

CORPORATE PARENTING BOARD

2 December 2008

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 advise the Board of the delivery of independent advocacy for Looked After Children and Care Leavers

2. Background

- 2.1 Independent Advocacy for looked after young people, care leavers and other users of Children's Social Care Services is provided under a contract with Action for Children (Formerly NCH Children's Rights Service).
- 2.2 The contract runs until April 2009 with provision for extension for up to a further 12 months
- 2.3 The statutory framework for this provision and eligibility for the service is as described in reports to the Board in June and September 2008

3 Current Position

- 3.1 Action for Children currently provide the service. There is direct access to the service by telephone, writing and email. Young People who contact the Young People's Officer or the Children's Complaints Service are routinely asked if they wish to have an advocate, and given the choice of making direct contact with the service, or having a referral made on their behalf.
- 3.2 All referrals to date have been made via the Safeguarding Unit or the Complaints Service, facilitated through either the Complaints Manager or the Young People's Officer. The most recent feedback from Action for Children (6th November 2008) is that no referrals have been received directly from young people.

- 3.3 The service is monitored through a quarterly meeting of local authority staff and the manager of the Advocacy Service. Since the last Board meeting this monitoring meeting includes representatives of the young people.
- 3.4 From 1st April to 6th November 2008 eight young people have accessed the service, exceeding the 2007-8 total of 7 for the whole year.
- 3.5 Not all young people wishing to raise concerns make use of the service. In one instance a young person declined the offer of an advocate, as he felt he had made his complaint clearly enough. The Young People's Officer and the Quality Assurance Officer ensured that he did receive a response to his satisfaction.
- 3.6 In a further two instances carers or social workers have raised concerns on behalf of young people who had not themselves sought advocacy and intervention by the Safeguarding Unit staff resulted in timely resolution.
- 3.7 The general impression is that the take-up of Independent Advocacy is comparable with some other authorities, but it is not possible to make accurate comparisons with most authorities because of the different ways in which their services are monitored.
- 3.8 Action for Children report no particular repeated themes in the details of cases so far this year. However 6 of the 15 advocacy referrals made over the past two years have been related to transitions from care to independence. Three of these highlighted concerns about young people with additional needs and who experienced difficulties or delays in reaching agreement about support from adult services.
- 3.9 Ongoing consultation between the Safeguarding Unit and Action for Children ensures that advocates' independence is not compromised by being drawn into inappropriate involvement in other aspects of the young person's case.

4 Accessing the Service

- 4.1 The guidance circulated at the September Board Meeting guidance has been circulated to all relevant services along with updated complaints procedures.
- 4.2 Allocation of advocates continues to be rapid, and well within the 5 working days of referral as required in the service specification.
- 4.3 Action For Children and the Young people's Officer have arranged visits to children's homes and to foster carer support groups to promote awareness of the service.

- 4.4 The new Children's Complaints Manager is working closely with the Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Unit to ensure that access to Advocacy is promoted.
- 4.5 Consideration was given to extending the service to 'Children who Foster' i.e. natural children of foster carers. Whilst these young people may be affected by their families' involvement in fostering, they are not 'children in need' as defined within the legislation, and should an advocacy service be required, it would be of a different nature to the one provided under the current contract.

5 Future Steps

- 5.1 Discussion with Action for Children through the quarterly monitoring meetings to identify any remaining obstacles to self-referral.
- 5.2 Action for Children are developing a web-enabled leaflet/brochure system which will enable leaflets tailored to the needs of our service provision to be generated and distributed quickly.

6 Summary:

- 6.1 The advocacy service continues to be promoted to our young people
- 6.2 Improved liaison between the Complaints Manager and the Young People's Officer and link with the Advocacy Service continues to develop
- 6.3 Partnership working includes direct involvement of young people in service development and monitoring.

7 Recommendation

The Board is requested to note the continuing development of the arrangements and to continue to receive quarterly reports.

