

MEETING THE PLACEMENT NEEDS OF LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN

Report of the Director of Children, Schools and Families.

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1. Purpose of the report

This item was requested by Tanis Kent and Roy Clements.

This report outlines the issues faced by CSF in placing Looked After Children appropriately.

The report-

- outlines the position of residential and foster care placements for children 'looked after' in Hertfordshire
- places Hertfordshire's position within the National context

2. Summary

The report –

- a) Identifies the increase in the numbers of Looked After Children in Hertfordshire.
- b) Identifies the availability of residential and foster care placement.
- c) Sets out the problem of emergency placements.
- d) Refers to the work programme of the Achievement Panel.

3. Conclusion

The Committee is asked to consider whether further scrutiny should be undertaken on placement pressure for Looked After Children and whether improvements can be made.

Background

4. Numbers of Looked After Children

- 4.1** There has been an 11% increase in the numbers of children ‘looked after’ over the last year (against a national increase of 9%). Reasons include:
- Increase in referrals to CSF and high expectations
 - Social work staff vacancies and the staff profile of social workers as younger, less experienced and less able to resist parental pressure
 - Families less tolerant of difficult behaviour of young people
- 4.2** The number of Looked After Children in May 2001 was 800. By August 2002 this increased to 940, representing an increase of 140 children in 14 months (15%).
- 4.3** A short study by the DOH in 2001 explained possible reasons for the National increase and found a complex picture which included –
- New needs being uncovered by better assessments
 - Greater awareness of the impact on children’s well-being of situations such as parental drug abuse, mental ill health and domestic violence
 - Staffing difficulties making it difficult to devote time to moving children out of the ‘looked after’ system
 - Increasing number of children entering under Care Orders
- 4.4** Children become ‘looked after’ for a variety of reasons including
- Court orders to protect children from significant harm
 - Abandonment by parents
 - Requests by parents to accommodate the young person
 - Unaccompanied asylum seeking children arriving in the UK
- 4.5** Where children are at risk of significant harm, CSF has a duty to protect them by putting the matter before a Court for final decision in respect of removal from families. However, when parents request their young person is accommodated, every effort is made to ensure the young person remains within their families. ‘Family network meetings’ are set up for professionals in CSF and families to look at the problems and devise solutions which will enable parents to fulfil their parental responsibilities.
- 4.6** SSI Inspectors nationally confirm that thresholds for children becoming Looked After are appropriate. In Hertfordshire the threshold for entering care is high, consistent with levels of risk to the child and SSI have expressed confidence in this threshold.

5. Residential Provision

5.1 In Hertfordshire there are 55 residential places and 11 respite places (see detailed list attached as Appendix 1) and please refer to the Corporate Parenting Members Pack issued in December 2001 which will be updated annually.

5.2 Residential provision for primary aged children is provided at Datchworth Turn, a specialist unit offering 6 places.

Nationally and locally children are entering care at a younger age with complex needs as a result of abuse they have suffered. Currently we are able to manage within this provision, however the demand is often intermittent and difficult to manage when young sibling groups need to be placed.

5.3 Careful monitoring of demand and trends is being undertaken in respect of residential places. In keeping with Department of Health guidance and good practice, children under 11 should be placed in foster care rather than institutional care as a preferred option. This position will need to be kept under review.

5.4 There is a shortage of residential places for secondary aged children nationally and locally, particularly for young people with complex needs such as multiple disabilities and severe behaviour problems such as violence and sexually abusive behaviour.

5.5 This is exacerbated by the increased number of looked after children who are remaining in care for a long period.

5.6 In order to reduce the numbers of looked after children we need to:

- reduce the number entering care
- ensure active care planning to return them home or to permanent alternative families

5.7 In Hertfordshire we have introduced tighter gatekeeping systems for children entering care through “Family Network Meetings” whereby professionals and family members meet to devise strategies so that the young person is kept within the family and parents are supported to fulfil their parental responsibility.

5.8 The increase in numbers of looked after children is mainly as a result of children remaining in care for long periods. In October an additional 2 Adoption workers take up post. They will directly with “hard to place” children awaiting adoption, undertaking life story work to prepare them for Adoption and to ensure there is no undue delay in progressing to final adoption.

- 5.9** In October 4 Independent Reviewing Officers will commence employment. Their role is to ensure effective Care Planning for looked after children, monitoring the plans to ensure children return home, move to Permanent care (Adoption or long term fostering) or move to Independence.
- 5.10** The identified gap in current services is family support for difficult, disaffected young people, that will prevent them becoming ‘looked after’.
- 5.11** Within the CSF Consultation Plan for 2003/04 there are options for increasing family support to prevent children becoming looked after or for ensuring a rapid return to families when young people have been accommodated in an emergency.
- 5.12** These options include
- Outreach work from the Children Homes
 - Emergency intervention – supporting families to care for the young person (possibly attached to Children’s Homes)
 - An evaluation within the stringent regulatory climate the possibility of developing short term emergency places and short term supported lodgings.

All the above will have substantial financial implications.

- 5.13** A benefit of the CSF approach is that there is recognition of a connection between children who require residential accommodation, educational provision, care and secure provision because of their emotional and behavioural difficulties.
- 5.14** The Achievement Panel, at their meeting on 26th September 2002 considered a report on provision for young people who are currently placed Out of County.
- 5.15** The report recommends consideration of increased In-County specialist residential provision and proposes a detailed piece of work is undertaken which looks at:
- a) The educational and care needs of young people placed Out of County where a statement of educational behavioural difficulties requires 52 week placement or because they are ‘looked after’.
 - b) Whether provision should be made within Hertfordshire.
 - c) The financial implications of any proposals.

The increase in number of EBD residential places will help families continue to care for their young people and reduce the need for them to be “looked after”.

6. Foster Care Provision

- 6.1** 80% of Looked After Children in Hertfordshire are in foster care. In 1999, Hertfordshire had 311 foster carers looking after 410 children. Currently there are 385 carers looking after 535 children. Last year, 52 new carers were recruited. Annually 10% of carers are lost through retirement (this figure is in line with the national picture). In addition, 6% of carers at any given point are not available for placements for a variety of reasons, including illness, divorce, bereavement, break between placements. Approximately 4% of places are “bed blocked” because the needs or behaviours of the child in placement prevent other children being placed.
- 6.2** To keep pace with demand, we need to recruit 80 carers year on year to care for children who have been abused, are out of parental control or disabled.
- 6.3** In 1999, the Government estimated that England was 7,000 foster carers short of requirements. A DOH led recruitment campaign failed to make any impact on this shortfall. Local Authorities have been struggling to recruit foster carers.
- 6.4** In Hertfordshire recruiting new foster carers poses a significant challenge as there are 3 major competitors in the Private sector who recruit within Hertfordshire (Integrated Services Programme (ISP), Foster Care Association and Foster Plus). There is also competition from London Boroughs who also recruit within Hertfordshire.
- 6.5** Hertfordshire has been able to grow its pool of foster carers, despite aggressive competition, at a steady rate. However over the past 14 months with the increase in demand it has not been possible to keep pace.
- 6.6** In Hertfordshire there is a recruitment team for foster carers responsible for running high profile campaigns and preparation groups. Courses run throughout the year and currently there are 32 foster carers in preparation. This is for 6 months and we expect a further 32 carers in the remaining 6 months. There has been a net gain of 28 carers in the first 6 months of the year as 4 carers were de-registered.
- 6.7** The CSF Plan 2002/03 prioritised recruitment and retention of foster carers. Increased fees are now paid to foster carers willing and able to care for adolescents with complex needs. Foster carers are now able to access 24 hour support and a specific training programme on therapeutic crisis intervention.

6.8 The Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service has developed a specific service for looked after children. The service has 3 elements:

- Information, advice and formal consultation to every children's home on a sessional basis and a consultation surgery for foster carers
- Fast track assessment service for looked after children
- Time limited focused therapeutic intervention

7. Emergency Placements

7.1 Between April 2001 and 2002 there were 36 emergency Out of County placements made.

7.2 The nature of emergencies has varied, including:

- 15 Remands to Care
- 2 detained in Training and Detention Centres
- 1 Residence Order
- 13 Police Protection Orders
- 5 Emergency Protection Orders

7.3 In addition 2001/2 there were 34 unaccompanied asylum seeking children requiring emergency placements in Hertfordshire. Since April 2002 there have been 51 unaccompanied asylum seeking children, 5 placed Out of County.

7.4 Emergency placements have been the subject of independent review. An independent social work consultant has examined the files of the last 5 emergency placements made in each Quadrant (20 cases in all). Her conclusions were that CSF had little alternative to these children becoming 'looked after' and that the thresholds applied were appropriate.

7.5 In exceptional cases a small number of children have been placed in an emergency in hotel accommodation supervised by carers. This is not a satisfactory position and is caused by the lack of any placements within Hertfordshire or out of county.

7.6 When such emergencies occur, often late in the afternoon, an immediate search is made of all foster care or residential placements within Hertfordshire. Where appropriate "exceptions" to foster care approvals are made i.e. additional children for a few nights.

7.7 A search is then made for independent fostering or residential places "out of county". There is an "off line" management check to ensure workers have exhausted all options including the extended family.

7.8 Given the seriousness of placing a young person anywhere other than with foster carers or residential units, management action has been

taken to ensure the only route to alternative forms of accommodation is through authorisation by the Assistant Director – Local Services.

8. Financial Implications

The average weekly net cost for Social Care placements has increased from £1,091 per week per child in July 2001 to £1,249 per week per child in July 2002, an increase of 15% . This increase is caused by:

- Increasingly complex needs of some children.
- Increased costs for the same/equivalent placements.

There are a significant number of children with very high cost placements (i.e. a net cost in excess of £2,000 per week). There are currently 42 children who fall into this category and a review of these placements is being treated as priority by Quadrants.

Placing children in an emergency has serious financial implications as providers charge a premium which can range from £3,000 to £5,000 a week.

Summary

Stringent measures have been taken to specify cash targets and management action for Quadrants to meet this financial year. However, this needs to be balanced with the level of risk to individual children.

CSF is unable to predict or control the harm to children caused by parents and has a duty to respond and place the matter before the Courts.

Background information referred to by the author.

11th Annual Report of the Chief Inspector of Social Services

Children Act Report 2001

Thomas Coram Research Unit

Achievement and Behaviour of Children and Young People report to Achievement Panel 26th September 2002.

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