

Item No. 9	Classification: Open	Date: April 2 2009	Meeting Name: Corporate Parenting Committee
Report title:		Long term stability of placements	
Ward(s) or groups affected:		Children looked after	
From:		Assistant Director of Children's Specialist Services & Safeguarding	

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Members take note of the current measures to improve the long-term stability of children in care, and make further proposals for consideration by officers.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

2. Placement stability is crucial for children in care to help them achieve better outcomes and have a good experience of being in care. It is therefore vitally important that authorities make achieving very high levels of placement stability a high priority. Placement stability is a critical quality indicator about standards of care in any children's residential service. In Southwark's Joint Area Review (JAR), it was noted that:

“invalidated data show the long-term stability placements for children who are looked after has declined”

3. Performance in this area was subsequently noted as an important weakness in the final JAR report. While the inspector acknowledged that Southwark had many of the key elements in place to support the stability of placements, the success of these measures was not being evidenced by the performance data.
4. The definition of the indicator is: % CLA under 16 yrs old who have been looked after for 2-1/2+ years and living in the same placement for 2+ yrs or who have been placed for adoption. Following the JAR, validated returns showed that Southwark's performance was strong, and in line with statistical neighbors. However, as of Feb 09, of the 179 under 16 CLA, only 119 were in stable placements (66.5%); less than its 07/08 Target & 07/08 SN of 70% and 68% respectively. However, this data must be treated with caution, because the cohort changes regularly as children become 16 and leave at one end, while others enter the cohort as they become looked after for 2 and half years.

KEY ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

5. As a result of the JAR recommendations, a working group was established to look in more detail at the factors causing placement instability, and measures that could be established to improve performance. A more detailed analysis of those children who had breached the indicator revealed that:
 - There were 60 children in the cohort, or whom 59 were on a full care order;
 - 60% were male and 40% female,
 - Placement matching was important when attempting to ensure stability, and

- Many of the children were from large sibling groups.
6. The fact that the majority of the children who had breached the indicator were on a full care order was a surprising feature. It had previously been assumed that older children who were in care under an arrangement with the parents (Section 20) were more likely to be unstable and need more placements.
 7. Previous studies have shown that no one action, can have an impact on performance. However four key factors taken together can improve outcomes in this area. They are:
 - Effective diversion from care and early intervention
 - Strong tracking, and case planning to avoid drift and achieve permanence
 - Increased placement choice
 - Increased multi-agency and multi-disciplinary support to placements
 8. Southwark has already put in place a range of services and interventions to address these key areas. The new strategy to reduce the need for children to enter care was endorsed by Members at the previous committee. Although this is a whole system approach, key services such as the development of Family Group Conferences, which draw on the support of the extended family, have enabled children to remain at home safely.
 9. Southwark has strong and effective systems for care planning which are overseen by Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs). Members are familiar with the work of the IROs through their annual report which was presented to an earlier committee. The IROs are independent of the line management of a child's social worker and are empowered to ensure that there are clear plans in place for each child. They monitor these plans to make sure they are completed within timescales which meet the child's needs.
 10. Southwark has good fostering and adoption services which provide a range of placement choices for children in care. For children with more complex needs, the service is able to commission more specialist placements from private and voluntary sector providers. Ironically, our success at adopting more children from care will have had an adverse impact on our performance, as a more stable cohort of children will have moved out of care. Our adoption performance remains stronger than ever, and is evidence of effective permanence planning.
 11. The children looked after service provides multi-agency support to children in care, and has helped to maintain placement stability. Services include: Carelink, which provides a flexible mental health service for children, and advice for foster carers; and additional education support and advice.
 12. Although a range of services have been put in place to improve the long-term stability of children in care, progress against the indicator will continue to be monitored by the long-term stability working group which is chaired by the Assistant Director Specialist Children's Services.

Policy implications

13. Work on this indicator is in line with the objectives for children looked after set out in the Children and Young People's Plan, and recommendations arising from Southwark's Joint Area Review.

RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

14. There are no additional resource implications arising from this report.

Finance Director

15. There are no financial implications.

AUDIT TRAIL

Lead Officer	Rory Patterson, Assistant Director Children’s Specialist Services and Safeguarding	
Report Author	As above.	
Version	Final	
Dated	March 24 2009	
Key Decision?	No	
CONSULTATION WITH OTHER OFFICERS / DIRECTORATES / EXECUTIVE MEMBER		
Officer Title	Comments Sought	Comments included
Strategic Director for Legal and Democratic Services	Yes	Yes
Finance Director	Yes	Yes
Executive Member	Yes	Yes
Date final report sent to Constitutional/Community Council/Scrutiny Team	March 24 2009	