

**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 the first annual report to the Board concerning the Independent Advocacy Service for the year 2008-2009.

**2. Background**

- 2.1 Independent Advocacy for looked after young people, care leavers and other users of Children's Social Care Services during 2008-2009 has been provided under a contract with Action for Children
- 2.2 The contract runs until April 2009 with provision for extension for up to a further 12 months subject to the availability of funding, current demand for the service, and satisfactory performance during the contract period.
- 2.3 The statutory framework for this provision and eligibility for the service is as described in reports to the Board in June and September 2008

**3 The Service**

- 3.1 Action for Children provide the service 52 weeks of the year, with a telephone messaging service to receive inquiries outside office hours
- 3.2 Action for Children provides a choice of Independent Advocates who have a range of background professional experience in Social Work or social care, education and health. They maintain a sufficient pool of advocates to allocate according to the skill and knowledge needed and where appropriate, gender, to suit the circumstances of the young person requiring the service.
- 3.3 All of the Independent Advocates are experienced practitioners, who then receive further training in advocacy skills. Young people from Sunderland have contributed directly to this training with the support of the Young People's Officer.

- 3.4 Young people can access the service directly by telephone, letter, or e-mail, or can contact the Young People's Officer in the Safeguarding Unit who will facilitate referral to the service.
- 3.5 Professionals or carers who think that a young person needs an Independent Advocate are advised to contact the Young People's Officer in the first instance. The Young People's Officer will make direct contact with the young person to confirm that the request is from the young person, and not driven by professionals' views, and facilitates the young person's contact with the Advocacy Service accordingly.
- 3.6 When young people make complaints, the Children's Complaints Manager will offer to refer to the Service if the young person does not already have an independent advocate.
- 3.7 The service is monitored through a quarterly meeting of the Advocacy Monitoring Group. This group includes representatives from Action for Children, the Safeguarding Unit all services responsible for looked after children and two representatives from the 'Change' council.
- 3.8 Service developments have included extension to cover children who are privately fostered, and access to the service for children in need is now accepted as an entitlement, and not discretionary.

#### **4 Service use 2008-2009 and outcomes**

- 3.1 From 1<sup>st</sup> April 2008 to 19 February 2009 seventeen young people have accessed the Independent Advocacy service, a significant increase over the total of seven in 2007-8.
- 3.2 Not all young people wishing to raise concerns make use of the service. Sometimes young people decline the offer of an advocate, feeling they have had made their representations clearly enough, sometimes supported by carers or the Young People's Officer.
- 3.3 In other instances carers or social workers have raised concerns about the circumstances of young people who had not themselves sought advocacy. In such cases intervention by the Young People's Officer has resulted in timely resolution or redirection to a more appropriate service.
- 3.4 As reported previously to the Board, it is not possible to make comparisons with other authorities due to differences in the way that this service is provided in other authorities. Informally acquired information from 2 neighbouring

authorities prior to the establishment of our scheme suggested that take-up would be much lower than we have experienced in reality.

3.5 The issues raised by young people using the Independent Advocacy Service have included

- Contact arrangements with families and siblings
- Transition to independence
- Support for care leavers
- Lack of support from Adult Services
- Disagreement about placement changes
- Desire for placement changes
- Children and young people not being consulted re changes of plan or placement
- Complaints about past incidents
- Whether assessments have been properly done
- Access to personal records

3.6 All of the issues picked up by the Advocacy Service have been for the young people, substantial and frequently complex. Any anxiety that young people would use the service to deal with frivolous matters has not been realised.

3.7 The ages of young people accessing the service ranges from 10 to 19 years, and all placement settings are represented, including foster care, placements with relative carers, residential, secure accommodation, supported lodgings and independent living, including placements within and outside of Sunderland.

3.8 It is not possible to report in this on specific outcomes in individual cases, since the relationship between the young person and the Advocate is confidential and is only received by the Council in the event that it results in a complaint or representation. Where an Independent Advocate supports the young person to make representations the outcome is a matter for the complaints and representations process, and would be appropriately covered by the Annual Complaints and Representations report.

3.9 It is possible to report on response to some themes raised in the referrals. As reported to the Board in December, a significant number of the Advocacy referrals made over the past two years have been related to transitions from care to independence, in particular, highlighting concerns about young people with additional complex needs who experienced difficulties or delays in reaching agreement about support from adult services.

- 3.10 In response to this initial exploratory meetings have been held with contributions from the Leaving Care Service, Disabled Children's Service, Legal Services (Adult and Children) and the Safeguarding Unit to begin to quantify the issues, legal frameworks, and implications for a relatively small number of young people with complex needs who do not appear to be covered in the proposals for improved transition planning.

#### **4 Accessing the Service**

- 4.1 Allocation of advocates continues to be rapid, and well within the 5 working days of referral as required in the service specification and usually within 24/48 hours.
- 4.2 The new Children's Complaints Manager is working closely with the Safeguarding and Quality Assurance Unit to ensure that access to Advocacy is promoted. On receipt of a complaint from a young person they also check that the young person has an Independent Advocate if they so wish.

#### **5 Future Steps**

- 5.1 The contract with Action for Children has been extended, within the provisions of the procurement arrangements, until end of March 2010.
- 5.2 Action for Children is hoping to work with the Young People's Officer and 'Change' to develop 'peer advocacy' with our young people in Sunderland. They have identified funding to arrange external trainers to work with a group of young people to launch this.
- 5.3 The service will also be scoping arrangements to improve advocacy arrangements for young people with learning disabilities and additional complex needs.
- 5.4 There is a need to ensure that Independent Advocates are informed of the outcome of complaints and representations so they are enabled to arrange more effective 'closure' of their involvement with young people. The Children's Complaints Manager will work with the service to ensure better communications with Advocates regarding the outcome of complaints.

#### **6 Summary:**

- 6.1 The Independent Advocacy Service has seen an increasing rate of take-up by our young people and meets all current statutory standards.

- 6.2 Young people other than those who are looked after are eligible for the service, although the majority of young people using the service to date are looked after or care leavers.
- 6.3 The issues raised by young people with their advocates are essentially those which the young people see as serious.
- 6.4 The take up of the service has steadily increased as awareness of the service has spread
- 6.5 The Action for Children has satisfied all requirements of the Service Specification to date
- 6.6 Proposals for service development 2009-10 include developing peer advocacy and enhancing access for children with learning disabilities.

## **7 Recommendation**

The Board is requested to note the continuing development of the arrangements and the extension of the contract, and to continue to receive quarterly reports.

John Arthurs  
Development Manager, Looked After Children      February 2009.