

CORPORATE PARENTING BOARD

A meeting of the Corporate Parenting Board was held on 6 August 2009.

PRESENT: Councillors Brunton, Biswas, Budd, Dryden, McPartland (as substitute for Councillor McIntyre).

OFFICERS: S Harker, S Little, N Pocklington and J Wilson.

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE: B Simpson and S Percival.

****CHAIR – APPOINTMENT FOR MEETING**

In the absence of the Chair, Councillor Brunton chaired the meeting.

****APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**

Apolo­gies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillors McIntyre and P Rogers.

****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 25 June 2009 were taken as read and approved as a correct record.

CURRENT STATISTICS - UPDATE

The Assistant Director Safeguarding, informed the Corporate Parenting Board that there were currently approximately 1800 children in need in Middlesbrough. There had been an increase in the number of children in care to 295 at 31 July 2009, with 294 subject to Child Protection Plans. The numbers at 31 May 2009 had been 281 and 268 respectively. The number of Children Looked After (CLA) continued to increase after remaining stable for some time.

The increase was a huge pressure on all aspects of the Service and there were a number of implications. The Service was employing agency Social Workers to address capacity issues. Out of a total of 42 Social Workers employed by the Service, there were currently only 13 who had sufficient experience and training to carry out the full range of functions required. This situation caused difficulties when allocating cases and therefore experienced agency staff had had to be employed. The Service was trying to reduce the number of agency staff employed but was not in a position to stop using them at the current time. There were currently 4 agency staff employed in the areas of CLA and Child Protection, where work could not be allocated to less experienced staff.

The workload of the Legal Department had also increased and the services of Barristers were being used more frequently in Court at additional cost to the Authority. Barristers were appointed for the more complex cases and sometimes families instructed Barristers at an early stage and the Authority had to match this in terms of presentation in Court.

There was also pressure on the number of foster placements available and as a consequence the Service was using agencies to assist with these capacity issues. Unfortunately there was no sign of the overall situation improving in the near future. However the problems reported were not unique to Middlesbrough and in fact twelve out of thirteen Local Authorities in the north-east region were reported to be experiencing similar problems.

There were also difficulties retaining the services of the more experienced Social Workers. It was often the case that Social Workers would work in the area of Child Protection for a certain length of time and then move on to a different area. Each Social Worker was currently allocated 21 to 22 cases which was 5 or 6 more than recommended in the Laming Report. The Service was in the process of creating two new Locality Teams, using existing resources to employ two additional Managers. The Managers would devote more time to supervising and supporting Social Workers. Negotiations were also underway with the University of Teesside to increase the number of places available on key training courses. A number of staff were now in their second and third years of training and by the end of the present year it was anticipated that the number of fully trained Social Workers would increase from 13 to 20. Whilst there was confidence about the type of staff the Authority was able to recruit, there were some reservations about the time-scales for them to be able to gain the relevant experience and training. However, better qualified staff were coming through the system and the longer term situation looked more positive.

Remuneration for Social Workers was also an issue, with competition from neighbouring authorities in terms of rates of pay. The Executive Director of Children Families and Learning was liaising with other authorities on a sub regional basis on this issue. It was highlighted that Social Workers had received a generous grading under job evaluation in Hartlepool and this had set a benchmark across the other Local Authorities.

The Service was also looking at practice issues, trying to improve standards and exploring other ways of conducting its business. More effective early intervention and diverting some tasks away from Social Workers to other agencies that could provide services at an early stage were being considered.

Members requested further information on staffing and other emerging issues related to the increase in numbers of children looked after.

RECOMMENDED that the Executive be advised to note the issues relating to the numbers of Children Looked After in Middlesbrough.

USAGE OF NATIONAL YOUTH ADVOCACY SERVICE – APRIL 2008 TO MARCH 2009

A report was presented to provide the Corporate Parenting Board with details of the use made by children and young people of the advocacy services provided under contract by the National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS).

Since September 2000, the NYAS had been contracted to provide advocacy services to children looked after and children in need, in line with national and local standards. Details of the standards were attached at Appendix 1 to the submitted report. The service was provided to children and young people across Teesside and Darlington under a joint arrangement between the five Tees Valley Local Authorities. The contract was due for renewal in 2010 and a process was currently underway to issue a new invitation to tender for the service in conjunction with other Local Authorities across the region. Children and young people would be involved in the process of selecting the successful tender.

NYAS was an independent organisation that offered young people the opportunity to talk to someone in confidence. NYAS would only act on a young person's behalf if that was their expressed wish.

During 2008-2009 there had been 12 new referrals in Middlesbrough, 6 of which were made directly by the child or young person themselves. Four referrals were made by Social Workers, one by a parent and one by a voluntary sector organisation. Some referrals related to more than one issue. The issues raised were detailed in the submitted report.

The referrals in Middlesbrough were higher than from the other authorities and the majority were made through the free telephone help line. Referrals could also be made via a web site, an on-line youth group or a text service. Most referrals were from teenagers or care leavers and those with a learning disability or physical impairment.

The effects of the present economic recession were highlighted as research had proven that there were clear links between child poverty and child abuse and neglect. It was anticipated that the number of referrals would increase along with the numbers of children and young people going into care. The number of ongoing cases during the period April to June 2009 in Middlesbrough was 34.

It was difficult to obtain feedback in order to evaluate the service. At the conclusion of each case the young person would be given a feedback form. Feedback could be provided via the form, online or by text, however the actual rate of return was low.

Copies of two leaflets about NYAS which were given to all children and young people going into care were circulated for Members' information.

RECOMMENDED that the Executive be advised to note the information relating to the usage of the National Youth Advocacy Service during 2008-2009.

FAMILY PLACEMENT PANEL ACTIVITY REPORT – OCTOBER 2008 TO MARCH 2009

A report was presented to advise the Corporate Parenting Board with an overview of the activity of Middlesbrough's Family Placement Panel during the period 1 October 2008 to 31 March 2009. The Family Placement Panel met on 13 occasions during that period and the number of items considered in each category during the 6 month period were detailed on page 3 of the submitted report. For comparison purposes, a table showing items considered by the Panel over the previous 18 month period was shown on page 4 of the submitted report.

Attention was drawn to the number of reports deferred due to concerns over the planning or the quality of the report. Five reports had been deferred and this reflected the climate that staff were working in. Family Placement Panel Members spent a great deal of time reading the reports in preparation for the Panel Meetings and it was disappointing when a recommendation could not be made due to lack of information provided. More importantly, deferrals at Panel led to a delay for the children concerned in their case being heard by the Court. The Service was addressing this situation and trying to improve on it by introducing training and refresher training around report writing. A new process had been introduced to ensure that amendments to reports highlighted at Panel meetings were actioned within a two week time-scale.

The notion of splitting the Family Placement Panel's work into two Panels had been explored. However it had been concluded that this would in fact lead to a greater administrative burden and would not reduce the workload.

It was noted that 2 foster carers had been de-registered and in both cases the reason for de-registration was related to concerns about the standard of care provided.

The total number of items considered was 66, however in the following three month period from 1 April 2009 to 30 June 2009 the same number of items had already been considered. The Family Placement Panel had been meeting weekly rather than fortnightly from June to August this year. It was likely that weekly meetings would be necessary again during the autumn to ensure that children's plans were ratified and foster carer approvals were completed.

The number of new foster carers approved during the last 18 months had been low. Recruitment of foster carers was a national issue although there were specific issues relating to recruitment and retention of foster carers in Middlesbrough. On a positive note there had been a noticeable increase in the number of people making enquiries about fostering recently, although it was too early to tell whether this would result in an increase in suitable applicants. The amount of money available for recruitment had been doubled due to a successful bid for grant funding. Foster carer allowances had been increased along with rates for mileage.

The success of previous high profile campaigns for recruiting new foster carers had proved to be disproportionate to the amount of staff time used to organise the campaigns. Recruitment via advertisements in the Yellow Pages and local newspapers, as well as by word of mouth, had proved to be more effective.

RECOMMENDED that the Executive:

1. be advised to note the information in relation to the Family Placement Panel.
2. give consideration to the increased workload and budget implications for the Panel.
3. give consideration to increasing the budget for recruitment advertising.

MIDDLESBROUGH PLEDGE - UPDATE

The purpose of the report was to inform the Corporate Parenting Board of the progress made in relation to the development of Middlesbrough's Pledge to Children Looked After (CLA) and Care Leavers.

Children and young people met on 27 May 2009 to discuss the draft Pledge and made some suggestions for change. They then met with the key adults involved on 4 June 2009 to present the outcome of their work. The Pledge was approved by Executive on 21 July 2009.

The next stage in the process was to bring children, young people and front line staff together to develop a clear understanding of how the Pledge would be implemented within Care Planning processes. Guidance for staff would be produced as well as information for children and young people explaining what they could expect from the Local Authority. Progress on these processes would be reported to the Corporate Parenting Board in due course.

RECOMMENDED that the Executive be advised to note the next stage in developing the Middlesbrough Pledge.