

WEST DUNBARTONSHIRE COUNCIL

Report by the Chief Executive

Council Meeting: 25 February 2009

Subject: “We Can and Must Do Better”: Information for Elected Members on Looked After Children and Young People in West Dunbartonshire

1. Purpose

- 1.1 This report follows on from the report to the Council Meeting on 26 March 2008 entitled Looked After Children and Young People: We Can and Must Do Better – the Corporate Parent Function. It is intended to inform members of the current position regarding Looked After Children and Young People in West Dunbartonshire and the services available for them.
- 1.2 This report also seeks to inform Members of the setting up of the for Corporate Parenting Executive Group.

2. Background

- 2.1 Looked After Children are not a homogeneous group. They range in age from new born infants who are looked after and accommodated to young people in their late teens being supported to become more independent and eventually leave care, with all ages and differing needs in between. Some are looked after for only a short period of time while others may remain looked after for many years until they reach adulthood. What all looked after children do have in common is that life will not have been easy for them.
- 2.2 The Department of Social Work and Health works with around 1450 children and young people at any given time. All of these young people are vulnerable and in need of targeted support beyond what can be provided by universal services. About half of the children receiving a service from Social Work are worked with on a voluntary basis and even children whose circumstances are very concerning do not necessarily become looked after.
- 2.3 In order for a child to become looked after, a Children’s Hearing or a Court has decided that the difficulties in that young person’s life are such that some form of compulsory intervention is required. It is possible for a young person to be accommodated through a voluntary agreement between their parents and the Council but usually there is a statutory order.

By definition, therefore, the life circumstances of these children and young people mean that they are particularly vulnerable and it is for these young people that the Council is the corporate parent.

3. Numbers of Children Looked After by West Dunbartonshire Council; Where they are placed and their age profile

3.1 There are at present 380 children looked after by West Dunbartonshire Council. 184 are looked after at home and 196 are looked after and accommodated.

3.2 Those children and young people who are looked after away from home are accommodated as follows:

Local Authority Home	23
Voluntary Home	2
Residential School	21
Secure Accommodation	2
Foster Care - LA	67
Foster Care - Private	13
Adoption Placement	1
With Friends/Relatives	67
Total	196

3.3 Most of our young people are accommodated within West Dunbartonshire but, as there are no Residential Schools or Secure Accommodation within our Local Authority area, those young people who require these placements are located outwith West Dunbartonshire. In addition, 13 children are currently placed with private fostering agencies and 13 children live with relatives outwith the Council boundary. In total we have 49 children looked after and accommodated outwith the Council area.

3.4 The age profile of our looked after children, as at 31 December 2007 is as follows:

Age at 31 December 2008	
Under 1 year	5
1 – 4 years	63
5 – 11 years	130
12 – 15 years	140
16 – 17 years	42
Total	380

- 3.5** West Dunbartonshire currently has 36 approved foster carers. We run regular campaigns to encourage more people to come forward to apply to become foster carers. We offer our foster carers training and support with a specialist team of social workers who work with them.
- 3.6** Work reported to the Education and Life Long Learning Committee on the development of a Kinship Care Strategy for the Council continues. At present 67 children are accommodated in the community with relatives or friends. West Dunbartonshire currently has a Link Carers Allowance Scheme which is paid to 31 carers who are caring for 51 of these 67 children.
- 3.7** An Advocacy Service for children and young people who are looked after and accommodated is provided through the voluntary organisation "Who Cares?"
- 3.8** One of the features of being a Looked After and Accommodated Child is that they may experience a number of moves in placement as a result of changing circumstances. Figures for West Dunbartonshire in 2007/08 showed that 65% of our accommodated children had experienced one placement; 22% had had 2 placements; while 12% had experienced 3 to 5 placements and 1% had had 6 placements.

4. Reasons for Children Becoming Looked After and Services Available

- 4.1** There are many reasons why children require targeted support and attention from our services including, for some of them, becoming looked after or looked after and accommodated. Some will have experienced neglect or abuse; perhaps their parents are unable to look after them because of their own mental health difficulties, substance misuse or poor parenting skills; some young people become involved in offending behaviour and a small number have complex disabilities which mean they need to be placed in specialised residential accommodation.
- 4.2** Children who have come to our attention as a result of Child Protection concerns are clearly a vulnerable group. As at 31 January 2009 there were 26 children on the Child Protection Register. Detailed information about services to protect children in West Dunbartonshire and the work done with these children and their families is reported to the Education and Lifelong Learning Committee through the Annual Report and Business Plan from the Child Protection Committee. At present 8 of the children whose names are on the register are also looked after. The remainder have been referred to the Reporter to the Children's Panel and are subject to legal processes. None of the children on the register are looked after away from home as it is usually considered unnecessary to maintain a child protection registration if other measures have been put in place to protect a child. This means that those children who have become accommodated as a result of child protection concerns would no longer appear on the child protection register.

- 4.3** The Children with Disabilities Team in Social Work currently provides support to 300 children and young people. Services are provided in conjunction with specialist health services when necessary. A small number of the children known to the Children with Disabilities Team are also looked after. 6 children are looked after and accommodated in specialist placements, 5 on a voluntary basis and 1 on a statutory order; 2 children are looked after at home and have either a learning disability or complex health needs and a further 4 children who are looked after at home are the siblings of children with disabilities. Some of these children attend the Siblings Group which has recently been set up by the Children with Disabilities Team and which is proving popular.
- 4.4** Another vulnerable group are children born into families where addiction is a problem. There are 2 specialist social workers within the Social Work Children and Families Teams who work in partnership with midwives, health visitors and addiction services to provide a Special Needs In Pregnancy Service (SNIPS) to vulnerable pregnant women who are misusing substances. In 2008 the team were involved with 32 babies born into families with addictions. Of these 32 babies, 5 were diagnosed with neo-natal abstinence syndrome. Last year there were 32 pre-birth case discussions held to consider the needs of these children and their families. As a result, 3 children were subsequently looked after. More generally, substance misuse or the abuse of alcohol are significant factors in leading to children and young people being looked after, with this being a feature for nearly half our Looked After Children.
- 4.5** Some young people are looked after because their behaviour causes concern. This might be offending or anti-social behaviour, drinking or taking drugs, self harming or other high risk behaviours.
- 4.6** West Dunbartonshire takes a strategic multi-agency approach in looking at what services within the Council area can contribute to reducing offending behaviour at a service level. West Dunbartonshire has a dedicated Youth Justice Team who work with persistent offenders; Includem, who work with high risk young offenders; Intensive Support and Monitoring Services support young people at risk of going into secure accommodation; Groupwork Services, and Children and Families Services Teams offer support to young people at risk of becoming involved in offending behaviour.

- 4.7** Looked After Children have often not had consistent health care and may need dental work, have missed their inoculations, or need attention for some other health issue. A specialist nurse links with residential staff and foster carers to identify and deal with the health needs of our young people in conjunction with her health colleagues. Looked After Children have a higher than average chance of suffering poor mental health. Young People in Mind is a service based at the Acorn Centre specifically designed to address the mental health and emotional well-being needs of young people who are looked after and accommodated and provides support to residential staff and foster cars. There is also a dedicated addiction social worker for these young people. West Dunbartonshire Council, in collaboration with Health colleagues, has recently developed guidance for staff working with young people who self harm.
- 4.8** There is a small number of young people who display high risk behaviours, such as inappropriate sexual behaviour or violence, and they present particular challenges in looking after them either in the community or away from home. Within West Dunbartonshire work has been undertaken over the past year through the Child Protection Committee to develop a protocol for working with these young people and training for staff has been commissioned from a specialist consultant. The Scottish Government has very recently issued guidance which will be useful in progressing this work.

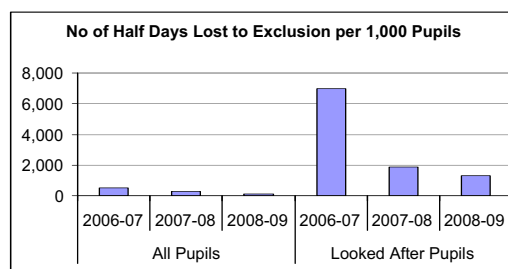
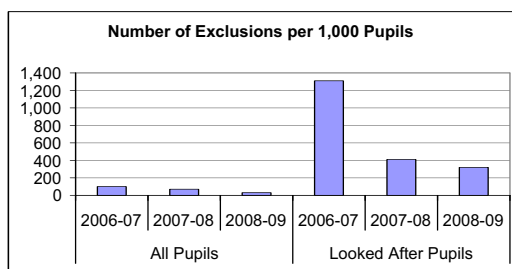
5. The Educational Attainment of Looked After Children

- 5.1** Historically, outcomes for Looked After Children in many aspects of their lives have been well below those of other children. This has been recognised for a number of years in relation to their educational attainment and work has been undertaken to build in additional support to try to overcome the disadvantages faced by this group of children and young people.
- 5.2** There are 223 Looked After Children in mainstream schooling. Educational Services have a wide range of support for pupils who are having difficulties in school for whatever reason. Looked After Children can receive support from the full range of Pupil and Family Support Services including learning and behaviour support and psychological services. Each secondary school has a multi-agency Joint Agency Team (JAT) which promotes early identification, intervention and transition support through better co-ordinated, more effective targeted packages of support to vulnerable children and young people. Multi-Agency Support Groups provide a similar approach to support cluster groups of primary schools.
- 5.3** In addition, Looked After Children also have access to teachers with a specific focus on addressing any particular difficulties experienced by Looked After or Looked After and Accommodated young people. Two teachers with specific responsibility for supporting the educational needs of children and young people who are looked after away from home are in post. These teachers work directly with young people, helping them to progress their educational attainment as well as supporting carers, whether residential staff or foster parents, with education issues.

5.4 In May 2006 the Council was successful in a proposal to the Scottish Executive for additional resources to develop a programme which would focus on raising attainment for children and young people looked after at home. Staff worked with parents and carers, school staff and social work to improve educational attainment. The Pilot programme was completed in August 2008. A full evaluation of the Pilot was undertaken by West Dunbartonshire Council Psychological Services and reported positive outcomes for the young people taking part.

5.5 The difficulties experienced by Looked After Children and young people can mean that their behaviour in school presents particular challenges. So far in the current academic year (from August 2008 to January 2009) there have been 54 exclusion incidents involving Looked After Children in West Dunbartonshire schools. In the last academic year (August 2007 to June 2008) there were 58. As the number of Looked After Children changes from year to year it is inappropriate to compare these figures directly with each other. To allow us to compare from year to year, we use the figure 'number of exclusions per 1,000 pupils'. In the current academic year there have been 325 exclusion incidents per 1,000 looked after children compared with 406 incidents per 1,000 Looked after children in 2007/08. The numbers in the general school population are 32 exclusion incidents per 1,000 pupils so far in the current academic year compared to 72 in 2007/08.

5.6 We also measure the amount of time lost through exclusion. For comparative purposes we again use a measure per 1,000 pupils. In the current academic year so far, 1,289 half days at school have been lost to exclusion per 1,000 Looked After Children, compared to 1,895 half days in the last academic year. In the general school population, so far in the current academic year 115 half days have been lost to exclusion compared to 287 in 2007/08.



5.7 Educational Attainment Statistics for Looked After Children in West Dunbartonshire are as follows.

Looked After Away From Home	WD	National Average
At least 1 qualification at SCQF Level 3 or above	61%	66%
Both English and Maths at SCQF Level 3 or above	39%	48%
Looked After At Home		
At least 1 qualification at SCQF Level 3 or above	55%	53%
Both English and Maths at SCQF Level 3 or above	31%	31%

5.8 West Dunbartonshire has a range of specialist provision for young people who cannot remain within mainstream schooling and this includes Kilpatrick School, Cunard School and Choices plus a range of Day and Residential Schools outwith West Dunbartonshire. All of our schools are aware of the Looked After Children who are on their roll.

5.9 Despite the difficulties identified for young people who are looked after we do have successes in supporting some young people into further or higher education. Social Work Throughcare Services support between 9 and 12 young people per year in higher or further education. In 2005, 2 young people graduated from University courses in Glasgow and Newcastle. In 2008, 3 young people were at University in Edinburgh and Paisley, one of whom graduated with a First Class Honours degree. A further 7 attend a variety of college courses in Clydebank, Glasgow and Perth. 15 young people are being supported in employment or training for work. Additionally, a total of 33 young people and 16 support staff have been supported to successfully graduate from the Columba 1400 Care Leavers Leadership Programme.

6. Young People Leaving Care

6.1 West Dunbartonshire has a well established and highly regarded service for young people leaving care. This provides support to care leavers to establish and maintain stable accommodation and to move on into further or higher education or employment.

- 6.2** All young people leaving care who are not returning to their family are referred to the Social Work Throughcare Team from age 15 years upwards. Throughcare staff become involved in reviews, care planning and preparation of the young person for leaving care. The team will offer young people supported lodgings as the initial stage after leaving care. When it is felt that the young person is ready to move on to the next stage then suitable accommodation will be negotiated with local housing providers. There are good working links with all the major housing providers within the authority area, mainly Council and Housing Associations. The team offer young people long term support which means that they can be supported well into their twenties.
- 6.3** We provide good information about the accommodation options in West Dunbartonshire with which young people could cope and good preparation and alternatives to their own tenancy on ceasing to be looked after and accommodated. Alternatives used are Supported Lodgings or temporary flats. This provides opportunities for young people to find out what living back in the community means with continuing support from Throughcare staff and allows them to build up their skills and confidence and realistically prepare them for the responsibilities of their own housing.
- 6.4** In providing a service to care leavers who go home and then become homeless at a later stage, there are good working relationships between the Social Work Throughcare Team and the Homeless section of the Council Housing Department and NCH Preparation for Life Unit. These working links will look at the particular support needs of the young person and decide which of the agencies can provide the most appropriate support.

7. Progress with Corporate Parenting Structures

- 7.1** The Chief Executive has set up an Executive Group to oversee Corporate Parenting work across the Council. The main aim of this group will be to commission the development of a West Dunbartonshire Corporate Parenting Strategy and thereafter to monitor the progress of its implementation. The membership of this group is as follows:

David McMillan, Chief Executive – Chair
Councillor May Smillie, Member
Councillor Patrick McGlinchey, Member
Councillor Jonathan McColl, Member
Councillor Martin Rooney, Member
Joyce White, Executive Director of Corporate Services
Elaine Melrose, Executive Director of Housing, Environmental & Economic Development Services
Liz Cochrane, Principal Policy Officer
Anne Ritchie, Head of Social Work (Operations)
Lynn Townsend, Head of Service (Support) Educational Services

7.2 The Executive Group met for the first time in January 2009 to establish a remit and set in train work on the Corporate Parenting Strategy.

7.3 The appointment of the Corporate Parenting Implementation Officer has gone ahead. Mr Charles O'Donnell took up post on 2 February 2009 and is currently undergoing a period of induction. He will be a key member of the We Can & Must Do Better Implementation Group which will lead on the operational management of the various work streams related to We Can & Must Do Better.

8. Personnel Issues

8.1 As noted in the previous report to Council, an additional post of Corporate Parenting Implementation Officer has been created.

9. Financial Issues

9.1 As noted in the previous report, funding for this additional post has been allocated to support the development of the Corporate Parenting Strategy for the Council.

10. Risk Assessment

10.1 There is no risk to service delivery but failure to progress the work identified by the report We Can and Must Do Better could result in the Council missing some opportunities to improve the life chances of our Looked After Children and Young People.

11. Conclusions

11.1 In order to progress the Action Points in We Can and Must Do Better, an Executive Group has been established, chaired by the Chief Executive and attended by officers of the Council and Elected Members. The successful appointment of the Corporate Parenting Implementation Officer will allow work to proceed on the Corporate Parenting Strategy.

12. Recommendations

12.1 Council is requested to:

- i) note the information provided in this report regarding the children and young people looked after by West Dunbartonshire Council and consider what further information members might find useful; and
- ii) note the creation of an Executive Group for Corporate Parenting and seek bi-annual updates from the Chief Executive.

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David McMillan
Chief Executive
Date: 20 February 2009

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Appendices: None

Background Papers: "We Can and Must Do Better"
Council Report of 26 March 2008: "Looked After Children
and Young People: We Can and Must do Better – the
Corporate Parent Function"

Wards Affected: All wards