

CORPORATE PARENTING BOARD

A meeting of the Corporate Parenting Board was held on 2 August 2007.

PRESENT: Councillors B Thompson (Chair), Brunton, B Kerr, P Rogers

OFFICIALS: M Cooper, K Curran, D Johnson, C Kendrick, S Little, J Wilson, S Robinson,
T Moody

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE: Councillor J Walker

****AN APOLOGY FOR ABSENCE** was submitted on behalf of councillor B Taylor

****DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

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

****MINUTES**

The Minutes of the Corporate Parenting Board held on 21 June 2007 were submitted and approved as a correct record.

MEMBERSHIP OF MIDDLESBROUGH FAMILY PLACEMENT PANEL

The Fostering Team Manager presented a report to inform the Corporate Parenting Board of the current membership of the Family Placement Panel. It was noted that the Panel's composition had to meet the requirements of The Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 and The Fostering Services Regulations 2002.

Middlesbrough's Family Placement Panel held its meetings on a fortnightly basis for half a day and made recommendations relating to adoption and fostering. The meeting was serviced by Officers from Legal Services, Members Office and the Family Placement Service.

The matters considered by the Panel were outlined in the report, including whether adoption was in the best interests of a particular child or whether foster care was in the best interests of a particular child, whether a prospective adopter would make a suitable parent and whether a prospective foster carer would make a suitable carer.

Officers from the legal department and the Family Placement Service were satisfied that Middlesbrough's Panel met all the necessary requirements of the two sets of regulations.

It was highlighted that there had been four membership changes to the Panel since the last report to the Corporate Parenting Board in July 2006, and these were outlined in the report and details of the current membership were attached at appendix 1 to the report.

The Vice Chair emphasised the importance of the Panel as the decisions made could change children's lives. It was suggested that the gender balance of the panel might be improved. An additional Panel meeting had been scheduled during September.

RECOMMENDED that the Executive be advised to approve the membership of Middlesbrough Family Placement Panel, as outlined at Appendix 1 of the submitted report.

MIDDLESBROUGH FAMILY PLACEMENT PANEL – ACTIVITY REPORT FOR OCTOBER 2006 TO MARCH 2007

The Fostering Team Manager submitted a report presenting the Board with an overview of the activity of Middlesbrough's Family Placement Panel during the period 1 October 2006 to 31 March 2007.

Members were informed that the Family Placement Panel had met on 12 occasions during this period and had considered a total of 71 items. A breakdown of the number of items considered

in various categories were included in the report. It was highlighted that 3 foster carers were de-registered during this period.

It was stated that the reasons for the de-registrations were due to one of the foster carers being inactive for some months and not responding to attempts to contact them. The other two de-registrations were due to concerns about the standards of care that the foster carers were providing.

It was noted that the number of new foster carers approved during the last 18 months had been low. The recruitment of foster carers was a national problem, however there were specific issues in Middlesbrough, some of which were related to the payment structure. Work was continuing within the Children, Families & Learning Department to address this as part of a general review of services for children looked after.

The Chair expressed concern about the numbers of foster carers, as it was difficult to offer a choice of placement.

RECOMMENDED that the Executive be advised to note the information in relation to the Family Placement Panel activity during the period 1 October 06 – 31 March 07.

MIDDLESBROUGH COUNCIL FOSTERING SERVICE – ANNUAL REPORT FOR 2007

The Fostering Service Team Manager presented a report to the Board outlining:

- Activity of Middlesbrough Council Fostering Service during the year 2006/7 and the plans for the year 2007/8
- The Statement of Purpose for Middlesbrough Council Fostering Service for 2007/8
- The Children's Guide to Middlesbrough Council Fostering Service for 2007/8

The Fostering Service Regulations 2002 and the National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services were brought into force on 1 April 2002. One of the requirements of the Regulations and National Minimum Standards was that each fostering service should produce a Statement of Purpose and a Children's Guide. The Regulations also required that, in the case of local authority, the Statement of Purpose was formally approved by elected members and was reviewed, updated and modified annually.

In previous years, the Fostering Service produced an annual report, which was a separate document. However, there were always several areas where the Statement of Purpose and the Annual Report contained the same material, therefore in order to avoid unnecessary duplication, it was agreed that the annual report should take the form of a Committee Report rather than a stand-alone document.

The Board was provided with information regarding the activity of the fostering service during 2006/7. It was noted that there had been 165 enquiries received, resulting in 38 requests for initial visits and 6 applications being made. As of 31 March 2007 there was a total of 99 approved foster carers, however it was reported at the meeting that this figure had fallen to 89. As of 31 March 2007 there were 110 children in foster care, 12 of those had long-term fostering plans approved and 7 were matched with long-term foster carers.

The report included details of staffing in the fostering service and details of post-approval training for registered foster carers.

Members noted that positive feedback had been received from the Commission for Social Care Inspection with regard to the Fostering Service following its fifth annual inspection in October 2006.

It was highlighted that recruitment and retention of foster carers had continued to be a challenge during 2006/7. There had been a net decrease in the number of registered foster carers for a third year in succession. On the positive side, joint work with Sure Start meant that the recruitment material had been re-designed and there had been an increase in the amount of

advertising, resulting in an increase in the number of enquiries. Unfortunately this had not led to an increase in initial visits or applications.

The Fostering Service would continue to offer support and training to all registered foster carers, in a bid to value and therefore retain them. Training planned for 2007/8 included a Healthy Living event in June, an Internet Safety session in September and a session on behaviour management in December. A programme of First Aid training would also be provided. Other courses from internal and external providers would be made available where appropriate.

Workloads throughout the Fostering Team were high and likely to remain so during the year ahead. It was acknowledged that the team was in need of an additional social work post and efforts would be made to address the issue. The possibility of securing the future of the Fostering Service by the creation of a Community Interest Company was being explored and the Board would be informed of any future developments.

The Statement of Purpose for Middlesbrough Council Fostering Service 2007/8 was submitted to the Board for the fifth annual review. The document was a requirement of the Fostering Service Regulations 2002 and was updated at least once a year. The document contained information about the:

- principles
- aims and objectives
- standards of care
- management structure and staffing details
- number of carers and number of children placed
- number of complaints and their outcomes
- the services and facilities provided
- a summary of the procedures and processes used by the Service in relation to recruitment, assessment, approval, support, training and review of foster carers.

The Children's Guide to Middlesbrough Council Fostering Service for 2007/8 was attached as Appendix 2. The document was also a requirement of the Fostering Service Regulations 2002 and was updated at least once a year.

The Chair emphasised the importance of putting forward an evidence-based business case to secure additional resources. In discussion and in response to questions, the following points were made:

- In response to a question about the generation of income for a Community Interest Company, it was explained that there was a market in placements and the provision of associated services.
- There had been a meeting between Members, foster carers and senior managers and some issues had been addressed. A further meeting was planned for September, when it was hoped that more foster carers would be able to attend.
- The retention of existing foster carers was attributed to the support given by the fostering service.
- Concern was expressed that a shortage of carers might lead to children being left in unsuitable situations. It was explained that the department's main aim was to keep children at home but that when necessary, external, agency placements were used to ensure children are safeguarded.
- It was suggested that people in contact with Sure Start Services might be a suitable target group for a foster carer recruitment campaign.

RECOMMENDED as follows:

That the Executive be advised to:

- (a) Note the information relating to the activity of Middlesbrough Council Fostering Service.
- (b) Formally approve the Statement of Purpose and the Children's Guide for 2007/8

- (c) Agree that the next annual review of the documents should take place in April 2008 or as soon as possible thereafter.

PAYMENTS TO FOSTER CARERS

The Board was presented with details of the allowances payable to foster carers as from 7th April 2007. The Middlesbrough Fostering Service had operated a Banded Payment Scheme for its Foster carers. Each payment band has a set of competencies associated with it and the recommendation for progression from one band to the next is made at the foster carer's annual review and then presented to the Family Placement Panel.

An exemption allowance was paid when more than 3 children were placed with a foster carer. An allowance was paid when a child with disabilities was placed but a Disability Living Allowance benefit had not yet been awarded and an out of hours allowance paid to carers that were willing to take emergency placements out of normal office hours.

The allowances paid by Middlesbrough compared unfavourably to that of other agencies in the region. Work had been implemented within the Children, Families & Learning Department during 2006/7 to address the issue, but a conclusion was yet to be reached. Until a further report was available the increase in allowances for 2007/08 would be 2% which was in line with inflation and consistent with the Council's overall financial strategy.

The details of the rates were given in Appendix 1 of the report.

In response to a question about comparative levels of payments to foster carers, it was explained that Middlesbrough's allowances were rated 8th of the twelve local authorities in the north-east region.

RECOMMENDED:

That the Executive be advised to note that the Band A Foster Carer Allowance had been increased in line with inflation, with other allowances remaining at the levels set in 2000.

MIDDLESBROUGH COUNCIL ADOPTION SERVICE – ANNUAL REPORT FOR 2007

The Adoption Team Manager presented a report to the Board that detailed the work of Middlesbrough Council Adoption Service as follows:

- information about the activity of Middlesbrough Council Adoption service during the year 2006/7 and plans for the year 2007/8
- the Statement of Purpose for Middlesbrough Council Adoption Service for 2007/8
- the Children's Guide to Middlesbrough Council Adoption Service for 2007/8

The Middlesbrough Council Adoption Service Statement of Purpose 2007-8 was included in Appendix 1, and the Children's Guide to Adoption Services in Appendix 2.

Levels of activity during the year had been high, reflecting the increased use of adoption as an option for children looked after. The total number of enquires received was 109 and 9 children were matched with adoptive families.

The Adoption Service had been affected by staff shortages for the whole of the year. The recruitment strategy was reviewed during the year and it was considered in conjunction with the results of a study of children whose plans for adoption were approved in a 3-year period. This had provided a clear profile of the children who needed adoptive placements in a typical year. A combination of targeted recruitment and forward planning regarding children's needs for placement had resulted in positive outcomes for children during the year.

Middlesbrough Adoption Service was inspected by the Commission for Social Care Inspection in October 2006 and the findings from the inspection were positive. In October 2006, a support group for adopters who were waiting for a placement was established in partnership with Stockton, Redcar and Cleveland and Hartlepool Councils.

After experiencing staff shortages since October 2005, it was expected that the Adoption Service was to become fully staffed in the year ahead.

Following the successful launch of a jointly run Adopters Waiting Group, further partnership working with neighbouring authorities was planned.

Middlesbrough Adoption Service participated in a regional Adoption Register event in May 2007, which was aimed at making regional links between children waiting for adopted placements and approved adopters who are waiting for families and led to potential matches for two children.

In discussion and in response to questions, the following points were made:

- One of the positive aspects of the work of the Family Placement Panel was the clarity about post-adoption contact with birth families.
- It was pointed out that the Children's Guide acts as a reminder of the process when they were adopted for those children who were adopted at an early age.
- It was explained that the service did support gay adopters and foster carers and that this had led to very successful placements.
- It was noted that national campaigns such as adopter's week were helpful in recruitment and that enquirers are always asked where they had heard about the service.

RECOMMENDED as follows:

That the Executive be advised to

- (a) note the information relating to the activity of Middlesbrough Council Adoption Service
- (b) formally approve the Statement of Purpose and the Children's Guide for 2007-8
- (c) Agree that the next annual review of the documents should take place in April 2008 or as soon as possible thereafter.

CHILD TRUST FUND ARRANGEMENTS FOR CHILDREN LOOKED AFTER

The Service Manager for Children Looked After presented a report that provided the Board with information relating to Child Trust Fund accounts, and the authority's responsibility with regard to these accounts for children looked after.

The report included an option appraisal about whether the authority should make contributions to the Child Trust Fund of looked after children, and a draft policy and practice guidance for staff.

The Child Trust Funds Act 2004 had introduced a long-term savings and investment account for all children to allow them to build up savings for when they reached 18 years of age. The purpose of the Child Trust Fund was to:

- help people understand the benefits of saving and investing;
- encourage parents and children to develop the savings habit and engage with financial institutions
- ensure that in future all children had a financial asset at the start of adult life to invest in their future; and
- build on financial education to help people make better financial choices

Children who were born after 31 August 2002 would be eligible for a Child Trust Fund (CTF) if child benefit had been awarded for them, they live in the UK and they were not subject to immigration restrictions. HM Revenue & Customs sends a £250 voucher to the child benefit claimant, which could be used to open the CTF account. Children living in low-income households would receive an extra £250. The voucher could be used by a person with parental responsibility to open a CTF account with a provider of their choice. If the CTF account was not opened within a year from the date of issue of the voucher, HM Revenue & Customs would open an account for the child.

Family and friends were able to contribute up to £1,200 per year to the Child Trust fund. Any growth achieved by the CTF would be tax-free and the child/young person could access the fund

on his/her 18th birthday. Early access to the account would be available to children who were terminally ill.

The Institute for Public Policy Research, who initiated the research that led to the Act, had gone further in recommending local authorities contribute to the CTF for looked after children. The institute suggested that each local authority should invest at least £50 a year in each CTF for each child in their care.

The Senior Management Team within the Children Families and Learning had considered the following options:

Option 1 – Middlesbrough Council would not contribute to the Child Trust Funds of looked after children.

Option 2 – Middlesbrough Council would contribute £50 per year to the CTF for all eligible looked after children.

Option 3 – Middlesbrough Council would contribute £50 per year to the CTF for all eligible looked after children that have been looked after for a set period of time.

Option 4 – Middlesbrough Council would contribute £50 per year to the CTF for all eligible children and establish a trust/saving fund for all looked after children who do not meet the eligibility criteria and have been looked after for a set period of time.

The Senior Management Team recommended that option 3 would be the preferred option, with an eligibility criteria of a payment being made for all children who had been looked after for more than one year.

There would be financial implications to the report. If the Council took a policy decision to contribute to the Child Trust Funds of looked after children, a budget would need to be identified on a long-term basis with a growth projection to sustain this commitment. Using the eligibility criteria of children being looked after for at least one year and based on the current looked after population, this would mean the total costs in 2007/8 would be £550 increasing to £8,400 by 2020.

In discussion, Members expressed support for the proposal and commented that it sends a strong message of equal treatment and will improve the financial situation of future care leavers.

RECOMMENDED as follows:

That the Executive be advised to:

- a) Consider the issue of Child Trust Funds and the option appraisal contained within this report
- b) That the approach outlined in option three be adopted, namely that Middlesbrough Council make an annual contribution to the Child Trust Funds of children looked after who meet the eligibility criteria, the amount to be £50 per year initially.
- c) To approve the policy statement and practice guidance for staff (appendix 1)

SUMMARY OF ROTA VISITS AND REGULATION 33 REPORTS

The Service Manager, Children Looked After presented a report to inform the Board of the outcomes of Rota visits and Regulation 33 visits that include three homes provided in partnership with the Five Rivers Project and the Gleneagles Resource Centre for children with disabilities.

Five Rivers, as the providers of residential childcare, had commissioned two independent Social Workers to undertake the Regulation 33 inspections and to report on a monthly basis. The reports were circulated to the Commission for Social Care Inspection; the Executive Director Children, Families & Learning; the Head of Family Services; the Service Manager, Children Looked After and to the Manager of the home. The reports contained detailed actions

and 'good practice' recommendations as appropriate. Overall the reports from October 2006 – February 2007 had been positive and reflected a high standard of care.

For Gleneagles, there was a rota of 'Regulation 33 visitors' which included the Head of Family Services; Head of Capital and Assets (CFL), Education Psychologist and other managers not directly involved with the service. This allowed for independence in the inspection role. The reports for October 2006 – February 2007 were positive and revealed a service valued by parents and other professionals.

Rota Visits were carried out by elected Members to all the residential facilities and the home managers responded to any issues that were identified in their reports. These were then forwarded to the Head of Family Services for action if needed. Overall the reports had been positive. There had been some visits made over the past year, the most recent at Gleneagles in January, however, these had been irregular.

In discussion, it was reported that the Mayor intends to write to all elected Members in relation to the importance of undertaking rota visits with the utmost diligence. It was also suggested that a Members seminar or conference should be held in relation to corporate parenting that would cover issues such as rota visiting and the role of Members as school governors.

RECOMMENDED as follows

That the Executive be advised to note the information in relation to Regulation 33 and rota visits.

****EXCLUSION – PRESS – PUBLIC**

ORDERED that the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the following item on the grounds that if present, there would be disclosure to them of exempt information as defined in Paragraphs 1, 2 and 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 and that the public interest in maintaining the exemption outweighed the public interest in disclosing the information.

CHILDREN MISSING FROM PLACEMENT – UPDATE REPORT

The Service Manager for Children Looked After presented a report to advise the Board of information relating to children who had been missing from placement, in Middlesbrough, between September 2006 and March 2007.

The report provided background information on the risk assessment process relating to children missing from placement and the procedures for responding to these situations. Children and young people who had spent time in care were more likely to run away than those who had lived only at home and children who go missing from local authority care can place themselves and others at risk.

The National Missing Persons Helpline offered its services to local authorities and provided a valuable safety net for some of the most vulnerable children.

Details of the local procedure were outlined in the report and Middlesbrough had assigned specific responsibility for looked after children who go missing to a designated Service Manager. Details of this named manager had also been recorded with the National Missing from Care Department.

In February 2002 a joint protocol was agreed with Middlesbrough Council and Cleveland Police that outlined a clear procedure for the process of risk assessment and reporting a child missing from placement to the Police. The protocol had been agreed by the local Area Child Protection Committee (now the Local Children's Safeguarding Board) and the Police Force. It was noted that the procedure was due for review and it was anticipated that a full review and revised document would be completed within the 2007/08 financial year.

In discussion, clarification was given as to the location of the residential facilities and who might visit on a regular basis.

RECOMMENDED as follows:

- (a) That the information presented be noted.
- (b) That the Executive be advised to endorse the actions taken by officers to develop and implement the Joint Protocol.

****ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

There were no items to report under Any Other Business.