

Looked After Children

Introduction

This chapter of the JSNA considers the needs of children who have become looked after as a result of a legal order or who have been accommodated on a voluntary basis in agreement with their parents/carers. Looked After Children (LAC) are one of the most vulnerable groups in society. The majority of children who remain in care are there because they have suffered abuse or neglect. It is recognised that children in care have significantly higher levels of health needs than children and young people from comparable socio-economic backgrounds who have not been looked after.

Their life opportunities and outcomes are also often much poorer and poor health is a factor in this. Past experiences, poor start in life, care processes, placement moves and many transitions mean that these children are often at risk of having inequitable access to health services, both universal and specialist

The local authority's duty to meet the social care needs of looked after children is set out in the 1989 Children Act and subsequent amendments. The local authority has specific duties:

- To receive a child who is the subject of a care order into care and to continue to look after them while the care order is in force;
- To safeguard and promote the welfare of looked after children - finding out the wishes and feelings of child/parents before making any decision, and giving due consideration to those wishes and feelings and to the child's background;
- To promote the educational attainment of children in its care;
- To regularly review the needs and circumstances of a child in care and to appoint independent reviewing officers to do this;
- To provide appropriate advocates for children in its care;
- To continue to support young people after they have left the authority's care.

The duty to meet the health needs of Looked After Children for both the NHS and local authorities are clearly laid out in '[Statutory Guidance on Promoting the Health and Wellbeing of Looked After Children](#)'.

The NHS is required to make arrangements to secure appropriate health services for the child, in accordance with the health assessment and the child's health plan and need to understand the current flows of looked after children both in and out of the CCG area and ensure that services are commissioned to meet the needs of all Looked After Children.

All children in care are subject to a health plan. Health assessments must be undertaken twice a year for children under 5 years, and annually for children and young people aged 5 years and over.

The local authority also follows the statutory guidance for Looked after Children and their education.

The Children and Families Act 2014 amended the Children Act 1989 to require local authorities in England to appoint at least one person for the purpose of discharging the local authority's duty to promote the educational achievement of its looked after children, wherever they live or are educated. That person (the Virtual School Head, VSH) must be an officer employed by the authority or another local authority in England.

All looked after children should have a Personal Education Plan (PEP) which is part of the child's care plan

As leaders responsible for ensuring that the local authority discharges its duty to promote the educational achievement of their looked after children, by ensuring that:

- closing the attainment and progress gap between looked after children and their peers and creating a culture of high aspirations for them is a top priority
- looked after children have access to a suitable range of high quality education placement options and that commissioning services for them takes account of the duty to promote their educational achievement
- VSHs are in place and that they have the resources, time, training and support they need to discharge the duty effectively
- VSHs have robust procedures in place to monitor the attendance and educational progress of the children their authority looks after
- the authority's Children in Care Council (CiCC) regularly addresses the educational experiences raised by looked after children and is able to respond effectively to such issues.

What do we know?

Facts, Figures, Trends
a) Number of Looked After Children

Following 3 years of rising numbers of Looked After Children, there was a reduction during 2014-15. As at 31 March 2016 there were 253 children looked after by Bedford Borough Council, this represents a stable figure since 31 March 2015.

Table 1: Looked After Children in Bedford Borough

	March 2012	March 2013	March 2014	March 2015	March 2016
Looked After Children)	215	247	268	252	253
Bedford Borough Rate per 10,000 children aged 0 - 17	60.4	68.4	72.9	67.4	66.7
Statistical Neighbour Average (rate per 10,000)	61.6	58.5	57.9	59.1	
National Average (rate per 10,000)	59.0	60.0	60.0	60.0	

Chart 1 - 5 year trend analysis chart

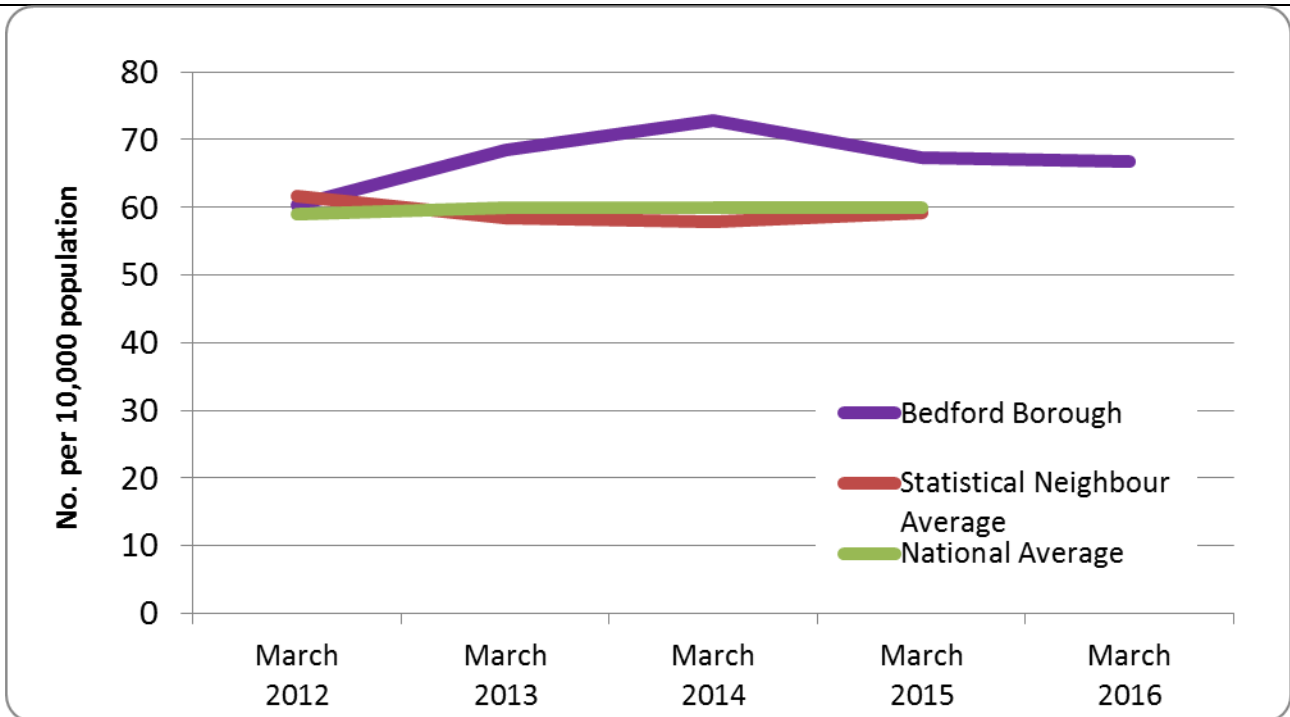
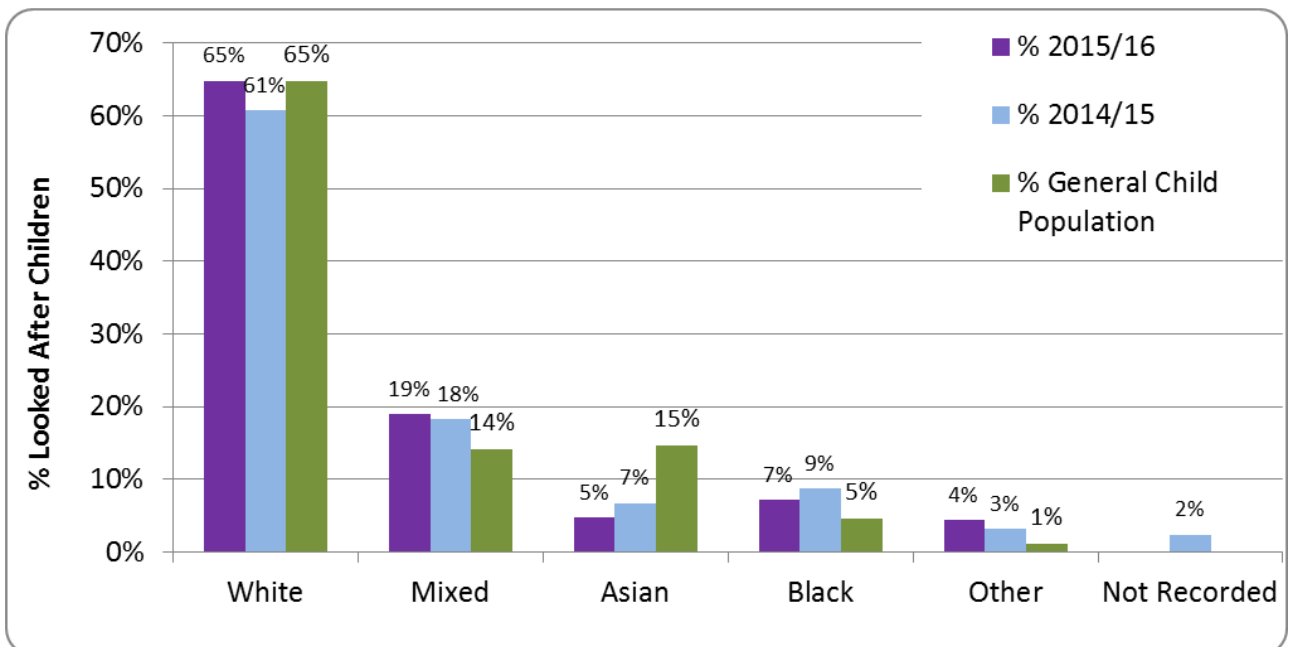


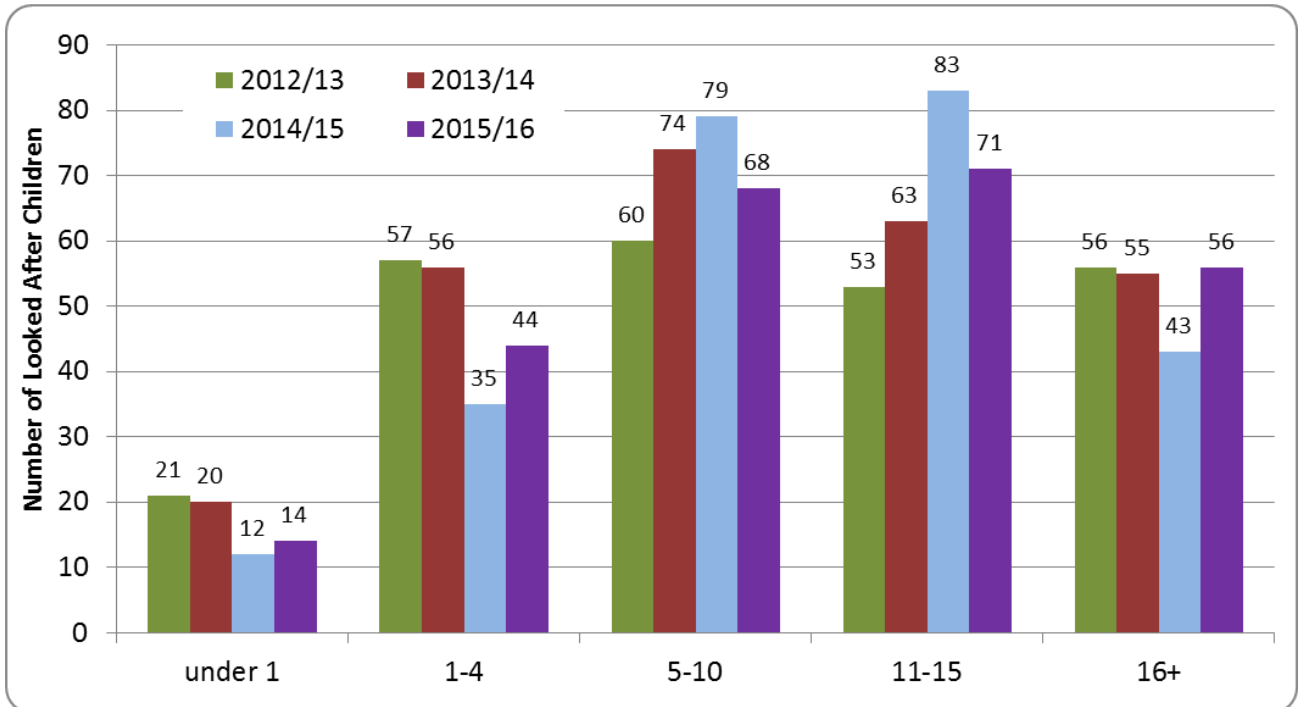
Table 1 above shows that in 2014 Bedford Borough had higher numbers compared to both national and statistical neighbour averages. Since 2014 the rate of children Looked After has reduced in Bedford Borough.

Chart 2 – Ethnicity of Looked After Children (as at 31st March)



In March 2016 the percentage of looked after children from BME groups was 35%, this compares precisely against 35% in the general Bedford Borough child population (2011 Census). Children from Black / Black British backgrounds decreased from 9% in 2014/5 to 7% in 2015/16. Children from Asian / Asian British backgrounds remain significantly lower than the general population (5% compared to 15%).

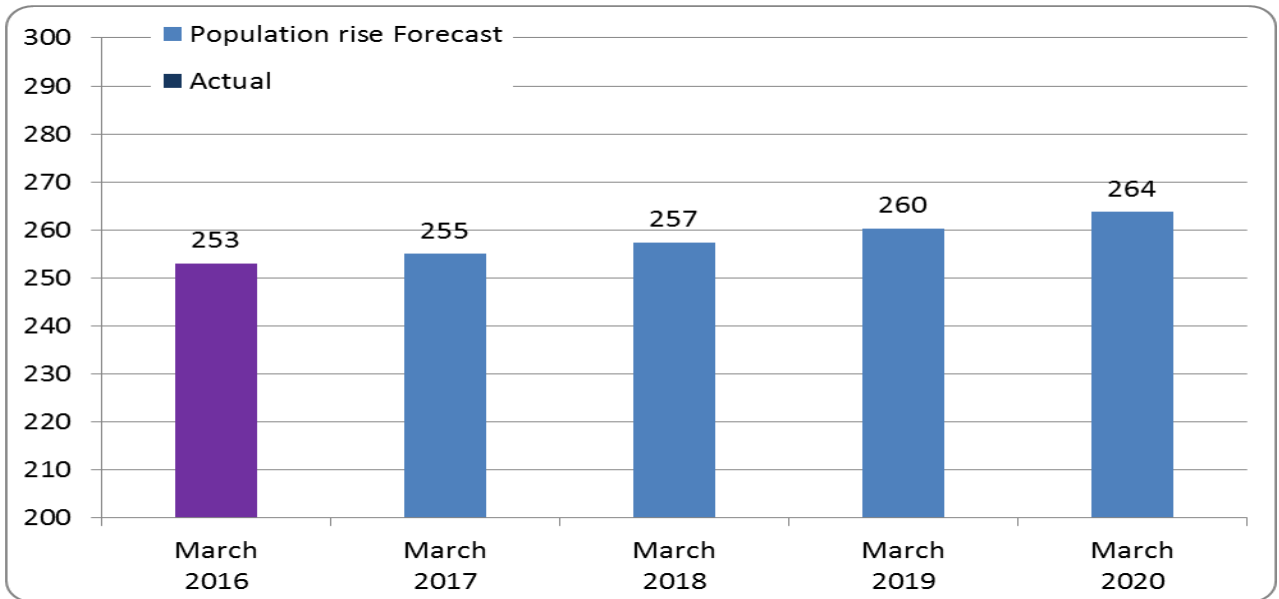
Chart 3 – Age of Looked After Children (as at 31st March)



Between March 2016 the number looked after children in both the under 1 and the 1 to 4 year old age ranges have increased slightly compared to the previous year, across both age groups there has been a total increase of 11 children looked after. The 11 to 15 age range saw a significant decrease from 83 to 71 following an upwards spike the previous year. The 16+ age range increased from 43 to 56.

Projected LAC population

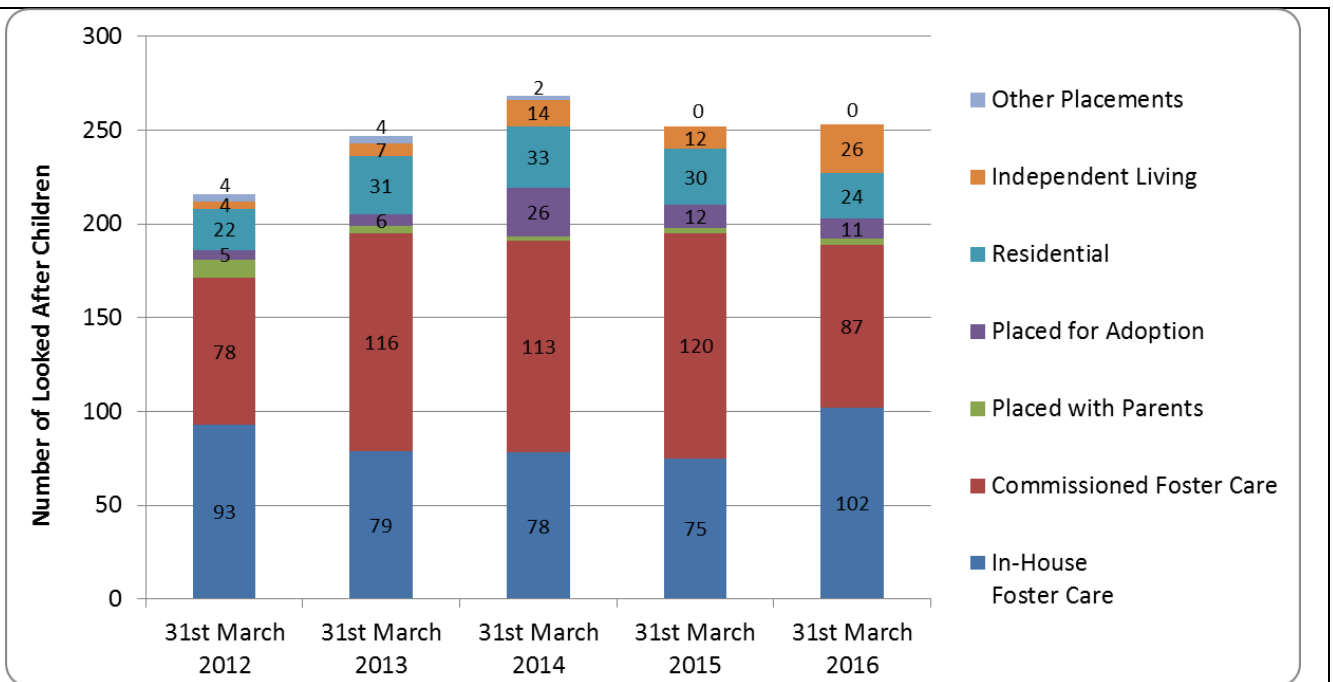
For the past 12 months to 2016, the Looked After Children population has shown a slow increase and therefore projections could indicate that the population will grow to in the region of approximately 264 children by 2020.



Current Placement Mix and Cost

As of March 2016 the Council had 253 children placed in care. Table 2 and chart 5 below shows the breakdown of where children were placed.

Chart 5 – LAC by placement type


Table 2– LAC by placement type

Date	In-House Foster Care	Commissioned Foster Care	Placed with Parents	Placed for Adoption	Residential	Independent Living	Other Placements	Total
31st March 2012	93	78	10	5	22	4	4	216
31st March 2013	79	116	4	6	31	7	4	247
31st March 2014	78	113	2	26	33	14	2	268
31st March 2015	75	120	3	12	30	12	0	252
31st March 2016	102	87	3	11	24	26	0	253

A very small number of children each year are Looked After by virtue of being remanded into local authority care following youth offending proceedings.

Additionally, unaccompanied asylum seeking children absorb 10% of placements.

Options for Permanence

Most children will have their need for stability and nurturing met by their birth parents and will not require support from, or come to the attention of, Local Authority Children's Services departments.

Where families do require support, the Local Authority will aim to support families to maintain care of their children whenever it is in their child's best interests.

Where children become looked after by the Local Authority the following three options for legal permanence must be fully considered:

- Remain with or return to birth parent(s) without a legal order, with appropriate support to maintain this.
- Live with a relative or person close to the child by virtue of a Special Guardianship Order or Child Arrangements Order (previously a Residence Order)
- Adoption into an alternative family

For a variety of reasons it may not be possible for some looked after children to secure any of the above three legal outcomes. The specific reasons for this may be complex and varied and will only be agreed following careful assessment, management endorsement and rigorous review, each of which must place the child's best interests at the centre.

In such circumstances case planning will be driven by the pursuit of achieving enduring stability through one of the following two options:

- Living with long-term foster carers as a looked after child;
- Living in a stable placement in a children's home.

A long term fostering placement is defined as one where the child has a clear sense of stability and belonging and the carers expect the child to be part of their family into adulthood. The child's primary attachments will be within the foster family, despite the potential for ongoing contact with birth family members.

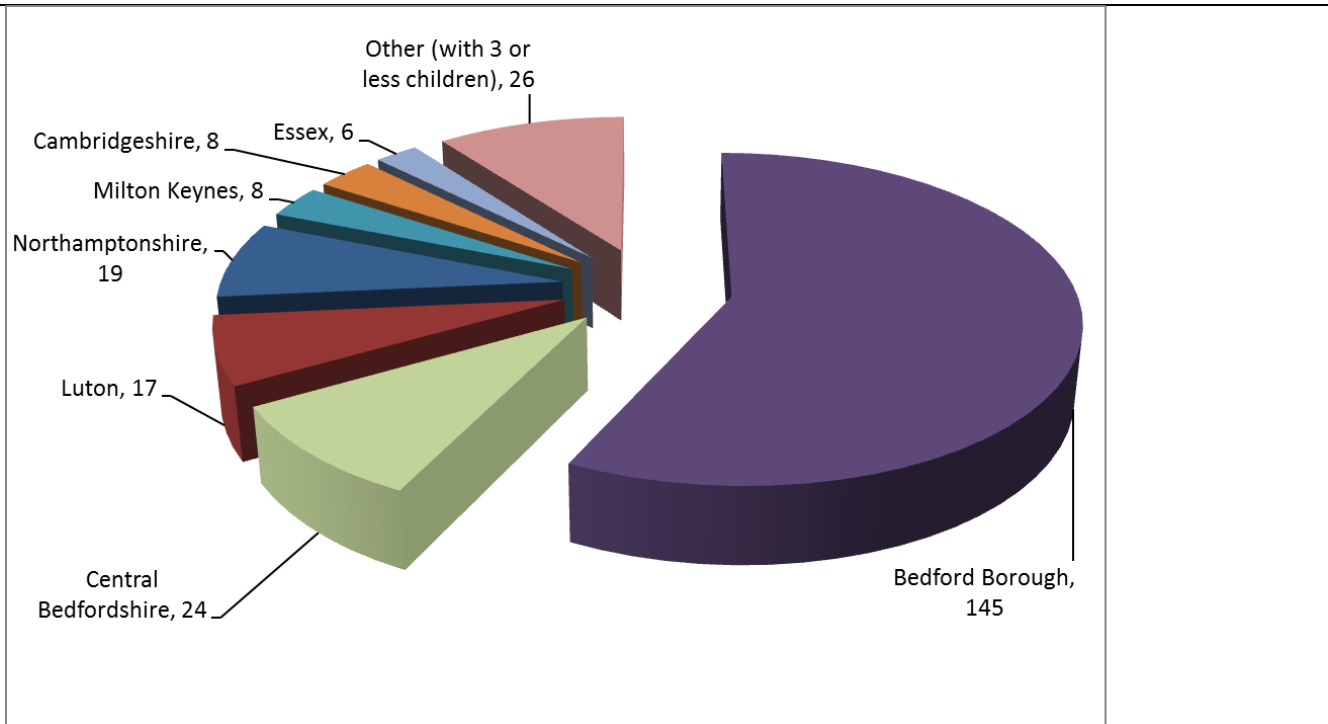
A long term fostering arrangement will be formally matched at a 'Best Interest Panel' and agreed by all parties, with input from the relevant professionals involved with the child and their carers. In all cases the child, the carers, the birth family and the authority will share an expectation about the permanence of the situation and provide a commitment to support and maintain an enduring, nurturing and caring home environment.

In many cases the plan for children in long- term fostering placements will be made with a view to securing their legal permanency by virtue of a Special Guardianship Order, but in some cases this will not be possible.

Care Leavers

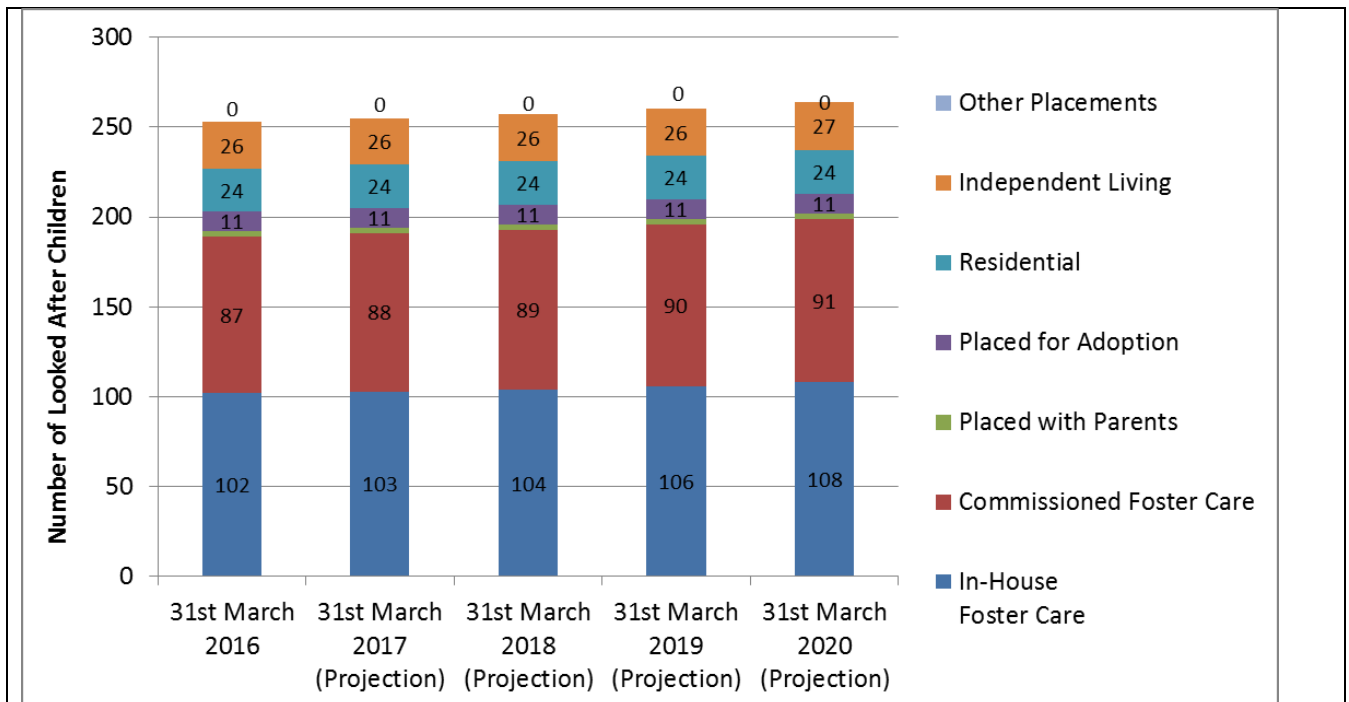
A recent peer review of Children's Social Care found that there are good links to providers of supported housing for care leavers and that there has been a year on year increase in the number of care leavers going into higher education.

Chart 6 – Location of Looked After Children Placed Out of Borough as at 31st March 2016



Of 253 Looked After Children as at 31 March 2016, 145 were placed within Bedford Borough, this is an increase compared to 105 during 2015. . Central Bedfordshire and Luton had a total of 41 of our looked after children placed in their areas this means that 186 Looked After Children by Bedford Borough Council were placed within Bedfordshire County.

Chart 7 – Projections of Looked After Children by placement

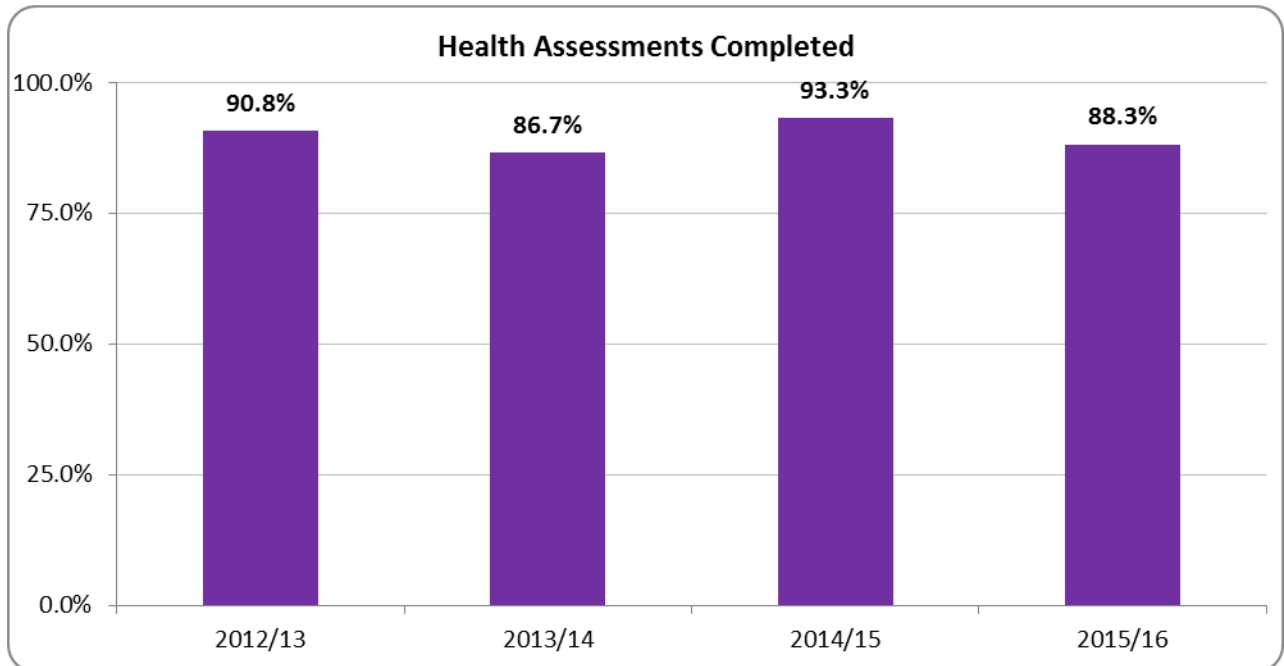

Table 3 – Comparative costs of placement types

Description	Actuals	Actuals	Actuals	Actuals	Actuals	Forecast
Budget year	2010 - 2011	2011 - 2012	2012 - 2013	2013 - 2014	2014-15	2015-16
Residential Care Home Placements	£3,067,775	£2,154,811	£1,907,011	£2,511,233	£2,152,876	£2,570,460
Independent Foster Care	£1,904,727	£2,733,731	£4,240,260	£4,962,802	£4,647,259	£4,014,440
In House Fostering Allowances				£1,164,298	£1,559,527	£1,553,530

HEALTH OF LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN
Health Assessments

During 2015/16 88.3% of children looked after for 12 months or more had at least one health assessments (children under 5 had two) during the year.

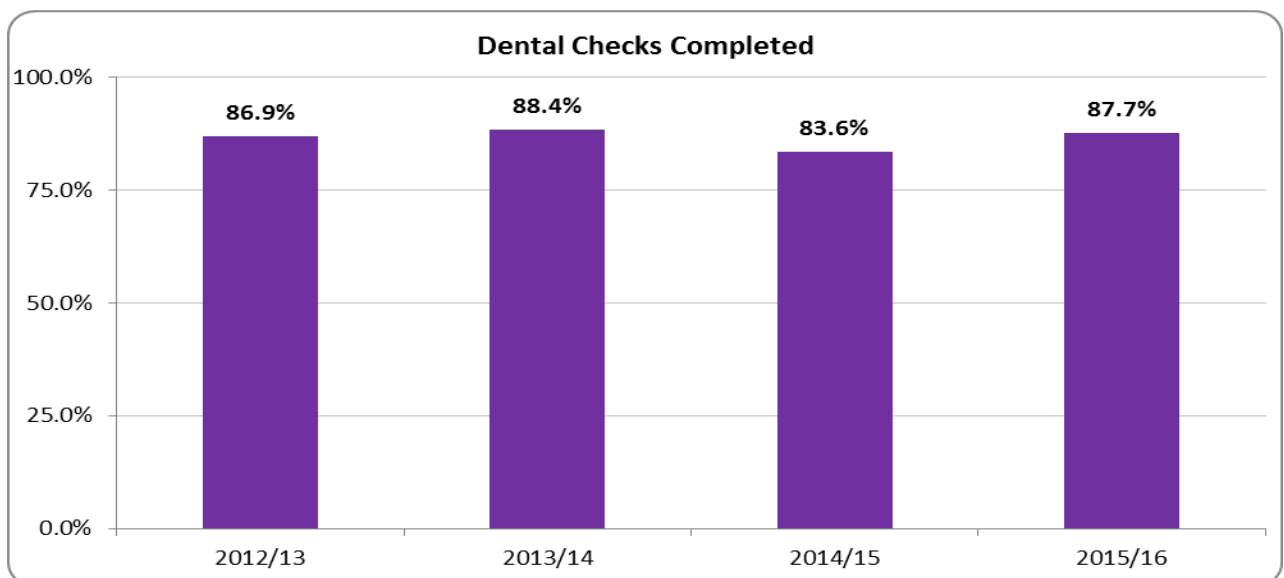
Chart 8 : Health Assessments for Looked After Children



Dental visits

During 2015-16 87.7% of children looked after for 12 months or more had at least one dental check during the year.

Chart 9 Looked After Children dental visits

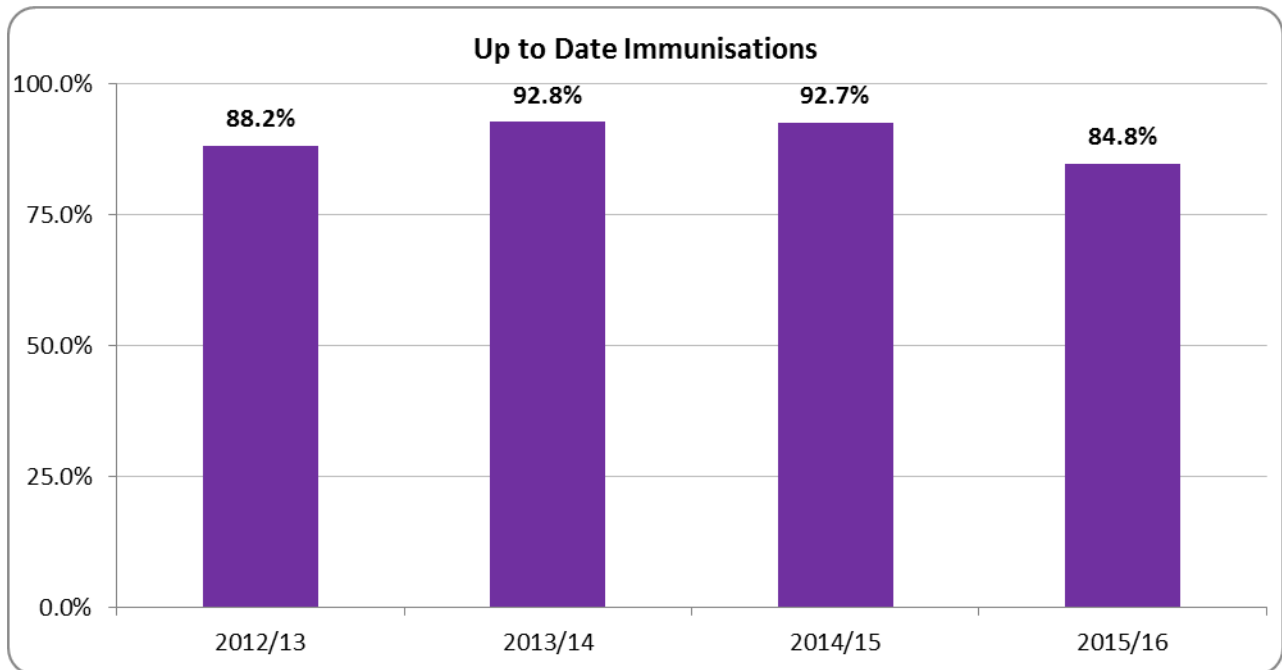


Immunisations

Children looked after for 12 months or more with all their immunisations up-to-date as at 31st March

2016 stands at 87.7%.

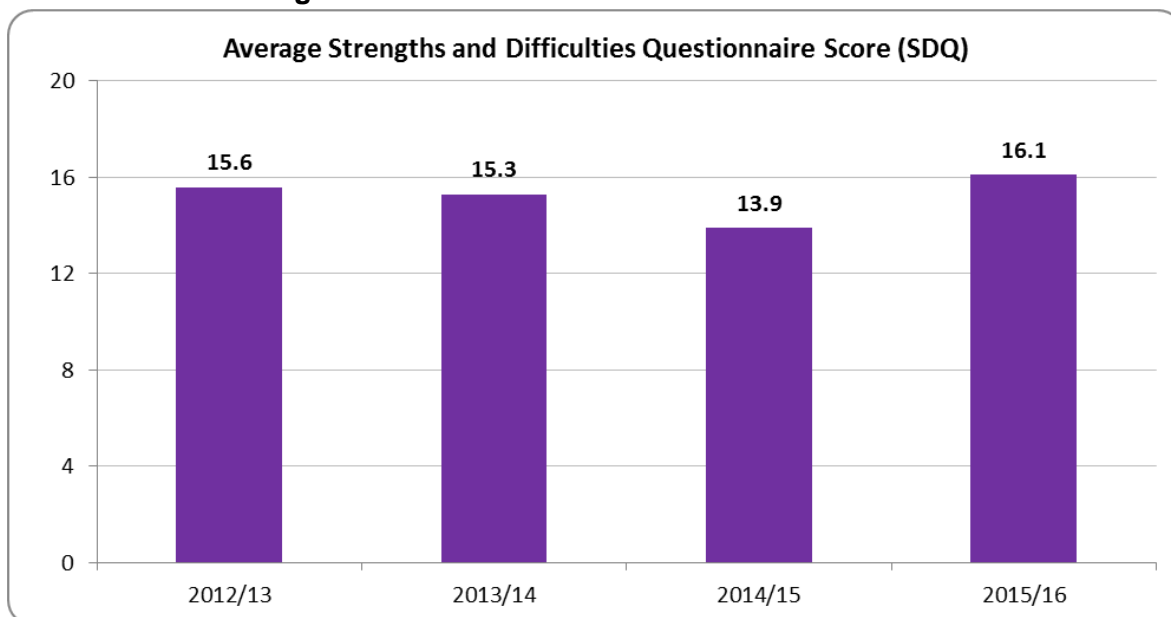
Chart 10 - Looked After Children immunisations:



Emotional Wellbeing of Looked After Children

The emotional wellbeing of Looked after Children is measured using a Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). This figure is measured and any score of over 14 is then referred to CAMHS. These scores are returned to the Department of Education as part of statutory returns using average scores for children who have been looked after for more than 1 year and are aged between 4 and 16 years old. The average score has increased from 13.9 in 2014-15 to 16.1 in 2015-16.

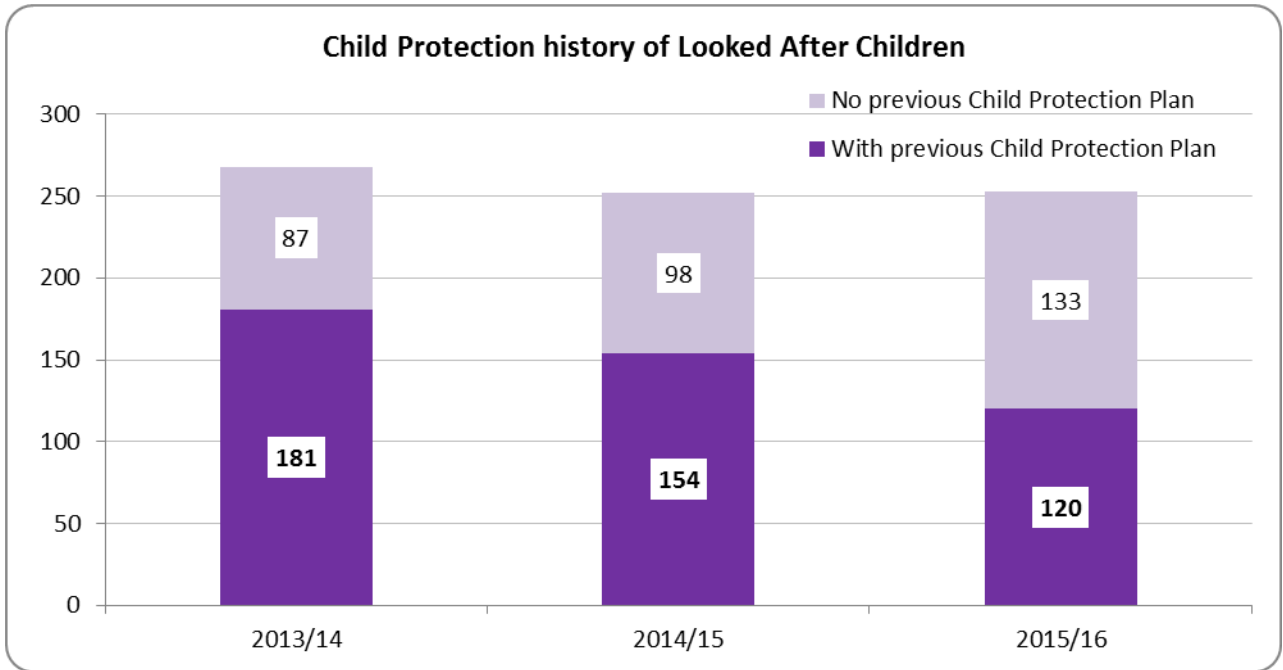
Chart 11 SDQ Average scores



Child Protection history of Looked After Children

61% of all Looked After children have Child Protection Plan histories (either previous or current). Of 253 Looked After Children as at 31 March 2016, 120 had previously been subject to a Child Protection Plan, and 133 had no Child Protection Plan history.

Chart 12 Looked After Children Child Protection history:



National & Local Strategies (Current best practices)

Our strategic approach for looked after children is aligned with our Corporate Parenting Strategy, our Sufficiency Strategy and other national and local drivers.

One of the best ways to ensure that we can deliver high quality services to children in care is to ensure that we have the right children in care, namely those most vulnerable and at risk, whilst ensuring that we support those children who can safely remain at home. To this end we have developing our “Early Help Offer” to ensure children and young people receive the best possible help before there is any need to refer to social care.

We are establishing a strong and consistent approach to managing our ‘front door’, which is critical to ensure that we look after the right children at the right time. This will ensure that children who meet our threshold of intervention receive a timely assessment of their needs and the most effective services and support from our front line teams.

The demand on Children’s Services has been increasing year on year and Bedford Borough Council has responded by investing in additional social work capacity and it commissions a range of targeted support services to meet assessed need. To support improvements in the quality of service delivery models of intervention will be reshaped using a systemic approach designed to support child centred practice and to promote the engagement of children and young people.

We will ensure that there is a ‘golden thread’ of permanency planning running through our decision making, starting at the point of first contact. This requires us to make decisions that reflect the long-term needs of each individual child at every point in their journey.

In line with our need to deliver permanent solutions for the children and families we serve we are updating and developing associated practice guidance. Our Participation Strategy is based on our need to understand and consider the views of the children and families. Our ‘Pledge’ to children in care is reflective of this aspiration and serves as our statement of commitment to change the way services for looked after children are delivered.

Effective management information and performance management systems will be developed to underpin our strategic approach.

In order to care for our children well, we need a good supply of high quality placements. Our response to the Government’s ‘Sufficiency Duty’ will ensure we have the right provision in the right place for all our children in care.

We will continue to deliver a mixed market of placement provision including foster care and residential children’s homes for children with disabilities provided by Bedford Borough Council as well as a wide range of placements commissioned from the private and voluntary sector.

We will also continue to innovate and look for new types of placements to meet the individual needs of children and young people. Specifically, this will include expanding our range of supported housing options for older young people.

For those children and young people who become looked after we are developing recruitment strategies and mechanisms designed to ensure Bedford Borough Council is the first choice agency for prospective foster carers and adopters. We will support our carers to provide high quality placements via a comprehensive training and support programme.

We will give priority to achieving timely, accessible and high quality service provision in order to improve health outcomes, support educational attainment, maximise life chances and promote

placement stability.

We will develop a range of policies and procedures that will support our ability to provide alternative care for those children whose needs are best met away from their home and our overarching “Friends and Family Policy” will be designed to offer a range of support to those children and young people whose needs can be met by their family and wider personal networks.

We know that outcomes for children are better when they are able to form long-term relationships with carer’s. To that end we will develop a “Placement Stability Policy” and associated practice guidance that will ensure that we secure permanent long term care arrangements for children.

Working closely with our virtual school we will ensure that services and strategies to promote the educational attainment of our looked after children and young people are prioritised in order to narrow the gap between the achievements of children who are not in care and those who are looked after by Bedford Borough Council.

In partnership with health services we are ensuring that the health needs of the children and young people we have responsibility for are identified in an appropriate and timely manner with a focus on prevention. Evidence shows that children and young people in care have some of the poorest health outcomes in comparison to their peers.

We recognise that young people in placement should remain with their carer’s beyond 18 if that is the best decision for them. We have introduced a ‘Staying Put Policy’ that enables young people to remain with their carer’s beyond their 18th birthday.

Bedford Borough Council are committed to a range of activities designed to ensure that all our children in care are able to access education, employment or training as they move towards adulthood. As one of the Borough’s largest employers we have more to do towards ensuring that there are work-based opportunities for young people leaving care.

What is this telling us?

What are the unmet needs/ service gaps?

We have completed a comprehensive needs analysis in order to refresh our ‘sufficiency strategy’ This will set out our commissioning intentions for 2016-2020 in light of emerging policy and changes to legislation that impacts upon the numbers and profile of children in care

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This section links to the following sections in the JSNA:

- Sexual exploitation of children
- Children in Need

References

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Appendices

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