
CORPORATE PARENTING BOARD

A meeting of the Corporate Parenting Board was held on 19 June 2008.

PRESENT: Councillors McIntyre (Chair), Brunton, Carr, Carter, Kerr, McTigue and P Rogers.

OFFICIALS: K Campbell, C Kendrick, S King, S Little and G Watson.

**** ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:** Mr B Simpson.

**** AN APOLOGY FOR ABSENCE** was submitted on behalf of Councillor B Thompson and Thomas Tolmie.

**** DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

No declarations of interest were made at this point of the meeting.

**** MINUTES**

The minutes of the meeting of the Corporate Parenting Board held on 17 April 2008 were approved as a correct record.

OVERVIEW OF CORPORATE PARENTING & THE CORPORATE PARENTING POLICY & STRATEGY

In the first meeting of the municipal year the Children's Participation Officer gave a presentation detailing the Council's corporate parenting responsibilities and explained the function of the Corporate Parenting Board to its Members.

It was explained that the government's approach to corporate parenting reflected the duty of care a parent would give to his or her own child. The collective responsibility extended to services across the Council to safeguard and promote the life chances of children looked after. The Corporate Parenting Board was an advisory body to the Executive.

The key responsibilities of corporate parents were:

- To keep children and young people safe and healthy;
- To make sure they lived with people who care for them;
- To give them opportunities to grow and learn;
- To ensure they had decent homes as they became independent.

The Children's Participation Officer explained that the term being 'looked after' had legal significance. It defined children who were in the care of the local authority for a continuous period of more than 24 hours.

The Board was informed of the reasons for children being 'looked after'. These included 'Neglect', which may have arisen from parents' life-style choices or other personal difficulties; 'Emotional Abuse' through the lack of consistent parenting or through parental disputes; and 'Physical or Sexual Abuse'. It was explained that children who go through the care system had reduced 'life chances' and poor levels of educational achievement.

The Board were informed that the Mayor was keen for all departments within the Council to take responsibility to ensure that the children's needs were met. The Corporate Parenting Board had responsibilities in developing corporate responses, to provide awareness, advocacy and to listen to children. The Children's Participation Officer explained that rota visits to local residential homes and respite care facilities would take place on a regular basis to ensure that the facilities were acceptable. The message of 'if this were my child' was reiterated.

The Corporate Parenting Policy & Strategy was explained. Of note, the Board were made aware of key elements such as how the local authority promoted children's rights. Other items discussed were education & personal development and the assessment care planning & review processes.

With regards to the health of young people in care it was explained that there was a designated nurse and a paediatrician to deal with their health needs, and annual health assessments were carried out.

The support that young people would receive once they emerged into adulthood was explained. The support provided to young people entering adulthood included:

- Preparation into adulthood;
- Practical, financial & emotional support;
- Keeping in touch;
- Personal Advisers;
- Assessments & Pathway Plans;
- Support to age 24 if in education or training.

Following the presentation a discussion ensued regarding support received for young people leaving care. Issues raised included support for care leavers with learning disabilities, the age at which young people left foster care and accessed to appropriate independent accommodation. It was explained that a Bill was currently going through parliament concerning the issue of young people and the funding for them when entering into adulthood.

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CORPORATE PARENTING BOARD ANNUAL REPORT

The Children's Participation Officer presented a report providing a summary of the work undertaken by the Corporate Parenting Board during the year 2007/2008.

It was explained that the Chair of the Corporate Parenting Board reported to Executive in an advisory capacity and would continue to do so in the future.

During the previous year, the Corporate Parenting Board considered the Government White Paper 'Care Matters: Time for Change' and its implications for Middlesbrough Council. A number of recommendations from the Board were made to the Executive and all were accepted.

The approvals from the Executive were listed. Of note, an annual contribution was made to the Child Trust Funds of children looked after. The amount would initially be £50.00 per annum.

The Board was informed that regular visits were made to residential homes under Regulation 33 of the Children's Homes Regulations. These visits were made to assess the standard and quality of care. When reported back to the Board, it was found that the standard of care and accommodation was good.

Concerns from the previous year included the shortage of foster carers resulting in a lack of choice of placement and the need to recruit and retain foster carers. Another concern revolved around housing for care leavers.

Following the report Members' expressed concern for care leavers finding suitable accommodation and queried the position of social landlords. Suggestions were made to ensure that care leavers had the highest priority when looking for suitable accommodation. When asking about hostel provision, it was explained that one of the problems with placing 'looked after' children in hostel provision was the age range of residents. The Deputy Mayor confirmed that the practice whereby Members reported to him in relation to fulfilling their corporate parenting responsibilities would continue.

RECOMMENDED that the Executive be advised to:

Note the issues relating to corporate parenting.

CHILDREN LOOKED AFTER STRATEGY

The Assistant Director of Intervention & Safeguarding presented a draft report of the Children Looked After Strategy for 2008 to 2009 and the associated action plan.

It was explained that a strategic overview had been established based on analysing trends found in research. Analysis of the data revealed an increase in the number of children and young people becoming 'looked after'. It was stated that there was a sharp increase in children becoming looked after, which had stabilised at figure of 271. The greatest increase occurred in the age groups 1 – 4 and 10 – 15 years. The Board was informed that the concentration of this was in the TS1 and TS3 areas. The causes for children becoming 'looked after' stemmed from either abuse or neglect. These causes were not unique to the locality, but a reflection the national picture.

Family dysfunction occurred most frequently with children between the ages of 10 – 15. One concern was that many children became 'looked after' without previously having any contact with Social Services.

It was stated that Police Protection Orders were volatile from year to year. The police continued to work closely with Social Care Services with regards to Police Protection Orders.

There was an increase in the number of purchased foster placements, particularly in the 10 –15 age range, however it was stated that they couldn't meet the current demand. The purchase of foster placements resulted in an overall increase in the budget for 'looked after' children since 05/06.

The stability of the placements was said to be strong and the JAR inspectors suggested that the service was 'clearly covering the main issues'.

The strategic priorities for 2008 – 2009 were:

- to reduce the number of looked after children;
- to extend the range and type of placements;
- to improve practice in relation to Permanency Orders.

Following the report the Assistant Director of Safeguarding and Intervention discussed elements of the associated Action Plan for 2008/2009. The following points were raised:

- It was explained that Special Guardianship represented a 'half-way-house' between fostering and adoption and that this opportunity was open to family members.
- The role of the Virtual Head Teacher was explained as being to champion the education of children looked after and to challenge schools. There were 11 pilot schemes currently in operation across the country to develop good practice. In response to a query, it was explained that the designated teachers in the academies were exceptionally good and that the academies responded rapidly to requests for information.

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- The thresholds for becoming looked after were constantly under review in particular with respect to abuse and neglect. It was explained that the Families First scheme was working very effectively, on a multi-agency basis, to assess the parenting capacity of drug using parents. The Police automatically contacted the Children, Families & Learning Department when their actions (e.g. a raid) impacted on children. Ultimately, it was the Courts that decided, on the basis of evidence presented to them, whether a child would become looked after.
 - The educational attainments of children looked after were affected by their experiences prior to becoming looked after. However, in the last year all but two young people out of twenty-eight in Year 11 exceeded their predicted outcomes. The Care Matters White Paper made provision for children to receive a Personal Education Allowance if they were in danger of falling behind. Decisions in respect of the allowance would be made via the Personal Education Plan process and possibly be used for the provision of one-to-one support, private tuition and the purchase of specialist equipment or lessons such as musical instruments or dancing classes.

RECOMMENDED that the Executive be advised to:

Endorse the approach being adopted to reduce the numbers of children looked after and to achieve the best possible outcomes for those who do become looked after.

PERFORMANCE DATA

The Planning & Strategic Commissioning Officer gave a presentation detailing the performance of Children Families & Learning with respect to 'Children Looked After' when compared to the Council's statistical neighbours and the national average.

The information, taken as at March 31 2008, illustrated how the number of 'Children Looked After' had risen in 2008 to a figure of 271. Comparisons were made with statistics from previous years.

The number of 'Children Looked After' in Middlesbrough, per 10,000 of the population aged under 18, was well above the national average with a figure of 74.2 compared to the national average of 54.3 for 2006-2007 (latest comparative data).

Statistics were given for 'Children Looked After' by age. The biggest increases of 'Children Looked After' occurred in the ages of 10 to 5 - from 112 in 2007 to 120 in 2008 - and ages 1 to 4 from 22 in 2007 to 49 in 2008.

When looking at the ethnic origin of 'Children Looked After', other than white, it was shown that the ratio of mixed origin was much higher than other ethnic groups. It was explained that it was difficult to place children of mixed race with foster carers of a similar ethnicity.

Statistics based on the number of children who were adopted each year revealed a dramatic reduction. The graph illustrated that since 2005 there was a reduction in the amount of children being adopted. The 2008 figure represented only 4% of 'Looked After Children'. It was stated that the target was to increase that figure to 8%.

Statistics showed that 70% of children who were 'looked after' for 2 years plus had stable placements, which was seen as a positive result.

When looking at final warnings and convictions of Children Looked After aged 10 and above, Middlesbrough was below the national average and the statistical neighbour, which was also seen as a positive result.

In discussion, Members were informed that the department was more likely to have worked with the families of children under the age of four than with those with children aged over 10 prior to them becoming looked after. The likelihood of a child being adopted declined with age and national advertising campaigns to promote adoption and fostering had a moderate effect on local recruitment.

In relation to children missing 25 or more days of education, some were placed at home with their families where it is less easy to oversee attendance and others were placed out of the local area where it may be difficult to secure a school place. The local education authority had a policy that advised against children being taken out of school for holidays, but it was the governing body that decided whether their school would give permission.

There was policy and procedure on Kinship Care and where children were placed with relatives, they may receive some financial and other support depending on individual arrangements.

RECOMMENDED that the Executive be advised to:

Note the performance data relating to 'children looked after'.

USAGE OF NATIONAL YOUTH ADVOCACY SERVICE - APRIL 2007 TO MARCH 2008

The Children's Participation Officer presented a report to inform the Board of the use made by children and young people of the advocacy services provided under contract by the National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS).

In the year 2000, NYAS was contracted to provide advocacy services to 'Children Looked After' and 'Children In Need'. The service was provided to children and young people across Teesside & Darlington under a joint arrangement between the five local authorities. Currently NYAS was an independent national organisation, which operated through a network of locally-based Advocates, an online web site, free phone help line or text message service to provide confidential legal advice and representation.

Across the Tees Valley in 2007/2008, there were 108 referrals. Within Middlesbrough there were 21 new referrals 13 of which were made by the child or young person themselves. Issues with placement and contact with family were those raised most often.

RECOMMENDED that the Executive be advised to:

Note the information relating to usage of the National Youth Advocacy Service.

CORPORATE PARENTING BOARD WORK PROGRAMME

The Children's Participation Officer introduced topics for the Corporate Parenting Board Work Programme. They were:

- Housing for Care Leavers
- Sport & Leisure
- Culture