**Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires (SDQs)**

**Guidance**

Target audience: Social Workers

Date effective from: 01 November 2021

Date of review: November 2023

**1. What is the SDQ?**

1.1 Local authorities are required to use the strengths and difficulties questionnaire (SDQ) to assess the emotional wellbeing of individual looked after children (LAC) aged 4-16. Understanding the emotional and behavioural needs of LAC is important so that the relevant support can be put in place and children are given the opportunity to achieve their full potential.

1.2 The SDQ is a brief behavioural screening questionnaire. All versions of the SDQ ask about 25 attributes, some positive and others negative. These 25 items are divided between 5 scales:

* emotional symptoms
* conduct problems
* hyperactivity/inattention
* peer relationship problems
* pro-social behaviour

1.3 The number of SDQs completed by the local authority for looked after children is reported to the Department for Education annually to demonstrate that Social Workers and professionals working with looked after children are considering emotional and behavioural difficulties.

**2. Why should carers complete an SDQ questionnaire?**

2.1 It is important to routinely assess the emotional wellbeing of our looked after children. Based on national research, here are some of the reasons why it is important:

* Looked after children have a higher prevalence of emotional and behavioural issues arising from neglect and abuse.
* Looked after children are more likely to develop mental health problems and require provision from CAMHS.
* Looked after children often experience attachment difficulties and require therapeutic support.

2.2 The completed SDQ can be used in the following ways:

* To inform statutory health assessments completed by the NHS.
* To inform whether the child/young person needs a referral into CAMHS.
* To evaluate progress against emotional wellbeing outcomes as part of the overall health needs of looked after children.
* To give commissioners of services a better understanding of the emotional wellbeing needs of Buckinghamshire looked after children.

**3. Summary of the process: What do Social Workers (SW) and carers need to do?**

Figure 1. Summary of SDQ Process

Consult with CAMHS LAC Service

SW triangulates borderline or score if cause for concern

SW enters SDQ scores onto Protocol

Carer completes SDQ

SW Distributes SDQ

If the score is borderline or cause for concern, contact Buckinghamshire Virtual School to arrange for the child’s school to complete an SDQ to triangulate information.

If after comparing the triangulated scores the child/young person is still borderline or cause for concern, then a consultation should be held with CAMHS and appropriate intervention agreed.

SW team to send the carer the SDQ by letter or email (every 12 months)

Explain the SDQ is a screening tool to help the child, not an assessment, or reflection, of how well they care for the child.

Carer returns completed questionnaire to the Social Worker by date requested.

An overall SDQ score is produced by entering the results of the questionnaire on to LCS.

Indicative scores will be normal, borderline or cause for concern.

**4. When is the SDQ questionnaire completed?**

4.1 Young people aged 4-16 are required to have an SDQ completed annually. The SDQ should be completed when children have been Looked After for over 12 months. It is recommended it is completed prior to when the child’s health assessment is due, so it can inform the assessment.

**5. Where can you download the SDQ form?**

5.1 The form is available on LCS. The Social Worker for the young person or fostering social worker/residential worker should complete this with the carer on visits/contacts to placement. They should input it onto LCS and ensure that this summary forms part of the child's review Health Assessment. The lead health professional is responsible for checking that appropriate services are involved to meet any requirements/needs identified.

**6. What does the Social Worker do with the completed questionnaire?**

6.1 Once the carer/residential staff/relative & friends has returned the completed questionnaire to the Social Worker; the Social Worker should then ensure the questionnaire is entered onto LCS and the total difficulties score is calculated.

**The SDQ score is automatically calculated as the SDQ is answered. The score can be viewed from the ‘Overall Score’ heading across the top of the form.**

**7. Using the SDQ score**

7.1 A number of bandings have been developed which can help predict children and young people who are likely to develop significant mental health problems, based on their SDQ score. The bandings classify scores as:

* Normal
* Borderline
* Cause for concern

7.2 These bandings are identified by obtaining the total difficulties score and the scores in each of the scales.

7.3 If the child’s total difficulties score is outside the normal range (see Table 1 below) and considered as giving cause for concern, the child may benefit from triangulating the scores from the carer’s SDQ with those of his or her teacher. Social Workers and the virtual school team should arrange for this to be done to provide more comprehensive information for the health assessment.

Table 1. SDQ bandings for parent/carer questionnaire results – using the score

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Main carer completed SDQ | Normal | Borderline | Cause for concern |
| Total difficulties score | 0-13 | 14-16 | 17-40 |

7.4 This part of the process will be co-ordinated by the virtual school caseworker.

7.5 Prior to the PEP, the social worker must ensure the SDQ score is included on the PEP paperwork under Education Designated Teacher section.

7.6 It is important to remember that the SDQ is only a screening tool and should not replace other processes, assessments and/or knowledge of the child and their behaviours. Therefore, social workers should not wait for an SDQ to refer to CAMHS for Consultation if a child is already presenting with sign of poor emotional wellbeing or mental health. An SDQ can be completed at any time should any professional feel this is needed to access services and support for a child/young person.

7.7 The completed SDQ is to be forwarded to the LAC Health Team prior to the Review Health Assessment (RHA). The RHA needs to reference any actions arising from the SDQ in relation to emotional and mental wellbeing of young people and should be included in the updated Care Plan. This all needs to be included in the Looked After Review with the oversight of the IRO.

**8. Consultation with CAMHS**

8.1 Buckinghamshire CAMHS has a consultant that is dedicated to working with Buckinghamshire children in care. The aim of the service is to improve the mental and emotional health and wellbeing of looked after children and consequently improve the stability of their placement relationships and other aspects of their life as they move towards adulthood.

8.2 If the triangulated scores confirm the carer’s score i.e. is in the borderline or cause for concern range, then a consultation with CAMHS should take place to understand if a full mental health assessment or additional therapeutic support is required.

**Appendix 1 - Frequently asked questions**

**Who completes the SDQ and when?**

The SDQ must be completed by the main carer; for most looked after children this will be the foster carer, family and friend’s carer, residential worker and preferably in readiness for the child’s annual statutory health assessment, when they have been looked after for 12 months.

Each looked after child must have a questionnaire completed within the last 12 months.

**What happens to the information on the SDQ?**

Social Workers need to ensure that completed questionnaires are input into the child’s record on LCS and that scores are considered i.e. does the score fall in the ‘normal’, ‘borderline’ or ‘cause for concern’ range?

The SDQ score should be used to inform the child/ young person’s statutory health assessment, and where the score has been triangulated with school it should trigger a social work consultation with CAMHS.

**What happens if the child is placed outside of area?**

CAMHS work with young people placed inside of Buckinghamshire. Those placed outside of Buckinghamshire will need to access CAMHS through the GP. Social workers would still need to ensure the SDQ was completed in accordance with guidance.

On requesting health assessments (RHA) for a looked after child placed out of the area, the LAC Health Team will provide the SDQ score to the out of area LAC Team.

**Is training provided?**

No training is required, but if necessary, the Social Worker should be able to explain to the carer what the questionnaire is for and why it is important for them to complete it together.

The Social Worker should:

* Check that all carers understand what they need to do and by when.
* Explain that it is important to be honest in their assessments and that the SDQ is a screening tool to help the child and is not an assessment, or reflection, of how well they care for the child.
* Make sure the carer knows the child well enough to be able to give meaningful insights in responding to questions.
* Agree a completion and return date for the questionnaire with the social worker.
* Complete the SDQ on LCS as part of the child's record.

**What if a child has changed carers?**

For children who have changed placements during the course of the year, Social Workers should assess which carer is best placed to carry out the assessment.

**What arrangements do we need to make for completing the questionnaire?**

The Social Worker should ensure that the SDQ is completed as part of discussions or visits to the placement in preparation for the Review Health Assessment (RHA) and is recorded on LCS.

Any scores of 17 or above should trigger a consultation with CAMHS.

The SDQ requires carers to read a series of statements and judge how well it describes the young person by ticking one of three or four boxes for each question.

Local authorities should ensure that the social worker/carer completes the questionnaire in advance of the health assessment. Local authorities are responsible for ensuring that the questionnaire is completed and loaded onto the child's file on LCS. The completed summary forms should be emailed by the child’s social worker to LAC Health admin

(buc-tr.LACBucks@nhs.net) prior to the health assessment and should also accompany any referral to CAMHS. It should be also emailed to Buckinghamshire Virtual School

(thevirtualschool@buckinghamshire.gov.uk).

**What if the questionnaire is not / cannot be completed?**

Completion of the SDQ is straightforward and there should only be rare exceptions where it cannot be completed. Having learning difficulties should not exclude a child from having a questionnaire completed that relates to them. However, where a looked after child has disabilities which mean that it would not be possible or appropriate to complete a questionnaire then that should be noted and recorded on LCS (see SDQ3 below).

Where a score cannot be obtained, the data return does contain a field so that the local authority can give the reason for this.

The SSDA903 data collection uses the following codes for this purpose:

* SDQ1 - No form returned as child was aged under 4 or over 17 at date of latest assessment.
* SDQ2 - Carer refused to complete and return the questionnaire.
* SDQ3 - Not possible to complete the questionnaire due to severity of the child’s disabilities.
* SDQ4 – Other.
* SDQ5 - Child or young person refuses to allow an SDQ to be completed.