

Update to the Looked After Children Strategy January 2018

Background

The purpose of the report is to provide an update to the progress of Looked After Children (LAC) Strategy and to provide an outline of the priorities for 2018/19.

At the time of the Looked After Children strategy being implemented in January 2015, Neath Port Talbot was faced with the challenge of reducing its number of Looked After Children which had been significantly above the National Average since 2012. In addition, it was anticipated that the Strategy would delivering a financial saving, and improving the outcomes of those children who needed to be Looked After.

The LAC strategy set the ambitious target of reducing the number of LAC from 467 to 345 by 1st April 2018.

This target has been achieved year on year however the focus has never been solely on reducing the numbers but on ensuring that the right children are being looked after in the right placements.

Table 1

Financial year	Target number of LAC	Actual number of LAC
2014/15	441	434
2015/16	411	377
2016/17	371	348
2017/18	345	329 as at 5 th Jan 2018

An agreed financial saving of £700,000 was achieved in the first year of the strategy.

Despite the targets above, as noted the Looked After Children Strategy is not intended to be simply a LAC reduction but to have a wider vision on how Looked after Children should be supported.

The focus of the strategy is:

- 1 To ensure that only the children who need to be looked after enter the care system
- 2 To ensure that when children are looked after that they have good outcomes and they have access to high quality and stable placements with carers who have the support they need.
- 3 That looked after children have care plans that are dynamic and continually consider how permanency can be achieved without the need for them being looked after.

The strategy has continued to be successful in achieving good outcomes for Children who are looked after.

Progress to date

Numbers of Looked After Children

Table 2

Type of placement	31.12.2015	31.12.2016	05.01.2018
Residential	8	11	9 (plus 2 alternative to residential)
Independent Fostering Placements	81	67	60
NPT Foster carers (inc Family)	224	206	213
Placed with parents	51	33	28
Independent Living	4	4	2
Pre adoption placement	16	20	15
Total Number in Care	384	341	329
Total Number of Paid Placements	305	273	273

As can be seen in the table above, although the overall LAC figures have reduced, the number of paid placements has not seen a significant reduction. This reinforces the purpose of the strategy not being just about the reduction in numbers. The reduction has been achieved by either supporting children to remain in their stable long term placements or by supporting children to be cared for safely without the need for them to be part of the Looked after Children System.

The service has continued to achieve its targets for the reduction of Looked after children year on year. Instead of being reported as having the highest number of Looked After children per 10,000 population this has been reduced as follows and as at 31.3.17 NPT had the 18th highest number of Looked after children out of the 22 Local Authorities in Wales:

Table 3

Year	Rate of LAC per 10,000 population
31 st March 2015	156
31 st March 2016	132
31 st March 2017	124

Admissions to care

The Service continues to hold a weekly admission and resource panel. The purpose of the panel is to consider any young person whose circumstances mean that there is a potential for them to need to be looked after. The panel considers resources available to support families to prevent accommodation.

No child who needs to be Looked After in order to ensure they are safeguarded will be refused a placement, however the role of the panel is to compliment the work of the Team Managers in ensuring that all opportunities for looking at alternatives to care have been explored.

The number of admissions and discharges from care are closely monitored and scrutinised by Managers. As shown in table 3 below, there continues to be a trend of a marginally lower number of admissions to care than discharges which has helped to maintain a stability in the LAC numbers.

Table 4

Time Period	Number of Admissions	Number of discharges
1st April 2016 – 31 March 2017	101	129
1st April 2016 – 31st Dec 2016 (Q1 – Q3)	66	91
12st April 2017 – 31st Dec 2017 (Q1 – Q3)	62	76

Readmissions/Multiple admissions

A recent overview report undertaken in relation to the outcomes for children who are admitted to care has shown that there continues to be effective reunification of young people who are admitted for short emergency periods of time, and that there are few readmissions to care. There is an effective arrangement in place with the Family Action Support Team which assists in the effective rehabilitation of children home, and ensures that children are discharged from care with the necessary supports to ensure that their return is sustainable.

Table 5 *

Calendar year	Number of children admitted who were returned home	Of these how many had a readmission
2015	23	2 (in both cases the readmission was as a result of being on Remand)
2016	18	0
2017	19	0

**information taken from the LAC Admissions report completed by PO Emma Meyrick, January 2018*

Discharges from Care

In addition to ensuring that there is routine oversight of the children coming into care there is a similar focus on ensuring that when possible children do not remain in the LAC system longer than necessary. No child will be discharged from being LAC unless there are clear assessments and plans involving multiple agencies which demonstrate that it is safe to do so. This may be as a result of the original concerns no longer being prevalent and therefore the risk to the child is removed, or because permanency for the child can be achieved without the child needing to be

One of the factors that impacted on the reduction of LAC figures over the past 3 years was the natural discharge of young people from care because they became 18 and ceased to be Looked After. As can be seen from the table below there was a significant increase in the number of care leavers in 2015/16. This arose due to the increased number of children, particularly teenagers who were accommodated in the period leading up to 2012.

Year	Number of children turning 18
2012/13	18
2013/14	21
2014/15	21
2015/16	44
2016/17	21
2017 to date	29

Permanency planning

The permanency plan for a child is considered at their 2nd LAC review and is monitored through permanency panel.

Since 2015 the impact of the number of Care Orders being discharged and alternative Orders being supported has had an impact on the overall number of children Looked After.

The number of children who have been made subject of Care Orders who remain living with their parents has reduced from 51 in December 2015 to 28 in January 2018. The number continues to be much higher than would be expected but the figure includes a number of children whose parents have been reassessed as now being able to provide the care for their child that they were previously unable to do. This has resulted in a number of children returning home to their parents as part of a planned rehabilitation, and following a period of monitoring the Local Authority will be seeking applications to the Court to discharge the Care Orders which will mean that the children will no longer be Looked After

The Family Action Support Team (FAST) provides support to parents and children to assist them with rehabilitation.

Special Guardians

In 2015/16 19 children were discharged from care as a result of a Special Guardianship Order (SGO) being granted. In 2016/17 this figure increased to 25 children made subject of an SGO. 12 children have been discharged from care in favour of an SGO between 1st April 17 -31st December 2017

Table 6

Year	Number of children subject to an SGO
2015/16	96
2016/17	117
2017/18	135

A combination of changes in the assessment process; the way that the Local Authority supports family members to care for children and a steer from the Court has significantly increased the number of children who are living with family members subject to an SGO. Previously these children would have been made subject of a Care Order, often remaining Looked After for the duration of their childhood, placing a strain on the care system and the leaving care services.

There has also been an increase in the number of children who have remained living with their foster carers subject to an SGO rather than remaining Looked After when they have not been able to return to their family.

Neath Port Talbot has been proactive in developing its support for family members and carers who make the decision to become Special Guardians, recognising that without this support there is a potential for those arrangements to come under some pressure and potentially impact on the readmission of children into the Looked after Children System. In order to prevent this the Local Authority ensures that each child placed with a carer under an SGO has an SGO support plan. The service has developed a support group for SGO carers and carers are able to access specialist training. In addition, as a minimum SGO carers have a worker allocated who provides an annual review of the financial support provided by the Local Authority.

Going forward it will necessary to develop a support and finance policy for SGO carers to ensure sustainability.

Sufficiency of placements

There are currently 137 foster carers approved by NPT. This figure has remained relatively static over the past few years, and although there continues to be a steady approval of approximately 10 new foster carers per year the net figure remains the same as a result of the deregistration of foster carers during each year. Foster carers may deregister for a number of reasons; retirement, ill health, changes to their own family or as a result of an allegation. NPT has not deregistered any foster carers as a result of them moving to another fostering agency.

Since 2015 the fostering Service has developed a Marketing and recruitment strategy and has revised its financial support to foster carers. The emphasis has been on recruitment carers who are able to offer foster placements for children aged 10 plus and sibling groups, as these remain the pressure areas for placements for the service,

12 new foster carers have been approved since 1st January 2017

In addition, the fostering service supports 2 Parent and baby foster placements.

Placements for older children, siblings and parent and babies remain a consistent pressure and remain the focus of recruitment campaigns.

Use of Independent foster placements versus Neath Port Talbot Foster Placements

As can be seen from table 2 the number of children placed with Independent Fostering Agencies has continued to fall. At the end of the financial year in 2014, the number of children placed with Independent fostering agencies was 117. This figure has nearly halved in 3 years.

The number of children placed with Neath Port Talbot foster carers has reduced overall, but does remain fairly stable.

There are many benefits to children being placed with NPT foster carers:

- Children are more likely to remain in their local communities and be able to retain education, health and social networks.
- The service has more control over the supports it is able to offer to the foster carers
- Previous analysis has demonstrated that children placed with NPT carers experience less placement moves than those placed with Independent fostering agencies.

An additional significant benefit is the cost saving to the Local Authority, with each Independent Fostering Placement costing double that of an in house placement (average cost of an NPT placement = £22k compared to £44k for an IFA placement per year)

There is a continued need to ensure that the Fostering Service continues to expand its resource in order to reduce the need to access independent fostering placements and provide a placement choice to allow young people to be matched with carers who are best suited to meet their needs.

It is recognised there will continue to be a demand for placements to be commissioned from Independent Fostering Agencies. Historically Independent Foster Placements would have been used predominantly as a result of a lack of capacity within the in-house provision, but such placements are also required when young people need to be placed out of NPT or when they require a specialist provision as a result of their needs or disability. Where independent fostering placements are used the commissioning and contract monitoring arrangements that have been developed in NPT are essential in ensuring that there is both a quality of Service and value for money.

Residential placements

The number of children living in residential placements has remained stable over the past 3 years. However, with the average annual cost of a residential placement being £205,000 the use of residential placements has a significant impact on the Looked After Children budget.

Over the past 12 months the Service has experienced a small but significant rise in the number of young people requiring residential care as a result of their physical or mental health needs or requiring secure accommodation due to significant concerns in relation to their own safety or the safety of others.

There is now an opportunity to consider how the service can deliver its support to those young people who have more complex needs, and in particular those young people whose needs are likely to continue to require support beyond the age of 18 and into adulthood.

Over the past 6 months the service has worked more closely with registered adult care providers and domiciliary care providers to extend their registration to under 18 year olds in order to provide alternative packages of support to traditional residential care which are sustainable. This would not be an appropriate service for all young people but for a number of young people it is proving to be an effective way of promoting independence whilst balancing their care and support needs.

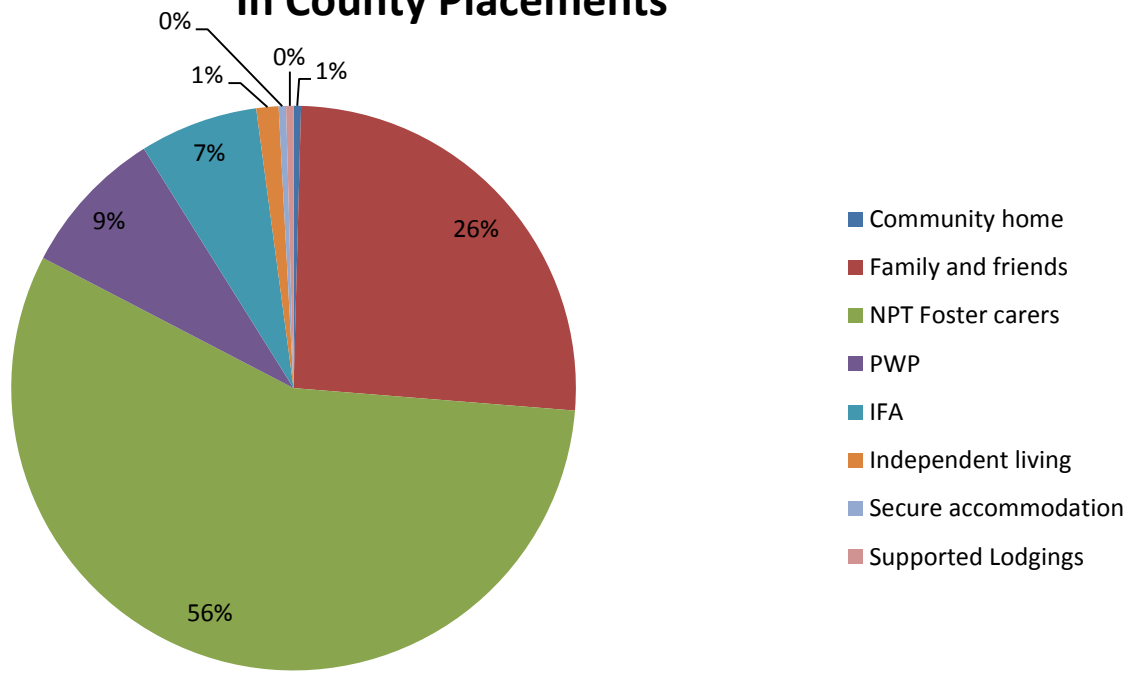
When young people are placed in residential care, there is now a more are arrangements in place to provide contract monitoring of placements and increased accountability for providers to deliver services in line with the agreed contract.

Supporting children to remain within Neath Port Talbot

The Service aims to support as many children who are Looked After to remain within their local community and to continue to access their local services. This means that children are more likely to retain links with their own school, health services and to be close to their friends and family that they need contact with.

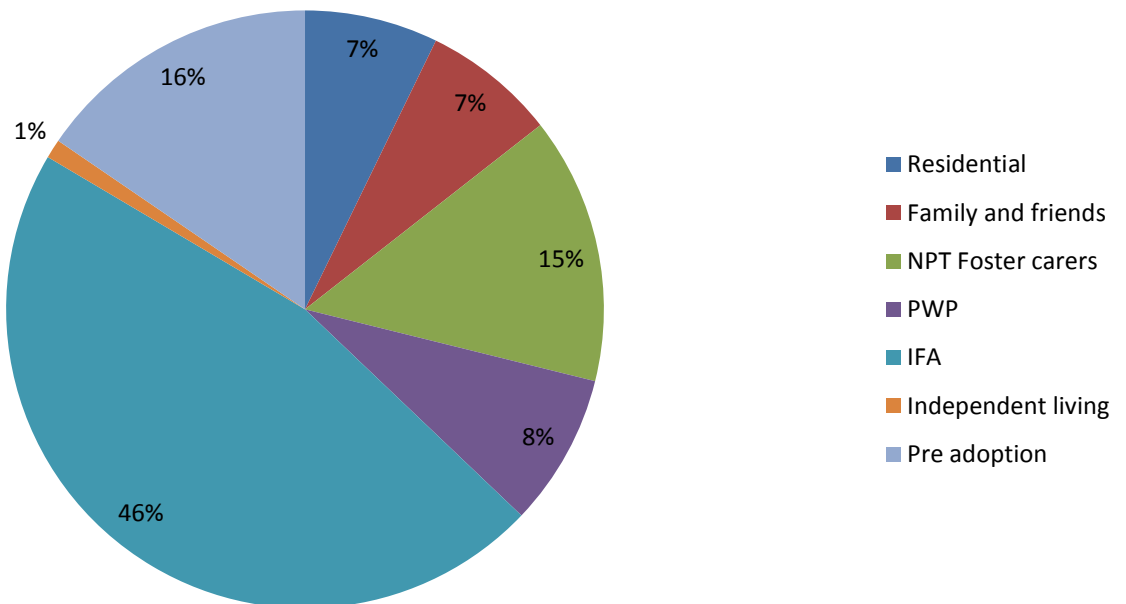
Of the 333 children who were looked after on 31st December 2017, 236 were living within the boundaries of Neath Port Talbot and 97 were living in other Local Authorities. As can be seen from the charts below nearly half of those children who are placed out of County are living with independent foster carers, and all of the children who are placed in a residential provision live outside the area. There will be a small number of children who need to live outside of Neath Port Talbot for their own safety however many placed out of County will be because there is not a suitable local provision to meet their care or educational need. This is an area which needs to be developed in order to expand the resources available in order to expand the resources within the County Borough.

In County Placements



**community home refers to young people who are living in a community placement supported by a registered provider who provides a high level of care and support.*

Out of County Placements



Supports to Looked After Children and Carers

The Fostering Service has had a play therapist in post since March 2017. The service has recently appointed a Psychologist and a Consultant Social worker to form a Clinical Support Team to Looked After children and carers.

The team will assist carers in understanding the reasons behind some of the challenging behaviours presented by Looked After Children in their carer and will also provide direct therapeutic interventions to children to support them to develop secure attachments and to support the stability of placements.

The fostering service staff are all experienced and highly trained practitioners with specialist training in understanding family dynamics, trauma and attachment and developing a secure base for children all of which is essential in ensuring that the children who need to be looked after have the best opportunities to be able to go on to form strong relationships which will help them to achieve in all aspects of their lives.

In addition to the in house clinical team, Children and Carers in NPT have access to the Western Bay Multi Agency Support team which can also provide a clinical overview and support to children, their carers and professionals who help to support the placement.

Young people leaving care

In 2017, Welsh Government announced its commitment to supporting all young people leaving care up to the age of 25 (previously support was available up to 21 or to 25 for young people in further education).

Young people have access to a social worker up to their 18th Birthday, and are supported by a Young Persons Advisor up to the age of 25.

Welsh Government Grant funding for 2017/18 has allowed for an additional temporary Young Person Advisor to be appointed to support the new requirements.

In addition, Welsh Government has provided funding to support with the education and employment opportunities for young care leavers and NPT proposes to develop a work experience scheme for young care leavers based on the success of a number of care leavers who have had apprenticeship with the Local Authority and subsequently been successful in securing full time permanent employment.

In 2018, the service intends to develop a pilot progression to adulthood team. The team which will consist of workers from adult and children's teams will initially support a small number of young people with complex needs to transition to adulthood with the intention of enabling them to develop independently and if achievable to reduce the need for services in the longer term.

Accommodation services for young people leaving care are an essential component to ensuring young people are able to move successfully into adulthood. The range of services available to young people includes remaining with their former foster carers as part of the When I Am Ready Scheme or accessing supported accommodation, supported housing or independent living.

In 2017, the current contract for supported accommodation was extended with the current provider until September 2018 while consideration is given to the service and finance model going forward.

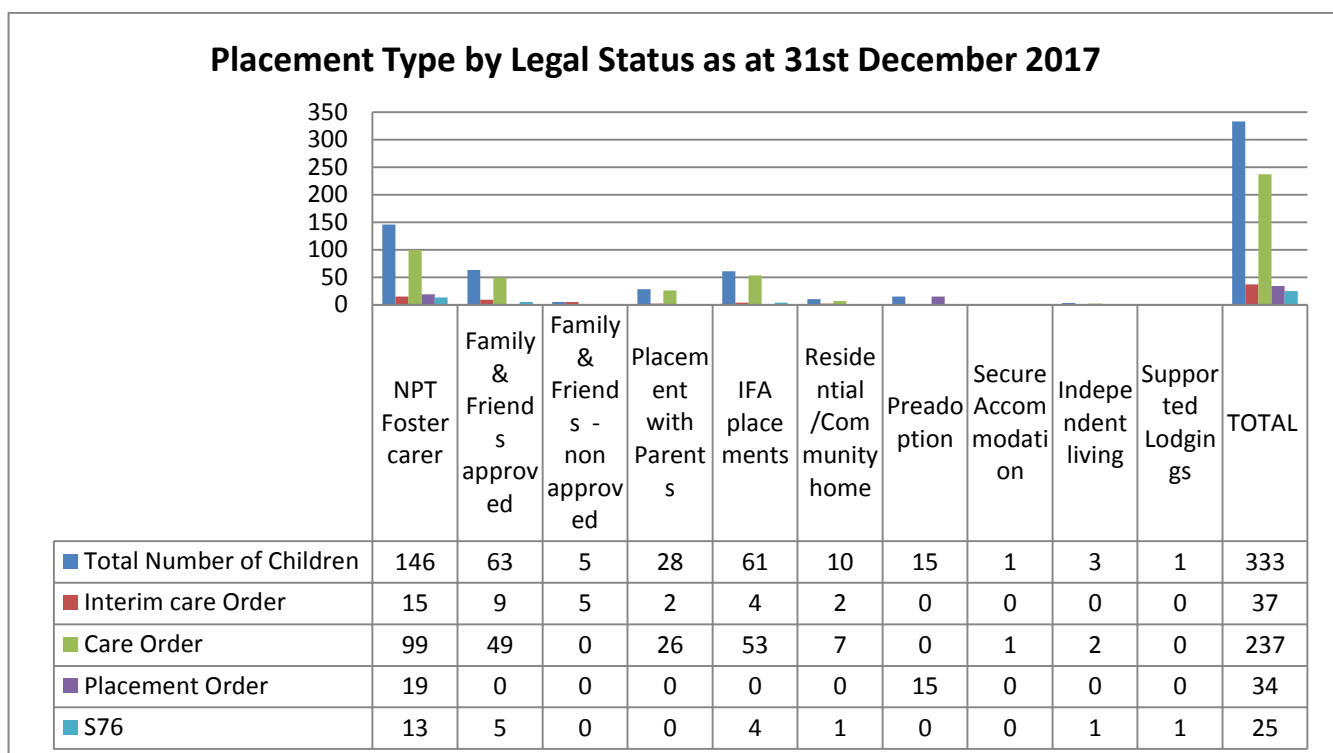
The current provider has over the past 12 months developed a number of staffed crisis beds which to date have been successfully used to support young people for a short period of time whilst planning their housing needs.

Priorities for 2018 – 2019

Continued safe reduction of Looked After Children

The number of children who are Looked After has remained fairly static over the past 6-9 months. Consideration has been given to whether the service has reached a natural plateau and one which is at the right level.

The table below shows a breakdown of the children placed in Foster care by their legal Status. What can be seen from this table is that the highest proportion of children who are looked after in paid placements are those who have been made subject to Care Orders by the Court. For these children, the majority will have a plan to be Looked After long term, and therefore reducing this cohort of children will not be possible. There will however be continual reviews and reassessments of each individual situation, and some of these children will have opportunities to return to their birth family, or for their Care Order to be discharged if it is considered safe to do so. In addition, there will be some children who are placed long term with their foster carers or family carers who will remain with their carers subject to a Special Guardianship Order and therefore will not be Looked After.



Of the 15 children placed in Pre Adoption placements, the longest has been placed for 11 months, and plans are in place to apply for an Adoption Order for this child so that they will no longer be Looked After. For the remaining 14, they have all been placed for 6 months or less.

Of the 19 children who have placement Orders, as at 31st December 5 have been linked with potential adopters, 2 have been matched with adopters, 2 have had a change of plan and will remain looked after by their foster carers and searches are ongoing for the remaining 10. Of the children who have not yet been matched or lined the longest a child has been currently waiting for an adoptive family is 8 months.

NPT, as part of Western Bay Adoption Service has committed to commissioning a service for more difficult to place children which will aim to reduce the time that some children wait for their permanent family, and to increase the support available to them.

Stability of placements

The provision of stable placements where children and young people can develop secure and strong relationships is essential to their outcomes and vital to ensuring that placements do not breakdown which can often result in children moving between fostering placements and escalating into Independent foster placements or residential care if needs cannot be met.

The service plans to increase stability in placements by increasing the support to children in care and to carers including clinical and therapeutic support as well as considering the role of the FAST team in maintaining and supporting placements.

Accommodation Services for young people leaving care.

It will be a priority in 2018 to finalise the service model for accommodation services for young people leaving care and to commission a service that can meet the range of accommodation and support needs.

Hearing the voice of the young people

The Service is committed to ensuring that the voice of young people and the families that we work with is a central part of how we work and how we influence service development.

Through the support of the Participation and engagement Officer and through helping young people identify and achieve their own outcomes and priorities we are better able to understand the services we need to provide to support people.

Looked after children are currently involved in participation and engagement activities and in the next year it will be a priority to ensure that we better understand what young people say matters to them and to learn lessons from good practice.

Expansion of the NPT Fostering Service

The fostering service will continue to implement its marketing and recruitment strategy with a focus on increasing the number of in house foster carers, and in particular those who can care for children aged 10 plus and sibling groups.

The managers meet on regular basis to review the plan and to ensure that the focus of recruitment is still appropriate to the service need. Mechanisms are being developed to further capture data to inform the service of trends in placement demand in order for the recruitment to be responsive to the needs of the service

Developing alternatives to external Residential care.

By working with existing providers and partner agencies it is hoped that the service will be able to expand the range of services available to children with complex needs and to deliver these in a regulated, but innovative way and in a way that is responsive to the changing needs of young people. Examples include considering how existing provisions of residential care within Education settings could be utilised outside of term time for young people to provide valuable respite support services, or expanding services which can deliver provision across both children and adult care.

Financial Savings

The reduction of Looked After children overall will not necessarily provide the Service with the financial saving that it is committed to delivering in 2018/19. Not all looked after children are in paid placements (See table 1). The type of placements where reductions can continue to be achieved through discharging care orders for children living with

parents and SGO's either provide no financial saving because they are not paid placements or require an ongoing financial commitment (albeit reduced) to the Local Authority.

Continued savings however can be achieved by ensuring that as many of the children who need to be looked after are done so by NPT foster carers which reduces the cost of Independent foster placements, or by providing alternative support packages which reduces the need for residential care placements.