना का सार हिन्दी में चाहते हैं, तो कृपया 0191 383 3149 पर फोन करें।

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"اگر آپ کو ان معلومات کا خلاصہ اردو میں چاہئے تو برائے مہربانی 0191 383 3149"

Foreword



For many people, the term “Looked After Children” (or children in care) suggests young people who have ended up in the care of a local authority because they are disruptive and difficult to bring up. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The biggest reason for children being taken into care is not because of anything they have done themselves. More often, it stems from abuse or neglect within the family home, frequently linked to alcohol or substance misuse by parents or carers. Sometimes young people go into care because they are carers themselves, either for parents or siblings and they require some respite from their caring role.

When young people enter the looked after system, the County Council acts as a corporate parent. This means that all of our Councillors individually have responsibilities. The Council is responsible for ensuring that the young people in its care receive the same support that any parent would wish to give to their own children.

Amongst the greatest of gifts we can give to young people is education. Research shows that those who do well academically get the best jobs and go on to lead socially inclusive lives. Looked After Children perform less well in exams than children generally and this impacts significantly upon their future lives and well-being.

The background to this scrutiny investigation was the specific stretch target about the educational attainment of Looked After Children agreed by the County Council with Government in the first generation Local Public Service Agreement (which the Council did not achieve) and the Council’s improvement priorities linked to vulnerable children.

Whilst the academic performance of Looked After Children in County Durham is improving and is not markedly different than that in some other local authorities, there are Councils where Looked After Children do better. The Government has also made it clear that it expects to see year-on-year improvements in the educational attainment of young people who are Looked After.

This report contains a number of recommendations, which seek to improve the educational support that Looked After Children receive. I hope that these recommendations will be given serious consideration and that they will lead to enhanced future life chances for the young people in our care.

I would like to thank all those members of the Working Group who have invested a considerable amount of time in this scrutiny investigation. Thanks also to the officers from Children’s and Young People’s Services (formerly Social Care and Health and Education) and Corporate Services who have supported the project.

Councillor Dorothy Bowman
Chair of the Looked After Children
Scrutiny Working Group

Executive Summary and Recommendations

Introduction and Background

- 1.1 There are over 400 Looked After Children in County Durham at any one time. Most are in care not because of things they themselves have done - the majority have suffered abuse or neglect. Children who are in the care of the County Council have the same rights, needs and expectations as any other child. Frank Dobson, MP, writing to Councillors in 1998 said "For children who are looked after, your Council has a legal and moral duty to try and provide the kind of loyal support that any good parent would give to their children." The County Council is a corporate parent to all the children in its care and County Councillors individually have the same responsibilities.
- 1.2 Outcomes for many Looked After Children are well below those of the rest of society and particularly so in the field of educational performance. Nearly 50% of Looked After Children nationally leave school with no GCSEs. This impacts on their ability to find and maintain employment and to lead full and socially inclusive lives.
- 1.3 This is a summary of the issues which have arisen during the course of this scrutiny project. The full report contains extensive evidence and data upon which this assessment and recommendations are based.
- 1.4 There are many reasons why young people who are Looked After perform less well in education than young people generally. The Social Exclusion Report 2003 advanced a number of factors as to why this may be:
 - Too much time out of school
 - Lives characterised by instability
 - Insufficient help with their education if they get behind
 - Primary carers not equipped or expected to provide sufficient support for learning and development (some carers have previous poor experiences of school themselves)
 - Unmet emotional, physical and mental health needs that impact on Looked After Children's education.
- 1.5 Whilst performance for the educational attainment of Looked After Children in County Durham is rising, it is still below national targets. The number of Looked After Children in County Durham who sit GCSE exams each year is relatively small – between 30 and 40. This means that a 3 or 4 young people not doing as well as expected in their exams can have a significant impact on overall performance. The aim of this scrutiny project was to look holistically at how we support Looked After Children and foster carers, to determine if more could be done to help young people achieve academically.
- 1.6 The Working Group found that provision for supporting the educational attainment of Looked After Children in County Durham was generally good, with staff and carers who are dedicated and committed to what they do. The provision of an in-house Education Access Service has assisted greatly, although key workers have heavy caseloads and there are still issues about support for Looked After Children below Year 5 and the completion of

Personal Education Plans which need to be addressed. All the agencies the Group spoke with appeared to work well together and the move towards integrated Children's and Young People's Services should further assist in this regard.

- 1.7 Whilst the Working Group felt that the drive to help Looked After Children achieve academically needed to be sustained, it recognised that, for some young people, it was as important, if not more important, that their emotional and behavioural needs be addressed first to enable them on leaving care to go on to play their full part as members of society. The Group also felt that, for some young people there needed to be an alternative pathway, with greater assistance for vocational studies and skills to allow them, on leaving care, to be able to support themselves.
- 1.8 The Working Group felt that there were a number of areas where recommendations for improvement should be made. These have been grouped around a number of themes as follows:

- The role and actions of the Council as Corporate Parent
- The functions of Designated Teachers and Governors
- The role of Foster Carers
- Support for Children who are Looked After and Recognition of Achievement

Recommendations

The Council as a Corporate Parent

- 1.9 It is the role of the Council to be responsible for all aspects of care for Looked After Children. This is not just the responsibility of officers and those Councillors who are members of the Corporate Parenting Panel. It is the responsibility of every member of the Council. Whilst the role of the Corporate Parenting Panel has developed over time and the value of the arrangements in County Durham has been recognised in previous Inspection Reports, the Working Group felt that there were still areas for improvement. The Working Group recommends that:
- (a) The role and powers of the Corporate Parenting Panel should be properly codified and incorporated within the Council's Constitution in order to better clarify its purpose.
- (b) Cabinet should consider how additional members of the Corporate Parenting Panel can be recruited. Consideration should be given to whether all Corporate Panel Members need to be County Councillors, although, in considering whether co-optees should be sought, careful regard will need to be given to procedures for recruitment and selection procedures to ensure young people are appropriately safeguarded. It is suggested that a conference, or seminar, following this scrutiny project to highlight the findings might provide a suitable vehicle to recruit additional members of the Council.
- (c) Mechanisms to allow for more direct contact by the Corporate

Parenting Panel with Looked After Children (in foster and residential care), and Carers, so that educational issues can be discussed and the respective views of young people and carers can be heard directly should be considered. Young people indicated that they would like to see informal quarterly events (perhaps with music and food provided).

- (d) Regulation 33 visits to Residential Children's Homes should include some observations about how the Home supports education – i.e. activities, resources, access to computers etc. This would ensure visits were also monitoring the overall ethos of learning and education within the child's home environment.
- (e) Whilst the time demands upon members as corporate parents are recognised and it is important that Regulation 33 visits are unannounced, greater efforts should be made to undertake visits at times when young people will be present, such as evenings, weekends and holiday periods.
- (f) Most young people in care know very little, if anything, about what a corporate parent (or a councillor) is. The production of information material for young people (including a DVD) might help to overcome this. It is understood that the Corporate Parenting Panel is actioning this point.

The Role of Designated Teachers and Governors

1.10 Designated teachers and governors have key roles in championing Looked After Children within the education system. They need to be pro-active in this role, whilst recognising the sensitivities and stigmatisation that being a Looked After Child can bring to young people within school settings. The Group felt on occasions that, whilst the overwhelming majority of designated teachers and governors were conscientious in their role, in some areas it appeared that more could be done. Being a designated teacher for Looked After Children is not easy, given all the other competing demands upon teachers time, but it is a key role and young people who spoke to the Working Group made it clear that having a teacher who cared made "all the difference". Given that scrutiny too is about making a difference, the Working Group recommends that:

- (a) The Access Service should consider how the accuracy of the database of designated governors can be improved, to ensure that all schools have designated governors, that governor details are updated regularly (currently they are only updated annually), and to provide for email contact details for governors wherever possible, which would be useful in terms of disseminating information and networking.
- (b) Training arrangements for newly designated governors and teachers should be reviewed and particularly, the ways in which courses are advertised, and when and where they are held. Whilst face-to-face training will always be preferable, it is time-demanding of Access Service staff. Consideration should be given to the development of on-line or DVD training modules. The DVD recently produced in partnership by Hampshire County Council and the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea is an example of good practice in this field and the Working Group commends its use in Durham as part of future training.

- (c) Consideration should be given to developing virtual networks and dedicated web-pages for designated governors and teachers to allow for the sharing of best practice and to continuously reinforce the respective championing roles of governors and teachers in relation to Looked After Children. In feedback from teachers/governors the use of the Council's Extranet for posting information was criticised due to the amount of information on the system.
- (d) Whilst "Total Respect" training has been delivered successfully to a number of professional staff by Looked After Children, the opportunity to develop a less time-intensive training package (perhaps in the form of a DVD) and supporting documentation around the Total Respect agenda, which could be used more widely (and particularly for designated teachers and governors), should be considered.
- (e) The above recommendations should be reinforced by the holding of an (at least) annual conference at which teachers, governors, and other professional staff and carers can come together to share best practice and discuss issues of common concern.
- (f) Most, if not all, County Councillors are school governors. As part of their corporate parenting role, all County Councillors should be encouraged to enquire at meetings of Governing Bodies whether designated governors and teachers are in place at their school(s) and if not, to report this fact to the Access Service for action.
- (g) The Access Service should put in place arrangements to encourage designated governors from time to time (perhaps by annual email or letter) to ensure that they:
 - Are aware of the designated teacher in their school
 - Promote the requirement for the designated teacher to attend appropriate training
 - Know the numbers, ages and educational attainment of Looked After Children in their school and monitor this
 - Make an annual report on Looked After Children issues to the Governing Body (which they share with the Access Service)
- (h) There needs to be proper recognition and reward for the role that designated teachers for Looked After Children undertake within individual schools. Designated governors should champion this and be encouraged to ensure that teachers are properly supported within their schools in this role.

Foster Carers

1.11 It is foster carers who can bring the love and normality of family life to the Looked After Children in their care, but they need ongoing support to do this particularly in relation to ensuring that the young people in their care are receiving a good education. The Working Group recommends that:

- (a) Consideration should be given to procedures which will build closer links between carers and teaching staff. Carers suggested that teaching staff might be invited to carers consultative meetings.

- (b) There should be a review of the procedures in place for ensuring contact between schools and foster carers. Carers saw this as being particularly important, especially when children are older and more independent and contact between carers and schools tends to diminish. This would also assist when young people are excluded, as carers felt they do not currently receive enough information to allow them to challenge exclusions.
- (c) Designated teachers, Social workers and Access Service staff should be asked to consider carefully the terminologies they use when communicating with carers so as to ensure that they are readily understandable to recipients.
- (d) The Access Service should further develop existing training programmes for carers to ensure that they are fully conversant with modern teaching methods. This will enable carers to more effectively support the young people in their care when helping them with homework. Training for newly recruited foster carers should also be reviewed to ensure that this issue is addressed and there should be greater support for and emphasis on the need for carers to take an even more active role in the education of children in their care. In line with the CSCI 2006 Fostering Service Inspection Report, sufficient notice should be given of training events to allow carers to make arrangements to attend.
- (e) All carers, who do not already have IT equipment in their homes, should be provided with equipment to allow the young people in their care to access the internet and to carry out research linked to their school studies whilst placed with them.
- (f) Procedures should be introduced to allow regular dialogue between carers and the Corporate Parenting Panel (there is a similar recommendation under the Section pertaining to the Panel).
- (g) Dyslexia and dyspraxia are areas where carers felt there was a need for ongoing training and the Access Service should consider re-running the previous courses, again subject to sufficient prior notice.

Enhanced Support for Looked Children and Recognition of Achievement

1.12 Whilst the Working Group acknowledges the considerable amount of support currently provided for Children who are Looked After, a large number of issues were raised in evidence which the Working Group feels merit closer attention. The Group recommends that:

- (a) Wherever possible, when determining placements for children within the Looked After system, a prime consideration by social workers should be stability in terms of the child remaining at their existing school, where it is safe and convenient to do so.
- (b) A review of the mechanisms currently in place to ensure that school moves for Looked After Children take place at the most appropriate time and that additional assistance is given (particularly where a different syllabus is employed in the new school) should be undertaken.

- (c) If it does not already do so, the Access Service should consider how it could more effectively support Looked After Children (and their carers) in appealing against exclusions from school.
- (d) Consideration should be given to reviewing resources within the existing Access Service to ensure that the educational needs of Looked After Children below Year 5 are better promoted in relation to PEPs.
- (e) Cabinet should ask the Director of Children's and Young People's Services to develop a clear and consistent policy in relation to IT provision for Looked After Children, based on the principle that young people should have access to IT facilities (including the internet) both in Residential Children's Homes and in the homes of foster carers with whom they are placed. Whilst this may have resource implications, the Council needs to think innovatively about how such facilities might be provided (i.e. sponsorship). We understand this may currently be under consideration.
- (f) Cabinet should ask the Director of Children's and Young People's Services to explore the feasibility of providing quiet study areas in Children's Residential Homes to allow young people to undertake homework without interruptions.
- (g) An audit of Children's Homes should be undertaken to ensure that residential staff are fully conversant with and consistently apply the procedures for supporting Looked After Children in relation to Education (see Appendix 4). The Working Group's recommendations to the Corporate Parenting Panel about greater scrutiny of education issues when undertaking Regulation 33 visits should help to reinforce this proposal.
- (h) Given the historically poor performance of young people resident in Children's Homes, Children's and Young People's Services should review the existing procedures for educational support of young people who are in such establishments (Appendix 4), in the light of the Hampshire model (i.e. evening "quiet times"), to determine whether any further opportunities exist to improve the support currently provided.
- (i) Whilst the emphasis in supporting the education of Looked After Children should continue to be on the attainment of recognised academic qualifications, the importance of vocational skills should not be overlooked. Consideration should be given to broadening the opportunities for Looked After Children to receive advice about, and access to, vocational courses. This should happen from Year 7 onwards.
- (j) If suitable arrangements are not already in place, the Access Service should encourage Head Teachers to notify the Service if any Looked After Children are not entered for SATs or GCSE exams and the reasons why this has occurred.
- (k) The Access Service should consider how more innovative ways of

providing support to Looked After Children, such as e-learning and “virtual classrooms” can be developed. It is recognised, however, that this will be dependent upon the provision of suitable IT equipment in carers and residential homes.

- (l) The Children’s Service should consider how the attendance by Looked After Children at a minimum of at least one out-of-school-hours activity/event per week can be promoted.
- (m) Cabinet should ask the Director of Children’s and Young People’s Services to undertake a review of the existing procedures which are in place for consultation with Looked After Children (i.e. the Reference Group) to ensure that the young people in our care have a greater role in the planning, delivery and assessment of service provision.
- (n) Cabinet should consider how it can better incentivise Looked After Children both in relation to educational achievement, and/or in terms in non-exclusion from school. There should be greater rewards and recognition for achievements, including the provision of financial (or in-lieu) rewards for those who are successful in their studies, or are able to remain in school without exclusion. As with the provision of IT, it is suggested that there is scope for an innovative approach here and there may well be opportunities for sponsorship of awards.
- (o) Cabinet should recognise and support the role undertaken by Care in Durham, which provides a valuable service to young people in the Looked After System. Care in Durham should be encouraged to develop a Business Plan in connection with its activities to access any potential funding which may be available.
- (p) The Working Group fully endorses the expansion of the existing student mentoring provision for Looked After Children, which provides valuable social, as well as educational, support for young people in care in County Durham. It would however, also like to see consideration be given as to how care leavers can play a greater role in mentoring of young people who are currently looked after.
- (q) Members heard during the course of the project about staffing issues in the STEPS Therapeutic Service because of a review of services underway. The Working Group would draw the attention of Cabinet to the role of STEPs which was considered in a previous scrutiny report “Minding the Gap” when recommendations were made (and accepted by Cabinet) about the need to ensure that adequate resources were deployed to sustain capacity within STEPS to fully meet the needs of young people. The move towards more a more integrated service (with CAMHS) should be supported, *if it can be shown that this delivers better performance and outcomes for young people.*
- (r) Cabinet may wish to bear in mind that, whilst the Council has well developed in-house education support for Looked After Children in the form of the Access Service, there are independent sector providers in the marketplace who may be able to provide ad-hoc consultancy or additional services which either cannot be met in-house, or be provided within relevant timescales.

- (s) Where criminal damage is caused by Looked After Children in Homes, the restorative justice project findings should be used by staff to guide their approach to dealing with such incidents and staff should be reminded of the need to apply this Guidance.
- (t) Cabinet should ask the Director of Children's and Young People's Services consider how the Audit Commission toolkit for Educational Attainment of Looked After Children can be employed in County Durham, given that its use may be beneficial in any Joint Area Review/Comprehensive Performance Assessment of the Council.
- (u) As a major employer, the Council should consider as part of its recruitment processes (i.e. apprenticeships) whether greater assistance into employment can be given to Looked After Children in (or formerly in) its care via the Teenagers into Work Scheme.
- (v) Foster carers, residential homes staff and designated teachers should be encouraged to ensure that where homework is given to Looked After Children, carers and staff are aware of this and can provide appropriate support, if necessary.

Review

- 1.13 These recommendations should be reviewed six months after consideration by the Executive.