

## **CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE: 4 JUNE 2024**

### **CHILDREN IN CARE AND CARE LEAVERS**

### **REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES**

#### **Purpose of report**

1. The purpose of this report is to provide the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee with an overview of Leicestershire County Council's duties and responsibilities to children in care and care leavers, the progress achieved and the development plan going forward.

#### **Policy Framework and Previous Decisions**

2. The functions of local authorities in relation to children who are looked after by them are set out in the Children Act 1989 and associated regulations and guidance; the principal regulations are the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review regulations 2010.
3. Corporate Parenting Strategy 2022-2025 outlines Leicestershire's commitment to the seven corporate parenting principles set out in the Children and Social Work Act 2017.
4. Local authorities have a duty to support young people who cease to be looked after (for example those referred to in legislation as 'relevant' and 'former relevant children'). The main aim of the Care Leavers Regulations and of this guidance is to make sure that care leavers are provided with comprehensive personal support so that they achieve their potential as they make their transition to adulthood. The Care Leavers (England) Regulations 2010 are made under the Children Act 1989.
5. At the meeting of the County Council on 21 February 2024, it was agreed that care experience would be treated as if it were a protected characteristic.

#### **Background**

6. As of 8 May 2024, Leicestershire County Council had 723 children in care and 652 care leavers (aged 18-25). This includes children and young adults who became looked after due to being unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.
7. 'Our Promise to Children in Care and Care Leavers', which is appended to the report, was launched in 2019. It sets out the commitment that Leicestershire County Council and its partners will provide the best support, guidance, and care to children in care and care leavers. It demonstrates that the Council values them for their individuality, provide stability and offer aspirational life chances as a good parent provides for their children. An annual report for Our Promise is completed to evidence the partnership working and impact for children and young people.

8. On the 11 May 2023, an Ofsted Focused Visit was undertaken which looked at the Local Authority's arrangements for children in care with a particular focus on:
- Decision-making for children who come into care,
  - Permanence planning for children in care including all permanence options,
  - The experiences of disabled children in care.
9. The inspection identified that since the full inspection in 2019, the quality and impact of social work practice have improved. Increasing numbers of children are achieving permanence within their own family networks via special guardianship orders, and more children are achieving a sense of belonging via permanent foster placements. Social work practice with children in care, including those with a disability, is consistently child focused. This impacts positively on their life experiences and their physical and emotional well-being.
10. The Department has recently launched a Continuous Improvement Plan 2024-2027 'Achieving Excellence through purposeful practice'. This built upon the Road to Excellence 2021-2023 plan, and both have steered the direction of work and development in the service areas of children in care and care leavers. The core values of 'Aspirational, Being Curious and Collaboration' and the associated behaviours of 'professional kindness, active listening, outcome focused and being accountable'; are central to all engagement with children and their networks.

### **Children in Care**

11. The following are key areas where positive outcomes have been achieved.

#### **Permanence**

12. Since 2019, the Department has continued to develop and strengthen the approach to permanence for children. The Service has therefore worked to ensure a framework that provides opportunity to give a sense of security, continuity, commitment, identity, and enduring belonging. Belonging is the feeling of security and support when there is a sense of acceptance, inclusion, and identity. When a child feels supported and not alone, they are often more resilient, and often cope more effectively with difficult times.

#### **Emotional Permanence for children with a care plan of long- term fostering**

13. The Permanence Panel has been central to having robust oversight and drive. The role of panel is key to ensure that children who have a sense of belonging in their foster home or residential home secure matching permanence in a timely way. 113 children (59%), where matching permanence can be considered, have achieved enduring belonging. The remaining 79 children (41%) have dates for permanence panel throughout 2024.

#### **Special Guardianship Order**

14. Special Guardianship permanence planning was a key focus within the Defining Children and Family Services for the Future (DCFSF) programme, which initiated in 2020. Special Guardianship Order (SGO) Pathway 2 identified that a number of children who were looked after could achieve permanency via an SGO.

The SGO Assessment Team was established in November 2021 as part of Pathway 2 to focus on achieving permanency for children who were subject of full care orders within the Children in Care Service.

15. Since April 2023 eleven children have achieved legal permanency via a Special Guardianship through this route.
16. SGO assessments are being completed on ten children. The Service is currently waiting for court hearings to progress to SGO for five children.

### **Life Story Work**

17. In 2022, the Life Story Guidance was updated ensure all children with a long term care plan of fostering has an understanding of their care journey and the decisions made. All Children now transferring to Children in Care Teams must have the start of a life story book which will continue to be added to and developed when in Children in Care.
18. In addition, young people turning 18 and moving to the Care Leavers Team all now have a 'Moving Forward' letter which gives detail of their experiences and decisions both before becoming a child in care and since. This is to give more detail to the young person taking into consideration their age and understanding.

### **Rehabilitation Home**

19. The SGO Assessment Team service offer has extended to include undertaking work where a return home to the parent(s) has been assessed and agreed as the plan, or where children/young people have already returned home (planned or unplanned), and revocation of the Care Order is the goal. The SGO Assessment Team will facilitate network meetings and ongoing reviews to ensure that the network and safety plans are robust and tested. The team ensure that there is a SMART trajectory to ensure timely decisions and assessments to progress to achieving revocation of the care order. The team are currently progressing seven children to revocation and have achieved one revocation in ten months.

### **Performance Data Children in Care**

20. The following performance data relates to Children in Care:
  - Care Plan have maintained a strong performance, within date plans currently being 98%.
  - Recorded visits to children in care within timescale are at 91% and have been maintained.
  - Health assessments 84.5% in timescale.
  - Dental checks for the Children in Care Teams is 93.5%, and for Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC) Children in Care it is 55.9% due to the difficulties of identifying an NHS dentist.

### **Care Leavers**

21. The following are key areas where positive outcomes have been achieved and are being progressed:

## Care Leaver Offer

22. There have been recent significant developments to the Care Leaver Offer which include Leicestershire County Council recognising Care Leaver status as a protected characteristic. The Department recognises that the experience of being a child in care can be a potential source of discrimination, like other protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010, such as race or disability.
23. This includes discrimination which results in disproportionate negative outcomes across a range of areas such as housing, employment, education, and exposure to the criminal justice system. The offer is not just about what the Council itself can do to help and support care leavers, but also partner agencies and the wider community.
24. The Department has extended the offer of support for Council Tax for its care leavers. Support will now be available for care leavers no matter where they go on to live, instead of those only living in Leicestershire. This ensures an equitable offer for all care leavers, which is really important.

## High Risk and Vulnerable Care Leavers

25. The Care Leaver Service continue to embed the Complex Risk process for those care leavers who are assessed as displaying increased risk-taking behaviour; over and above behaviour and risks associated with children or young people who have experienced disruption, loss, and trauma.
26. The aim for Multi-Agency Complex Risk Process is to provide a consistent response to the risk management of 'low', 'medium' and 'high' risk children or young people. To provide a structure which ensures a joined up multi-agency approach which will create more effective safety.
27. Care leavers who are in custody are considered as part of this process as it is recognised care leavers need additional support during their prison sentence and in preparation for release. In addition to the Complex Risk process the Service Manager for Care leavers works closely with the Youth Justice Service Manager and both attend the three-monthly regional Care Experienced Young People in Custody Meeting.

## 22-25 year old Care Leavers

28. The Service has enhanced the process for maintaining contact with its care leavers who have chosen not to continue to have a Personal Advisor post 21 years of age. A Keeping in Touch Letter, Newsletters, offer leaflet and opportunities are shared with all 18-25 Care Experienced Young People at a minimum of three times a year. No care leaver under the age of 25 has their support offer closed, instead, they are allocated or unallocated with an open-door policy for support.

## Housing

29. The Housing Protocol agreed and signed by Leicestershire County Council and the seven district/borough councils, was launched on the 3 April 2024. The protocol provides better joint working across the Local Authority and the seven district/borough councils in meeting the housing needs for Care Leavers. The protocol includes Care Leavers being a protected characteristic and recognises the discrimination and inequality care leavers can face in their day to day lives.

30. The protocol also reviews the use of private rent for care leavers and the Local Authority being the rent guarantor. This is a temporary measure due to the lack of housing provision and support young people in developing their independence instead of remaining in a placement that they no longer need.
31. The protocol is clear that this is temporary until the young person can access social housing, it also enables young people to develop their skills in living independently which will help them maintain their tenancy once they have a property designated to them.
32. The Service has a specialist housing officer who ensures appropriate escalation between the service and the seven district/borough councils. The Housing Officer also provides advice and support to Personal Advisors across the Service which has proved to help reduce issues of homelessness and ensure housing applications for social housing are completed for Care Leavers by the time they are 17 and half years of age, ready to go live when they are 18. The officer provides valuable support in making appropriate challenge when needed and continues to act as a bridge between the service and the districts. Although the relationship with the district/borough councils have improved, the Service are still struggling with timeliness and a lack of stock available to care leavers.

### **Voice of care leavers**

33. Supporting Young People After Care (SYPAC) is an established monthly social event for care leavers which is well attended and lifelong offer. After Care Council has been established in the last twelve months which give an additional forum for care leavers to have a voice to support, inform and influence service and policy developments.
34. The Service has recently appointed to a Participation Worker whose focus is to develop understanding of trauma and voice of unaccompanied children and care leavers. They will consider the wider cross-cultural competencies for unaccompanied children and young people and how this impact on engagement and work with them, to support achieving the best outcomes.

### **Performance Data Care Leavers**

35. The following performance data relates to Care Leavers:
  - Pathway plans in timescales: 92.8%
  - Care Leaver recorded visits in timescales: 88.8%
  - Care leavers in Employment, Education or Training: 62.6%
  - Care leavers in contact: 98.8%
  - Care leavers in suitable accommodation: 96.8%

### **Background papers**

36. Minutes from County Council meeting on 21 February 2024:  
<https://democracy.leics.gov.uk/documents/g7305/Printed%20minutes%20Wednesday%2021-Feb-2024%2014.00%20County%20Council.pdf?T=1>

### **Circulation under the Local Issues Alert Procedure**

37. None

### **Equality Implications**

38. All assessments and services provided for Children in Care and Care Leavers are done so in a framework of respecting equality and diversity for young people. The Children and Family Services department is committed to equality and ensuring the human rights of all users, and importantly to support those young people who have arrived here from other countries as unaccompanied children.
39. Care Leaver status being considered a protected characteristic is considered as part of all service development.
40. There are no equality implications arising from this report.

### **Human Rights Implications**

41. There are no human rights implications arising from this report.

### **Appendix**

Our Promise to Children in Care and Care Leavers.

### **Officer(s) to Contact**

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