

Keeping Families Together – Safely Reducing our Looked After Population in York

1. Introduction

This paper analyses the trends in York's looked after children population.

A whole system approach to achieving a sustained reduction in the number of children Looked After by the city is described.

The paper concludes with a description of the ongoing work to ensure that the city's early intervention and preventative services are focussed on those children and young people most at risk of coming into public care.

2. Background

Looked After Children

Children are 'looked after' where the local authority becomes legally responsible for their care. In York, such an arrangement is always an intervention of last recourse. In the first instance where serious safety or welfare concerns are identified for a child, the local authority and its partners always make every effort to support the child at home with parents or extended family members. It is only when such arrangements are not viable or remains unsafe that a child is taken into public care.

Becoming 'looked after' is rarely an outcome of choice. Children and young people, who become looked after, often from very chaotic, unsafe and troubled family environments, almost always seek an early return home. Social workers and other professionals work with parents and extended families to achieve such rehabilitation at the earliest safe opportunity.

However, for many children who become looked after, such a return home is unsafe. For these children the local authority works within a tightly prescribed statutory timescale to achieve alternative permanent care arrangements. These arrangements include adoption, long term foster care or alternative care placements outside of the birth family (Special Guardianship Orders).

3. Placement Types

Local Foster Placements

In York, we are very successful in placing most of our looked after children in family settings (foster care).

Currently there are 114 fostering households who look after between one and up to four children/young people at any one time. These foster carers are recruited, approved and supervised locally by our Family Placement Service.

The average cost of a child's placement in foster care in York is £18,426 pa.

As at 1 June 2013 this year, of our total looked after population of 227, 155 (68%) were placed in York fostering households. This compares favourably to the national average of 51%.

Independent Fostering Agency Placements

Where we cannot identify a suitable local foster placement for a child we sometimes need to approach independent fostering agencies (IFAs) for placements. Such placements are often at some distance from York (often necessitating a change of school for the young person) and cost significantly more than our local placements.

The average cost of a child's placement in an IFA arrangement is £55,000

As at 1 June 2013, of our total looked after population of 227, 16 (7%) were placed in Independent Agency fostering households.

Specialist Residential Placements – Out of Authority

For some young people, because of their very challenging behaviour or very complex needs it is necessary to identify specialist residential provision. Typically such young people will already have experienced several fostering placement breakdowns, display dangerous and harmful behaviours either towards themselves or others or have complex psychological or physical needs that require specialist care.

Unsurprisingly, this level of care is extremely expensive. The average cost of a child's placement in specialist residential care is £162,000

As at 1 June 2013, of our total looked after population of 227, 10 (4.4 %) were placed in specialist residential care.

Local Residential Care - In Authority

In York, we have recently re-procured our children's home provision – letting the contract to Northern Care to provide short term care for up to 4 young people between the ages of 14 and 18 years. This children's home provides care for those young people who could not be supported in a family placement.

This level of care is also extremely expensive. However, the average cost of a child's placement in local residential care has reduced to £92,415 from £130,000 pa (when provided directly by the local authority)

As at 1 June 2013, of our total looked after population of 227, three (1.3 %) were placed in local residential care.

Placed at Home with Parents

In York we have a significant group of children and young people who are the subject of care orders and therefore technically 'looked after' but who remain at home with their parents under this legal arrangement.

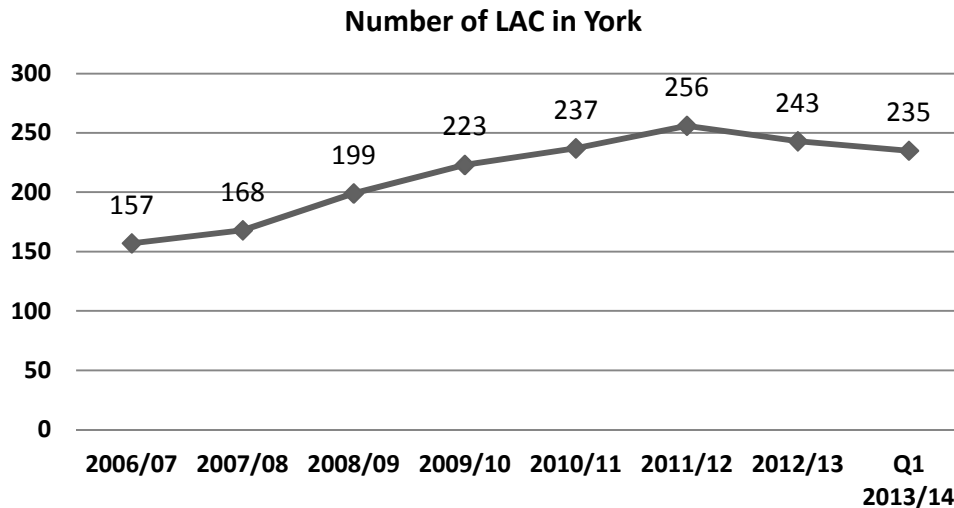
Whilst these children do not incur direct placement costs, they are by definition children for whom there is a very high level of concern and who therefore require a high level of support and surveillance. These costs are not directly reflected in the council's placement budgets but are reflected elsewhere in staffing and support costs.

There has been significant work over the past eight months to review this group and to secure their legal permanence with their families.

As at 1 June this year, of our total looked after population of 227, 25 (11%) were placed at home with parents.

4. The Looked After Population

Graph showing a year on year increase in LAC in York from 2007 peaking in 11/12.



5. Children and Young People Entering Care

The increase in the care population in York to a high of 256 in 2011/12 has its origins in a significant increase in admissions during the period 2007–2009.

This period coincided with a heightened awareness of child protection issues brought to the fore through a series of high profile child protection cases including ‘Baby Peter’. An analysis of the activity at the time also highlights a period of escalating drug and alcohol misuse and domestic violence. This was also a period where arrangements to identify and refer children for whom there may be concerns were greatly improved contributing to a ‘net widening’ effect for cases coming to children’s social care.

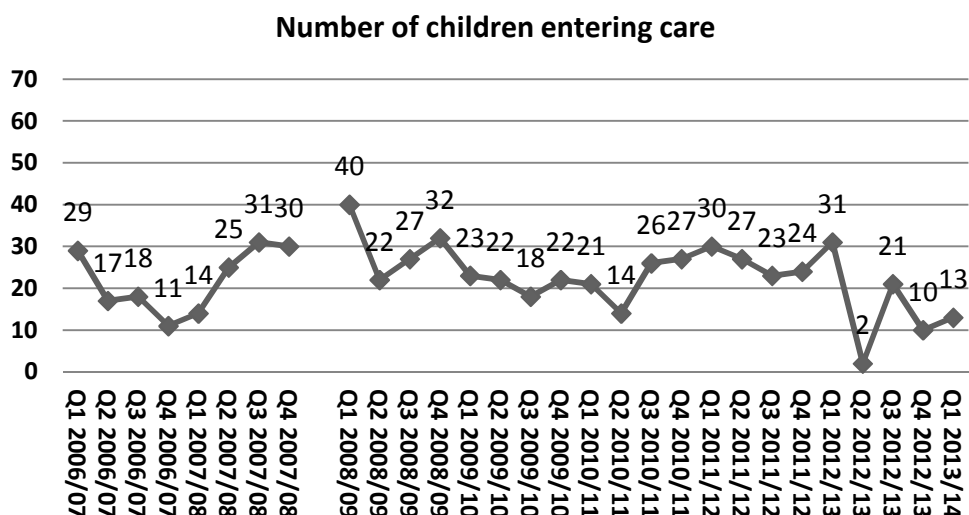
During this period the number of children entering care as a result of the local authority’s legal interventions rose sharply.

The number of children entering care reached its peak in 2008/09 when 111 children became looked after.

At the same time the number of children entering care on a voluntary basis reduced significantly. Such a pattern is clearly indicative of a period of high concerns both for children and young people ‘at risk’ but perhaps also a reaction to the high profile

criticism levelled at authorities where they were perceived to have failed to act robustly in some cases.

The more recent and sustained reduction in new entrants to care is encouraging and reflects the impact of the introduction of new services (including the Children's Front Door) to support families and prevent concerns from escalating – the two key strands of our early intervention and prevention strategy.



In summary, there is evidence to show that year on year since 2009 there has been an overall incremental reduction in the number of new entrants to the care system in York. This reduction has undoubtedly been achieved by our significantly enhanced early identification and preventative strategy, better targeting of those high risk groups and improved services for those children and young people who may be on the 'edge of care'.

6. Safely Reducing the Number of New Entrants to Care

Managing the flow of new entrants to care is at the heart of professional social work. Social workers function as agents of change for families where there are serious and often intractable problems. A key task is to manage the risk to children and young people whilst trying to bring about changes in parental behaviour/capacity. A workers ability to help families achieve the necessary changes whilst balancing a continued and often high level of risk to the children in the household is influenced by several factors:

- their level experience and skills
- the availability and quality of good supervision

- the organisational culture
- attitude to risk
- local interpretation and implementation of national policy drivers
- a strong and effective local preventative strategy
- a strong multi agency commitment to **keeping families together**

Anyone of these factors can have a significant impact on social workers decision making and in turn influence the thresholds for higher levels of intervention (for example increased recourse to the courts to implement care plans).

Of course, there are always environmental issues that will influence the trend of new entrants to the care system. However, close attention to addressing positively the factors above can mitigate any sudden or extreme fluctuation in the number of children becoming looked after in any one year.

7. Keeping Families Together (KFT)

Our transformation work to better improve the immediate line management support to social workers, our strengthened supervision policy and practices and a sharp focus on our workforce development arrangements give some confidence that we can sustain the current year on year reduction of new entrants.

The Keeping Families Together programme is well underway with the service reconfiguration phase complete.

A 'Vision Statement' for all CSC staff and our partners has been published to strengthen and underpin the KFT programme. This document will set out clearly how we are addressing the factors set out above and in turn will greatly strengthen our continued drive toward a preventative approach at every level of social work practice.

8. Children and Young People who are moving through care

A key feature of the current large number of children looked after is the rate at which they subsequently leave care. The pathway through care for younger children must be short and lead home or

to alternative permanent care. The paper updates below our performance in York in relation to this group of children.

For older children who enter care in their early teens the key challenge is to provide them with stable placements from which they can achieve the best possible education, health and social outcomes. We know from experience that for this group the longer they remain in LA care before they attempt the transition to independence the better their likely outcomes.

An analysis of the past five years shows that more young people are remaining in care than ever before. Overall, this is positive although it does sustain the looked after population at a high level despite the reductions in new entrants.

Of greater concern is a relatively small but significant group of children in care who are there longer than desirable due to delays in the court processes. Specifically, where the LA applies to the court for an order to implement its care plan for a child there can be long delays before a final decision is reached effectively leaving the child in limbo for that period.

The analysis below of those children and young people currently moving through the care in York informs our strategy to target key groups in order to secure their safe and timely permanent care arrangements outside of the looked after system.

Placed with parents

This group stands at 25 in July 13, all of these children and young people will have been discharged from their care orders by March 2014.

Interim care orders with kinship carers

This group stands at six in July 2013, 75 % of these should proceed by March 2014 to legal permanence (SGO, RO).

Long term kinship placements

This group stands at 17 in July 2013, 33 % of these should proceed by March 2014 to legal permanence (SGO, RO).

Leavers by age of 16-18

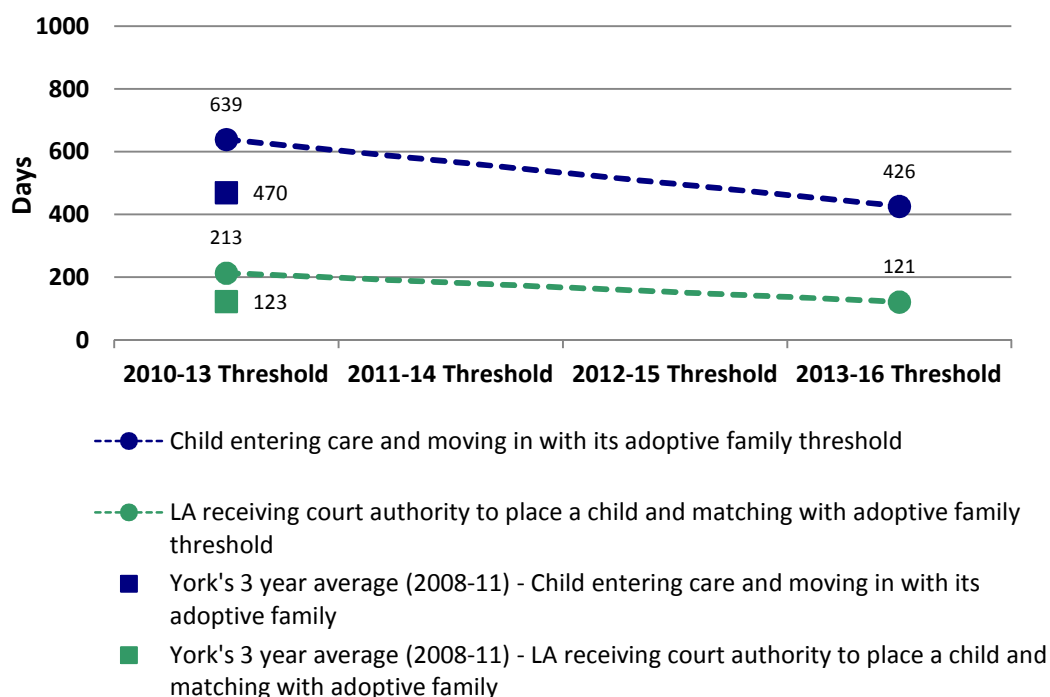
This group stands at 16 in July 2013; all of these should leave care due to age or plan by Mar 2014.

9. Children who leave care as they become adopted

For a small but significant group of children who enter local authority care the planned outcome is adoption. Adoption is the highest order within the public law arrangements. It removes all the rights and responsibilities from birth parents and transfers these to the adoptive parents. The local authority's role in this process is largely facilitative. However, the journey for most very young children who become adopted is through care. As adoption tends to be the plan mostly for babies and very young children the timescales for achieving this outcome are tightly prescribed by government and rigorously monitored.

In York we have a very strong track record in meeting the required timescales and to-date our children move to adoption and therefore leave care promptly.

Average Time Threshold Indicators



The graph above highlights York performance on adoption over the past 5 years.

Children who are placed for adoption

This group stands at 17 in July 2013, all of these should proceed by summer 2014 to an adoption order and therefore ending their looked after status.

10. Summary of Those Targeted to Leave Care between September 2012 and March 2014

Movements			Local Fostering	IFA	Residential – Out Of York	Residential – Within York	Placed with Parents/Other
	Number	Reduction					
Sept - 2012	243		+3	-4			+1
Dec - 2012	238	-5	-4				-1
Mar – 2013	230	-8	-6	-4			+2
Total 12/13		-13	-7	-8			+2
July – 2013	227	-3	-5	-1	-1		-1
Sept – 2013	214	-8	-6				-1
Dec – 2013	206	-8	-5	-1			-1
Mar – 2014	198	-8	-5	-1			-1
Total 13/14		-32	-21	-3	-1		-4
Grand Total		-45	-31	-4	-1		-6

11. Associated Cost Impact of this Incremental Reduction of LAC Numbers

Cost Reductions based on movements	Local Fostering	IFA	Residential – out of York	Residential – within York	Placed with Parents/Other	Total
Sept - 2012	+58,500	-220,000				-161,500
Dec - 2012	-78,000					-78,000
Mar – 2013	-117,000	-220,000				-337,000
pa from April 2013	-136,500	-440,000				-576,500
June – 2013	-97,500	-55,000	-162,000			-314,500
Sept – 2013	-117,000					-117,000
Dec – 2013	-97,500	-55,000				-152,500
Mar – 2014	-97,500	-55,000				-152,500
pa from April 2014	-546,000	-605,000	-162,000			-1,313,000
2013/14 Reductions	-292,500	-495,000	-121,500			-909,000

(13-14 Reductions includes all movements to April 2013 & part year movements for each quarter in 13/14)

12. A Whole System Approach to the Reduction of York's Looked After Population

In order to ensure a continued year on reduction of new entrants into the looked after system it is necessary to continue to develop a 'whole system' approach to responding to vulnerable children.

This whole system approach is of course much wider than children's social care and involves all partners.

In the next six month review period we will:

1. Review of the Troubled Family/Integrated Family Service arrangements to ensure that these services are targeted at those children and young people most at risk of coming into public care.
2. Review the role and of the Children's Centres in relation to those children considered to be on the 'edge of care'.
3. Ensure the Integrated Youth Support Service transformation programme delivers more targeted support to those young people who are at risk of entering public care.
4. Develop the Children's Front Door arrangements to improve further the ability to identify earlier those children and young people whose circumstances or behaviour indicates an increased likelihood of them becoming looked after.

Eoin Rush
September 2013