



Scrutiny Report

Children & Young People Scrutiny Panel Corporate Parenting

September 2010



CONTENTS

| | Page |
|---|-------------|
| Foreword from the Chair..... | 3 |
| Background to the Review | 4 |
| Recommendations..... | 5 |
| Findings | 7 |
| Conclusion..... | 15 |
| Appendices | |
| Appendix 1 - Membership of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Panel | 16 |

FOREWORD FROM THE CHAIR



Councillor Stuart Wilson
Chair of the Children and Young People
Scrutiny Panel

This report sets out the findings and recommendations of the Panel's review into Corporate Parenting in North Lincolnshire.

Corporate Parenting and the issues faced by Looked After Children and Young People should be at the very heart of the council's work; they are some of our most vulnerable people and as such the Children and Young People Scrutiny Panel undertook this review to ensure that the council was fulfilling its duty.

The responsibility, which all members and officers of the council have towards children in their care is an onerous one and must not be taken lightly.

We all have only one childhood and it should offer us the chance to prepare for the rest of our life. Looked After Children deserve the same chance from their childhood. The purpose of this review was to find out how well we are doing as Corporate Parents, and how the role is carried out in the council ensuring that the children in our care are helped to maximise their potential and prepared for working life.

I hope this review will make a contribution to North Lincolnshire Council's policies for children in care and contribute to the good work that is already being carried out across the council.

I would like to thank all those who have taken part – the members of the panel, the scrutiny officer, other council officers, foster carers and of course the children themselves. The willing co-operation from many people always adds significant value to Scrutiny reviews.

BACKGROUND TO THE REVIEW

Councillors, along with professionals and agencies within North Lincolnshire, are charged with the duty of acting as Corporate Parents to children/young people who are looked after by a local authority and either accommodated in care or remanded/detained.

Looked After Children and Young People (LAC & YP) have historically been significantly disadvantaged by their experiences within the care system. Therefore, in view of the importance of this issue, this review aimed to establish the level of commitment currently provided to our Looked After Children, and if required, to help to assist the council to achieve better outcomes for children and care leavers through more effective intervention by all Elected Members, Senior Officers and our partners through active fulfilment of their responsibilities as Corporate Parents.

The Government launched its 'Care Matters: Time for Change White Paper in 2007 with the aim of improving outcomes for children and young people in care. Its goal was stated as follows:

“Our aspirations for children in care are no less than each parent has for their own child. Children in care are often in much greater need than other children but much less likely to get the help they require. We aim to create a care system that provides every child with a safe, happy, healthy, secure and loving childhood, nurturing their aspirations and enabling them to fulfil their potential”.

The scrutiny panel sought to investigate how the White Paper recommendations had been implemented within North Lincolnshire Council, in respect of certain aspects of the council's responsibilities for Looked After Children.

SCOPE OF THE REVIEW

The panel agreed to focus on a number of key issues. These were:-

- To examine the role of the council and its partners as Corporate Parents with a view to making recommendations on how effective the current practice and procedures are;
- To investigate if the council is clear about its Corporate Parenting responsibilities and how to implement them;
- To improve Corporate Parenting awareness and service delivery for Looked After Children in North Lincolnshire.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The final recommendations of the panel are summarised below:-

Recommendation 1

It is not evident that all Elected Members and Senior Officers are kept up to date with information about Looked After Children in North Lincolnshire. The panel would, therefore, like to see arrangements put into place which regularly update Members and officers in particular with information concerning their wards and LAC & YP.

Recommendation 2

Along with receiving information about LAC & YP in their wards etc, Elected Members and officers require more information and opportunities to explore their role as Corporate Parents by attending events or speaking with YP. Regular bulletins should be issued to all members updating them of developments and key messages.

Recommendation 3

It is evident that there is some good Corporate Parenting work being carried out across certain service areas. However a mechanism needs to be put in place to ensure that all pledges are being reviewed, and that an audit trail is put in place to ensure that the actions in the pledges are carried out.

Recommendation 4

The Corporate Parenting Group carries out a great deal of work. However, the Cabinet Member for Children's Services must ensure that this work gets filtered through to the wider sphere of members outside of the Children and Young People Service area.

Recommendation 5

That more formal corporate visits be arranged that are pencilled in the calendars of the children's homes. This would inform the children of when members are arriving in order for them to be able to chat if they wish to do so.

Recommendation 6

The panel would like to see a piece of work carried out to make sure we are doing everything as a council to make sure that LAC & YP General Practitioner records are transferred in a timely manner.

Recommendation 7

LAC & YP are not always aware of Elected Members' roles, responsibilities and the assistance they can provide. A leaflet should be developed and distributed to all LAC & YP and care leavers explaining the role of members as their 'Corporate Parents' with their contact details and dates of their surgeries.

Recommendation 8

That all Elected Members undertake mandatory training on their Corporate Parenting role, with refresher courses held every three years. The Corporate Parenting training should also be a compulsory part of any new Member's and Senior Officers induction package.

Recommendation 9

That briefings/seminars on the Corporate Parenting role should be scheduled into the Member Development Programme for North Lincolnshire Council.

Recommendation 10

That the Children and Young People Scrutiny Panel be kept informed of progress made with regards to the Virtual School team currently being established.

Recommendation 11

That this review be re-visited in 12 months time.

Recommendation 12

That everyone involved throughout this review be thanked for their participation and contributions.

FINDINGS

1. National Perspective

A Looked After Child or Young Person (LAC & YP) is someone deemed potentially vulnerable and/or at risk and is therefore under the legal care of a Local Authority.

Every child needs a good parent who looks out for them, speaks out on their behalf and responds to their needs. For children in care this is a statutory role for local authorities - all councillors and council officers share this corporate parenting responsibility.

In September 1998 Frank Dobson MP, the former Secretary of State for Health wrote what has now become known as "the Dobson Letter" asking that services for children should be based around the question "is this good enough for my child?". In 2003 this led to the publication of the "If this were my child A Councillor's Guide to being a good corporate parent", which outlined the responsibility that the whole council, both officers and councillors, have in relation to Looked After Children and Young People. It stated that councillors and officers should:

- Accept responsibility for children in the council's care;
- Make their needs a priority;
- Seek for them the same outcomes as any good parent would want for their own children.

This agenda was also part of the wider policy context of Every Child Matters and its five outcomes:

- Stay Safe
- Be Healthy
- Enjoy and Achieve
- Make a Positive Contribution
- Achieve Economic Well-Being

With the continuous drive from Government on this agenda and the publication of the White Paper "Care Matters: Time for Change", it is important for North Lincolnshire Council to ensure that it is meeting the expected targets and outcomes.

2. Local Context

In October 2007 the Joint Area Review (JAR) published its findings in relation to North Lincolnshire Council's Social Care Services. It found that in relation to its Corporate Parenting role:-

- The management of the service is outstanding and provides very clear direction, with very strong and effective support from the Corporate Parenting Group.
- Looked After Children's views are represented effectively.
- There is clear evidence that the views of young people are listened to and that they influence the development of services.
- Members of the group play a very active role in creating opportunities for leisure and employment.

Then in 2009 an Inspection of the Adoption Service was carried out and the feedback given was:

"There is a strong approach to Corporate Parenting responsibilities. The Executive is fully informed of the agency's work and there is inclusive and supportive infrastructure within which managers and workers feel valued and encouraged."

It was in light of this that the panel undertook its review, in order to help ensure and investigate that this progress is maintained and built upon.

There are approximately 157 children in care from within North Lincolnshire and in addition to this, there are 64 children from outside of North Lincolnshire who are in care in the area (this figure is correct at the time this report was written but it is constantly fluctuating as young people enter and leave the care system).

3. Key Responsibilities

3.1. Cabinet Member for Children's Services

All members of the local authority have a shared responsibility for Corporate Parenting, but the Cabinet Member for Children's Services has the lead political role in ensuring that children looked after by the local authority have their interests protected, their opportunities maximised, their educational achievement enhanced, their voices heard and care services shaped to meet their needs. When interviewed by the scrutiny panel the

cabinet member indicated that he played a key role with looked after children and provides strong leadership. This was evident from his commitment in chairing and playing a major role in the Corporate Parenting Group. This group is made up of Elected Members, the Director for Children's Services, Service Directors from across the council and our partners in the Health services. Children in care are also part of this group that is responsible for monitoring performance, activities with LAC & YP, development and all Child Protection Issues. The cabinet member provided examples of positive interaction with the LAC & YP and meets them on a regular basis as part of the children in care council meetings. However, it is not so evident how all other Elected Members in the authority are regularly kept up to date with North Lincolnshire's Looked After Children.

3.2. Elected Members and Senior Officers

There have been numerous reports that have examined the part that Councillors have to play in safeguarding vulnerable children and young people, not least the Laming Inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié (2003). This serious breakdown in communications and failure of agencies to work together led to tragic consequences.

As part of the evidence given to Lord Laming, Councillors said that they were unaware of the scale of the problems faced by their agencies. The Laming Inquiry harshly criticised the defence "no one ever told me" and stressed the importance of distinct lines of accountability. He insisted that 'Elected

Members and Senior Officers must ensure that they are kept fully informed about the delivery of services and must not accept at face value what they are told, or what is written in the authority's strategies for Corporate Parenting 2007 - 2010. This does not always seem apparent across the authority.

As the review was focussing on Elected Members as Corporate Parents, the panel circulated a questionnaire to all Councillors and Service Directors of the council to ascertain their views and level of knowledge about their role. Out of the 54 distributed, only 20 were returned. Clearly, 63% of those invited to comment declined to return the questionnaire, however, the panel believe that they were able to draw some conclusions on the basis of the responses received.

The panel asked if Members and Service Directors were clear about their roles as Corporate Parents. Whilst 15 of those said they were clear about their role, worryingly 5 were not. Of those who were clear about their role, there was a very good level of awareness about their roles and what Corporate Parenting should involve.

Only a very small proportion (8) of those who responded said they regularly receive information on LAC & YP but 11 do not. Similarly, a significant number of respondents were unaware of how many children were looked after in North Lincolnshire. Out of the 20 respondents it was good to see that 17 had received training for their role as

Corporate Parents. Unfortunately as previously stated in this report not all Members have attended training in this area.

As a final point members were asked what would help them in their role as Corporate Parents: -

- “Corporate visiting should be advertised to the children more, so that they know when a visit is arranged and can be there to chat to the members if they wish to do so. Some visits need to be more about having a chat with the children rather than looking at the buildings etc.”
- “More information required especially relevant to the ward”
- “Regular updates to all members”

It is therefore incumbent upon the local authority to provide, and for Elected Members to actively seek, regular information, support and guidance in relation to Looked After Children and Young People. Elected Members and Senior Officers require more information and opportunities to explore their role as Corporate Parents more effectively.

3.3 Key Partners

Other local agencies share this Corporate Parenting responsibility, including schools, health and youth justice organisations. The panel initially had some concerns about the health care of LAC & YP and invited the NHS North Lincolnshire Clinical Development Co-ordinator to attend one of their meetings.

The panel members were impressed with the work that had been carried out since 1 January 2010 following the appointment of a dedicated NHS North Lincolnshire Looked After Children Co-ordinator. Members were informed of some positive initiatives being carried out including full health care assessments for every child in care on an annual basis or, if the child is under five then they receive two assessments per year. All children also receive a mental health assessment and are fast tracked through to the Children and Mental Health Services (CAMHS) if required. NHS North Lincolnshire's Sexual Assessment lead has also implemented a policy that all female children and young people in care receive education and awareness training on teenage pregnancy as part of their annual health assessment. In response to questioning members were informed that all Looked After Children now receive their health assessment within twenty days of being admitted into care. Drop-in sessions are also held at Cambridge House where some of the young people attend on a daily basis. When members of the panel attended a site visit here they received good feedback on numerous aspects of the service and were informed that these drop-in sessions had been very popular.

Members were told that the government had issued new guidance before Christmas 2009 on 'promoting the health and well-being of Looked After Children'. Following an audit, NHS North Lincolnshire is close to complying with all aspects of the guidance. However,

one area requiring attention is the length of time taken to transfer the General Practitioner records of the child once they move out of care.

3.4 Foster Carers

As part of the scrutiny review, the panel felt that it was important to seek the views of foster carers. We thank the Fostering Team for their help in setting up the meeting and foster carers for their time and contributions.

Many of the foster carers felt that Looked After Children and Young People are stigmatised by being 'in care', particularly in education and there was a need to make sure they have access to the same resources and support as other children. Some expressed frustration at arrangements being changed at short notice, and foster carers not having the power to help.

One of their big frustrations was around transportation issues with regards to being able to change taxis for the child in their care and the children sometimes miss out because they have not been able to do this. Other issues with regard to being able to authorise the child to go on a school trip, sometimes missing out because of the delay in having to get papers signed by the council, if the school requires an urgent response. When the panel discussed this with senior officers from Children's Services they informed the panel that a meeting had been arranged to discuss these issues and they would hopefully be resolved.

3.5 Training

As part of this review all members of the panel were invited to attend Corporate Parenting Training provided by Senior Officers from Children's Services at North Lincolnshire Council. Whilst training on this issue has been held in the past, all Elected Members and Senior Officers should attend training on this very important subject and due to changing legislation should attend every three years to ensure up-to-date knowledge, particularly in the field of Safeguarding.

The panel was very concerned when they were informed that only 23 out of 43 elected members on North Lincolnshire Council had attended the training. This is an issue when all concerned are charged with the duty of acting as Corporate Parents to LAC & YP. All Service Directors have attended the training. All Elected Members and Senior Managers have been issued with a Corporate Parenting Guide.

An area that seems to be under developed is Corporate Parenting Training for other officers of the council. A piece of work could possibly be undertaken by the Corporate Parenting Group as to how knowledge of this responsibility can be disseminated to all employees and how they can be further involved in working with the LAC & YP.

3.6 Corporate Parenting Group/Plan & Pledges

In 2005 North Lincolnshire Council developed and launched its first Comprehensive Corporate Parenting Plan. The model on

which it was based involved developing the Corporate Parenting role of all council service areas and the involvement of Elected Members and Service Directors as Corporate Parents. Fundamental to the development of this role were pledges made by each service area, which identified how children in care would be supported. Members were also informed that the Corporate Parenting Plan has become established and has enabled many key activities and events to take place to support individuals and groups of children in care in North Lincolnshire.

All these pledges and strategies appeared on the face of it to be promoting opportunities and safeguarding LAC & YP. However, during the review when further research was carried out by the panel members they were disappointed to find out that once some of the pledges had been written and formed part of the Children's Plan they were not always acted upon. However, two service areas, Highways and Planning and Asset Management and Culture (Leisure), appeared to be leading by example with some outstanding work. Despite considerable enthusiasm from these services, it did not appear that these examples of good practice were being used to inspire/support work in other services to the same extent. It was felt by the panel that some of the other service areas could be providing more opportunities and support to LAC & YP. The panel would like to see more evidence that the pledges are being reviewed and that an audit trail is put in place to ensure that the actions in the pledges are carried out.

As previously mentioned, a Corporate Parenting Group has also been established by North Lincolnshire Council, which is chaired by the Cabinet Member for Children's Services. The panel was informed of the success of this group which is attended by Elected Members, the Director of Children's Services, Service Directors from across the Council and Health. Children in Care who sit on the Children in Care Council also form part of this group. It is responsible for monitoring performance, activities, developments and all corporate parenting issues. It reports to the Children's Trust with its findings and minutes but it does not appear to be filtered through to the wider sphere of members outside the Children and Young People's Service area.

As part of its evidence gathering the panel was informed of a report that was written for the Council's Management Team (CMT) in March 2010. The report proposed a review of the Council's Corporate Parenting commitments. In the report it indicated that North Lincolnshire Council's Corporate Parenting Strategy ran from 2007 to 2010 and was now due to be reviewed. As part of this an event was to be held for all Corporate Parents within the council and the Children's Trust partners. The proposal for the event stated it aimed to:-

- Provide all partners with information on the new statutory guidance and regulations;
- Provide all members with the opportunity to hear from children and young people about their experiences in care and what they expect from their Corporate Parents;

- Deliver specific themed workshops that would support Corporate Parents in the review/renewal of their pledges to children in care and care leavers and support partners in developing new pledges.

The panel was impressed with the work that was proposed and went on to enquire how and when the event had taken place, and what, if any, outcomes were achieved.

Members were informed that following the original plan for an event to be held, CMT had held further discussions and decided that it would be more effective to meet with each of the Service Directors (or their representatives) first, spend some time working through what they will put in their pledges, discuss them with young people and draw up action plans that can then be monitored before holding the bigger event. Alongside this, they have been working on and reviewing/updating the Corporate Parenting Plan.

Members were informed that CMT anticipated that all the pledges would be finalised by the end of September 2010. The event would then be launched at an extended Corporate Parenting meeting on 21 October when everyone can present their pledges and sign up to the Corporate Parenting Plan.

3.7 Virtual Head Teacher

As part of the review members were advised of a number of education performance indicators relating to LAC & YP that were showing as 'off track by exception'. When the

panel queried this, it was informed that this was due to the small cohort of numbers which was always changing due to the numbers coming in and out of care. However, results for 2010 were showing good improvements.

Members investigated the issue of educational attainment of LAC & YP further and in particular the role of the 'Virtual Head Teacher'. The details of education of children in care are held as a virtual school. The Virtual Head is responsible for monitoring the educational provision for all children in care within North Lincolnshire Council and intervenes when there are difficulties. Working closely with Children's Social Care Officers at all levels in Children's Services the Virtual Head initiates and supervises interventions, to ensure that children in care make the best educational progress they possibly can. Unfortunately the panel struggled at the start of this review to establish who was responsible for this role due to changes in Children's Services. However, it was informed that it was the responsibility of Assistant Director Learning and Improvement. The Assistant Director was invited for questioning to clear up any confusion and to explain her role and remit as the virtual head teacher. It was explained that the role is not statutory and as such received no additional funding. Members were reassured that the role was being carried out and a presentation was made outlining what was expected, what North Lincolnshire was doing and what provisions were made available to the children in care. The panel was further informed at a later meeting by

the Director for Children's Services that it was proposed to have a virtual team for children in care consisting of actual Head Teachers from Primary and Secondary schools, along with school improvement partners, a Virtual Education Welfare Officer, Psychologists and guidance officers. The panel are keen to monitor progress on this issue.

3.8 Visit to Cambridge House/Care Leavers Accommodation

Part of the review incorporated a visit by panel members to Cambridge House to speak to some of the young people in and leaving care. Cambridge House is part of the support mechanism for LAC & YP, where they can attend for support and guidance, carry out activities, use the facilities, hold meetings of the children in care council etc. The majority of LAC & YP who the panel met were happy with the service they received (in relation to Cambridge House), but they did say they found it difficult to find employment or similar opportunities. Many of them spoke highly of the Highways and Planning Service of North Lincolnshire Council who had provided help with interview techniques and work experience. Apart from meeting the Cabinet Member for Children's Services as part of the Corporate Parenting Group they did not regularly see or meet other Elected Members or Senior Officers. Many of them had little understanding or awareness of Elected Member roles. LAC & YP may benefit from receiving details of their local councillors and dates of their surgeries.

There was a mixed experience of residential care and like any child most of them would rather not be in that situation. However, some of them reported having experienced good support whilst being in care. Many said they valued the support they received from social workers and had positive relationships with them. The panel had received concerning information from various Elected Members carrying out rota visits that not all LAC & YP in the residential homes were attending school. Members questioned senior officers on this and were assured that every LAC & YP was given a personal educational plan, and encouraged at every opportunity to attend school or placement. Unfortunately it is not always easy as most of them have not attended school prior to them coming into the authority's care. But assurance was given that it is a priority and all avenues are explored with every child.

The panel members, in groups, were kindly shown around a house and a flat of children who had recently left the authority's care to live independently. On the whole they were satisfied with the support they had received apart from a few teething problems. They did indicate that it was a very daunting experience and that they found the support provided by Cambridge House essential. Some members of the panel had concerns with regards to children leaving care and how their progress was monitored, but were reassured by senior officers that they do their utmost to support care leavers in many ways, including, pathway plans, personal advisors and personal progress plans etc.

CONCLUSION

When the panel embarked on this review they wanted to understand more the role of Corporate Parents and be confident that this role was being undertaken effectively across the council. There is clearly some good work taking place and the panel commend the work undertaken in what are often difficult and traumatic circumstances.

It is apparent that there is commitment to improving services for LAC & YP at both executive and scrutiny level. However, as demonstrated by the responses to the Members' questionnaire, and during various interviews, this is not consistent across the council with a proportion being unaware of their responsibilities. We are not suggesting that all Members of the council should have an equal role; clearly there are some who will have greater commitment than others. The panel believe and reiterate the point that Corporate Parenting is a shared responsibility and it is timely to remind all Members and Senior Officers of this requirement.

Through the panels findings it was apparent that there was a requirement to increase the awareness and understanding of Elected Members as to their Corporate Parenting role and the benefits from training and guidance.

The panel would like to see action taken (both at officer and member level) to ensure that Members are more informed of their roles and the children that are in their care on a more frequent basis. The panel are also mindful of the requirement to equip Members with the essential skills to communicate and listen to LAC & YP and care leavers.

The young people and foster carers that were interviewed all welcomed the opportunity to speak to the panel and would like more opportunities for further discussions to raise their concerns. It is also important for the council to give appropriate levels of support to Foster Carers, including training to ensure adequate knowledge of changes in legislation. It is also as important to find out their experiences so as to ensure their retention and ensure good practice in recruitment for the future. The panel think that it is vital that this is facilitated to make sure that the views of the 'people who matter' inform the work that we do.

APPENDIX

Membership of the Children and Young People Scrutiny Panel

Councillor Wilson (Chair)

Councillor C Sherwood (Vice-Chair)

Councillor Mrs Bromby

Councillor Cawsey

Councillor Simpson

Councillor P Vickers

Councillor Whiteley

Co-opted Members:

A Dunkerley
(Parent Governor Representative)

W Egan
(Diocesan Board of Education
Representative)

N Craven
(Parent Governor Representative)

W Witter
(Diocesan Board of Education
Representative)

The panel conducted a number of evidence gathering sessions, speaking to a range of key officers from the council and its partners. The panel would like to thank them for their valued input and attendance. They also received and considered a range of written evidence, including local and national research, guidance and legislation.

