

Report of the Director of Children's Services

Report to Executive Board

Date: 7 March 2012

Subject: Looked After Children (LAC) Report

Are specific electoral Wards affected? If relevant, name(s) of Ward(s):	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Are there implications for equality and diversity and cohesion and integration?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No
Is the decision eligible for Call-In?	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
Does the report contain confidential or exempt information? If relevant, Access to Information Procedure Rule number: Appendix number:	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No

Summary of main issues

1. Looked After Children are a priority for the Council and partners. Reducing the number of looked after children in Leeds is being accepted as one of the three 'obsessions' by the Children's Trust Board, and the Children and Families Scrutiny Board has been undertaking a review of placements for children and young people who are taken into care in Leeds.
2. The report highlights that, although Leeds has not yet 'Turned the Curve' in relation to the number of looked after children, the strategy adopted by Children's Services and partners has already had an impact on both numbers and costs associated with looked after children. In Leeds the number of looked after children has stabilised and there are the same number of looked after children as four months ago (September 2011). However, the numbers of looked after children in both statistical neighbours and core cities have continued to increase significantly. If the number of looked after children in Leeds had increased at the same rate as that of our statistical neighbours, there would be 1550 looked after children in the city 31 March 2012. Providing placements for a further 98 children would have cost the Council 6 million pounds.
3. Stopping the sustained increase in the numbers of looked after children, safely and appropriately, is a significant achievement and an important precursor to 'Turning the Curve'. This report also sets out the strategy and key actions being taken by Children's Services and partners to reducing the number of looked after children.

Recommendations

1. Executive Board is asked to note the progress made by Children's Services in stabilising numbers of looked after children.
2. The Executive Board is asked to endorse the strategy and key actions being taken by Children's Services and partners to 'Turn the Curve' on the number of looked after children in Leeds.

1.0 Purpose of this report

- 1.1 Looked After Children are a priority for the Council and partners. Reducing the number of looked after children in Leeds is one of the three 'obsessions' by the Children's Trust Board, and the Children and Families Scrutiny Board has been undertaking a review of placements for children and young people who are taken into care in Leeds.
- 1.2 This report provides members with an update on the number of looked after children and informs members about key outcomes for children for whom they act as corporate parent. The report then sets out the key initiatives that are being taken forward to reduce the number of looked after children and ensure that those children looked after by the City of Leeds receive high quality care.

2.0 Background information

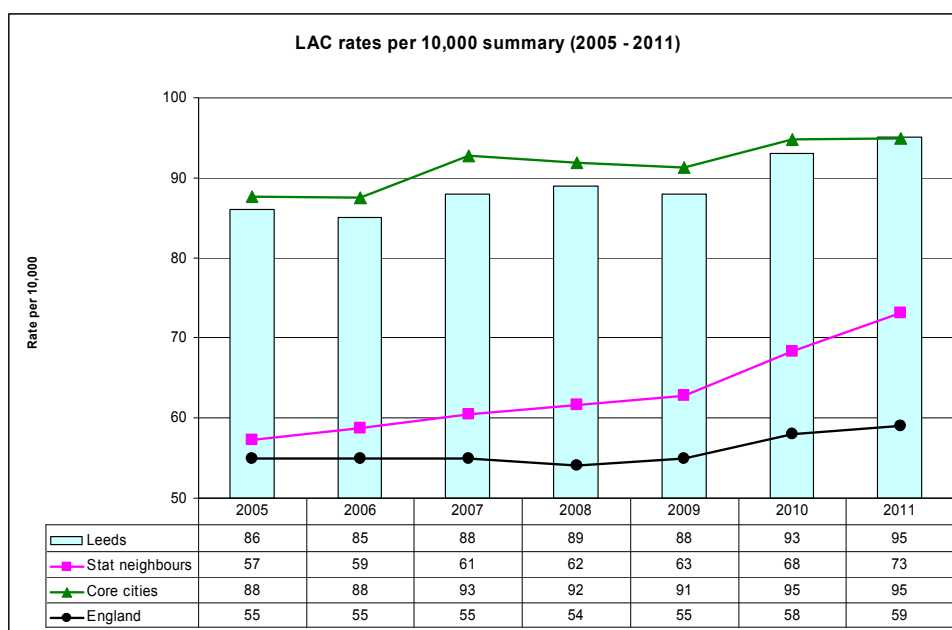
- 2.1 In March 2010 Children's Services in Leeds were made the subject of an Improvement Notice by the Under Secretary of State for Children and Families. This followed two inspections and an annual assessment by Ofsted, which highlighted the need for significant improvements across services for vulnerable children.
- 2.2 In relation to looked after children, Ofsted found a number of areas where particular improvement was required, these included:
 - Arrangements for prevention and early intervention, including the Common Assessment Framework were not sufficiently robust
 - Services were not targeted on children and young people at the point of crisis to prevent family breakdown.
 - Issues with the quality of care planning.
 - Issues with the timeliness of statutory reviews for looked after children.
- 2.3 It was in the context of these areas for improvement that Leeds experienced a significant increase in the numbers of looked after children in the city from 1370 in November 2009 to 1434 in November 2010.
- 2.4 Efforts to address these issues have been a key element of the Improvement Plan and the monitoring work of the Improvement Board that the Scrutiny Board is familiar with. Whilst there is still significant work to be done, the progress made to date is reflected in the recent lifting of the Improvement Notice.
- 2.5 More generally, there is a significant body of research highlighting that looked after children have poorer outcomes than other children and young people in the community and that reducing the numbers of looked after children and improving their outcomes requires a coordinated effort from agencies working with children, young people and families.
- 2.6 Building on the vision of making Leeds the best city in Britain and using the framework of the Child Friendly City, the Council has mobilised the city and community behind children and young people. Members agreed to increase funding for Children's Services and improving the quality of service and outcomes for vulnerable children, young people and their families has been the focus of the Council and its partners working together through the Children's Trust and the Local Safeguarding Children's Board.
- 2.7 Reducing the number of children and young people becoming looked after was adopted as one of the three 'obsessions' identified within the latest Children and Young People's Plan.

3.0 Main issues

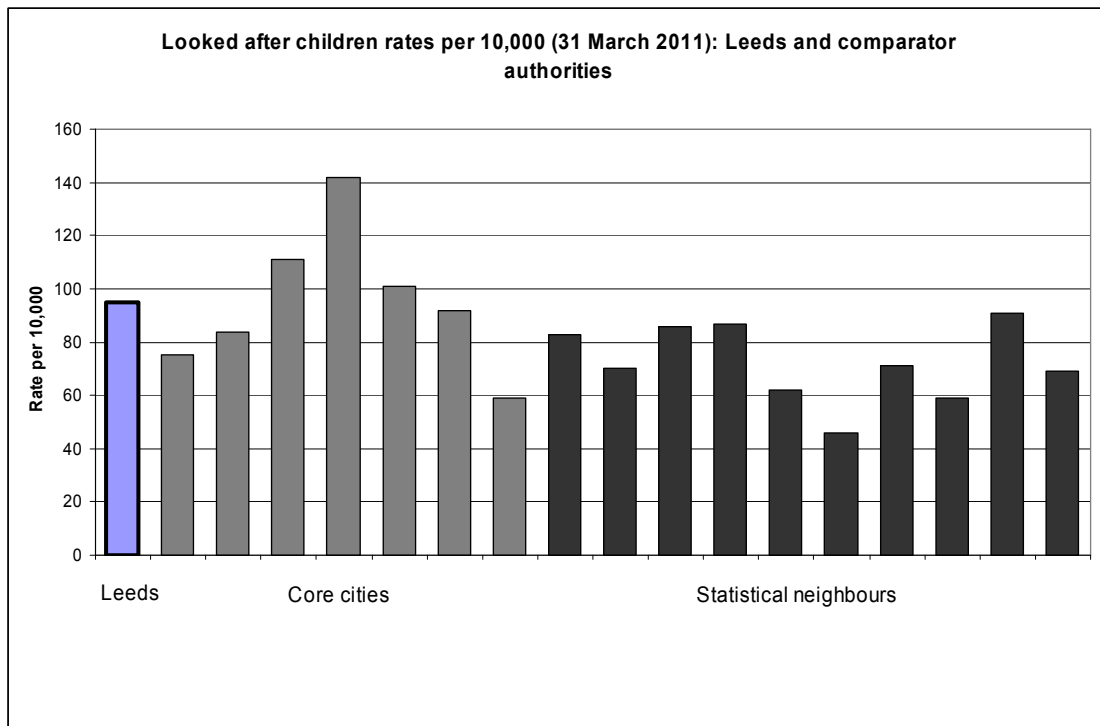
3.1 Number of children in care

- 3.1.1 The number of looked after children in Leeds has been steadily increasing since 2005, with the most significant rise coming between 2009 and 2010. Graphs 1 and 2 provide a comparative statistical analysis of the numbers of looked after children in Leeds (the rate of looked after children per 10,000 children in the general population) against both statistical neighbours and core cities, which have similar demographic characteristics.
- 3.1.2 Graph 1 illustrates that, as a result of the work undertaken to strengthen practice, the number of looked after children in Leeds has not seen a significant increase over the past year. In November 2010 there were 1434 looked after children and in November 2011 1445. On the 14th of February 2012 there were 1452 looked after children in Leeds.
- 3.1.3 However, the graph also highlights that, although Leeds has not yet 'Turned the Curve' in relation to the number of looked after children, the strategy adopted by Children's Services and partners has already had an impact on both numbers and costs associated with looked after children. In Leeds the number of looked after children has stabilised and there are the same number of looked after children as four months ago (September 2011). However, the numbers of looked after children in both statistical neighbours and core cities have continued to increase significantly. If the number of looked after children in Leeds had increased at the same rate as that of our statistical neighbours by the 31 March 2012 there would be 1550 looked after children in the city. Providing placements for a further 98 children would have cost the Council 6 million pounds.
- 3.1.4 Stopping the sustained increase in the numbers of looked after children, safely and appropriately, is a significant achievement and an important precursor to 'Turning the Curve'. The second part of this report (paragraph 3.5 onwards) sets out the strategy and key actions being taken by Children's Services and partners to reduce the number of looked after children in Leeds.

Graph 1: Looked after children rates per 10,000 summary (2005 - 2011)



Graph 2: Leeds & comparator authorities' rates of looked after children March 2011



- 3.1.5 Table 1 provides an analysis of the numbers of looked after children by age group at January 2011 and again in November. This indicates an increase in the number and proportion of looked after children under 4 years and a decrease in those aged between 11 and 15. This may indicate that initiatives to strengthen assessment and care planning to support early intervention may be having an impact. However, Table 1 also highlights the importance of increasing the recruitment of more foster carers.
- 3.1.6 Table 2 provides an analysis of looked after children by ethnicity. There is an over-representation of children and young people from a dual heritage and a Black British background when compared with the child population as a whole and an under-representation of children from an Asian background.

Table 1: Numbers of looked after children by age group at Jan and Nov 2011

Age Group	0-4	5-10	11-15	16-17
Jan 2011	344 (24%)	359 (25%)	459 (32%)	272 (19%)
Nov 2011	429 (30%)	371 (26%)	396 (28%)	211 (18%)

Table 2: Looked after children by ethnicity

Ethnicity	White UK	Black / Black British	Asian / Asian British	Dual Heritage	Other
	79%	3%	3%	12%	3%

3.2 Children's placements

- 3.2.1 Providing good outcomes for looked after children is underpinned by matching the child or young person with a placement that is appropriate to their needs. Table 3 provides an analysis of looked after children. It shows that 27% of looked after children are being

supported to live within their birth family or extended family (Placed with Parents or Family Network). Just over half of looked after children in Leeds (54.4%) are placed with foster carers with a further eight percent being placed with prospective adoptive parents. This is consistent with the make up of the looked after children population (Table 1), which indicates that 56% of looked after children are under 10 years of age.

Table 3: Looked after children by placement

Foster Care	Family Network Placement	Placement with Parents	Residential Care	Children awaiting adoption
54.5%	15.5%	11.5%	10.5%	8%

3.2.2 The number of children in Leeds placed in Independent Fostering Agency placements has increased significantly in response to the rapid increase in the numbers of looked after children. Previously Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) placements were used where children and young people had needs that could not be met by an in-house foster placement; for example complex needs or a large sibling group. However, Independent Fostering Agency placements are now also being used due to the lack of availability of in-house foster placements. Improving the recruitment of foster carers is a significant target for Children’s Services.

3.2.3 There is a similar pattern in the use of residential placements and a review of residential provision is currently underway. Although the use of Independent Fostering Agency and external residential placements has continued to grow during this financial year, there are indications that placement numbers in the third quarter have remained more stable (276 IFAs and 101 external residential placements at 18/12/11).

3.3 Placement stability

3.3.1 The stability of a placement is a useful indicator of whether children and young people are being matched with carers that can meet their needs. Table 4 shows the placement stability figures against core cities and statistical neighbours. It indicates that the number of children and young people experiencing three or more placements has increased. This may indicate difficulties in initial matching and is the focus of work to improve recruitment and care planning in the coming year. However, children and young people placed in long term placements have remained relatively stable.

Table 4: Looked after children: Placement stability

Placement Stability			2009-10	Core City	Stat Neighbour	2010-11
NI 62	Stability of placements of CLA	Percentage of children looked after with 3 or more placements during the year	11.0%	11.3	10.6	13.3%
NI 63	Stability of CLA	Percentage of children looked after for at least 2.5 years who had been in their placement for at least 2 years	68.4%	68.6	66.5	67.6%

3.4 Outcomes for looked after children

Safe from harm

3.4.1 A number of things are essential if children and young people who cannot be looked after by their families are to be safe from harm:

- They must be provided with good quality placements;
- Their case should be overseen by a qualified social worker who is well managed and supported;
- They must be visited, seen and spoken to regularly by their social worker;
- The plan for their care and its implementation should be reviewed regularly.

3.4.2 These factors are scrutinised by Ofsted as part of their inspection of safeguarding arrangements. The January 2010 Ofsted inspection judged that arrangements to safeguard looked after children had improved and were now 'adequate'. The most recent inspections of fostering and adoption (in June and December 2010) rated the services ability to keep children safe from harm and neglect as 'good'.

3.4.3 Children's homes are also inspected regularly by Ofsted. Currently, five of the local authority's children's homes in Leeds are rated as 'good', five as 'satisfactory' and one is rated as inadequate. Where they are needed, clear action plans are in place to ensure that necessary improvements are being made to achieve consistently high standards across all Leeds children's homes.

Case file audits

3.4.4 In November 2010, to ensure that looked after children were receiving a good quality social work service and in the context of the wider improvement work taking place, a large scale audit of 1095 looked after children and child protection case files was undertaken. The audit looked at the quality of practice against clear practice standards agreed with practitioners. The findings of the audit were used to determine development needs as well as areas of good practice across the service to help raise standards and increase consistency.

3.4.5 A case file audit framework has been developed and implemented, with managers required to undertake a certain number of audits each month dependent upon their role. The sample of cases for audit is undertaken centrally by the Performance Team to ensure random selection. Cross team audits are used and in addition to individual areas for action and good practice being identified aggregated information is collected to inform service development and improvement.

Looked after children's reviews

3.4.6 Care plans for looked after children are subject to independent scrutiny by an Independent Reviewing Officer. To improve the timeliness and quality of reviews, the Independent Reviewing Officer Service has been strengthened as part of the development of the Independent Safeguarding Unit. As a result, the percentage of looked after children's reviews carried out within required timescales has improved from 71% in 2009/10 to the current figure of 91%. This performance is similar to statistical neighbours though it is our ambition that performance in Leeds will continue to improve.

Child sexual exploitation

- 3.4.7 Some looked after children and young people are particularly vulnerable to exploitation. Children's Services and the Local Safeguarding Children Board have been working together to ensure that there are appropriate arrangements in place to safeguard these young people.
- 3.4.8 New arrangements to support agencies to work together more effectively where there are concerns that a young person may be at risk of exploitation have been developed and the new procedures will be formally launched at a multi-agency event on the 3rd of February 2012.
- 3.4.9 A specialist Child Sexual Exploitation practitioner was recruited in 2011. Based in the Integrated Safeguarding Unit this practitioner is responsible for coordinating operational and strategic matters in relation to Child Sexual Exploitation. This has led to more a coordinated response operationally and a large scale event to highlight this issue is planned for February 2012.
- 3.4.10 The Local Safeguarding Children Board provides training on this issue and are working closely with all partners to address the issue.

Children lead healthy lives

- 3.4.11 The timeliness of completion of initial Health Needs Assessments has been of concern, with a backlog of appointments and significant number of missed appointments. A review of the service by the designated doctor has resulted in improved systems, local clinics and patient/carer centred booking, which has resulted in improved timeliness. This will continue to be monitored and further improvements have been proposed, to ensure all children are accompanied by their parent and social worker as well as their carer wherever possible.
- 3.4.12 The proportion of our looked after children having up to date health needs assessments shows a year on year improvement. In 2006/7 72% of looked after children had a health needs assessment, in 2010/11, we achieved 92%. The statistical neighbour average was 82%.
- 3.4.13 The proportion of children with up to date dental checks also shows a similar year on year improvement from 78% in 2006/7 to 87% in 2010/11 against a statistical neighbour average of 75%.
- 3.4.14 The proportion of looked after children and care leavers with up to date immunisations is reported annually and has also increased from 57% in 2007-2008 to 76% in 2008-2009, 84% in 2009-2010 and 90% in 2010/11. The statistical neighbour average was 74% in the same year.

Children and young people do well in learning and have skills for life

- 3.4.15 Contextual Value Added provides a way to compare groups of children and young people with different previous educational experience. Though the government has decided not to support it in future, it still provides a helpful estimate of progress that allows one year group to be compared with another group, even though the groups might have differing 'academic' potential.
- 3.4.16 The estimated Contextual Value Added between Key Stages 1 and 2 has consistently fallen between 99 and 101 over recent years. A score of 100 is usually accepted as evidence

that a cohort of children is achieving in line with expectations and so, though the academic potential of Year 6 groups has varied over recent years they continue to achieve broadly in line with expectations. The estimated Contextual Value Added between key stages 2 and 4 has, in contrast improved steadily from 960 in 2008 to 993 in 2011. Whilst still short of the 1000 that would suggest that the cohort was achieving as expected, this does show a positive trend of improvement.

- 3.4.17 By the end of key stage 2 the percentage of looked after children who had achieved level 4 or above in the core subjects has risen significantly since 2008 to 54% and 40% in English and Maths respectively. Though this remains lower than for all children the gap in attainment narrowed from 40% in 2010 to 26% in 2011, in English, and from 44% to 38% in Maths.
- 3.4.18 The percentage of looked after children who achieved 1+A*-G at GCSE by the end of Key Stage 4 rose from 64% in 2008 to 84% in 2011 and those achieving 5A*-G from 44% to 59% over the same period. Those achieving 5A*-C increased from 9% in 2008 to 33% in 2011 and those achieving 5A*-C, including English and Maths, rose from 6% to 9% over the same period. The %A*-C including English & Maths fell back in 2011 from 14% in 2010, which may reflect a reduction in national funding used for one to one tuition, which has previously focused on English and Maths.
- 3.4.19 Attendance by looked after children in primary school (96.4%) has gone up slightly since 2008 (96.1) and remains 1.6% higher than that of all children (94.8%). Persistent Absence among looked after children in primary school has declined further in 2011 (to 0.8% at the 20% absence threshold) and is lower than among all children (1.4%). At the 15% threshold of absence, persistent absence among primary school looked after children is 2.0% compared to 4.3% among all primary school children.
- 3.4.20 Attendance by looked after children in secondary school (90.2%) remains lower than that of all children (92.4%) but has improved by 1.8% since 2008. While Persistent Absence (at the 20% threshold) remains higher among looked after children than all children in Leeds (12.7% compared to 6.3%) it is significantly lower than it was in 2008 (18%).
- 3.4.21 Only 2 looked after children were permanently excluded from Leeds schools in 2010-2011. Data on fixed term exclusion must be treated with caution as academies are not required to submit fixed term exclusion data to the authority and some do not. However, based on available data, the total number of days that looked after children lost to exclusion continued to fall, from 828 in 2008-09 to 412 in 2010-11 while the number of children excluded and the number of exclusions they suffered also continued to fall. Exclusions among looked after children continue, however, to be significantly higher than among all children.

Children and young people are active citizens who feel they have voice and influence

- 3.4.22 It can be difficult for looked after children, because of their needs and circumstances, to participate in decision making and to influence the provision and development of services. It is essential therefore that they are supported to have voice and influence. All looked after children and care leavers have good access to independent, proactive, advocacy services through the independent Children's Rights Service commissioned from Barnardos.
- 3.4.23 Looked after children and care leavers were involved with every senior appointment in Children and Young People's Social Care as well as the appointment of the Director of Children's Services. They have also contributed to the development of services through:

- The 'Leeds Promise' to looked after children was sent together with a questionnaire to all looked after Children aged 8 and over and their comments are being used to improve services;
- The Children's Rights service has worked in partnership with younger looked after children and staff in one of the children's homes to produce a range of stories to illustrate our promise to looked after children and assist them to understand the changes in their lives. It is intended that these powerful stories will be published;
- The Elected Member, Corporate Carer group's forward plan includes 6 monthly joint meetings with the Children in Care Council.

3.4.24 The 'Have a Voice group', (Children in Care Council) is working closely with the Looked After Children Partnership group and Elected Members to review the Looked After Children's Strategy and inform service development. The strategy will be used as a catalyst to further improve engagement and influence of looked after children.

Children and young people have fun growing up

3.4.25 Many looked after children and young people will have had limited opportunity to participate in the type of fun activities that most children and young people take for granted.

3.4.26 Since mid-May 2010 the 'Creative Start Project' has delivered a range of arts provision to 6 children's homes across Leeds – all aimed at developing a long term and sustainable interest in the arts among the young people. Creative Start has also funded visits to a variety of locations including the Yorkshire Sculpture Park and The Deep in Hull, and has brought in artist Tim Curtis to support staff and work with two small groups of autistic young people at Acorn Lodge to create artwork inspired by their days out

3.4.27 The Leeds 'Find Your Talent' pilot linked looked after children with libraries, arts and heritage activities.

3.4.28 The youth service has worked closely with our children's homes. All homes have a designated link within the service who works in partnership with the homes activity coordinator to ensure that looked after young people have access to universal and targeted youth services. This has resulted in improved take up of youth service activities.

3.4.29 The Looked After Children's Strategy review has commenced with a thematic review of 'Have fun Growing up'. The partner group and our children's group agreed that we should prioritise ensuring that all children have positive self esteem, build on placement stability, good relationships with carers and key adults and good friendships but both also made positive recommendations about improving access to a range of activities. These will be developed into an action plan and form part of the Looked After Children's Strategy.

3.5 Strategy for 2012-13

3.5.1 There are four key elements to an effective strategy to safely reduce the number of looked after children:

- Effective and coordinated preventative and early intervention services;
- Targeted services to support families at the point of crisis;
- Placement Choice;
- Care Planning

This section provides members with a summary of the actions being undertaken in 2012/2013.

Prevention and Early Intervention work

Early Start

- 3.5.2 Early Start Teams are being established in Children's Centres. The findings of the universal review in relation to Early Start Teams have now been implemented in one cluster, Seacroft/Manston, where the Early Start Team is in place. Early Start Teams will be up and running across the city by September 2012.
- 3.5.3 Early Start Teams will identify and work with families and place children for the free 2 year old child care places in Children's Centres, specifically targeting those likely to become looked after.

Common Assessment Framework

- 3.5.4 The Common Assessment Framework is designed to support agencies to identify the needs of vulnerable children and to ensure that appropriate support is provided at the earliest opportunity. Where a practitioner identifies that a child is vulnerable they should complete a common assessment. The common assessment will help the practitioner to understand the child's needs and engage the support of other agencies. It is expected that the number of children needing universal or targeted services, therefore eligible for a common assessment, should exceed those needing a specialist assessment from social care. However, in the 2010/11 financial year, 1131 common assessments were initiated. Between 01 April 2011 and 30 November 2011 570 common assessments were initiated. If this rate of completion continues it is anticipated that 855 common assessments will be completed in 2011-12, a drop of approximately 24%.
- 3.5.5 There is therefore a need to significantly increase quantity and quality of common assessments undertaken in order to identify and meet needs at an early stage. A full multi-agency review of the common assessment is underway. It has identified the need to simplify existing processes. Support and advice is being provided by Professor Harriet Ward from the Centre for Child and Family Research and Mark Peel from Leicester University who have worked with a number of authorities on the successful implementation of the common assessment. Consultation on proposed changes is taking place now and it is anticipated that the new arrangements will be launched in April 2012.

Multi-agency working through locality and cluster working

- 3.5.6 Cluster arrangements provide a multi-agency framework to support vulnerable children in their local communities.
- 3.5.7 All clusters in the city now have in place a structure that includes a multi-agency group working together to provide more support to vulnerable children, young people and families. These groups meet regularly to receive 'Requests For Support' from those universal settings (schools and children's centres) where it is considered a vulnerable child or young person needs additional support. The multi-agency group shares information, where appropriate, and discusses the individual child or young person to identify what support they require and how this is best provided. A lead person is nominated to lead on the support to ensure that it is coordinated and to monitor what difference it is making to the child. Where appropriate the group will refer back to the universal setting as best placed to

progress a recommended action, for example undertaking a common assessment. Where the Targeted Service Leader is in post, they chair the meetings.

3.5.8 All of the cluster multi-agency groups are at different stages of development, some beginning to work effectively, and some still evolving. However, where arrangements are established there are some excellent examples of how the sharing of information has led to positive outcomes for the children, young people and their families. Efficiencies are being made in the use of resources by coordinating support by agencies and reducing duplication. As a result of the information collected in clusters the delivery of evidenced-based parenting programmes is becoming more needs driven.

3.5.9 Development of the cluster practice and infrastructure is on-going, this involves partnership support including the Leeds Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB). The significance and challenge of this work is considerable and while progress is being made the scale and support needed should not be underestimated.

- All of the three early adopter clusters have held Outcomes Based Accountability workshops focussing on the obsession “reducing the need for children to be in care”;
- The targeted services leader role, which is being piloted in 3 clusters, J.E.S.S, Inner East and Bramley is beginning to show some success. All three pilot clusters now have in place a list of their most vulnerable families. Using the Top 100 methodology they have managed to identify those families that need a coordinated support package in place, and have identified the most appropriate lead agency;
- Children Leeds leadership team have identified a further resource that will now provide for up to 18 Targeted Services Leaders posts across the city and build on the learning of the pilot clusters;
- A skills audit has been undertaken of all cluster family support staff and the Leeds Safeguarding Children Board have produced a list of training courses with recommendations to the clusters on who should attend;
- To support practitioners principles of effective supervision are currently being developed, for ratification by the Leeds Safeguarding Children Board for implementation in schools and clusters.
- Ongoing areas for development include cluster case-management and effective and appropriate information sharing.

3.6 Responding to requests for service and referrals

Re-referral rates

3.6.1 Initial contacts with Children’s Services in Leeds are known as ‘requests for service’. A decision about the information contained in a requests for service is made by a social work manager to determine whether a referral to a social work team is needed. A referral will be dealt with within one working day. The outcomes of a referral may be that the case is closed after the provision of information, advice and guidance or an initial assessment to gather more information. The case may be closed following the initial assessment if there is no need for support from a social worker. If a child requires social work support to safeguard or promote their welfare a service will be provided. This may be on a short term or long term basis. In some cases this will include protective services and care or accommodation.

3.6.2 If after a case is closed it is referred to Children’s Services again within twelve months this is classified as a re-referral. The rate of re-referrals can, therefore, provide a useful

indication of how effectively the child or family's needs were met. Table 5 shows that there has been a significant increase in the number of referrals and the rate of re-referrals since 2008. Managing high rates of referrals impacts on the ability of Children's Services to direct support to those children in Leeds who are most vulnerable and the Leeds Safeguarding Children Board commissioned research from Professor David Thorpe in order to understand the reasons for the increase, the implications for children and families in Leeds and whether there way of managing referrals and requests for services could be improved.

Table 5: Rates of Referral and Re-referral to Children's Services

	2008-09	2009-10	2010-11	Nov 2010 to Nov 2011
Number of referrals in financial year	8,667	9,909	12,945	14,139
Number of re-referrals within 12 months of initial referrals	1,821	2,790	4,154	5,025
Re-referral rate	21.0%	28.2%	32.1%	35.5%

3.7 Analysis of referral taking in Leeds

- 3.7.1 Professor David Thorpe had previously been commissioned by authorities in the region to review referrals being made to Children's Services across the region and how these were managed. This study looked at 300 referrals accepted by each local authority Children's Social Care Service in 2008. The referrals were studied in terms of decision making and response at the point of referral but also followed through for one year where social care remained involved for this period of time.
- 3.7.2 The Safeguarding Children Board commissioned Professor Thorpe to repeat this study in relation to referrals from June 2010, which were tracked through to June 2011, as a children's screening team had been Introduced of at the Contact Centre during this time.
- 3.7.3 Professor Thorpe has now completed his analysis and a report is to be shared imminently. Initial findings indicate that a significant number of referrals to Children's Services do not require a social worker and that the best source of support is from universal and other support services. Professor Thorpe has identified that although families are directed to these services there is no mechanism in place to identify whether families take up the support and, where they do, if it has the desired impact. As a result the rate of re-referrals has increased. Professor Thorpe's research has also identified that many categorised as child protection, resulting in an investigative approach, are actually 'welfare concerns' which could have been dealt with as children in need which would be more successful in engaging families.
- 3.7.4 Professor Thorpe has recommended a number improvements that can be made to the way in which Children's Services manage requests for service and referrals which will improve outcomes for children and families and the service provided to partners. Over the next three months Children's Services will be working with key partners and Professor to implement these changes. The new arrangements will ensure that vulnerable children and young people receive the support they need promptly, in a coordinated manner and in the most appropriate way.

3.8 Family Group Conferencing

- 3.8.1 Family Group Conferencing is internationally recognised as an evidence based method of working with families. It is an approach that is consistent with the commitment in Leeds to work *with* families in a restorative way that keeps them engaged and involved in arriving at the best solution to the problems they are facing and delivers a good outcome for their child. Family Group Conferencing brings families together and supports them to find solutions to their difficulties. The existing Family Group Conference service is to be expanded from one to three teams to enable the service to work across the city. It is intended that Family Group Conferencing will be used with families at points of crisis to ensure that families experiencing difficulties are enabled to find solutions within their own family and community network, with support and monitoring from agencies to ensure that children remain safe at all times. This approach will identify strengths in families and solutions that are sustainable without the need for extensive agency involvement.
- 3.8.2 Leeds will be undertaking this expansion in partnership with the Family Rights Group, a nationally recognised expert agency in this field. The expansion will take place from March 2011 onwards.

3.9 Improving services to children at the point of crisis

- 3.9.1 In those circumstances where the more effective and coordinated early intervention services have not been able to meet the needs of children and they reach crises point, specific edge of care services will be available to intervene appropriately.
- 3.9.2 Multi-Systemic Therapy has proved to be very effective in Leeds during it's pilot period, however the service has consisted of one team across the city. The team works with 11 – 16 year old young people at risk of care or custody. It has also proved effective, in a small number of cases, in returning children from external placements back to Leeds own placements and to children's families.
- 3.9.3 This service is to be expanded to three teams working across the city targeting children on the edge of care or custody. They will also be involved with a number of young people who have already become looked after but where there is a prospect of a return home. A number of these young people may have been in care for sometime, however, as this work progresses the service will focus on returning children and young people who have just become looked after.
- 3.9.4 Research suggests that children who become looked after and remain in care for longer than six to eight weeks are much more likely to remain in care for over two years. This window of opportunity therefore is very important in returning young people home and improving their outcomes. As well as MST a crisis support team is to be developed to ensure that families receive support at this critical time to ensure children do not enter care unnecessarily.

3.10 Effective care planning

- 3.10.1 There has been a very significant restructure of Children's Services in Leeds bringing together the former Education Leeds and Local Authority services as the basis of a much wider plan of integration of services to children and their families. The integration of Children's Services along with more effective early intervention and edge of care services outlined above is aimed at reducing the need for more intensive services from agencies.

- 3.10.2 The social work teams are to be realigned geographically to relate to clusters in order that each team relates to a small number of local schools, health visiting teams and other local agencies. These relationships will form the basis of more effective safeguarding and preventative work where the local social work manager will provide support, guidance and reassurance to professionals to help them to meet the needs of children earlier and to avoid the need to refer for more specialist support. This will enable agencies to target this support on those children who are the most vulnerable.
- 3.10.3 Specialist Looked After Children's Teams are also being established to ensure that looked after children benefit from dedicated, high quality support. This will ensure that care plans for looked after children are driven forward to avoid 'drift'. Care plans will be monitored and quality assured by independent reviewing officers to ensure that they meet the needs of the child and support them to achieve permanence. All young people looked after will have a permanence plan which means that agencies are working together actively towards a positive exit from care for all looked after children. These exits will include return to their family, special guardianship and adoption. Children may need one or more placements to prepare for permanence but it is essential that each looked after child has a clear plan to achieve emotional and legal security through permanence.

3.11 Placement choice

- 3.11.1 Placement choice is important in achieving good outcomes for looked after children as it ensures that children are matched with carers that can meet their needs. Work is underway to improve the choice of placements. The fostering and adoption team has been strengthened and a recruitment drive is underway to increasing the range and number of in-house foster carers and prospective adopters. A review of residential provision aimed at ensuring that in-house residential provision is appropriate to the needs of children in Leeds and reduce the use of expensive external placements that take children away from their community. We will also be looking to increase the use of special guardianship orders to help children to remain within their extended families.
- 3.11.2 Placement choice will also be increased as we reduce the number of children that need to become looked after through more effective preventative and early intervention services. The expansion of in-house provision coupled with a reduction in demand for placements is a very high priority in the Council and will see more effective and efficient use of resources to meet children's needs and to maintain children in their community and in Leeds.

4.0 Corporate considerations

4.1 Consultation and engagement

- 4.1.1 None specifically for this item.

4.2 Equality and diversity / cohesion and integration

- 4.2.1 The ethnicity of looked after children is highlighted in the main body of the report and shows a variance with the population of children in Leeds. This issue is subject to analysis as part of the service redesign of Children's Social Care. National research highlights this as a concern, but concludes that there is little evidence to support the view that social workers or other welfare professionals operate a different threshold for groups from ethnic minority families when offering services or removing children from their parent's care.
- 4.2.2 The disparities in Leeds are less significant than other places in the UK however, further work is to be undertaken to understand the issues in Leeds.

4.3 Council policies and City priorities

- 4.3.1 The work with looked after children is a very significant priority and reducing the need for children to be looked after is central to the ambitions for Leeds to become a child friendly city.
- 4.3.2 It is also one of three obsessions in Children's Services and will require the support of the whole Council and its partners and the city as a whole.

4.4 Resources and value for money

- 4.4.1 The work outlined in this report and the Looked After Children Plan is based on reducing the need for children to become looked after. This will require more effective early intervention, a greater focus on children on the edge of care and more effective care planning to achieve permanence where children are looked after. All these features will mean that outcomes for children are much improved. Over a period of time the reduction in the number of looked after children will also lead to financial savings for the Council.

4.5 Legal implications, access to information and call in

- 4.5.1 This report is subject to Call In.

4.6 Risk management

- 4.6.1 None specifically for this item.

5.0 Conclusions

- 5.1 There has been considerable commitment from members and partners to improving outcomes for vulnerable children. This has resulted in the number of looked after children stabilising in the past year and significant improvements in outcomes for looked after children.
- 5.2 The number of looked after children in Leeds remains too high and reducing the need for children to become looked after and supporting looked after children to achieve permanence is a priority for the Council and its partners. There is a clear strategy in place to achieve this and progress will be reported back to the Executive Board and Scrutiny on a regular basis.

6.0 Recommendations

- 6.1 Executive Board is asked to note the progress made by Children's Services in stabilising numbers of looked after children.
- 6.2 The Executive Board is asked to endorse the strategy and key actions being taken by Children's Services and partners to 'Turn the Curve' on the number of looked after children in Leeds.

7.0 Background documents¹

- 7.1 The Looked after children obsession action plan is available on request.
- 7.2 Scrutiny Inquiry Final Report on External Placements.

¹ The background documents listed in this section are available for inspection on request for a period of four years following the date of the relevant meeting. Accordingly this list does not include documents containing exempt or confidential information, or any published works. Requests to inspect any background documents should be submitted to the report author.