

CORPORATE PARENTING BOARD

A meeting of the Corporate Parenting Board was held on 31 July 2008.

PRESENT: Councillor McIntyre (Chair), Councillors Brunton (Vice Chair), Carr, S Carter, J Hobson, Kerr, McTigue and B Thompson.

OFFICIALS: S Little, T Moody, J Wilson, J Yelder

PRESENT AS OBSERVER: B Simpson (Foster Carer)

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE BY INVITATION: Councillor McPartland

****APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Councillors Dryden and P Rogers

****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 19th June 2008 were submitted and approved as a correct record.

FAMILY PLACEMENT PANEL ACTIVITY REPORT OCTOBER 2007 TO MARCH 2008

The Family Placement Service Manager presented a report to inform the Corporate Parenting Board of an overview of the activity of Middlesbrough's Family Placement Panel during the period 1 October 2007 to 31 March 2008.

It was reported that each local authority that provided a fostering service and acted as an adoption agency was required to establish a panel consisting of social work practitioners experienced in adoption and family placement matters, elected Members and independent persons. The composition of the panel was prescribed by the Adoption Agencies Regulations 2005 and the Fostering Services Regulation 2002.

The panel met fortnightly for half a day and comprised of 10 members, including officers from the Legal Department, Members Office and the Family Placement Service. It was noted that the Panel was currently meeting weekly until September because of the heavy workload.

The Panel considered the following issues:

- applications from prospective adopters;
- plans for children to be placed for adoption;
- proposals to place a specific child or children for adoption by particular prospective adopters;
- reviews of the approval of prospective adopters;
- applications from prospective foster carers;
- reviews of the approval of foster carers;
- plans for children to be placed in long-term foster care;
- proposals to place a specific child or children in a long-term foster placement with particular foster carers;
- termination of the approval of foster carers; and
- applications for approval as supported lodgings.

The Panel met on 13 occasions during the period from 1 October 2007 to 31 March 2008. It was noted that the matters considered by the Panel were often complex and at times meetings could be lengthy and demanding.

The number of items considered in each category during the 6 month period were as follows:

Number of adopters approved	6
Number of children whose adoption plans were approved	9
Number of children whose placements with adoptive parents were approved	4
Number of foster carers approved	6
Number of foster carers who were de-registered	5
Number of children whose long-term fostering plans were approved	6
Number of children whose placements with long-term foster carers were approved	5
Numbers of foster carer reviews that were considered	24
Number of supported lodging approved	1
Number of reports which were deferred due to concerns over the quality of the report	2
Number of reports presented for consultation or update on a specific issue	1
Total number of items considered	69

It was noted that five foster carers were de-registered during the period. Two of these came about because the foster carers resigned following the end of a long-term placement. One because the carers had been inactive for some time and had not responded to attempts to contact them; one because the child they were fostering became subject to a residence order; and one because there were concerns about the standard of care provided.

A table of the last 18 months was presented to the Board for comparison.

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

Tribute was paid to the commitment shown by the elected Members who had sat on the Panel. It was noted that there could be as much as eight hours required reading in preparation for the Panel meeting followed by three to four hours attendance at the meeting itself. A question came from the Board as to what the procedure was regarding screening potential panel members. It was reported that there was a rigorous approach to recruitment, with a standard personal specification which had to be met. There was an induction process that includes candidates being obliged to go on site visits and observe the Panel before fulfilling the requirements of the post. There was also an obligatory annual training day.

NOTED

MIDDLESBROUGH COUNCIL ADOPTION SERVICE ANNUAL REPORT 2007 – 2008

The Family Placement Service Manager presented a report to inform the Board with information about the activity of Middlesbrough Council Adoption Service during the year 2007/2008 and plans for the year 2008/2009. The report also sought formal approval for the Statement of Purpose for Middlesbrough Council Adoption Service for 2008/2009 and the Children's Guide to Middlesbrough Council Adoption Service for 2008/2009.

The Local Authority Adoption Services (England) Regulation 2003 and the National Minimum Standards for Local Authority Adoption Services were brought into force on 30th April 2003. One of the requirements of the Regulations and National Minimum Standards was that each adoption service should produce a Statement of Purpose and a Children's Guide to the Adoption Service.

A summary of the main areas of activity during the year were presented as follows:

Number of enquiries received	84
Number of requests for initial visits	23
Number of application	9
Number of adopters approved	14
Number of children whose adoption plans were approved	18
Number of children matched with adoptive families	17

Number of adoption orders made 9

It was noted that staff and structural changes had affected the Adoption Service during the year. The previous team manager left the service in September 2007, and following her departure the Service Manager carried out a review of the structure of the whole of the Family Placement Service. The result was to create an additional post at Senior Practitioner level so that, instead of one Senior Practitioner being shared between the Adoption Team and the Fostering Team, each team had its own Senior Practitioner who was responsible to the Family Placement Manager.

The level of activity relation to adoption plans and placement of children had been at an average level during the year, however the number of adoption orders granted was lower than usual. This reflected the fact that there were a lower number of placements made in the year 2006/2007. In addition, some of the placements made during 2007/2008 were of older children and sibling groups of 3 children where both the adopters and the children were likely to need a longer period of adjustment before the time was right to apply for an adoption order.

Middlesbrough Adoption Service had continued to work in partnership with Stockton, Redcar & Cleveland and Hartlepool Council Adoption Services to provide a support group for adopters who were waiting for a placement.

In the forthcoming year there were plans to develop post-adoption support services by creating an additional post of Adoption Support Worker within the Adoption Team. The main responsibilities of the post would be to operate the adoption post box service, which was an area of work that expanded every year; to provide support to birth parents in relation to post box and other contact issues; and to be involved in tracing birth records where appropriate.

Following publication of new guidance from the British Association for Adoption and Fostering about the need to protect children looked after from environmental tobacco smoke, there was a need to update the Adoption Service's policy in relation to the issue which was currently in draft format.

The Statement of Purpose for 2008/2009 for Middlesbrough Adoption service was attached as Appendix 1. It contained information regarding:

- principles, aims, objectives and functions of the Adoption Service;
- organisational structure;
- management and staffing details;
- the services and facilities provided;
- a summary of the procedures and processes used by the Service in relation to recruitment, assessment, approval, and of prospective adopters;
- details of monitoring systems; and
- a summary of the complaints procedure and contact details for Ofsted.

A question came from the Board as to what was the level of post adoption care. It was reported that care continued life-long and specific needs were identified as part of an adoption support plan. The plan was monitored by Independent Reviewing Officers in Middlesbrough for three years following the adoption. After that time, adopters could apply for support to the local authority area in which they live.

It was reported that in the next year efforts would be focused on recruiting adopters who would be willing to adopt older children as part of National Adoption Week in November.

Members commented on the clarity and usefulness of the Children's Guide in answering questions about adoption.

RECOMMENDED 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 2008-2009; and
- (c) agree that the next annual review of these documents should take place in April 2009, or as soon as possible thereafter.

MIDDLESBROUGH COUNCIL FOSTERING SERVICE – ANNUAL REPORT FOR 2007 - 2008

The Family Placement Service Manager presented a report informing the Board about the activity of Middlesbrough Council Fostering Service during the year 2007/2008 and plans for the year 2008/2009. The report also sought formal approval for the Statement of Purpose for Middlesbrough Council Fostering Service for 2008/2009 and the Children's Guide to Middlesbrough Council Fostering Service for 2008/2009. The Fostering Services Regulations 2002 and the National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services were brought into force on 1st April 2002 ensuring each fostering service produced a Statement of Purpose and a Children's Guide to the Fostering Service.

A summary of the activity of the Fostering Service during 2007/2008 was presented as follows:

Number of enquiries received	193
Number of requests for initial visits	54
Number of applications	4
Number of foster carers approved	6
Number of foster carers de-registered	9
Total number of approved foster carers on 31 st March 2007	96
Number of children in Foster Care on 31 st March 2007	128
Number of children whose long-term fostering plans were approved	9
Number of children matched with long-term foster carers	8

It was reported that staff shortages and structural changes had affected the Service during the year. Following the Adoption Team Manager leaving the Service the Service Manager carried out a review of the structure of the whole Service, resulting in creating an additional post at Senior Practitioner level, thus giving Adoption and Fostering their own Senior Practitioner.

The Fostering Service provided a programme of post-approval training for registered foster carers during 2007/2008 and it was a high priority. The topic for the training sessions were:

- Healthy Living – June 2007
- Internet Safety – September 2007
- Behavioural Management – December 2007
- Every Child Matters – March 2008

In addition to these quarterly sessions, foster carers could also attend courses as part of Middlesbrough Children, Families & Learning in-house training programme. A programme of First Aid training had also been provided by St John Ambulance specifically for Middlesbrough foster carers with sessions held in May, September and November.

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills carried out the 6th annual inspection of Middlesbrough Fostering Service in October 2006. A wide range of checks and interviews indicated generally positive results, and recognised the contribution of foster carers and their supervising social workers. Some issues were identified as areas for improvement and an action plan has been devised and implemented to address these issues.

The recruitment and retention of foster carers had continued to be a challenge during 2007/2008. There had been a net decrease in the number of registered foster carers for the fourth year in succession and a low number of applications. On the positive side, the joint work with Sure Start had continued and during March and April the two services worked jointly on a high-profile recruitment campaign. The results were a significant increase in the number of enquiries but unfortunately there had not been the same level of increase in the number of people who have the potential to meet the needs of children looked after.

The plans and issues for 2008/2009 included support and training to all registered foster carers, in a bid to value and therefore retain them. Training planned for 2008/2009 included sessions on Care Matter and Emotional Well-being; Education of Children Looked After; and Attachment. The Programme of First Aid training would continue, and other courses from internal and external providers would be made available when appropriate.

Other key tasks were:

- implementing a new set of standards issued by the Children's Workforce Development Council, relating to the training and support of foster carers;
- recruitment and retention of foster carers;
- addressing the issue of allowances paid to Middlesbrough foster carers;
- developing a new database which was compatible with SWIFT and ICS;
- updating the Fostering Service's policy in relation to the issue of protecting children looked after from tobacco smoke;
- the Interim Service Manager would carry out a review of the structure and work of the service, other plans may be developed during the year as a result of this.

The Statement of Purpose for Middlesbrough Fostering Service 2008/2009 was attached as Appendix 1 to the report. It contained information about:

- the principles, aims and objectives of the Fostering Service;
- the standards of care;
- management structure and staffing details;
- number of carers and number of children placed;
- numbers of complaints and their outcomes;
- the services and facilities provided; and
- 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 2008/2009 was attached as Appendix 2.

The two documents were now being presented to the Board for the 6th annual review and sought formal approval.

A question was raised debating whether foster carers were leaving Middlesbrough Council for financial reasons. It was stated that foster carers were not purely motivated by money but it was acknowledged that the current levels of allowances were inadequate and were being reviewed. By way of example it was mentioned that the car mileage rate had not been changed since 1999 and allowances had not increased since 2000. In response to a question, it was clarified that agency foster carers were being used which incurred additional costs.

RECOMMENDED 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 2008-2009; and
- (c) agree that the next annual review of these documents should take place in April 2009, or as soon as possible thereafter.

FOSTER CARER RECRUITMENT CAMPAIGN

The Family Placement Service Manager presented a report informing the Board of the outcomes of a recent fostering recruitment campaign and the need for ongoing efforts to increase the number of foster carers in Middlesbrough.

The underlying approach of the strategy was to drip feed information to the local population, using different forms of publicity throughout the year. The budget was limited, around £5,000 per annum, which had meant that the amount of advertising had been limited and the presentation of written material had been basic.

The strategy did, however, produce a significant increase in the number of enquiries, applications and approvals for the first three to four years after implementation. The strategy had become less effective in the last 3-4 years and the service experienced a net loss of carers.

Since the implementation of the original recruitment strategy in 2000, the context in which Middlesbrough Fostering Service operated had undergone a dramatic change. A rapid growth in independent fostering agencies had increased the variety of agencies to choose from. It was also felt that demographic factors, both national (e.g. the changes in family structures and the role of women, pressure to take paid employment and the low status of volunteering) and local (high levels of deprivation and a falling population) affected the recruitment of foster carers.

In January 2008, funding became available for further joint work with Sure Start and it was agreed that this would take the form of an intensive advertising campaign. The following advertisements and other measures were put in place as part of the campaign, which started in March and ran for 3 months:

- Adshell posters at 10 locations in Middlesbrough for 4 weeks from 24th March
- An advert in the Middlesbrough Football Club programme for each home game
- An advert in the Middlesbrough Herald and Post
- A 2 page 'advertorial' in the Middlesbrough Evening Gazette
- A Community Roadshow in Middlesbrough Mall from Monday 3rd March to Sunday 9th March, consisting of a display stand with a multi-media presentation and with leaflets and other promotional items being handed out to the public
- A radio event on Century Radio
- A launch even which was held in conjunction with the re-branding of the Child Care Information Centre to 'The Family Information Service'
- A radio advert on TFM, featuring contributions from Middlesbrough foster carers, which ran during Foster Care Fortnight in May
- The purchase of 2 additional portable display banners
- The purchase of information leaflets and a DVD for use at information evenings and other promotional events
- The re-design of the Fostering Information Pack so it was available in full colour layout, using the skills of a graphic designer

The total expenditure on the campaign was £30,620.

Information was presented to the Board displaying figures for enquiries about fostering and for requests for initial visits during the first 6 months of the year.

The campaign produced a significant increase in the number of enquiries about fostering; the total number of enquiries during the 3 months of the campaign was 96, as compared with 40 during the other 3 months. However, the number of people who followed through their interest by requesting an initial visit after receiving an information pack did not show the same level of increase; there were 23 initial visits resulted from the campaign, compared with 14 during the other 3 months.

It was reported that the two-page 'advertorial' in the Evening Gazette had been the most successful, but was the most costly. It was noted that additional funding to support recruitment had been identified.

NOTED