

Chapter One - Introduction

1.1 Background to the Research

This dissertation will critically evaluate the performance of Liverpool City Council (LCC) delivering placement stability for its Looked After Children (LAC). It will identify and then examine the critical success factors involved in placement stability and endeavour to measure their impact.

Looked After Children are one of the most vulnerable and politically sensitive of any other group of children. They also form a significant proportion of the child population; Table 1 below gives details of the national and local population of LAC for the last five years.

Year	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
England	61,200	61,000	60,300	60,000	59,500
Liverpool	985	866	824	862	844

Table 1: Children in care – National and Local Profile

A useful comparator is that the total LAC population for England was 59,500 in 2008 which is equivalent to the total under 18 population of the city of Nottingham (59,161). There is a wealth of national and indeed local studies on the analysis of stability of placement. The government has itself commissioned various bodies to undertake qualitative studies and published a white paper on this issue *Care Matters: Transforming the Lives of Children and Young People in Care (2006)*. This white paper details the case for reform in stating:-“The long term outcomes of children in care are devastating” (2006, p5). The report further states that:-“Only 11% of children in care attained 5 good GCSE’s in 2005 compared with 56% of all children” (2006, p6). LCC also commissioned a report by an external consultant to look at ways it could improve the stability of placement for its LAC. This report resulted in an action plan to improve placement stability, the recommended actions ranged from better recruitment of foster carers to improving the quality and range of information held on LAC.

There are therefore many factors which contribute to placement stability, one example of which is the recruitment and retention of foster carers. Marketing forms a key element in the recruitment of foster carers, J Blythe definition of marketing:-“Term given to those activities which occur at the interface between organisation and customers. It comes from the original concept of the market place” (J Blythe, 2005, p2). The difficulty in the recruitment and retention of foster carers is a national issue and is a particular problem for Liverpool as it has a high number of LAC (853 in January 2009). LCC are the designated *corporate parents* and should endeavor to place LAC in the most appropriate setting in terms of their ethnic origin and individual needs. The customer specified for marketing purposes is of course each individual looked after child and this dissertation will recommend possible ways to improve the stability of LCC’s LAC population. The ultimate aim is for each Looked After Child to have a:-“Happy, stable home life which is fundamental to the successful development of all children” (Care Matters, 2006, p.41)

1.2 Research Question

To determine what are the critical success factors in Liverpool City Council ensuring the placement stability of it’s Looked After Children.

The objectives of this research project are to determine:-

1. What are the positive outcomes from placement stability for LAC?
2. What are the negative outcomes of placement instability for LAC?
3. How can the problem LAC placement instability be resolved?
4. How does LCC’s performance, in relation to placement stability, compare against other local neighbouring authorities? This will be determined by using both quantitative and qualitative research techniques.
5. As a result of the research undertaken to make recommendations on possible measures to improve placement stability for Liverpool’s LAC

This dissertation will examine the possible positive outcomes which emerge when a LAC has a stable placement for example improved academic achievement. It will also examine the possible negative outcomes when a LAC has an unstable placement for example a deterioration in school attendance. The dissertation will then attempt to identify the key factors which impact on LAC placement stability which will include examining the performance of the neighbouring local authorities. At the end of this process it is intended to make recommendations on possible measures to improve placement stability. These recommendations may range from strategic management processes to actual social work professional practices and processes.

1.3 Justification for the Research

Every local authority is assessed, in terms of its performance, against a large number of national indicators. A large proportion of these national indicators are concerned with Children's social care which cover the areas of child protection and LAC. The most important and high profile of all the LAC indicators is the stability of placement (NI 62 – Stability of placements of LAC: number of placements). The reason for the focus on the stability of a Looked After Child's placement is that it is believed to have a direct impact on a child's outcomes e.g. mental and physical health, academic achievement and eventual employment. The various studies undertaken in this area will be covered in the next chapter. Although some LAC are "Placed at Home" (approximately 20% of Liverpool's LAC population) the vast majority are placed in either foster care or residential accommodation which are influenced by placement stability.

1.4 Methodology

"Research is about seeking the knowledge and understanding of the subject and its processes" (Wisker, 2001, p26). The approach for conducting the research for this dissertation will be through an inductive approach this will allow a better understanding of the issues concerned. It will therefore be based on the principle of "developing the theory" (Saunders et al, 2007; p.38) or in this case recommendations after first examining all the primary and secondary data.

The research methodology will take two approaches:-

Descriptive approach – this will allow an examination of the various data, publications and journals available and will provide an accurate current picture. There are a number of key documents and qualitative studies that have been undertaken in the last three years which will be examined. Adopting a descriptive approach will allow the use of both primary and secondary data. The use of primary data will allow the research to be set in the context of the period and will ensure the research captures and collects up to date information. Secondary data will be analysed to examine previous data and publications.

Positivist approach – this favours quantitative analysis of statistical data. Various data will be examined:-

- Data profiling of Looked After Children and the outcomes of both placement stability and instability
- Data published by central government in reports and “White Papers”
- Data published by voluntary organisations e.g. Barnardo’s and other interest groups
- Data published by various consultants both nationally and locally
- Academic publications with particular relevance to Marketing and Operations Management

Leading on from the descriptive approach will be the explanatory research to deal with the “why” questions. The research aims to examine the cause and effect of placement stability for Looked After Children.

To support the research strategy the following data collection methods will be employed:

- **Literature Review** – A detailed review of academic literature, reference books, journal articles, published government data, consultancy papers. This will cover both the published findings on placement stability and also management theory in relation to marketing and operations management.
- **Semi-structured interviews** – These will be face to face interviews to investigate the current practices and procedures within the local authority. It will also examine the practices and procedures of colleagues in neighbouring local authorities. The interviews will also analyse the marketing strategies currently employed within LCC in relation to LAC.
- **Questionnaire** – This technique maybe used to ascertain the views of former Looked After Children, though the use of such a questionnaire would have to be approved by senior managers within the Children’s Services portfolio. If the questionnaire were to be approved then ethical considerations would need to be made and also data sensitivity and security would have to be addressed.

Management of Data -The data collected in the various research methods will have to be carefully collated and categorised. The data collected from the semi-structured interviews from the various LAs will be cross validated. If it is possible to collect data directly from LAC and former LAC, through the use of a questionnaire, the completed pro-formas will have to remain secure, confidential and anonymised. This will ensure compliance with all the various provisions under the Data Protection Act.

1.5 Outline of the MBA Dissertation

I give below a brief description of each chapter within the dissertation:-

Chapter 1 – Background, title and objectives of the dissertation with details of the methodology to be employed.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review – examination from both local and national sources of information in relation to placement stability together with a review of appropriate management techniques.

Chapter 3 – Methodology – a positivist approach is undertaken using both Quantitative and qualitative research techniques.

Chapter 4 – Findings – based on the literature review and the semi structured interviews undertaken within Liverpool City Council and a number of neighbouring local authorities.

Chapter 5 – Conclusions and implications – based on the literature review and the research findings these will focus on the impact for possible changes for Liverpool City Council.

Chapter 6 – Recommendations –these have been formulated from the research undertaken and may range from changes in monitoring techniques to changes in social work practices and procedures.

1.6 Summary

This first introductory chapter has introduced the research question and given the background and importance of LAC placement stability. It introduced some of the areas that will be examined in the research e.g. recruitment and retention of foster carers. It has also detailed the specific aims and objectives that follow on from the research question. These aims and objectives are a series of questions in relation to placement stability which the dissertation will attempt to answer. The methods that will be used to undertake this research are also examined and included semi-structured interviews and the use of questionnaires. The next Literature Review chapter will examine the published data from other national and local sources.