

Draft Scrutiny Inquiry Final report External Placements 2012



Introduction and Scope

Introduction

1. This year the terms of reference for the Children and Families Scrutiny Board identified three pieces of work for the Board to undertake, related to the three obsessions in the Children and Young People's Plan.
2. At the board's meeting in June, members agreed that their first major piece of work this year would be an inquiry on the first of these areas – reducing the need for children to be looked after.
3. The council has adopted an Outcome Based Accountability approach to addressing the obsession, drawing up plans to 'turn the curve' and improve performance. In relation to this particular obsession, earlier intervention is seen as key to achieving the Children and Young People's Plan priority to help children and young people to live in safe and supportive families.
4. The Board was also aware that the key budget challenge for Children's Services is managing expenditure on external placements for looked after children. This includes both the use of independent fostering agencies in addition to council foster carers and also residential placements for children and young people outside of the council's own residential provision, in some cases outside of the Leeds area.
5. The current trend of both an increasing dependence on external placements and rising costs is not unique to Leeds, but it is an area that we must address if we are to be able to manage our budgets effectively at a time of diminishing resources, and also be able

to reinvest in early intervention to meet our aspirations for turning the curve.

Scope of the Inquiry

6. We therefore decided to focus our scrutiny inquiry for this obsession on the issue of external placements.
7. We emphasised at the outset that safeguarding our children and young people cannot be compromised, as reflected in the Children and Young People's Plan outcome that our children and young people should be safe from harm. We committed to ensuring that any recommendations we made took account of the need to ensure that our children and young people are safely provided for.
8. The purpose of our inquiry was to make an assessment of and, where appropriate, make recommendations on:
 - Opportunities to safely reduce reliance on external placements; and
 - Scope to reduce the costs of external placements that continue to be needed.
9. The Board undertook its inquiry between September and December 2011, receiving evidence through a combination of formal Scrutiny Board meetings, smaller working group meetings and visits with stakeholders and relevant service providers. Full details are provided at the end of the report.
10. We would like to thank everyone who took part in our inquiry for their time and effort in sharing information with us. We hope that our findings will provide a positive contribution to tackling this



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particular obsession within the Children and Young People's Plan.

Anticipated Service Impact

11. Outcomes for looked after children are too often poor in the UK. Research has shown that young people who have been in care are much less likely to attain good qualifications and much more likely to become unemployed, homeless or to be in prison. For many children coming into care the gap between their potential and their achievement is already wide because of their challenging childhood experiences.
12. Whilst acknowledging this, it is clear that there is a need to have the highest aspirations for these most vulnerable children for whom the local community is responsible.
13. A basic outcome for looked after children is for their care to be effective. Wherever possible we also want to prevent children and young people needing to become looked after in the first place, or safely reduce the period that they need to be in care.
14. We hope that our recommendations will support the work of Children's Services and the wider Children's Trust partnership in delivering on their obsession.



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Context

15. At our first meeting of the inquiry in September, we received a range of information which set the context in terms of the local and national picture with regard to numbers of looked after children and their care, before providing a more detailed description of the situation in relation to the use of external placements.

16. There is a national trend of increasing numbers of Looked After Children, although there is a wide variation between local authorities.

17. As of the end of July 2011, 1449 children and young people were in care in Leeds, representing a rate of 95.1 per 10,000 (based on a total figure of 152,200 children and young people). This was a small increase on the July 2010 figure of 1424, and a rate of 93.8 per 10,000. Leeds figures are in line with core cities but much higher than national and statistical neighbours.

18. We asked for some more detailed information which was provided at our second meeting, giving a breakdown by ethnic group and also by ward and cluster. We noted that a high proportion of looked after children originate from a limited number of wards and clusters.

19. We also noted that, whilst the large majority of looked after children are white British, there is a particular challenge in placing children from some black and minority ethnic groups with carers of a similar ethnicity, especially in the case of some of the relatively new ethnic groups to the city.

20. We also received information on the numbers of unaccompanied asylum seekers included in the number of children in care, as well as the numbers of children from other local authority areas currently accommodated within Leeds.

21. We noted the following distribution of looked after children at 31 March 2010:

In house foster care	797
Independent fostering agencies	143
In-house residential	83
Outside placements	66
Unaccompanied asylum seeking children	56
Placed with parents	168
Pathway planning (excluding foster placements)	119
Total looked after children	1,432

22. We learned that there were 194 children placed in Leeds by other local authorities. However, this number needs to be treated with caution as, although local authorities have a duty to inform each other when they place a child, they do not have a corresponding duty when the child or young person leaves.

23. We were reassured to learn that these children were not in Leeds City Council residential homes or placed with Leeds City Council foster carers.

24. Of the children in care at the end of July 2011, 89 children and young people were in externally provided residential placements and 254 in placements with independent fostering agencies. The Board noted that there had been a year on year increase in the number of children and young people in externally provided placements, resulting in an increased spend on this provision.

25. We learned that the number of children subject to a child protection plan rose



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steeply over the same period, from 662 in July 2010 to 1,074 in July 2011. This brings Leeds into line with core cities and statistical neighbours. It reflects improved safeguarding practices following the recent Ofsted inspections which identified thresholds as too high, but also the increasing demand for services seen nationally.

26. The increase in the number of child protection plans has the potential to reduce the need for children to enter care, as services are put in place to support the child or young person to stay within their family.

New approaches

27. The Director of Children's Services stressed that the council's strategy is for children to be placed within their existing family and community setting where at all possible. The evidence suggests that children have better outcomes the closer to their family and community networks they are.
28. He acknowledged that the current patterns of external placements were not sustainable. He suggested that the key to addressing this was to think differently about the measures that needed to be put in place for more children and young people to have their needs met within their current setting, ultimately reducing the numbers of referrals into children's social care.
29. He told us that although the situation was not unique to Leeds, he believed there was a particular commitment and ambition within the city, articulated through the Children and Young People's Plan obsession, to change the patterns of referral and placements in

Leeds. The recent Ofsted inspection had confirmed that the obsessions were well understood and supported across all partners.

30. The challenge is significant, especially when placed in the context of the resources available. There is an implicit tension in the rising number of looked after children and increasing social care workload placed against the resources available for more effective early intervention.
31. High social worker caseloads were at the core of the 'inadequate' judgement in the announced Ofsted inspection of safeguarding and looked after children services in November 2009. Increasing referrals to social care and rising numbers of children in care since then mean that caseloads remain higher than we would like despite additional investment in staff.
32. Although Leeds has resources in preventative service provision it has been identified that there is a lack of coordination of early intervention and edge of care services and that there has yet to be significant impact on reducing the need for children to become looked after.
33. However there is also significant potential to translate our partnership efforts and local approaches into impact, which is being reflected in the increasing adoption of Outcome Based Accountability approaches. This includes improved targeting of need at the local level; more integration around the family at the frontline; increasing the use of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) as a partnership tool to focus collective effort; and



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encouraging a shared culture of leadership, responsibility and support.

34. It is essential that both the quantity and quality of common assessments undertaken is addressed in order to identify and meet needs at an early stage. CAFs should be routinely undertaken with families where a single agency does not feel they can meet need and so consultation with other agencies is needed, with parental consent. The number of CAFs (children needing universal or targeted services) should exceed those needing a specialist assessment from social care. In the 2010/11 financial year, 1,131 CAFs were initiated. There were 13,643 referrals to social care in the same year and over 26,000 requests for service.
35. However, it is also acknowledged that the CAF process has become more complicated than it was intended to be. Dr Mark Peel and Harriet Ward, who developed the original national CAF model, are coming to work with Leeds to look at addressing this problem. This is in addition to research work being carried out by Professor David Thorpe looking at the appropriateness of social care referrals.
36. We were also told about the piloting of the targeted services leader role in 3 clusters across the city. This role provides additional capacity to effectively prioritise and coordinate targeted support to the most vulnerable families within the local area more quickly. The results from the pilot areas will enable an analysis of the benefit of such a role, to inform future investment arrangements.
37. Information about the numbers of children involved is now being provided at cluster level, on a regular basis, to support services in identifying target families. The emphasis is on local discussions about the families we need to be “worried about”, to encourage local management of cases and to cut down on the patterns of inappropriate referral to social care.
38. All clusters now have some form of multi-agency group meeting regularly to receive ‘requests for service’ from universal services, where it is considered that a vulnerable child or young person needs additional support. Information is shared between agencies within these groups in order to identify and agree an appropriate package of support.
39. The clusters (and the multi-agency groups) are at different stages of development. We acknowledged that the significance and challenge of this work is considerable and while progress is being made the scale and support needed should not be underestimated.
40. Another pilot involves the integration of support for 0-5s, chiefly through the bringing together of children’s centre and health staff. These ‘Early Start’ teams will be operating across the city by September 2012. Again this should assist with better identification of needs and more effective responses at an early stage in a child’s life. Services around conception, pregnancy and the very early years have a very important role to play in the early intervention model which aims to keep children from needing to be taken into care.
41. We felt that there was also an important role for local communities to play. We believe there is a need to proactively engage more community members,



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including through locally based third sector organisations, to be able to support vulnerable families when the professionals are not around.

Recommendation 1 – That the Director of Children’s Services reports back to us on how local communities can be more proactively engaged in the support to vulnerable families.

42. Part of the issue relates to the numbers of referrals made to social care and also the bureaucracy associated with the CAF, which means that more cases are referred and assessed by social care staff – taking up time and resources – than need to be. It is imperative that we break this cycle so that universal and targeted services have the competence and confidence to work with more families before they reach appropriate social care thresholds.
43. Ultimately we want to see better ownership of the response to concerns. In the past there has been a history of reluctance to respond coupled with high social care thresholds, leaving many children’s situations to escalate before any action is taken.
44. The reorganisation of social work teams on a locality basis in the near future, which will promote closer working with local communities and with cluster based teams, should help with this aim.
45. The clear message to us from Children’s Services was that, although some work can be undertaken to enhance in house resources and reduce spend on external placements, the majority of cost saving will be engendered through more efficient and targeted early intervention and edge of care provision. This will result in fewer children and young people needing to be taken into care, or where that is still the case, for those care episodes to be shorter in length.
46. Nevertheless, research tells us that a child who has been in care for more than eight weeks is much less likely to return home. Over 75% of looked after children in Leeds have been in care for a year or more. Therefore, dependent on the age profile of the long term care population, there are a number of children already in our care who are likely to remain looked after for a number of years to come regardless of the changes taking place elsewhere.
47. We were also reminded that the demographic changes resulting in a growth in the population of children and young people in Leeds, along with the current economic climate, provide further challenge to the achievement of our objectives to reduce the number of children needing to be looked after.
48. We did however learn that the number of children discharged from care through the making of a Special Guardianship Order (SGO) had increased from an average of 1.4 per month in January 2009 to 4.1 per month by September 2011. These orders allow foster carers to take on more parental responsibility for the child in their care, whilst continuing to receive some financial support from the authority.
49. These arrangements provide stability for the children concerned and help to reduce the numbers of children who need to be looked after. Increasing the number of children who are able to be discharged from care, either back to their family or using alternative



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arrangements such as the Special Guardianship Order, is an important element of the strategy.

50. We also heard about some of the initiatives being used to work intensively with families on the edge of care, such as Family Group Conferencing and Multi-Systemic Therapy. Although both are very small scale in Leeds at present, there is a strong evidence base for their effectiveness.
51. Family group conferencing is a decision making meeting in which a child or young person's wider family network come together to make a plan about the future arrangements for the child. The expectation is that the plan produced will be agreed by the referring agency as the way forward, provided that it adequately addresses the concerns that the agency identified, and is considered safe for the child.
52. This approach gives more confidence to families and their networks and communities to deal with issues themselves. It is planned to increase provision in 2012/13.
53. There is also the intensive multi-systemic therapy team, which virtually moves in with families to work with them.
54. Multi-systemic therapy is an intensive family and community based treatment that addresses the multiple influences that contribute to serious antisocial or illegal behaviour in young people. The ultimate aim of the therapy is to empower parents by developing their skills and resources to address the difficulties that arise in raising children and adolescents, as well as empowering the young people to cope with family, peer, school and neighbourhood problems.
55. Leeds City Council successfully applied for Department of Health funding for a pilot MST project in 2008. The Leeds model has been cited as a national model of excellence, and further funding from the DfE has been obtained to support the development of two additional teams.
56. Each team is expected to work with 40 families per year, at an average cost of £7k per young person. This is seen as a key element of the 'edge of care' provision which forms part of the overall strategy to reduce the numbers of children needing to be in care.
57. We were told that MST has also been used in a small number of cases to assist children to return home after a period in care. This will continue to be an objective for the service, with consequent savings in the cost of external residential placements.
58. The Board supported the desire to increase these activities and we were very pleased to see their expansion included in the budget proposals to council as an investment priority.
59. We will continue to monitor the delivery of the proposed positive outcomes presented to the Board throughout this inquiry and wish to see the Director of Children's Services recruiting to vacant posts as quickly as possible to secure the necessary expertise and structural stability.



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60. Available evidence indicates that 'getting it right first time' is not only more beneficial for the child in increasing positive outcomes, but that it is also more cost effective in the long term. If families needing support are identified earlier, and children who are unable to stay within their family are also identified at an earlier age, then although support goes on for a longer period of time, it is not as costly as long term residential placement.
61. The Director explained to us how this fitted in with restorative practice working techniques that are being promoted across the children's services partnership. At its simplest, this is about a way of working with families and individuals, rather than doing things to or for them or, as can be the case, doing nothing.

Budget

62. The 2011/12 budget for externally provided placements was calculated on the basis of forecast potential increased demand together with a plan to 'turn the curve' and reduce placement numbers and costs over the course of the financial year.
63. The budget represented an increase of £8m on the previous year to £15.9m. However this was still forecast to lead to an overspend of £7.84m by September 2011.
64. The initial 'turning the curve' action plan to address this gap was based around delivering against several key challenges. These included reducing the number of looked after children through work with families and partners at a local level to intervene early and prevent the need for escalation to social care services and also to have a stronger focus on multi-agency working to de-escalate cases where risks have been diminished. In addition, work was focused around reducing placement costs through negotiation and contract management with external providers, by increasing capacity within in-house looked after children services and through improved cost sharing with partners.
65. Senior management are now examining detailed data on referrals and looked after children on a weekly basis in order to track changes and improvements and respond to concerns much more quickly.
66. This reflects a renewed and enhanced commitment to making progress in this area of challenge, recognising that the plans and projections from the previous year had not met the original targets, as observed by the Chair of the Scrutiny Board in prompting her recommendation that this inquiry take place.
67. We are very pleased that the council has supported this work by prioritising improvements in social care services to young people and safeguarding of vulnerable children in the city in the budget proposals for 2012/13. This includes a further £10.9m which will be used to fund additional external placements and the rise in cost of fostering care reflecting the trends we have seen. This is supported by £2.1m for early intervention and prevention services including intensive and specialist family support; family group conferencing and multi-systemic therapy as mentioned above; and the targeted mental health programme in schools. A further £0.9m is to be invested in the



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expansion of childcare for vulnerable 2 year olds in line with government policy.

68. We believe that this further investment, aligned with the revised 'turning the curve plan' will give the partnership a more realistic chance of delivering improvements against this key obsession. We will be monitoring this progress closely.

Recommendation 2 – That the Director of Children’s Services provides 6 monthly updates to us on progress in tackling the budget pressure relating to the cost of external placements. The first report is required July 2012

Costs

69. We examined the variation in unit costs between in house and external placements, both residential and foster care.

70. We were told that the average full unit cost of an in house foster carer placement with a level 4 carer (the equivalent of an independent agency foster carer) was £500 per week, made up of two main elements – a professional fostering fee based on skills and experience; and a weekly allowance based on the child’s age – plus management costs associated with recruitment and support services. This compared with the average cost of foster care from an independent agency of £800 per week.

71. For residential placements, the comparative costs were £2,003 per

week in house compared to £2,750 for external placements.

72. We received figures for the 2010/11 costs of each of the council’s own residential children’s homes.

73. Some of the external placements are highly specialised. We recognise that it would be reasonable to expect there to be an ongoing need for a small number of such specialised placements, as it would not be feasible for the authority to provide all possible requirement for this type of accommodation.

Placements strategy and sufficiency action plan

74. We also considered the children’s placements strategy and sufficiency action plan, although we were told that this is subject to review at present and will be finalised in the coming months.

75. The strategy and plan are designed to meet the statutory duty under section 22g of the Children Act 1989 for local authorities to secure, so far as reasonably practicable, sufficient accommodation for looked after children within their local authority area.

76. The strategy includes the following partnership ambitions:

- Support and maintain diversity of services to better meet the needs of looked after children including through the provision of preventative and early intervention services to reduce the need for care proceedings;



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- All children are placed in the local authority area, except where this is not consistent with their needs and welfare;
 - All children with adoption recommendations are placed with an adoptive family within 12 months of that recommendation;
 - There is a diverse range of universal, targeted and specialist services working together to meet children's needs, including children and young people who are already looked after, as well as those at risk of care or custody;
 - Children's Trust partners, including housing, work together to secure a range of provision to meet the needs of those who become looked after at the age of 16 and 17, and support the continuity of accommodation beyond the age of 18;
 - Services are available in adequate quantity to respond to children and young people, including predicted demand for a range of needs, and emergencies;
 - In addition to meeting relevant National Minimum Standards, services are of high enough quality to secure the specific outcomes identified in the care planning process for children and young people;
 - Services are situated across the local authority area to reflect the geographical distribution of need;
 - Placement providers (including private, voluntary and public sector providers) are linked into the wider network of services and work with these services to offer appropriate support to deliver identified outcomes for looked after children;
 - Universal services know when a child or young person is looked after and have good links with the range of targeted and specialist services which support them, including placement providers;
 - There are mechanisms in place to ensure that professionals involved in placement decisions have sufficient knowledge and information about the supply and quality of placements and availability of all specialist, targeted and universal support services within the local authority area;
 - The local authority and its Children's Trust partners collaborate with neighbouring Children's Trusts to plan the market for services for looked after children and commission in regional or sub-regional arrangements;
 - We will support the market to deliver more appropriate placements and other services locally;
 - Children and young people will be involved in placement decisions.
77. The plan contains a forecast of future placement requirements, taking account of the impact of a range of anticipated changes such as increased foster carer recruitment; population growth; more preventative and early intervention work; more adoptions and kinship care; and quicker exit from care. The combined impact of these pressures and improvements is forecast to result in a net future demand for 119 external placements.
78. We learned that the majority of current external placement decisions are not



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due to a specific request for specialist or external provision, but are due to the lack of available in-house provision.

79. We also noted that in 2009/10 one in six (17%) of placement decisions were due to a breakdown in the previous placement. This figure covered both internal and external placements. However it is a cause for concern in terms of the stability of the children and young people involved. There may be indications of difficulties in initial matching for placements. In addition we noted that some of the most costly placements are often related to previous placement breakdown.

80. Making the 'right' decisions about a child or young person's placement and providing placement stability can have a significant impact upon cost in terms of the additional support required as well as the implications for the outcomes for that child or young person.

Placement decisions

81. We learned about the various decision making panels operated by Children and Young People's Social Care in relation to placing children in care. A representative of the Board attended a meeting of each of the Panels to observe the process at work.

82. The Panels operate within the following summary framework of financial responsibility and approvals:

- Social Workers assess and propose the level of need, having regard for cost. Support for approval is provided by the Team Manager and Service Delivery Manager

- Where an external placements is likely to be required the Head of Service's approval is required.
- The Head of Service Decision and Review Panel (HOSDAR) quality assures the need for the placement, taking account of the funding requirements, particularly for high cost placements
- The Placement Service provides matches for the Social Worker and fieldwork management to select from and make a proposal to the Placement Panel
- Placement Panel approves the proposed match and expenditure, including any joint funding arrangements.

Head of Service Decision and Review Panel (HOSDAR)

83. This Panel is chaired by a Head of Service and scrutinises all cases prior to a child's admission into care (or reviews the decision in the case of emergency placements). 650 children from 399 families were referred to the Panel in the 12 months from June 2010 when the Panel was established. Of these cases, the request for care was only refused on 17 occasions, with workers asked for further information in 15 cases.

84. However a review of case studies would indicate that early, skilled and joined up intervention could have prevented a significant number from entry into care, with the related considerable personal costs to the child and family and financial costs to the council.

85. The Chair of the Scrutiny Board observed this panel and felt that the process was very thorough, with social



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workers attending and presenting a full report on each case.

Placement Panel

86. The Placement Panel meets weekly, chaired by the Head of Service for Looked After Children. It is a multi agency forum, which considers the needs of children requiring placements in the independent sector. The panel takes into consideration the needs of the child as well as financial and service quality issues in making its decisions. The Chair of the Scrutiny Board also observed a Placement Panel meeting.

Joint Agency Decision and Review Panel (JADAR)

87. This panel supplements the role of the HOSDAR panel in relation to cases requiring joint funding from social care, education and health, agreeing the package of needs and the allocation of costs between the various partners.

88. The meetings include a combination of new cases presented by social workers and case managers, and shorter reviews of existing placements.

89. As observed by the Scrutiny Board member who attended a panel meeting, links are made at the panel with transition services into adult care for young people, so that all young people should have a pathway plan starting at the age of 14.

90. It was noted that there were pressures on the administrative support to the Panel to enable all information to be provided in good time; this situation was under review to find a more permanent solution.

91. However the panel was observed to work well together and to keep the best interests of the child at the forefront of the discussion and decision-making.

Placement commissioning

92. We were told that improvements had been made to the commissioning of external placements over the last year. This has included the development of initial placement commissioning capacity and the establishment of a multi-disciplinary Children's Placement Service. This includes service contracting, contract management and monitoring of all residential and independent fostering agency providers, market analysis, invoice processing and quality assurance, as well as the placement matching process itself. Further developments will create a permanent placement commissioning service.

93. This includes work at both a West Yorkshire sub-regional and Leeds level to negotiate down provider charges. The sub-region is also exploring various procurement options for future placement provision. We were told that this work saved £550k in 2010/11, with a further £500k saving projected for 2011/12.

94. Work has also been taking place to ensure a greater contribution from the NHS to the cost of external placements as the total contribution at the time we began our inquiry was less than 1% of total costs.

95. We were pleased to learn that this work is being complemented by developments in the quality assurance



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framework to monitor independent provision in relation to the quality of practice and safeguarding of placements.

Recommendation 3 – That the Director of Children’s Services provides a report in July 2012 on savings on the cost of external placements achieved in 2011/12 against the £500k projection, including progress with health contributions.

Turning the curve action plan

96. We decided to hold an additional session of our inquiry in November in order to consider the programme plan to ‘turn the curve’ in more detail. We agreed to do this in the light of a refresh of the plan with revised timescales and profile for achieving the reduction in placement numbers and the associated financial implications.
97. In line with the original budgetary concerns that triggered this issue as the focus for our inquiry, we welcomed officers’ recognition that a more realistic timescale had needed to be identified and a detailed plan devised, with a stronger emphasis on management oversight and control.
98. A copy of the summary ‘plan on a page’ that was presented to us in November 2011 is attached as Appendix 1. It demonstrates the many and varied strands that need to be progressed in order to make a real difference for our most vulnerable children and young people.

99. The single page is supplemented by a more detailed programme plan. The aims of the programme are to strengthen families and communities through better support at an earlier stage; develop effective practice; build in-house capacity; and improve the governance process and contract management of placements.

100. We are keen to support progress against the range of activities that are being undertaken.

Recommendation 4 – That the Director of Children’s Services reports to us in July 2012 with an update on progress against each of the key milestones in the programme plan, the majority of which are due to have been achieved by then.

Recruitment and retention of foster carers

101. We were told that recruitment and retention of carers is a key objective for the fostering service.
102. 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 placements were mainly 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



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placements. There is some welcome indication that placements numbers have been more stable in the third quarter of 2011/12.

103. We learned that the fostering service had recently been restructured to enable the development of a dedicated Recruitment and Assessment team, with a new manager recruited with experience in the independent sector.
104. Our second inquiry session included the presentation of the foster carer recruitment and assessment strategy. This set out increased levels of activity including plans for a range of recruitment campaigns, supported by open evenings for those interested in exploring foster care further, as well as the development of a marketing strategy.
105. Plans also included a 'spread the word' campaign amongst existing carers, as this has been shown to be a common route for generating enquiries. We support this campaign and believe that greater use of existing foster carers' stories and experience in recruitment and training of foster carers could be utilised.
106. In particular the service is planning to develop a dedicated recruitment website to compete with the independent sector, given that the internet is many people's first port of call for information about fostering. There is intense competition for the top spot in response to online searches and the council needs to be more visible in this arena. We heard that this has already begun, through paying for Google advertisements. It is hoped to have the new website operational early in the new financial year.

Recommendation 5 – That the Director of Children's Services reports back to us in July 2012 on progress in launching the fostering recruitment website, and if up and running the impact it has had so far.

107. We were also told that prospective foster carers are tending to explore several options including the local authority and one or more independent agency, to see what each offers, before deciding which route to take for registration.
108. The service needs to be able to respond to inquiries quickly and start the assessment process promptly if it is to maximise the number of queries that can be converted into successful in-house foster carers. This is being addressed by identifying dedicated staff to deal with these queries. Agency staff have been employed to ensure that assessments are completed in a timely manner. It is planned in future to have a bank of such staff available for occasions when existing staff do not have the capacity to progress assessments.
109. We were pleased to hear that all current assessments were on target for completion within a timescale of 4-5 months, which is shorter than the 8 month maximum detailed in new national standards.
110. The service is also aware that further work is required to match recruitment more closely with identified needs and trends in placements.
111. At our January meeting we considered a report on outcomes for looked after children. We noted that the



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numbers and proportion of looked after children in the 0-4 age group has risen significantly during 2011, with a consequent impact on the need for appropriate foster carers.

112. The service was on target to deliver a net gain of 20 additional foster carers in 2011/12 and 40 in 2012/13. Target times have also been set for the timeliness of assessment and approval processes at 3 and 4 months from application respectively. Sessional workers are being recruited where necessary to meet these target times.
113. However, we were warned that these efforts need to be seen in the context of a national shortage of foster carers and also increasing competition between local authorities and the independent sector. The situation is exacerbated in relation to certain groups of children such as teenagers, children under four and sibling groups.
114. We also noted the knock on implications for the team in terms of supporting a higher number of in house foster carers.
115. Fostering has become a more complex task, with carers being expected to provide therapeutic parenting for children with complex needs; manage relationships with birth families and work as part of a multi agency professional team. In Leeds as in most local authorities, there has been a need to improve the quality of care provided within the in-house foster placement service, resulting in some carers being de-registered. The foster carer population is ageing and the council is working to gain clarity about the retirement plans of its foster carers to understand the potential impact on the recruitment and retention plan. This mirrors the national picture.
116. In addition, Leeds previously had foster carers caring for large numbers of children within one household. This practice was outside Fostering Regulations and was highly criticised in the Ofsted inspection in 2009, as a result of which instant action was taken to reduce numbers in each household.
117. With the increase in Special Guardianship Orders referred to earlier, there has also been a number of de-registrations of foster carers as they have taken on this alternative role.
118. We held a specific working group meeting focusing on foster care recruitment and drawing on the experience of 2 staff who had recently joined the authority from the independent sector. We found the insights they were able to give very useful. It is important that the authority uses their knowledge to help develop and improve the service further.
119. Some of the advantages of the independent sector that they highlighted to us included the speed with which agencies respond to inquiries and progress assessments, approval and placements. These are factors that the authority could seek to replicate. For example, apparently it takes two weeks for a decision to be formally signed off following a Fostering Panel meeting within the local authority, whilst an agency will sign off the decision and make a placement often on the same day.
120. We heard that social workers in independent agencies generally have a much smaller case load of around 12-15



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cases, with more frequent contact and supervision with carers. One of the officers we spoke to told us that the national agency he had previously worked for had a therapist available through each office to provide support and advice if there are problems with the placement, as well as a dedicated out of hours service. Within the local authority out of hours support is provided through the generic Emergency Duty Team.

121. The independent agencies often arrange social events and opportunities for carers and children to develop networks. Since hearing about this, one of our members organised a Christmas reception for foster carers in his local area. This type of initiative should be explored further.

Recommendation 6 – That the Corporate Carers group explores the potential to arrange social events and opportunities for foster carers and children to develop networks.

122. We also discussed the process of matching carers with children and young people needing placement. We were told that the independent agencies have a vested interest in ensuring that this is a thorough process, as placement breakdown is seen as a threat to their commercial viability. As independent agencies they are in the position of being able to decline a request to provide care, whereas the local authority as the corporate parent must find a placement for the child.
123. We considered why people would chose to work for private fostering agencies over the local authority when deciding to explore fostering. We were

also concerned about the risk of existing local authority carers moving to the independent sector, although we understood this has only happened in two cases so far in Leeds.

124. Leeds currently operates a competency based payment for skills framework, allowing carers to progress from level 1 (basic skills) to level 4 (professional care). This is seen as being in line with best practice within local authorities.
125. However, our discussions with foster carers and in relation to the independent sector indicate that there are question marks about the effectiveness of this approach. It appears that the independent sector only operates one level of carer, paid at levels similar to a local authority level 4 carer. In addition the same fee is paid for each child, which is not the case with the local authority. The new system is unpopular with some existing carers, but may also act as a deterrent to some people considering entering fostering, who will choose to enrol with an independent agency in order to obtain a higher rate of pay.
126. We understand that there may be historical reasons for the higher cost of agency placements when the authority generally used these for the more complex cases, but now those same higher rates are being paid for care that is purchased to fill a general capacity gap.
127. Whilst supporting the development of high standards and skills for foster carers, we believe that more consideration needs to be given to this matter as a factor in the overall costs of foster care to the authority.



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Recommendation 7 – That the Director of Children’s Services reviews the payment structure for foster care with particular reference to the impact of the differential between in-house and independent fostering agency rates and reports to the Scrutiny Board with the outcome of this review in July 2012

128. We did also note that carers are not paid when they don’t have a placement. As the local authority always looks to its own carers first, this would suggest greater security of income for in-house carers.

129. In addition, fostering agencies usually prefer carers to be available full time, whereas some local authority carers combine the role with other commitments including jobs and small children.

130. Notwithstanding all of the above, the officers we spoke to warned that many agencies as well as local authorities are now working to capacity following the national increase in the numbers of children in care. Additionally a lot of carers are approaching retirement. As such the challenge to recruit more foster carers needs to be seen as a target for all concerned rather than focusing on competition between providers. We noted that in Teesside a successful fostering consortium has been established.

Recommendation 8 – That the Director of Children’s Services explores what good practice might be learned from the Tees consortium for the sub-regional work on placement commissioning that is currently taking place in West Yorkshire.

131. The Deputy Executive Member made us aware of an issue that had been raised with him by foster carers in ALMO accommodation who required extra room or adaptations. We agree that work should take place with Housing and the ALMOs to ensure that this is not an unnecessary barrier to people providing foster care.

Recommendation 9 – That the Director of Children’s Services works with the Director of Environment and Neighbourhoods to secure support from the ALMOs to meet the accommodation needs of foster carers.

Foster carers

132. We invited foster carers who take part in the Foster Carers Liaison Group to meet with us before one of their regular meetings with the Executive Member and social care staff, in order to gain their input into our inquiry. 7 foster carers took us up on our invitation.

133. Some of the specific issues that they raised fell outside the scope of our inquiry and the Chair has taken these up separately. However they raised the following points of relevance to our inquiry:

- It is important that the risk assessment for each child is updated over time, with consequent changes in the plan for their future, including the possibility of a managed exit from care if appropriate. The foster carers told us that older teenagers often try to return home. Social care staff agreed that this can be a cause



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of tension when the professional judgement is that this is too high a risk.

- They were very complimentary about the support from schools.
- Clear and transparent rates and frequency of payment are important.
- There should also be clear and consistent guidelines about what decisions foster carers can make in relation to the children they are responsible for. This will support them in making the placement feel more of a normal family situation with positive implications for the children and young people concerned.
- Foster carers feel it is important that they should have an input into the review process for the children they care for. The service has agreed to explore ways of promoting this, and we look forward to hearing more.
- We specifically asked the foster carers about recruitment and why they thought new carers may choose to work for an independent agency. The key issue was that the agencies pay 'the going rate' from the outset, as opposed to the skills framework used by the council, which takes time to work through.
- The foster carers stressed the importance of the council monitoring the quality of service from the independent agencies, particularly given the higher costs.
- Overall the foster carers stressed that they enjoyed looking after the children. We agreed that we need to nurture this important asset to our city.

Recommendation 10 – That the Director of Children’s Services reports back to us in July 2012 on how foster carers can have a formalised input into the review process for children they care for.

Residential care

134. The number of homes provided directly by the authority has reduced in recent years by 56 beds due to the closure or reduction in capacity of the authority’s own homes and the termination of previous contracts with local providers. National guidance on the optimum size of homes indicates much smaller units of provision than may have been the case in the past.
135. As part of our inquiry members of the board visited two of the local authority’s existing residential children’s homes, and also two homes from the independent sector, both located within Leeds.
136. In all cases we were very pleased to learn that the children are actively encouraged to join local organisations such as sporting and social activities. We know that the council’s youth service has links to each of the council’s care homes, but we were not aware that this had been considered for independent homes located in Leeds.
137. One of the independent care homes we visited was part of a larger organisation that is establishing its own school in the near future for in house education provision across the local area. It will be interesting to see how this develops.



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138. The emphasis was on giving the children as near 'normal' a life as possible. At one of the homes visited, two residents proudly showed off their bedrooms.

139. Independent care homes are monitored by Ofsted. Whilst this is important we were concerned that not all external placements are individually checked before a child is placed. At present this happens after the placement. We are also concerned that appropriate checks need to be in place to ensure that providers are delivering the services that the child needs and that Leeds partners are paying for. These are our vulnerable children and we must take care to make sure the provision they need is given to them.

140. All of the homes we visited appeared to provide a good safe and secure place for children to stay, with little distinction between the local authority and independent provision seen. We felt that there ought to be scope for the authority to consider increasing its in-house provision, at least in the short to medium term in order to help more young people to be placed in Leeds.

141. However we did note that there have been a number of independent children's homes recently opened in Leeds, which are providing services to children from other local authorities.

142. We were pleased to hear that Looked After Children Services are liaising with City Development about this issue, and hope that, with better communication, it will be possible for more Leeds children to take advantage of these new placements within the city therefore reducing the need to provide placements outside of the city.

143. We were also told that the authority is carrying out a full review of residential children's homes, including the condition of buildings and their fitness for purpose. This is due to be completed early in 2012.

144. We have not been able to see the output of the residential care review during the period of our inquiry. We realise that it would be a challenge to make new provision in a time of financial difficulty. However we consider that there may be opportunities to make medium term savings and provide a better service to our own children and young people if more children could be accommodated within Leeds.

Recommendation 11 – That the Director of Children's Services presents the initial residential care review outcomes to us at the April 2012 meeting for comment, with a further update on improvement progress required in July 2012.

145. In our scrutiny report on Outdoor Education Centres published in spring 2011 we recommended that the potential to use the existing resource of Silverdale in the Lake District to support the need for emergency placements be explored. Progress of this will be monitored by the Scrutiny Board.

Voice and influence

146. 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.



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All looked after children and care leavers from Leeds have access to independent advocacy services through the independent Children's Rights Service commissioned from Barnardo's. This includes children placed outside Leeds itself, who are visited by workers from the service to make them aware of their rights.

147. As part of our inquiry we arranged for representatives of the Board to meet with the Children in Care Council in order to offer the opportunity for children and young people's voices to inform our inquiry.

148. We met with 5 young people in care, all aged around 15. A young woman on work placement with Barnardo's who had previously been in care also took part in the discussion. The young people had been in care for varying periods from about 5 years to most of their lives. One was currently in a non-council residential home in Leeds and the others were living with foster carers.

149. We asked about how long they had been in placements. Again the answers varied from 7 years with one family to five placements in a single year. Two of the young people were siblings who had spent part of their time in care living together but were now in different placements. One young person had experienced an adoption breakdown, followed by a number of different placements.

150. We wanted to find out what involvement the young people had in the decisions about their placements. Their answers related largely to the level of involvement they had in decision-making within the placement. We were pleased that most of them talked about

negotiation with and advice from their carers on a positive light.

151. The young people had a number of theories about the differences between residential placements and foster care, as well as the relative merits of local authority and independent care homes, but this seemed to be mainly based on hearsay generated within their own networks of looked after children. Some of this related to queries about allowances and entitlements, which they were unclear about.

152. We discussed with them the situation that some variation would be due to the differing approaches of individual carers, but aside from that we could understand that it would be helpful to them to know for example what allowances they were entitled to. We were not sure whether this information is readily available to young people in care, but if not, then this should be given consideration.

153. They also experienced different 'rules' with different carers and were unclear about what rules existed and how much discretion carers have. This mirrored the comments we heard from the foster carers about lack of clarity and consistency about their discretion to make decisions.

154. We consider that carers should have the autonomy to make decisions within the confines of acceptable risk and taking into consideration safeguarding requirements.

Recommendation 12 – That the Director of Children's Services provides a report to the Scrutiny Board in July 2012 on the decision making capacity of carers when supporting children in their care and how this could be improved to promote autonomy and consistency.



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155. The young people told us about the impact of placement moves on their ability to trust people, especially if they felt that they had been let down often. In some cases the young people did not know why their placement had ended; it seemed in at least one case that the foster carer had decided to stop. We heard that they don't always get much notice of a change in placement. Some of the young people however told us that they had been happy that their placement had changed. In some cases they had the opportunity to go on a trial stay or had been able to stay on with a respite carer.

156. The young woman on work placement spoke very positively of the help she had received to set herself up living independently, including advice on budgeting on her allowance. The young people were very interested in this, but didn't seem to be aware of the service.

157. We heard that some young people prefer residential care because they find foster care to be too painful a reminder of the family life that they don't have.

158. In relation to residential care, young people liked arrangements where they knew which staff would be on duty when. Stability and commitment of staffing was also important to them. We also heard that practice varied between residential homes as to whether or not young people had free access to communal areas like the lounge.

159. The young people had varying experiences of having to move school when they moved placement. One told us that he was in his exam years and now had a taxi across the city so that he

could stay at the same school. Several of the young people said that they didn't like being dropped off in a taxi at school as this marked them out as being in care. Some said that insisting on dropping them off at school rather than their preference for nearby was to ensure that they attended school; however they could walk off site anyway if they chose to.

160. They also discussed how their acknowledgement of one another in the school environment was influenced by their attitude to their peers knowing about them being in care.

161. We are grateful to the young people for sharing their thoughts with us. We are aware that Children's Services Managers and also the Corporate Carers group aim to meet regularly with the Children in Care Council to ensure that their views are taken into account. We hope that these groups will follow up some of the issues discussed above with the young people in influencing the future shape of service delivery.



Evidence

Dates of Scrutiny

Scrutiny Board meetings

- 8 September 2011
- 6 October 2011
- 10 November 2011
- 12 January 2012

Working Group meetings

- 18 October 2011 – Leeds foster carers
- 19 October 2011 – foster carer recruitment
- 16 November 2011 – Children in Care Council

Observation of Panels

- 20 September 2011 – Joint Agency Decision and Review Panel (JADAR)
- 28 September 2011 – Head of Service Decision and Review Panel
- 6 October 2011 - Placement Panel

Visits

- 15 November 2011 – Oastler House Advanced Childcare
- 15 November 2011 – Pebbles Care
- 5 December 2011 – Luttrell Crescent
- 5 December 2011 – Inglewood

Witnesses Heard

- Councillor Judith Blake – Executive Member (Children's Services)
- Councillor Ted Hanley – Deputy Executive Member (Children's Services) – safeguarding)
- Nigel Richardson – Director of Children's Services
- Steve Walker – Children's Services – Deputy Director (Safeguarding, Specialist and Targeted Services)
- Sue May – Children's Services - Looked After Children Lead
- Sarah Sinclair – Children's Services - Chief Officer (Strategy, Commissioning and Performance)
- Saleem Tariq – Children's Services - Head of Service, Children's Social Work
- Alun Rees – Children's Services – Head of the Leeds Virtual College for Vulnerable Children
- Graham Puckering – Children's Services, Placements Service Manager
- Ben Foster – Children's Services, Team Manager (Fostering)
- Leeds foster carers
- Members of the Children in Care Council



Evidence

Reports and Publications Submitted

- Report of the Director of Children's Services – 8 September 2011 – External Placements Review
- Report to Leeds Children's Trust Board – 15 June 2011 – Update on Children's Services Obsessions – Reducing the need for children to be looked after (Help children to live in safe and supportive families)
- Children's Placements Strategy and Sufficiency Action Plan
- Foster Carer Recruitment and Assessment Strategy
- Data including number of LAC by ward, ethnicity information, numbers of asylum seeking LAC and LAC placed in Leeds by other authorities
- Staffing information
- Financial information in relation to placements, including costs of in house and external placements
- Family Contact Centres
- Multi Systemic Therapy Pilots
- Family Group Conferences
- Turning the Curve on Placements for Looked After Children – plan on a page – October 2011
- LAC Obsession Programme Plan
- Report of the Director of Children's Services – 12 January 2012 – Outcomes for Looked After Children in Leeds

Monitoring arrangements

Standard arrangements for monitoring the outcome of the Board's recommendations will apply.

The decision-makers to whom the recommendations are addressed will be asked to submit a formal response to the recommendations, including an action plan and timetable, normally within two months.

Following this the Scrutiny Board will determine any further detailed monitoring, over and above the standard quarterly monitoring of all scrutiny recommendations.



Appendix 1

The Story

- The information on this sheet provides a summary of the various strands of the **turning the curve programme plan** which supports the Children's Trust Board strategic obsession.
- The overall aim of the **turning the curve plan** on placements for looked after children is a whole system transformation to focus resources on early intervention, prevention and family support in order to reduce the need for children and young people to be in care.
- As at the end of July 2011, 1,447 children and young people were in care in Leeds representing a rate of 95.1 per 10,000.
- Looked after children numbers in Leeds have historically been high when compared to statistical neighbours (**fig 3**)
- The numbers of externally provided placements has grown significantly over recent years (**fig1**) with a consequential financial impact.
- If left un-checked, the growth in external placements will continue and by March 2014 could represent 50% of placements in Leeds (**fig2**)
- There were 12,934 requests for service and 13,643 referrals to social care in 2010-11, a total of 26,577.
- Domestic violence is the primary referral reason (20%), with the next largest categories being parenting support (17.5%) and suspected neglect (11.5%).
- In terms of the source of referrals in 2010-11, (30%) were from the police with 13% from schools/education focused organisations and 11% from hospitals, doctors or community based health organisations. 1,128 (8%) of referrals were from neighbours, family friends or the household of the child or young person. There were 95 self-referrals.
- In July 2011, 1,074 children were subject to a Child Protection Plan, a rate of 70.6; this is a significant increase from the July 2010 numbers of 662, a rate of 43.6.
- There is a need for an increase in the quantity and quality of common assessments undertaken in order to identify and meet needs at an early stage. In the 2010/11 financial year, 1,131 CAFs were initiated.

Strand 6 - Information & Performance Management

- Ensure placement and financial information to meet business needs
- Develop and implement monthly performance dashboard for the looked after children obsession.
- Develop and implement quarterly performance and management information by city area and locality.
- Ensure robust and secure arrangements are in place for the safe transfer of information within and between directorates and agencies.
- Support the use of Outcomes Based Accountability for developing local strategies around intervention.
- Develop a medium-term forecasting model to map demographic & socio-economic impact on placement activity and financial forecasting.

Strand 1 - Early Intervention and prevention

- Adopt the findings of the universal review by implementing the "Early Start" teams.
- Invest £1.1m in 2012/13 of Early Intervention Grant funding to expand child-care for vulnerable 2-year olds
- Increase the use of the Common Assessment Framework assessments
- Target and re-commission specialist and targeted Family Support Services
- Invest an additional £325k to expand Family Group Conferencing. Two new area teams to be fully operational by April 2012.
- Implement changes to improve the referral and assessment processes.
- Improve the response to domestic violence referrals – new approach from December 2011.

Strand 3 - Interventions with children on the edge of care and their families

- Prioritise access to Early Years Services for families at risk
- Invest an additional £500k (£200k grant funded) to expand Multi-systemic Therapy with two new teams to be operational by March 2012.
- Develop and implement a 60 day default plan for children just entering care (or on the edge of care).
- Develop and implement prioritised exit from care plans by January 2012.
- Invest £0.4m to continue the expansion of Targeted Mental Health support in schools.

Fig 1 Actual/Forecast Number of external Placements

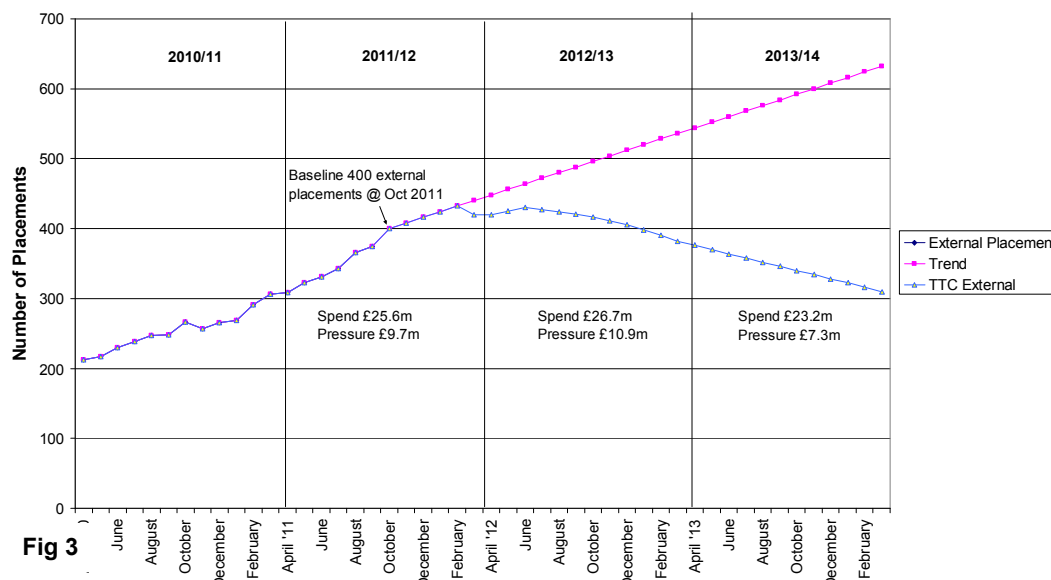


Fig 2 Placement Numbers March 2011 to March 2014

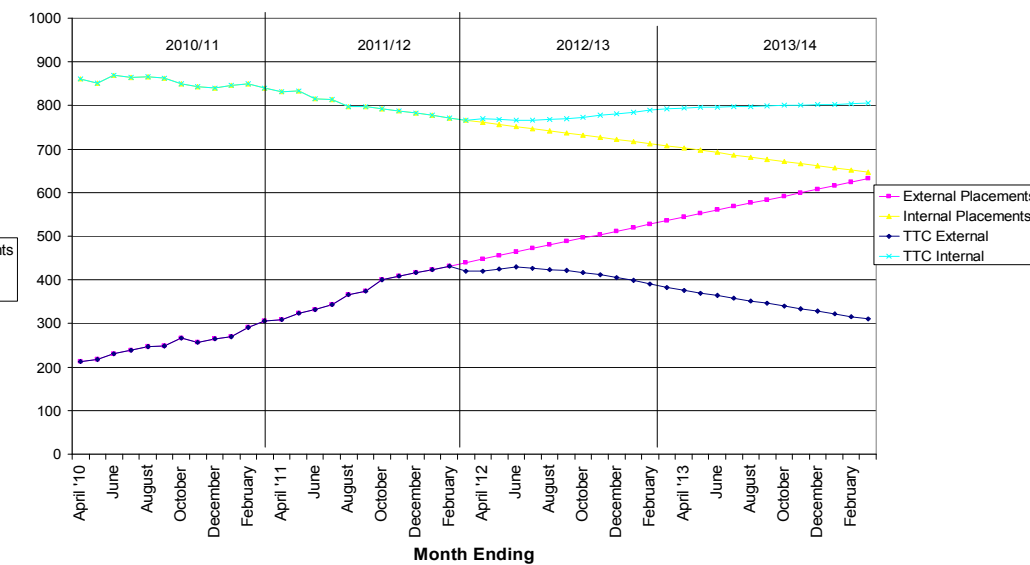
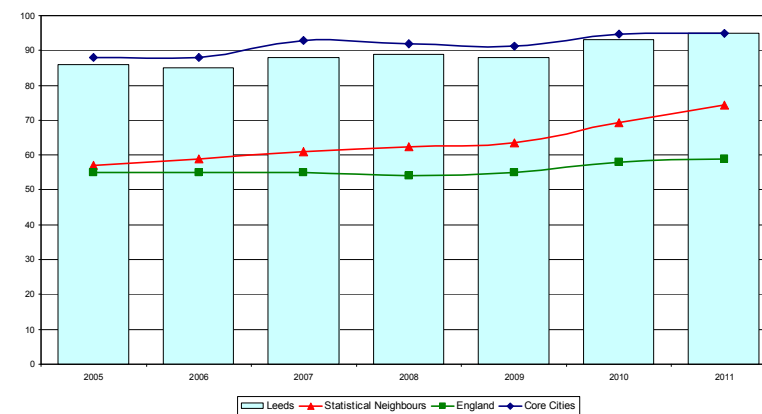


Fig 3 Looked after children rates per 10,000 population



Strand 2 & 5 - Placement Service, Processes & Governance

- Re-develop the looked after children & care leavers placements strategy and sufficiency plan.
- Invest an additional £270k to strengthen the placement service and the contract management of all placements.
- Review the end to end placement processes and implement improvements.
- Review governance and decision-making processes around placements
- Ensure fair and equitable funding for placements from all partner agencies.
- Invest an additional £0.4m to support the child specific adoption strategy, inter-agency adoptions and the forecast growth in adoptions.
- Invest an additional £0.25m to support the anticipated growth in special guardianships.

Strand 4 - In-house Capacity (Residential Review)

- Complete the review of the in-house residential capacity by January 2012.
- Develop the capital strategy for residential provision by January 2012.
- Create additional in-house residential capacity (8 placements) by April 2012.
- Business case for social pedagogy model to be completed by November 2011 with model to commence from January 2012.

Strand 4 - In-house capacity (in-house fostering)

- Fully implement the Payment for Skills model.
- Further develop the foster carer recruitment strategy.
- Achieve a net growth of 20 carers by the end of March 2012 (from original base line at 31/3/11)
- Achieve a net growth of 40 carers by the end of March 2013 (from original base line at 31/3/11)

**Scrutiny Board (Children and Families)
External Placements
2012**

Report author: Kate Arcscott

www.scrutiny.unit@leeds.gov.uk