
CORPORATE PARENTING BOARD

A meeting of the Corporate Parenting Board was held on 23 September 2004.

PRESENT: Councillor J Jones (Chair), Councillor Brunton (Vice Chair), Councillors McIntyre, J Taylor, Mrs B Thompson and A E Ward.

OFFICIALS: J Cooke, L Ferguson, D Johnson, S Little and S Robinson.

**** PRESENT BY INVITATION:** Thomas Tolmie (Young Persons Representative).

**** PRESENT AS AN OBSERVER:** Mr B Simpson (Foster Carer).

**** APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE** were submitted on behalf of Councillors Brady, Hubbard, B Taylor and P Thompson.

**** DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

No declarations of interest were made at this point of the meeting.

**** MINUTES**

The Minutes of the meeting held on 1 July 2004 were submitted and approved as a correct record.

FIVE RIVERS PARTNERSHIP BOARD SUMMARY REPORT

The Head of Children and Families' Services submitted a report presenting the Board with a summary of issues considered by Middlesbrough Council and Five Rivers Partnership Board between January and August 2004.

Members were advised that Five Rivers Project Limited was established in December 2001 to provide residential care for children in Middlesbrough, in partnership with Middlesbrough Council.

The Partnership Board was established in 2002 and details of the Board's role, function and remit was attached at Appendix 1 to the report. The Board met on a quarterly basis, to which reports of the Five Rivers Regional Manager were submitted and fully discussed.

No significant quality assurance issues had arisen and the standard of care provided was consistently high. This was evidenced by the Regulation 33 reports (monthly independent reports) and rota visitor reporting.

There had been no community issues and only three minor 'neighbour' complaints, which were resolved immediately by staff. The Five Rivers Regional Manager had arranged regular meetings with residents of Marton Avenue (Fir Tree) to monitor and address issues.

The Partnership Board continued to receive reports on activity within the Houses and Five Rivers. It was reported that an additional place had been provided at Rosecroft as part of the wider review and agreement regarding the contract and financial arrangements. Since the report was written, three potential vacancies had arisen in Holly Lodge.

It was confirmed that the next Partnership Board was scheduled to take place in December 2004.

Members commented on the very positive outcomes for young people who go home or move into independence.

RECOMMENDED that the contents of the report be noted.

SUMMARY OF ROTA VISITS AND REGULATION 33 REPORTS

The Service Manager submitted a report presenting the Board with a summary of the process and findings of rota visits and Regulation 33 reports in relation to residential care facilities in Middlesbrough.

The report outlined the local arrangements put in place by Five Rivers which met the requirements of Regulation 33 of the Children's Home Regulations under the Care Standards Act 2000, as detailed in the report.

Two independent Social Workers were commissioned by the organisation to carry out the Regulation 33 Inspections at all three houses. Inspections were carried out on a monthly basis and followed up by a report which was required to meet the National Minimum Standards for Children's Homes, covering various subjects.

If possible, at least one child/young person would be interviewed during an inspection to seek their views on living in the house.

Copies of the inspection report were forwarded to the Head of Children and Families' Services, Service Manager for Children Looked After and to the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI). The houses would also receive a copy of the report in order for the teams to devise action plans in relation to any issues raised.

A Regulation 33 Response Form completed by the Regional Manager was attached to the reports and detailed the actions to be taken in relation to any issues raised and comments on the outcome/findings of the inspection. The reports were submitted to the Five Rivers Partnership Board for information.

The submitted report provided details of those issues and recommendations resulting from the Regulation 33 process over recent months in respect of Hollylodge, Fir Tree and Rosecroft.

Members were informed that this was a well-established system and all recommendations in the last three months had been followed up by the Regional Manager, details of which appeared in the report. Overall, the reports were very positive.

It was reported that five Elected Members had been trained to undertake rota visits in conjunction with an agreed timetable. It was confirmed that a substitute for the rota visits would be required to undertake inspections in any of the four homes in the absence of the Member assigned to that home.

Members commented positively on the very diligent approach taken by the independent social workers carrying out inspections.

RECOMMENDED as follows:-

1. That the contents of the report be noted.
2. That Members endorse the processes and procedures that ensure residential care in Middlesbrough meets prescribed minimum standards.

CHILDREN'S SERVICES INSPECTION PROGRESS REPORT

The Head of Children and Families' Services submitted a report presenting the Board with information on the progress made in relation to actions arising from the Inspection of Children's Services carried out by the Social Services Inspectorate (SSI) in July 2003.

A report on the SSI Inspection was presented to Members in November 2003 and the action plan was submitted to Executive in January 2004.

The progress against actions and recommendations would inform the overall assessment of Children's Services. This had been assessed as 'promising capacity for improvement' and 'serving some people well'.

Appendix 1 to the report highlighted achievement against actions. Outstanding actions which related to long-term change or formed part of a wider programme within the service or the Council were on target.

Following reviews, the Service has been reconfigured to bring together referral and assessment systems under a Social Services Manager, with other teams being locality based. This change had resulted in a significant reduction in pending cases and improvement in time scales for initial assessment.

The Inspection Report identified good practice within family placement services, 'highly regarded' leaving care services and a successful outsourcing of the residential services to the independent sector (Five Rivers). A number of actions had been completed in response to concerns regarding Children Looked After.

A specialist 'Children Looked After' team had been created to ensure standards and focus were maintained. This was proving to be very beneficial. The continuation of the long-term strategy of developing preventative services on a multi-agency basis was felt the best way to reduce the number of children looked after in the future.

Members acknowledged the excellent work undertaken to a high standard by Officers. The value of the analysis of trends and the positive feedback regarding services from parents to Members was noted.

RECOMMENDED that the contents of the report be noted.

ADVOCACY FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

The Children's Participation Officer presented a report to inform Members of a new duty to provide advocacy for children and young people making representations or complaints under the Children Act 1989 and to set out the actions taken to fulfil this duty.

The Children Act also required local authorities ensure that effective mechanisms were in place to respond to representations and complaints made by children, young people and their parents or carers.

The Government was promoting the development of independent advocacy services and the Department of Health had established "National Standards for the Provision of Children's Advocacy Services" (2002) to provide a framework. Young people from Middlesbrough participated in consultation activities organised by the Social Services Inspectorate to develop these standards.

It was the Government's opinion that the key factors were involving advocates as early as possible when issues arose and giving young people access to advocacy services.

Since September 2000, the National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS) had been contracted to provide advocacy services to children looked after and children in need in Middlesbrough. NYAS was an independent national organisation, which operated a free phone help line and provided confidential legal advice and representation.

In terms of raising awareness, the Comments, Compliments and Complaints leaflet had been updated to include information about NYAS and other support organisations. Information was also included in information packs which were issued to children/young people when they first became looked after. NYAS posters were displayed in residential children's homes and also in social services offices. Information was also given to children and young people at the time of their initial assessment and at subsequent review meetings.

It was confirmed that a response is made to a request for advocacy within 24 hours.

RECOMMENDED that the contents of the report be noted.

PRESENTATION ON NATIONAL YOUTH ADVOCACY SERVICES

Caroline Hilton, Regional Co-ordinator for National Youth Advocacy Services (NYAS) gave a presentation on the background and services provided by NYAS.

NYAS had worked in Middlesbrough for 4 years and was a national organisation, their head office being based in Merseyside. Their view on advocacy was that it was a process to help a child or young person speak up for themselves to get something stopped, started or changed.

NYAS' mission was to empower and enable children and young people to have a voice by providing them with independent and confidential advice and information. Their aims were to:-

- Provide information to help children and young people make informed decisions and have better outcomes.
- Support young people to be heard in the most appropriate way.
- Provide early intervention/prevention services.
- Provide robust mechanisms for listening.

These included listening, discussing, clarifying legal positions, solving problems through discussion and mediator and supporting the child or young person to ensure they were in control of the situation.

The organisation was well established in Middlesbrough and NYAS had good relationships with their service users. NYAS helped their service users to learn skills to enable them to speak out for themselves, and not feel pressured or persuaded into situations.

Members were informed that nine referrals from looked after children were made from April 2003 to March 2004. There had been seven referrals from April 2004 to September 2004. The Advocacy service lasted as long as required by the service users and more complex issues might lead to other complaints. For example, one service user was supported by NYAS for three years.

Caroline Hilton confirmed that it was her view that NYAS were definitely making a difference. Often, children/young people just needed a listening ear or an independent person to discuss issues with. NYAS had received very good feedback from service users. Their helpline could signpost people to other services if NYAS could not help them.

NYAS had approx. 200 advocates nation-wide who worked/campaigned with many fostering/adoption agencies and local authorities. Advocates were required to hold a professional qualification and have a significant level of experience in working with children/young people. Young People were involved in the recruitment process and their opinions on applicants approachability and attitude were taken into account. Successful applicants were required to provide two references and undergo an Enhanced Criminal Background Check. They were also required to attend a two day residential course where they would be supervised and monitored by experts. The Regional Co-ordinator and Legal Advisors screened all advocates work.

Members thanked Caroline Hilton for her enlightening presentation.

RECOMMENDED that the contents of the presentation be noted.

PRESENTATION OF CASE STUDIES

The Service Manager made a presentation to the Board to provide Members with insight into the issues and problems experienced by children looked after in Middlesbrough and to share some of the difficulties and dilemmas faced by Social Workers in planning for children looked after.

Social Worker, Angela Carter was in attendance to assist with the presentation.

A case study of a child was presented to Members tracing her care since initial referral to Social Services in 1997 at 6 weeks of age.

The case study highlighted the following areas:-

- Child's early history
- Referral to Social Services
- History of Child's placements
- Social Services plans for the Child
- Child's behaviour and associated assessments
- Social Worker's extensive involvement and support
- Referrals to other agencies
- Contact with birth family
- Plans for the future

Members commented on the lack of specialist residential care in the local area. The Head of Children and Families' Services reported that following two unsuccessful bids for funding to provide Treatment Foster Care Programme, the possibility of a small specialist fostering provision within Middlesbrough is being explored.

The Chair summarised Member's feelings on this case and thanked the Social Worker and Service Manager for their attendance and presentation. Members commended the Social Worker for her support and commitment to this child.

RECOMMENDED that the contents of the presentation be noted.

EXCLUSIONS – PRESS – PUBLIC

ORDERED that the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the following agenda item on the grounds that it involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as defined in Paragraph 6 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972.

CHILDREN MISSING FROM PLACEMENT REPORT

The Service Manager submitted a report to inform Members of:-

- (i) the issues relating to children looked after who go missed from placement and how the Council responded to these issues; and
- (ii) information relating to the numbers of children who had gone missing from placement in Middlesbrough between March and August 2004.

A summary was provided on the agreed Joint Protocol for 'Responding to Middlesbrough Children who were Missing from Placement' which was established in 2000 by Middlesbrough Council and Cleveland Police.

A child or young person was considered to be 'missing' from placement if s/he was absent from his/her place of residence without authority or in circumstances where the absence caused concern for the safety of that individual or there was a potential danger to the public. Absences which caused concern were those where staff or carers had no indication that a child was likely to return within a short space of time or there was immediate concern for the child's safety.

On a national level, the Missing from Care department at the National Missing Persons' Helpline offered its services to Social Services and provided a valuable safety net for some of the most vulnerable children. The department held a national database of missing looking after children which shared informed with Social Services, Police and other appropriate agencies

The report provided statistical information regarding Children Looked After who had gone missing from foster care provision.

Information regarding children missing from placement was monitored and reported through various forums including Middlesbrough Council and Five Rivers Partnership Board, Children Look After Planning and Implementation Group and in the Executive Member's Report to Council.

It was confirmed that none of the figures in the report included looked after children playing truant from school.

RECOMMENDED:-

1. That the contents of the report be noted.
2. To endorse the actions taken by Officers to develop and implement the Joint Protocol.