



**Looked After Children Report
April 2021**



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Introduction

Healthwatch Leicester and Healthwatch Leicestershire (Healthwatch) are the local independent voice of the public in the delivery of Health and Social Care in Leicester and Leicestershire. We collect feedback from members of the public about their experiences of using health and social care services. One of the ways that feedback is collected is through carrying out Special Projects. The findings are shared with service commissioners and service providers to influence service improvements.

The subject of a Special Project is chosen by Healthwatch based on the experiences shared by the public and conversations with the local authorities. Once a Special Project has been agreed, Healthwatch focus on the project between 3-12 months, gathering information and opinions of the public. The findings are shared with service commissioners and service providers to influence service improvements.

This project was undertaken to understand how prepared Looked After Children (LAC) feel about looking after their health and emotional wellbeing once they are living independently.

Dyslexic friendly and large print versions of the report are available upon request.

Background

There has been little work, particularly in Leicester and Leicestershire, looking at the experience of Looked After Children (LAC) when using health services. There are some anecdotal concerns about the readiness of LAC when leaving their care service and how prepared they are to look after their emotional health and wellbeing. This is of concern as research suggests looked after children have poorer health outcomes than other children.

Further research is needed to understand the experiences of LAC in managing their own health and wellbeing and how the care system prepares them to live independently. This project will look at the experiences of looked after children to see what information they are provided with and how well it prepares them to look after themselves once they leave the care system.

What We Did & Why

We wanted to gather stories to gain a deeper insight as to the issue’s children face. This may not be something children, or young adults who have left the care setting, want to talk about openly. With this in mind, we designed focus groups and interview questions with the aim of building trust with participants and breaking down any barriers there might be in discussing this topic.

We reached out to a number of organisations providing LAC care explaining the project and advising we would like to talk to children and young people to gather their experiences. We also contacted voluntary organisations who provide support to looked after children as well as city and county services such as the 16+ team.

A survey was made available online for people who wanted to let us know their experiences, but either couldn’t attend a focus group or wanted to tell us their experience anonymously.

Considerations

Identifying looked after children can be difficult. This group of young people is protected and rightly so, but for a project of this nature it has been very difficult gathering children’s experiences.

We were reliant on organisations promoting the project and helping LAC and care leavers to come forward and talk to us about their experiences. The table below shows the number of different organisations we contacted across voluntary, private, and statutory organisations.

Residential care providers	5
Supported living for care leavers	3
Fostering Agencies	3
Local Authority services	6
Voluntary sector organisations	14
University Welfare Office	2

In the first phase of the communication plan we sent emails to all of the organisations with a brief description of the project and what we wanted to do. This was then followed up with telephone calls. Despite the 2 phased approach we did encounter barriers when trying to talk to LAC or care leavers.

- ❖ People were too busy to talk to us.
- ❖ Emails and voicemails were not returned.
- ❖ People advising, they needed to speak to someone else.

With no-one coming forward we were unable to organise focus groups.

A different approach was tried, and the survey was widely circulated. The 16+ team promoted the survey as well as SENDIASS, Virtual School and both the city and county Youth Councils. Social media was used to promote the survey by Healthwatch and SENDIASS. Despite the wide circulation we received only 4 responses.

We tried again to set up focus groups and one to one interviews. Healthwatch attended the youth council in the city and discussed peer led focus groups with voluntary organisations providing support to looked after children and care leavers. This was a better approach and seemed to a more constructive way of engaging with this group.

Unfortunately, due to the government restrictions applied because of the COVID 19 pandemic we were unable to see this progress through. Meetings such as the county youth council had to be cancelled and any face-to-face activities that were planned had to be cancelled.

Virtual forums were discussed with voluntary organisations but were not felt to be a good way of engaging with looked after children. One organisation has tried using a virtual forum with its young people but found attendance to be very low, with only 4 people attending. Normally the number of people attending would be much higher with up to 45 care experienced or looked after children engaging in different activities. Once the lockdown rules were relaxed a picnic was organised by the VSO but only one person attended.

This has meant we have a received a very small sample from the survey of 4 responses. This is not enough information to draw conclusions from or make recommendations but the information we received is below and next step have been suggested.

Survey Questions & Results

Q1. Please rate your experience of accessing health and wellbeing services whilst in care

	Very Poor	Poor	Average	Good	Very Good
Your relationship with carers			2	1	1
You daily routine		2	1	1	
The support you received to manage your health and wellbeing i.e. access to doctors, dentist etc	1	2		1	
The extra support available to you when needed	1	2		1	
Access to health and wellbeing services		3	1		
Information about keeping yourself well	1	1	2		
What you learnt about emotional health	1	1	1	1	
The amount of choice and control you had for your health and wellbeing whilst in care	2		2		
The degree to which you were listened to about your health and well being	1	2	1		

Comments from Question 1 - anonymised

'It was non-existent. I had no support in accessing services and when I knew I had something wrong with my health I was ignored. I had surgery two months ago that confirmed a lifelong extremely painful medical condition that was ignored when I was in care. The pill is one of the few things that helps it.'

Q2. What do you feel about the support and guidance you received in order to be able to manage your own health and wellbeing when living independently?

	Very Poor	Poor	Average	Good	Very Good
How is/did the care system prepared you for independent living		4			
Information available to you about registering with a GP/dentist	1	2	1		
Where to go when you feel unwell	1	2	1		
Did you get enough advice and guidance around developing self-care skills	3		1		
Were you advised as to what different types of services are available to you in your community e.g. pharmacist, A&E, GP, walk-in centre, minor injuries unit, emotional support services	1	2	1		

Steps you can take to promote your health and prevent illness	1	1	2		
Steps you can take to promote your emotional wellbeing e.g. what to do if you feel depressed	2	1	1		

Comments from Question 2 (sic)

Everything I answered very poor means I received no advice or support whatsoever.

Q3. What do you think could be done differently to better prepare young people leaving care to live independently and manage their own health and wellbeing?

	Very Poor	Poor	Average	Good	Very Good
How relevant and useful was the information provided to you about the help available to you	1	2	1		
Were you able to develop self-care skills through being involved in your own care	3		1		
Were you given information about services and when to access them - urgent vs non-urgent services - and was this useful	1	2	1		
Were you given advice on health promotion and was this sufficient e.g. diet, lifestyle, awareness of risk	2	1	1		
Were you given information about your patient rights e.g. the right to be registered with a GP practice	1	2	1		
Were you provided information about advocacy services that are available	3	1			
Did you receive enough advice and support around risk-taking behaviours	1	2	1		
Were you educated about sexual health and healthy relationships	3	1			
Do you believe the care and support you received helped you to develop risk awareness, identification, and management skills	2	1	1		

Comments from Question 3 (sic)

“I didn’t even know until now you have a right to be registered to a GP. I have also suffered through several abusive relationships because I have never been educated on what is healthy. Again, everything answered very poor means there was no support or advice given.”

Findings

Whilst it is not possible to be able to draw any definitive conclusions from the small sample we were able to engage with, there is a sense of a lack of education and preparedness for adult life and using Health services.

Even from our small sample a key improvement could be made in how children in care are educated on how to use Health (and Care) services as an adult.

Next Steps

- The responses we received suggest that more education is needed to enable looked after children to manage their own health and wellbeing. We will investigate how applicable existing “Health Literacy” training could be for Children in Care.
- Peer led focus groups could be a way of gathering more detailed experiences of looked after children and provide the chance to ask them what they think they need to look after themselves once they are living independently.

Thank You!

Healthwatch Leicester and Healthwatch Leicestershire would like to thank all the participants and organisations who helped with this project. Without you this project would not have been possible.

healthwatch

Healthwatch Leicester and
Healthwatch Leicestershire,
Clarence House, 46
Humberstone Gate
Leicester LE1 3PJ

www.healthwatchll.com

0116 2518313

enquiries@healthwatchll.com

tw: @HealthwatchLeic

FB: @HealthwatchLL

Instagram: HealthwatchLeic