

A Review of Residential Children's Homes

Executive Summary

October 2006

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Introduction

1. This Executive Summary describes the key aspects of the review of residential children's homes in Leeds, setting them in a broader context of national and Leeds specific placement and policy information. It reports on processes and outcomes of consultation and discussion, and concludes with a framework of improvement priorities which will drive the ongoing development of provision for looked after children in residential children's homes in Leeds.
2. The full report, including a detailed report on children's views, is available on the Leeds City Council website. Other detailed appendices are available on request to Elected Members and Council staff.
3. The initial scope for the review included the following four themes:
 - To achieve an overview of Leeds children's residential provision
 - To gather and collate input from Leeds children's residential provision
 - To deliver a report detailing recommendations for the future of residential provision for the next 5-10 years
 - To begin to consider implementation of the review recommendations.

National Context

4. The Every Child Matters agenda is driving change across children's services. Nationally achieving real placement choice is a difficulty. Improvements across residential care, including fostering, aim to improve placement choice and the tailoring of provision to meet children's needs and wants.

Leeds context

5. Leeds Social Services Department is currently in a process of organisational change, in response to the Children Act 2004, and the need to operate as an integral part of Leeds Children's Services. A commissioning framework is being put into place by the Directorate of Children's Services, which will require the Department to act as both a commissioner and provider of services. This will mean an increasingly business oriented approach to planning, delivering and monitoring outcomes from services for children. This presents a number of challenges as children's services budgets in Social Services were overspent in 05/06 and are predicted to overspend in 06/07. £7.6, was spent on Leeds residential children's homes in 05/06, out of a total children's social services budget of £56m.

6. When compared with other Local Authorities, Leeds has a relatively low percentage of children in residential provision, and a significantly lower unit cost of services for looked after children. Per placement costs are also significantly lower than in other Local Authority residential provision.
7. Priorities for improving placement choice are set out within the Department's Business Plan, which includes its transformation priorities. Part of this is to change the balance between residential home provision and foster care, increasing the number of foster carers, and reducing the number of beds in residential homes. The three key service improvement priorities that have relevance to children's homes are:
 - All looked after children should have personal education plans
 - More looked after children should participate in their care planning and reviews
 - Outcomes and integrated support should be improved.
8. In March 2006 there were 1252 looked after children who were the responsibility of Leeds City Council. 120 of these children were placed in residential homes. Leeds has 15 children's homes, and procures the services for four homes from NCH and Catholic Care.

Children's Homes – Key Issues

9. An analysis of inspection findings shows weaknesses in management, staffing levels, and suitability of some buildings and safety arrangements. Staff absence is higher than the Council target. Use of agency staff and over-time is significant, and creates budget management difficulties.
10. The Leeds Social Services Children's Plan (02-05) set out a number of approaches to improve residential care. Limited progress has been made on proposed action. A number of actions set out in the strategy are similar to the findings of this review, which will, it is intended, add a fresh impetus to the achievement of improvements.

Review Method

11. The review method has focused heavily on the need to engage children and young people and residential staff in the process and to offer regular opportunities for ongoing consultation on the emerging findings and recommendations of the review. It also recognised the need to have a strategic lead within the Department, its progress was overseen by a Project Board. Best Value principles, including comparisons with other authorities were applied throughout the review process.

Children's and Young People's Views

12. Leeds Children's Rights Service were commissioned to consult with children and young people in Leeds Children's Homes to gather their views regarding the children's homes. A detailed report has been produced and this is available on the Leeds City Council web-site.

13. The children's and young people's views reflect their own experiences and perceptions. There are some key themes:

- Homes vary in character and style
- There are differing standards in the different homes.
- 'Bullying' can be an issue, especially where children of widely differing ages are mixed.
- Children would like to be involved in the recruitment of staff
- There are not enough staff and agency staff are not always welcomed.
- A number of young people expressed a desire to have more space / quiet areas
- A common theme was that of pocket money – generally a wish for more
- A number of the children see their homes as an institution rather than a home

Staff Views

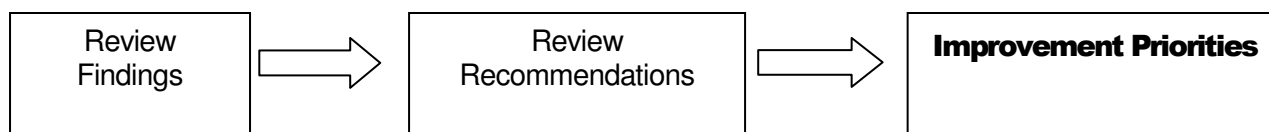
14. The consultation with staff took the form of one to one and small group interviews where participants were asked to comment on a range of subjects. Their views are reflected throughout the discussion on review findings in the full report. The most commonly rehearsed views relate to inadequate staffing, and the pressures this creates to deliver high quality and consistent care. Levels of commitment amongst staff were very high.

Review Findings

15. Findings are structured under the 5 headings of:

- General Service
- Accommodation
- Staffing
- Leaving Care provision
- Disability provision

16. The full findings are set out within the main report of the Residential Review. Many findings relate to other findings. Because of the number (33) and complexity of the findings, and the need to ensure a coherent approach to implementing improvement, they have been translated into recommendations and then grouped into improvement priorities, thus:



Improvement Priorities

17. There are 6 Improvement Priorities, each of which is supported by a range of activities which are drawn from the findings and recommendations. The 6 Improvement Priorities are:

1. Improve the strategic management of residential services, including foster care.
2. Improve operational / service management processes to ensure consistency and improve quality in residential services, including foster care.
3. Involve children and young people in implementing the outcomes of the review of residential services, to include contributing to monitoring and evaluation processes.
4. Achieve an infrastructure of residential homes where buildings are fit for purpose and located in appropriate locations.
5. Develop a highly skilled and flexible workforce, able to respond appropriately to the changing and unpredictable needs of children and young people
6. Ensure that the needs of disabled children and their families are fully included within overall service planning and service delivery.

18. The activity programmes supporting each Improvement Priority are in section 6 of the full residential review report.

Conclusions

19. The review has provided a wide-ranging exploration of many of the factors that both promote and inhibit the provision of high quality residential care. The challenge for the future is to achieve a forward looking focus, building on what works well, and minimising the effect and occurrence of what does not.
- 7.2 There are challenges for all in the service of providing care to our children. For all staff it is clear that effective communication and clarity of roles and responsibilities is paramount. The Improvement Plan is explicit in describing steps to improved performance. It will need to be owned and driven by senior staff, who will need to provide strong and inspirational leadership.
- 7.3 For service managers, providing regular coaching, support and leadership to service staff, with a strengthened focus on monitoring and accountability for both outcomes for children and performance targets for the service, is essential for organisational effectiveness.

