

## ***Corporate Parenting Board***

**Minutes of the Meeting held on Tuesday 23 September 2008 in  
Committee Room 6, Civic Centre, Sunderland at 5.00 pm**

### **Present:**

Councillor P Smith (Chair)  
Councillor H Trueman  
Councillor C Gofton  
Councillor A Hall  
Councillor Paul Maddison

### **Members of the Board**

Lead Member, Children's Services  
Lead Member, Housing and Public Health  
West Sunderland  
Coalfield  
Opposition

### **Part I**

### **Also in attendance:**

Mick McCracken  
Nick Murphy  
Mike Foster  
John Arthurs  
Helen Fay  
Jane Hedley  
Gillian Warnes

### **All Supporting Officers**

Head of Safeguarding  
Residential Services Manager  
Virtual Head Teacher  
Development Manager for Looked After Children  
Residential Services Manager  
Senior Solicitor  
Senior Democratic Services Officer

### **Young People**

Kirstyn Wood  
Chaneice Wood  
Shannon Arnold  
Naomi Johnson  
Tiffany Johnson

### **Apologies for Absence**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Ball, Oliver, Speding,  
D Smith, Timmins, L Walton, N Wright and Alyson Boucher.

## **Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

## **The Role of the Virtual Head Teacher**

Mike Foster, the Virtual School Head, submitted a report outlining the role and responsibilities of his post and how he would work towards raising attainment and ensuring the progression of children in care in the Sunderland area.

The 'Virtual School for Looked After Children' is a structure rather than a teaching institution with a focus on learning. Mike explained that looked after children do not do as well as they should academically, throughout the country. The aim of the initiative is to wrap a school around the schools which children in care are already attending. The Virtual School Head will create a situation where through monitoring and collection of data, he knows about individual students and can identify matters in which he might need to intervene.

The Virtual Head Teacher will work to engage carers and act as an information point for parents. There will be potential for some on-line teaching. Students will be asked what they need to learn and improve and a Personalised Learning Environment (PLE) will be created around the young person. The 'virtual school' will operate in the same way as any other school with a governing body and a Council or advisory body which will have representation from young people. A website will also be developed with on-line messaging established in due course.

Mike advised that he would undertake a lot of personal learning around social care so he could link issues together. The focus of the programme would be on learning and raising attainment and attendance would also be closely monitored. Extended services would also be developed which will organise packages which will help young people into the type of education which is right for them.

Councillor Maddison asked if all Head Teachers in the City were happy with Mike's role as Virtual Head Teacher and Mike reported that he was attending a Head Teachers meeting the next day to present the 'Virtual School for Looked After Children' model and to talk about fine data collection. The immediate focus would be on increasing the life chances for those in Years 10 and 11.

One of the young people in attendance asked how the virtual school would operate for those children in care who attended schools outside of Sunderland. Mike advised that the Local Authority was responsible for the education of children in care no matter where they went to school and the Looked After Children Team would liaise with teams outside the Authority. The Virtual School would operate in the same way for all children in care.

The young people also asked if the Virtual Head would work in colleges as well as schools and Mike stated that he hoped to be able to offer support in keeping looked after children in college. Councillor Gofton added that in the past it might not have

been known by colleges that young people were looked after and it was necessary for the Authority and education establishments to get better at talking to each other.

Councillor Hall asked if other Local Authorities in the area had Virtual Head Teachers and Mike informed the Board that some Authorities have established the position of Virtual Head and he was to meet with the others in the near future.  
Upon discussion, it was:-

8. RESOLVED that the report be noted.

### **Minutes of Meeting held on 24 June 2008**

9. RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 24 June 2008 be agreed as a correct record.

Councillor Maddison asked if arrangements had been made for the nurse for looked after children to attend a meeting of the Board and Mick McCracken advised that she would be invited to the next scheduled meeting in December 2008.

### **Children Looked After Performance Report**

The Head of Safeguarding submitted a report providing Members with information about performance against key performance indicators and targets for looked after children. Mick McCracken thanked the young people who had made suggestions and helped to make the report less technical and easier to understand.

The report highlights a number of areas of good performance including a downward trend in the number of children in care since March 2005 and the total has been stable at around 400 for the last six months. The figure is slightly more than it is felt it should be and a range of support is in place to help families stay together.

Jane Hedley commented that these figures were very important as there had been changes nationally with regard to care proceedings, meaning that a lot of work had to be done before care proceedings could be issued with respect to a child. This had led to a 66% reduction in care proceedings regionally and there were concerns that children were going unprotected. It was reassuring that the numbers of children in care had remained stable although the Authority was not issuing as many care proceedings.

The number of children in care for 12 months or more who had three or more placements during the year was 38, which represented 9.4% of the looked after population. Included in this figure were children who had gone missing from care.

One of the young people asked what happened if children became attached to their carers and then had to move placements. Mick McCracken replied that sometimes moves are necessary for the right reasons but if bonds have been formed between the young person and carers then efforts would be made to maintain the relationship.

Councillor Gofton highlighted that a move from carers to which a young person was attached could lead to a reluctance to build relationships with new carers as they do not want to risk becoming attached again. Mick McCracken explained that sometimes a young person wants to move on and sometimes a carer's circumstances change and a young person has to move placement. One of the young people commented that she and her sister had been placed with temporary carers but had ended up staying with them for over three years. Mick responded that unfortunately things are done with the best intentions but plans can sometimes change and lead to placements becoming longer term than initially envisaged.

Jane Hedley again referred to changes in the law which have impacted on care proceedings and which may have an effect on a young person's placement. The previous protocol on care proceedings had been to complete matters within 40 weeks but now the guidance stresses that any proceedings should fit around the child's individual needs and life events.

The young people commented that some permanent foster carers only want young children and if it takes a long time to resolve plans for children in care then their chances of securing a permanent placement can be reduced.

Councillor Gofton enquired if there were carers who pulled out of placements when things became difficult. Nick Murphy advised that foster carers go through a rigorous and lengthy assessment process and an extensive report which includes issues such as motivation of carers and preferences for certain age groups, is then considered by the Fostering Panel. It is the Fostering Panel's job to recommend whether carers should be approved. Foster carers are well trained and supported but if some find it difficult and give up, then the situation would be analysed to clarify what had happened and if it could have been prevented.

Nick went on to say that there were differences in approvals for temporary and permanent carers as the task is very different and there are occasions where age ranges may be changed but it was not usual for carers to frequently change their approval status.

In response to a query from one of the young people, Jane Hedley highlighted that the Authority does look at reassessing temporary to permanent carers if an attachment has developed with a young person. Mick McCracken stated that potential carers were asked what would suit them in terms of a child's age and short or long term fostering. However, the Authority still needed to recruit new foster carers and hard decisions had to be made about placements on a regular basis.

Turning back to the report, it was outlined that 185 children under 16 had been in care for at least two and a half years and of those, 135 had been in the same placement continuously for two years. Seven care leavers had turned 19 since April. Of these, four were in full time education, employment or training, five were in contact and five had suitable accommodation.

From April to July 2008, 12 children had secured permanent new family arrangements, ten through adoption and two through special guardianship. All children over four years old had communicated their views to meetings held to review their plans.

Priorities for improvement had been identified as reducing the level of offending by children in care and increasing the number of looked after children with a Personal Education Plan (PEP).

43 looked after children from the total of 209 children aged 10-17 years who had been looked after for one or more years, had been recorded as offending in the year ending June 2008. An operational and strategic group were involved in helping to improve this indicator.

237 out of the 297 looked after children eligible for a PEP currently had a plan. This represented 79.8% of the total number of children in care which is a greatly improved figure but it still needs to be higher. A number of actions had been identified to ensure that this happens.

Upon discussion, it was:-

10. RESOLVED that the report be noted.

### **Independent Advocacy for Looked After Children – Quarterly Report**

The Head of Safeguarding submitted a report advising the Board of current progress in the delivery of independent advocacy for looked after children and care leavers.

John Arthurs, Development Manager for Looked After Children outlined the report and informed the Board that the service continued to develop and so far there had been as many referrals this year as for the whole of last year.

There is an Advocacy Monitoring Group which meets quarterly and from the next meeting there would be young people represented on the group. The service was still being promoted and new ways sought to get the information out.

A draft guidance document about advocacy services had been produced and was circulated to Board Members. The guidance was directed at complaints officers, social workers, managers and carers and there would also be a version produced for young people. The document would be presented to the Children's Services Senior Management Team and if approved it would become official guidance.

Consideration also had to be given to how complaints brought by a young person to a Councillor would be dealt with. Councillor Smith commented that through the Youth Parliament, Members had been encouraging young people to bring issues to Councillors.

Members felt that a Councillor would probably deal with complaints from children in care in the same way as any other complaints and it was not unusual to receive complaints about care packages. It was highlighted that a Councillor's role as corporate parent added an extra dimension to any complaint received.

Councillor Smith suggested that this could be covered at the forthcoming training sessions. John Arthurs confirmed that sessions were taking place on 7 and 10 October for Safeguarding and 10 and 21 October for Corporate Parenting.

Upon discussion, it was:-

11. RESOLVED that the continuing development of the arrangements for advocacy services be noted and that the Board continue to receive quarterly reports from the Advocacy Monitoring Group.

### **Children and Young Persons Bill 2008 : Children in Care Council**

The Head of Safeguarding submitted a report advising the Board of the progress made in establishing a Children in Care Council.

'Care Matters: Time for Change' places a requirement on Local Authorities to establish a 'Children in Care Council' to enable young people in care to influence the development of services they receive.

Since 1999, Sunderland has had a young people in care consultation group '4UM' which is a monthly meeting for young people in care to discuss their concerns. Different models of Children in Care Councils have been emerging across the country and the 4UM group have discussed how the Children in Care Council could work in Sunderland and have decided that the group will be called "Change: Young People in Care Changing Lives".

A 'Change Fun-Day' was held on 20 August 2008 and was attended by 90 children, young people and carers and included a range of consultation exercises where the 4UM team gathered young people's views about many aspects of care. It was important that carers were involved in the consultation so that they could be on board from the beginning of the process. The Young People's Officer and 4UM team would be collating the feedback from the day.

The 4UM group met as "Change" for the first time on 9 September 2008 and a programme of monthly meetings is envisaged. Tiffany Johnson outlined some of the ground rules which had been discussed for the group which included helping each other, respecting each other, communication, trust, no bullying, keeping noise levels down and dressing smartly.

Specific next steps which have been identified include:-

- The establishment of a constitution for "Change" and standards for governance.

- Invitation to the Directorate and the Council to consider arrangements for links between the Director and Lead Member and the relationship between 'Change' and the Corporate Parenting Board.
- Council Members to work with the Children and Families Communications Team to define the brand for 'Change'.
- Establishment of a termly or quarterly newsletter to allow 'Change' to communicate with the whole Looked After population.
- Agree and establish a system for young people to be elected, nominated or appointed to the Council from 2009-10.
- Identify the additional input required to sustain continued participation of young people who are not members of 'Change'.

Councillor Maddison asked if it would be possible for Members of the Board to have a copy of the Autumn newsletter being produced by the group. John Arthurs advised that the newsletter was primarily a way for the Change group to communicate with others but the print run would be expanded to cover social workers, carers and Members. One of the young people also suggested that it would be good to have a website for the group and John reported that the development of the website was part of the work in progress.

Upon discussion, it was:-

12. RESOLVED that the report be noted.

(Signed) P SMITH  
Chairman

**Note:-**

The above minutes relate only to items considered during the time which the meeting was open to the public.

Additional minutes in respect of other items are included in Part II.

