

CORPORATE PARENTING BOARD

05 JULY 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 2009-2010 has been provided under a contract with Action for Children.

3 Service use and outcomes

- 3.1 Whilst the take-up of the service was lower in 2009-2010 than in previous years, with no requests for the service being received at all in the first quarter in the current year demand has picked up, with six new referrals being picked up in the first quarter of the year.
- 3.2 The number of referrals from children in foster care continues to exceed those from residential care, with more direct requests from children and young people or from carers on their behalf.
- 3.3 The Advocacy Service provides information about themes identified by young people, and feedback regarding responses.
- 3.4 Themes continue to relate to young people's uncertainty about their plans, but a significant characteristic of half of the current cases is that the child is seeking support to resolve difficulties which are essentially rooted in entrenched disagreements between the local authority and their parents. Resolving such differences is not within the remit of the Independent Advocacy Service, and

we need to ensure that the service maintains its independence from 'Casework'

- 3.5 There have been four occasions when the young people concerned have been content to have their representations supported by the Children and Young People's Rights Officer (previously designated 'Young People's Officer') without using the Advocacy Service, although the Advocacy Service is offered. In some cases, particularly in relation to highly specific representations, where young people feel they do not want to have to repeat their concerns again. In the main these relate to concern about specific decisions or actions by staff.
- 3.6 Not all requests for advocacy result in representations via the Children's Complaints Service. In some cases the young person is assisted to make representations directly to carers or social workers and ensure that their wishes are considered in care planning.
- 3.7 Not all young people wishing to make complaints take up the offer of an advocate, feeling well able to make their own representations, or feeling sufficiently supported by peers, relatives or staff.

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' and new leaflets have been distributed.
- 4.3 Three of the new 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, but it is encouraging that the service children placed out of area are aware of the service.
- 4.4 There is continuing developing awareness amongst professionals about the service, 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 Contract Review for 2010 and beyond.

- 5.1 The Contract for Independent Advocacy was extended beyond its expiry in March 2010, with the current provider due to the delay in the re-issue of the service for tender being delayed by changes Corporate Procurement arrangements. It has now been advertised, with a view to being re-commissioned by the end of September 2010.
- 5.2 The new specification is for a three year contract which will give the new arrangements greater continuity and stability up to August 2013, and subject to satisfactory performance and continued funding allowing extensions, up to 2016.
- 5.3 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:

- 6.1 The service continues to be accessed by our young people
- 6.2 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.
- 6.3 The Service Specification for 2010 onwards should continue the present but with increased cost-effectiveness.

7 Recommendation

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

