

Committee: Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Panel

Date: 21st March 2017

Agenda item:

Wards: All

Subject: Corporate Parenting, Looked After Children (LAC) and Care Leavers

Lead officer: Paul Angeli, Assistant Director of Children, Schools and Families

Lead member: Cllr Katy Neep, Cabinet Member for Children's Services

Forward Plan reference number: N/A

Contact officers: Sarah Daly, Head of Permanency, LAC & Care Leavers

Recommendations:

Members of the Panel discuss and consider the contents of the report as part of their scrutiny of Merton's approach to corporate parenting and of support of and outcomes for Merton's looked after children and care leavers.

1 PURPOSE OF REPORT AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1. The report provides members with an overview of our work to support and improve outcomes for Merton's looked after children and care leavers and by way of appendices provides the Panel with information which is seen and scrutinised by the statutory Corporate Parenting Panel (CPP). The CPP is chaired by the Chief Executive and includes the partners who have a statutory duty to work together to ensure the championing of and better meeting the needs and aspirations of our LAC and care leavers.
- 1.2. It should be noted that where necessary the information in appendices has been anonymised and redacted to ensure that children and young people cannot be identified and to enable the information to be published. The CPP is provided with more detail but this would not be suitable for public discussion.

2 DETAILS

- 2.1 The Corporate Parenting Panel (CPP) is chaired by the Chief Executive and is attended by the administration lead member for children's services and a representative from the opposition as well as officers from across the council and its partners in providing children's services.
- 2.2 The terms of reference include:
 - Understanding and championing the needs and ambitions of looked after children (LAC) and care leavers across the Merton Partnership.

- Ensuring joined up pathways in education, health, employability, leisure and recreation for Merton LAC, LAC children overseen by the Virtual School and Merton care leavers.
- Receiving direct feedback from Merton Children in Care Council and the wider looked after children and care leaver population, to improve council and partner service development and delivery.
- Providing mutual challenge within and across the partnership to prioritise continuous improvement for services and outcomes.
- Giving conspicuous care and attention to particularly vulnerable looked after children such as young offenders, substance misusers and pregnant teenagers, to ensure effective risk assessment and appropriate service support.

2.3 The CPP meets bi-monthly and routinely: reviews the LAC and care leavers and their outcomes; receives feedback from LAC and care leavers on participation; and throughout its annual work programme receives reports with a specific focus: health; education; housing; CAMHs etc. Where performance or other intelligence indicates it the CPP can and does receive more detailed reports on specific issues. Its role in summary is to both advocate for LAC and care leavers and to scrutinise and challenge all partners regarding LAC and care leaver outcomes. This report summarises some of the context and key issues for our work with children in the court system, children who become LAC and our care leavers as reflected in the annual Corporate Parenting report.

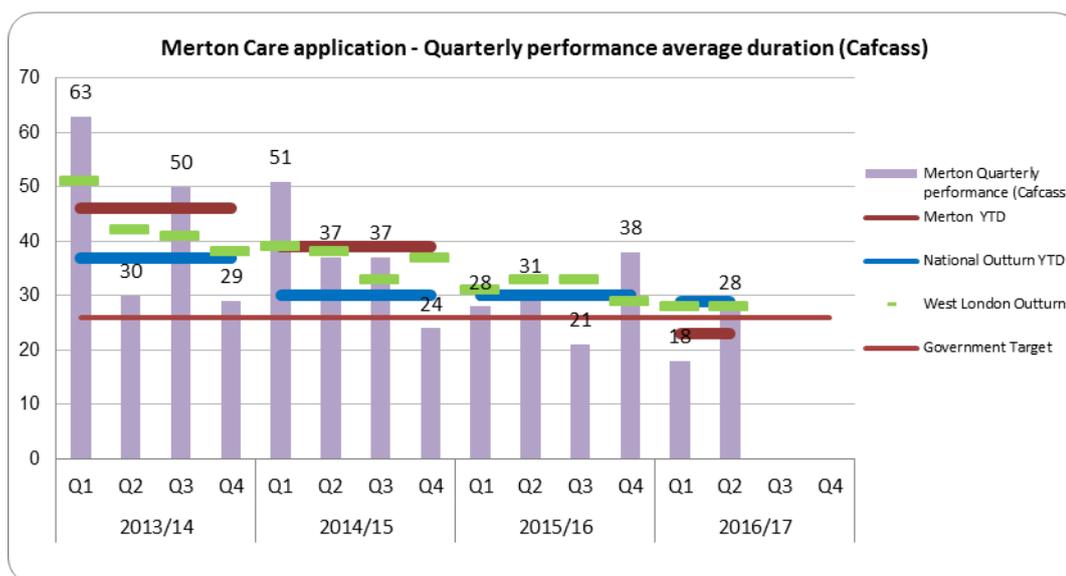
3 THE EXPERIENCE AND PROGRESS OF OUR LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN AND CARE LEAVERS

3.1 In Merton we are ambitious for all our children and young people, particularly so for all children who become looked after by the authority. Our Children and Young People's Plan sets out our ambitions for our looked after children and this is enhanced by our LAC Strategy 2015-18 and Care Leavers Strategy 2015-18 both received by this Panel in March 2016 and which are monitored by the Corporate Parenting Panel with performance information also scrutinised by the Children's Trust and Merton Safeguarding Children's Board as well as through the CSF KPIs to this panel.

3.2 Rightly over the last decade national and local expectations have risen with regard to performance in relation to a number of key areas involving LAC and care leavers including a greater focus on adoption and a raft of changes arising out of the Children and Families Act 2014 including the rights of care leavers to "stay put" with their foster carers and to extend the duration of leaving care services. Attached as an appendix to this report is the 2015/16 annual corporate parenting report. This report summarises key areas covered and presenting issues.

3.3 Care proceedings – During 2013, we redesigned our looked after children and permanency services to deliver care proceedings and permanency more quickly and to accommodate the requirements of the Family Justice Review

and Children and Families Act 2014. Further structural changes were made in 2015 to ensure a stronger focus on long term care. We reviewed key processes and procedures to ensure compliance with the Public Law Outline guidance. These changes have ensured a more joined up approach with clearer accountability and effective working across services and teams. Management oversight continues to be maintained through monthly case tracking panels chaired by Heads of Service. As a result we have seen considerable improvements in the duration of care applications). It should be noted however that small cohorts of children can significantly impact quarterly performance figures.



3.4 Our LAC Population: The annual corporate parenting report provides the Corporate Parenting Panel with an overview of the population, trends and key emerging issues from reviewing local and benchmarking data where available. Headlines include:

- Merton has improved the timeliness of care proceedings significantly from 2014-15 when average case duration was 42 weeks;
- The number of Merton LAC remains stable after a period of increase reflecting demographic and other factors which have seen numbers rise nationally;
- Merton's rate per 10,000 in March 2016 was 35 and in Jan 2017 was 34, this remains below statistical neighbours;
- Our LAC cohort is increasingly skewed towards adolescents reflecting our success in achieving permanency for younger children and reflecting a wider trend of vulnerable teenagers entering care;
- Our LAC population is slightly skewed to boys – this is particularly affected by our UASC cohort;
- The UASC cohort also affects our ethnic profile;
- The reasons for children becoming looked after remain relatively stable;
- The creation of the LAC permanence team has impacted positively on a range of PIs and young people's experience

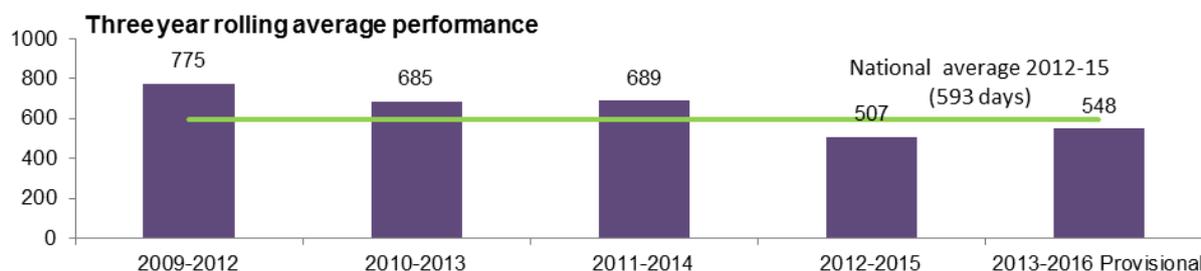
3.5 **Achieving permanency:** The report sets out the numbers of special guardianships 2012 to 2016. Merton’s relatively low numbers are consistent with similar sized authorities. With regard to adoption performance our low numbers mean that one complex child disproportionately skews our averages. We can update Panel on our most recent adoption performance below:

Numbers of adoptions made:

Year	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
Number of children adopted	2	5	9	5	10	8	11

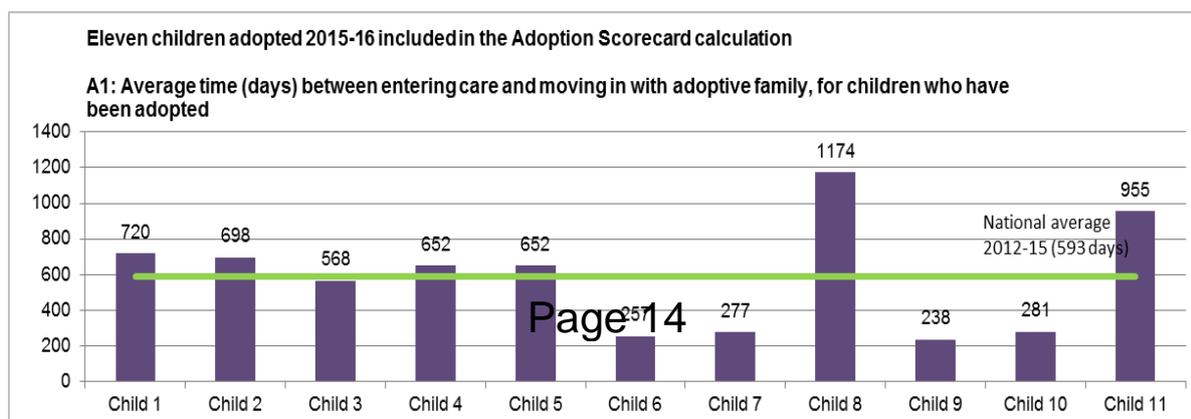
3.6 We believe that wherever we have decided that adoption is the plan for a child, we should aim to place the child as early as possible with the carers who are likely to become their adoptive parents. We use a fostering to adopt approach when appropriate to ensure attachments are formed at the earliest opportunity and to reduce the number of placements experienced by a child. We recognise however that as only relatively small numbers of looked after children are adopted; any delay in even one case results in a disproportionate impact to our overall performance and distorts our reported figures. Despite the challenges of small cohorts and complex cases year on year, we are able to demonstrate a trend of improvement in the average time it takes for a child who goes on to be adopted from entering care to moving in with his or her adoptive family.

A1: Average time (days) between entering care and moving in with adoptive family, for children who have been adopted

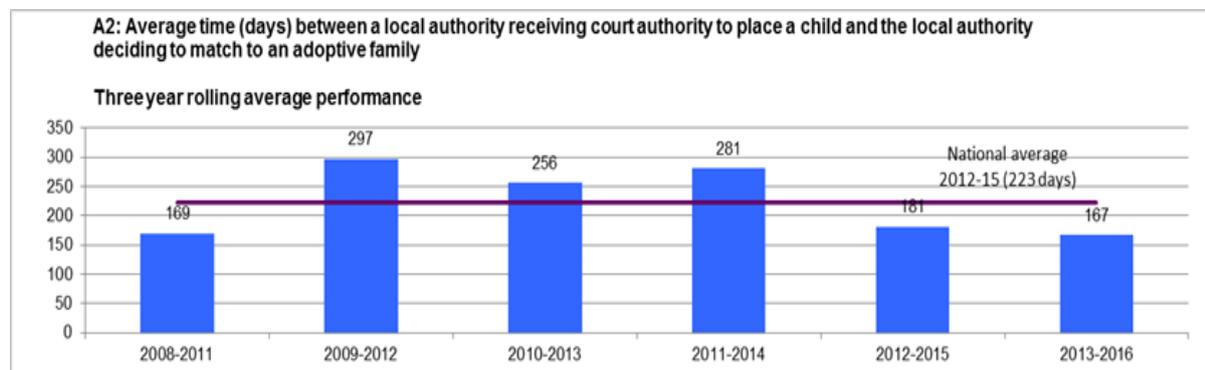


3.7 In 2015/16, Merton had 11 children who were adopted. The graph below sets out the timescales for each child in this cohort. Factors which caused delays in the adoption processes for these children include:

- Complexity of care proceedings
- Complexity of the child’s needs (e.g. disability, age)
- Sibling groups



- 3.8 Year on year, we are also able to demonstrate some continued improvement in the average time from receiving court authority to place a child and matching with adoptive family (A2).



- 3.9 Merton's three year rolling average for this indicator is 167 (2013/16) - this is better than the average of 223 days (2012/15).
- 3.10 In 2015-16 we developed the LAC Permanence Team; a team designed to work with settled Looked After Children aged 6+ for whom we have responsibility for longer term as corporate parents. The key driver behind the development of the team was to provide greater support for children with plans for permanency. A recent feedback exercise completed with children and their carers highlighted that the children felt that they had a better understanding of their care plan and carers reported that they felt more informed about what was happening for the child.
- 3.11 Children ceasing care to return home to live with parents/relatives has remained stable in 2016 (39%). Nationally a third of children ceasing care returned home. In 2016, 19% of Merton's looked after children moved to independent living, a reduction of 41% on 2015; this nevertheless remains above the national of 13% and reflects the higher proportion of older young people in our LAC cohort.
- 3.12 **Health outcomes: LAC health outcomes** – Health outcomes for Merton looked after children are better than the national average with the exception of immunisations. Ninety one per cent of Merton LAC had an annual health assessment during 2015/16 compared to 90% nationally and in London (2014/15). Ninety three per cent of Merton LAC had a dental check during 2015/16, compared to 93% nationally (2015/16). 81% of Merton LAC had immunisations that were up to date (2015/16), compared to 88% nationally and 85% in London in 2015/16.
- 3.13 The Merton CAMHS Social Care Team (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service) is now in place as part of the borough's Children's Social Care service. This adds a quality, integrated mental health component to the engagement, assessment, planning and support of our looked after children. Emotional and behavioural health is determined by the average score of children looked after for a Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire was completed. Merton's average score was 14.9 above the London (13.2) and national averages (13.9). Work has taken place to improve the scoring

through a mandatory training programme for practitioners. We are screening children through our CAMHS team if the scores are particularly high.

3.14 The CAMHS Social Care Team works as part of a multi-agency response to improve the quality of life for children and young people that have a wide range of presenting social, psychological and mental health needs. It provides effective evidence-based interventions as part of the clinical and social response to meeting the emotional and mental health needs of these

3.15 **Education outcomes:** The Head teacher of the Virtual School provides an annual report to the Corporate Parenting Board and information on LAC educational outcomes was reported to the CYP Panel as part of the annual Standards Report. A copy of the Virtual Heads report is included as an appendix for ease of reference. Key points for the panel include:

- At the end of KS4, Merton LAC have improved their performance in all key indicators in comparison with the previous year. The proportion achieving 5+ GCSE at Grade A*-G rose by thirteen percentage points to 46%, and the proportion achieving 5+ GCSEs at Grade A*-C including English and maths rose by seven percentage points to 15%. This last figure is now just above the 2016 national average for LAC nationally.
- There were also successes in the Early Years Foundation Stage and for the Year 1 phonics screening check, where cohorts achieved above the national averages for all pupils.
- At Key Stages 1 and 2, where, although there are no national comparisons yet available for LAC, Merton LAC did not perform well against national attainment averages for all pupils with regard to attainment. Average progress scores however, are strong in reading and writing at this key stage (above the LA averages, which are in turn above the national averages for all pupils).
- The proportion of Merton LAC attending good or better schools rose to 90% in 2015/16 which is just below the national average. Where Merton LAC were in schools judged to be less than good the decision was made very carefully that keeping them in these provisions was in their best interests, taking into account each LAC's individual circumstances and ensuring that they make good progress notwithstanding the Ofsted judgement for the overall effectiveness of education provision.
- Average attendance for the whole school fell by just under one percentage point to 90.72%. However, there was success at Key Stage 3 where the average attendance rose by 7.8 percentage points to 93.9%.
- There were again no permanent exclusions for Merton LAC. The proportion of Merton LAC experiencing fixed term exclusions fell by three percentage points to 14%. However this remains above the national average for LAC, and so will remain a priority. This is especially so in the secondary phase, where, although there were again successes this year (a drop of 2.2 percentage points) the rate is higher than nationally.

3.16 **Care leaver population and outcomes:** Due to the requirements to support care leavers according to their needs to 21/25 years the number of care leavers we are supporting has been growing and will continue to increase. A considerable amount of work has taken place across CSF to improve our work with care leavers. As with our looked after child population the UASC cohort has an impact on our data in respect of gender and ethnicity. Key issues for this cohort include:

- In the SSD903 return for 2015/16 we reported that the % of care leavers aged 17- 21 years 'in touch' was 89%. The January data indicates that we are in touch with 93% of our care leavers aged 17-21 (145/156 young people). This performance improvement reflects a significant amount of work undertaken by the 14+ to build and maintain relationships with their young people.
- In the SSD903 return for 2015/16 we reported that the % of care leavers aged 17- 21years living in suitable accommodation was 94%. The January figure is 89% (139/156 young people) which indicates a slight dip in performance This dip mainly relates to a number of UASC young people who have left their official accommodation due to removal/repatriation concerns.
- In the Annual Care Leaver Survey all care leavers who responded said they felt safe or very safe in their placement.
- In the SSD903 return for 2015/16 we reported that the % of care leavers aged 17-21 years who were in education, employment and training was 65.9%. Due to the restrictions of the current IT system we are not able to produce comparative data for this age group for this period. We can provide data for a reduced cohort aged 18-21 and this indicates that 62% were in education, employment and training.

3.17 **Offending:** in July 2016 we undertook a review of all looked after children and care leavers who experienced being in custody or who were convicted in the year. In that cohort (of 92) 7.6%of our adolescent LAC population received a conviction in the year. Because of the small population and the ability to identify individuals we will provide only general comments, but headlines include:

- Neglect had an impact on the early lives of a number of the cohort
- Some had experienced significant loss
- Robbery and assault were the most common offences.
- This cohort are at particular risk of going missing
- A very small number had a gang affiliation or were at risk of CSE

3.18 **CSE:** we continue to pay close attention to CSE and risk of CSE in our LAC population. Including auditing relevant cases to ensure we take forward any learning and that young people's plans and support are robust. All cases

where CSE risks are identified are reviewed at the Multi Agency Sexual Exploitation Meeting (MASE).

- 3.19 **Missing:** In 2015-16 we updated the Children Missing from Care and Home Protocol and established a weekly multi agency missing meeting. This has resulted in a timelier sharing of information in respect of the children reported as missing from home and care. Strategy meetings are convened on children who go missing from care and there is embedded practice of escalation of cases to senior management.
- 3.20 Most missing incidents were short; 88% lasted two days or less (this is in line with the national figure of 89%). 27% of missing episodes related to a period of less than 24 hours.
- 3.21 **Listening to our LAC and Care Leavers –** We are committed to listening and responding to our young people’s voices and there has been a longstanding commitment in Merton to investing in direct work skills training which equips social workers with high level engagement and communication skills. In line with this commitment and with the recommendations of the Munro review, learning and development opportunities for both newly qualified and more experienced staff routinely have included:
- Keeping the child in focus - communicating with vulnerable children and young people.
 - Direct work with children
 - Life Story Work and My Story (workshops delivered by the adoption team in partnership with CAMHS) Children’s rights
 - Signs of Safety
 - Motivational interviewing
 - Commissioning of Theraplay
 - Fostering Changes for our foster carers
- 3.22 Social workers are aware of the statutory requirements for the frequency of visits to children, and include seeing children alone. 95% of LAC reviews were completed within timescale as at January 2017. At the end of January 2017, 96% had participated in all reviews during the financial year. This is a significant improvement and commitment to hearing the voices of children in the review process. In 2016/17, we have used a well evaluated model from Sheffield of engaging young people in their reviews which has been received very positively by the young people involved.
- 3.23 When things go wrong, Merton reviews feedback from children and young people as a central part of our drive for continuous improvement of services. All looked after young people have access to the complaints process. They can request an advocate through a service commissioned from Jigsaw4U. Young people are also provided with independent visitors through Jigsaw4U.
- 3.24 We facilitate young people’s forums and activities which link with and impact on the management of children’s services and the adult democratic process. These include the Children in Care Council, Youth Parliament, Young Advisors, Young Inspectors and Your Shout (specifically for older young people with disabilities). Feedback from children and young people across

these strands of work have informed strategies including the Children and Young People's Plan, LAC Strategy, CSF service plans and discrete improvement plans as well as broader council services such as the borough's regeneration plans. We have recently appointed a very experienced practitioner to support the participation and engagement of our LAC and care Leavers. Representatives from the Children in Care Council played a significant role in the successful launch of the Looked After Children and Care Leaver's Pledge in February 2014 and were involved in its review and refresh during 2016. Young people from the Children in Care Council are involved in the recruitment to the Children's Social Care Division and senior posts across CSF and the recruitment and training of foster carers.

- 3.25 Direct feedback from the Children in Care Council is obtained by the Director, Lead Member for Children's Services and Head of LAC and Permanency who ensure a feedback loop to the Corporate Parenting Board, MSCB and the council's administration. Actions arising from this feedback are taken forward by relevant parties and fed back to the young people.
- 3.26 **Wider opportunities for LAC** – Merton's overall approach to working with children looked after incorporates a holistic understanding of the importance of life chances. We not only support good health and educational outcomes but also see other elements of life as core to promoting good outcomes. The care planning process identifies interests and hobbies of our children in care and funding is available to encourage our young people to participate in these interests. This includes the creative use of corporate parenting budgets to encourage talents and special aptitudes of LAC and care leavers. There is a delegated authority protocol in place that clarifies the decision making responsibility of foster carers in respect of access to recreational and leisure activities. Following the withdrawal of the Personal Education Allowance (PEA), the Virtual School was allocated funding to support enrichment activities for Looked After Children.
- 3.27 The Virtual School provides resources to foster carers which include books, puzzles, games, CDs and DVDs. We have also secured e-safety training and on-going support for six Olympic Legacy Computers for foster carers in need of a PC. We have secured additional DSG funding to ensure that all eligible looked after children have their own computer provided and maintained by the Virtual School.
- 3.28 In recent times the authority has supported music lessons, bought sporting equipment and funded young people to attend events of interest. In one instance, following music lessons funded by our Virtual School, one of our LAC has been awarded the London Mayor's Music Scholarship. Other examples of enrichment activities include: the Letterbox Project involving children receiving a parcel of books, maths activities and other materials monthly. We also organise a number of cultural activities which include theatre trips for LAC, their carers and our care leavers.
- 3.29 We support a range of events and activities throughout the year including for example BBQs, Black History Month, and celebrating success events which the Director and Lead Member for Children's Services attend. We also hold a

monthly social event at a local coffee shop where young people and practitioners get together to play games and watch films.

3.30 Elsewhere on the agenda Panel has the Annual Sufficiency Plan for looked after children and care leaver's placements which will cover this area in more detail. Panel is also receiving a detailed report on partnership work to improve care leaver accommodation choices and opportunities.

3.31 When Panel last received this report they received copies of the LAC and Care Leaver Strategies 2015-18. Attached as appendices to the report are updated action plans for these two key areas of work.

4 CONSULTATION UNDERTAKEN OR PROPOSED

4.1. None for the purposes of this report.

5 TIMETABLE

5.1. N/A

6 FINANCIAL, RESOURCE AND PROPERTY IMPLICATIONS

6.1. The increase in children in care is impacting on a range of budgets across the CSF department, most significantly on placements and staffing. The pressures on placements alone amount to in excess of £1.5m, although these have been partially offset during 2016/17 by underspends elsewhere. The majority of these underspends are one-off and will not reoccur in future years.

7 LEGAL AND STATUTORY IMPLICATIONS

7.1. The council has extensive legal duties with regard to LAC and care leavers and is the legal parent to these children and young people.

8 HUMAN RIGHTS, EQUALITIES AND COMMUNITY COHESION IMPLICATIONS

8.1. We are dedicated to narrowing the gaps in outcomes between our LAC and care leavers and their more advantaged peers.

9 CRIME AND DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

9.1. Children entering the care system become looked after and can be eligible for leaving care services.

10 RISK MANAGEMENT AND HEALTH AND SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

10.1. Social workers have to utilise a range of risk assessment and management tools both within child protection and looked after children's work.

11 APPENDICES – THE FOLLOWING DOCUMENTS ARE TO BE PUBLISHED WITH THIS REPORT AND FORM PART OF THE REPORT

- Annual Corporate Parenting Report – November 2016
- Virtual School Annual report 2015-2016
- Care Leaver Strategy 2015-18 updated action plan

- LAC Strategy 2015-18 – updated action plan

12 BACKGROUND PAPERS

12.1. None

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