

CORPORATE PARENTING BOARD

A meeting of the Corporate Parenting Board was held on 15 February 2007

PRESENT: Councillor P Thompson (In the Chair), Councillors Brady, Davison, J Taylor and Mrs B Thompson

OFFICIALS: M Braithwaite, J Cooke, G Corbett, C Kendrick, S Kershaw, S Little, A White, J Wilson, J Young.

PRESENT BY INVITATION: J McNaughton (Erimus Housing),

****APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE** were submitted on behalf of Councillors Brunton, McPartland, B Taylor and A E Ward, B Simpson and T Tolmie.

****DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST:**

No Declarations of Interest were made at this point in the meeting.

****MINUTES**

The Minutes of the meeting of the Corporate Parenting Board held on 23 November 2006 were approved as a correct record.

FOSTERING SERVICE INSPECTION

The Fostering Team Manager presented a report outlining the findings and outcomes of the fifth annual inspection of the fostering service conducted by the Commission for Social Care Inspection (CSCI) during the period 16 to 20 October 2006 which achieved an overall rating of "good".

The following statutory requirements identified at the previous inspection in December 2005 had been completed:

- Improvement of foster placement agreement paperwork;
- Staff recruitment records to meet requirements of Schedule 1 of Fostering Service Regulations
- CRB disclosures must specify whether it relates to working with children
- The shared Care Fostering Service must be brought within the Fostering Team
- Exemption certificates must be retained for all emergency placements
- Regular child protection training for all Foster Carers
- Full and detailed records of Fostering Panel decisions must be made.
- CRBs must be taken on all Foster Carers at enhanced level.

The 2006 inspection required the service to take on board the following statutory requirements and good practice recommendations that would form the basis of the service action plan:

Statutory Requirements

- Implement newly devised placement agreement form
- Schedule 7 monitoring should be more detailed
- Human Resources files require proof of staff identity
- CRB disclosures to include the date they were received
- Views of children who have been fostered must be included in the foster carer review process.

Good Practice Recommendations

- Ensure all children's files have full information
- Health and Safety checks of foster carers to be undertaken annually
- Placement agreements to have fuller information about matching
- Provision of Safe Care training

- Inclusion of specific dates for staff commencing and leaving previous jobs (Human Resources files)
- Authority to complete work on fostering allowances to ensure it can recruit and retain carers
- Senior Practitioner post should be made permanent
- Audit staffing levels to ensure it can fulfil its duties
- Foster Care reviews to monitor and record when safe care policies, health and safety checks, medicals, CRB checks and unannounced visits have taken place
- Record all Foster Care training
- Training re: first aid, health and safety and behaviour management, to be provided to Foster Carers
- Increase the proportion of carers with NVQ in child care
- Authority to continue to develop kinship Care process so that it complies with the requirement to undertake such assessments within six weeks

A copy of the full inspection report had been placed in the Members' Library with a summary appended to the circulated report.

In discussion, Members considered issues relating to fostering allowances and emphasised the need to provide evidence to support any proposals for change. It was also recognised that competition from Independent Fostering Agencies affects recruitment of foster carers to the Council's Fostering Service.

RECOMMENDED that the Executive be advised to note the information relating to the Fostering Service Annual Inspection Report.

CARE MATTERS - GREEN PAPER CONSULTATION

The Children's Participation Officer presented a report summarising the outcome of the consultation undertaken locally as part of a national consultation exercise in relation to 'Care Matter: Transforming the Lives of Children and Young People in Care', October 2006, DfES, Command Paper 6932.

Five groups of people were targeted for consultation locally: care leavers, children looked after aged between 6 and 18, foster carers, parents of children with disabilities (in relations to one specific proposal) and staff from a range of agencies. Middlesbrough Council has been awarded £1,250 from GONE to support the consultation.

Care leavers had been invited to attend a regional conference and were offered two sessions prior to the event to discuss relevant issues. Incentives had been offered to encourage participation and to recognise their contribution. Transport and staff support had also been made available. Other children and adults were asked to respond by way of a questionnaire, adapted where necessary for ease of use. Other children looked after had been divided into two age groups. Respondents were able to submit their responses directly to the DfES Consultation Unit or to the service department for collation and on onward transmission to the DfES.

There was a wide range of views, ideas and comments about the green paper which was regarded positively and was seen to provide an opportunity to improve the life chances of children and young people looked after.

The following key messages that emerged in relation to the government's priorities and pledges (combined where appropriate) were:

- **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.

In discussion, Members identified a need, as good corporate parents, to develop appropriate systems to provide support to children and young people out of office hours.

RECOMMENDED that the Executive be advised to note the information relating to the Care Matters Green Paper.

ACHIEVE ECONOMIC WELL-BEING – UPDATE

The Head of Community Education Services and the Children's Participation Officer presented a report outlining developments during the year within each of the five aims within the Every Child Matters outcome of Achieve Economic Well-Being:

- **Engage in Further Education, Employment or Training on Leaving School**

The percentage of young people in care aged 17 and who were in education, training or employment at age 19 had risen from 40% in 2004-2005 to 50% in 2005-2006.

The number of young people aged 16-17 engaging in employment, education and training had been maintained since the previous year. In September 2006, of 15 young people aged 16-17, nine were in full-time education, employment and training with a further three in part-time education, training or employment.

As previously reported (23/11/06), Middlesbrough's participation in the 'What Makes the Difference' project attracted £30,000 for tuition fees. This enabled additional packages of support to be given to individual young people to enable each to succeed in their own right. A range of other measures had been taken to improve educational outcomes for children looked after, such as improving the percentage who have an up-to-date Personal Education Plan, closer monitoring of school attendance and monitoring pupil improvement, coupled with immediate follow-up on areas of concern.

- **Be Ready for Employment**

Good educational outcomes improve the future economic well-being of children and young people. In 2005-2006, 66.7% of children looked after achieved at least one GCSE A-G or GNVQ, representing an increase of 16.7% since 2004-2005.

The Connexions Service had continued to dedicate two specialist Personal Advisors (PAs) to the needs of Care Leavers and had recently agreed to extend that support up to the age of 21 in line with proposals in the Care Matters Green Paper. The Connexions Service was to disaggregate to Middlesbrough Council from April 2007 and there was a clear commitment to continue to have that specialist provision within the new Middlesbrough based service.

For those young people in care that were pre-16, another dedicated PA ensured that the Connexions Service was aware of all looked after children in education. That officer had taken on the Connexions Personal Advisor role for most looked after young people educated in Middlesbrough, the exceptions being where a relationship with an existing Personal Advisor had already been established and out of area looked after children educated in Middlesbrough.

Joint training and development activities for the Pathways Team and the Connexions PAs had taken place and would be ongoing. There were two Connexions PAs who had worked closely with the Pathways Team in relation to the Employability Project. That support had been invaluable.

The preparation for independence programmes that were offered to all care leavers had now been accredited by the Open College Network. This enabled the learning process to be recognised and included in personal portfolios.

- **Living in Decent Homes and Sustainable Communities**

The percentage of children looked after living with foster carers or placed for adoption had risen from 78% (185) in March 2005 to 82% (198) at March 2006. Those placements were closely monitored to ensure that children were living in decent homes.

A separate report on the Housing Needs of Care Leavers would form the basis of a further item later on this agenda.

- **Have Access to Transport and Material Goods**

Most foster carers had their own transport and were entitled to claim a mileage allowance for journeys involving the child in their care. This applied to 78% of Children Looked After in Middlesbrough. Transport for all young people continued to be an issue with the LSP Transport Theme Group. It was hoped that a holistic view would be taken in the very near future to address the transport needs of all young people, including Children Looked After. Development of this would be reported to the Board in due course.

- **Live in Households Free from Low Income**

A review of foster care allowances was currently taking place and would be reported separately at a future Board meeting. The ability of foster carers to provide adequately for children and young people who were in their care was always taken into consideration.

Members were informed that the 'What Makes the Difference' project would be formally evaluated but that there was already clear evidence that the project had enabled children looked after to stay in school and to improve their grades. The decision to use the £30,000 tuition fees on supporting young people in Year 11 was a deliberate attempt to use the money strategically to reap long-term benefits. In this regard, Middlesbrough was likely to be included in the national report on the project as an example of good practice. In response to a question, Members were informed that all Middlesbrough Schools, including the Academies, provide School Governors with regular monitoring reports on the progress of children looked after. In discussion, Members emphasised the need to maintain the specialist support for children looked after currently provided by Connexions Tees Valley.

RECOMMENDED that the Executive be advised to note the information in relating to enabling children looked after to achieve economic well-being.

EMPLOYABILITY PROJECT

Sean Kershaw, Youth Development Worker, Middlesbrough Pathways Team gave a presentation on the Employability Scheme developed as part of the 'What Makes the Difference' Project. The Pathways Team works with "Looked After" young people aged 16-21 who were in or preparing to leave the care of the local authority. The service also works with young people up to age 24 if they were in further or higher education.

The presentation outlined the background to the employability scheme, its aims, objectives and developments since its introduction in May 2006. During that time a cohort of 25 young people who were not in education, employment or training (NEET) had been identified. Working with those young people, the team had consulted with them as to their ETE aspirations and developed work placements.

Since July 2006, 8 young people had successfully undertaken work experience placements within a range of work settings within the local authority. Three had successfully completed a 3 month placement in their preferred work area, one young person had been offered full time employment with the opportunity to undertake an NVQ level 2 in Catering and two others had taken up employment with E2E (Entry 2 Employment).

Some of the challenges highlighted for the future included:

- Gaining support/interest from council departments;
- Education and promotion of care leavers;

- Supporting employers and young people to maintain placements (individual support plans);
- Staff Resources (sustaining placements and support).

Lessons learnt following evaluation of the initial period of the scheme were that:

- employers needed to be better prepared, maybe through briefing sessions so that they understand the issues;
- young people required individual preparation (link with existing providers e.g. E2E);
- there should be further evaluation on how to sustain support for placements and
- that the Corporate Parenting approach worked.

In discussion, Members emphasised the need for all service areas within the Council to respond positively to requests for work experience placements. Members were informed that most departments had been made aware of the scheme via senior management and that, in general, departmental responses had been very positive. It was suggested that Erimus Housing might be able to offer work placements and that members of the Strategic Partnership might be approached to provide placements, particularly if supported by a good support package.

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HOUSING ISSUES FOR CARE LEAVERS

Further to the meeting held on 12 January 2006, the Housing Needs, Homelessness and Advice Co-ordinator submitted a report, prepared in conjunction with the Pathway Team and Erimus Housing advising on the ways in which young people leaving care could gain access to housing and support to maintain a tenancy.

Housing arrangements were an integral part of the Pathway Plan for young people leaving care and helped to ensure a smooth transition from care to independence. Members were previously advised that there was a need to consider the options available to the client group to access suitable housing with support and encourage independent living skills.

A Young Persons Accommodation Worker was employed by the Pathways team to assess the housing needs of young people coming through the service and ensure that all opportunities for access to independent living were maximised. Each young person's Pathway Plan included identification of housing options that could be explored with their Personal Adviser. The Pathway team would expect to have approximately twenty young people looking for independent housing options per year. Each young person was advised to complete application forms for a number of housing providers, with properties in Middlesbrough, in order to maximise their options of finding a suitable tenancy. Each housing provider would consider the application in accordance with their own allocation policy and the availability of suitable properties in the particular areas of choice identified by the young people.

Middlesbrough had a number of housing and support providers offering housing options with various levels of support and accepted referrals from the Pathway Team and the Homelessness and Housing Advice Service (which was delivered on behalf of the Council by Erimus Housing). The Pathway team also had a Supported Lodging Scheme, which provided supported accommodation for looked after young people and care leavers. The scheme had recently secured funding from Supporting People and currently provided six placements located across the Tees Valley area. Young people accommodated within the supported lodgings scheme were expected to remain in the scheme until they acquired the necessary skills to sustain a tenancy with a housing provider. The availability of appropriate single person's accommodation could also have an impact upon the time young people stay in such schemes and the amount of new clients, that could therefore take up places.

- **Availability of properties**

Key stakeholders felt there was a lack of available properties suitable for single young people and, in addition the following factors could contribute to the difficulties experienced in meeting supply and demand:

- a) Registered Social Landlords (RSLs) implementing age restrictions to properties which were physically suitable for single people but due to management problems experienced and the need to try to better balance the stock, were only available to older single people;
- b) affordability issues for single young people in terms of securing private rented accommodation due to rent restrictions in place for people under the age of 25 years; and,
- c) a perceived reluctance that some housing providers, due to previous management problems, decline to re-house the client group.

In recognising the factors outlined above the following measures were being progressed to improve the opportunities for young people to access and sustain settled and affordable housing:

- a) The Pathway team were working in partnership with Erimus Housing to adopt a protocol which would outline the roles and responsibilities of agencies involved with clients, and provide a structured response to problems arising which could potentially result in tenancy failure;
- b) Housing Services, through its regular formal liaison with RSLs was raising the profile of the issue of the lack of move-on accommodation for this particular client group;
- c) The allocation policy of the Council and Erimus Housing was currently being reviewed and the Pathway team were actively involved within the current consultation process;
- d) Housing Services undertake regular monitoring in respect to the performance of RSLs in providing a percentage of their available properties for allocation through the Council's allocation policy; and,
- e) Housing Services work closely with Erimus Housing in respect to monitoring the level of available properties allocated to priority groups.

- **Choice Based Lettings**

In November 2004, the Council transferred its housing stock to Erimus Housing, included within the conditions of the transfer agreement was a commitment that Erimus Housing would introduce a Choice Based Lettings (CBL) allocation scheme. This type of scheme was the Government's preferred system for housing allocations, with all local authorities required to introduce such schemes by 2010. The key principles of a CBL system being:

- a) applicants taking a proactive role in seeking housing through bidding for advertised properties through a variety of methods;
- b) the policy operates a number of different bandings which reflect a variety of different priority groups and housing needs;
- c) when fully developed the system will offer a one stop approach to housing, through which properties are available from a variety of housing providers offering a full range of tenure types; and,
- d) a fair and transparent policy for allocating properties, with regular information published to demonstrate which category of client had been successful in securing accommodation.

Within the current Council approved Choice Based Lettings policy, (presently subject to a full review) the following bandings were used to prioritise allocation:

- a) band 1 - households losing their home due to regeneration and demolition schemes;
- b) band 2 - a number of priorities including statutory homeless households, hospital leavers and young persons leaving care;
- c) band 3 - general needs; and,
- d) band 4 – out of area applicants and eligible owner occupiers.

In addition to the above, factors such as the date of registration on the scheme could be taken into account in respect to who qualifies for a particular property from within a particular band.

In addition to accessing accommodation through the bidding process of CBL the policy included a process known as a management let whereby certain client groups were offered a property outside of the bidding cycle in order to allow for a more controlled and managed process to rehousing. The policy relevant to management lets included a number of different client groups

who could be offered accommodation in this way. Looked After young people and care leavers who were moving on from supported accommodation schemes were included in the list of eligible applicants. Effective working between the young person's case worker and Erimus Housing staff was crucial in respect to the timing of an offer and information sharing in terms of ongoing support.

- **Homelessness**

There were occasions when a young person would complete a homeless application to secure accommodation. The circumstances, under which that route was chosen, were varied but could include:

- a) a young person who had previously been rehoused through a care leaver priority status and had subsequently failed to sustain a tenancy; and,
- b) a relationship breakdown which left a young person without any accommodation and with no family to provide support or assistance.

Young people who were homeless and not supported by the Pathway team were considered within the homelessness legislation. All 16 and 17 year old applicants were considered vulnerable within the homelessness legislation and therefore entitled to temporary accommodation, if appropriate. In terms of support, the Homelessness and Housing Advice Service at Erimus would make referrals to Middlesbrough Independent Network (MIN) who provided advice and outreach support to young people.

Where possible referrals for 16 and 17 years old service users were made by the Homelessness and Housing Advice service to supported accommodation projects. Opportunities could be limited as the primary funding regime for supported accommodation, Supporting People, was designed for adults 18 years and over and could only fund 16 and 17 year old clients in exceptional cases. In terms of bed and breakfast accommodation, the Government had recently introduced targets aimed at minimising the use of bed and breakfast for homeless 16 and 17 year olds. Within Middlesbrough the numbers at any one time were low (2 households at the end of September 2006), more robust statistics were currently being collated and were now required to be reported quarterly as part of the statutory homelessness monitoring process.

- **Floating Support**

Floating support was a system that allows an individual to live in his/her own tenancy and gain independent living skills with the help of a floating support worker. The worker visits, or could be contacted, to provide advice and support for an agreed number of hours each week. Community Campus had recently appointed a Resettlement Worker to provide support for a short period of time following a move-on from the organisation's supported living scheme. In addition Tees Valley Housing Group (TVHG) provided floating support within Middlesbrough, through Supporting People funding as part of a scheme designed to offer support for people in TVHG's own tenancies, Erimus Housing tenancies or private sector tenancies.

The floating support service provided support on all aspects of tenancy management, including payment of rent and utilities, housing benefit and money management. There was also sign posting to a doctor, or dentist, and advice regarding training and employment. As the floating support scheme was not property based the service could be gradually withdrawn without the need to find move-on accommodation. Referrals for the floating support scheme were taken from a number of different agencies and organisations.

In discussion, Members recognised the need to take responsibility for this issue in their capacity as corporate parents and emphasised the need to develop strong protocols with housing providers. It was felt to be important to take a strategic approach to this issue. Members suggested that young people should be involved in discussions with registered social landlords about possible solutions.

RECOMMENDED that the Executive be advised to note the information relating to housing issues and be asked to initiate a report on housing options for care leavers.

LEAVING CARE SERVICE - ANNUAL REPORT 2006

The Leaving Care Service Team Manager presented the 2006 Annual Report on the work of the Leaving Care Service, now known as the Pathways Team, following consultation with young people.

The report provided information on the aims and objectives of the Leaving Care Service, the services and facilities provided, staffing and other developments that had taken place in 2006. The report also outlined developments and priorities for 2007.

It was indicated that 2006/7 had been a successful year for the Leaving Care Service. Young people were staying in placement for longer periods and, through the work of the Pathways Team, had been reassured that they would continue to be supported until they were ready to leave care, and, where possible, be supported beyond the age of 18. The Supported Lodging scheme was going well and two additional days support had been secured from Connexions with a view to a possible full time link following the transfer of the Connexions service to the Council. Positive work was also being achieved with Erimus Housing and, as a named officer was now in place, further development working with the Pathways Team was anticipated. The Service would continue to work towards accreditation.

Reference was made to concerns and pressures on the service due to the large increase in the numbers of unaccompanied asylum seekers, up from around 1 or 2 young people to 15/16. Although some of the young people were older than 16 years, some over 18 years of age, the service was required to provide funding for them until their status had been determined or they left the country.

RECOMMENDED that the Executive be advised to note the information relating to the Leaving Care Service.