



2014-
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Looked After Children Strategy



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INTRODUCTION

‘We will ensure our Children Looked After have all the opportunities that good parents afford their children’

This multi-agency strategy outlines our strategic ambitions, pledge and commitment to the children and young people who come into our care. We want to ensure that all children and young people who are looked after are provided with the best possible care and support, in placements that are as close as possible to their home. In providing this support we will seek to work in partnership with children and young people, their parents and families and partner agencies, aiming to ensure that children and young people enjoy their childhood and succeed in adult life.

This strategy should be read in parallel with the Looked After Children and Care Leavers Placement Commissioning Strategy 2014-17, the Primary Prevention and Early Help Joint Commissioning Strategy to triangulate the way in which we are Transforming Services to safeguard and improve the outcomes for all vulnerable children. It specifies the means by which our strategic intentions will be realised and the actions that will be taken to ensure that we achieve the best possible outcomes for all the children and young people for whom we have responsibility. We will review this strategy on an annual basis to measure our success as champions for our looked after children and young people. An essential part of this review will be to ensure that the views of children and young people are taken into consideration on all aspects of the priorities included in this strategy.

Keeping children safe and protecting them from harm presents unique challenges. Children, by virtue of their age, immaturity and dependence on adults are all vulnerable to some extent or other because adult voices tend to dominate when dealing with professionals. In the vast majority of circumstances these voices can be relied upon to act in the child’s best interests; however this does not apply when the adults are the source of the child’s problems.

The challenge for children’s social care professionals is judging when it is timely to take a child into care and when it is in their best interests not to do so. When children are removed from their birth families social workers can often be accused of being over-zealous in their efforts to protect the child. Yet when things go badly wrong the public, with the benefit of hindsight, wonder why the child wasn’t taken into care earlier. The reality of social work requires professionals to identify and manage a myriad of complex risks and relationships. They must not only respond to the child’s immediate presenting needs but must also evaluate and predict what may or may not happen to that child in the future.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child sets out the basic human rights that all children have including the right (i) to survival (ii) to develop to the fullest (iii) to protection from harmful influences, abuse and exploitation (iv) to participate fully in family, cultural and social life. Of these, studies have shown that children themselves consider ‘protection from abuse’ to be the most important. The

vision of children in the Children's Act 1989 is that they are neither the property of their parents nor should they be viewed as helpless objects of charity.

LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK

The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010 came into force on 1st April 2011 and to support their implementation, a suite of statutory guidance was issued setting out how local authorities should carry out their responsibilities in relation to the care planning, placement and review for all children who are looked after.

These revised regulations and guidance streamline processes to increase the emphasis on more effective care planning, with a focus on the child, and are designed to improve the quality and consistency of care planning, placement and case review for looked after children. They also aim to improve the care and support provided to care leavers. This statutory guidance outlines all of our responsibilities and underpins all of our work in promoting good outcomes for children who are looked after.

The legislative framework is supported and underpinned by a wide range of publications, identifying good practice and research into the national context and impact of strategies to improve the outcomes for children looked after. In Southampton, we are using this intelligence to improve services and stretch our ambitions as corporate parents, for example, the OfSTED report on, 'The Impact of Virtual Schools on the Educational Progress of Looked After Children', published in 2012, has shaped the way we are improving educational achievement for our children.

NATIONAL CONTEXT

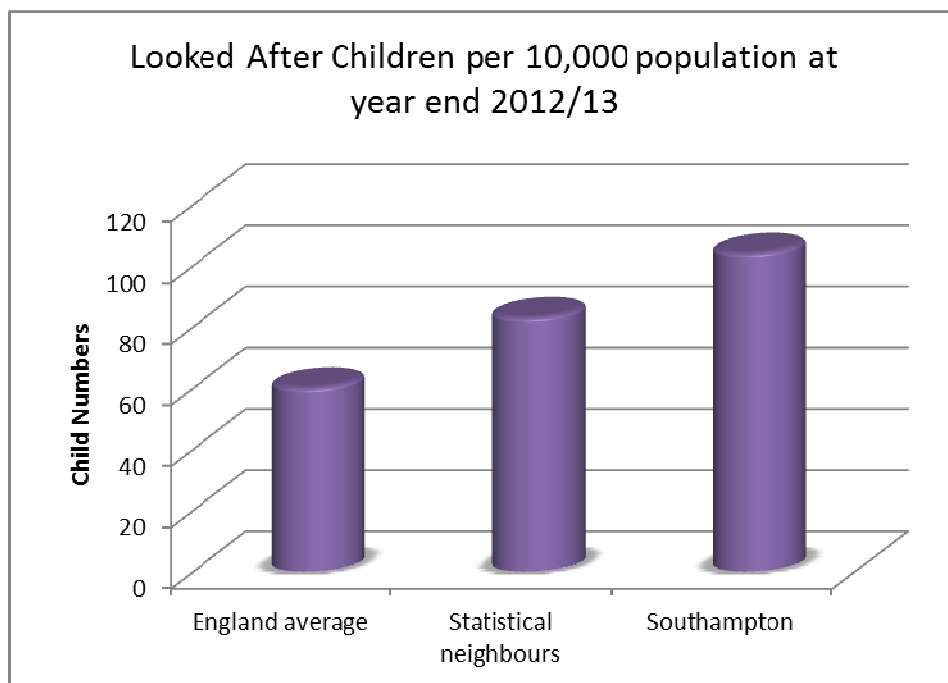
A 'looked after child' can be defined as someone at risk aged 0 to 18 years for whom a local authority has full or shared parental responsibility. A child can become looked after either by voluntary agreement with their parent or they can be placed in the care of a local authority through the courts. The term 'care leaver' refers to a young person aged 16+ who is transitioning into adulthood. A local authority will maintain a statutory duty of care until they reach the age of 21 (or 25 if they are in full time education). A child may become looked after (i) because of temporary or permanent problems facing their parents, (ii) as a result of abuse or neglect, (iii) because of challenging behaviour or (iv) because they have no-one to care for them. Looked after children and care leavers face a variety of unique challenges as they grow up and transition into adulthood. For example, they are at greater risk of experiencing social exclusion because moving away from the family home can often break social networks, which in turn can induce strong feelings of loss and separation.

By the end of March 2012 there were 67,050 looked after children and young people in England. 62% of these cases recorded 'abuse or neglect' as the main reason for entry into the care system. Looked after children are amongst the most vulnerable groups in society and their physical health, social, emotional and educational well-being is heavily influenced by the quality of care they receive. Their early life

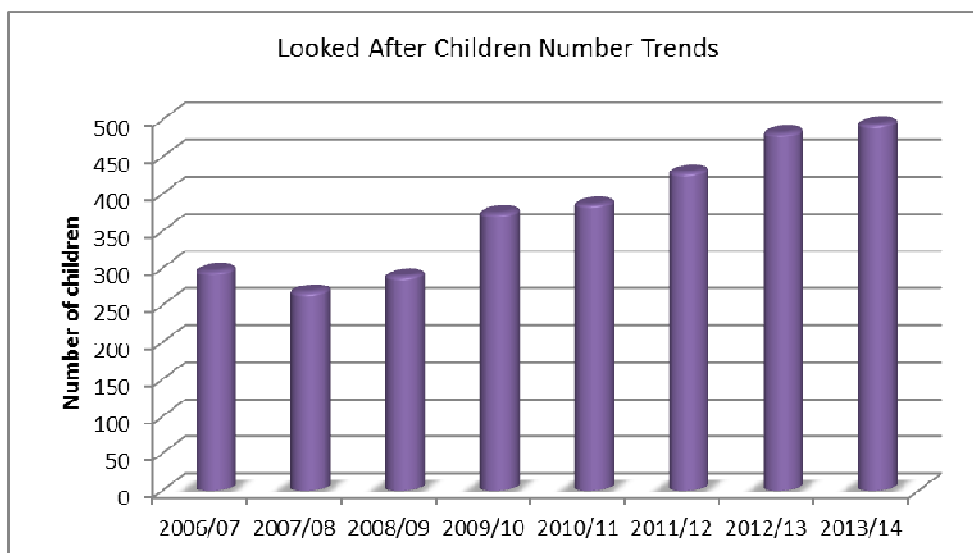
experiences can have a profound impact on their personal development and future life chances. As such, when children cannot be looked after by their birth parents, it is vital to ensure that the best alternatives are identified early and that timely interventions take place in order to maximise their chances of achieving their full potential and narrowing the gap with their peers.

LOCAL CONTEXT

Southampton has a local population of 239,400, with an estimated 58,000 children. The city is one of the more deprived areas in England and is ranked 81st on the overall indices of multiple deprivation (2010) (where 1 equals the most deprived and 354 equals the least deprived). 20% of the local population are aged between 16 and 24 and they experience 29% unemployment. A recent Save the Children report estimated that 6,000 children locally live in severe poverty, as measured through median income and material deprivation levels.



This challenging environmental context places acute pressures on all local public services. For example, hospital admission rates for alcohol and substance misuse among young people is 26% higher than our statistical neighbours, teenage pregnancy rates are 17% higher and domestic violence accounts for 20% of all local violent crime. It places particular pressure on social care services and the overall trend in demand for children's services has been consistently rising in recent years.



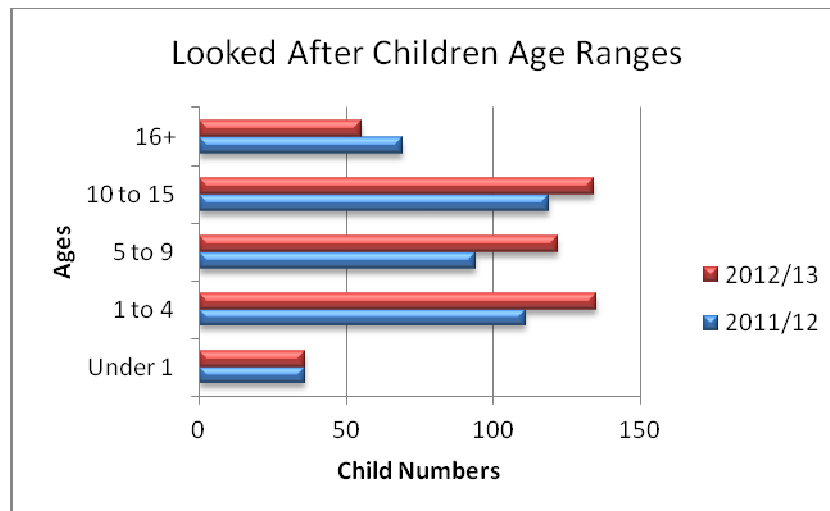
The Southampton Journey

The trend data demonstrates a dramatic increase in the number of Looked After Children from 286 in 2007 to 494 in April 2014. This high rate in some ways reflects the City's levels of deprivation, currently 81st out of 326 Local Authorities in the Multiple Deprivation index. The percentage of children living in poverty is 6-7% above the national average and the unemployment rates in Southampton show the highest increase for 16-24 year olds, creating further demand within the system. Domestic Violence is also a significant priority issue in the City, impacting on the safeguarding and wellbeing of children and is a factor in 80% of all referrals to social care and the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub.

The City has responded well to the pressures as shown in the 2011 OfSTED inspection reports on Adoption, judged to be 'Good' and Fostering, judged to be 'Outstanding'. Following these inspections, there was a dip in some outcome measures and the 2012 inspection report on Children Looked After and Safeguarding, judged services to be 'Adequate' setting the agenda for further improvement.

A policy change on safeguarding was implemented to ensure that the safeguarding and wellbeing of children and young people in the City is the top shared priority, driven and challenged by the Local Safeguarding Children's Board.

The impact of this strategy is reflected in the increasing numbers of babies and children in the 0- 9 age group taken into care reflecting the strong multi-agency priority on safeguarding and the focus on early adoption to secure permanence in children's lives. The largest proportion of Looked After Children is the 34% within the 0 to 4 age range.



In April 2014, 40 children were placed in adoptive placements awaiting final adoption orders, signifying the leadership focus on permanence within the lives of our most vulnerable children. However, concerns still remain around the pace of decision making and delays in progressing some cases.

The focus and impact on the life chances of babies and younger children is in evidence through the dramatic improvements in outcomes as a result of high quality placements, greater stability and more robust plans for permanence. This has been mirrored by the drive to raise standards in schools and improve educational outcomes, with significant success at Key Stages 1 and 2, which will enable our Looked After Children to progress to achieve and sustain outcomes in the future. Our ambition to ensure all Looked After Children are taught in good or outstanding schools is making progress, standing at 77% in March 2014. It is also underpinned by the work of Early Years Advisory Teachers, who support Early Years providers, ensuring children have a coherent PEP to improve their achievement and guide their transition to primary school.

The intervention strategies in place for older children and young people have not impacted so impressively on overall outcomes, although progress is evident in some key areas, notably Youth Offending, teenage pregnancy rates, mental health and the decreasing levels of drug and alcohol abuse. There is a real drive to secure more robust Pathway Plans, health assessments and reviews, increased access to Education, employment and training and to provide suitable accommodation for care leavers, maintaining contact to offer support into independence and adult life.

Transformational Change

In April 2013, a new People Directorate was set up to adopt a more strategically aligned approach to maximising the health and well-being of everyone living in the city from cradle to grave. The overriding aspiration is to make a real and positive difference to people's lives and to improve the outcomes for those in need of services. Since then Children's Services has embarked on an ambitious three year Transformation Programme with the expectation that upon completion practice standards will be improved, performance will be raised and good outcomes will be consistently achieved. The vision is:

“An early intervention city with a multi-agency integrated service provision that works to ensure children’s needs are met at the earliest stage. Where possible, and children’s welfare is assured, these needs will be met within their family and community resources.”

This vision stems from our belief that all children and care leavers deserve to be healthy, happy and safe and to feel loved, valued and respected. They also deserve to have a good experience from social care pathways. Through this programme we aim to refocus our delivery model towards adopting prevention and early intervention strategies, because we believe that in doing so we can reduce the demand for tier 4 (highest level) services over time. This approach is also in response to the growing body of evidence which demonstrates that investment in children from pre-birth up to age 8 will maximise their life chances later on.

Where children and young people cannot safely be brought up with their own family, we will act quickly and effectively to safeguard and protect children and young people by taking them into our care for as long as necessary.

The Children’s Transformation programme is designed to take a ‘whole systems’ approach to service provision and as such our modus operandi for supporting looked after children and young people is underpinned by the following principles:

- The child’s welfare will take precedence in all our decision making activities and interventions, ensuring we meet our duty to protect children from significant harm, through abuse, neglect or exploitation
- In all our work with children we will protect and promote their cultural inheritance, religion and racial identity. We will challenge racism and discrimination.
- Children with a disability or learning difficulty have the same right to be heard and to access and achieve excellent outcomes
- Children will be given the opportunity to make their views known and will feel confident that they have been involved and listened to.
- Prevention and early intervention services will enable families to stay together but where this is not possible kinship will be considered as the next best alternative.
- Where children require alternative care provision outside their family or kinship network, our preference will be to try and meet their needs through local in-house services first, securing flexible, high quality, affordable placements.
- Independent fostering agencies will only be used as a last resort and residential placements will only be made if they are judged to be in the child’s best interests.

- Where it is safe to do so, children will be placed locally to enable them to remain close to their communities, maintain their networks and minimise disruption to their lives.
- All children of statutory school age will have access to the highest quality education provision to meet their individual needs.
- Placements will provide stability and permanency for children and support positive transitions into adulthood.
- Young people leaving care will receive positive preparation and support so that they are enabled to participate fully as active citizens once they reach adulthood. Significant attention should always be given to preparing and implementing Pathway Plans with young people and minimising any engagement with criminal activity.
- Children will be supported by an experienced, well trained stable team of social workers and form strong relationships to enable them to achieve good health, educational and developmental outcomes.

SOUTHAMPTON'S AMBITION FOR LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN

*Where children cannot safely and effectively be brought up within their own immediate family our interventions will be timely and our service provision of a sufficiently good standard to ensure our looked after children population subscribes to the **'right child, right placement, right time'** only for as long as necessary.*

In Southampton we want the same things for the children and young people we look after as any good parent would want for their child. We want our children to be healthy and happy in childhood. We want them to feel valued for who they are and to feel loved. We want them to enjoy learning and to benefit from the experience. We want them to grow into well adjusted, emotionally balanced individuals who will experience positive relationships, be responsible citizens, fulfil the goals and ambitions they have for themselves and ultimately provide good parenting to their own children.

CORPORATE PARENTING AND GOVERNANCE

The term 'corporate parenting' stems from the Children's Act 1989 and refers to the collective statutory duty of council officers and elected members to provide the best possible care and protection for looked after children and care leavers in the local area. These children tend to have complex, acute, specialist or multiple needs (tier 4) and as such they require a high level of support. Because elected members have position, power and influence in the local community, they are well placed to champion the cause and broaden opportunities for looked after children and those leaving care.

In Southampton they take this responsibility very seriously, through the leadership of the Cabinet Member for Children's Services. He chairs the City's Corporate

Parenting Committee which acts to assist the Council in continuing to fulfil its legal obligations and responsibilities towards looked after children and those leaving care. It acts strategically to ensure that looked after children and care leavers are effectively supported to reach their potential through the provision of excellent parenting, high quality education, opportunities to develop their talents and skills, and effective support for their transition to adulthood.

The Corporate Parenting Committee monitors and reviews the quality and effectiveness of services for looked after children delivered by the Council and its partners. Within this responsibility the Committee has a key role in listening to and hearing the voice of children and young people looked after and leaving care. In this context, the Corporate Parenting Committee's objectives are:

- To oversee the implementation of the Southampton City Council Corporate Parenting Strategy and Action Plan and monitor the quality and effectiveness of services to ensure they fulfil the council's responsibilities and achieve good outcomes for LAC
- To monitor and evaluate progress of relevant legislation and government guidance and its implementation in Southampton to ensure services are responsive to the needs of LAC in line with the national agenda.
- To monitor and review the quality and effectiveness of services across the council, partner agencies and commissioned services to achieve continuing improvements in outcomes for looked after children and care leavers.
- To ensure that the voice and opinions of as wide a range as possible of children looked after and care leavers are heard and that their views are used to shape policy and monitor performance.
- To directly receive the views of children and young people looked after and leaving care via the Children in Care Council mechanisms and annual consultation to ensure their views and experiences directly influence decisions made at this level.
- To receive reports on all aspects of children looked after and care leavers' welfare as required from the local authority and partner agencies in sufficient detail to enable it to undertake its strategic responsibilities for planning, monitoring and evaluation.
- To monitor the performance of the Council by receiving progress reports on the score card of key performance indicators relating to children looked after and care leavers.
- To monitor Southampton's whole authority commitment to joint-working arrangements between council departments and partner agencies and examine ways in which holistic, integrated and cross-cutting practice can be further embedded and priorities and objectives agreed.
- To maintain a strategic overview on the developmental of all new policies, procedures and initiatives to ensure these are in line with local and national priorities and objectives including the Corporate Parenting Strategy; and that they will effectively meet the needs of children looked after.
- To make recommendations to decision makers in Southampton City Council and its strategic partners as it deems appropriate to fulfil its Corporate Parenting duty.

Southampton's Corporate Parenting Committee is a strategic forum which meets six times a year. It is chaired by the Lead Member for Children's Services, has a broad membership base and works collaboratively with the local Children's Safeguarding Board and The Health and Well Being Board to maximise the impact of the governance arrangements across The City. The purpose of this Committee is to be a champion for looked after children and care leavers, to monitor multi-agency working and analyse performance outcomes to improve their life chances.

DELIVERING PRIORITY OUTCOMES

The strategy is based on 8 key areas, arising from our self-evaluation, which are the focus for intervention and improvement. Each key area has an overarching aim and ambition which will be measured by improving outcomes that impact on children's lives. These key areas are as follows:

1. Safeguarding
2. Participating and Having your Say
3. Staying Together, Identity and Relationships
4. Ensuring Good Educational Outcomes
5. Providing Clear Care Pathways and Timely Permanence
6. Promoting Health and Well being
7. Positively Managing Risk Safe and Stable Placements
8. Widening Access to Culture and Leisure Activities

In all areas of focus we have highlighted our pledge to Looked After Children. Whilst we have 'A Promise' in place within Southampton, it is our intention to broaden this promise and subscribe, as Corporate Parents, to an ambitious agenda to improve outcomes for the children and young people who are in our care.

We are 'looking out' to learn from national research and other local authorities to improve our practice in services for looked after children and care leavers. We have highlighted our ambitions for children in our care and the progress we have made along The Southampton Journey. This is evidenced in our Self Evaluation document and monitored by the Corporate Parenting Committee and The Southampton Safeguarding Children Board, through the Improvement Action Plan from the OfSTED inspection in 2012.

1: Safeguarding

Aim: To work in partnership to manage risk, keeping our children and young people safe and free from harm.

We passionately believe that children are best protected if we take a 'whole systems' approach to safeguarding through key agencies working together. We are therefore convinced that multi-agency partnerships represent the most effective pathway to delivering good outcomes for looked after children and care leavers. Through our Local Safeguarding Children's Board in particular these key agencies come together to agree on how best to co-operate with one another to safeguard and promote the welfare of local children. The purpose of this forum is to hold each other to account and to ensure that safeguarding underpins everything that we do. It also serves to

reinforce in very practical terms the notion that safeguarding is everyone's responsibility. Any child or young person may be at risk of sexual exploitation, regardless of their family background or other circumstances, regardless of gender, age or any other socio-demographic factor. We are consistently monitoring and managing risk to ensure that when children are taken into care it is at the right time. To do this effectively we need to have shared intelligence, open and honest dialogue with children and their families and put robust interventions in place which enable everyone to take responsibility for bringing about agreed changes.

What we know nationally

- Research identifies that young people who are at risk of sexual exploitation are often at risk because they have significant unmet emotional needs or have earlier life experiences of abuse and neglect.
- Children looked after are therefore a particularly vulnerable group and this vulnerability is heightened should any child go missing from care.

Next Steps

- We will use the SSCB multi agency assessment of the risks for Missing Children and those in danger of sexual exploitation to improve safeguarding practice
- We will ensure that management oversight and the audit of care plans assesses the quality of risk assessments based on the full assessment of the child's needs, previous missing episodes or the possibility of going missing in the future.
- We will monitor the impact of MASH and Early Help in safeguarding and protecting children and reducing the number of children coming into the care system.

2: Participating and having your say

Aim: Looked after children and care leavers will be listened to and they will be involved in making decisions about their lives. They know how to get information and support, as well as how to raise a concern if they are not happy.

In our Pledge, we recognise that children and young people have a key role in making decisions about their lives and the services they are able to access. We will ask looked after children to help us in providing the most appropriate services and ensure they have access to an advocate to assist them in feeding back to us, including complaining about the services received when appropriate. We will ensure there are a variety of ways for looked after children to give their feedback to all agencies, including through statutory and health reviews and through the Children in Care Council. Children looked after will be supported through Independent Visitors or access to a Mentor to help them play an active role in the decision making to achieve their aspirations.

What we know nationally

- Findings from a Care Inquiry by eight leading children's charities in 2013 showed that too often children and young people in contact with the care system were neither listened to nor involved in decisions about their lives
- In June 2013, Ofsted's review of Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) in 10 local authorities reported some good work in involving children in their plans and reviews, and to make their wishes and feelings known. However, overall, the key findings of the report were negative, highlighting that IROs are responsible for too many children in care and too many additional duties, leaving them insufficient time to speak to children and listen to their views

Next Steps

- We will develop a comprehensive participation strategy, building on the feedback from children looked after and care leavers, building on the Brightspots Project
- We will strengthen the Children in Care Council broadening the membership to include children with disabilities and children from other minority groups
- We will build stronger links between the Governance arrangements for Corporate Parenting to enable children looked after and care leavers to have their voice heard.

3. Staying together

Aim: To keep children and families together wherever possible, through a single needs assessment that minimises risk and respects their identity and heritage

We fervently believe that children's needs are best served within their own families if this can be supported. By taking a 'whole systems' perspective, we see the child's presenting needs within the context of their family, their school and their community. In this context it is imperative that we understand and respect each child's heritage and identity. This needs to be part of the work from across the thresholds and services, from Early Help services through to the MASH. A whole service approach, with a single assessment of the needs of children and families will enable us to identify and intervene early and in doing so help to reduce the number of children reaching the threshold for care proceedings and becoming looked after. Prevention and early intervention is excellently supported in our Children's Centres, where staff are well placed to understand the identity of the child and their needs, offering practical assistance to vulnerable families e.g. through parenting classes, advocacy and a wide range of cultural activities. Children's Centres also play a vital role in supporting families with a looked after child to work towards returning them back home e.g. through supervised visits.

Wherever possible, when children become looked after, we will keep children with their siblings and maximise communication with their birth families.

In our Pledge, we promise to enable children to maintain, build and sustain positive relationships with others, including their birth families, siblings in care, carers and their peers and ensure children and young people know who they are, why they are looked after and understand their heritage. They feel valued by others, and their individual needs are understood.

What we know nationally

- Developing a positive identity is associated with high self-esteem and emotional wellbeing.
- Life-history work can contribute to this by helping children and young people to explore and make sense of their family history and life outside the care system.
- Children and young people have needs and preferences for contact with people they value, for example siblings, who may be an important part of their identity. Good contact management is important for promoting a sense of belonging, positive self-esteem and emotional well-being.
- In 2011, 68% of looked after children said that they thought coming into care was the right thing for them at the time. 20% were not sure and just 12% thought that coming into care was the wrong thing for them at the time.
- 92% of children looked after placed together with their siblings thought this had been the right in their case.
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Next Steps

- We will continue with targeted recruitment for local foster carers and adopters to ensure we can effectively match children's needs with carers' skills and cultural backgrounds
- As part of our transformation programme we are reviewing our service delivery models and staffing structure across the directorate for looked after children, fostering and adoption services to ensure outcomes improve
- We are creating a bespoke team for Care Leavers to meet our aspirations and ambitions as corporate parents
- We will ensure learning from our audit programme improves the quality of work, including ensuring that permanent care plans for fostering have knowledge of their life-story & memory boxes
- We will ensure that contact plans take notice of the child's wishes and contact with birth families and other relevant key people are at the heart of the child's care plan.

4: Ensuring good educational outcomes

Aim: Looked After Children have access to good or outstanding education, supported by high quality Personal Education Plans which support them to make good progress and achieve

We ensure that all our children and young people looked after have access to education in a good or outstanding placement. The Virtual School team monitor, support and challenge schools and act as a champion for ensuring they make progress and achieve good outcomes. Looked after children and care leavers are particularly vulnerable in this area, because problems at home can often manifest themselves as problems in school and vice versa. Being suddenly taken into care can be deeply disruptive, because it can break daily routines, friendship groups and support networks simultaneously with minimal notice. Where appropriate we will collaborate with key stakeholders in order to keep children in the school they were attending before coming into care. We will ensure that Personal Education Plans are

tailored and updated to meet individual needs, preparing for key transition points. We will work with designated teachers, foster carers and social workers to promote and monitor progress and attendance, supporting through maximising the impact of the Pupil Premium and Careers Advice and Guidance. Southampton's Virtual School works closely with the Education Data Analysis Team to promote and track children looked after and celebrate achievements. We fully recognise that a care leavers life chances can be dramatically improved if they can be supported into education, employment or training and this remains a key priority. The council wants to ensure apprenticeships are available both within council services and in our partnership organisations to enable looked after young people to have opportunities for work and training.

What we know nationally.

- Children and young people who are looked after have poorer educational outcomes than children and young people who are not in care
- Care Leavers are over represented in the national figures for children Not in Education, Employment and Training
- Children and young people with an effective high quality Personal Education Plan make more progress.

Next Steps.

- We will strengthen the role of the Virtual School, in partnership schools and Education Data Analyst, to develop a robust scheme for delegating and monitoring the impact of The Pupil Premium Grant
- We will improve the number and quality of up to date PEPs to ensure they reflect the targets and progress of children looked after
- We will create a Care Leavers Team under the Transformation Programme and improve the Pathway Plans for Care Leavers, ensuring more young people access Education, Employment and Training

5. Providing clear care pathways and timely permanence

Aim: We will provide the best placement to meet your needs and only for as long as necessary, progressing to timely permanence when appropriate

Providing looked after children and care leavers with a sense of security, continuity and commitment is crucial to their experience of care. This sense of permanence and stability can be achieved through a variety of means:

- Reunification with their birth family
- Living with extended family or friends
- Being placed voluntarily in temporary foster placements
- Being placed with permanent foster carers until they reach adulthood
- Adoption or other legally permanent order

Because the option chosen will largely depend upon the child's unique circumstances, having a clear care plan and pathway in place is essential. A robust care plan ensures that interventions are timely and sufficiently flexible to allow 'step up' or 'step down' support depending upon progress. In Southampton we passionately believe in the importance of child-centred care and that children have the right to participate in decisions made about them. This means encouraging them

to make their views known, if they are old enough to do so, and taking these into account when determining their best interests. We also offer advocacy services to those who may have difficulty expressing themselves and for children and young people with a learning difficulty or disability. This enables the child to feel a greater sense of involvement in proceedings and to have the security of knowing what to expect now and in the future. We also believe in the value of developing care plans in partnership with the child, their family and other key stakeholders. Through open and honest dialogue, mutual trust can be built, options can be explored and shared responsibilities can be agreed to ensure we make timely progression to permanence, including adoption where appropriate.

Ultimately our goal will always be to work towards reuniting families. However we recognise this is not always possible and in these cases we will strive to ensure that the child's experience of the care system is a positive one. We promise to progress a permanent placement as soon as possible and to meet children's needs and best interests to seek a place with family or friends. Most importantly, we will endeavour to ensure that their journey through the care pathway equips them with the necessary life-skills and confidence to thrive when they leave care.

What we know nationally

- Children would rather stay within their family network. At March 2013 11% of looked after children were placed with family or friends foster carers
- The percentage of children with 3 or more placements in a 12 month period is 11%.
- The percentage of children looked after for 2½ years or more (aged under 16) who have been in the same placement for two years, or are placed for adoption and their adoptive placement plus their previous placement totals 2 years is 69%

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Next Steps

- We will develop a recruitment strategy to increase the availability of adopters and to ensure we only use inter-agency placements where this is necessary to meet the specific needs of children
- We will improve timescales for the assessment of adopters and ensure all are within the six month timescale, unless there are exceptional circumstances
- We are strengthening further the family finding model within the adoption team as part of Phase 2 of Southampton's transformation journey
- We will embed Family Group Conferences and use them more in planning for children

6. Ensuring positive health outcomes

Aim: Children looked after are healthy and supported to achieve emotional stability, resilience and self - confidence.

All too often children who enter the care system have had their health needs neglected. These can be driven by a broad range of factors, including poor parental support, missed medical appointments, unhealthy lifestyles and the impact of substance misuse and domestic violence within the home. The impact of early neglect and trauma on well-being is also well researched and proven.

The physical health, mental health and emotional wellbeing needs of looked after children and care leavers need to be identified and addressed in a timely manner if they are to be enabled to cope with the challenges of being in care. We already have mature links to local health partners and have recently strengthened these further through improved information and intelligence sharing. We will continue to work closely with health partners and local schools to ensure that healthcare is timely and easily accessible so that looked after children and care leavers can have routine health assessments and up to date health plans, which are reviewed regularly.

Through our multi-agency network we will work collaboratively to deliver consistent messages about the benefits of maintaining a healthy lifestyle through a balanced diet, regular exercise and respectful relationships. We will also use these networks to raise awareness among looked after children and care leavers about the dangers of substance misuse and risky behaviours. This joined up approach will be further strengthened by our aspiration to co-locate health and social care professionals in the future.

In the wider context, we will enlist the support of parents to ensure that the family health history is known when securing a permanent placement for the child, and through our stakeholder training programme we will educate professionals and carers on a broad range of health promotion topics including obesity, self-harm and sexual exploitation. Furthermore our established multi-agency CAMHS service (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service) is specifically designed to provide a single point of access for our looked after children and care leavers.

What we know nationally

- Children and young people say that their emotional well-being and self-esteem is supported when they cared for in an environment where they feel they belong
- Interventions and support for children and young people need to be accessible, so that children experience placement stability.
- Looked after children need continuity of support from their social worker and other professionals
- Foster carers want better peer support networks, on-going training to deal with emotional needs and more information on access to services, in particular mental health services
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Next Steps

- We are monitoring and scrutinising health data and taking action to improve outcomes for children looked after
- We plan to establish the use of a screening tool as routine to measure the emotional and behavioural health of children and young people as they enter the care of the local authority and monitored annually thereafter. This will be used to identify looked after children who require additional support, via health assessments
- We are developing mentoring support to looked after children through the Integrated Service led group, to build on emotional resilience and identity, in partnership with the Pathways Looked After Children Service

- We will improve the take up of health assessments for care leavers

7. Positively Managing Risk Safe and Providing Flexible and Affordable Placements

Aim: Children looked after live in high quality placements where they feel safe and supported, and where they are able to remain for as long as they need to

In many respects the experiences of looked after children and care leavers will be unique and as such their needs at any given time will be distinctive also. Whilst the council has a statutory duty to meet these needs, this must be balanced with the need for Southampton's residents to obtain value for money. Therefore a key priority for Children's Services is to ensure the range of placements is sufficiently flexible and affordable to meet all types of local need. We will continue to invest in in-house services by focusing effort and resources on recruiting and training new foster carers. This will enable us to cope with rising service demand and ensure that local carers have the appropriate skills to meet a diverse range of child needs. In doing so, we hope to reduce our dependency on independent fostering agencies, continuing our trend of increasing permanency plans and placing more children for adoption. Although we will always require the support of a range of independent providers, in-house provision will always be our preferred option.

What we know nationally

- Government targets state that the time from a child becoming looked after to placing them with an adoptive family should be no more than 608 days. The average in England was 647 days. This target will become more challenging each year
- Government targets state that the time from a council having court permission to place a child for adoption to matching them with adopters should be no more than 182 days. The average in England was 210 days. This target will become more challenging each year.
- The Family Justice Review has implemented timescales for care proceedings to be concluded in 26 weeks.

Next Steps

- We will monitor the implementation of the Looked After Children and Care Leavers Placement Commissioning Strategy to achieve flexible, affordable placements
- We will be proactive in care planning for permanency and ensuring we meet our Pledge to try our best to keep children within their family and kinship group where it is safe and suitable
- We will ensure the recruitment and assessment of foster carers and adopters is sufficient to meet the needs of children and takes account of the 'Staying Put' initiative for Care Leavers

8: Widening access to cultural and leisure activities

Aim: To develop healthy active lifestyles for children and young people

To complement our efforts to promote active and healthy lifestyles we will collaborate with partners to broaden opportunities for looked after children and care leavers to

engage in sport and recreational activities. Because of the potentially disruptive nature of the social care system, many children in care experience social exclusion through no fault of their own. Access to cultural and leisure activities not only enable them to have fun but it also enables them to build friendships, learn new skills and express themselves. Exposure to these types of activities can enhance their self-esteem by developing their sense of personal identity in a very positive way. We will therefore continue to work with schools and other partners to encourage looked after children and care leavers to actively participate in local group activities which will help them to become fit and healthy, to gain self-confidence and to improve self-esteem. We will also encourage them take up or develop hobbies in order to feed their interests, talents and imagination so that their overall quality of life will be improved. Finally we will acknowledge and celebrate the achievements of our looked after children and care leavers both individually and collectively.

What we know nationally

- Children looked after and care leavers often miss out on opportunities to access the full range of sport and leisure activities
- Children who move away from their locality may experience difficulties in developing friendships and engaging in leisure and sporting activities
- Children may experience trauma and depression that reduces their engagement in social and leisure activities
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Next Steps

- We will explore the use of the Pupil Premium with schools to secure access to a wide range of leisure and sporting activities
- We will consult the Young People in Care Council about what we need to do to make a difference
- We will look at good practice nationally and review our offer to children and young people looked after

Conclusion

This strategy sets out our commitment to improve outcomes for looked after children and care leavers in Southampton. Our Corporate Parenting Committee will work jointly with The Health and Well Being Board and the SSCB to ensure our Children's Services senior management team monitor the impact of services on children and their families to champion our children looked after and achieve our collective ambitions.

Our improvement and Transformation Plan underpins this strategy and provides the specific detail of the action we are taking to deliver our priorities.

We resolutely believe that with strong political leadership and corporate parenting, our Children's Services Partnership will make a real difference to children's lives