

**CORPORATE PARENTING BOARD**

**15<sup>th</sup> February 2007**

**CARE MATTERS CONSULTATION**

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**PURPOSE OF REPORT**

1. The purpose of this report is to present to Members a summary of the consultation undertaken locally in relation to *'Care Matters: Transforming the Lives of Children and Young People in Care'*, October 2006, Department for Education & Skills, Command Paper 6932.

**BACKGROUND AND EXTERNAL CONSULTATION**

2. Care Matters follows on from the 'Every Child Matters' agenda and reflects the government's view that, despite progress made for all children and young people in recent years, it has not made sufficient difference to the lives of children looked after.

*"In setting our priorities for change, we are driven by the knowledge that these are our children, and that the childhood we are giving them has not been good enough." (Care Matters, p5)*

*"As their corporate parent, the State cannot and must not accept any less for them than we would for our own children." (Care Matters p6)*

3. There are over 100 proposals contained within the green paper, of which over 30 related specifically to education services. The government has identified seven broad priorities:
  - Better support for those on the edge of the care system
  - Making sure there is a more consistent adult in each child's life to fulfil the State's responsibilities as corporate parent
  - Giving every child in care a stable, high quality placement
  - Getting every child in care a place in a good school, helping them to get the most out of it and supporting them to continue in education post 16
  - Securing support for all aspects of children's lives outside school
  - Supporting children better to make the transition into adult life and
  - Ensuring clear, strong accountability to make the whole system focus on the needs of children in care.
  
4. The government has also suggested that all local authorities should, as some already do, make a pledge to children in care that sets out the things that all children in their care will receive. They suggest that the following might be at the core of the pledge offered by every local authority:
  - A choice, made with their social worker, of high quality placements
  - 24/7 support from their social worker or an out of hours contact
  - A minimum entitlement to sport and leisure activities – for example, 4 hours a week
  - A chance to take part in volunteering
  - Twice yearly health assessments for under 5's and annual health assessments and twice yearly dental check ups for older children
  - An independent advocate
  - The choice of when to move on to enter adult life, up to the age of 18, and
  - The right to have their voice heard and influence the work of the local authority through participation in a 'Children in Care Council'
  
5. The Department for Education & Skills carried out a national consultation exercise that closed on 15th January, primarily via a questionnaire. Government Office North East (GONE) also organised a series of regional consultation events for staff and elected Members, which were attended by staff and Members from Middlesbrough. GONE also offered financial support to local authorities to enable them to carry out more detailed consultation at a local level. Middlesbrough was awarded £1,250 to support this consultation.

## **LOCAL CONSULTATION PROCESS**

6. There were five groups of people targeted for consultation locally: care leavers, children looked after aged between 6 and 18, foster carers, parents of children with disabilities (in relation to one specific proposal) and staff from a range of agencies.

7. Care Leavers were invited to a regional conference and to help young people from Middlesbrough to prepare for the event, they were offered two sessions to discuss the issues particularly relevant to them. Incentives were offered to encourage participation and to recognise their contribution. They were also supported to attend the event by the provision of transport and staff support. Seven young people took part in the discussion and four attended the conference.
8. Other children looked after were split into two age groups and were sent copies of the appropriate young people's versions of the green paper and the appropriate questionnaire. The questionnaires were adapted slightly to make it easier for young people to use. Children and young people were given the option of responding directly to the DfES Consultation Unit or of sending their response to the department for recording prior to being sent to the DfES. 11 young people chose to send their response via the department. Children and young people were also offered the opportunity to attend a meeting (to be held at the Tuesday night youth session for children looked after at the Manor Youth Centre) to discuss the green paper – none took advantage of this.
9. For adults, a summary of the key issues for services was prepared. All Middlesbrough Foster carers were sent a copy of the summary of key issues and a copy of the adults' questionnaire. Foster carers were given the option of returning their questionnaire direct to DfES or via the department (two chose to reply via the department). The proposal relating to children with disabilities was discussed with the Planning Forum for the parents and carers of children with disabilities. The Children Looked After Planning and Implementation Group, a multi-agency meeting, discussed the key issues and their responses were recorded. Team Managers within Family Services were sent a summary of key issues and asked to raise the green paper in their team meetings. Individual members of staff were encouraged to complete the adults' questionnaire. Some teams and individuals sent their views via the department. With the exception of the questionnaires, which were forwarded directly to the DfES, all other views were collated and sent to the DfES Consultation Unit. All the views captured locally have been submitted to Government Office North East and a summary of the findings will be circulated to participants.

## **SUMMARY OF LOCAL VIEWS**

10. There was a wide range of views, ideas and comments made about the green paper. Overall, the green paper was regarded very positively as being based on the views of children and young people and reflecting the issues of concern to them. It was also seen as providing an opportunity to improve the life chances of children and young people looked after. The following represents the key messages that emerged in relation to the government's priorities and pledges (combined where appropriate).

- **Better support for those on the edge of the care system**  
This was generally welcomed, with a number of specific suggestions being made as to how this might be achieved. However, some children, young people, foster carers and staff expressed concern about the damage that might be done to children who remain with their families but are not kept safe.
- **Making sure there is a more consistent adult in each child's life to fulfil the State's responsibilities as corporate parent**  
This was clearly identified as a priority by children and young people, who placed particular emphasis on building trusting relationships with consistent adults – foster carers and social workers being mentioned most. Some young people commented on the importance of not having many changes of social worker, of not having a part-time social worker and of being able to spend time alone with their social worker. Care leavers emphasised the importance of having someone to believe in them.
- **Giving every child in care a stable, high quality placement**  
Having a stable placement was regarded by children and young people as **the most important** aspect of their care. Having a choice of placement was also felt to be important, as was having as few placement moves as possible.
- **Getting every child in care a place in a good school, helping them to get the most out of it and supporting them to continue in education post 16**  
All the proposals aimed at improving access to education and support to do well were widely welcomed. Children and young people made specific suggestions about how additional funding might be spent (e.g. laptops, books, extra tuition) and for mechanisms to support their education (e.g. a home-school book for foster carers, more individual support from designated teachers). They also expressed some concern about the cost of higher education and the danger of getting into debt or being a burden to foster carers.
- **Securing support for all aspects of children's lives outside school**  
All participants welcomed proposals relating to this but it was pointed out that the whole council should take responsibility for supporting children looked after to access out of school activities. Children and young people suggested discounts and passes, including for children living outside of Middlesbrough. There was also some support for activities specifically for children looked after. Staff identified the need for greater support from health services, particularly Child and Adolescent Mental Health, and the difficulties of gaining commitment from other agencies.
- **Supporting children better to make the transition into adult life**  
There was widespread support for the proposal to enable young people to live with their foster carers until they are at least 21 (some suggested up to 25). It was also said that this should apply to residential homes as well as

foster care. There was a clear view from children and young people that the local authority should provide housing for care leavers and additional support mechanisms such as someone to talk to and help with practical problems.

➤ **Ensuring clear, strong accountability to make the whole system focus on the needs of children in care.**

Foster carers and staff emphasised the importance of all agencies (including schools) and departments being made accountable for the support that they give to children and young people looked after. Children and young people emphasised the importance of being told what is happening, having things explained properly and listening to their views through PEPs, reviews and special groups for looked after children, including the possibility of a 'Children in Care Council'.

➤ **24/7 support from their social worker or an out of hours contact**

Staff generally felt that 24/7 access to social workers is impractical and queried who could provide out of hours contact – one suggestion was for foster carers to take this on. Children and young people generally thought this was a good idea, although some specified just for emergencies, but also expressed concern about talking to someone they didn't know if they rang out of hours.

➤ **An independent advocate**

The majority of children and young people felt that all children looked after should have an independent advocate, although some specified limits (e.g. only for serious issues). One young person pointed out that all social workers should be doing that any way and another said that once past 16, they could speak for themselves. Some staff were concerned that changing the role of Independent Visitors might deprive children and young people of someone who would just be their friend.

## **OPTION APPRAISAL/RISK ASSESSMENT**

11. Care Matters is a consultation paper and the proposed changes may not appear in any subsequent legislation. However, many of the proposals would potentially have a significant impact on the local authority in terms of financial commitments. These include proposals that seem to have gained widespread support such as enabling young people to remain with their foster carers until at least age 21, maintaining placement stability, supporting educational achievements and improving life outside school.

## **FINANCIAL, LEGAL AND WARD IMPLICATIONS**

12. There are no immediate financial or legal implications arising from this report. This report will be of interest to all Members.

## RECOMMENDATION

13. It is recommended that the Corporate Parenting Board advises the Executive to note the information relating to the Care Matters Green Paper.

## REASONS

14. *'Care Matters: Transforming the Lives of Children and Young People in Care'* indicates potentially significant changes to the requirements placed on the local authority with respect to fulfilling its responsibilities as a corporate parent. It is important that Members are aware of the government's proposals for change.

## BACKGROUND PAPERS

*'Care Matters: Transforming the Lives of Children and Young People in Care'*, October 2006, Department for Education & Skills, Command Paper 6932.

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