

16 July 2012**Agenda Item: 7**

REPORT OF THE SERVICE DIRECTOR, CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE

LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN STRATEGY

Purpose of the Report

1. To consider and comment on the proposed Looked After Children (LAC) Strategy, attached as **Appendix A**, which has been recommended to Policy Committee for approval on 18 July by the Children & Young People's Committee.

Information and Advice

2. It has been identified that our approach to Looked After Children would benefit from the development of an over-arching strategy which outlines the commitment of the Council and our partner agencies to supporting children in care. The strategy has been developed based on what young people have told us is important to them in The Pledge for Looked After Children, published in October 2010.
3. Nottinghamshire's commitments to Looked After Children, as set out in The Pledge, underpin our Looked After Children Strategy. The strategy has been developed with our key partners and was endorsed by the Children's Trust Executive in June 2012. This strategy identifies the Council's ambition for its Looked After Children and young people, ensuring that they receive placements that meet their needs, have access to high quality education and enjoy positive activities that support them to achieve their full potential. For those children who require permanent alternative families, it means ensuring that effective plans are made so that they achieve permanence as quickly as possible.
4. In common with other areas of the country, Children's Social Care services in Nottinghamshire continue to be under pressure from the increase in numbers of Looked After Children. In Nottinghamshire, there were 808 children and young people in public care at the time of writing this report. Independent audit shows that thresholds for entry to the care system are being applied appropriately and the numbers of Looked After Children are in line with those of Nottinghamshire's statistical neighbours. There is evidence, however, to suggest that some children spend longer in the care system than necessary. The challenge is therefore to ensure that those children who will remain in care have a loving, safe, stable and happy childhood whilst also having a clear focus on finding permanent alternative placements through adoption, special guardianship or within the extended birth family through kinship care.
5. The Council's performance in relation to adoption timescales has also improved recently. Our current performance can be seen on the scorecard issued by Government in May

2012. Recent developments aimed at improving our performance include the establishment of a Permanence Team. This team was established in August 2011 to work exclusively to progress adoption plans and (together with significant revision of adult and child adoption processes) already shows signs of improving the quality and timeliness of adoption planning. However, we cannot underestimate the challenge of providing permanent families for vulnerable children. This is especially true at a time when nationally there are more children in care than ever before.

6. The LAC Strategy action plan (**Appendix 1** to the LAC Strategy document) will in part be delivered by the LAC project within the Children's Social Care Transformation Programme. This project has a number of work streams which include piloting new panel arrangements for entry to care, reviewing the support in place for kinship care and care leavers, and the wider range of options for permanency available to children and young people in the care system.

Other Options Considered

7. It is considered that not developing a strategy which encapsulates our commitments to this particularly vulnerable group of children and young people places at risk the outcomes which can be achieved, particularly in gaining the commitment of our partners to support children and young people in care.

Reason/s for Recommendation/s

8. The Looked After Children Strategy has been developed to give a clear and consistent cross-agency approach to improving outcomes for Looked After Children in Nottinghamshire.

Statutory and Policy Implications

9. This report has been compiled after consideration of implications in respect of finance, equal opportunities, human resources, crime and disorder, human rights, the safeguarding of children, sustainability and the environment and those using the service and where such implications are material they are described below. Appropriate consultation has been undertaken and advice sought on these issues as required.

Implications for Service Users

10. Looked After Children will benefit from clear commitments from the County Council and partner agencies which support them, based on what young people in care have told us is important to them in The Pledge.

Equalities Implications

11. The Strategy commits Council and partner services to giving Looked After Children the same opportunities as any other group of children and young people.

Safeguarding of Children Implications

12. The Strategy strengthens the commitment of the Council and partners to effectively safeguarding this vulnerable group of children and young people.

RECOMMENDATION/S

- 1) That the Sub-Committee considers and offers any comments on the proposed Looked After Children Strategy.

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Constitutional Comments (LM 04/07/12)

13. The Corporate Parenting Sub-Committee has responsibility for overseeing the County Council's responsibilities as the corporate parent of children and young people in care. The Sub-Committee may consider and offer any comments on the proposed Looked After Children Strategy.

Financial Comments (NDR 03/07/12)

14. There are no financial implications arising directly from this report.

Background Papers

The Pledge for Looked After Children
DfE Adoption scorecard May 2012
Report to Corporate Leadership Team – CSC Transformation Programme May 2012

Except for previously published documents, which will be available elsewhere, the documents listed here will be available for inspection in accordance with Section 100D of the Local Government Act 1972.

Electoral Division(s) and Member(s) Affected

All.

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