



**SURREY COUNTY COUNCIL'S
LOCAL COMMITTEE IN
EPSOM & EWELL**

LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN

19TH MARCH 2007

KEY ISSUE:

To support Elected Members in understanding their role and responsibilities as Corporate Parents for Looked After Children (LAC) in Surrey.

SUMMARY:

Looked After Children are a priority group for Surrey Children' Service. We want to improve their life chances so they can succeed as adults with their local communities.

OFFICER RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Committee is asked to agree

- (i) That Elected Members be aware of their role as Corporate Parents.
- (ii) That Elected Members support officers in their work to support LAC and improve their attainment.

1. INTRODUCTION and BACKGROUND

1.1 The Role of the Corporate Parent

In September 1998 Frank Dobson then Secretary of State wrote to all Local Councils outlining Elected Members responsibilities towards Looked After Children in the care of their Local Authority.

“For children who are Looked After, your Council has a legal and morale duty...to provide the kind of loyal support that any good parents would give to their children”

The questions he said each Elected Member should ask themselves are:

- What can I do?
- What is happening to our children?
- Would it be good enough for my child?
- How can we improve their outcomes – health, education and social?

Elected Members are asked to ensure children in the care of the Local Council have effective corporate parents. The National Children’s Bureau in 2005 defined the role of the corporate parent as being:

1. To provide care, a home, access to health and education
2. Celebrate achievements
3. Be ambitious for your children

1.2 How can an Elected Member do this in practice?

The first issue to be aware of is your population of children in care and their characteristics. Nationally children in care are disadvantaged compared to the rest of society. 22% of care leavers are likely to be unemployed at aged 16 compared to 6% of their peers. Adults who have been Looked After are 3 times more likely to be convicted or cautioned for an offence. 25% of current prisoners were in care as children.

The role of the corporate parent is to try to reverse some of these statistics and trends by providing the additional support and opportunities these young people need so they can catch up with their peers and become full participating citizens. The recent Green Paper to which Surrey submitted a response as part of the Government’s consultation is prioritising the needs of LAC in order to improve their chances of success. However, despite the Government saying that this is cost neutral in practice this group of children require additional support and resources. In Surrey we have been targeting resources specifically on LAC in order to improve their life chances.

There are many practical ways Elected Members can become involved. This can be by sitting on the Fostering and Adoption Panels and visiting one of our 8 local community homes.

The reasons children and young people become Looked After is often misunderstood. Approximately 85% of children who become Looked After are either removed for home or leave because of parental abuse and/or neglect.

In Surrey we have 785 children in care, 19 of them come from Epsom and Ewell. This includes some children with profound physical and learning disabilities whose parents are unable to care for them.

In Surrey we have been very successful in raising the educational attainment of children in care but the attainment gap between those children and other children in Surrey is not closing fast enough.

2. ANALYSIS and COMMENTARY

2.1 Success Stories

We have done well this year with some of our projects. We have provided additional tutors for young people who have missed schooling to help them catch up. Many Surrey parents do this for their children and our children in care appreciate this and have benefited from it. This has meant that 61% of our LAC this year gained a minimum of 1 GCSE pass and 40% gained 5 or more passes A* to C. 76% of LAC are now in full time education beyond year 11 which represents a huge increase over the last 2 years. 85% of all our children and young people have yearly health and dental checks. At Key Stage 1 and 2 Looked After young people do well although they generally struggle with school transitions to secondary school and their disrupted lives often mean they have difficulty in studying for exams without additional support. Of the 434 LAC currently in full time education, 178 have a Statement of Educational Need.

2.2 Progress still to be made

Although the education attainment of children in care has improved it is still not good enough. 14% of LAC are not in any form of education, employment or training. 2% of Looked After young people are permanently excluded from school and 10% have short-term exclusions.

11% of children and young people are placed more than 20 miles away from their home address. This means they are unlikely to maintain their school placement causing further disruption for them. Lack of placement stability is a big issue which causes disruption for children and young people. In the last year 29 children in care have had 4 placement changes, 16 children have had 5 placement changes, 12 children have had 6 placement changes and 5 children have had 7 or more placement

changes. In fact Surrey performs well nationally on placement stability but we feel that this is not good enough.

The costs of looking after children vary considerably. Most children are placed with in house foster carers. These foster carers do a tremendous amount of supportive and caring work with young people and any support and appreciation that Elected Members can give to foster carers is very much appreciated. There is a regular winter dinner held for foster carers in the Grand Hall where Elected Members and Senior Officers show their appreciation for this service. There is also an annual barbecue for foster carers and their children including those in care.

The area of shortage in terms of placements is for teenagers, particularly girls. These girls often have complex problems and can be very challenging to care for. We do provide specialist advice and support to foster carers to help with this. We are currently trying to recruit more foster carers for this area of work. If local foster carers are unable to cope then we have to place children either in our own in house residential resources or in expensive out of county resources. These can cost up to £800 - £900 per week for a foster home and between £3700 - £4200 per week for a residential placement.

Surrey produces a magazine for and by young people in care every 6 months called 'Wazzup'. This is distributed to every Looked After young person in Surrey. There is also an independent advocacy service (NYAS – National Youth Advocacy Service) which we commission to do work on self-esteem and help young people access education, training and advocacy support when they have problems.

NYAS have developed the 'Total Respect' training which is run by young people and is part of an ongoing programme. The young people have successfully 'trained' senior managers who work with LAC. Dorothy Mitchell as Lead Member is organising a short programme for councillors which should prove both interesting and illuminating. Dorothy Mitchell chairs the Corporate Parenting Steering Group which meets termly and champions the cause of Looked After young people throughout the council. There is also the Corporate Parenting Operational Group which meets on a more regular basis and reports to the Steering Group. This is a group of key managers within Children's Service with responsibility for delivering and improving services to children in care.

There are 2 Children's Teams across the County based in the East (A02 at Reigate), and the West (Quadrant Court in Woking) containing social workers who deal solely with cases in care proceedings and LAC. These social workers have responsibility for supporting LAC through their social and education placements and helping them attain their potential. One issue of concern to our young people is the fact that they are often unable to secure educational placements in the best schools and that because of their sometimes complex behaviour they are subject to a high rate of exclusions. Given the small number of these children in each school an

aspirational goal for Surrey County Council would be to ensure that there is a policy of no permanent exclusions for LAC. A system of managed moves across school confederations and a priority system whereby LAC can access the more successful schools would be the proposed alternative. We are not at this stage yet but some Local Authorities have managed to pilot this successfully.

Historically we have not had sufficient aspirations for our young people and unlike what we all do for our own children, as corporate parents we have not pushed them sufficiently. It has become evident that many schools do not enter LAC for exams feeling that they may do badly. In fact the evidence shows that where LAC are put in for exams they do better than expected. This is an issue that we are currently addressing with Head Teachers and Designated Teachers for LAC.

The challenge for Elected Members is to see this small but very special group of children and young people as the particular responsibility of the council. These young people have had the most disadvantaged start in life and in order to make up the gap in attainment with their peers they need additional support and help. They may have concentration difficulties, missed considerable periods of schooling and not had the nurture, love and affection which we would expect a child to have received in its early years. However, these children have a lot of potential and if given additional support can improve. The steps we have put in place so far have significantly improved their achievements but we aspire to do better than this for the children of Surrey.

LEAD/CONTACT OFFICER: Janet Forster

TELEPHONE NUMBER: 01372 832611