

Bolton (Looked After Children) Virtual Schools

Having a Looked After Student in your school

A guide for Bolton Schools and their teachers

There may already be looked after children on roll in your school, but even if there isn't, the chances are there will be in the future.

This guide is designed to help schools ensure that their policies and practices are fully inclusive of the needs of looked after children.

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1. Legislation and Inspection

Legislation- Under Section 52 of the Children Act 2004, local authorities have a duty to promote the educational achievement of the children in their care. To do this effectively Bolton Council (through its Virtual School system) need the help and support of schools, teachers and all those involved in providing education and support to this group of children.

School Inspection criteria

The Children Act 2004 provides for inspections of all children's services within local authorities. Those inspections report on how far services, including schools and educationalists, are working together effectively to secure positive outcomes for all children but in particular, vulnerable groups such as looked after children.

Local Authorities, local politicians, schools, health agencies and others are tasked under statutory guidance with becoming 'Corporate Parents' to Looked After Children. The guidance states that Corporate Parents should respond in the way that any good parent would respond with their own child.

Schools are inspected on the outcomes required by the Government for all children. Inspectors have said that if schools can meet these outcomes successfully for vulnerable children, such as those who are looked after, they will be able to meet them for all children.

Schools should also consider whether their internal policies give sufficient emphasis to children's well-being and ensure that looked after children are explicitly included in school policies.

The government has said they will review the achievement criteria in 2011/12 for those children who are in receipt of the LAC element of Pupil Premium Grants-

2. Looked After Children

Who are 'looked after children'?

The term 'looked after' refers to children who are under 18 and have been provided with care and accommodation by children's services. Often this will be with foster carers, but some looked after children might stay in a children's home or with another adult known to the parents and children's services. This is often called 'kinship' or 'friends and family' care. Generally young people over 18 are described as 'Care Leavers'

In Bolton we have 4 specialist Looked After Children teams of Social Workers who oversee all interventions with pre school and school age children and their families once they have become 'looked after'. The teams are based in the 3 geographical districts.

- North District is at Castle Hill,
- West District is in Westhoughton
- South District is in Farnworth

Children with a disability and sometimes their siblings may have a social worker in the Children with Disability Social Work team based at Castle Hill.

During their Year 11 most looked after pupils will be allocated a social worker from the leaving care/post 16 team based at The BASE.

The aim of a child becoming looked after is to ensure their health, safety and importantly their development is secured and maintained. Children who come into our care have often come from families experiencing extreme hardship and upheaval. If it is possible, birth parents will stay involved and in many cases and following interventions children will return to live with either a parent or an adult from their close family.

It is well researched that traumatised children have problems with learning and concentration. In recent years much more focus has been placed on responding to children's educational needs to ensure their learning is enhanced and encouraged during the period of being looked after and beyond.

Why do children become 'looked after'?

In order to remove a child from their parents care, the threshold of 'significant harm' must have been reached. In most cases this threshold will have been tested in a court arena. Some children will become looked after without a court order under Section 20 of the Children Act 1989. In this situation the parents retain parental responsibility and will need to be consulted for any decisions made regarding their child.

A large number of these children coming into care will have a history of physical, sexual or emotional abuse. Some may have suffered the death of a parent, or have parents who can't look after them properly because of illness. Some disabled children may be accommodated as part of a package of support and not because of any concerns regarding significant harm. This is usually managed through section 20 of the Children Act 1989..

How does a child become 'looked after'?

Children come into our care by two main routes – because the parents have asked for this help or because the child is in danger of being harmed.

Under Section 20 of the Children Act 1989: where parents have asked for our help and where we have found areas of concern leading to a need to offer the child accommodation. Under Section 20 - Parental responsibility remains with the parent or guardian.

Under Section 31 of the Children Act 1989: if the criterion of significant harm has been met, an Interim Care Order (ICO) (Section 38) is made whilst the situation is processed through the Court arena. Eventually once all evidence has been heard a full care order can be made by a court.

In emergency situations a child may become looked after under an Emergency Protection Order (EPO) Under Section 31 parental responsibility is held by the local authority alongside the parent or guardian. .

Under Section 21 CYPA 1889. A very small number of children become looked after because of their criminal behaviour and are remanded by the courts into the care of the local authority.

What's involved in this process?

After an assessment of the child and their circumstances has been made by a Social Worker, they will agree with the family and if possible, the child, the arrangements for their care. These arrangements can include a plan for the process of returning the child to the family home. They are set out in two documents: a care plan and a placement agreement. These documents help Social Workers to plan, review and monitor the child's services. They have been designed to improve and strengthen the relationship between child, parents and professionals working with them. All looked after children are reviewed under statutory guidelines by an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) who is also tasked with ensuring the child's wishes and feelings are incorporated into any decisions made. Some children may access Independent Advocacy which can help them articulate their wishes and feelings.

The Care Plan describes how the child's health, education and welfare will be supported, along with how to maintain contact with family and friends.

The Placement Agreement covers living arrangements, including travel, and any specific care issues for the child. Your designated Looked after Children Teacher has a very definite role to play in ensuring your school has collected and collated all relevant information on the pupil.

Why do looked after children often underachieve?

Looked after children as a group are no less able than their peers, but the statistics show starkly that as a group they hugely underachieve in comparison to their non-looked after peers. Disruption, trauma, low expectations and a lack of trust in the adults who should be caring for them have all been identified as contributing to this underachievement.

Looked after children and young people often have many adults involved in their care, poor communication between these adults or 'Corporate Parents' has also been identified as having a negative effect on ability to achieve.

3. The role of the Designated Looked After Child Teacher

Section 20 of the Children and Young Persons Act 2008 places a duty on the governing body of maintained schools to designate a member of staff as having responsibility to promote the educational achievement of looked after children who are registered pupils at the school. The guidance says the designated teacher should be either be a head teacher, qualified teacher or someone currently qualifying as a teacher and provide an annual governors report on the progress of this group of children.

The role of designated teacher is designed to enhance the Local Authorities safeguarding response and as such Designated Looked After Teachers should be fully aware of the arrangements for all the looked after children in their school and be the holder of important and often personal information the school may need to educate and respond to children's individual needs. If looked after children move into their school the designated teacher should liaise with the pupil's social worker to ensure all records and recording held by the previous school have followed the child on admission. As always, confidentiality about young people's personal lives should be given the highest priority in communiques across the school.

In particular when a Looked After Child starts at their school, the Designated Looked After Teacher will need to:-

- Ensure a welcome and smooth induction for the child involving the child and that their social worker and carers are made aware of school policies such as home-school agreements; time-keeping and attendance; homework diaries; parents' evenings etc.
- Ensure that the school has copies of key documents/information, including:-
 - The Looked After Status of the child and their living arrangements
 - Copy of the current Personal Education Plan and the date of next review – if one is not in place to prioritise this
 - Copy of the child's current Care Plan and date of the next review
 - A 'pen picture'¹ of the child to include a summary of:-
 - Social history and the key life events and experiences they have had
 - Any current social or educational issues, for example challenging behaviour, self-harming etc. and what is in place to support the child
 - Whether the child has any additional learning or special education needs and what is in place to support the child, including a copy of any linked plan
 - Details of other relevant services providing support to the child
- Ensure that the Personal Education Plan (PEP) is developed or reviewed; mutually agreed and completed
- Ensure that each Looked After Child has an identified member of staff that they can talk to, that need not be the designated looked after teacher
- Track academic progress and target support appropriately
- Co-ordinate any support for the Looked After Child that is necessary within the school
- Ensure confidentiality for individual pupils, sharing personal information on a need to know basis
- Support Looked After Children to access the full curriculum on offer and to join in a wide variety of the extra-curricular activities on offer
- Ensure, as far as possible, attendance at planning and review meetings – or if not possible ensure the child's voice is heard
- Act as an advisor to staff and governors, raising their awareness of the needs and experiences of Looked After Children

¹ The pen picture could be a written summary provided by the social worker or a verbal report provided at an induction meeting when the child first moves to a school

- Share information and set up timely meetings with relevant parties where the pupil is experiencing difficulties or other challenges within the school – this should always include the social worker and the child’s carers
- Ensure timely transfer of information between individuals and agencies, including where a Looked After Child leaves the school and transfers to another setting and ensure the speedy transfer of school records to a new school and ensuring that the local authority responsible for looking after the child has the most up-to-date version of the PEP
- Be pro-active in supporting transition and planning when moving to a new phase in education
- Promote inclusion in all areas of school life
- Be aware that Looked After Children may be more vulnerable to bullying, emotional health issues, attachment difficulties, present with challenging behaviours etc and the Designated Looked After Teacher should be aware of these issues and develop shared responses with key individuals i.e. carers, social worker, the child, key teaching and support staff etc.

The DfE statutory guidance for designated teachers can be found on the DfE web site or [here](#).

4. The educational component of the Care Plan is covered by the Personal Education Plan or PEP

Statutory guidance issued under **Section 52 of the Children Act 2004** states that every looked after child should have a personal education plan or PEP

PEPs are a simple document that either pull together existing plans IEPs/IBPs and the like, or create a new plan that addresses the implications of changes in the child’s life.

PEPs seek to organise a group of adult supporters around the educational needs of the child and they should be reviewed at least twice per year. In Bolton we have established an effective PEP system where the child’s teacher or the schools designated LAC teacher will meet with the pupil, carer, Social Worker and others to agree what is required to maintain or progress the pupils education. These meetings are often brief but will always draw up a list of actions which can be reviewed and monitored at a future nominated date

Increasingly information and guidance for schools regarding the education of Looked after pupils and Virtual Schools information will be distributed via the schools extranet pages.

See <http://mossextranet.bolton.gov.uk/website/pages/home.aspx>

For older pupils there is a simple document which records discussion and actions. The Social Worker will record the outcome of the meeting which will then be added to the existing plans held on the child’s computerised files.

The PEP meetings and subsequent actions are monitored in a regular meeting held within the Social Work team. Any issues or problems identified within the PEP are discussed in this meeting and if resolution can not be found the PEP is passed up to the Virtual School meeting for more comprehensive discussion.

5. Bolton Looked After Children Virtual Schools

As stated, Bolton divides its Looked After Children between 3 district Social Work Teams based in the North, South and West of the borough. Each district or team has a virtual school attached to it. If your pupil has a social worker based in the West Team they will belong to the West Virtual School. Yr 11 pupils with a post 16 social worker will relate to the process through their originating Virtual School

The education of the pupils of each district becomes the responsibility of the Virtual School, who can then assume the role of a good parent.

Like any good parent the virtual school monitors the academic performance, attendance and prospects of their children and where necessary intervenes to improve them. This intervention could cover a range of options for example, helping to provide/commissioning extra teaching or support input, help with finding the best school place or occasionally visiting the school to discuss the progress of the child.

Often it's just a case of asking the right questions. Social Workers and Carers all receive training on the importance of maintaining educational progress and will have high expectations for the young people they look after.

Each Virtual School has a minimum of 5 members who consist of

- A Head Teacher from a secondary school in the area
- A Head Teacher from a primary school in the area
- The District Social Care Manager
- The Manager of the district LAC Team
- The Virtual School manager

Often the meetings are attended by the district based Educational Psychologist. The cluster coordinator and the LAC learning mentor.

The Virtual Schools are currently developing a web based portal (**Virtual Schools Portal**) which will allow Bolton schools to upload looked after childrens attainment 3X per year. This will allow the Virtual Schools to monitor progress and plan interventions.

6. What works in improving outcomes for looked after children?

Ofsted recently published findings from research which show the very achievable key elements of a schools practice which made a difference to outcomes.

- Having and maintaining high expectations of looked after children, (for example recognising that looked after children may be gifted and talented)
- Ensuring looked after children are encouraged to take responsibility for their learning

- Close monitoring and response of academic, social and personal progress
- Young people's involvement in learning outside the classroom and participation in after-school activities
- Unified but low profile support in school for each looked after child so that they are not made to feel different from other children.
- Swift and early intervention if a problem emerges, such as with behaviour or attendance
- The successful engagement of either/or carers and parents in the child educational planning.

7. Looked After Pupils have additional funding!

Looked After Children attract a Pupil Premium Grant of £1900 which will be paid to the school by the local authority subject to agreement between the child's social worker and the school of a suitable plan of action. The PPG and how it is spent should be contained within the pupils Personal Education Plan although we would advise against using the PEP meeting to discuss finance. Part 1 PPG funding will be sent direct to schools in April- Part 2 funding will be transferred in the autumn term following submission of a Personal Education Plan which has been agreed with the child's social worker.

If the child is transferring to your school, their Pupil Premium Grant or part of may still be with their previous school. Ask the previous schools bursar or finance administration. Please try and use the money for Year 11 pupils before they leave your school. Please ensure your LAC designated teacher has enough seniority within the school to authorise PPG spend and resource allocation

If in doubt ask the appropriate LAC Virtual School for guidance.

8. I am expecting a Looked After Child to start at my schoolOne of my current pupils has just become looked after..... What do I do?

This checklist may help, in no particular order:-

1. Do you know the Child's allocated Social Worker- you can find this out by either ringing the district children's social work team or the PEP administration officer on 01204 332832
2. Check that the child is in the care of Bolton Council. They may be placed in Bolton but responsibility could be held with their originating local authority – you need to clarify this
3. Speak to the child's social worker and make sure you have been given all relevant information on the pupil/ do you have the information available that the social worker may need? Check back to Section 3 for further guidance
4. If the pupil has transferred from another school do you have the notes of the previous PEP meetings and other planning information? Ask the originating school for all their recordings – again check back to Section 3 for further guidance
5. Is the child living with siblings, do these children attend your school? Has the pupil changed address and if so who are the carers, have you met them and discussed

any changes? Have you encouraged existing or new carers to visit/contact your school? The child may be living with their extended family. Check this out

6. A PEP meeting will need arranging within 20 days of the child coming into care. When the Social Worker organises this you will receive confirmation of date and time. Think of who needs to be in the PEP and check with the child's social worker that they have been invited.
7. Have you all the information to hand which will inform the PEP- Current levels, progress, reading age, SEN/EHCP status etc. Social Workers are not experts in Education they may need help in fully understanding assessments and the pupil's academic strengths and weaknesses
8. If there are concerns about the child's progress request an Educational Psychologist assessment- this is arranged at no cost to the school through the education referral meeting held within the social work team. The child's social worker will make the referral.

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August 2012
Updated Sept 2014
Updated March 2015*