

Item No. 9	Classification: Open	Date: June 18 2008	Meeting Name: Corporate Parenting Committee
Report title:		Trends in the Care Population	
Ward(s) or groups affected:		All	
From:		Strategic Director of Children's Services	

RECOMMENDATION

1. That the report for information be noted.
2. That the action being taken to reduce the overall numbers of children in Southwark's care be endorsed.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

3. Children looked after are some of the most vulnerable children in society; living away from their families primarily because of abuse or neglect. The majority of these children will be placed with foster carers who have been recruited and approved by Southwark. However, about 85 children and young people will be placed with independent fostering agencies and a small number of young people may also be placed in residential care homes. Children may spend a short time in the council's care, either returning to their families or moving to permanent arrangements such as adoption, special guardianship and residence orders; but for others, their stay is for many years lasting through to adulthood.
4. The Children Act 1989 provides the statutory framework through which the local authority's responsibilities towards the care of children are defined. The act states that a child may be 'looked after by a local authority' through either being:
 - a) in their care (subject to a Court Order, Section 31 of the Children Act 1989) where the local authority shares "parental responsibility" with the parent for the child to ensure planning for their care meets the child's needs; or
 - b) provided with accommodation (Section 20) where the local authority supports the parent in the care of the child through offering accommodation because the parent or person with parental responsibility recognises such support is required to achieve the best outcomes for the child. The local authority does not share parental responsibility for these children, which remains with the parent.
4. The Children Act 1989 defines a 'child' as being aged 0-18 years. However, the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 extends the local authority's responsibilities to care leavers, to those aged up to 21 years and, in some circumstances, to 25 years.

KEY ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

5. For the past few years, Southwark has had one of the highest rates of care in

London; however, in the last year, there has been a steady decline in the number of children and young people in care from 640 in January 2007 to the current figure of 560.

6. There are a number of reasons for this reduction which include:

- A reduction in the number of unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people. Southwark has previously had high levels of unaccompanied children coming to the borough. However, in the past year, there has been a reduction from 85 to 58.
- There are large numbers of 16 (75) and 17 (85) year olds in care, and these will all be leaving care in the next two years. They are not being replaced at the same rate so, consequently, there will be a reduction in the care population.
- The implementation of the Public Law Outline, which encourages local authorities to enter into mediation with families prior to initiating care proceedings. This has slowed down the rate of care proceedings, by ensuring that all other options are fully explored before resorting to the courts and that, wherever possible, the extended family is encouraged to support the child, and if necessary, provide kinship care.
- Related to the above, the increased use of family group conferences has encouraged the involvement of extended family members in supporting children who may be on the verge of entering care. Three years ago, Southwark did not commission any family group conferences; however in the past year almost 100 have taken place, and this has had an impact on the number of care proceedings and children coming into care.
- Southwark has successfully adopted 44 children in the past year which is well in excess of previous adoption levels in the borough. This has placed Southwark among the top performing authorities nationally, and contributed to the reduction of children in care. This figure includes Special Guardianship Orders, which is a new legal order intended for children for whom adoption is not appropriate, and provides an alternative route for families to attain parental responsibility for a child.
- The Alternatives to Care Team works with young people and their families where there is a risk of family breakdown. The team receives referrals from other social work teams and can work intensively with families, providing parenting training where necessary.

Age of Children Looked After

7. Table 1 sets out the age and gender of the current care population. 60% (334) are between 12 and 18 inclusive and 40% (226) are between 0 and 11. The number of children aged 5 and under is 108, which is the group more likely to be successfully adopted. However, with the development of Special Guardianship Orders, there are greater opportunities for older children to be provided with permanent home.
8. There are significantly more boys than girls in care (48) with considerable variations at ages 9, 11 and 14. The data in the table has to be treated with some caution, as it does not reveal at what age the child came into care. So, it is well known that the transition between primary and secondary school is a key time for children, and we would expect to see some evidence of greater family stress, and a consequent admission to care. Also, in early adolescence, one would expect to see more young people entering care because of behavioural

problems which have resulted in family breakdown.

9. Another interesting change in the last year has been the reduction of males in the group aged 17, where there is now a more even spread across the genders. This may partly be a reflection of the reduction in the number of unaccompanied asylum seeking children and young people, who were predominantly male.

**Table 1 Age and Gender of Children Looked After
28 May 2008**

Client Age	Female	Male	Total
0	13	17	30
1	12	9	21
2	10	15	25
3	5	5	10
4	3	7	10
5	6	6	12
6	7	5	12
7	8	7	15
8	4	3	7
9	9	20	29
10	12	9	21
11	12	22	34
12	6	11	17
13	22	25	47
14	15	36	51
15	28	27	55
16	42	33	75
17	41	44	85
Grand Total	256	304	560

Ethnicity of Children Looked After

10. Table 2 shows the ethnicity and care status of children looked after, against the different categories of care status. The difference between care order and Section 20 were explained earlier in the report. The remaining categories are:

- Remand – this applies when a young person is remanded into the care of the local authority after they have been charged with an offence. The young person will usually return home once the remand period has ended, either when they are bailed or the proceedings have been completed.
- Interim Care Order (ICO) – applies when the local authority has applied for a care order for children who it believes are at risk of serious harm. There are usually a number of hearings, and the proceedings can take over a year to complete. Over that period the children are usually placed on interim care orders pending the outcome of the final hearing. Parental responsibility is shared between the local authority and the parent.
- Placement Order – applies to children where the local authority has successfully secured a care order on a child where adoption is the care plan. At the final hearing a placement order is also applied for which will enable the local authority to place the child with prospective adopters.

11. The single largest ethnic group in care is white British children. However, if one includes black African, black Caribbean and black other children, the number of black children in care becomes the largest single group.
12. Black African children are the largest group looked after under section 20 of the Children Act. This is due to the number of unaccompanied asylum seeking children (58), who are mostly in care under Section 20. Black African children make up a significant proportion of this group.
13. Although white British children is the largest group with care orders, current activity shows that black African children are more likely to have an interim care order. It is of some concern that there are no black African children with a placement order, which indicates that they are not being placed in adoptive placements. This is an area which warrants further investigation, as it could suggest that black African children are waiting longer for adoption. White and black Caribbean children are the second largest group on a care order.

Table 2 Ethnicity of Children Looked After

	Section 20	Full Care Order	Remand	ICO	Placement Order	Total
Asian – Bangladeshi		1		1		2
Asian – Indian	1					1
Asian other	27	3				30
Asian Pakistani	2					2
Black African	54	33		1 9		106
Black Caribbean	16	29	1	9	1	56
Black Other	18	28		9	4	59
Chinese	5					5
Other	9	4		4	1	18
Other – Mixed	3	18		4		25
White Other	5	5		4	1	15
White and Black African	2	4		5	1	12
White Asian						1
White and Black Caribbean	5	39		8	1	53
White British	31	113		8	4	156
White Irish	5	13	1			19
Total	183	291	2	71	13	560

14. The children's social care division has an electronic records system which increasingly allows the department to analyse data and trends in the looked after population. This is an important development which facilitates more effective commissioning of services for this vulnerable group. An example of this has

been the commissioning of a voluntary group Afruka, to support more effective preventative work with African families in the community. It is anticipated that this work will help support children within their families and reduce the need for them to come into care.

Policy implications

- 15. Southwark has developed a comprehensive range of family placements to meet the needs of children in its care. These range from foster placements which are recruited and approved by the Council’s Fostering Service; the use of independent fostering agencies to meet the specific needs of sibling groups or children with special needs; residential care for children with more complex needs, and supported accommodation for young people who are being prepared for leaving care.
- 16. The strategy to reduce the need for children to come into care is in line with objectives set out in Southwark’s Children & Young People Plan. This recognises that, with more effective and appropriately targeted services, children can be supported within their extended families in the community.

COMMUNITY IMPACT STATEMENT

- 17. The council’s strategy for children looked after can have a differential impact on the diverse population within Southwark. It is important that the Children’s Services monitor the application of these strategies and how they can affect different groups in the community. While there is currently no evidence that current strategies for children looked after are having an adverse impact on specific communities, there is clearly a case for further, more detailed analysis of why there are variations in the ethnic makeup of the care population.

RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS

- 18. There are no immediate resource implications arising from this report. However, should this trend continue, there could be implications for the sustainability of some services, such as current provision for unaccompanied asylum seeking children, for whom the local authority receives a Home Office grant. The trend continues to be monitored closely, and any significant impact will be reported back to the committee.

SUPPLEMENTARY ADVICE FROM OTHER OFFICERS

Strategic Director for Legal and Democratic Services

- 19. There are no legal implications arising from this report.

AUDIT TRAIL

Lead Officer	Rory Patterson, Assistant Director, Children’s Specialist Services & Safeguarding
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Version	Final

Dated	June 10 2008	
Key Decision?	No	
CONSULTATION WITH OTHER OFFICERS / DIRECTORATES / EXECUTIVE MEMBER		
Officer Title	Comments Sought	Comments included
Director of Legal and Democratic Services	No	No
Director of Finance	No	No
Executive Member	Yes	Yes
Date final report sent to Constitutional/Community Council/Scrutiny Team		June 10 2008