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| North West Looked After Children Summit Report |

**Introduction**

This report has been compiled following the North West Looked After Children Summit hosted by North West ADCS in December 2014. This has been supplemented by reference to research material and other evidence in order to provide a basis for the development of holistic local and regional responses to challenges in developing effective services for Looked After Children and those at the edge of care. The report and associated resources focus on the following areas.

* Early Help and services at the edge of care
* Managing entry into care
* Care planning and achieving permanence
* Realising placement sufficiency
* Recommendations for action

1. **Summary**

**i. Early Help and services at the edge of care**

* Resource decisions based on outcomes, with clear governance arrangements, focus on re-directed resource with a focus on early years and adolescence.
* Partnership and co-design in service delivery and commissioning with views of children, young people and families across diverse communities underpinning a partnership response.
* Early Years focus should include harnessing of other targeted and universal services supported by specialist interventions which prevent escalation and reduce admissions to care.
* Services for young people should focus on alternatives to care and encompass flexible use of existing resources and develop innovative approaches to outreach and community asset based support.

**ii. Managing entry into care**

* Tackling perceptions and tolerance of risk in its widest sense and through practical solutions including the early and effective use of Family Group Conferencing.
* Pre-proceedings and Public Law Outline processes should be robust, well-resourced and enable early and decisive action through the use of care orders for those children for whom it is appropriate.
* The use of court-directed assessments should be avoided or challenged where appropriate through high quality practice bolstered by effective strategic and legal services support.

**iii. Care Planning and Achieving Permanence**

* Emotional health and wellbeing should be addressed through effective placement support strategies and evidence-based interventions to improve stability, permanence and outcomes.
* Reunification and return home can be further developed as an effective and sustainable route to achieve permanence if policy, care planning and support arrangements are further developed.
* Special Guardianship offers a notable route to permanence particularly when accompanied by strong support, but research evidence, combined with policy changes – including Staying Put – and financial pressures create concern about the long-term viability of this route to improve outcomes.
* Workforce considerations including capacity, organisation and morale are closely linked with quality and the scope to develop and sustain innovative approaches which deliver improvement.

**iv. Realising placement sufficiency**

* Data and intelligence collation and analysis can be improved to better manage performance, predict demand, measure effectiveness and understand costs of placements and interventions.
* Internal services could be better utilised through improvement of business processes, development of more sophisticated internal fostering services, flexible deployment of residential resources and sharing of internal placements across local authorities.
* Commissioning processes offer further opportunities to improve local provision, manage markets more effectively, improve value for money and drive change in relation to long-term placements.
* Collaboration is a key opportunity in delivering sufficiency through shared strategies, joint recruitment and assessment of foster carers and consistent approaches to Staying Put.

**v. Recommendations**

* **Widespread consideration should be given to the development of edge of care services for older young people, including Adolescent Support Units, learning from practice in the region and beyond.**
* **Emerging learning and practice from Children’s Social Work Innovation Fund projects within the region, in particular those focussed on asset-based responses to adolescent risk should be shared widely as new research projects and services develop.**
* **Constructive and evidenced-based collective challenge to partners including Cafcass and the Judiciary should be considered, based on learning from the implementation of the 2014 Public Law Outline.**
* **Opportunities to collaboratively commission or deliver services which promote placement stability – including in adoption- should be explored in appropriate regional structures.**
* **Opportunities to share learning on approaches to promote high quality and innovative approaches to care planning and permanence, including through workforce development, should be explored regionally.**
* **The North West Commissioning Managers Group, supported by Placements Northwest, to prepare and outline delivery plans for a regional sufficiency and commissioning strategy.**
* **Co-ordination and pooling of existing recruitment and assessment capacity and resources should take place to support regional efforts to recruit, assess and approve foster carers.**
* **That Local Authorities consider the identification, protection or pooling of resources – including through the North West ‘Fostering Front Door’ – for dedicated foster carer recruitment officer posts.**
* **Local Authorities individually, or in clusters, identify opportunities to share access to internal placement resources as an alternative to commissioned placements. This to be supported by the development of placement finding and other commissioning support via Placements Northwest mechanisms in the first instance.**
* **A regional approach to Staying Put in both internal and commissioned placements is developed, in partnership with providers, with consideration of the extension of similar principles across all placement types.**

## Early help and services at the edge of care

The increasingly cohesive approach to early help presents both a strength and risk to achieving an overarching approach to Looked After Children which is both proportionate and sustainable.

* 1. **Resources** – whilst sustained investment in Early Help remains a priority, the non-statutory nature of services creates a financial disincentive in an environment of increasingly scarce resource. Challenges and enabling approaches discussed included:
* clear outcomes sought for well-defined cohorts of children, young people and families, based on evidence of need which are agreed and scrutinised effectively. Joint Strategic Needs Assessment, Health and Wellbeing Board and Local Safeguarding Children Board acting as the ‘golden thread’ of governance across partners.
* achieving political commitment to invest in early intervention for children, young people and families to promote better outcomes and reduced costs;
* a ‘cash limit’ model, predicated on re-directing resource, rather than an ‘invest to save’ approach, an increasing imperative for most localities; and
* prioritisation of investment in early years (including pre-birth) and adolescence services.
  1. **Partnership and co-design** – collaboration across agencies and an asset based approach of ‘working with’ rather than ‘doing to’ families was broadly acknowledged as the likely future character of early help services through:
* aggregation and analysis of the views of children, young people and families being be better utilised to understand widely accepted perceptions that families are often able to be supported and challenged more effectively, and at an earlier stage, by non-Social Work professionals;
* efforts to provide more impactful training, development and structural solutions to streamline the role of professionals to meet need outside of the Looked After system was broadly considered an opportunity to improve the journey of many children and young people.
* the scope for Multi-Agency Safeguarding/Public Services Hubs to effectively manage demand across agencies, share budgets and break down some persistent barriers including between children and adult health and social care services in particular;
* meeting diverse needs, with rapidly changing and often transient populations in many localities across the region through:
* better representation of the community and community languages within staffing cohort;
* proactively addressing issues of culture, trust and compatibility of assessment frameworks across all communities to meet ‘hidden’ need earlier and more effectively; and
* utilisation of commissioning arrangements, including with smaller community, voluntary and faith organisations.
  1. **Early Years** – there are clearly articulated risks around very young children due to changes in Sure Start/Children’s Centres offer and capacity. The targeting of resources to prevent escalation and ‘break the cycle’ with those families experiencing intergenerational barriers was cited as a valuable approach in formal input and discussion:
* harnessing other services – the role of wider programmes including Troubled Families/Troubled Families 2 was widely cited as an opportunity to address wider family issues including worklessness, substance misuse and mental ill health as a preventative measure to reduce younger children requiring statutory intervention. The role of early years providers/primary schools in providing early help and as partners in promoting sustainable outcomes for those at the edge of care also highlighted.
* specialist programmes – the increasingly established efficacy of programmes such as the Family Nurse Partnership and the growing evidence base demonstrated by services such as Salford’s Strengthening Families programme (see attached presentation) present opportunities to support families effectively to prevent younger children, including siblings of those previously Looked After, entering the care system.
  1. **Young people** - there is limited confidence in the ability of many early help services to respond effectively to the needs of older children and young people, which creates an inevitable pressure on statutory services and ultimately the LAC system. This response to ‘adolescent risk’ across the continuum is increasingly well documented in research, with the findings of ADCS ‘What is care for?’ and Research in Practice resources referenced in this report, being reiterated by presentations and discussion at the summit. Opportunities for development focused on services at the edge of care:
* residential edge of care services – the re-designation of existing or recently closed residential children’s homes for residential short breaks provision is an increasing favoured approach to the use of LA accommodation to provide support to families. ‘Adolescent Support Units’ have proven effectiveness both in terms of outcomes and cost benefit in several areas including Bolton and, in particular, Blackburn with Darwen. Recent DfE-funded Cost Benefit Analysis undertaken by iMPOWER has validated local practice in Blackburn with Darwen, finding that Return on Investment is in the order of 1:12, that is that for every £1 spent on the ASU, a £12 cost saving/avoidance has been achieved. For these reasons, many areas are exploring the extension or establishment of such arrangements.
* outreach and community asset based support – there are a growing number of approaches to outreach both within Looked After Children services and at the edge of care. Utilising the skills of support workers in residential children’s homes differently is one such approach with support to young people and their carers being delivered more flexibly to manage ‘step down’ arrangements into family placements, support foster carers and prevent breakdown within families. The development of further sub-regional hubs of the Safe Families for Children service, supported by DfE also presents an opportunity to add further facets to existing edge of care services. Alongside these developments, a number of Children’s Social Work Innovation Fund projects, at various stages of development, are being developed in the region. Scope for systematic sharing of emerging practice in this area is a clear opportunity.
  1. **Resources**

*Salford Strengthening Families RiP/ADCS 7 Principles to improve Blackburn with Darwen LAC*

*Presentation December 2014 responses to adolescent risk Strategy Presentation Dec 2014*

  

## Managing entry into care

There is an increasing articulation of the complexity and multi-faceted nature of Looked After Children cohorts and the requirement for differentiated approach at the point of entry. Key factors and areas of practice highlighted included:

* 1. **Tolerance of risk** - cultural aversion to risk within political leadership, partner agencies, families/ communities creates pressure to manage risk through the care system rather than within families. The role of the media appears significant in exacerbating this, particularly in response to high profile cases and reviews.
  2. **Family Group Conferences/Meetings** - proactive identification and assessment of realistic care options within families via this mechanism was dually cited as a means to manage risk within families, while ultimately – in some cases - reducing pressure on placement and other resources through achieving desired outcomes in the courts.
  3. **Pre-proceedings and the Public Law Outline** – the subject of structured input (St Helens) and significant discussion, the role of pre-proceedings processes or ‘front loading’ in PLO cases were widely accepted as an opportunity to robustly manage entry into care. Key aspects included:
* focus on reducing age at entry;
* well-resourced and managed, through dedicated posts to monitor quality and timeliness, commissioned specialist reports/assessments and consistent legal support; and
* trend of children Placed with Parents on care orders/ICO an interim measure of success.
  1. **Court-directed assessments** - Pressures within the court arena to pursue multiple viability assessments and assessments under s38(6) of the Children Act 1989 were highlighted by a number of localities as an increasing issue. This was described both in terms of creating delay in individual cases and in respect of system pressures which create additional demands on services then less able to effectively recruit and assess foster carers. Scope to influence change via robust legal support, engagement with District Family Judges and via Local Family Justice Boards were cited as opportunities to challenge and improve practice in this area at both individual case level and across the system. The limitations of these approaches were acknowledged with some examples of use of appeals, up to and including the Court of Appeal (Bolton, Blackburn with Darwen) noted.
  2. **Resources**

*St Helens Pre Court and Care Proceedings Presentation December 2014*



1. **Care Planning and Achieving Permanence** 
   1. **Emotional health and wellbeing** - Addressing emotional wellbeing and mental health issues for Looked After Children continues to be a notable barrier to achieving placement stability and permanence. This view from within services is supported by research evidence (Biehal et al, DCSF, 2009) which cites a clear correlation between SDQ scores and stability and permanence. Support to foster carers from was cited as a means to promote both emotional wellbeing and foster carer retention preventing placement breakdown and improving stability. Commonly used support mechanisms included use of educational psychologists and specialist parenting programmes, such as Nurturing Attachment (K. Golding), KEEP (Oregon Social Learning).
   2. **Reunification/return home** - limited evidence of systematic approaches in respect of reunification/ return home as an outcome-focused route to achieve permanence. Some perceived reluctance to consider reunification as a sustainable and well planned route to permanence across the system. This was in part explained by a sense that this route is looked upon less favourably through Government and Ofsted performance reporting and inspection. With changes to the policy landscape in this area nationally, there is clear scope for further development of practice and local approaches in this area.
   3. **Special Guardianship** - an increasingly problematic area with several LAs beginning to question sustainability given increasing anecdotal and research evidence (Selywn et al, DfE, 2014) of breakdown rates and less favourable outcomes. Since the inception of the legal order, case law has also significantly increased costs of maintaining these placements with many LAs slow to respond in terms of the implications for the structuring of fostering allowances. A minority did cite robust SGO support policies as an enabler to improving permanence. However, with high and exceptionally high proportions of placements with Independent Fostering Agencies in some areas, the reluctance of both agencies and their carers to convert placements to SGO, this may be a diminishing route to permanence for some children.
   4. **Workforce** – the importance of a strong, stable and motivated workforce, effectively enabled to practice both innovatively and effectively cut across much of the discussion and is cited in London Councils qualitative research as a key determinant of effective management of services for LAC.
      1. Capacity and structural considerations– exacerbated by recruitment and retention issues and increasing proportions of ASYE/NQSW, was identified as a presenting challenge to the quality and effectiveness of care planning. Linked to this was the oft articulated concern in respect of the continuity of social worker, with broad agreement that robust care planning and timely achievement of permanence was enabled by ownership of and commitment to plans and outcomes by social workers. Whilst concerns were raised about segmentation across more traditional ‘front door – CiN/CP – LAC/Permanence’ teams, some established and more recent efforts to reduce transfer points were noted as potential structural solutions to address this.
      2. Morale – that change, restructuring and uncertainty were ever-present was widely acknowledged as a potential barrier to high quality planning and good permanence outcomes. Strongly linked to recruitment and retention, steps to maintain and grow levels of morale amongst social workers and the wider workforce would be roundly welcomed.
      3. Quality – despite the reforms promoted by Prof Eileen Munro, there remains a strong sense of current systems acting as a barrier to quality. Burdens on Independent Reviewing Officers and concern as to the efficacy of this function to challenge care planning and achievement of permanence were noted in some quarters. Some highlighted the importance of communication of clear adoption strategies across the workforce to promoting this route to permanence. Elsewhere the whole system approach to permanence was characterised by expectations to articulate permanence or ‘exit’ strategies into care plans and assessments and the point of placement, with responsiveness promoted through clear contingency arrangements.
      4. Innovation - there is growing evidence, validated in some instances through inspection, of the benefits of Advanced Practitioner/Practice Supervisor type roles to promote and develop the quality of practice whilst maintaining the integrity of team manager functions. In addition to sharing such practice, opportunities to learn from and ensure the scaleability of a number of Children’s Social Work Innovation Fund projects currently being developed in the North West to address such wider system issues are emerging.
   5. **Resources**

*Looked after children in Outcomes and meaning of types Beyond the Adoption*

*London, London Councils of permanent placement, Biehal et al Order, Selwyn et al*

  Follow link [here](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/beyond-the-adoption-order-challenges-intervention-disruption)

1. **Realising placement sufficiency**

Capacity, choice and matching concerns across internal and commissioned services were variable, but, on balance, reflective of a regional trend of increasing issues in achieving sufficiency

* 1. **Defining and understanding need** - the importance of data was broadly acknowledged in basic terms of ensuring effective data collection and analysis is used to understand need and identify patterns and trends. More sophisticated use of data was also cited as an enabler to:
* benchmark performance and impact;
* predict future demand reliably to create political ‘trust’ and support investment;
* understand the impact of specific interventions and services;
* improve targeting of approaches to different identified cohorts;
* adopting a whole system approach to understanding cost; and
* establish local understanding, across agencies, of a ‘steady state’ for LAC population.
  1. **Utilising internal local authority services** - improving and better, indeed fully, utilising internal services was a common theme throughout presentations and discussion. A recent National Audit Office report estimates that internal foster placements cost over £19k less than those with commissioned providers. Conversely, residential provision internally creates an additional £31k cost burden over commissioned placements. This supports the view that LAs need a more business-like approach, ‘selling what we’re good at and retaining our resources better’. Challenges and proposals included:
* identification of weak business processes within internal fostering and/or adoption services (as demonstrated by targeted reviews in areas including Bury and Cheshire East) with resultant scope to improve these to impact on the recruitment of foster carers, including through the creation/retention of dedicated fostering/adoption recruitment officer posts;
* development of more sophisticated internal fostering services – redirection of resources to support and develop skills and resilience amongst internal foster carers to offer care for ‘harder to place’ children and young people; consideration of in-house/collaborative development of evidence-based placement and training services e.g. MST, MTFC, KEEP;
* improved configuration and use of residential children’s home provision. Restructuring of provision to provide more short breaks/edge of care services; improved arrangements for transition into family placements; use of outreach support to families, related and recruited foster carers; and reconfiguration to more, smaller children’s homes were variously noted in areas including Blackburn with Darwen, Bolton, Cheshire East and Warrington;
* systems to share internal placements across local authorities to address issues including, high use of IFA placements, higher internal vacancy rates, reciprocal arrangements where placements at a distance are an assessed need.
  1. **Commissioning** - strongly differing views on the role of partnership working with IFA and other providers emerged in discussion. Despite this, consistent challenges around the ability of LAs to effectively use care planning and commissioning to manage the contribution of the market emerged:
* keeping it local – clear desire to improve local sufficiency and reduce the need for children to be placed at distance, even where this may require a planned placement move. An opportunity in some areas for LAs to work with providers to better articulate need and develop local provision, supporting local providers by placing locally wherever possible;
* long-term placements – acknowledging some structured reductions in payments, further dialogue with providers needed to achieve better outcomes from placements where attachments are formed with carers. Conversely, more robust challenge and constructive negotiation with independent providers to enable stepping down of residential placements and conversion to permanence arrangements (SGO, CAO, adoption) where some resistance is reported. Proposed regulatory changes create an opportunity for greater flexibility in long term fostering where this is in the interests of children;
* better value from commissioned placements - regional benchmarking, practice sharing and commissioning activity needs to be better utilised to deliver consistent costs and benefits from commissioned placements. Different approaches needed to provider engagement needed locally and regionally to support this;
* market management – improved sufficiency assessments needed to inform long term strategy for commissioning. This should act as the basis to strength arrangements with providers to meet gaps and address pressures including placements for older children.
  1. **Collaboration** - a distinct element of discussion was the drive toward further collaboration, both as a financial imperative and as a consequence of structural and political change including the development of Combined Authorities. Identified areas for collaborative development included:
* North West Sufficiency and Commissioning Strategy – an end-to-end approach to sufficiency at regional level with steps such as a regional sufficiency strategy; processes to share and match regional placement resources – a regional clearing house; wider area market management to control sufficiency to meet North West needs, not those of other regions.
* recruitment and assessment of foster carers/ adopters – there was a high level of support for further regional activity to ensure the recruitment and timely assessment of foster carers and adopters. The experiences of You Can Foster and Adopt North West and the associated activity were frequently cited. The planned ‘fostering front door’ provides an opportunity to test, regionally, an improved enquiry handling process and develop learning from good practice, including amongst IFAs; and
* placements for young people aged 16 and over – potential benefit of a regional approach to Staying Put in commissioned placements, with agreements ‘built-in’ at point of placement. Sharing/standardisation of practice in relation to Individual Placement Agreements and development of regional level provider engagement on Staying Put was widely proposed. Further extension of existing regional approach to commissioning of leaving care placements, including semi-independence and development in respect of internal provision also suggested.
  1. **Resources**

*Children in Care, National Audit Office 2014*

