

CORPORATE PARENTING BOARD

A meeting of the Corporate Parenting Board was held on 20 September 2007.

PRESENT: Councillors B Thompson (Chair), J McPartland

OFFICIALS: M Cooper, D Johnson, C Kendrick, S Little, S Mitchell, T Moody

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE BY INVITATION: B Simpson Foster Carer, S Percival National Youth Advocacy Service

****AN APOLOGY FOR ABSENCE** was submitted by Councillor P Rodgers

Quorum

At this point of the meeting it was noted that the Board was inquorate. The Members present agreed to proceed with the business of the meeting as representatives had travelled from outside the area.

****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 2 August 2007 were submitted and approved as a correct record.

MATTERS ARISING

FAMILY PLACEMENT PANEL

The Chair reported that since the previous meeting, membership of the Family Placement Panel had been approved by the Executive. It was noted that the recent advertisement to appoint an independent member for the Panel had received a good response.

CHILD TRUST FUNDS (CTF)

It was noted that the Executive approved Option 3 - that Middlesbrough Council would contribute £50 per year to the CTF for all eligible looked after children, as recommended by the Board.

ROTA VISITS

Further to the previous meeting the Deputy Mayor had written to all elected Members in relation to the importance of undertaking rota visits and duties as school governors with utmost diligence. It was reported that the response had been very positive.

YOUTH OFFENDING SERVICE SUPPORT FOR CHILDREN LOOKED AFTER

The Deputy Head of the South Tees Youth Offending Service presented a report on the support available for Children Looked After. The report highlighted issues that related to corporate parenting in respect of the joint target to reduce offending within the group.

The South Tees Youth Offending Service was a multi-agency service established as a result of the Crime & Disorder Act 1998. Their aim was to prevent and reduce offending by children and young people aged 10 to 17 years across the boroughs of Middlesbrough and Redcar & Cleveland. Work was carried out closely with partners from Police, Probation, Children, Families & Learning, Health, Safe In Tees Valley and the Youth Service as well as a number of voluntary organisations.

As at 15 March 2007 it was reported that there were 150 young people in the age group 10 to 17 years being looked after in Middlesbrough, which reflected an increase from 128 in 2004. Of the 150 young people, 17 had been involved in offending activity in the previous 12 months, which represented 13.33% of the cohort of young people offending. It was reported that the current information indicated that there were now 15 young people in the category. Six were first time entrants to the system; six were persistent offenders and three had received final warnings, mostly for criminal damage or theft.

The joint target to reduce offending by young people looked after (PAF C18) made specific reference to those who had been looked after for 12 months or more, which was a much smaller number. Latest statistics up to September 06 showed a ratio of 0.9, which was well within target.

The Boards attention was drawn to an anomaly where young people appeared in the statistics not due to family circumstances, but following a Court appearance when they were remanded into the secure estate or in the care of the Local Authority. It was noted that remand periods varied according to the complexity of each case and could be for a week or several months, but in all cases the aim was to keep such time to a minimum.

There were 358 young people open to the Youth Offending Service in the Middlesbrough area. The Courts had issued 5 remands into Local Authority care and on average there were 3 young people from the Middlesbrough area remanded into custody every month.

A new protocol was developed which clarified that children accommodated by the local authority before they go into custody would still be kept as an open case to the relevant social work team.

The Board commented that the Youth Offending Service Support for Children Looked After provided an invaluable service and recognised their hard work in keeping young people out of the system.

RECOMMENDED as follows: -

- 1) That the Executive be advised to note the information relating to the Make a Positive Contribution agenda for Children Looked After.
- 2) That the Executive be advised to endorse the continued work of South Tees Youth Offending Service in offering alternatives to custody to prevent children and young people coming into the looked after system.

USAGE OF NATIONAL YOUTH ADVOCACY SERVICE 2006-2007

The Children's Participation Officer presented a report on the usage by children and young people looked after of the advocacy services provided under contract by the National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS). NYAS was an Independent national organisation that provided services across Teesside & Darlington under a joint arrangement between the five local authorities.

The Children, Families & Learning Department policy on Advocacy for Children, Young People and their Families (Executive, February 2005) set out a clear commitment that supported access to advocacy services. This policy enabled the authority to comply with statutory requirements regarding access to advocacy for children and young people making representations to the department.

NYAS operated a web site, a freephone help-line and provided confidential legal advice and representation. NYAS also operated a text service and an on-line youth club. It was noted that NYAS had been awarded the Community Legal Service Charter Mark and also provided a legal service specifically for unaccompanied children who were seeking asylum.

Advocates were recruited and supported on a regional basis, and completed an accredited advocacy training course. They provided support by visiting the young person and via contact over the telephone.

Children and young people were provided with information about NYAS in a variety of ways, including leaflets and information packs, and at various times such as during assessment processes and at the time of reviews. Posters were also on display in residential children's homes and in relevant offices.

It was reported that during 2006/2007, NYAS received a total of 93 referrals from across the five local authorities, which represented an increase from 60 referrals during 2005/2006. All contacts were responded to within three working days and contact was made with the young person in 90 of the allocated cases within 24 hours of receipt of referral. There were three cases where the young person did not respond to repeated attempts at contact.

Within Middlesbrough there were 31 referrals, 17 of which were made directly by the child or young person themselves. Eight were made by social workers, four by relatives and two by an Empower Family Worker. A breakdown of the different categories of referrals was included in the report. The service was used by 18 males and 13 females aged between 9 and 20 years of age. Most of the children and young people were living in Middlesbrough but NYAS also supported five young people from Middlesbrough who were living in Darlington, Durham, Prudhoe and Brighton.

It was reported that the majority of the young people were from White British ethnic backgrounds (18 of the 31 cases). NYAS had produced and distributed new multi-lingual leaflets, age related information packs, posters and English language leaflets to ensure children and young people from all ethnic backgrounds were aware of the aims and availability of the service. NYAS also raised awareness by visits to staff meetings and residential children's homes.

A representative from the National Youth Advocacy Service provided the Board with additional information about the service. The leaflets and information packs that were made available to the children and young people were presented to the Board to give them a greater understanding of the service. It was reported that children from age 6 had used the online service and the online youth club was very popular. It was regarded as very positive that adults from Middlesbrough were proactive in referring children and young people into the service; Middlesbrough had the highest number of adult referrals in the Tees Valley. It was reported that the legal service for unaccompanied asylum seeking children had not been well used in the north-east region.

In discussion, the Board expressed their satisfaction that children from Middlesbrough were accessing a good quality advocacy service. The availability of an independent service was regarded as very useful in situations where there may have been conflict between different parts of the local authority. A concern was expressed that on occasions the direct contact between NYAS and a young person in foster care could affect the placement. It was emphasised that NYAS represented only the child, and operated to a high level of confidentiality. It was noted that by having an Advocate attend a foster care meeting, understanding of the different aspects of the problems would be increased.

RECOMMENDED that the Executive be advised to note the information relating to usage of the National Youth Advocacy Service.

INVOLVING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN DECISION-MAKING

The Children's Participation Officer presented a report detailing ways in which children and young people were involved in decision-making processes.

It was reported that legislation and guidance required that before making any decision with respect to a child whom they were looking after, or proposing to look after, a local authority shall, so far as was reasonable practicable, ascertain the wishes and feeling of the child or young person regarding the matter to be decided.

National reports [e.g. 'Lost in Care' (1999) and 'Keeping Children Safe' (2003)] emphasised that listening to children helped to keep them safe and to protect them from poor practice. The requirement for governments to listen to children and to protect and promote their rights was a core principle of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Middlesbrough

Council had been committed to the Convention since 1996 and included a commitment to promoting children's rights and participation in the Council's Corporate Parenting Policy. It was noted that in general awareness of this Convention was low.

The government White Paper Care Matters: Time for Change proposed 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.

'Getting Involved' (Executive, December 2004) was the department's strategy for the involvement of the children and young people who use Family Services. The aim was to help children and young people to get involved in all aspects of decision-making, including decisions about their own life; planning and improving services; and decisions about policies.

It was noted that the most important aspect of decision-making for children and young people looked after was involvement in their individual assessment, care planning and review processes which involved them in the decisions about their own life. There were clear standards for social work practitioners in relation to involving children and young people within the process.

A range of information resources had been developed, with the help of children and young people to support their involvement, which included a pack for children becoming looked after that contained information on:

- people's roles;
- useful phone numbers;
- the children's guide to fostering;
- health information;
- the complaints process; and
- how to gain access to an advocate.

Children and young people were involved in developing the Personal Education Plan documents and the consultation form 'Its Time for Your Review'. Children and young people were encouraged to air their views by foster carers, social workers and reviewing officers, and were made aware that they could use an independent advocate to put forward their views if they wished. Young people were also involved in developing the assessment and planning documents used by the Pathway Team.

A recent audit of case files had identified some excellent examples of involvement by children and young people in decision-making. From the over 5's age group, 19 out of 25 files audited had very clear evidence of full involvement with young people. Some cases were less clear and work was undertaken to ensure that involvement would be fully recorded.

Children and young people were also involved in the selection of staff; training for staff and carers and discussions on service developments. 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 board on the 15th February 2007. The views of children and young people had clearly influenced the content of the subsequent White Paper. At a local level children and young persons' views were included in reports and information presented to the Board, and they were encouraged to attend the meetings as appropriate.

Children and young people looked after had access to the opportunities available to all young people such as, the Local Democracy Week Youth Conference, the Youth Council, the Youth Opportunity Fund and Young People's Strategic Partnership.

The following actions had 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 would 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 were being updated and would include more information on how they could get involved;

- the children's complaints leaflet would be reviewed;
- the PCT's health assessment materials were being revised in consultation with children and young people;
- discussion would 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 would be discussed with children and young people.

It was reported that there would be an achievement event for children and young people looked after on October 24th at the Riverside stadium from 6 – 8pm, which included and disco, food, video box and a footballer would possibly attend from Middlesbrough football club.

RECOMMENDED that the Executive be advised note the work undertaken and planned, to enable children looked after to get involved in decision-making.

CARE MATTERS: TIME FOR CHANGE

The Children's Participation Officer presented a report on the key proposals of the White Paper Care Matters: Time for Change on behalf of the service manager for children looked after. The report considered the implications of the proposals for practice and delivery of services by the Council to its children looked after.

It was reported that Care Matters: Time for Change was published in June 2007 and set out the steps the government intended to take to improve the outcomes of children and young people in care. The White Paper was developed following extensive consultation and was informed by four working groups established to investigate best practice in supporting those in care.

The White Paper concluded with a section on 'next steps', which set out in some detail the plan for:

- Strengthening the legislative and regulatory framework;
- Establish a national partnership with voluntary and statutory sectors to ensure outcomes were delivered;
- Develop a detailed implementation of the White Paper;
- Introduce a change fund to support implementation of the White Paper;
- A new approach to working with the private sector to gather support for looked after children, including access to apprenticeship programmes and other routes to employment.

It was noted that the Government was currently supporting or proposing a number of pilot schemes to test out the proposals within the White Paper, for example Virtual Headteachers, Regional Commissioning Units, Independent Social Work Practices and Fostering at aged 18+.

The Government had identified £300 million over the next three years to support the implementation of the proposals. It was anticipated that the legislation would be issued in the autumn. The White Paper had, to date, been well received by all stakeholders.

The Implications for Middlesbrough Council were presented to the Board. It was noted that children looked after were already a high priority for Middlesbrough Council, and in 2004 a Looked After Business Unit was created to bring all services for looked after children under one Service Manager. The restructure had proved very successful as the quality of services had improved significantly and outcomes for children and young people were improving. The Looked After Business Unit produced an annual action plan which was attached as Appendix 1 of the report, which was implemented and monitored via the Children Looked After Planning and Implementation Group.

It was noted that when the White Paper was reviewed, there were some areas of practice where Middlesbrough Council already had systems in place, yet there were a significant number of proposals which would require action by the Council. The report reviewed the proposals in each chapter of the White Paper, and identified key priorities for action as follows:

- Establishing a Children in Care Council and developing the Council's 'Pledge';
- Strengthening the preventative agenda and responsiveness of services to prevent children entering the looked after system;

- Improving the quality and choice of placement options;
- Developing services to improve the education outcomes of Children Looked After;
- Improving access to leisure activities for Children Looked After;
- Strengthening the role of the Independent Reviewing Officer.

The White Paper set out the Government agenda until 2011 and it was anticipated that the White Paper would become legislation in autumn 2007. The reform programme would commence immediately and the programme of change within the Council needed to start at the earliest opportunity with a working group(s) set up, and an action plan developed to tackle the key priorities and manage the change process.

RECOMMENDED as follows: -

- 1) That the Executive be advised to note the contents of the report
- 2) That the Executive be advised to endorse the proposal to establish a working group, or series of groups to take the key priorities forward.