

CORE OFFER BUDGET FOR LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN (including leaving care services)

WHY DOES THE COUNCIL HAVE TO PROVIDE THIS SERVICE AND WHAT DOES IT NEED TO COVER?

Looked-after children

S 20 of the Children Act 1989 lays out the general duty of a Local Authority to provide care for children in order to safeguard their welfare where their safety or welfare cannot, for whatever reason, be provided for by parents or other adults with parental responsibility. Darlington Borough Council currently has responsibility for the care and welfare of 191 Looked After Children.

Why are looked after children a priority?

Health:

Looked After children have the same health risks as their peers but the extent is often exacerbated due to their previous experiences. Research has shown that Looked After children show significantly higher rates of mental health issues, emotional disorders such as anxiety and depression, hyperactivity and autistic spectrum disorder conditions.

Education:

Evidence indicates that looked-after children do not generally do as well at school as their peers, which reduces their opportunity to move to further education, and affects their future employment, training opportunities and life chances. Education that encourages high aspirations, individual achievement and minimum disruption is central to improving immediate and long-term outcomes for looked-after children and young people.

Key legislation, statutory guidance and inspection frameworks that underpins Local Authorities responsibilities for Looked After Children

Children Act (1989)

Sets out many of the duties, powers and responsibilities local authorities hold in respect of looked after children and care leavers.

In 2015 new regulations relating to the Children Act came in to force. Among other things, these regulations set out arrangements for local authorities considering ceasing to look after a child.

Section 20 of the Children Act 1989 (Voluntary Care)

Under Section 20 of the Act, the local authority has a duty to provide accommodation for 'children in need'. This accommodation, either in foster care, residential care or a

connected persons placement, can be long or short-term, and does not involve the courts. The parent retains full parental responsibility.

Section 31 of the Children Act 1989 (Care Order)

The court can create a care order under Section 31(1) (a) of the Children Act, placing a child in the care of a designated local authority, with parental responsibility being shared between the parents and the local authority. It can only be made if the court is satisfied that 'the harm, or likelihood of harm, is attributable to ... the care given to the child, or likely to be given ... if the order were not made, not being what it would be reasonable to expect a parent to give ... or the child being beyond parental control'. The court may make an interim care order (for up to eight weeks in the first instance) to investigate a child's home circumstances.

Children (Leaving Care) 2000

Sets out duties local authorities have to support young people leaving care from 16 -21 years of age.

Leaving care services

Under the Children Act 1989, as amended by the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 and Children and Young Persons Act 2008, eligible care leavers are entitled to leaving care support until at least 21. To be eligible they should have been in care for 13 weeks after the age of 14, with at least one day in care after 16. Most looked-after children will begin to receive a service from leaving care and after care services around the age of 16, including the development of a Pathway Plan. Young people who wish to pursue education and training have the right to return and request assistance from their local authority until age 25.

Adoption and Children Act 2002

Updated the legal framework for domestic and inter-country adoption, and places a duty on local authorities to maintain an adoption service and provide adoption support services.

Children and Adoption Act 2006

Gives courts more flexible powers to facilitate child contact and enforce contact orders when separated parents are in dispute.

Children and Young Persons Act 2008

Legislates for the recommendations in the Department for Education and Skill's 2007 Care Matters white paper to provide high quality care and services for children in care.

Children and Families Act 2014

Encourages 'fostering for adoption' which allows approved adopters to foster children while they wait for court approval to adopt. Introduced a 26 week time limit for the courts to decide whether or not a child should be taken into care. In some cases, this limit may be extended by eight weeks. Introduced 'staying put' arrangements which

allow children in care to stay with their foster families until the age of 21 years. This is provided that both the young person and the foster family are happy to do so.

Policy and guidance

Recent government policy has focused on speeding up the adoption process and increasing the stability of placements for looked after children.

An action plan for adoption: tackling delay. . (Department for Education, 2011)

The government introduced proposals to change the system for prospective adopters and strengthen the performance regime for local authorities. Local authority performance on adoption targets are reviewed through a scorecard. The approval process for new adopters was reduced to six months; and a national gateway for adoption to provide a first point of contact

Further action on adoption: finding more loving homes. (Department for Education, 2013)

Introduced further reform to the adoption system in England, with the main objective of speeding up adoption recruitment. Local Authorities are required to outsource adoption services if their recruitment process is taking too long; financial support for local authorities for greater investment in adoption in the form of a one-off £150 million Adoption Reform Grant; and a two-stage approval process, reducing the period from a formal application to approval being granted or refused to six months.

The NICE quality standard on the health and wellbeing of looked after children and young people. (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, 2013)

This NICE quality standard, which is endorsed by NSPCC, sets out best practice in meeting the health and wellbeing needs of looked-after children and young people. NICE guidelines cover health and care in England. Decisions on how they apply in other UK countries are made by ministers in the Welsh Government, Scottish Government, and Northern Ireland Executive.

Statutory guidance on children who run away or go missing from home or care. (Department for Education, 2014)

Introduced statutory requirements on action that local authorities and their partners should take to stop children going missing from home or care and to protect those who do. A number of detailed requirements are set including agency roles and responsibilities; multi-agency working; access to support; risk assessment; safe and well checks; independent return interviews; emergency accommodation; children who repeatedly run away and go missing; and additional actions to protect looked after children.

**The Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations
volume 2 care planning, placement and case review.**

Updates the 2010 edition of the guidance. Consolidates the key principles underpinning the 1989 Children Act and information previously contained in a series of updates and supplements, including: contact with siblings, contact with youth justice services, out of authority placements, long-term foster placements, ceasing to look after a child, fostering for adoption and the delegation of decision making about looked after children to their carers. Aimed at local authority workers with responsibilities for looked after children. (Department for Education, 2015)

Promoting the educational achievement of looked after children: statutory guidance for local authorities.

Updates the 2010 statutory guidance. Details the duty local authorities and Virtual School Heads have to promote the educational achievement of the children they look after, including those placed out-of-authority. (Department for Education, 2015)

Promoting the health and well-being of looked-after children: statutory guidance for local authorities, clinical commissioning groups and NHS England

Updates the 2009 guidance. Looks at the profile of looked after children using evidence from research and practice. Considers the health needs of this particular group of people and how well their needs are met. Also discusses the roles and responsibilities of Local Authorities and the NHS.

(Department for Education and Department of Health, 2015)

Framework and evaluation schedule for the inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers: reviews of Local Safeguarding Children Boards

Sets out the framework for the inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers under section 136 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006. Areas covered include the experiences and progress of children in care, including adoption, fostering, the use of residential care, and children who return home. The framework also focuses on the arrangements for permanence for children who are looked after and the experiences and progress of care leavers.

OFSTED (2015)

Inspection of children's homes: framework for inspection from 1 April 2015

Updates the 2013 framework for the inspection of children's homes. Takes into account the overall experiences and progress of children and young people living in the home, with particular focus upon how well children and young people are helped and protected and the impact and effectiveness of leaders and managers. OFSTED (2015)

Current Looked After Children

There are 191 Children & Young people Looked After

Specific Outcomes for Looked After Children as set out in the Looked After Children Annual Plan

Improve the engagement & influence of children and young people

Including:

- Implement actions in the Young Person's Participation Strategy
- Increased use of advocacy services
- Extend the work of the Young Inspectors
- Widen participation of more Looked After Children in the Children in Care Council (Darlo Care Crew) and Corporate Parenting Panel activities

Improved educational achievement and attainment

Including:

- Work closely with our Virtual School Head for LAC to improve the quality of PEPs and use of the Pupil Premium
- Ensure schools understand and are well informed about specific issues that are faced by children and young people who are Looked After including why they tend to under achieve and what schools can do to help narrow the gap
- Improve educational outcomes for Looked After Children by using more robust data collection to inform improved service delivery

Improved health and emotional wellbeing

Including:

- Provision of additional support via the Family Intervention Team's therapeutic offer
- Develop 'Health Passports'
- Promote access to free sport and leisure activities
- Development of emotional wellbeing for Looked After Children, through the use of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). Scores from the SDQ could give a good estimate of the prevalence of some emotional issues that exist for Looked After children.

Improve the confidence and skills of Young People leaving care & becoming adults

Including:

- Ensure continued improvement of accommodation options including Staying Put arrangements
- Develop opportunities for apprenticeships
- Ensuring that care leavers are able to take appropriate responsibility for their own health and emotional wellbeing, including communication and interpersonal skills; lifestyle (e.g. risks from tobacco, alcohol and other substances); sexual and relationship health and how to access sources of information and advice about a range of health issues.

Service delivery model

The services required to fulfill the duties outlined above in the legislation and statutory guidance and meet the outcomes in the LAC annual plan consist of a range of social work services from the CAP/MASH, 4 Area Social Work teams and services that specifically focus on children and young people once they enter the care system.

The Looked After Through Care team (LATC) oversees the implementation and development of care plans to ensure all children and young people have the best opportunities for them to reach their full potential. The team ensures that services for care leavers continue to offer the most appropriate individual support for young people in terms of careers, education, training, accommodation, life skills and health information.

The Family Placement Service recruits and supports foster carers, supported lodging providers and assesses prospective adopters and Special Guardians.

The Fostering Service Recruitment Strategy for 2015-2016 specifically focuses on recruiting carers to provide placements for children aged 5 – 17 years and particularly those able to care for sibling groups of 2 or 3 children. We are also seeking to recruit foster carers to provide parent and child placements, this has been successful so far this year with 1 set of carers having been approved and a second carer due to panel in December 2015. The strategy is based on the identification of specific areas of need. The strategy is monitored regularly and adapted to take account of any changing trends. During the past 6 months there has been an increase in the number of babies requiring placements which has put some pressure on foster placements. To ensure there are sufficient placements available if this trend continues we will be focusing on enquiries from carers able to provide placements for infants up to 12 months old. This strategy to increase in-house foster carers represents best value for money for the Council.

Residential provision for some young people is sometimes more appropriate than a foster placement. Darlington currently has three children's homes that are all rated as 'good' by OFSTED for the quality of care they provide.

Where in-house accommodation is not available or very specialist provision is required, external provision is sometimes required. To ensure appropriate provision is sourced and is value for money, there is a placements officer within the service. We are currently in the process of reviewing the effectiveness and cost of in-house residential provision.

Where specialist therapeutic services are required for Looked After Children, and health service provision is either unsuitable or unavailable, there are social workers and educational psychologists that offer a range of interventions to support care plans.

Contact between children looked after and their families is in most cases part of their care plan and is important in maintaining their identity. Often contact is ordered by the court and the Local Authority has to comply with the instructions. This service is provided in-house and is flexible to allow for the changes in demand where numbers of looked after children vary from month to month.

Children and young people sometimes require the services of an advocate or independent visitor to assist with articulating their views or providing external support where there are no family members. Services are commissioned to ensure the 'voice' of the child or young person is heard at all times.

Advocacy

All local authorities with social services responsibilities should ensure that advocacy services are provided for children and young people making or intending to make complaints or representations under section 24D or section 26 of the Children Act 1989.

Independent Visitors

Independent visitors are volunteers who befriend and spend time with a child or young person within Local Authority care. All local authorities have a statutory duty to provide an Independent Visitor's service in accordance with the Children Act 1989 (Schedule 2 Paragraph 17) and the Children and Young Persons Act (2008).

HOW DOES THE CORE OFFER BUDGET MEET THE COUNCIL'S OBLIGATIONS?

Above narrative sets out the services that cover the key elements of the statutory responsibilities.

The fostering strategy as described above aims to increase the delivery of services by in-house carers thus lessening the dependency on independent foster care (IFA) agencies. This is a cost effective strategy given the high cost of IFA placements.

The complexities of some very vulnerable young people mean that sometimes the assessed needs are that a residential establishment is more appropriate. This can mean that an external placement is required given the specialist nature of some of the assessed needs. Any decision to use an external placement is made at Head of Service or above level and is subject to on-going scrutiny via the external placements panel.

The Family Placement Service is key to sourcing foster carers and adoptive parents and taking them through a rigorous training process before matching them with children and young people. This is a highly specialised service and the adoption service has been recognised as being 'good' in the recent OFSTED inspection.

DOES THIS DIFFER FROM THE CURRENT SERVICE?

At this stage the model is similar to the current service. Further work will be undertaken to review effectiveness of in house children's homes as part of our placement strategy.

WHAT IS THE CORE BUDGET MADE UP OF?**2019/20 - £10,173,862 (Net of income and grants)**

£661,494	Family Placement Team
£4,615,357	Externally provided residential placements & Independent Fostering
£1,738,840	Fostering allowances and foster carer support.
£937,370	Special Guardianship Order and Residential Order allowances
£377,530	Pre adoption/ adoption order allowances and inter-authority adoption
£1,073,618	Three in house children's homes (9 places)
£359,217	Contact Service
£13,920	Independent Visitors Contract
£10,000	Advocacy Contract
£30,000	Young Carers
£356,516	Overheads

Leaving care:**2019/20 - £868,315 (Net of income and grants)**

£24,734	Supported Lodging officer
£154,910	Supported Lodgings/Staying Put payments
£688,671	Looked After Through Care Team

GRAND TOTAL £11,042,177 (Net of income and grants)