

**INDEPENDENT ADVOCACY FOR LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN**

**REPORT OF THE HEAD OF SAFEGUARDING**

**LINK TO WORK PROGRAMME : Corporate Parenting**

**1. Purpose of Report**

- 1.1 To advise the Board of the delivery of independent advocacy for Looked After Children and Care Leavers in the first year of operation under 'spot purchase' arrangements, and of progress towards a fully contracted service.

**2. Background**

- 2.1 From 23 April 2007 arrangements commenced with an agreement with NCH to provide Independent Advocacy for certain young people. These arrangements were established on a 'spot purchase' basis.
- 2.2 The service was advertised for expressions of interest and as reported at the Corporate Parenting Board meeting four organisations submitted applications to provide the service on a contracted basis. These were, National Youth Advocacy Service (NYAS), Advocacy in Gateshead & South Tyneside (AIGST), Spurgeon's (an independent provider) and NCH Children's Rights Service. Spurgeon's withdrew their application during the assessment process. The contract for 2008-9 was awarded to NCH Children's Rights Service.

**3 Current Position**

- 3.1 NCH Children's Rights Service provide the service. There is direct access to the service by telephone, writing and email.
- 3.2 Sunderland Young People's Officer continues to exercise a facilitating role where required to support young people accessing the service and continues to be involved in support to young people's rights
- 3.3 Under the new contract in place since 1st April 2008 two young people have accessed the service. A third young person has been offered Advocacy but at the time of writing it is not known whether this has been taken up. In addition two young people who were provided with advocacy in 2007-8 continue to receive support from the Advocacy service in relation to ongoing complaints and representations.

3.4 Children and young people are eligible for independent advocacy if they:

- Are accommodated by the Local Authority, or
- Are subject to Care or Interim Care Orders to the Local Authority, or
- Are a child or young person making complaint or representation relating to a period when they may have previously been accommodated or subject to a Care Order, or
- Qualify for the provision of service under the Leaving Care Act,
- Are a child or young person who meets the statutory definition of a child in need.

and:

- They wish to make or are likely to make a complaint or representation about the service they receive from the Council.
- They wish to make a complaint at any stage of the Complaints Procedure up to and including making representations to the Ombudsman.

3.5 The current contract provides for such variation as may be required due to changes to legislation or government guidance

#### **4 Accessing the Service**

4.1 In 2007-8 we identified some obstacles to ensuring young people have informed access to the service. These were primarily related to staff awareness of the scheme, and draft guidance has been circulated to all relevant services for comment (See 5: 'Future Steps', below)

4.2 Revised information leaflets were circulated to young people and their carers, about the Children's Complaints Service and advocacy availability but there remains a concern that awareness of the service needs to be constantly refreshed, including regular contact from the Advocacy Provider with children's homes, carer groups and other service staff. This was not provided for under the spot purchase arrangement in 2007-08, but is included in the service specification for the contracted service from April 2008.

4.3 Children's Complaints leaflets have been updated to include current contact details including the Advocacy Service details.

4.4 NCH have arranged visits to children's homes and to foster carer support groups to promote awareness of the service

- 4.5 The Children's Complaints Officer is now working closely with the Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Unit to ensure that access to Advocacy is promoted.
- 4.6 Independent Reviewing Officer have been briefed to ensure that when young people's awareness of the complaints system is discussed at Looked After Reviews, that they also ensure that they are aware of the Advocacy Service

## **5 Future Steps**

5.1 A range of guidance and information sharing protocols is being prepared to ensure compliance by all services which have a potential role in supporting young people to access the service. This will include:

- Information for Young People
- Guidance for Children's Complaints Service staff
- Information for inclusion in the Foster Carers' Handbook
- Information for Children's Homes Guidance
- Information for Safeguarding Unit staff and Independent Reviewing Officers

Draft Guidance has been circulated for comment and consultation

5.2 The Advocacy Service will be engaging young people in the redesign and production of information leaflets to replace the currently available information with a range of leaflets for different for different ages and needs

## **6 Summary:**

6.1 In 2007 – 2008 we established arrangements for Advocacy which met with minimum National Standards for Children and Young People's Advocacy.

6.2 From 2008- the new contract provides more robust arrangements for the promotion and development of the service

6.3 The awareness of the Advocacy Service has improved but further work will be undertaken with the new provider to ensure that the arrangements for keeping young people their carers aware of the service are more robust

## **7 Recommendation**

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

John Arthurs

Development Manager, Looked After Children      June 2008