



Young People in Care Changing Lives

Report to Corporate Parenting Board 14 July 2008

1 Purpose of Report

To provide the Board with an update on the work of the Change Council since last Corporate Parenting Board meeting in March 09

An overview of some of the things the Young people from the Change Council have discussed at their monthly meetings or been involved in since CPB in March 09.

2 Change Council newsletter

Their first magazine was published on the first of May 09 called "Change News". The magazine is packed full of all the things the young people from Change council have been up to as well as useful information for other young people. The magazine contains articles that will be regular features in future issues, the Council has already received some ideas from other young people about possible additions that might be made to the Change News in the future.

3 Training

- The Total Respect training course due to take place in May, unfortunately had to be cancelled due to lack of numbers signed up to take part in the course! The young people are keen to take part in future courses and recommend the course to all adults who work with young people in whatever capacity!
- 15 young people took part in Recruitment & selection training which looked at the many different aspects of recruitment and selection the training also covered safer recruitment – it was a brilliant – so the team are now raring to go with interviewing staff!! Three young people were part of the interview panel for Independent Reviewing Officer's (IRO's) and the feedback from the "officers" involved was that "the young people were brilliant!"
- The young people have expressed the desire to become peer advocates; they are keen to help other young people who have been in similar positions to themselves. The Young People's Officer and Action for Children are looking into suitable courses that the young people could undertake.

- Some of our young people have been working with staff from the training department and have been developing & delivering training for student social worker.

4 Regional young people's meetings

Some young people had been with The Young People's Officer to Hartlepool & South Tyneside, on a number of occasions to work with young people from throughout the region. The idea is to develop a regional group of young people, who will help run a fun event to bring a lot of young people together so together we will look at what they think the Children in Care councils should be like! It is hoped that the event can take place in August near the end of the school summer holidays.

5 Visitors / guests

- Sara Dawson, from Fostering Network - Sara told us about the Fostering Network and what sort of work she does; Sara told the Change Council about all the different types of things that young people could get involved in. Sara works on the "Leading our Lives" project – she works with young people who are in care and also the children & young people of Foster Carers. Sara told us she would like to hear from young people who get involved in the things the Fostering network is doing! And yes there is some paid work for young people!
- In April the Change Council, discussed & planned what they wanted to talk about when their invited guests came in the future
 - Cllr Pat Smith – 20th May 09
 - Leaving Care, Service Managers - 24th June 09
 - Director of Children's Services – 23rd Sept 09

Some thought was given to who else they might want to invite to their meetings.

5 Councillor Pat Smith visited 20th May 09

The young people had prepared 10 items to discuss with:-

- Budgets for holidays for Young People. Some young people who are in Foster Care get the chance to go on holiday with carers, but young people in Residential can't because of budgets and risk assessments – why can't we be like other young people who have holidays? One young person had written a letter about being allowed to go on holidays abroad!
- Young People want different things; one wants supported housing and others want their own flat. What is clear is that we need more of each type of accommodation

- Need to meet the family more – is it possible to have a proactive approach to supporting families more in the home rather than bringing them into care?
- Before leaving care young people need a passport and at least a provisional driving licence, this helps with ID, opening bank accounts and other things
- More help for going to university – Books/support/accommodation/information and help with grants, a flexible approach to the individual.
- Staff do too much paperwork – this means that they can't spend valuable time with young people.
- Risk Assessments – seem excessive and are often used as an excuse not to do something
- Why should we accept presents from staff, if they can't accept them from the Young People – this is a silly rule when you have been living with someone for a long time and you just want to say "thanks", you can't
- Could young people give feedback of Services/Social Worker or other staff e.g. secret shopper.
- Leaving care only have a budget up to 18 years old, however have a duty to young people up to 25 year if they are in full time education/training

Cllr Pat Smith requested the above issues be put forward for the agenda for Corporate Parenting Board.

A number of questions and issues raised by the young people at the Change Council on 20th May were sent to managers at Services for Looked After Children

The issues and responses from Nick Murphy and Helen Fay; are set out below:

5.1 Holiday budgets in children's homes are £253 per person. Talk to Cllr Pat Smith and Helen Paterson about the budgets for holidays for other young people who are in foster care because they get the chance and kids in residential can't because of the budgets

Last year young people from Cotswold Road went to Benidorm for a holiday. The staff and young people at Colombo Road are currently looking at the possibility of having a holiday abroad this year. Although the holiday budget is relatively small children's homes managers are able to use the allocated budgets for the home in a flexible way. Affording a holiday abroad will involve

making savings in other budgets, as it would for most families, and often the choice is whether to have a foreign trip with a low budget for extras such as outings, or a holiday in the UK with more money available to spend on extras.

5.2 Need to meet the family more – is it possible to have a proactive approach to supporting families more in the home rather than bringing them into care

We do everything we can to prevent children from becoming looked after – apart from anything else, it's very expensive!

There is a whole section in our service plan called "Increase Access to Family Support and Preventative Services". So, we have services like Children's Centres and the new Locality Teams which work directly with families to help them with issues with their children. There is also the Community Support Team which works with children and their families where the children are in danger of having to be brought into care – this has been very successful.

Before a social worker can think about the need to bring a child into care, they have to appear before a panel of managers which meets every week. This panel asks the worker questions about why is the child at risk, what other support might the child or family need to stay at home (eg Community Support Team, Youth Offending Team, school services etc), what other family members might be able to offer the child a home. Only when all those questions have been answered and it is clear that no other option can protect the child from harm is the decision made to bring them into care.

The proof of our success in prevention is in national statistics – Sunderland has lower than average numbers of children in care compared to other councils both nationally and in the north-east.

5.3 Staff do too much paperwork – this means they can't spend valuable time with young people

Social workers have to keep good written records on children, and the government tells us to use a computer system to do this called ICS. This system does not work well and means that social workers have to spend a lot of time filling in records on the computer when they could be out talking to children and families. The government know this is a problem and is looking at ways to improve this.

Staff in children's homes also have to do a lot of writing. This is because, as a corporate parent, they need to record all the things about children that ordinary parents keep in their heads. There are national minimum standards for children's homes and government regulations which tells us all the things we must record, and there are lots of them! The government sends an inspector to each home twice a year and they spend at least one day, sometimes two, checking all the records, so staff have to spend time in making sure they are right.

However, we are doing two things to try and improve matters. We are having new record books printed which will make it easier and quicker for staff to record what they need to. And, we are giving the homes new computers and better internet access to make recording both easier and more accurate.

5.4 Risk assessments – seem excessive and are often used as an excuse not to do something

Risk assessments are part of health and safety and there are often stories in the papers about some daft rule that one council or another has brought in – like banning conkers for example!

However, we have a difficult balance to keep, between making sure that we keep children safe from unnecessary risk, and allowing children to experience exciting activities and the other things that “normal” children do. Again, the government has rules for us about risk assessments and Ofsted looks at these very carefully when they inspect a home, so they have to be thorough.

We do try and be sensible though, and we have changed things like the policy for sleepovers.

5.5 Why should we accept presents from staff if they can't accept them from the young people

The policy on staff giving and receiving presents was changed last year, and all staff received this policy. It says that there is no problem with staff receiving small gifts from children.

We have asked all the children's homes managers to remind their staff of the change in policy and that it's ok for young people to give them gifts if they want to, eg as a thank you when leaving the home.

Nick Murphy & Helen Fay 23 June 2009

The Change Council was due to discuss these responses at their meeting on 24th June, however, the young people had a full agenda and they had visitors from The Leaving Care Service at that meeting and ran out of time! The young people are hoping to look at all the responses received at their preparation for Corporate Parenting Board meeting on 7th July 09.

6 Meeting with Leaving Care Service managers

Simone Common and Catherine Joyce attended the Change Council meeting 24th June 09 and the following issues were raised. As well as the issues below the young people talked in detail to Simone & Catherine about their experience of the Leaving Care Service. A good and lively debate was had. There was a very balanced discussion from the young people, for example “my experience was bad” verses “ah, but my experience was really good”! The young people then said “perhaps some work could be done to try and make sure each young persons experience with the Leaving Care service was a good one”.

Leaving Care Service response to the issues raised by the Change Council.

6.1 Young people want different things in terms of accommodation such as supported lodgings, supported accommodation and trainer flats.

Service's for Young People manage the supported lodgings scheme that currently has four hosts. We also manage Burlington Close, a six bed semi independent unit that is staffed 24 hours a day. We currently also have 14 trainer flats with floating support. The Leaving Care Service also uses a variety of supported accommodation in the local area such as the YMCA, TZ, Holmewood and Centrepoint which opened this year. There is a variety of accommodation for young people available but often the Leaving Care worker will resist moving a young person from their care placement in to supported accommodation as they do not feel the young person is ready for this transition. Therefore it is not always the case that there is not the accommodation available but rather it is in the young person's best interest to remain in placement. However if young people feel that there is a specific gap in provision then Simone has agreed to raise this to ensure that their views are represented in the Housing Strategy.

6.2 Before leaving care young people should be provided with a passport as this is a vital form of ID.

It was agreed that young people transferring to the Leaving Care Service should have a passport. If they do not then the Leaving Care Service will provide one. If a young person loses their passport it will not be replaced.

6.3 Young People would like more help going to University

Care leavers who attend university are entitled to £6640 per year funded by the Leaving Care Service. This covers the cost of the course fees and accommodation. This includes a maintenance grant funded by the Local Education Authority of £2800. Care leavers are classed as being independent from their carers, so receive the same grant as young people from low income families. Getting this grant means care leavers are also eligible to access the university bursaries which varies depending on the university. Currently government recommendations are that care leavers attending university are provided with a £2000 bursary from the Leaving Care Service. We pay a far greater amount than this recommendation, since we are aware that most care leavers going to university can have up to an additional 22 weeks accommodation and living expenses during university holiday times to fund more than young people who go home to their families.

6.4 Leaving Care have a budget to support young people up to the age of 18 but have a duty to work with young people up to the age of 24.

Leaving Care has a statutory responsibility including for financial support up to the age of 18. Once a young person reaches 18 then our only duty is to assist

and befriend. We do offer some financial support post 18, however this is generally linked to university or if a young person presents in crisis. As we have no statutory responsibility post 18 then we are not allocated a budget for this age group and we need to do the best we can within the money we have for other things.

6.5 Leaving Care office is not very welcoming. Also some young people would like to be able call in for help or advice and this is difficult if a young person is working or in college during the day. A number of young people in the group pointed out that they found the leaving care service staff very helpful, and gave a number of examples where the help given had been particularly appreciated

We are currently updating all our notice boards to ensure that the information is useful and still relevant and isn't all negative. We always welcome suggestions from young people on how to make the waiting area more welcoming.

We will set up a pilot project to open until 6 pm one night a week to reflect the needs of the young people who are employed or in training.

Leaving care workers however should make every effort to see young people in an environment where they feel comfortable and at ease. Therefore workers should arrange appointments in young people's homes or in the community and not rely on young people to attend the office.

6.6 Training for social workers to stop the use of jargon

This will be discussed at the Leaving Care team meeting to raise staff's awareness of this issue and ask them to be mindful when using jargon.

6.7 More chances for employment and training.

Unlocking Potential, the employability project that supports care leavers has just received funding to ensure that it continues for a further three years. This will allow the project to expand to include a worker dedicated to meeting the needs of those young people aged 18+. The Leaving Care Service is also working with the National Care Advisory Service, which is a national charity that supports care leavers, in a new project to increase the employment options for care leavers. This involves working with local business to provide opportunities for employment for young people. This project starts in September 2009.

6.8 Income Support of £50 a week is not enough for young people living independently.

The rate of Income Maintenance is set nationally and we cannot change that. Whilst we acknowledge that it is a struggle to live on a small amount of money every effort should be made to ensure that you have the support to access employment opportunities. Young people should be supported in budgeting by their leaving care worker and any one off payment to support young people through a particular situation i.e. money for interview clothes will always be considered.

6.9 Young people should not have to share a bathroom and kitchen with people they don't know.

Some of the accommodation we use such as Holmewood have shared facilities. Whilst this is not ideal Holmewood offers a good standard of support to young people who live there. If a young person is unhappy in their accommodation then they should discuss with their Leaving Care worker who will work with the young person to try to move them on.

6.10 When staying at friends, you shouldn't have to give the address to leaving care.

Leaving care have a duty to ensure that young people are safe and well looked after. If you are in foster care or residential care then your carers should be able to agree or refuse your request to stay at a friend's house. For young people under 18 who are subject to a care order but live independently then the Leaving Care worker will look in to this.

Finally it was agreed that representatives from the Change Council will be invited to a Leaving Care team meeting to discuss practice issues within the team.

Catherine Joyce
Team Manager Leaving Care Service

Stop Press!

Young people from the Change Council are part of the team of young people who are currently preparing to interview for the two important posts of Head of Safeguarding & Assistant Head of Safeguarding. The young people from all over the City have come together to enhance the recruitment process for these posts.

Alyson Boucher
Young People's Officer
July 2009