



CORPORATE PARENTING BOARD

11TH SEPTEMBER 2008

LOCAL AUTHORITY PLEDGE TO CHILDREN LOOKED AFTER

**MIKE CARR- EXECUTIVE MEMBER FOR CHILDREN, FAMILIES &
LEARNING**

**GILL ROLLINGS – EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF
CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND LEARNING**

PURPOSE OF REPORT

1. The purpose of this report is to inform the Corporate Parenting Board of the government's proposals in relation to a pledge to be made by local authorities to children looked after and care leavers, and for establishing a Children in Care Council. It also identifies the action taken to date and proposes a way forward in Middlesbrough.

BACKGROUND & CONSULTATION

Pledge

2. The Care Matters Green Paper (October 2006) first introduced the idea of a pledge to be made by Local Authorities to the children that they look after (and of a Children in Care Council). The pledge would clearly set out the services and support that all children in care can expect to receive. Following extensive consultation, including with children and young people in Middlesbrough (see Appendix 1), the White Paper, Care Matters: Time for Change (June 2007) identified the following core elements of a pledge:
 - A commitment to involve children in decisions which affect them and to take account of their wishes and expressed feelings about the services they receive.
 - Qualified social workers for every child in care with clear arrangements in place for the child in care to contact his/her social worker as necessary

- Effective assessment of individual needs and an up to date care plan based on those needs
- A placement with carers who can meet their needs
- Contact with siblings and birth parents in line with their care plan
- Regular reviews in which children will be enabled to participate meaningfully (particularly for disabled children with communication difficulties)
- Services which recognise the diverse ethnic and cultural needs of the children
- Access to advocacy services if children have a complaint
- An Independent Reviewing Officer to ensure children's rights are upheld
- Access to high quality free early years provision at age 3 and 4
- A place at a good school
- A designated teacher in school to ensure high quality support in school
- Details of support available to participate in positive leisure time activities
- Support to reduce absence from school
- Help to catch up with school work if they fall behind
- Regular assessments of their health (physical and emotional)
- Details of support available when they move on from care
- The support young people can expect when entering further and higher education
- How the local authority will support young people seeking employment, including employment with training.

3. In Care Matters: Time to Deliver (March 2008), the pledge is described as a key communication tool to be developed in partnership with children and young people. It should reflect the perceptions of children and young people about the parenting they need. Each child and young person's care plan or pathway plan should reflect how the commitments made in the pledge would be delivered for that individual child.

4. This view reflects the findings of the national 'What Makes the Difference' (WMTD) project, which has developed a booklet for local authorities on developing their pledge. This builds on national consultation with children and young people and on the experiences of local authorities that have already made some progress on their pledge. The key messages from the project are:

- The pledge should be developed in partnership with children and young people.
- It should reflect the Every Child Matters outcomes framework and should be based on individual needs.
- It should be regarded as a clear, specific commitment by the local authority to each child or young person - a contract.
- The commitments within the pledge should be incorporated into individual care plans and pathway plans.
- Children and young people should be consulted in all decisions about their life and have their voices heard.
- Delivery of the pledge should be monitored via care planning and review processes and by other mechanisms developed in partnership with children and young people.

- The content of the pledge should be reviewed annually by children and young people in partnership with the local authority.
- As corporate parents, all services within the local authority and partner agencies must understand the purpose, content and significance of the pledge.
- The pledge should be reflected in the local Children and Young People's Plan.
- Children and young people should be given real power to enforce the pledge and have a direct line of influence to the people who govern the local authority.

Children in Care Council

5. The government suggested that a 'Children in Care Council' should be made up of a rotating group of children in care, through which children's views would be collected and passed directly to the Director of Children's Services. The views collected by this council would inform an annual stock take of services. The Director of Children's Services would work with the Children in Care Council to develop an annual feedback mechanism to ensure that every child has the opportunity to provide their views to the Director. The Children in Care Council was identified as a way of enabling regular, good quality dialogue about developing and delivering services.

6. The findings of the 'What Makes the Difference' project suggest that the use of a council or forum would be crucial to the success of the pledge and would enhance accountability for the pledge within the local authority. However, it is also recognised that a council, forum or other groups should not be the only mechanisms that local authorities use to interact with children and young people and involve them in the creation of the pledge. Where a Children in Care Council is to be developed, it is suggested that the main requirements would be:
 - The group should be led by children and young people; should have a clear agenda; should meet regularly; and should be self-determining in relation to frequency, location and format.
 - The group should be supported by staff and should aim to be self-supporting with minimal intervention by staff.
 - All children and young people should be encouraged to participate, ensuring that those who are under-represented or marginalised have equal access and opportunity to participate.
 - Children and young people should be supported to develop the skills needed to enhance their participation in the group and their capacity to represent the group and other children and young people.
 - The group should have clear lines of communication and interaction with appropriate staff including staff to support the running of the group, appropriate service managers and particularly with the Director of Children's Services and the Lead Member for Looked After Children. This interaction would be essential to the success of the pledge.
 - The local authority should ensure that all services and partner agencies are aware of the significance of the group and the role that it plays in corporate parenting decision-making processes.

Performance Framework

7. In Care Matters: Time to Deliver (March 2008), the government identifies the Public Service Agreements and the National Indicator set as the key mechanisms for assessing how well local authorities are improving outcomes for children in care. There are also plans to institute an annual stock take led by the relevant minister and a rolling programme of Ofsted inspections that will focus on outcomes for children in care.

Action to date in Middlesbrough

8. Middlesbrough has had a Corporate Parenting Policy and Strategy in place since 2000 that was updated in January 2008 to clarify the links with the Every Child Matters outcomes framework and the new National Indicators. This policy and strategy provides a strategic framework for the development of the pledge. The document sets out the local authority's intentions in relation to:
 - Children's rights and children's involvement
 - Assessment, care planning & review
 - Placement
 - Education & personal development
 - Health
 - Support into adulthood
9. Staff have supported and enabled children and young people to take part in national consultation activities on Care Matters such as those supported by Government Office North East and the 'What Makes the Difference' project. Their views, alongside those of other children and young people have influenced the development of the government's proposals. The outcomes of these activities have been reported, via the Corporate Parenting Board (15/2/2007 & 17/4/2008) to the Executive (24/7/2007 & 19/8/2008).
10. Since 2005, the Every Child Matters outcomes framework has been used to present information to the Corporate Parenting Board and developments relating to Care Matters have also regularly been presented to Members. In relation to the Pledge, the Corporate Parenting Board was keen to ensure that the whole Council takes ownership of the pledge and that it is seen as a real promise between the Council and individual children looked after. The need to be inclusive was emphasised, as was the need to reflect individual needs, as set out within care plans (Corporate Parenting Board 17/4/2008).
11. A small officer working group has been set up and an action plan has been developed that proposes a two stage approach: firstly, to raise awareness of the pledge and the children in care council, and secondly, to plan and implement a series of activities to develop the pledge in conjunction with children and young people. In the course of developing the pledge, it is hoped that children and young people will be identified who are interested in getting involved in a children in care council. The aim is to produce a draft pledge by January 2009.

12. An initial meeting has taken place with the After Care Group to discuss the idea of the pledge and to ask for their views on a draft publicity leaflet. The young people chose to use this opportunity to give their views on the issues to be included in a pledge for Middlesbrough. Those views are attached at Appendix 2.

OPTION APPRAISAL/RISK ASSESSMENT

13. The government expects all local authorities to develop a pledge to children looked after and care leavers, and a mechanism for developing and maintaining a dialogue with children and young people for whom it has corporate parenting responsibility.
14. Whilst 'doing nothing' is one possible option, such an approach is likely to impact adversely on our performance in the annual ministerial stock take of services for children looked after and the rolling programme of Ofsted inspections of how local authorities are improving outcomes for children in care.

FINANCIAL, LEGAL AND WARD IMPLICATIONS

15. In the 2008/2009 financial year, Middlesbrough has been allocated £148,000 under the Care Matters grant funding, which covers the 2008-11 Comprehensive Spending Review period. A budget of £4,000 has been set aside in 2008-2009 to support the development of the pledge and the children in care council.
16. There are no immediate legal implications arising from this report. Services for children looked after cover all Wards so this report will be of interest to all Members.

RECOMMENDATIONS

17. It is recommended that the Corporate Parenting Board advise the Executive to:
 - a). discuss the implications of developing a Local Authority Pledge to children looked after and a Children in Care Council.
 - b). consider the most appropriate governance arrangements, in particular linkages between this work and the work of the Corporate Parenting Board and partner agencies.

REASONS

18. A clear commitment from senior managers, elected Members and partner agencies is essential to making the pledge a genuine promise to children and young people in care and leaving care in Middlesbrough. The local authority will be held accountable through inspection and corporate assessment processes for its performance in relation to this issue.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

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

- Care Matters: Transforming the Lives of Children and Young People in Care (DfES October 2006)
- Care Matters: Time for change (DfES, June 2007)
- Care Matters: Time to Deliver (DCSF, ADCS & LGA March 2008)
- Making the Difference.... Putting the care back into corporate parenting (Rainer 'What Makes the Difference? Project' 2008)

Author: Sue Little, Children's Participation Officer
Tel No: 01642 728706

Address: 1st Floor Vancouver House, Gurney Street, Middlesbrough, TS1 1EL
Website: <http://www.middlesbrough.gov.uk>

APPENDIX 1

What some children and young people from Middlesbrough said about Care Matters in 2006

These are the views of 12 children and young people, aged between 6 and 18 years, captured via a government questionnaire that was distributed in October 2006.

1. What are the most important 'pledges' (promises) that the Government should make to children and young people in care?

- To do their very best for all children in care.
- To look after me and make sure that my needs are met.
- That they will put people in care with people nice.
- I think a choice of placement and to be able to get support and exercise.
- A choice of placements.

- To see them and make sure they are alright.
- Regular checks from social workers but the children in care with the social workers on their own.

- I think I live a normal life but I think the government should make a stronger stance on bullying at school.

- Give a membership card for local activities (e.g. swimming pools, tennis pitches etc.)
- I think there should be more, safer clubs and after school activities. I am happy with my mum and dad (named) because they take care of all my needs.
- Regular health and dental checks. A choice of when to move on from care up to the age of 18.

- A consistent adult - this would someone like a social worker or carer who does not change. A good settled placement that is right for each child. A place at a good school that helps each child to do their best. More support after school. Giving young people a say in when they want to leave care and helping them to move in a safe way. The government also wants to give children in care the right to be listened to. [NB this is text taken directly from the consultation document]

9. What could be done to help children take part in sports and other things going on near where they live?

- They should advertise things.
- Make the streets safer. Open sports and social clubs and provide passes.
- Put social services fun days, sports days, cross country. Fund raising, e.g. litter picking.
- Run more sports centres
- Activities, e.g. football, rock climbing
- To make more facilities available for people with behaviour problems and learning disabilities
- Give membership cards for people in London as well.
- You can give us London passes to go into leisure centres and swimming lessons. Or you can give us vouchers at least.

13. What more should be done to give children in care more say in decisions that affect them?

- They should be told what is going on and what affects them.
- Ask them questions
- A day of fun then ask in a fun way whether it should be done or not.
- Take them to PEP and Review meetings
- Should be told everything
- Send out some papers to get them to fill in questions
- Just ask questions
- Be listened to - most kids don't get listened to
- They should get someone to come and see them for at least 1 hour a week if they feel like they aren't getting listened to.

15. Are there other things that you think could be done to make the priorities in this Green Paper work?

Yes 4
No 3
Not sure 4

- To make sure that things are explained easier.
- Social workers coming to see us with leaflets and info on behaviour clubs
- Make less paper work for children in care.
- Make everyone do comments.

17. What do you think the Government's new rules on care plans should say?

- I think they should be kept up to date and about what they want to do in their care time.
- What's best for the child and to keep the child safe.
- I think that children should be able to sleep out.
- All children must be taken from the streets
- Care plans should be about my needs
- They should always listen to what we have to say and always give help to my carer.
- Children should get more support. Foster carers should get more money to support the kids.
- How's school? What's been happening? How are you? How are you and the family and kids been?
- Listen to what the children have to say.

18. Do you think that the independent advocates should be for children who have no contact with their family or for all children in care?

Children with no contact 2

All children in care 8

- If they want an independent advocate then they should have one but should also give a reason for why they want one.
- I have my new mum and dad.
- Children with no contact, because all children in care are not for big things some are just for things like arguments.
- All children in care, because it is not fair for one type of children.
- All children in care, because everyone needs them.

24. Should young people be able to say 'no' to moving on from care, before 18, if they do not feel they are ready?

Yes 12

No

Not sure

- Yes because it is up to them if they want to leave care or not.
- Because some need more time than others.
- Because you class foster parents as your parents.
- Yes, I want to stay longer.
- Yes, because it is your decision
- Yes because they might end to live on the streets.

Care Leavers

These are the views of seven young people. This consultation took the form of two sessions held at Park Road North in November 2006. Four of the young people then went on to take part in a regional consultation event. They commented on each of the government's proposals:

1. **A choice of good placements (with help from their social worker)**
 - Every young child needs a good placement and have a choice if they feel that a placement offered is not for them
 - Young people should go and see people and placements before moving in
 - I think that it is right because you don't want to go somewhere you don't like
 - Foster Carers should teach young people more about independence

2. **Access to support from their social worker, 24 hrs a day, 7 days a week or an "out of hours" contact**
 - Its good to talk
 - Yes. When you need to talk to someone
 - Yes in case of an emergency
 - I would like Social Work support in my own area
 - Good idea as young people always want someone to talk to
 - It's not that good because if you phone a social worker you don't know, you don't know if you can trust that worker and some people don't like to talk about their problems over the phone

3. **The right to a minimum amount of sport and leisure activities (e.g. 4hours per week)**
 - Good idea. Young people should have access to leisure cards and discounts
 - Good idea because young people need to meet new people and do new things
 - Yes. Young people to get discounts on sport and leisure activities

4. **Regular Health and dental checks**
 - Yes. No pressure to go though
 - Yes more support with these
 - Yes, as some people have to pay so they don't go, as they can't afford the cost.

5. **A chance to work as a volunteer**
 - Good idea. Listen to what we think and share our experiences to help others
 - Good idea as some new things to do and gain new qualifications
 - Yes it's a good thing, goes well on C.V's and could lead to further opportunities

6. **Having someone to act as their personal champion and speak on their behalf (if that's what they want)**
 - This is a good idea as some young people are not confident at speaking to new people
 - Yes. Young people need people to believe in them
 - All social workers should do that anyway
 - Once over 16, we can speak for ourselves

7. **A choice of when to move on from care (up to age 18)**
 - Good idea and it does happen - we all have leave sometime
 - I think it should be up to 25 years old.

8. **The right to be involved in a Council for children in care to tell the local authority their views**
 - It is a good idea as groups get their point across
 - Yes as we are the experts
 - Definitely - the council need to listen to young people so they can do more for them

Other Ideas/comments

- Give money when needed
- More help with housing and money
- Help with furniture or household problems
- Young people should be given more chances if they get into trouble with the Police
- No need to tell Teachers
- More preparation for the transition to independence (more thorough)
- Please pledge to help young people make more of their lives with regards to education, training and employment
- "Believe in us"

APPENDIX 2

After Care Group Meeting 5th August 2008

Four young people attended this meeting. A discussion on the pledge under the Every Child Matters outcomes produced the following ideas:

Stay Safe

- Keep the streets safe from gangs
- SW/PA to ask us about our friends
- Help us to do a safety assessment of our houses (Provide smoke alarms)
- Ask us if we feel safe in our relationships
- Stop us being harassed, persecuted, intimidated, made to feel vulnerable
- Be there for us when we take risks & make mistakes
- Give us information that helps to keep us safe

Be Healthy

- Free Gym pass up to the age of 25 (free access to X4)
- Provide the same for young people who don't live in Middlesbrough
- Advertise activities for young people more e.g. youth clubs
- Easier access to contraceptive services. Prevent teenage pregnancy.
- Opportunity to see health staff in a familiar place
- Need a choice about who to talk to
- Fast access to counselling (different sorts) i.e. drug and alcohol, self-harm, sexual abuse, relationships
- Food hygiene & health & safety
- Personal hygiene, self care
- Annual health checks post 18 (MOT). Up to 21.
- Tell us we look great everyday
- Believe in us
- Trust us
- A GP of our choice

Enjoy & Achieve (Most important)

- Help us to make our dreams real
- Make us feel important
- Treat us with respect
- Help us to believe that we can be successful (start early so we have time to learn)
- Talk to us about our future & help us to see how we can get there
- Do thing in small steps, let us start work or college gradually

- Tell us what we are entitled to so we don't have to be on benefits. Tell us in good time, not when its too late.
- Help us to understand who we are & where we came from
- Help us to understand other people
- Provide activities that we enjoy, for each young person to be in a group with other young people in care, no awkward questions, like being part of a big extended family

Make a Positive Contribution

- Ask us to choose the staff (interviews) but ask well in advance & give us training
- Give us feedback that shows that you have listened to us
- Tell every young person that they can get involved and have their say
- Children in care council - need support from an adult, support for young people to take part (preparation)
- Have groups for different ages. Agree on ideas & issues before meeting the adults (one representative from each age range).

Achieve Economic Well-Being

- Contact with foster carers after you leave
- Provide free transport
- Support from foster carers to say if a young person is doing ok (or not)
- Provide funding to help set up a business
- Extra support to decide what to do when you leave school (an extra push)
- Housing: better accommodation in better areas. Not being forced to move away, better condition, better state of repair, better decorated, homely, keep promises, practical help to do decorating, put up curtains etc
- SW/PA to go with young people to shop on pay-day
- Healthy food, cooking skills
- A clothing allowance like a setting up home grant for young people on benefits (once or twice a year)