

**REPORT OF THE SERVICE DIRECTOR, YOUTH, FAMILIES & CULTURE****LETTERBOX CLUB FOR LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN****Purpose of the Report**

1. To present a review of the Letterbox Club for Looked After Children, as operated in 2012 by the Library Service.

**Information and Advice****Context**

2. The Letterbox Club is a national literacy and numeracy scheme which is managed by the charity Booktrust in partnership with the University of Leicester. The project focuses on improving educational outcomes for Looked After Children (LAC) aged 7 to 13 years old as research has shown that children in care often underachieve in education compared with their peers. Children participating in the scheme are sent a parcel of exciting books, maths games and stationery to their home for six months between May and October.
3. Independent evaluation of the effectiveness of the Letterbox Club carried out by Queen's University, Belfast<sup>1</sup>, has shown that there is clear evidence that children who participate in the Letterbox Club make significant progress during that period in relation to their reading accuracy and comprehension, and their number skills.
4. The recent report, Education Matters in Care<sup>2</sup>, has highlighted the Letterbox Club as an example of good practice and recommends that 'more support should be given to providing key learning resources for foster homes e.g. Letterbox scheme'. Last year 122 local authorities in the UK subscribed to the Letterbox Club.
5. The Library Service's current 10 Year Strategy has committed to exploiting national reading initiatives to encourage reading for pleasure, as studies have shown that this can have a major impact on children and young people and their future. Reading for pleasure is positively linked with literacy related benefits such as reading attainment and writing ability, breadth of vocabulary, and self-confidence as a reader.
6. Parcels are sent in brightly coloured packages addressed directly to Looked After Children; they are differentiated according to age:

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<sup>1</sup> An Independent Evaluation of the Letterbox Club Northern Ireland. Centre for Effective Education, Queen's University, Belfast: Winter K, Connolly P, Bell I and Ferguson J

<sup>2</sup> Education Matters in Care, A report by the independent cross-party inquiry into the educational attainment of looked after children in England, July 2012

**Letterbox Blue** designed for children in Year 3 (aged 7-8), to follow them into Year 4

**Letterbox Red** designed for children in Year 5 (aged 9-10), to follow them into Year 6

**Letterbox Green** designed for children in Year 7 (aged 11-12), to follow them into Year 8

**Letterbox Yellow** for children aged 7-11 working below National Curriculum Level 1, with additional educational needs.

7. Each parcel is delivered to the child's home address and once on the scheme the child will continue to receive parcels even if their placement is changed or if they are no longer Looked After.

### **Nottinghamshire Letterbox Club**

8. In 2010 Nottinghamshire's Virtual School for Looked After Children and Library Service worked together to deliver the scheme to many of Nottinghamshire's Looked After Children. The Virtual School identified appropriate children to take part and provided funding for the parcels (£125 per child) and associated administration and delivery costs. The Library Service administered the scheme. The Letterbox Club has run again in 2011 and 2012.
9. Parcels include:
  - two books (usually one fiction and one non-fiction)
  - maths game (varies according to National Curriculum maths level)
  - stationery such as exercise book, felt pens etc.
  - personalised letter outlining contents of parcel
  - occasional letter from an author e.g. Jacqueline Wilson, Michael Rosen.
10. In addition to the standard Letterbox contents a personalised letter promoting the Library Service and occasional library incentives are also included to encourage children and their foster carers to use libraries. In 2012 all parcels also included a listing of Nottinghamshire County Council events for LAC provided by the Young People's Support Service.

### **Evaluation – views of participants and foster carers**

11. In 2012, 74 Nottinghamshire LAC children took part in the Letterbox Club; of these 21 children were living outside of the County.
12. After the final parcels were sent out in October 2012, an evaluation questionnaire was sent to foster carers to gain feedback from them and the children who participated; 23 forms were returned.
13. Children's views on the scheme, parcel contents and reading were sought.
14. The majority of children (18) reported that they liked the parcels 'a lot', three children said they liked them 'a little', three thought they were 'OK' and one child said they didn't like the books much.

15. Similar responses were given to the question about whether they enjoyed reading; 13 children said they liked reading 'a lot', six liked it a 'little', four thought reading was 'OK', one said they didn't like it much and another didn't like reading 'at all'.
16. When considering how much they had liked the maths games in the parcels. 14 children said they liked them a 'lot', four 'a little', five thought them 'OK' and two said they didn't like them 'much'.
17. Overall children who responded said they had enjoyed being in the Letterbox Club.

*"Everything was amazing. I really enjoyed having Letterbox, I hope I can have it again"*

*"I liked them so much that I would like loads more"*

*"It's my treat every month"*

18. The majority of foster carers felt that their foster child had benefited from receiving the parcels. They felt that the parcels had a positive impact on the child's willingness to read and the range of books read.

*"Gave them something to look forward to and encouraged them to read"*

*"He said he wasn't bothered about getting the books but as soon as they arrived he read them"*

*"[the parcels have]... broadened her range of authors and the non-fiction books have given her a valuable resource for homework"*

19. A few commented that the maths games were useful in developing numeracy skills.

*"We all played the games as a family, very informative and brushed up on maths"*

20. A couple of carers commented that the parcels were not at the right level for their child. As parcel contents could have been amended during the scheme, further work will be done in future to ensure an on-going dialogue between foster carers and the Library Service and a greater awareness about the delivery of the project.

21. Having the parcels delivered directly to children at home is a particularly valued feature of the Letterbox Club.

*"[Child] really looked forward to receiving the parcels and loved the books that were enclosed"*

*"he enjoys receiving his own post"*

*"made them feel really special"*

*"[Child] loved having the parcels and kept asking when the next one was coming"*

## **Evaluation – library use**

22. Throughout the course of the scheme, children were encouraged to use their local library. Nottinghamshire based children who did not have a library card at the start of the scheme were issued with one (26 children).
23. Of the 53 Nottinghamshire based children who participated, 16 (30%) used their library card to borrow at least once during the six month period of the scheme. Of these four children had not used their existing card (registered at their current address) for over six months and three had been issued with library cards at the start of the scheme.
24. Of those who responded to the questionnaire 21 of 23 children said they used or 'sometimes' used a library.
25. The Letterbox Club will run again in 2013 with a focus on increasing the percentage of participants visiting libraries to borrow books during the period of the scheme.

## **Evaluation – participants' educational progress**

26. Collating individual participants' educational progress whilst taking part in the Letterbox Club will be built into future schemes as the Virtual School is currently developing a data system to enable this information to be easily accessible.

## **Other Options Considered**

27. No other options were considered.

## **Reason/s for Recommendation/s**

28. National research demonstrates the positive effect of the Letterbox Club on participants' literacy and numeracy skills.
29. Participation in the scheme contributes to Nottinghamshire's Closing the Educational Gaps Strategy.

## **Statutory and Policy Implications**

30. This report has been compiled after consideration of implications in respect of finance, the public sector equality duty, 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.

## **Equalities Implications**

31. Due regard has been given to the Public Sector Equality Duty. As the Letterbox Club is a national scheme specifically aimed at Looked After Children there are no specific equality implications for protected groups.

## **RECOMMENDATION/S**

- 1) That the review of the Letterbox Club for Looked After Children in 2012 be noted.

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## **Constitutional Comments**

32. As this report is for noting only, no Constitutional Comments are required.

## **Financial Comments (KLA 14/05/12)**

33. There are no financial implications arising directly from the report.

## **Background Papers and Published Documents**

Background papers comprise reference documents as listed in the footnotes.

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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