

CORPORATE PARENTING BOARD

30 March 2010

INDEPENDENT ADVOCACY FOR LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN

REPORT OF THE HEAD OF SAFEGUARDING

LINK TO WORK PROGRAMME : Corporate Parenting: Safeguarding

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To provide Members with an annual update on Young People's access to Independent Advocacy

2. Background

- 2.1 Independent Advocacy for looked after young people, care leavers and other users of Children's Social Care Services during 209-2010 has been provided under a contract with Action for Children.

3. Service use and outcomes

- 3.1 The take-up of the service has been lower in 2009-2010 than in previous years, with no requests for the service being received at all in the first quarter.
- 3.2 During the year advocacy which commenced in 2008-2009 for one young person (a Care Leaver) with particularly challenging circumstances continued to be provided throughout 2009-2010. A further 11 new cases were picked up by the service in the current year.
- 3.3 All but one referral during the year have been in respect of children or young people in foster care, including children and young people placed outside Sunderland.
- 3.4 Two referrals have concerned young people placed a considerable distance from Sunderland. Action for Children have liaised with the Safeguarding Unit to confirm appropriate steps to resolve the additional logistical issues involved in dealing with these.

- 3.5 The Advocacy Service provides information about themes identified by young people, and feedback regarding responses. A pattern emerged during the year with some young people feeling they were not given sufficient explanation about what was happening to them, or their involvement in their care planning. This has been fed back to the Advocacy Monitoring Group which includes representation of all key services.
- 3.6 The Advocacy Service has latterly reported that young people who have made complaints have received good responses written in appropriate language, which has often helped to clarify issues and help the young people to move on.

4. Accessing the Service

- 4.1 Allocation of advocates continues to be rapid, and well within the 5 working days of referral.
- 4.2 Promotion of the service continues to include information in 'Change News'
- 4.3 There has been a slight increase in self-referral, but the overall numbers remain small. There is increased awareness amongst professionals about the service, and this has generated some referrals. However some inquiries and referrals has highlighted the need to continue to ensure that the service is not compromised by being asked to provide assistance to a young person as an alternative to assistance which should be provided by the authority

5 Young People with Learning Disabilities or Learning Difficulties

- 5.1 Work in relation to young people with learning disabilities has not progressed as clearly as intended. Access is still supported where required but this has been identified within the revised service specification in more detail for the re-commissioned service.
- 5.2 Transition to Adulthood for care leavers with learning difficulties represents a challenge for the provision of Advocacy services. The statutory entitlement to the Children's Independent Advocacy Service ends when the young person's entitlement to statutory support under the Children Act or Leaving Care Act ceases. Currently this varies from age 21 to age 24 depending upon the pathway plan for the young person concerned. Some young people with severe learning disabilities will be eligible for service from Adult Services, and may be referred to the Adult Service's advocacy provider. Children's and Adult's Services will need to establish appropriate criteria for transfer of advocacy eligibility.

6 Contract Review for 2010 and beyond.

- 6.1 The current contract extension expires in March 2010. Due to changes in the arrangements for Corporate Commissioning, and changes in personnel at Corporate Procurement, the re-issue of the service for tender has been delayed. However, we have agreed arrangements with the current provider to continue the service provision to individual young people as required, pending the completion of the re-commissioning process
- 6.2 The revised arrangements from 2010 essentially maintain the current system, with changed pricing arrangements which will be more cost effective. This will involve separate charging for management and promotion of the service at a fixed fee, and variable charges, depending upon demand, for the provision of Independent Advocates for individual young people.

7 Summary:

- 7.1 Service take-up is consistent with previous years in terms of overall numbers, but with an increasing proportion of children in foster care accessing the service.
- 7.2 There are lessons identified in responses to complaints which are being taken forward by the Complaints Officer and the Safeguarding Unit to improve the standard and timeliness of responses to complaints.
- 7.3 The Service Specification for 2010 onwards should continue the present but with increased cost-effectiveness.

8. Recommendation

The Corporate Parenting Board is requested to note the continuing development of the service and the due arrangements for re-commissioning the contract.

