

CORPORATE PARENTING BOARD

20TH SEPTEMBER 2007

**INVOLVING CHILDREN AND YOUNG
PEOPLE IN DECISION-MAKING**

**BRENDA THOMPSON - EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR CHILDREN,
FAMILIES & LEARNING**

**JAN DOUGLAS – INTERIM EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF
CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND LEARNING**

PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1. The purpose of this report is to update the Corporate Parenting Board on the ways in which children and young people are involved in decision-making processes.

BACKGROUND

2. Central government is committed to creating a culture of openness where listening and responding to children and young people's concerns become an integral part of everyday practice. The requirement for the participation of children and young people in day to day decision-making about their own care is spelt out in legislation and in the government's objectives for children's services. The Children Act 1989 requires that, before making any decision with respect to a child whom they are looking after, or proposing to look after, a local authority shall, so far as is reasonably practicable, ascertain the wishes and feelings of the child or young person regarding the matter to be decided.
3. Reports such as 'Lost in Care' (DoH, 1999) and 'People Like Us' (DoH, 1997) emphasise the importance of enabling children and young people to speak openly about their experiences and concerns. More recently, one of the main messages from 'Keeping Children Safe' (the Government's response to the Climbie inquiry, 2003) is that listening to children keeps them safe and helps to protect them from poor practice.

4. This approach builds on the core principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) which require governments to listen to children and to protect and promote their rights. Middlesbrough Council is committed to the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which was formally adopted by the authority in 1996 (Policy & Resources Committee, February 20th). The Council also has a clear commitment to promoting children's rights and participation embodied in its Corporate Parenting Policy.
5. Most recently, Care Matters: Time for Change introduces the expectation that every Local Authority should develop a 'Children in Care' Council with direct links to the Director of Children's Services and Lead Member, and set out a 'Pledge' to children in care. Work has started with children and young people to consider the development of a 'Children in Care' Council.

MECHANISMS FOR INVOLVEMENT

6. 'Getting Involved' (approved by Executive, December 2004) is the department's strategy for the involvement of the children and young people who use Family Services. The aim is to help children and young people to get involved in all aspects of decision-making, including decisions about their own life; decisions about planning and improving services; and decisions about policies.
7. The most important aspect of decision-making for children and young people looked after is involvement in their individual assessment, care planning and review processes. A range of information resources has been developed, with the help of children and young people, to support their involvement. These include a pack for children becoming looked after that contains information on who people are (e.g. social workers and foster carers); useful phone numbers; the children's guide to fostering, health information, the complaints process, and how to get access to an advocate.
8. The standards for social work practitioners in relation to assessment, care planning and review include specific requirements for involvement. For example, the views of the child or young person must be clearly recorded and care plans must be signed by them or an explanation given as to why they have not been signed. Similarly, their views and wishes must be recorded in relation to their Personal Education Plans and statutory reviews.
9. In relation to statutory reviews, young people helped to develop the consultation form, "It's time for your review". This simple and colourful document asks for their views on where they live, families and friends, education, leisure time, health and what they like and dislike generally. Foster carers, social workers and reviewing officers all support children and young people to help them to participate in their review meetings and they can use an independent advocate to put forward their views if they wish. Young people were also involved in developing the assessment and planning documents used by the Pathway Team. At the time of their review, children and young people are routinely reminded of their right to make a complaint and asked if they would like to contact an advocate to support them in putting forward their views.
10. A recent inter-agency audit of case files drawn from across Family Services highlighted some excellent examples of involvement of children, young people and

their families. Of the files audited, there were 25 that related to children looked after aged over 5 and in 19 of those cases there was very clear evidence that children and young people were being fully involved in decision-making. However, in some cases it was less clear and work is currently underway to ensure that this aspect of work is fully recorded.

11. There are several ways in which children and young people are involved in decisions about planning and improving services. For instance, they can get involved in the selection of staff, training for staff and carers and discussions on service developments. For example, the Pathway Team had a video-box consultation exercise during Care Leavers week in October 2006 and the Looked After Social Work Team discussed their team's service plan with young people. The Pathway Team has recently worked with young people to produce an information pack on transition to adulthood. The Children Looked After Planning and Implementation Group recently reviewed the involvement action plan for the children looked after business unit and identified a number of actions for development in the forthcoming year.
12. In relation to decisions about policy, children and young people were involved in a national consultation exercise on the Care Matters green paper, as reported to a previous meeting of the Corporate Parenting Board (15th February 2007). The views of children and young people have clearly influenced the content of the subsequent White Paper. At a local level, children and young people's views are included in reports and information presented to the Corporate Parenting Board and they are encouraged and supported to attend meetings as appropriate.
13. Children and young people looked after also access opportunities available to all young people. This includes involvement in the Local Democracy Week Youth Conference, the Youth Council and taking part in accredited training in relation to the administration of the Youth Opportunity Fund. They have also contributed to the work of the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership.

NEXT STEPS

14. A number of actions have been identified to enhance the involvement of children and young people in decision-making:
 - A planned review of the assessment, care planning and review standards and procedures will include steps to strengthen the elements relating to the involvement of children and young people.
 - The information packs for children coming into the care system are currently being updated and will include more information on how they can get involved.
 - The children's complaints leaflet will be reviewed.
 - The PCT's health assessment materials are being revised in consultation with children and young people.
 - Discussion will take place with children and young people about the development of more child-friendly versions of the assessment, care planning and review documentation.
 - The development of a 'Children in Care Council' and the content of the Council's Pledge to children looked after will be discussed with children and young people.

FINANCIAL, LEGAL AND WARD IMPLICATIONS

15. All the issues outlined in this report are contained within established budget provision. The service covers the whole of Middlesbrough so this report will be of interest to all Members.

RECOMMENDATIONS

16. It is recommended that the Corporate Parenting Board advises the Executive to note the work undertaken and planned to enable children looked after to get involved in decision-making.

REASONS

17. To ensure that the Members are aware of this important aspect of the department's work with children and young people looked after by the local authority.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

The following background papers were used in the preparation of this report:

- Getting Involved: Children and Young People's Involvement Strategy, Middlesbrough Council, 2004
- Care Matters: Time for Change, DfES, 2007

AUTHOR: Sue Little, Children's Participation Officer

Tel No: 01642 728706

Address: Vancouver House, Gurney Street, Middlesbrough TS1 1EL

Website: <http://www.middlesbrough.gov.uk>