

CORPORATE PARENTING BOARD

January 2011

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 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 is provided under the Advocacy Services and Representations (Children)(Amendment) Regulations 2004. This has been provided through an independent service provider since 2007, meeting the requirements of the National Standards for the Provision of Children's Advocacy Services 2004.
- 2.2 This was initially on a spot-purchase basis, but from 2008 was provided under a one-year contract, with provision for a one-year extension up to March 2010 under a contract with Action for Children (previously NCH).
- 2.3 Work on renewal of the contract tender process commenced in September 2009 anticipating a new contract to be in place in March 2010. However, as reported to the Board in June 2010, the completion of the process was required to be halted due to changes in the corporate commissioning process, and it was necessary to begin the process again from the start to ensure legal compliance with the new arrangements. During the delay the service was sustained through quarterly extensions under delegated powers.

3 Current Position

- 3.1 The new procurement process elicited 'Expressions of Interest' from 18 potential providers, of whom six submitted Pre Qualification Questionnaires, At

the Tender Evaluation stage four tenders were received by the deadline from 'Action for Children', 'Barnado's', 'Children North-East' and 'Skills for People'

- 3.2 In the Tender Evaluation process Action For Children were the successful bidder, on the basis of both assessment of quality of service in relation to the Service Specification and competitive pricing.
- 3.3 The newly awarded contract runs initially for 3 years with subsequent extension options subject to continued quality and funding has potential to provide long-term continuity of service to our children and young people.
- 3.4 The new contract commences on 1 February 2011 under a substantially changed financing arrangement, which, on the basis of our now-established experience of take-up of the service, should bring financial savings in the remainder of the current financial year and over the coming three years.

4 Service use and outcomes

- 4.1 Whilst the take-up of the service was lower in 2009-2010 than in previous years, eighteen new referrals have been picked up in 2010-11, two of these being in the current quarter.
- 4.2 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.
- 4.3 The Advocacy Service provides information about themes identified by young people, and feedback regarding responses.
- 4.4 Themes continue to relate to young people's uncertainty about their plans, but a significant characteristic of some 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. Some representations have related to specific decisions about placement moves or school enrolment.
- 4.5 There have been six occasions when young people have asked for their representations to be supported by the Children and Young People's Rights Officer without using the Advocacy Service. Where the issues have been relatively straightforward, their wishes have been met although where the issues are more complex the Children and Young People's Rights Officer has encouraged the young person to use the Advocacy Service.
- 4.6 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.

- 4.7 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.

5 Accessing the Service

- 5.1 Allocation of advocates continues to be rapid, and well within the 5 working days of referral.
- 5.2 Four 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 and are able to access it.
- 5.3 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.

6 New arrangements from 1 February 2010

- 6.1 The new arrangements from 1 February 2010 will be relatively unchanged as far as the role of Independent Advocates and young people's access is concerned, but Action for Children will have a more pro-active role in directly promoting the service by visiting children's homes and foster carer groups to ensure a sustained level of awareness of the service, and the Independent Advocate allocation timescale is reduced from 5 to 3 working days.
- 6.2 The main change to the contract from the Council's perspective are:
- 6.2.1 Changes to financial arrangements in the interests of improving value for money. This involves replacing the current fixed 'block' payments for the whole service, with a smaller fixed fee (10% of the current contract value) with additional hourly fees charged according to actual usage of the service. This will mean that the total annual cost will vary according to use of the service, but based on our experience over the past three years, this is expected to result in continued savings without compromising the effectiveness of the service.

6.2.2 A longer contract period of 3 years plus the prospect of annual extension at the Council's discretion for up to 3 further years, thus giving the prospect of long-term consistency for young people

7 Summary:

- 7.1 The service continues to be accessed by our young people and awareness of its availability continues to spread and the service is accessible to all our young people including those placed out of area
- 7.2 Service take up has increased over the past six months
- 7.3 Procurement arrangements for re-contracting the service have been completed and the new contract will take effect from 1 February 2011.
- 7.4 The new contract will enable cost-savings in the remainder of the financial year, and based on past usage, will enable continued savings over the next 3 years.

8 Recommendation

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