

TITLE OF REPORT: Placement sufficiency for Looked After Children

REPORT OF: Caroline O'Neill, Strategic Director, Children and Families

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report outlines the challenges faced by Children's Social Care in relation to placements for Looked after Children (LAC) and provide information about developments within the service, linked to the placement sufficiency strategy.

POLICY CONTEXT

Children in Care

1. Under the Children Act 1989, a child is legally defined as 'in care' by a local authority if he or she:
 - Is provided with accommodation for a continuous period for more than 24hours under S.20 (voluntary agreement with parent or with the young person if he/she is over 16years old).
 - Is subject to a Care Order (made by the Family Court)
 - Is subject to a Police Protection Order, Emergency Protection Order or Remand
 - Is subject to a Placement Order (pre-adoption)
2. Within this report we will refer to young people who meet these criteria as Looked After Children (LAC) or young people
3. A young person ceases to be in care when he or she turns 18 years old, an adoption order is granted, or their parents resume parental responsibility.
4. The Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 extends the local authority's responsibilities to Care Leavers up to the age of 21, or 25 if they are in full-time education or continue to need a service/support.

Background

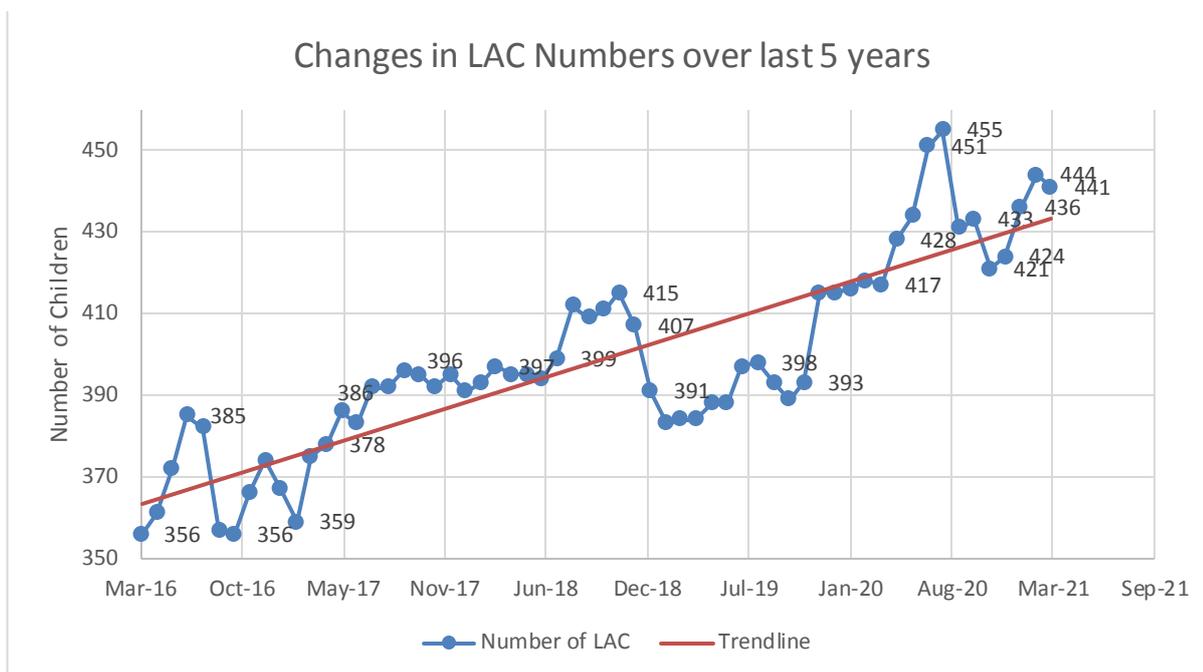
Gateshead Demographic context

5. Gateshead has a population of around 201,600 people. Gateshead's population is projected to increase by 11,000 (5.5%) between 2014 and 2039 to 211,500.
6. The population is ageing, and it is projected that by 2039 there will be an additional 14,400 people aged 65 or older, an increase of 38%. There will also be a slight decrease in the number of children and young people aged 0-15 of around 500 or 1.5%.
7. One in four children in Gateshead live in poverty. Children who live in poverty are significantly more likely to experience poor mental health as well as physical health.

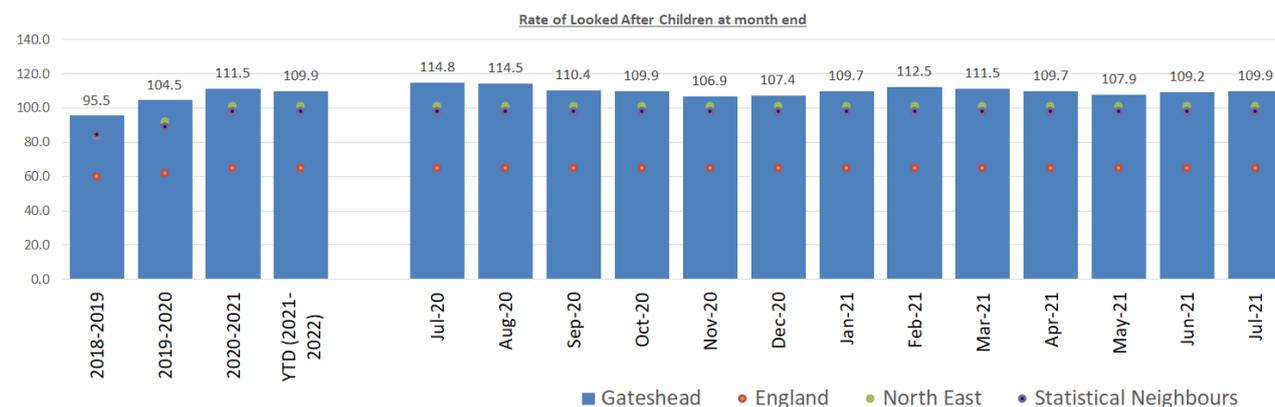
8. Entering care is strongly associated with poverty and deprivation, and with emotional and mental health problems. Research suggests that around 45-60% of LAC and Young People have emotional and mental health problems, increasing to 72% for those in residential care.

The number of LAC in Gateshead

9. The number of LAC in Gateshead on the 16th February 2018 was 386, which has steadily increased, with the highest being 455 in August 2020. In July 2021, there were 433 LAC, which is a rate of 109.9 per 10,000, which is higher than both the England average, our statistical neighbours and North East average. This is closely monitored by team managers and senior managers within Children's Services – please see graphs below

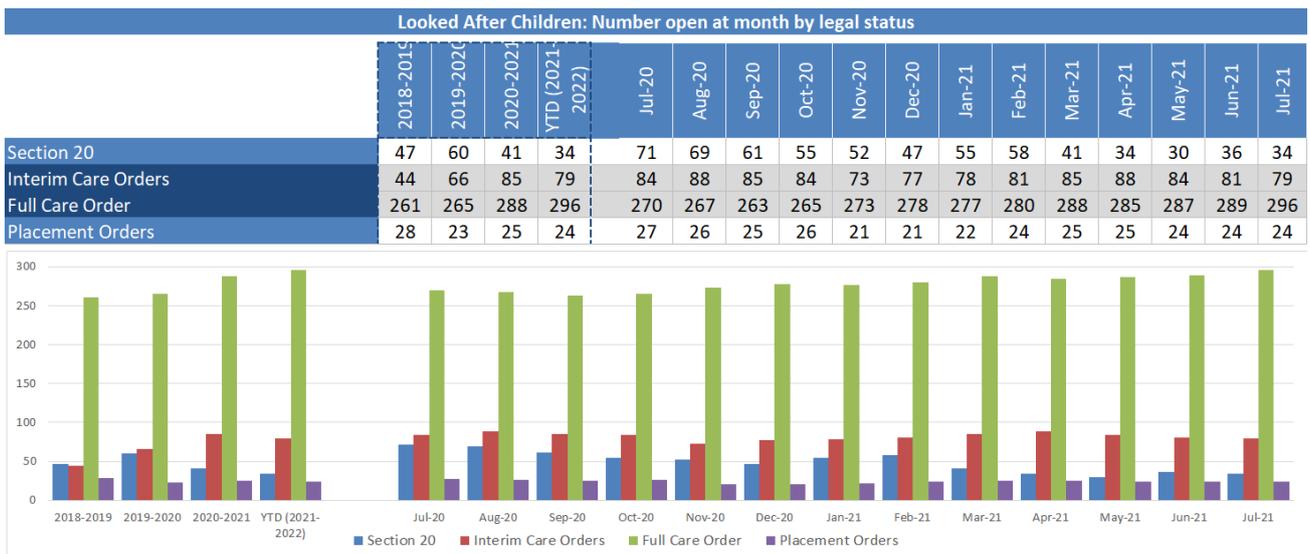


Looked After Children: Number and Rate per 10,000																	
	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021	YTD (2021-2022)	Jul-20	Aug-20	Sep-20	Oct-20	Nov-20	Dec-20	Jan-21	Feb-21	Mar-21	Apr-21	May-21	Jun-21	Jul-21
Number of Looked After Children at month end	380	414	439	433	452	451	435	433	421	423	432	443	439	432	425	430	433
Rate of Looked After Children at month end	95.5	104.5	111.5	109.9	114.8	114.5	110.4	109.9	106.9	107.4	109.7	112.5	111.5	109.7	107.9	109.2	109.9



10. The below graph shows, the types of legal orders our LAC are on.

- Section 20 are primarily new into care
- Interim Care orders are often used when families are unwilling to sign section 20 and children need to be removed for their protection. This order is also used when an assessment has been undertaken and the long-term plan is for the children to remain looked after
- Full Care Orders are made at the end of parenting assessments, psychological assessments or any court directed assessments, resulting in the child not being able to return home to their parents. They remain LAC, often until they are 18
- Placement Orders are made for those children who are being adopted



What does this mean?

11. The steady increase and sustained numbers of between 420 to 455 LAC has caused immense pressure on the fostering service and has resulted in a higher use of Independent Fostering Agencies (IFA) and external residential provision.

Internal provision

12. In Gateshead we currently have

- 175 fostering households, comprising of 142 mainstream fostering households and 33 kinship/connected foster carers and six foster-to adopt households
- Grove House – short-break provision for children with disabilities
- Blaydon Children’s Home – long-term residential provision for five young people aged 11-18years
- Longside House – long-term residential provision for six young people aged 11-18years with one of the placements being a small flat to prepare a young person for independence. This enables one young person to stay after their 18th birthday
- Kites Rise – three-bedded therapeutic residential home for children aged 10-18years
- We also commission supported accommodation and taster flats via SAILS for our Care Leavers

13. In terms of the number of young people we have in our own resources, we are doing very well as we have

- 237 placed with our in-house foster care carers
- 52 placed with approved connected carers
- 8 foster- to-adopt placements
- 14 young people in our own residential provision
- 14 children waiting for adoption in their adoptive families
- 19 children placed on care orders at home

14. This equates to approximately 80% of our LAC being cared for in our own resources. This is positive as we know our own foster carers and residential provision gives the best outcomes for our children.

Independent Fostering Placements

15. Historically we had a very low use/need for IFA placements, however over the last 12 months there has been a significant rise in the use of IFA placements.

16. All IFA placements are approved and monitored by the High Needs Review Panel, which is chaired by Andrea Houlahan, Assistant Strategic Director. Every effort is made to keep the use of these placements to a minimum, and to return children to our own foster placements as soon as possible. We currently have 34 independent fostering placements for 52 children, which is primarily made up of sibling groups and hard to place complex young people requiring a specialist or solo placement.

External residential Placements

17. This is an area that has remained fairly static from 2018 to the present day, with placements fluctuating between 28 and 32. These placements often care for our most challenging and hard to place young people with a range of complex needs, including

- Autism
- Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder
- Learning disabilities/difficulties
- Behavioural difficulties, including violence and aggression to staff and peers
- Offending behaviour
- Missing episodes
- Risk of child sexual exploitation
- Self-harm
- Step down from mental health services (Ferndene)

18. Every effort is made to keep the use of these placements to a minimum and share the costs with education and the CCG. These placements are approved by Andrea Houlahan, Assistant Strategic Director.

Leaving Care

19. The leaving care team are working with 104 young adults aged 18-21 years and have 108 eligible young adults aged 21-25. The accommodation needs of these young people are met by

- Staying-Put with their foster carers
- Supported accommodation with commissioned SAILS providers
- Taster flats
- Own tenancies
- Living with family and friends

20. We also have one young person in custody, and one young person detained under the Mental Health Act
21. A strategic review of homelessness is underway, which includes young people's services, and this will be completed in September 2022. The SAILS contract will remain in place until this review is completed

Placement sufficiency

22. The development and delivery of highly effective support for children who are looked after by the local authority is a key priority for Gateshead. We constantly seek to improve outcomes for LAC and Care Leavers in order to improve their life chances and opportunities. These outcomes are closely linked to placement stability and ensuring that children have placement choice and are matched and placed with the right carers or residential establishment.
23. Gateshead's Corporate Parenting Pledge sets out our commitment and responsibilities as a corporate parent, which is to provide the best possible care and protection for children and young people in care. At the core of this responsibility is the moral duty to provide the kind of support that any good parents would provide their own children. This includes enhancing the quality of life of children in care as well as simply keeping them safe.

Fostering

24. Gateshead currently has 52 young people placed in independent fostering placements. This has increased in line with the LAC numbers increasing, however we would like this number to reduce. It needs to be acknowledged that some young people have been matched long term with their IFA carers and therefore, even if we are successful in recruiting 30 new sets of foster carers each year, there will still be some use of IFA placements.
25. Significant work has been taking place with the Fostering Team Manager and Marketing and Recruitment officer to develop a recruitment strategy that will bring more foster carers to Gateshead as we need
 - Single placements for complex young people
 - Teenage placements
 - Placements for sibling groups
 - Parent and child placements
 - Placements for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children
 - Short break/home-from-home carers for children with disabilities
 - Long-term carers
26. This is a big ask as we are competing against IFA's and our regional fostering services, however enquiries have increased over the last six months and the monitoring of enquiries is more robust
27. The marketing plan for 2020-21 focussed on maintaining a presence across a wide range of media channels with the aim of promoting fostering to those living within the Gateshead area and surrounding 20-mile radius. It was necessary to review our marketing approach due to the impact of the pandemic as it was not worthwhile using outdoor advertising during the periods of lockdown.
28. We focused our activity on our social media and utilising the Council Corporate Channels, including residents' magazine and e-mail updates to communicate that we

were still recruiting foster carers. The service continues to increase the use of digital channels and we can see an increase in enquiries generated via these channels (Facebook and Google AdWords). Enquirers are consistently using the website to find their information and the resident's magazine (Council News) also performs well.

29. All campaign assets involved images and video footage of our own Gateshead foster carers which produced authentic messaging. We have also developed a "recommend a friend scheme", which rewards existing foster carers and is a starting to produce results
30. We have also become a "fostering friendly" employer in the aim to recruit and support council employees. This is in early stages, but we are hopeful that this will encourage more people to enquire
31. We have noted that the ongoing marketing activity and promotions has resulted in a higher number of enquiries and whilst some people have needed to be ruled out/enquiries did not progress, we have 15 new assessment being undertaken and a further six sets of prospective foster carers on the next Skills to Foster training
32. The marketing plan will continue to evolve and will utilise the "free of charge" marketing tools as well as 'paid for' campaigns to ensure that Gateshead Council's Fostering Service has a good presence to compete with other local authorities and IFA's. We will continue to deliver our marketing campaigns utilising our established brand and advertising materials to drive prospective foster carers to our website. Specific attention will be focussed on increasing our use of social media channels in line with the Corporate Social Media Review. In addition to the above wider awareness raising a targeted plan will be developed to target specific gaps and needs.
33. There has also been a bid submitted regionally for money to develop the Mockingbird project in Gateshead and we are waiting to see if we have been successful in this bid.

Residential

34. It has to be acknowledged that whilst we would like to have all of our young people within our own resources not all of these young people can be returned as they need highly specialised resources. However, we would like to develop additional resources within Gateshead to meet the needs of the children we have placed at a distance and can safely return to Gateshead. To achieve this, we need to develop a range specialist residential resources to include
 - Single occupancy/two-bedded children's home
 - Three-bedded children's home – already planned in
 - Three-bedded residential home for children with disabilities – already planned in
35. The development of these homes comes at a cost to the Council, some of which have been agreed as part of the medium-term financial strategy.

Supported Accommodation

36. The current commissioned model does have some shortfalls and under the homelessness review we will be asking for
 - Additional 24hour supported accommodation
 - Supported accommodation that will work for our most challenging, high risk young people
 - Parent and child supported accommodation as this is limited at present

Role of Commissioning

37. Commissioning of Children's Services in Gateshead is focussed on delivering excellent outcomes for children and families, achieving the best value for money and building local capacity.
38. Within commissioning we work strategically with other local authorities, our partners and with local providers to offer choice and flexibility, including frameworks and collaborative commissioning across geographical and organisational boundaries. Gateshead Council will continue to work with providers and alongside regional partners to expand what is available and improve quality monitoring to meet the needs of the children in our care. This provision includes:
- NE7 Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) framework
 - NE12 is a Flexible Procurement Agreement for delivery of placements for children and young people as outlined below, which include residential children's homes for children and young people aged 0-18 years and Ofsted registered residential short break services for children and young people aged 0-18 years
 - Independent Ofsted registered providers that are off framework and willing to provide placements for Gateshead Council
 - PAUSE programme aimed at reducing the numbers of children and young people brought into care
 - A dynamic purchasing system which enables providers to register to deliver future provision in a planned or emergency situation, whilst undergoing checks to maintain their safety.
 - Lead on stakeholder engagement to clarify our commitment and mechanisms for engagement at an individual, service and strategic level.
 - In partnership with Children's Services, investigate alternative ways of working with families and children.
39. Whilst we would ideally like to have all our young people placed within our own resources this is not achievable, and we will continue to have a need for externally commissioned placements. However, externally commissioned placements are also in short supply and face similar pressures as those described earlier regarding fostering services. Across the country the numbers of LAC continue to rise and therefore the demand for placements is competitive as other local authorities both within and out-with our region are making placement requests of the same providers. This is acknowledged in the current Care Review and cements our position in relation to the need to invest and develop our local residential provision.

Next steps

40. Our priorities are informed by what our LAC and Young People say is important to them. We have worked with them and they have told us that having placement choice, placement stability and being able to maintain their social links and identity are very important
41. As already shown, placement choice is limited and there are areas of development required to increase placement sufficiency both in residential, fostering and supported accommodation. There will be work undertaken both strategically and operationally to develop services that can not only meet the current demand but also the projected demand. This work will be cross cutting and link with
- Vision 2030
 - Thriving Gateshead
 - Gateshead Council Plan

- Gateshead's Children and Young People in Care and Care Leavers Strategy (2018-2023)
- Gateshead Council's Fostering Recruitment Strategy
- Placement Sufficiency and Commissioning Strategy

42. By working together to increase our placement choice it is hoped that our offer to LAC and Young people and Care leavers is improved, and that they are placed and supported within Gateshead,

Recommendation

The Board is asked to

- Note the report
- Agree the contents
- Consider the frequency of updates to the committee

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