

# MEDWAY COUNCIL

## CABINET

16 DECEMBER 2003

### THE EDUCATION OF LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN

Portfolio holder: Councillor Les Wicks – Education  
Councillor Howard Doe – Health and Community Services

Report from: Rose Collinson – Director of Education and Leisure  
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#### 1. Summary

- 1.1 This report accompanies the scrutiny review report produced by the Education and Lifelong Learning Overview and Scrutiny Committee into the education of looked after children and invites the Cabinet to respond to its findings.

#### 2. Decision Issues

- 2.1 An in-depth review of the education of looked after children has been conducted by a sub-group of the Education & Lifelong Learning Overview and Scrutiny Committee. This report has been submitted to the Cabinet for its consideration.
- 2.2 All of the recommendations set out in the report are matters for Cabinet, as the implementation of review findings will be contained from within existing budget provision.

#### 3. Background

- 3.1 The Education and Lifelong Learning Overview and Scrutiny Committee decided that its first major in-depth review in 2003/04 would be on the way Medway Council promotes the educational attainment of looked after children.
- 3.2 Between July and October 2003, a cross-party four member group took evidence from a wide range of witnesses. These have included a number of council officers from Director level to service managers and key professionals who work with looked after children.

- 3.3 The main scrutiny report outlines the full list of witnesses on page 4. As well as oral evidence hearings, more informal focus group approaches were employed to seek the views of representative groups of foster carers and looked children via the Medway Challengers support group.
- 3.4 The group's draft report was considered by the Education and Lifelong Learning Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 26 November 2003. The bound overview and scrutiny report outlining the full findings of the review was circulated to all members on Thursday 4 December 2003. **It has not been produced in full with these papers and any Cabinet member requiring an additional copy is advised to contact the Cabinet Office.**
- 3.5 The review findings can be broadly separated into recommendations that can be actioned by the local authority, those that schools and other agencies are being asked to respond to and a number of general conclusions that the Cabinet is asked to note. The findings are set out in these categories below. **For background information relating to all of the findings, members should refer to the main report.**
- 3.6 The review team would like to draw the Cabinet's attention to the key factor that they believe prevents looked after children succeeding in education – stability. By Medway focusing its efforts on securing stable environments for children in public care, it is then possible to raise aspirations and see the gap in attainment with peers narrow. The efforts of all may be in vain if Medway does not tackle the underlying causes of poor attainment.

#### **4. Director's comments**

##### Director of Education and Leisure

- 4.1 We welcome the findings of this scrutiny review of the education of looked after children.
- 4.2 The educational underachievement of children in public care is well documented. Locally and nationally evidence suggests that looked after children are, on average, more likely than other children to:-
- achieve less well in tests and examinations
  - not progress to further or higher education
  - be poor attenders
  - be more at risk of exclusion
- 4.3 This lack of educational success is unacceptable. The LEA has high expectations and aspirations for all children in public care and, working in partnership across the Council and with schools is committed to making sure each child achieves their maximum potential.

- 4.4 The scrutiny review provides useful and helpful support in this critical task.

Director of Health and Community Services

- 4.5 The findings of the scrutiny review reinforce the responsibility of all key stakeholders – elected Members, foster carers, social workers, teachers and allied professionals – to promote the educational attainment of looked after children. It is considered that the establishment of a corporate parenting group to monitor the progress in this area would both reflect the priority given to this vulnerable group of children and indicate the seriousness with which the local authority takes its corporate parent role.
- 4.6 The recommendations to improve the educational outcomes of looked after children are timely, given the announcement in the Queen's Speech of a Children's Bill that will reinforce the responsibility of local authorities to promote the educational achievement of children in public care.
- 4.7 The review team draws attention to the issue of placement stability as a key factor in promoting educational achievement. This is not in dispute, but it should be noted that Medway's looked after children enjoy a high level of placement stability when compared with other local authorities. Only 12% of children looked after during 2002/3 experienced more than three moves. This figure includes children who were moved on to adoptive placements. For this performance indicator, Medway received the highest possible rating in 2002/3. Efforts are being made this year to reduce the percentage to 10% by increasing support to carers through a new ring-fenced Choice Protects grant.
- 4.8 The recommendations regarding training for foster carers and social workers to promote their understanding of the education system are supported. Fostering social workers who undertake the assessment, support and monitoring of foster carers should also be included in this training.
- 4.9 It is accepted that therapeutic and counselling support to looked after children and their carers should be more easily accessible. From 1 April 2004, a social work post in Canada House, the local CAMHS Tier 3 service, will be ring-fenced for this purpose.
- 4.10 Revised guidance on the local authority's responsibility to promote the educational attainment of its looked after children is welcomed. This should build on the guidance approved by the former joint education / social services committee.

## 5. Financial and legal implications

- 5.1 Any additional expenditure required to action recommendations will need to be contained from within existing budget provision.
- 5.2 There are no direct legal implications arising from this report.

## 6. Recommendations

- 6.1 Cabinet are asked to agree the following recommendations of the review, that : -
- (i) A Corporate Parenting Steering Group is established that advises officers on policy relating to looked after children, monitors performance and celebrates achievement. **(RF2)**
  - (ii) Medway should continue to work in partnership with schools and foster carers to develop high quality Personal Education Plans (PEP's) for all looked after children residing in Medway. These PEP's should always include the views of the looked after child in a way that is appropriate for each individual. **(RF3)**
  - (iii) A programme of training opportunities for foster carers and social workers should be developed which will enable them to support the education of looked after children more effectively. **(RF7)**
  - (iv) Advisory information for foster carers should be improved. We recommend producing practical information for carers in the form of booklets on the Key Stages, Admission Arrangements, National Curriculum etc. This information should also be made available on the council website and details widely publicised to carers. **(RF9)**
  - (v) Officers are requested to investigate how stability and number of care placements affects performance at school to help us understand underlying reasons for poor educational performance. **(RF12)**
  - (vi) Officers are urged to complete the task of a comprehensive list of all looked after children placed in Medway by other local authorities as a matter of urgency. **(RF14)**
  - (vii) When another local authority places a Looked After Child in Medway who requires additional support at school, wherever possible a request for funding to support the placement should be actively pursued. **(RF15)**
  - (viii) Officers should assess support arrangements for looked after children placed by other authorities and where appropriate

request funding from the placing authority or independent fostering agency. Officers are requested to investigate the most appropriate way of obtaining additional support so the services of groups such as Medway Challengers can be accessed. **(RF16)**

- (ix) Officers are requested to assess the suitability of Medway's procedures as a local education authority for supporting young asylum seeker pupils in light of the findings of the recent Ofsted national study of the Education of Asylum Seeker pupils. **(RF17)**
- (x) Officers are requested to analyse the proportion of looked after children who are subject of fixed term or permanent exclusion from school. **(RF19)**
- (xi) Note that anecdotal evidence was heard which indicated a difficulty in accessing children's mental health services (CAHMS) for those in need and require officers to investigate ways of improving access. **(RF20)**
- (xii) All pre-school looked after children are referred through the early years triage system to ensure they are accessing a free nursery place. **(RF22)**
- (xiii) The Early Years Team is requested to work with Social Services to establish whether pre-school Personal Education Plans could be introduced in Medway. **(RF23)**
- (xiv) Cabinet notes that Quality Protects funding from 2004/05 will no longer be ringfenced and ensures that funding for initiatives relating to looked after children and other disadvantaged young people are continued at current levels. **(RF25)**
- (xv) Over the next twelve months, a guide on the education of looked after children is developed. This document should be a practical tool that clearly sets out the roles for all who have a responsibility for the education of looked after children. **(RF26)**

6.2 Cabinet are asked to support the following recommendations addressed to schools and other agencies : -

- (i) That the Connexions service, Learning and Skills Council and other appropriate agencies give favourable consideration to the funding of posts with responsibility to increase the participation of looked after children in post-16 education, employment or training. **(RF1)**
- (ii) That schools should be sensitive to the needs of looked after children and seek to provide appropriate additional support without unnecessarily stigmatising them. **(RF4)**

- (iii) That schools should be aware of the prevalence of bullying of looked after children and are asked to include in their anti-bullying policies a paragraph on bullying of vulnerable groups. **(RF5)**

6.3 Cabinet are asked to note the following findings and comment as appropriate :-

- (i) We welcome current initiatives to enable schools to be able to contact the Children and Families service more easily when they have concerns about looked after children. **(RF6)**
- (ii) Greater collaboration is required between the Directorates to ensure that foster carers and social workers fully understand the complex school admissions procedures and their rights of appeal. **(RF8)**
- (iii) There are no easy answers to improving the educational achievement of looked after children. Stability is the key issue that was consistently highlighted. Without a suitable placement that the child is happy in it is unlikely that education will be a priority. **(RF10)**
- (iv) When making a placement decision, the impact on their education must be a key factor. The foster carer's ability to support a looked after child's education should also be a major factor in assessing their suitability. **(RF11)**
- (v) The situation where other local authorities are not informing us of looked after children being placed in Medway when they are required to do so is unacceptable. We would urge officers to do all they can to ensure that the scenario of looked after children arriving at a school without any warning ceases. **(RF13)**
- (vi) A Learning Mentor scheme has been highlighted by a number of witnesses as a potential way of improving educational achievement. If the Local Education Authority are keen to develop such a scheme in the near future, we would urge that priority consideration is given to the needs of looked after children. **(RF18)**
- (vii) We welcome that the Health Promotion Service has identified looked after children as a priority group for work to address their health needs through a more holistic approach. **(RF21)**
- (viii) The Council should respond in a positive way to the proposals contained in the children's service green paper and Children's Bill that relate to the education of looked after children. We

particularly welcome the removal of barriers to information sharing. **(RF24)**

6.4 Cabinet is requested to note that a copy of the review report will be provided to each school's designated teacher for looked after children.

6.5 Cabinet is also requested to note that an action plan will be produced which will allocate responsibility for implementation of review findings (subject to Cabinet's approval) and that the Education and Lifelong Learning Overview and Scrutiny Committee will review progress made in December 2004.

## **7. Suggested reasons for decision(s)**

7.1 An in-depth scrutiny review has been undertaken into the education of looked after children. The Cabinet has one month following publication of the report to respond to these findings.

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### **Background papers**

Appendix of evidence to the group – available from Overview and Scrutiny Office, Civic Centre

List of background documents used are contained in the main report, 'The Education of Looked After Children' – Education & Lifelong Learning Overview and Scrutiny Committee