

EDUCATION SCRUTINY COMMITTEE – 16 APRIL 2015

Children on the Edge of Care and Exclusions

Report by the Director for Children's Services

Purpose of Report

1. To update Education Scrutiny Committee about children on the edge of care and exclusions.

Definitions

2. A child is termed on the edge of care by Social Services if they are imminently likely to be placed in care and, therefore, become looked after.
3. A child is looked after by a local authority if they have been provided with accommodation for a continuous period of more than 24 hours, in the circumstances set out in sections 20 and 21 of the Children Act 1989, or is placed in the care of a local authority by virtue of an order made under part IV of the Act. This will include unaccompanied asylum seeking children or young people.
4. A young person is a care leaver if they have been looked after for at least 13 weeks since the age of 14, and who was in care on their 16th birthday and aged between 16 and 21 (or beyond if being helped with education or training).

The Family and Placement Support Service

5. The Family and Placement Support Service have now been integrated into the new Edge of Care and Residential Service which will combine intensive family support for those on the edge of care with residential respite and assessment. This work will be overseen by a multi-disciplinary team and the residential element will be delivered from the new assessment centres being built in Thame and Eynsham. This work will build on the early intervention already in place, such as the Team Around the Child process.

The Virtual School for Looked After Children (VSLAC)

6. The Virtual School for Looked after Children (VSLAC) has the responsibility to improve the educational experiences and outcomes of the Authority's looked after children and care leavers, including those placed outside the caring authority's boundaries by working with the schools and other education establishments where the young people learn.

In Oxfordshire

7. How are pupils on the edge of care identified?

Social workers identify children on the edge of care and refer them to the Edge of Care Team. They use a list of risk factors to identify how close to being in care a child might be, such as:

- parental poor mental health;
- offending behaviour;
- domestic violence;
- parental learning difficulties;
- self-harm;
- substance misuse.

Usually there are at least three indicators from the long list (of which the above is only a small selection) when a referral is made. Typically, when a referral is made the child's situation falls into two categories:

- those within families that are known to social workers and who exhibit neglect to the children;
- and those whose families or parents suddenly go into crisis.

8. How many does Oxfordshire have?

Every year there are approximately 170 young people identified as on the edge of care in Oxfordshire. This has been a consistent number over the past few years. The boy:girl ratio is about 50:50. Three-quarters are aged 11 or above. Whilst referrals have been consistent and reasonably equal between areas, the South area in the county refers the least. About 30% of children identify education as a risk factor, although this is undoubtedly a significant underestimate.

9. What interventions take place for these children and who is responsible?

The Edge of Care Team works with families and young people. Typically, the levels of intensive support from this team do not lead to children going into care. Children often have school attendance figures below 70% and are, therefore, a persistent absentee. Education has usually not been important to a family and children feel schools are too socially difficult to attend. The Edge of Care Team employs a part-time worker to work with school leadership by negotiating how a child can improve attendance, often via moderated timetables. Where schools are successful, the leaders have developed an inclusive culture where emphasis is made on early child and family planning, placing school leadership in a stronger position to anticipate and be responsive to complex challenges. This is not always the case.

Models of successful in-county intervention exist from within the Virtual School, where full-time case workers negotiate with school leadership and advocate for the education of children in care.

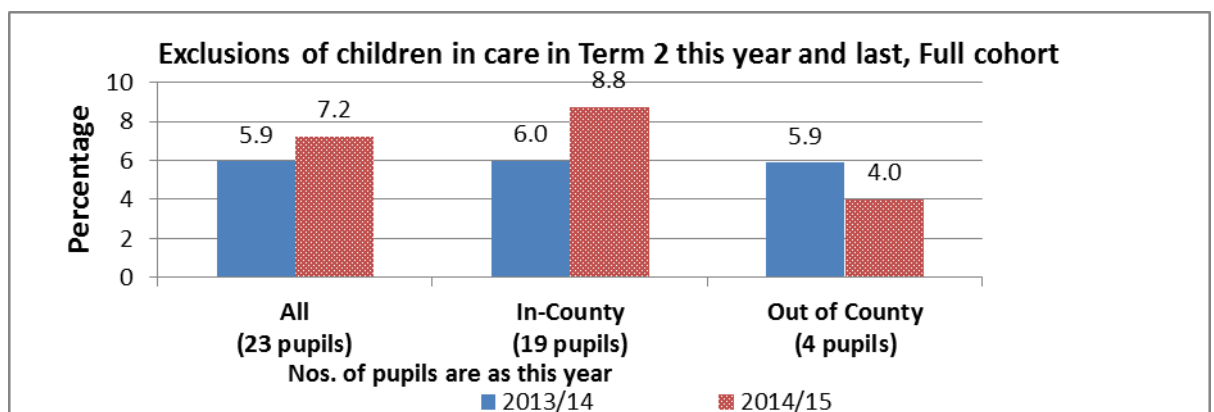
10. **How is the exclusion process managed and by whom?**

A child who has experienced traumatic family circumstances may well exhibit behaviours that present school teachers and leaders with significant challenges. The ability of school leaders to provide appropriate provision for young people who present high levels of challenge depends upon staff skills and experience, levels of training, organisation or willingness to involve external advice and support. For secondary school children who have been excluded, the In-Year Fair Access Panels (IYFAP), supported by Local Authority Social Inclusion Officers (SIOs), manage moves to alternative provision or another school.

Advice on dealing with children on the edge of care should be contained within each school's policy and practice of exclusion. The developing Local Authority edge of care strategy will need to create environments in the assessment and residential centres which support education and learning. The strategy aims to engage school leadership in meeting the specific education and support needs of each child in order to intervene before the need to exclude, but this will be challenging. This strategy will be steadily rolled out across the county in the next few years.

When a child is in care, there is an agreed protocol for Oxfordshire to *prevent the exclusion of Children in Care* or care leavers. In Oxfordshire the protocol adheres to the guidance given by the DfE, whereby the 'exclusion of children in care should be an absolute last resort. It is vital that schools and social workers work together in partnership with other professionals and try every practicable means to maintain them in school. Before excluding, school leadership, in conjunction with the local authority, should first consider alternative options for supporting the child...'. Although it is important that the decision to exclude is the preserve of the headteacher, the protocol states that good practice is for the Virtual School Head to be included in the decision-making process. Sometimes exclusions are appropriate.

There have been no permanent exclusions of looked after children for several years, but recent data shows that, untypically, December was a difficult month for fixed term exclusions within the county.



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Background papers: