

Report of the Director of Children's Services

Report to Executive Board

Date: 13th March 2013

Subject: Update on Children's Services' Obsessions – Reducing the need for children to be looked after (Help children to live in safe and supportive families)

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?	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> No

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.0 This is an update report to Executive Board on the Children's Trust obsession to safely and appropriately reduce the need for children and young people to be in care. As well as being one of our 'obsessions', it is also part of the Council's Top 25 priorities. It is a key area of interest for elected members given their role as corporate parents.
- 2.0 Over the past 12 months a relentless focus has been placed on addressing this priority and significant progress has been made. The number of looked after children in Leeds reduced by 90 between the end of March 2012 and the end of January 2013. This is an important achievement for the children and young people and for the service.
- 3.0 Focus is continuing on improving the experience of and outcomes for Leeds looked after children, building on the progress of work in recent years. For example, a clear 'nine point plan' for children's social care services has been developed, investment is being made in attracting, retaining and supporting foster carers and there is important work taking place across the city to improve preventative services and develop more restorative approaches to helping families.
- 4.0 There is still much more work to be done to achieve our ambitions for looked after children and young people in Leeds. This report demonstrates both the progress made and the opportunities to improve further.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Executive Board is asked to endorse the approach outlined in this report and note the progress made to safely and appropriately reduce the number of looked after children in Leeds.

1.0 Purpose of this report

- 1.1 This is an update report to Executive Board on the Children's Trust obsession to safely and appropriately reduce the need for children and young people to be in care.
- 1.2 The report provides an update and analysis on the number of children looked after by Leeds City Council and progress on actions taken by Children's Services, with the support of key partners, to safely and appropriately reduce the number of looked after children.

2.0 Background information

- 2.1 The number of looked after children in Leeds has been steadily increasing since 2005, with the most significant rise coming between 2009 and 2010. Between November 2009 and November 2010 the number of looked after children in the city rose from 1370 to 1434.
- 2.2 Previous reports noted that the rate of increase in the number of looked after children had slowed in 2010/12 and on the 31 March 2012 there were 1474 looked after children. This was in contrast to our statistical neighbours, which experienced significant increases in numbers. Had the number of looked after children in Leeds increased at the same rate as that of our statistical neighbours there would have been 1550 looked after children in the city by the 31 March 2012, which, based on existing placement patterns and costs, would have incurred an additional six million pounds of expenditure .
- 2.3 Table 1 demonstrates that after the 31st of March 2012 the number of looked after children began to fall and this downward trend has continued throughout 2012/13. On 25th January 2013 there were 1384 children looked after by Leeds City Council 90 fewer than on 31st March 2012. On this evidence, although there is more to do and much further to go, it is possible to say that Leeds has turned the curve on looked after children.

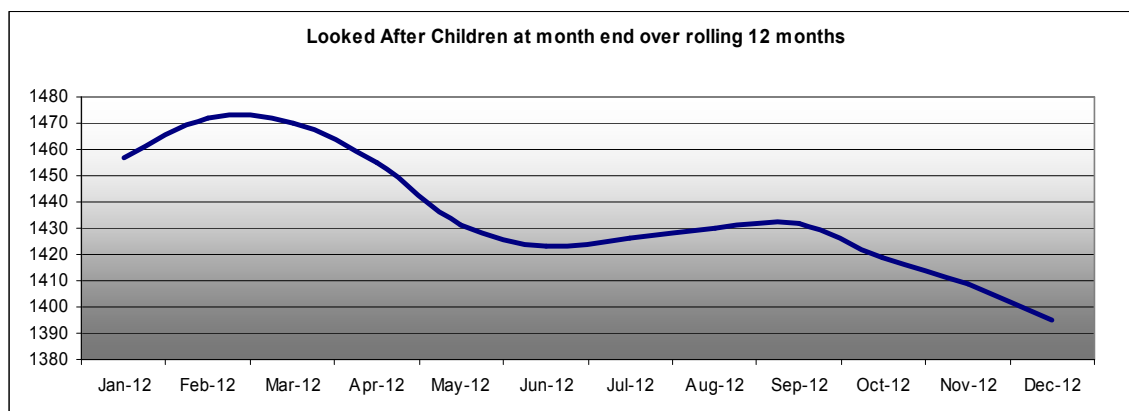


Table 1

- 2.4 An analysis of the ages of children becoming looked after in Leeds, Table Two, conducted for the first three months of 2012 highlighted that there had been a significant change in the pattern of children who become looked after. Fewer teenagers were entering the system and a much higher proportion, over 60 percent, were under five with a significant number aged under 1 year.

	0	1-4	5-10	11-15	16+
March 2011	90 (6.2%)	322 (22.3%)	359 (24.9%)	431 (29.8%)	242 (16.8%)
March 2012	123 (8.3%)	331 (22.5%)	387 (26.3%)	396 (26.9%)	237 (16.1%)

Table Two: Looked after children by age group at March 2011 and March 2012

- 2.5 This trend has continued. 39% of all the children (122) who have become looked after in the first three quarters of 2012 (1 January 2012 to 30 September 2012) were aged under one and 63% (197) were aged under five years.

3.0 Main issues

- 3.1 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.

- 3.2 These factors will be primarily considered by Ofsted in their inspection of local authority arrangements for looked after children and care leavers. However, they will also be scrutinised in any case where a child has been looked after examined as part of an inspection of safeguarding arrangements.

- 3.3 In April 2012 Ofsted introduced a new framework for the inspection of safeguarding arrangements. The new framework is more rigorous. It is unannounced and not as concerned with process measures and documentary evidence as the previous inspection regime. Rather it seeks to understand the 'child's journey' through services through a focus on direct practice observations, evidence from children, young people and families and case file information. This has raised the bar significantly and of the 10 local authorities inspected under the new safeguarding inspection framework by the 16th of November 2012, one was rated as good, four as adequate and five as inadequate.

- 3.4 Children's Ofsted has said that it intends to conduct a safeguarding inspection of all local authorities currently rated inadequate and adequate using the new framework by the 31st of March 2012. Therefore, Leeds can expect an inspection at any time.

- 3.5 Ofsted are currently developing a revised framework for inspecting services for looked after children and care leavers which will come into operation in July 2013. Leeds has worked closely with the Ofsted team developing the new arrangements. This included focus groups with social workers and team managers and a visit by

nine inspectors to Leeds on the 13th and 14th of February 2013 to test out some of the new inspection tools and methodology. The new framework has a focus on the 'child's journey,' how services provided impacted on outcomes for the child and the child's views of the service they received.

3.6 On the 10th of January 2013 John Goldup, Deputy Chief Inspector wrote to the Local Government Association, SOLACE, the ADCS, and the Children's Improvement Board seeking their views on a number of further changes to the inspection frameworks. They included:

- Introducing a short notice period for inspection of services to looked after children and care leavers;
- Replacing the grade of 'adequate' to 'requires improvement';
- Making it explicit that an 'inadequate' judgement in any of the key judgement domains is likely to lead to a judgement of 'inadequate' for overall effectiveness.

3.7 Considerable work has been undertaken in Leeds by Children's Services, the Children's Trust Board and the Local Safeguarding Board to strengthen services for looked after children and improve their outcomes and there have been significant improvements since the last inspection. However, meeting the requirements of the new regime will be a new challenge for agencies working with children in Leeds.

3.8 To focus and drive improvement Children's Services has developed the '9 Point Plan' (presented to the Children and Families Scrutiny Board on 13th December and available within those papers). The 9 Point Plan sets out how the Council intends to work with partners to further improve support for families, strengthen social work and deliver improved outcomes for children. The plan sits within the overall context and framework of the Leeds Children and Young People's Plan and sets out how social care services will contribute to the shared vision of a Child Friendly Leeds. The development of the plan has been informed by:

- A review of progress over the past year;
- Consultation with partners and external experts, including the Children's Trust Board and Leeds Safeguarding Children Board;
- The findings from our programme of internal audits and other quality assurance mechanisms;
- The outcome of scrutiny enquiries;
- Feedback from managers and staff from across Children's Services obtained through the staff survey, visits by senior managers and the Lead Member and regular meetings with trade unions;
- Input from children and young people.

- 3.9 The Plan is in two parts; Part One is a review of progress structured around the 'journey of the child' and Part Two sets out the priorities and the plan. An Operational Improvement Group chaired by the Deputy Director (Safeguarding, Specialist and Targeted Services) has been established to oversee the implementation of the plan supported by dedicated resource from the Quality and Improvement Hub. To ensure that progress in delivering the plan is subjected to external scrutiny it is proposed that regular quarterly reports will be provided to the Children's Trust Board; Child and Family Scrutiny Panel; and the Leeds Safeguarding Children Board. Progress reports will also be provided to the external expert support and challenge board; Corporate Carers and the Children in Care Council.
- 3.10 No Leeds Children home is rated inadequate by Ofsted. Currently, five of the local authority's children's homes are rated 'good', six are rated 'adequate' and one, which was inspected in July under the new strengthened inspection regime, is rated as 'outstanding' in all categories.
- 3.11 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 Three highlights that a significant proportion of looked after children (22.5%) remain within their families; either placed with a parent or in a kinship care arrangement. This suggests that Family Group Conferences, which offer families an opportunity to work together to come up with safe and appropriate solutions for the issues that they face could have a significant impact within a short period of time. The Family Group Conferencing Service is currently being expanded to enable the authority to achieve its commitment that:
- *Families, whose children might otherwise be removed from their homes, are supported to develop an alternative, safe solution before such action is taken, and*
 - *Families are supported to develop solutions in all other circumstances where there is a safeguarding issue.*

	Foster Care	Kinship Care	Placement with Parents	Residential Care	Children placed for adoption	Independent living	Other
March 2012	847 (57.6%)	202 (13.7%)	126 (8.6%)	149 (10.1%)	57 (3.9%)	43 (2.9%)	47 (3.2%)
Sept 2012	817 (57.1%)	194 (13.5%)	129 (9.0%)	122 (8.5%)	77 (5.4%)	28 (2.0%)	64 (4.5%)

Table Three: Looked after children by placement at 31 March and 30 September 2012

- 3.12 Most looked after children in Leeds (84%) are placed in a family context; with family, foster carers or prospective adoptive parents. This reflects the make up of the looked after children population (Table 1). The majority of children in foster care are placed with Leeds foster carers (67%). The number of children placed in Independent Fostering Agency Placements (33%) has reduced slightly from April 2012 (35%) in April. The proportion of looked after children in Independent Fostering Agency placements is lower in Leeds than the national average (20% vs. 23%) but the ambition remains to have all Leeds children placed with Leeds carers.

- 3.13 Earlier reports to the Board have highlighted the work to improve the recruitment and retention of carers. This work has continued. Table Four shows that the number of expressions of interest has increased significantly in the current year from an average of 44 in 2011-12 to 71 for the first six months of 2012-13. There are currently 15 carers from Independent Fostering Agencies who are being assessed to become Leeds carers. This is a very positive development. It provides clear evidence that Leeds is attractive to carers from Independent Agencies because of the support that we offer to our carers and the value that the city places on its foster carers and the work they do with vulnerable children. Work is currently underway, with the support of members and the Corporate Leadership Team, to develop this further by establishing a clear corporate offer to Leeds City Council foster carers.

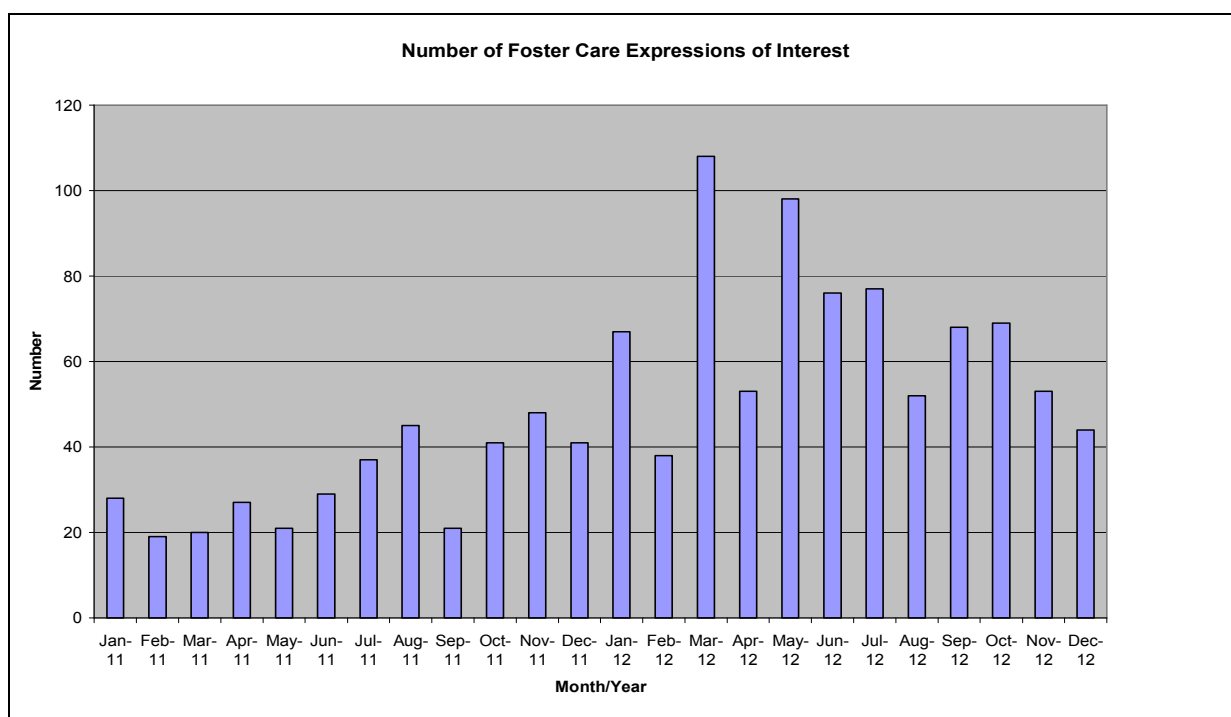


Table Four: Registrations of interest August 2010 to February 2012

- 3.14 Placement stability provides a clear indication of whether children and young people are being matched with carers that can meet their needs. Table Five shows the placement stability figures against core cities and statistical neighbours. This figure is only available on an annual basis. Performance for the year to date indicates that performance has continued to improve and in November 2012 the percentage of children experiencing 3 or more placements was 7.5%.

	Core City 10-11	Stat Neigh 10-11	2009-10	2010-11	2011-12
Stability of placements of CLA - Percentage of children looked after with 3 or more placements during the year	11.3%	10.6%	11.0% (155/1,414)	13.3% (193/1,448)	11.1% (163/1,475)
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	68.6%	66.5%	68.4% (381/557)	67.6% (348/515)	67.6% (382/565)

Table Five: Looked after children: placement stability

- 3.15 It is important that the appropriateness of both care planning and the care being provided to all looked after children is subjected to robust external scrutiny. This is undertaken by the Independent Reviewing Officers who are located within the Independent Safeguarding Unit. In December the vast majority, 98.9%, of looked after children had been reviewed within the statutory timescales and where the timescales were not met in every case all children were reviewed. This is an improvement from 81.1% in March 2012.
- 3.16 In January 2013 the Independent Reviewing Officer Service and services for looked after children were the focus of a Thematic inspection by Ofsted. Although the inspection did not result in a judgement it does inform the view that Ofsted holds of Leeds Children's Services and, if inspectors identified poor practice, it could result in a full inspection of services being brought forward. In their feedback to senior managers inspectors noted that services in Leeds were well placed to deliver good outcomes for looked after children and that they were impressed with the quality and commitment of the staff they met from both the Independent Reviewing Officer and Children's Social Work Services.
- 3.17 After the positive experience of the thematic inspection, it was followed up by a further two day visit from Ofsted inspectors in February as part of their work to pilot and prepare for a new inspection framework for looked after children and care leavers. Nine inspectors looked at 20 cases and spoke to a number of teams and practitioners. The overall feedback from this visit was extremely positive, with inspectors noting a widespread pattern of service improvement, good strategic direction and understanding, ambition and emphasis on supporting children to achieve permanence. There was a range of other specific, positive feedback about particular aspects of the service. The feedback also provided a number of helpful indications of areas for further development, which were in line with our own understanding of the service. Again, this experience has been a positive reflection on the direction of travel and self-awareness of services for looked after children and young people.

Reducing the need for children to become looked after

- 3.18 Efforts to improve preventative work in Leeds are focused around the Early Start Teams in the children's centres, this is a key partnership between early years and health services to work together more effectively where there is overlap in the support provided to families. The findings of the universal review in relation to Early Start Teams have now been implemented across the city. 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.
- 3.19 There are now 25 early start teams in place across 57 Children's Centres in the city.

Common Assessment Framework (CAF)

- 3.20 The revised Common Assessment Framework for Leeds and Common Assessment Record was introduced in April. Rather than a large launch event a series of smaller events were held supported by Dr Mark Peel, who has been involved in evaluating the new processes.
- 3.21 After a positive initial response, which saw an increase in the number of common assessments being completed, there was a fall in numbers in August and September. However, numbers have risen again. In October 89 Common Assessments were completed an increase of 7% on the same month last year and 100 common assessments were completed in November.
- 3.22 A range of work is being undertaken to support the use of the Common Assessment in Leeds. An Integrated Processes Team has been formally established to provide training on the Common Assessment for partners, support practitioners and agencies in using the Common Assessment and monitor its use. The team is working with Targeted Service Leaders to encourage the use of the Common Assessment in clusters and with Family Intervention Services, to promote the use of the new Common Record for multi-agency delivery plans to coordinate and support service delivery to families. A conference on Assessment and Best Practice in relation to the Common Assessment is planned for early 2013.

Multi-agency working through locality and cluster working

- 3.23 Clusters enable multi-agency support to be co-ordinated at a local level. All clusters in the city now have in place a structure that includes a multi-agency, 'support and guidance', group working together to provide and coordinate support to vulnerable children and families.
- 3.24 Targeted Service Leaders have now been recruited to all clusters. They will work with universal and specialist services to ensure that children and families are able to access the right level of support as early as possible. To improve consistency across the clusters a specification has been produced that outlines the expectations of the Targeted Service Leaders function within a cluster (top 100, shared assessment, shared intervention plan, team around the family, communication plan). It also outlines expectations for effective support and guidance meetings within clusters before onward requests for services are made to the Children's Social Work Teams. The specification makes clear the expectation of work with social work colleagues to secure the de-escalation of cases that can be safely closed alongside the safe landing of cases from the Duty and Advice Team.

Improving Front Door arrangements

- 3.25 The new 'front door' arrangements have now been in place for 6 months. These seek to provide professionals with the opportunity to talk through any concerns they have about a child or young person and agree the most appropriate way of providing support to the child and family. The Duty and Advice team has been strengthened to ensure that professionals are able to speak directly to a qualified social worker who has the time to discuss issues in detail. Table Six shows that

whilst the number of contacts with the Duty and Advice Team has increased slightly the number of those contacts going on to require a referral has decreased. Based on the current rate, Leeds will receive 19% fewer referrals in 2012-13 than in 2011-12. The percentage of re-referrals has seen a slight drop, from 36.1% in March 2012 to 33.3% in November 2012. However, this is a rolling 12-month indicator, and so the impacts of the front door policy are not immediately seen in this measure. Re-referrals measured on a monthly basis show the impact of the new arrangements, with a decrease in re-referrals from 38.3% in April 2012 to 27.1% in November. The reduction in the rate of re-referrals is important as it suggests that families are receiving the appropriate support.

Total contact and referrals by month

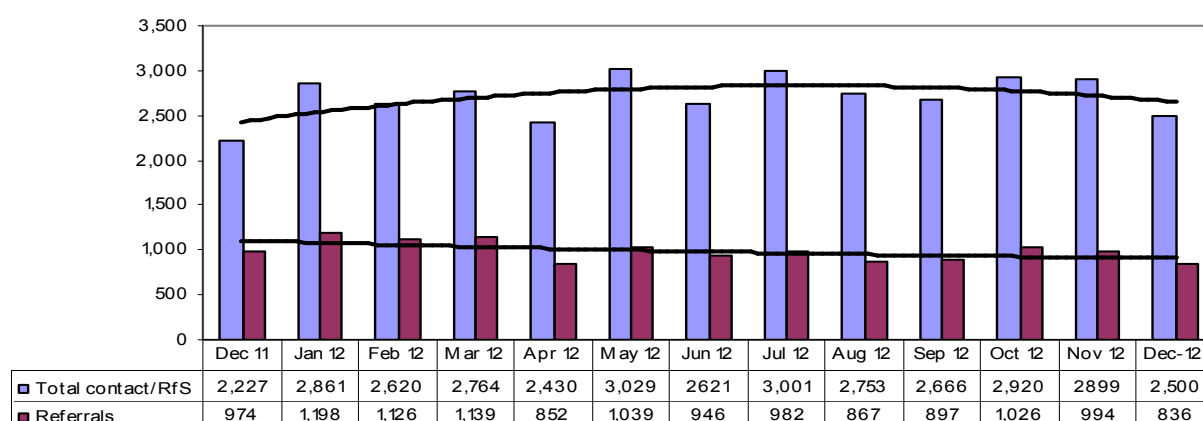


Table Six: Contacts and Referrals

- 3.26 At the same time the proportion of referrals resulting in a service has increased, indicating that the service is focused on those families requiring social work intervention. The reduction in the number of referrals does not have an impact on the number of children becoming looked after. However, if social workers are not undertaking high levels of initial assessments that do not result in a service they have more time and opportunity to work with those children and family that require more support. Consequently, they are able to achieve permanence for children at an earlier opportunity.

Family group conferencing

- 3.27 Family Group Conferencing is at the heart of the restorative approach being adopted in Leeds to reduce the need for children to become looked after. Family Group Conferencing aims to support families to develop their own solution to the difficulties they may be facing. The Family Group Conferencing Service is currently being expanded to enable the authority to achieve its commitment that

- *Families, whose children might otherwise be removed from their homes, are supported to develop a safe, alternative solution before such action is taken, and*
- *Families are supported to develop solutions in all other circumstances where there is a safeguarding issue.*

Leeds received 140 applications when the posts were advertised and the high quality field enabled fourteen new coordinators to be appointed and a further 8 sessional coordinators, who can be used as necessary, approved. The new service will be operational from March 2013. The service will initially focus on children under five at risk of becoming looked after.

Effective care planning

- 3.28 Effective care planning is important in supporting children to achieve permanence at the earliest opportunity and to avoid drift. The Children's Social Work Service is working with Professor David Thorpe and Dr Nina Biehal from the Social Work Research and Development Unit at the University of York to develop training for social workers and managers which is being rolled out in 2013.

4.0 Corporate Considerations

4.1 Consultation and Engagement

- 4.1.1 The strategy for looked after children has been developed and is being implemented through consultation with looked after children and young people and partner agencies.
- 4.1.2 There are a number of ways in which children and young people are consulted: they meet with their social worker and also their Independent Reviewing Officer alone on a regular basis. The Children in Care Council meets regularly and feedback is provided to Corporate Carers on a monthly basis. The Chief Officer for Social Work meets with the Children in Care Council at least quarterly.
- 4.1.3 Information informing this report has been shared and discussed with the Children in Care Council, Children's Trust Board, Corporate Carers and the Local Safeguarding Children Board.

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 There are no legal implications in accepting this update on the Children's Services LAC obsession.

4.6 Risk Management

- 4.6.1 No risks have been identified.

5.0 Conclusions

- 5.1 Safely and appropriately reducing the number of looked after children is one of Children's Services three obsessions. Considerable work has been taken place over the past year and, as a result, the number of looked after children has reduced by 90 in nine months.

This report highlights that good progress is being made in improving the quality of services to looked after children and putting the range of interventions in place that will further reduce the need for children to become looked after.

6. Recommendations

- 6.1 Executive Board is asked to endorse the approach outlined in this report and note the progress made to safely and appropriately reduce the number of looked after children in Leeds.

7. Background documents - None

The background documents listed in this section are available to download from the Council's website, unless they contain confidential or exempt information. The list of background documents does not include published works.