

CORPORATE PARENTING BOARD

A meeting of the Corporate Parenting Board was held on 6 March 2008

PRESENT: Councillors Brunton, Kerr, P Rogers, B Thompson, P Thompson

OFFICIALS: P Ayre, S Caddell, C Kendrick, S King, S Little, T Moody, J Wilson

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE BY INVITATION: B Simpson

****APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

****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 31 January 2008 were submitted and approved as a correct record

Commemorative Award

The Corporate Parenting Board discussed the possibility of establishing an annual achievement award to commemorate the life of a child who was looked after by Middlesbrough Council. Further information will be presented to the Board at a later date.

CARE MATTERS: TIME FOR CHANGE – PRESENTATION ON ENRICHING CHILDREN'S LIVES

The Children's Participation Officer presented a report on enriching children's lives, which came from guidance in the Government White Paper - Care Matters: Time For Change.

Corporate Parenting involved Central Government, Local Authorities, Children's Trust Partners and individual professionals and carers who were responsible for ensuring the best for children and young people in care, as they would for their own children.

The Director of Children's Services held lead responsibility for ensuring that children and young people in care participate equally in positive activities along with their peers. A pledge would be set out to children in care stating what services and support children in care should expect to receive.

It was reported that a good start was highly important for children in care, which was enforced by arranging appropriate, high quality early years provision for children in care under five. Play strategies should address the play requirements of children in care.

Guidance for schools was to promote and support take up of extended school activities by children and young people in care. Schools would be given funding to provide 2 hours a week of extended school activity and 2 weeks of holiday provision free of charge. New regulations would ensure that music tuition in schools would be free to children in care.

The Education and Inspections Act 2006 made it a duty to provide positive leisure time activities. Local authorities should make their own leisure provision free for children and young people in care, which was consistent with the role of the corporate parent. Youth Sport Trust and Sport England provided new approaches to community-based sport for children in care.

Children and young people looked after should be given priority status in local authority youth work provision. Outcomes for children looked after could be improved by involvement in youth work activity; engagement with the Youth Opportunity Fund; and Aiming High for Young People, which included national minimum standards.

In the care system, local authorities should ensure that:

- leisure activities were a key part of the care planning process;
- social workers would ensure good support was available;
- foster carer training would cover play and leisure time activities;
- information packs for carers and children would be produced; and
- the benefits of social pedagogy in residential care were explored.

In the care system it was important that all children who wanted to have access to independent visitors were able to, and that £500 per year was allocated to support educational and development needs of each child.

In discussion, it was noted that Early Years provision was good in Middlesbrough and a Member questioned whether after school music teaching would come from the £500. It was also asked whether such money should go to the child rather than be included in base budgets. Officers would present further information to Members in respect of the funding issues arising from the Care Matters White Paper.

RECOMMENDED that the Executive be advised to note the information relating to Care Matters: Time for Change, Enriching Children's Lives.

THE INVOLVEMENT OF SPORT & LEISURE WITH CHILDREN LOOKED AFTER

The Duty Officer for Rainbow Centre presented a report to raise Member awareness of the activities delivered to Children Looked After by the Sport & Leisure service in 2007/2008. Further opportunities were outlined that could be developed to enable children looked after to access sport and physical activity opportunities.

It was noted that the Sport & Leisure service operated in a commercial environment, and users could choose to use the services run by the council or private providers. The service balanced its social obligations with income generation requirements.

The Sport & Leisure Service began working with Children Looked after in 2005/2006. A period of consultation led to initial delivery of holiday activity programmes and some football coaching specifically for children looked after. Young People from the group were supported in applying for Big Lottery funding to enable delivery of these activities; further subsidy had been funded for the Sports Development budgets.

Holiday programmes had been developed in consultation with young people giving a sense of ownership and choice. Activities such as rope courses and outdoor sports challenged young people, extended their comfort zones and exposed them to opportunities they may otherwise not have experienced. They have gained confidence and established new relationships both within their peer groups, and with adult leaders.

Membership cards that provided access to free swimming sessions had been distributed to young people in care settings. Access was granted to any public swimming session, not just restricted time slots.

The service, in partnership with Tees Valley Sport (County Sports Partnership) had developed a bid for a dedicated sports officer OR Community Sports Coach, to work with Young People in Care. Funding to support the bid had been committed from Middlesbrough PCT with indicative funding from Sport England. However, Sport England's changing priorities have prevented them from committing. The delay was now jeopardising the financial commitment from Middlesbrough PCT.

In discussion, it was noted that a 2 day programme had been set up with local sports clubs working with Sport England in activities such as volleyball, tennis, table tennis and rugby. It was reported that transporting young people to activities was proving to be difficult to organise, increasingly costly, and that a long-term solution was needed.

It was noted that there had been some difficulties in accessing swimming sessions which officers would resolve. It was suggested that access to the whole range of sport and leisure services should be free for children in care and the whole foster family.

Members congratulated the service on its actions and suggested that specific information on costs would be needed to make further developments.

RECOMMENDED that the Executive be advised to note the information relating to The Involvement of Sport & Leisure with Children Looked After.

YOUTH SERVICE PROVISION TO CHILDREN LOOKED AFTER

The Children's Participation Officer presented a report prepared by the Youth Service Operations Manager that informed the Board of the work undertaken by the Youth Service to support Children Looked After.

Concerns were raised, via the Children Looked After Planning & Implementation Group (CLAG), about the capacity for Children Looked After to access Youth Service facilities. This was for a number of reasons. Many young people hadn't sustained friendships due to moving areas, schools and foster placements. Their confidence levels as a result of their backgrounds may be low and a barrier to seeking such provision.

The Ofsted report of the Youth Service in 2004 identified that the service produced positive work with young people who came through the doors of the Youth Centres but did little to target groups of young people who might have additional needs. The groups included children looked after, young people with disabilities, BME groups and others.

Working together, the Sports Development team supplied football coaches to support the group and the Youth Service supplied the Manor Youth Centre's gym and other facilities at no cost, plus transport where necessary. The group met for one hour a week initially to support football practice. This later developed into two hours as other children and young people looked after, who were not directly interested in playing football, came along to support their friends and to access other facilities in the centre. Provision started in November 2005.

The group took part in a residential experience at Stainsacre last year and was actively looking for funding for the year. Two members of the group have taken part in a residential as part of their Open College Network training for Monitoring and Evaluation. One young person was involved with the National Children's and Young Peoples' Board.

In discussion, it was recognised that the model of having a specialist group linked to mainstream provision had worked well and should be continued. It was noted that issues around funding for activities and transport needed to be resolved.

RECOMMENDED that the Executive recognise the ongoing contribution made by the Youth Service to enable the Local Authority to fulfil its obligation as a corporate parent.

HOUSING ISSUES FOR LOOKED AFTER YOUNG PEOPLE AND CARE LEAVERS

The Housing Needs Homelessness and Advice Co-ordinator presented a report to advise the Board of the actions taken to improve access to appropriate housing and support in maintaining a tenancy for young people leaving care.

Housing arrangements were an integral part of the Pathways Plan for young people leaving care and help to ensure a smooth transition from care to independence. A report to the Corporate Parenting Board in February 2007 summarised the issues relating to access to suitable housing and support for the client group. Those included housing options, availability of properties, choice-based lettings, homelessness and sources of support.

As previously reported to the Board the Pathways team supported approximately twenty young people per year to access independent housing options. The accommodation applied for included supported accommodation projects and general needs housing.

The Pathways teams' Supported Lodging Scheme currently provided eight placements across the Tees Valley area. A young person accommodated within the scheme would be expected to remain until they acquire the necessary skills to sustain a tenancy with a housing provider.

Other supported accommodation options that were available for care leavers and young people aged 16 to 25 years in Middlesbrough included:

- Community Campus '87;
- 7 Park Road North Hostel;
- Single Key;
- Wellington Street Hostel; and
- Hostel accommodation in other local authorities.

Floating support, where a young person received a package to assist them to develop their independent living skills continued to be provided by Community Campus and Tees Valley Housing Group for 16-25 year olds, including care leavers; living in cross tenure; and general needs accommodation within Middlesbrough. As the floating support scheme was not property based, the service could be gradually withdrawn, based on the young person's ability to manage independently, without the need to find move-on accommodation.

There had been increased pressure on accommodation in the last few years due to a number of circumstances such as the introduction of the Choice Based Letting (CBL) scheme and Middlesbrough Council and Erimus regeneration activities. In addition the following factors could further compound the difficulties experienced on meeting demand from care leavers:

- age restrictions imposed by some Registered Social Landlords on properties which were physically suitable for single people but were available only to older single people;
- affordability issues for single young people accessing private rented accommodation and owner occupation due to house price rises over the past three to four years.

The Choice Based Lettings (CBL) scheme operated on a bidding cycle where people applied for properties and were subsequently placed into a banding system. This system had recently been reviewed and care leavers were most likely to be included in bands 2a and 2b.

An assessment is conducted to determine which part of Band 2 would apply to a care leaver seeking accommodation through CBL. Middlesbrough Council were currently leading on the development of a sub regional CBL scheme with other partners in the Tees Valley area. The scheme would place care leavers in the second part of Band 1, behind only those seeking housing due to regeneration or demolition.

There were occasions when it may be necessary for care leavers to make a homeless application to secure accommodation. The current Middlesbrough Homelessness Strategy was being reviewed in preparation for the production of a revised Homelessness Strategy, which must be adopted and published no later than 31 July 2008.

Since the report was submitted to the Corporate Parenting Board in February 2007, the Pathways team had worked with Erimus Housing to develop a protocol that outlined the roles and responsibilities of agencies involved with single young people, and which provided a structured response to problems arising which could potentially result in tenancy breach or failure. In addition, Erimus Housing and a number of other RSLs, have adopted good practices such as ensuring appropriate support was in place prior to any offer of accommodation, as a result of the issue being raised at regular liaison meetings with Housing Services. Housing Services continued to monitor the allocation of property to priority groups.

In discussion, Members expressed satisfaction that the issue had been acknowledged but would welcome more progress. Members raised the possibility of extending the supported lodgings scheme and queried the possible use of the Housing Market Renewal Programme to develop housing options for care leavers.

RECOMMENDED that the Executive be advised to note the information relating to housing issues for looked after young people and care leavers.

ANNUAL INSPECTION OF MIDDLESBROUGH COUNCIL FOSTERING SERVICE

The Fostering Service Manager presented a report to share the findings and outcome of the most recent Ofsted inspection of Middlesbrough's Fostering Service. The inspection took place in October 2007.

Ofsted was the body responsible for ensuring that the Council (and other agencies) was compliant with the National Minimum Standards for fostering services and the related Fostering Service Regulations (2002).

The overall rating for Middlesbrough from the inspection was 'Good' from the range of 'Inadequate', 'Satisfactory', 'Good' or 'Excellent'. The rating indicated that 'this aspect of provision was strong' and was supported by evidence provided by the children, their foster carers and social workers, supervising social workers and the Manager of the service.

The service was rated as 'Good' in the following areas:

- helping children to be healthy;
- protecting children from harm or neglect and helping them stay safe;
- helping children achieve well and enjoy what they do;
- helping children make a positive contribution.

The service was rated as 'satisfactory' in the area of:

- achieving economic wellbeing
- care assessments

The inspector had listed the improvements made by the service since the last inspection as:

- staff files
- schedule 7 monitoring – accidents/illness and death.
- reviews
- safety checks
- NVQ3 up take – were now in partnership with Stockton College and had 16 people
- records of training

It was noted that all but two of the good practice recommendations of the 2006 inspections had been met, the exceptions being related to 'achieving economic well-being' and expediting care assessments.

There were 7 statutory requirements from the 2006 inspection, all of which had been implemented prior to the inspection.

The one statutory requirement that arose from the inspection was to develop a behaviour management policy.

In discussion it was clarified that the satisfactory rating for 'Achieve Economic Well-being' related to the issue of foster carer allowances. Other areas of concern were recording information on files and the emergency placements arising from Police activity. Members confirmed that these issues would be picked up by the Joint Area Review process.

RECOMMENDED that the Executive be advised to note the information relating to the annual inspection of Middlesbrough Council Fostering Service.

BEHAVIOUR MANAGEMENT POLICY MIDDLESBROUGH COUNCIL FOSTERING SERVICE

The Fostering Service Manager presented a report to inform Members of the contents of a 'Behaviour Policy' which was written following the annual fostering inspection of October 2007.

The Ofsted Inspection Report required that the service must prepare a written policy on acceptable measures of control, restraint and discipline of children placed with foster parents.

In the Policy Statement it was noted that the following principles should be observed:

- the well being of the child is paramount;
- every reasonable step should be taken to understand the wishes and feeling of the child;
- the wishes and feelings of the parents/carers should be listened to and recorded;
- in general, behaviour should be managed by good professional relationships being developed between the foster carer and the children and young people for whom they care;
- in so far as possible, a child/young person should experience consistency between home (if appropriate), school, and the foster carer with regard to how behaviour is managed i.e. a 'care team' approach;
- every effort should be made to ensure that the behaviour of one child does not cause unreasonable concern or distress to another;
- every effort would be made to understand why any challenging behaviour occurs;
- appropriate behaviour would be promoted at all times by the clear and expressed approval of the foster carer and, where appropriate, by the use of suitable rewards;
- inappropriate behaviour would be addressed by the clear and expressed disapproval of the foster carer, in a manner which is appropriate to the age and understanding of the child, and in line with agreements with parents and the placing social worker;
- when sanctions were used they would be recorded by the foster carer in their diary and reported to parents/social worker in keeping with the established lines of communication within children looked after procedures;
- physical restraint would be used only as a last resort, for example, when there was immediate danger to the child or another person, or serious risk to the environment in which the incident was taking place.

Further details of the Behaviour Policy were presented to the Board.

In discussion, it was noted that this information was already included in the Foster Carers' Handbook and that carers were trained on behaviour management. The policy had been subject to consultation with carers and was accepted by them.

RECOMMENDED that the Executive be advised to note the information relating to Behaviour Management Policy Middlesbrough Council Fostering Service.

FOSTER CARER RECRUITMENT CAMPAIGN

The Fostering Service Manager presented a report to raise Members' Awareness of the diminishing number of Middlesbrough Council Foster Carers and the current and potential impact of this upon children looked after by Middlesbrough Council. The report aimed to illustrate the recruitment strategy to date, provide details of the proposed campaign and clarify the role that elected Members might play in supporting the recruitment drive.

In January 2008, funding became available for further joint work with Sure Start and it was agreed that it would take the form of an intensive advertising campaign. A range of advertisements and other measures would be put in place as part of the campaign.

The expenditure agreed so far totalled £16,200, however some of the plans have not yet been finalised and the total expenditure on the campaign is likely to be in the region of £25,000.

Whilst there was no guarantee the campaign would result in an increase in applications from prospective foster carers, it was essential that every effort was made to publicise the need to increase the essential resource.

It was noted that elected Members, as the corporate parents of the town's children could help to raise the profile of Foster Care in the town by:

- promoting the need for 'Local Foster Carers for Local Children' in their day to day work within the community, in schools, at residents meetings and in their Ward Surgeries;

- taking part in the Community Roadshow in the Middlesbrough Mall to be held between Thursday 7 March and Sunday 9 March;
- using promotional material on a personal level, e.g. carrying leaflets, flyers, and put a car sticker in their window;
- attend the launch of the campaign (26 March), bringing people who may be able to promote the recruitment campaign and
- maintain ongoing links with the Fostering Service and its carers to ensure that there was 'recruitment and retention momentum'.

In discussion, it was explained that progress had been made in relation to foster carers' allowances and that a number of options were being considered. The need to be diligent when undertaking assessments was emphasised to ensure that only the right kind of people were recruited. Existing carers were developing a local branch of the Foster Carers' Association to protect their interests.

Members paid tribute to the commitment of carers who had been very loyal to Middlesbrough Council and welcomed the campaign to recruit more local carers.

RECOMMENDED that the Executive be advised to note the information relating to the Foster Carer Recruitment Campaign.

SURVEY ON VISITS AND INVOLVEMENT

The Children's Participation Officer presented a report to inform the Board of the outcome of a survey in which children and young people were asked their views on visits by social workers and involvement in decision-making processes.

In June 2000, as a response to the current Waterhouse recommendations, a practice guidance document was issued to all social workers and managers giving the standards to be followed when visiting children looked after. The main requirement was for weekly visits during the first 4 weeks of care and a minimum of monthly visits after that. There were also requirements in relation to:

- talking to the child alone
- making unannounced visits
- seeing the child's bedroom from time to time
- visiting at a time when all members of the household are present

In October 2007, a survey was developed to seek the views of children and young people in relation to visits by social workers and involvement in decision-making processes. The survey was distributed in October to 195 children and young people aged between 5 and 18.

33 survey forms were returned but some children did not complete all of the questions so the numbers did not always match.

25 out of 33 respondents said that their social worker visited between every 2 weeks and every 2 months, of whom 15 said they were visited monthly. 31 respondents commented on what they thought of their social workers visits and of those, 13 were positive (e.g. 'I like them'), 14 were neutral (e.g. 'They are ok.') and 4 were negative (e.g. 'poo')

6 respondents said that their social worker always sees them on their own and 19 that this happens 'sometimes'. 7 said they never see their social worker on their own.

12 respondents said that their social worker sometimes asks to see their bedroom but 19 said this never happens.

18 respondents said that their social worker always visits them before their review and 8 said this sometimes happens. Only 4 said that this never happens. 16 respondents always attend their reviews and 9 sometimes do so. 6 never attend.

12 respondents said their social worker often reminded them that they could complain, 10 said this happened 'sometimes' and 9 said 'never'. 11 were often reminded about access to advocacy; 4 sometimes reminded and 15 said they were never reminded.

The return rate of 17% was within normal limits (15-20%) for a small-scale survey of less than 200 participants. Overall the feedback in relation to visits by social workers and involvement in decision-making seemed reasonable positive.

In discussion, Members suggested that such a survey should be carried out on an annual basis. There was some concern about visiting frequency and further work was proposed. Members also asked that the training for Rota Visitors should be expedited.

RECOMMENDED that the Executive be advised to note the information relating to the survey on visits and involvement.