

**MINUTES OF THE SCRUTINY REVIEW - CORPORATE PARENTING
TUESDAY, 18 JANUARY 2011**

Councillors: Ejiofor (Chair), Gibson and Solomon

Co-opted Members: Ms. Y. Denny (church representative) and Ms. S. Young (parent governor)

LC6. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

An apology for absence was received from Councillor Alexander.

LC7. URGENT BUSINESS

None.

LC8. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

LC9. MINUTES

AGREED:

That the minutes of the meetings of 5 October and 8 November 2010 be approved.

LC10. CORPORATE PARENTING

The Panel received evidence from Councillor Lorna Reith, the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People and Councillor Rachel Allison, the Opposition Spokesperson.

Councillor Reith stated that the Council's Corporate Parenting Advisory Committee looked in detail at services provided by the Children and Young People's Service (C&YPS) for looked after children and, in particular, relevant statistical information. This included the numbers of children in care, their age groups, feedback from visits and educational performance.

In terms of education performance, this was very good in comparison with children in care in other local authorities but still had not reached the standards achieved by children not in care. Many children in care now went to university. The Advisory Committee also had a role in listening to the views of children in care. Some had come to meetings of the Committee and engagement events had been held, sometimes hosted by Tottenham Hotspur. A Children in Care Council had also been set up and had now met twice.

An officer from the Council's Housing Support and Options team regularly attended the Committee. It also considered issues relating to the Council's two children's residential homes – Muswell House and Haringey Park. She felt that the Committee provided a good element of challenge to C&YPS. It was less able to address the wider corporate parenting agenda and the role of other Council services and partners. Services such as parks and leisure had a particular role as both providers of services and potential sources of work placements. However, economic circumstances were currently very challenging and it was now difficult to arrange things like apprenticeships.

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A lot of Council staff would be leaving shortly due to the budget cuts and one option that could be explored was to ask if any of them would be interested in becoming foster parents. The service was first and foremost looking for people who lived in the borough but this was not essential.

There was a specific officer in the leaving care team with responsibility for finding placements and opportunities at a wide range of organisations had been found. However, due to the junior status of the post, its influence could be limited. She felt that other parts of the Council had the potential to contribute more through, for instance, providing work placement opportunities. The Panel noted that one possibility would be to involve care leavers in the Haringey Guarantee scheme.

Papers from the Corporate Parenting Advisory Committee contained a wide range of statistical information and could be accessed via the Council's web site. She noted that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee had considered statistics on missing children but she felt that they did not tell the full story. For example, the figures did not state how long the absence had been or how often. It was necessary to record young people as missing if they had not come back for one evening and even if staff knew where they were. The issue was taken very seriously. If there was any suggestion that there whereabouts were unknown, the Police were informed. It was a complex area and statistics required a degree of interpretation and explanation. She agreed to provide a written commentary on this issue.

The practical needs of young people leaving care were addressed well. Housing support was particularly effective. Care leavers were in the highest priority band for housing. Young people could be accommodated in a wide range of accommodation including some that was semi independent. Care leavers all received a lump sum allowance to assist them with the transition. All young people received specific guidance on finance and budgeting. There was also input from health partners.

She had particular concerns about emotional support. Care leavers could become very vulnerable and loneliness was a big problem. Most young people were still living at home the age that young people left care. They therefore did not have the same support networks. Two young care leavers had died in the previous year. It was unclear whether these cases were suicide or neglect but care leavers were a high risk group. There were particular challenges in meeting the needs of young people who came into care as teenagers, such as those affected by the implications of the Southwark judgement. These young people could be very damaged.

A lot of work was undertaken on the issue of pregnancy. The dangers of becoming pregnant were explained. However, some young people who had no family wished to create one of their own. They also felt that having a child gave them status. This view point was common even amongst fostered children. They could become very lonely if the father of the child did not remain with them.

One option that could be explored was mentoring, which some other local authorities had set up. She had asked the Leaving Care Service to consider how emotional support could be improved and a report was being prepared for the Corporate Parenting Advisory Committee. Although peer support could be developed, some young people did not wish to be defined as being in care.

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There were good links with some services such as Housing and Adults. Other services had the potential to play a greater role as corporate parents. In reference to leisure, it was noted that if leisure passes were bought for children in care the cost of these came out of the budget for C&YPS. It was not always easy to track the progress of care leavers so that lessons could be learnt from successes as well as those who had encountered problems. It was more likely to be those who had been successful that kept in touch.

The fostering and adoption team had been split between those who dealt with existing carers and those responsible for recruiting new ones. Improvements had taken place since this had been implemented and further progress was anticipated. The Council now worked with five other authorities. Testing of the telephone response to enquiries from the service was welcome.

Councillor Allison felt that the current Cabinet Member had helped to improve services in a short space of time but there was still a particular need to focus on outcomes and improvements needed to be sustained.

She felt that there were two key groups of people that she felt that the Panel could benefit from hearing the views of;

- Parents of children in care; Children were taken into care for a variety of reasons, such as mental health issues. Some were of the view that their children had been wrongly taken into care.
- Guardian ad litem; These were appointed by the courts to speak on behalf of children and young people and to arbitrate. They were senior social workers with experience of the court system and were employed by the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (CAFCASS).

She stated that feedback from family courts suggested that improvements needed to be made. In particular, there had been issues with the preparation of cases which had led to some cases being referred back to court several times. In addition, there had been an overspend of £1.5 million in legal costs. She had raised her concerns with the Director, who had given assurances about the situation.

Councillor Allison was concerned that some children might be being taken into care unnecessarily. Practical solutions could be found to help keep children out of care. It was much cheaper to support families than to sue the care system. She felt that families should not be split up unless absolutely necessary. She agreed to share information on the Council's performance as compared with statistical neighbours.

She felt that the recruitment of foster carers should be given to specialist organisations. People became foster carers for a range of reasons and this was not addressed sufficiently in recruitment advertisements. There were also delays in information being sent out to prospective carers. She felt that the Council should seek to recruit the best foster carers from private agencies. She was of the view that the recruitment panel could be made less intimidating. There were 12 professionals on it and many local authorities had smaller panels.

She stated that one of Haringey's children's homes had been judged as inadequate in an OFSTED inspection in 2009. Action had been taken to respond to the inspections

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recommendations. The home had recently been re-inspected and this had identified some areas from the earlier inspection that were still outstanding. She had raised concerns about the home on several occasions.

She also expressed concern that Red Gables, which was one of the main contact centres, was not being used as much as it should. Schools were sometimes being used and this was not appropriate. She felt that more suitable locations needed to be identified for supervised contact visits.

There was a very high turnover of staff in residential homes. One of the Council run homes was intended for assessment and children and young people were only supposed to stay for a few weeks. However, some were staying for up to 6 months. The other home was for medium to long term placements. She was of the view that the residential homes could be more assertive in retrieving children who had not returned when supposed to but this had staffing implications.

She felt that work experience was particularly important to young people. Even a few weeks could make a difference.

The Panel thanked Councillors Reith and Allison for their contribution.

LC11. DATES OF FUTURE MEETINGS

Ms Denny requested that future papers for the Panel be circulated to her in large print.

AGREED:

1. That a meeting of the Panel be arranged for Thursday 10 February at 10:00 a.m.
2. That the draft questionnaire for Members on their role be circulated to the Panel for comment and sent out to all Members.
3. That a copy of the report arising from the current OFSTED inspection be circulated to all Panel Members.
4. That CAFCASS be contact regarding the possibility of the Panel receiving evidence from Guardians.

**Cllr Joseph Ejiofor
Chair**