

Corporate Parenting Board

Minutes of the Meeting held on Tuesday 18 March 2008 in the Council Chamber, Civic Centre, Sunderland at 5.00pm

Present:

Councillor P. Smith (Chair)
Councillor M. Speding
Councillor E. Timmins
Councillor H. Trueman
Councillor P. Gibson
Councillor A. Hall
Councillor L. Williams
Councillor L. Walton

Members of the Board

Lead Member, Children's Services
Lead Member, Culture and Leisure
Lead Member, Adult Services
Lead Member, Housing and Public Health
South Sunderland
Coalfield
Washington
Opposition

Part I

Also in attendance:

Keith Moore
Mick McCracken
Nick Murphy
Sharon Nelson
Jane Hedley
Gillian Warnes

All Supporting Officers

Deputy Director of Children's Services
Head of Safeguarding
Residential Services Manager
Home Manager
Senior Solicitor
Senior Democratic Services Officer

Prior to the commencement of the formal part of the meeting, there was a showing of 'Messed Up', a film about bullying made by looked after young people in Sunderland.

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Wakefield, A Cuthbert and Oliver.

Minutes of Meeting held on 8 January 2008

1. RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 8 January 2008 be agreed as a correct record.

Keith Moore reported that work had begun with the young people around the improvement issues identified but it was proposed that a detailed report be brought to the next meeting.

Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

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.

The report highlights a number of areas of good performance including a downward trend in the number of children in care since March 2005. This currently stands at 407, equivalent to 67 per 10,000 of the child population. Officers felt that investment in early intervention and Children's Centres was making a difference and it was expected the effects of this would be seen in the numbers of looked after children in the City.

The numbers of children in care for 12 months or more who had three or more placements during the year was down to 8%. 72.5% of children who had been in care for at least two and a half years had been in the same placement continuously for two years. It was highlighted that placement stability was closely associated with good outcomes for looked after children and this area had been prioritised for improvement.

The proportion of care leavers in education, employment or training on their 19th birthday was almost the same as that for all children in the City. It was also noted that 91% of children in care for over a year had taken the opportunity to have a health assessment during the year. It would be desirable for this figure to be 100% but it was voluntary and young people could not be made to attend.

Sunderland was in the top performance band for securing permanent new family arrangements through adoption or special guardianship orders and 100% of children over four years old had contributed to their looked after review. Mick McCracken advised that he planned to look at how children and young people were participating in the reviews and proposed that this could be considered at a future meeting of the Board.

There were two main priorities for improvement relating to offending and Personal Education Plans. In the year to 31 December 2007, there was a reduction in the number of children in care who had a substantive outcome arising from an offence committed while in care. 38 children had a substantive outcome compared with 41 in 2006. The Children Looked After Operational Group and the Children Looked After Strategy Group were involved in trying to improve this indicator. The Head of Safeguarding reported that attempts were being made to engage the Police and to look at more effective ways of working together to get the message across.

All school age children in care should have Personal Education Plans (PEPs), however by the end of March this figure stood at 72.8%. It was understood that a large number of children did have PEPs but the information was not getting into the system. Details of children who do not have an up to date PEP had been distributed to team managers for monitoring within supervision sessions. The Head of Safeguarding added that in time he hoped to look at PEPs for pre-school children.

Councillor Timmins welcomed the focus on PEPs and stated that although education is just one of the elements that needs to be considered in the care of looked after children, PEPs were vital. The overall Council policy is inclusion and all work towards achieving this aim should be supported.

Councillor Hall asked if there was a particular reason why health assessments were offered to all children in care, as this wouldn't be something available to all children in the City. Jane Hedley responded that the health check was a statutory requirement and Mick McCracken added that it used to be classed as a 'boarding-out medical' but things have moved on considerably since then. Due to the life experiences of some children in care and the fact that care can sometimes be disjointed, information may not be passed on and a routine check can pick up health matters which may have been overlooked. It was suggested that the Board may welcome some input from the looked after nurse at a future meeting.

Keith Moore highlighted that the health service for looked after children had been short-listed for an LGC award this year and officers were now looking at the potential of offering all children a health MOT based on the model for looked after children.

Councillor Williams referred to children and young people communicating their views at looked after reviews and enquired if the children were asked focused questions, or was it an open discussion. Mick McCracken advised that the Government provide booklets for children having reviews, although these are not particularly child friendly. It was important to consider who collects the children's views and in what format they do this. Some children prefer someone else to speak for them, some want to write something down or draw pictures. The Council also has a software licence for a video game which takes children through questions which form part of the review and a large number of looked after children like to contribute in this way. The programme can identify collective messages coming from the looked after children in the City.

Councillor Timmins commented that the more work which is put into health early on, the better the effects that are seen in later life. It was good to see health checks being encouraged at an early age.

Upon discussion, it was:-

2. RESOLVED that the report be noted.

Advocacy Update

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.

The Council has a responsibility to offer independent advocates for all children in care and since April 2007, services have been spot purchased from NCH. The referrals for advocacy have increased since this time, but some young people have been directed to other help where the referrals clearly have not been prompted by the young people themselves.

Awareness of the Advocacy Service has improved but further work will be undertaken to ensure that the arrangements for young people to be aware of the service are more robust.

The procurement process for a fully contracted service has been completed. There were four expressions of interest and the contract has been awarded. Full information about the successful bidder would be available within the next few days.

3. RESOLVED that the arrangements for advocacy services be noted and that the Board agree to continue to receive quarterly reports from the Advocacy Monitoring Group.

(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.