

Corporate Parenting Board

Minutes of the Meeting held on Tuesday 24 June 2008 in Committee Room 1, Civic Centre, Sunderland at 5.00pm

Present:

Councillor P Smith (Chair)
Councillor M Speding
Councillor E Timmins
Councillor H Trueman
Councillor E Ball
Councillor C Gofton
Councillor N Wright
Councillor Paul Maddison
Councillor R Oliver
Councillor D Smith

Members of the Board

Lead Member, Children's Services
Lead Member, Culture and Leisure
Lead Member, Adult Services
Lead Member, Housing and Public Health
East Sunderland
West Sunderland
North Sunderland
Opposition
Opposition
Opposition

Part I

Also in attendance:

Mick McCracken
Nick Murphy
John Arthurs
Helen Fay
Gavin Taylor
Alyson Boucher
Gillian Warnes

All Supporting Officers

Head of Safeguarding
Residential Services Manager
Development Manager for Looked After Children
Residential Services Manager
Independent Reviewing Officer
Young People's Officer
Senior Democratic Services Officer

Young People

Jordan Sawyer
Tiffany Johnson
Naomi Johnson
Daniel Johnson
Rob Cresswell

Appointment of Chairman

1. RESOLVED that Councillor P Smith be appointed as Chairman of the Corporate Parenting Board for the municipal year 2008/09.

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor L Walton.

Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

Minutes of Meeting held on 18 March 2008

2. RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 18 March 2008 be agreed as a correct record.

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. The total was 398 children in care at 31 March 2008, equivalent to 64.6 per 10,000 of the child population. At the current time, the number actually stands at 407 which was still within the target of 410 which had been set for March 2008.

The numbers of children in care for 12 months or more who had three or more placements during the year was 10.5%. 71.9% 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 Sunderland scored well in comparison with other local authorities in this area of performance.

The proportion of care leavers in education, employment or training on their 19th birthday was almost the same as that for all young people in the City, which was considered an excellent result. 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 was proposed that Judith Corrigan, the nurse for looked after children, be invited to a future meeting of the Board to discuss meeting the health needs of children and young people in care.

Sunderland was in the top performance band for securing permanent new family arrangements through adoption or special guardianship as 9% of those children who

had been in care for at least six months had achieved permanence in the year up to 31 March 2008. It was highlighted that instability around permanence had adverse effects on children and young people in care and that permanence could be achieved through children's homes, foster carers, kinship care and where appropriate, adoption or special guardianship.

It was again reported that 100% of children over four years old had contributed their views to their looked after reviews. Mick McCracken stated that 61% contributed by actually attending the review meeting and in almost 40% of reviews, an advocate attended to speak on behalf of the young person concerned.

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

In the year to 31 December 2007, there was a reduction in the number of children in care for 12 months who had a substantive outcome arising from an offence committed while in care. Two groups are involved in helping improve this indicator and looking at what can be done to divert the young people from criminal activity.

As of 31 January 2008, 82.7% of looked after children had a PEP which had been reviewed. The target for this indicator was 100% and the newly appointed 'Virtual Headteacher' has classed the development of PEPs as one of his top priorities.

Mick McCracken expanded further on the concept of the 'Virtual Headteacher'. He explained that the idea had come out of the 'Care Matters' Green Paper which deals with improving services for looked after children. It was felt that someone in each authority had to take overall responsibility for the education of looked after children. The 'Virtual Headteacher' does not have a school of his own but has responsibility for all looked after children of school age. He will work with the headteachers of schools across the City on issues affecting children in care.

Councillor Gofton queried what the actual proportion was of care leavers who were in education, employment or training. Mick McCracken referred to the performance indicator PAF A4 which shows the proportion of care leavers in education, employment and training as a ratio compared to their peers. This was shown as 0.91 to 1, so the level was almost what you would expect in the general population. Councillor Gofton commented that it would be better if this sort of information could be presented in a way that would make it more accessible for members and young people.

Councillor Gofton also requested more information on what it meant to be in the top performance band for achieving permanence. Mick McCracken advised that this referred to indicator PAF C23 where the Government had set bands for the number of adoptions and special guardianship achieved per numbers of looked after population. It was felt that there could be better ways to reflect the targets in respect of this indicator.

The young people in attendance at the meeting had a number of questions in relation to the report. They asked why percentages rather than actual numbers of young

people were used in the document as they felt it could be easier to distance yourself from the young people involved when using percentages.

Mick McCracken thanked the young people for highlighting those issues and suggested that they may be able to work together in the future to find a better way of presenting this information. It was proposed that data could be brought to the Board in a more personalised, but anonymised way. It was highlighted that it was only when referring to the numbers of children in care who had offended that actual figures were used rather than percentages.

Councillor Speding added that a lot of the relevance of the information was dependent on how it was expressed.

The young people drew attention to the figures relating to placement stability and noted that this meant around 40 young people had been moved around a lot. They also highlighted that it was stated that young people need to be settled in one placement to achieve and be successful and questioned how the Council was going to make sure that all young people in care got the best chances and start in life.

Mick McCracken stated that it was really important for a young person to have predictability in their lives in order for them to get the best chances. With regard to placement stability, it was important that young people were not being moved for less than good reasons. Another way for young people to get the best chances in life was around educational opportunities and the need to capture and promote the talents of children and young people and the role of the 'Virtual Headteacher' would be integral to this. Health was also an important factor for looked after children and it was suggested that if looked after nurse attended a future meeting of the Corporate Parenting Board then she could talk about how health contributes to good outcomes for looked after children and young people.

The young people asked why all children and young people were not having a health assessment. Mick McCracken advised that some young people as they have got older have said that they do not want a health assessment and sometimes assessments can be missed following a placement move where information has not come through quickly enough.

Reference was made to the percentage of children who had achieved permanency in the last year and the young people asked what steps had been taken to improve these figures. Mick McCracken acknowledged that the majority of adopters did want to adopt young children and although children up to the age of six and seven years old had been found adoptive placements, it still was fairly unusual to have children older than that adopted. For older children, it was no less important to have permanence and predictability. Some young people find that stability in children's homes, others from fostering which can be secured by a permanent fostering arrangement with a clear understanding that this would be for the rest of their childhood. Some placements do lead to adoption, a residence order or special guardianship. The significance of having permanence is the most important thing.

Councillor Timmins commented that it was always the intention to attract more adopters and foster carers for children in care and in the past, advertisements had

been placed in magazines for carers. One of the young people remarked that their profile had been circulated in a magazine and they felt it was a good method as all the relevant information was included to enable appropriate matching with potential adoptive families.

The young people also asked for more information on how 100% of children could contribute to their looked after review as it was understood that merely saying they did not want to be involved in the review would be classed as a contribution. Mick McCracken stated that once a child had passed their fourth birthday then their participation in reviews was tracked and that complaining was still meaningful participation. Mick advised that he had also been concerned by the figure of 100% and a way forward has been agreed for a piece of work on this. This matter would be looked into further and brought back to the Board.

Upon discussion, it was: -

3. RESOLVED that the report be noted.

Independent Advocacy for Looked After Children

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 stated that the Council had a responsibility to offer independent advocacy for looked after children and care leavers. Since April 2008, a full service contract had been in place with NCH Children's Rights Service and during this time, three young people had been linked with independent advocates and two had arrangements pending. Potentially five young people using the service within the first three months of operation suggests that people are becoming more aware of the service.

Any young person receiving a statutory service from Children's Services can apply for advocacy services. There needed to be further work done on leaflets to go out to carers and young people and NCH would be visiting homes and meeting foster carer groups to explain more about the services they offer.

A range of guidance and information sharing protocols was being prepared to ensure compliance by all services that have a potential role in supporting young people to access advocacy. Draft guidance had been circulated for comment and consultation.

Councillor Maddison enquired as to what qualifications advocates were required to have and John Arthurs advised that they would be qualified practitioners in social care, health or education and with experience working with children and young people.

Councillor Speding queried the membership of the Advocacy Monitoring Group and John Arthurs advised that he attended, along with representatives from NCH and services dealing with children and young people. Councillor Speding also asked how young people fitted in to the arrangement for this group and John Arthurs

acknowledged that they did not at this time and the situation would have to be looked into further.

Upon discussion, it was: -

4. 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.

Improvement Issues Identified by Young People

The Head of Safeguarding submitted a report detailing work that had been done to address issues for improvement highlighted by young people at the Corporate Parenting Board meeting in January.

Helen Fay, Residential Services Manager, presented the information contained in the report which had been gathered following meetings with young people at one of the homes. The issues which had been looked into were: -

- Not enough pocket money;
- Having a say about house furniture;
- Having the same rules for staff and young people about having snacks;
- Young people were not consulted about staff moves;
- Staff spend too much time on paperwork/ in the office and not enough with young people; and
- Some homes turn off electricity in bedrooms to control noise.

With regard to pocket money, comparisons had been done with other authorities in Tyne and Wear and Durham and Northumberland and it had been found that rates of pocket money in Sunderland were actually very similar to those in other authorities, with Sunderland generally paying its younger children more than others and its older people slightly less. The young people in attendance asked how it was that young people in Gateshead, North Tyneside and Durham received more as 16 year olds than young people in Sunderland and what was the value of the leaving care grant in other areas. Nick Murphy advised that he was not able to say how other authorities paid more as it was down to how they managed their budgets but he could look into the leaving care grant value in other areas.

Since April 2008, each young person had been entitled to an extra £33 per month allocated to a smart card to spend on a wide range of activities in the area. The young people highlighted that only 13-16 year olds were eligible for the 'Lets Go Sunderland' card and this was not pocket money as such. It was also asked if all young people had their cards and if staff and carers knew how to use them. Helen advised that all homes were in the process of getting the 'Lets Go' card and this had been a way of meeting requests from young people who said they wanted more pocket money to pay for activities.

Older teenagers who remain in education are entitled to claim Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) at £30 a week during term time. However the young people were

keen to highlight that EMA an allowance to assist with studying and not to spend on anything young people wanted. Helen Fay acknowledged that young people should be encouraged to spend their EMA on educational equipment or activities, the fact was that in some homes, expensive textbooks were not always required and the EMA could be spent on other things.

The young people referred to a meeting they had attended to go through the Green Paper and there had been mention of a scheme to provide funding for looked after children and young people going on to college. It was suggested that this could be used as a key fund that young people could apply for.

It was asked if it was known how many looked after children in further education were in receipt of EMA and Helen Fay undertook to find this out.

It was reported that during school holidays young people aged 14 and over could take part in the 'Teenagers to Work' scheme which was paid employment. The young people commented that this was a good scheme but only took place four weeks of the year and it was asked if more work experience could be considered at placements within the Council. The Chair stated that this had been done in the past and suggested that it might be beneficial to find out more about what was happening and the range of placements on offer.

With regard to the issue about furniture in homes, the young people had asked if all children had a choice of colour in their bedrooms. Helen advised that as far as possible all the children's homes involved the young people in the purchase of new furniture and they had choice in how their own room was decorated and furnished. Obviously there were limits on the budgets for redecoration and young people would have to wait until something was due to be replaced before they could have a say about furniture or décor.

The young people suggested that staff and young people could sit down together and agree a plan that they were all happy with regarding snacks. Helen responded that most people would like this to be the arrangement but there had been issues where young people with medical conditions would eat more than was healthy for them if they were given unlimited access to snacks. She stated that she was confident that all homes operated reasonable regimes with regard to snacks and Nick Murphy added that Ofsted had never highlighted food provision as being an issue in any of their inspections. However, if anything unreasonable had occurred in relation to provision of snacks, young people were asked to make Helen aware of this.

Another issue which had been raised was that young people were not consulted about staff moves and a question was asked about how young people had been involved in staff recruitment in the past. It was suggested that young people should be allowed to be fully involved in the recruitment of all staff who were going to work with them.

Nick Murphy stated that young people had been involved in an indirect way with the appointments process but this needed to be developed. Councillor Speding highlighted that this principle had already been agreed and it needed to be carried through in future recruitment processes for care home staff.

It had been highlighted that staff in homes had to spend a lot of time on paperwork and young people had asked if one person could remain in the office to do paperwork, to allow other members of staff to be with young people.

It was accepted that the amount of paperwork required does increase on an annual basis and the staff all understood it was a problem and were trying to develop strategies to address this. Unfortunately, the volume of paperwork was determined by Ofsted and it was necessary to complete it in order to do things better for children and young people in local authority care.

Councillor Timmins commented that the paperwork was not simply for administrative purposes but that accurate reporting was vital to the management of the homes. The young people highlighted that part of this issue for them was that they simply wanted to spend more time with the staff in the homes.

Regarding turning electricity off to control noise, young people asked how staff could make sure that all the residents of the house were not being punished due to the actions of one person. Helen Fay advised that this should no longer be an issue as virtually all homes could now switch off the power in individual bedrooms.

Following detailed discussion, it was: -

5. RESOLVED that the information contained in the report be noted.

Putting Corporate Parenting into Practice

A leaflet on 'Putting Corporate Parenting into Practice' had been circulated to all members of the Board.

'Time for Change' – a young person's guide to the Care Matters White Paper was also circulated as it was important for members to be aware of the promises which were being made to children and young people.

Upon discussion, it was: -

6. RESOLVED that the leaflets be received.

(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.