

REPORT ON CORPORATE PARENTING ACTIVITY WITHIN FLINTSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

REPORT AUTHOR

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INTRODUCTION:

In the main corporate parenting activity within the County Council centres around the work of the Children's Services Forum, ably assisted by the two participation groups. The pinnacle of our yearly activity is the annual Pride of Flintshire awards ceremony which celebrates the achievements of our looked after children and care leavers. The awards were held in September 2011 and once again the Children's Commissioner for Wales attended one of the events and repeated his support for the work involved in staging this important celebration of our looked after children. The evaluation of the awards ceremony is attached (*appendix a*) and will inform the planning for the 2012 awards which are to be held in October 2012 during the half term week. Photographs are taken and made up into an album then placed in the Members' Room in order that all county councillors can share in the successes even if they are unable to attend.

Concerns have grown over recent years about the increasing number of looked after children in Wales. Within Flintshire we track our figures and query any anomalies. This attachment (*appendix b*) provides the picture across Wales as at 31.03.11. Children enter the care system via different routes, i.e. some are removed from their parents and made subject to care orders due to abuse, neglect or abandonment whilst others are voluntarily accommodated at the parents' request due to behavioural problems or relationship breakdowns. Statistics indicate that for children who enter the care system voluntarily the prognosis for successful rehabilitation diminishes the longer the child or young person is accommodated after a 6 week period. To this end, within Children's Services, we strive hard to prevent accommodation occurring, devising robust intervention packages and when the situation is unavoidable we put equal effort into a speedy rehabilitation plan. Our efforts, of course, aren't always successful. This attachment (*appendix c*) provides details of the legal status of our looked after children population as at 29.02.12. Members need to be aware that children who are made the subject of care orders by the Family Proceedings Court can either remain with their parents following the hearing as part of the care planning arrangements or be returned to their parents as part of the care planning during or after the care proceedings. The children are still subject to close monitoring by the allocated Social Worker and 6 monthly reviews by our Independent Reviewing Officers.

The following areas outline the detail around corporate parenting activity during 2011/12.

1. CHILDREN'S SERVICES FORUM

The current membership is as follows:

ELECTED MEMBERS:	Cllr. R.C.Bithell (Chair) Cllr. C.A. Ellis Cllr. F. Gillmore Cllr. H. McGuill Cllr. N. R. Steele - Mortimer Cllr. S. Jones Cllr. H. Brown Cllr. N. Phillips
NEW MEMBER:	Cllr. C. Thomas
OFFICERS:	Chief Executive Officer Director of Lifelong Learning Director of Community Services Head of Legal and Democratic Services Head of Social Services for Children Head of Housing Planning Officer Committee Officer (Sharon Thomas)
NEW MEMBER:	Susan Willis, BCUHB
NEW MEMBER:	Foster Carer – Mr. Robert Minion
YOUNG PEOPLE'S REPRESENTATIVES X4:	Tom, Dawn, Jake and Shaneice

The topics covered on the agenda for the Children's Services Forum during 2011/12 are as follows:

<u>DATE</u>	<u>TOPICS</u>
	To follow

2. EDUCATION OF LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN

Table attached (*appendix d*) and narrative on observations (*appendix e*).

3. CARE LEAVERS IN EMPLOYMENT

During 2010 Flintshire Social Services for Children in conjunction with Deeside College, Job Centre plus and Careers Wales designed and delivered a scheme for Flintshire's Care Leavers. This scheme was seen as part of the commitment to the

Corporate Parenting Strategy & Action Plan. This plan outlined that *“the corporate parenting commitment should be realised through a quality of care and range of opportunities that lead to measurable improvements in the life chances of looked after children – enabling them to succeed in line with their peers.”*

Initially there were 9 students on the course. This reduced to four students by the end of the programme. A dropout rate of 60% is the average on this type of programme

The students enjoyed the course in particular the work experience placements. All who completed the programme have progressed onto Further Education one Young Person obtained an apprenticeship with Flintshire County Council.

Due to the small cohort of young people Leaving Care who would be eligible for this scheme in 2011/2012 discussions took place with neighbouring Authorities to discuss the potential of ‘joining forces’ to deliver a similar scheme. However only Conwy were interested but following a number of discussions with them (mainly due to distance) Conwy decided to develop a local scheme of their own

Recent Government changes to the benefits system and changes to how Job Centre Plus/Careers Wales deliver skill build programmes do not allow for Flintshire to deliver a similar scheme any longer, therefore Children and Young Adults Support Team will deliver a programme of Occupational Skills group work which are targeted to improve the Young Persons confidence and self esteem which will enhance their opportunities when applying for further training/employment. CYAST are currently in discussions with relevant agencies and will deliver a bespoke programme during Summer 2012.

There are currently 60 young people who receive a Leaving Care Service from the Children and Young Adults Support Team.

Of those 2 young people are detained in custody and 1 has recently been released from custody.

One young person had an apprenticeship but unfortunately the company he was working for recently went into liquidation, he has enrolled on a college course to begin in September.

There are a further 14 young People not in employment education or training at this time.

4. CARE LEAVERS’ HOUSING SUPPORT NEEDS

The Head of Housing is acutely aware of the needs of this group of vulnerable young people and has plans to increase the availability of suitable housing to this group by redesigning housing stock and developing other initiatives as outlined in the attached report for the Children’s Services Forum (*appendix f*).

Alongside this the Head of Housing and myself are working closely together to develop an integrated team for young people presenting as homeless to more robustly address the needs of this group and ensure that the principles behind the Southwark Judgement are adhered to.

We are conscious of the impact of the Welfare Benefit Reforms on young people over the age of 18 years. It is clear that in terms of affordability, the

prospects of young people acquiring a sole tenancy are diminishing and sharing will in future become the norm. This message is being disseminated to our current looked after children in order that their expectations are realistic.

5. IMPROVING THE HEALTH OF LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN AND CARE LEAVERS.

We continue to issue Leisure discount cards at no cost to looked after children and care leavers and foster carers. Take up has reduced of late and we need to consider relaunch.

During 2011 – 2012, Sian Cork, our LAC/Leaving Care Nurse, focussed on arranging and undertaking Nurse Led Health Assessments for School Aged children who are Looked After in Flintshire County – when Flintshire is the placing authority or not. She worked with colleagues in Performance Monitoring to develop & improve the database of health assessments within the Local Authority, holding appointments in the evening as well as during the working day.

She liaises with colleagues regarding to those who are younger & those who require a Paediatric Health assessment as well as those children & young people who are placed outside of Flintshire.

Sian has worked with colleagues in the dental team to devise an improvement in dental health care. This will involve earlier identification of those who may benefit from extra support regarding attending & receiving dental treatment.

She has also worked alongside colleagues to enable children & young people to receive appropriate & timely immunisations.

She has been able to offer a sexual health service for young people and through her qualification as a Family Planning Nurse she is able to provide some contraception & emergency contraception on a flexible, individual & confidential basis.

Ongoing work includes working with the Leaving Care Team in developing a programme of independence skills as well as working with the Volunteer Mentor Co-ordinator in supporting events that have been organised with young people.

6. SUPPORT TO LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN

I. CONTRACT FOR ADVOCACY

The current Service Level Agreement for advocacy and independent visitors for looked after children and care leavers has been retendered and the current providers (NATIONAL YOUTH ADVOCACY SERVICE)

have been awarded the new contract which is a joint arrangement between ourselves, Denbighshire and Wrexham.

II. VOLUNTEER MENTORS

Volunteer mentors are now deployed across Children's Services but some are specifically linked to care leavers to provide additional support. Attached (*appendix g*) is an activity report from the Coordinator Andrea Wade.

III. DISRUPTION MEETINGS

During 2011, I commissioned an external evaluation of the disruption meeting service and the outcomes have been discussed and implementation is ongoing (*appendix h*).

IV. PARTICIPATION GROUPS – THE SPEAKING OUT FOR CHILDREN IN CARE GROUP (SOCC) AND THE CARE LEAVERS' SUPPORT NETWORK (CLSN)

The meetings are held fortnightly and are chaired and minuted by the young people themselves. A "Speak Out" event was held for all our looked after children in the summer of 2011 (*appendix I*).

The SOCC/CLSN groups, as well as representative involvement in the Children's Services Forum, have contributed to the following initiatives and consultations:

- The development of the I.D. card for looked after children and young carers (see later narrative)
- An internet safety workshop led by the Children and Young Peoples Partnership
- A review of Supported Lodgings approvals commissioned by myself, from BAAF (British Agency for Adoption and Fostering).
- Work undertaken by the Children's Commissioner for Wales on the Lost After Care report and "My Planner".
- Attendance at the recent LSCB workshop where one member was a panel member taking questions on internet safety.

We are concluding the process which will see the appointment of a dedicated (part-time) participation officer for children's services who will we feel enable some of our future plans to reach fruition e.g. development of a Junior LSCB with Wrexham, development of a corporate parenting handbook for Flintshire produced by the young people themselves.

The corporate parenting budget purchases the "WHO CARES?" magazine which is distributed to all looked after children and care leavers. For the second year running questionnaire responses from

the young people themselves have indicated how useful they find this publication and that its distribution should continue.

V. PRIVILEGE CARD FOR LOOKED AFTER CHILDREN CARE LEAVERS AND YOUNG CARERS

This stemmed from discussions at the Children's Services Forum during 2011 and a chance conversation I had with Sarah Mathews from Barnardos Young Carers in April last year. We were both considering this and agreed to collaborate on its production. The card will we hope ensure that the group of young people named above will receive some priority within the council and with outside agencies such as GPs, pharmacists and schools. For the young people it is hoped that possession of the card will prevent constant questions of their background / circumstances. The Children's Commissioner for Wales is committed to the development of such cards across Wales and was due to attend our launch event in April which has been postponed due to the local government elections. Promotion and awareness raising will be the key to the card's success. This is currently being discussed.

OTHER ISSUES

A. SUPERVISED CONTACT

When children become the subject of care proceedings the court mandates the amount of contact which should ensue between the child and the parents. Within Flintshire the costs of supervised contact is rising and we evaluated this with the assistance of Karen Stone. A report was produced and an action plan has been devised which will aim to (i) challenge the frequency of contact for very young children – citing quality not quantity as per recent research findings and (ii) consider differential arrangements for contact such as the use of staffed contact centres. A full copy of the report and resultant action plan is available upon request from myself.

B. SAFEGUARDING UNIT

The Children's Safeguarding Manager reports directly to myself and members may recall that a second CSM was recently appointed due to the consistently high numbers of children on Flintshire Child Protection register and the need to ensure that scrutiny of safeguarding activity was robust. In December 2011, following discussion within the directorate, the Independent Reviewing Officers also came under my direct report and a new Safeguarding Unit was devised to include the 4 managers and their respective administrative support. It is early days but we have high aspirations for the new unit which we believe, via additional support to frontline practice and scrutiny will contribute to better outcomes for our children and young people, including these in the looked after system.

CONCLUSION

Some members may have seen the recent "PROTECTING OUR CHILDREN" series which followed child care social workers in Bristol.

The series had acres of media coverage and provided a rare insight into the deprivation and desperation which social workers in this country deal with every day. The series demonstrated the difficult choices which have to be taken when faced with children in need of protection. We have excellent preventative services which aim to support parents wherever possible. Early intervention has been further developed by the Families First initiative and the impending expansion of Flying Start but interventions often fail unfortunately. It is the council's imperative as a corporate parent to ensure that our children's care experience is as good as we can make it – as good as we would wish to be for our own children. I recall comments made by the SOCC/CLSN groups when the corporate parenting guidance was reissued by the Welsh Government in 2009. They didn't like the title "If you were my child...." And said "... not if – we are your children!" This comment is something I carry with me at all times and I commend this to you as "touchstone" for your own involvement in corporate parenting. Finally, by continuing to hear the child's voice and their take on our interventions we can make significant progress in our aspirations around good outcomes for "our" children – they are after all our harshest critics! I leave you with a quote from a recent publications post – Munro Review.

"Hearing and acting on the Child's voice is only part of what is needed for a child-centred system but it's fundamental. The challenge is to make it a reality for children and young people"

BLYTH, M and SOLOMON, E. (Eds) (2012) "EFFECTIVE SAFEGUARDING FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE; WHAT NEXT AFTER MUNRO?"