

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD

21 OCTOBER 2008

SUMMARY OF CHILDREN AND LEARNING SCRUTINY PANEL'S FINAL REPORT ON ASPECTS OF THE COUNCIL'S CORPORATE PARENTING RESPONSIBILITIES

Purpose of the scrutiny investigation:

The Government launched its "Care Matters: Time for Change" White Paper in 2007 with the aim of improving outcomes for children and young people in care. Its goal was stated as follows:

"Our aspirations for children in care are no less than each parent has for their own child. Children in care are often in much greater need than other children but much less likely to get the help they require. We aim to create a care system that provides every child with a safe, happy, healthy, secure and loving childhood, nurturing their aspirations and enabling them to fulfil their potential."

As the white paper was found to be very wide ranging, covering virtually all aspects of the Council's corporate parenting responsibilities, the scrutiny panel agreed on a narrower focus covering the areas outlined in the terms of reference below. The panel sought to investigate the current position, and implications of the white paper, in respect of these aspects of the Council's responsibilities for children looked after.

Terms of reference:

The terms of reference of the scrutiny investigation were as follows:

In the context of the Council's overall corporate parenting responsibilities and the Government White Paper "Care Matters: Time for Change":

- *To investigate training and support that is made available to foster carers.*
- *To assess how the Council might encourage partner organisations to promote or offer employment opportunities for young people not in employment, education or training ('NEET').*

- *To examine how existing arrangements for the supported lodging scheme are operating.*
- *To examine support arrangements for children looked after in respect of emotional and mental health issues.*

Findings:

The scrutiny panel considered information regarding the background to the introduction of the Government White Paper “Care Matters: Time for Change.” Particular reference was made to the difficulties and barriers which children and young people in care face (such as in education, problems with emotional and social wellbeing and in the transition to adulthood) and proposals which were aimed at making improvements in these areas.

The panel found that, in general, the authority has recognised and acted on the problems faced by children and young people in care and the Council’s corporate parent role is well developed. However, the panel was of the view that further improvements can be made and these are reflected in its conclusions and recommendations, which are outlined below.

Conclusions:

Based on the evidence considered during its investigation, the panel made six conclusions. These are shown in full in the final report and relate to:

1. The fact that the “Care Matters” white paper is a significant document in aiming to improve outcomes for children and young people in care.
2. The excellent work undertaken by the authority to date, plus the need to further develop a shared responsibility and work in partnership with all relevant organisations to provide appropriate support and intervention.
3. The wide ranging training and support that is available for prospective foster carers and also after their recruitment.
4. The importance of the supported lodging scheme in supporting young people in the transition from care to independent living and how the scheme is working in Middlesbrough.
5. The particular problems associated with young people in care who are not in education, employment or training (‘NEET’) and steps which have been taken to improve training or employment prospects.
6. The well developed support which is available for children looked after in terms of emotional and mental health issues and the need to ensure that the dedicated support team approach is continued.

Recommendations:

The scrutiny panel’s final report contains five recommendations. These are shown in full in the report and relate to the following:

1. Monitoring the number of foster carers in Middlesbrough and taking steps to increase this
2. Maintaining and building on existing training for foster carers to encourage increased numbers.
3. Monitoring the results of the national pilot scheme relating to the supported lodging scheme, assessing whether any examples of best practice can be developed in Middlesbrough and increasing the profile of the scheme.

4. Working with appropriate partners to improve work experience or employment prospects for young people in care and reduce those classified as 'NEET'.
5. That in respect of mental health support for children looked after:
 - a) continuing work to address gaps in service provision, particularly in cases of dual diagnosis (ie more than one mental health need).
 - b) maintaining the existing staffing and management structure given the high level of service currently provided.

The Children and Learning Scrutiny Panel's full report on this topic is attached for the Overview and Scrutiny Board's consideration.

COUNCILLOR JAVED ISMAIL

CHAIR OF THE CHILDREN AND LEARNING SCRUTINY PANEL