Children & Community Services
Policy & Scrutiny Committee

Looked After Children, Care Leavers
and Corporate Parenting
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June 2012

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Chairman’s Introduction

On the 20th June 2012, the Children and Community Policy & Scrutiny Committee met to investigate the services provided for Looked after Children and Care Leavers, alongside reviewing the role of councillors as Corporate Parents.

Children in the care of local authorities are one of the most vulnerable groups of the population. At any one time around 60,000 children are looked after in England, although 90,000 pass through the care system each year.

It is essential to note that all Elected Members take on the role of ‘corporate parents’ to looked after children at their local authority. Councillors have a duty to take an interest in the development and wellbeing of those young people, as if they were their own. Although the Cabinet Member for Children and Community Protection has particular responsibilities, the responsibility to act as corporate parents is held by all councillors, regardless of their individual role.

The Children and Community Services Policy and Scrutiny Committee offers a key way in which councillors can fulfil this responsibility, by giving Committee Members the opportunity to ask searching questions of a range of providers and assure themselves that care leavers and children in the care of the City are being well looked after and the aspirations and opportunities for are tangible.

Investigating this topic has been a valuable and significant opportunity for councillors to hear directly from young people who have been looked after by the authority and to ensure that their voices are heard when considering the effectiveness and impact of services, especially when care leavers can give such a broad perspective of how they have interacted with Westminster for a number of years.

This review was not only restricted to children’s care services, but other areas which have an impact on the lives of children in care and those leaving care, such as housing and accommodation provision and ensuring that carers heighten the aspirations of all of those being looked after by the City.

I commend this report, on the behalf of our Committee, to the Cabinet Member for Children and Community Protection, to accept and implement our recommendations and ensure Westminster maintains its commitment to Looked after Children and Care Leavers.

Cllr Ian Adams,
Chairman of the Children and Community Policy & Scrutiny Committee
Recommendations from the Looked After Children, Care Leavers and Corporate Parenting Item at the Wednesday 20th June 2012 meeting of the Children & Community Services Policy & Scrutiny Committee:

1. The Committee recommends that the Cabinet Member should create a protocol to deal with the issue of staff turnover, ensuring that, normally, the social worker will inform the Looked After Child / Care Leaver (LAC/CL) that s/he is leaving, to minimise any impact on the LAC / CL of any unavoidable social worker handovers and ensure that social workers familiarise themselves with written information in files, in preference to revisiting potentially painful history with our young people in care.

2. The committee recommends that a programme be set up whereby Members of the Children and Community Services P&S Committee should, in response to the invitation of the Children in Care Council (CICC), attend and work with the CICC.

3. The committee recommends to the Cabinet Member that there should be formal involvement of LAC / care leavers in the recruitment of foster carers and involvement of LAC / care leavers in the training of foster carers, post-recruitment.

4. To maximise the aspirations of our children in care, the committee recommends to the Cabinet Member that the City Council should target a broader range of carers. This could be through a campaign to particular ranges of people (such as those with HE qualifications), who are currently underrepresented.

5. The committee recommends that the Cabinet Member should further heighten the aspirations and attainment of LAC/CL, through instituting a mentoring project, similar to the ‘E18eighteen programme’ referred to at committee, where care leavers act as mentors to looked after children.

6. The committee recommends to the Cabinet Member that a joint Children’s and Housing Strategy should be developed to ensure favourable treatment for approved foster carers needing larger properties in Westminster, and to ensure the availability of suitable accommodation for care leavers.

7. The committee recommends that the Cabinet Member should require organisers of City-sponsored events to invite looked after children, their foster carers and care leavers. A mechanism to institutionalise this involvement should be established.
Background

1.1 The term Looked After Children refers to those children for whom the City Council has either assumed Parental Responsibility via a court order or those children where parents have entered into a voluntary agreement with the City Council so that their children are ‘looked after’ for a period of time.

1.2 These children and young people cover 0-18 years. Beyond 18 they become Care Leavers and have different entitlements but are still the responsibility of the City Council. The work is spread across the various social work teams with the early work undertaken in the Duty and Assessment Service and Child Protection Teams but once a permanency plan is made children become the responsibility of the Looked after Children and Leaving Care Services.

1.3 Many looked after children are able to return to their parents care speedily and do not require long term services or interventions. Those that remain in care are likely to have suffered from neglect or abuse and require input from a range of services, including a dedicated team to raise educational attainment (Epic), specialist nurses to undertake regular health reviews and a co-located children and adolescent mental health team (CAMHS).

1.4 Where the City Council assumes Parental Responsibility as a result of care proceedings, the aim is always to secure a permanent living arrangement as quickly as possible. Many young children will be placed permanently either via adoption, special guardianship or residence orders. Each order has its respective merits and will mean that the child is no longer looked after but placed within a family setting that has been assessed as suitable for that particular child. Older children, or sibling groups, may remain in care long term and for these children Westminster has been successful in securing long term fostering arrangements. It was reported that this offers the opportunity for stability and the normalising experience children need.

1.5 Officers stated that adolescents may enter care for a variety of reasons, often as a result of families refusing to care for their teenagers when difficulties arise in their relationships. The number of unaccompanied asylum seeking young people had diminished considerably in recent years but Westminster continued to accommodate a small number, as all local authorities. The Southwark Judgement (a ruling that vulnerable, homeless 16-17 year olds should be looked after by the Local Authority) also results in a number of older teenagers becoming the responsibility of the City Council.

1.6 The Committee was asked to note that at the end March 2012 there were 208 LAC in Westminster. This represented a 15% decrease since 2010 (247). This was against national trend and is primarily attributable to effective early interventions with families and more rigorous decision making to ensure that adolescents are only accommodated where it is the only option to meet their needs.

1.7 The majority of Westminster’s LAC are in foster care (79%) and have stable placements. Most of these placements are outside the Local Authority boundary and one of the challenges for the newly formed Tri-Borough fostering and adoption service will be to increase the numbers of local foster carers across the three authorities.
1.8 The LAC population is skewed towards the older age range, with 26% aged 16-17, this places considerable demands on the services required for this particular age range and the Leaving Care Service, responsible for them as they progress into adulthood. 18% of current Lac is under the age of 5 years.

1.9 The Looked After Children Service was inspected by Ofsted in September 2011 and the overall finding was ‘good’ with one area of ‘outstanding’ practice, ‘Enjoy and Achieve’. Ofsted made a number of recommendations following their visit and progress against these recommendations is reported. There was a further ‘thematic’ inspection by Ofsted of Westminster’s Youth Offending services in relation to Looked After Children in March 2012 and the findings were positive.

1.10 The committee were asked to note information in relation to the new Care Proceedings Pilot, commenced 1 April 12 and the newly formed Tri-Borough Fostering and Adoption service with an analysis on the Council’s performance in relation to the Adoption Scorecard. Whilst a relatively small number of children are adopted from Westminster, this is reflective of the particular Lac population. Where children have been placed for adoption the City Council has been able to secure placements speedily, within recommended time scales and been very successful in the recruitment of adopters, a number of whom have returned to offer an adoptive home to a second, and in some cases, a third child. Adoption and Fostering services are due to have Ofsted inspections later in 2012.

1.11 A report on the Council’s performance on Looked After Children and Care Leavers was last presented to Committee in June 2010 and recommendations were made in relation to work experience, corporate parenting, the education of looked after children and raising the profile of fostering. These continue to be key themes for Looked After Children and the service as a corporate parent.

Committee evidence

1.12 Sarah Clarson (Co-ordinator For Children’s Participation and Independent Visitors Project) gave information to committee about the Children in Care Council which is made up of looked after young people and care leavers. All local authorities are required to have a Care Council and its role is to bring together young people with authority staff and senior management to improve and influence services they receive. It was reported that one of its major benefits was that young people were likely to share their views amongst their peers and appreciate services shaped by other young people.

1.14 Sarah reported that the Children in Care Council gives young people skills, knowledge of local government and legislation, education, training, possible employment pathways and improves the working relationship between senior management and young people.

1.15 The Committee then heard from two care leavers who had experienced Westminster services for a number of years:
First Care Leaver:

Overview
As a Westminster young person, the care system has mostly been good, but there has been some inconsistency in terms of placements and changes of social workers. The Children in Care Council is concerned with the consistency of accommodation for young people and carers. It is important to realise that inconsistency creates instability and has a long term effect on our education and having trust in adults.

Engaging with others
In terms of engagement, we have done quite a lot at the Children in Care Council in terms of raising awareness and promoting our work. This way we try to find out young people’s and care leaver’s views about services that they receive. We then share these views with Westminster and get involved with decision-making in relation to the services provided.

Education experience:
My education has improved since coming into care due to the placement I was living with my brother. Even though it was children’s home, we got tuition to help with Maths and English (which was good, because English was our second language). English tuition was also really helpful for GCSEs.

I have just finished my 3rd year at University where I am studying social policy. The support and funding from Westminster Social Services has actually helped me. I was also really happy with accommodation I was provided with. I also know that I can call back for help with further services.

Second Care Leaver:

Education experience:
I went into foster care at the age of 11. It was not the best experience, as I was placed in many foster homes across London. I did not have stability in care. I was taken out of education in Year Ten for two years, so I ended up missing my GCSEs. I decided to go back to college and I moved from Essex back to South London to do GCSEs. The support of Westminster’s social services really helped me to stick at it and I didn’t end up dropping out. I did my GCSEs, then A-Levels and then I went to University. When I needed extra support I always had a tutor and services were easy to access.

Most difficult parts of my experience:
There were so many social workers. When they left the City Council, they left without telling me. I would call and ask to speak to them then get told that they had left the Council – this was difficult.

Also I was often moving as all placements broke down. Placements are meant to be long term – so this was hard.

Positive parts of my experience:
Relating to education - there is a lot of support of young people. I did a university exchange programme to America and City Council Social Services supported me to do this.
Committee discussion

2.1 Members asked a series of questions to Council officers present (Janine Rowe, Head of Service: Looked After Children and Specialist Services, Jhonathan Turner, LAC Service Manager and Matthew Blood, Virtual School Head for LAC) alongside the Committee care leaver witnesses:

- **How many children are currently located out of the borough and what issues will be created by the merging into the tri-borough working?**
  - 80% of looked after children are housed outside of Westminster boundaries, some in neighbouring boroughs and some further afield.
  - A motivation for the Tri-Borough Children’s Services merger was to recruit more carers and also provide a larger field of carers with which to work; there are now 300 foster carers across 3 authorities so there is a greater likelihood of looked after children being placed within Westminster or in a neighbouring borough.

- **Is there anything that local councillors can do in their role of ‘corporate parents’ in order to assist looked after children?**
  - It was suggested that Children in Care Council meetings were a good opportunity for the committee to become more involved with looked after children.

- **What means are in place to allow children in care to notify the system if there is a problem or they feel unsafe, or as though they are not being adequately provided for by the system?**
  - Committee care leaver witnesses reported that children in this position are lacking a stable relationship with an adult, particularly if they are located in a residential care unit, as the carers can often change frequently and then there is no opportunity to obtain mentoring and motivation to pursue their goals. Some of these children are not in education so they also lack a stable teacher or similar figure.

- **How many looked after children are missing without leave?**
  - In was reported that in cases where looked after children return late or are absent from their allocated placement for several days, children are monitored on a weekly basis. However, it tends to be the case that there are a small number of repeat offenders and not a widespread problem.
  - There are no children that are completely ‘missing’ as some member of the service is always in contact with them even if they are absent from their allocated placement.
• Is it a common occurrence that looked after children regularly have different foster carers and social workers, and why might this be the case?
  - Social workers that change are not adequately prepared and can rely on the children themselves to obtain information concerning their background and why they have been placed in care, which can be very distressing for the children involved. However, there is a new IT system in place that may help with this problem and will also make it easier to consider the interests of children in the long term.
  - There is only negative contact with social workers, and children are only contacted when something has gone wrong, rather than just to check up so it is not a mentoring relationship. What could be done to adapt the relationship between a social worker and a child so that it becomes more focused on mentoring and advice should be considered.
  - Recruiting foster carers is approached wrongly; the focus is often on the potential earnings of a foster parent and not on the experience itself, which leads to people becoming carers for the wrong reasons and without a clear idea of what to expect. It was suggested that they should be given more training with children. Care leavers are currently involved in the training of future carers, perhaps this is a factor that could be built upon.
  - More effort should be put into matching children in care with suitable foster parents; there is not enough consideration of whether they will be compatible as people.

• How are looked after children rewarded if they are particularly high achieving?
  - There is an annual Celebration of Achievement Ceremony held at Tate Britain in which various awards including an ‘Award for Outstanding Achievement’ are announced.
  - Members suggested that there should be a reward system in place throughout the year to reward behaviour and attainment from children in care. They could be included in events within the borough such as the ‘West End Live’ concert and the fancy dress New Years Eve parade.

• Can the social housing system be used to prioritise those that may be potential carers or increase the capacity of existing carers to care for more children?
  - An increased number of children could be located in the borough.
  - It is very important to maintain existing ties to the community and extended family members that a child may have, as this network will be very valuable when they come to leave care.
  - Shared housing could be provided for young people leaving care, similar to shared housing that is provided for students, as this would lead to a supportive atmosphere between people that have had similar experiences.
• How can the percentage of children in care going on to higher education be increased?
  - Westminster runs a programme with UCL, through which children in care can receive help with their personal statements, attend visits to universities and attend mini lectures
  - Care leavers that have been to university could be involved in encouraging children in care to consider this option
  - Foster carers have often not been to university themselves, so they may also need some encouragement to promote the benefits of higher education to their foster children. Could people who have been to university be targeted to become foster carers?
  - It must be recognised that higher education is not the right choice for everyone and children with a lower attainment must also feel that they have a choice of options available to them as alternatives to higher education.

• External mentoring programmes such as the E18ghteen programme could be supported or replicated in the borough as this provides a stable mentor in a child’s life.
  - Schemes such as this one are targeted at children who are not in education, training or employment.

• How can it be expected that outcomes will continue to improve if savings are also being made?
  - High cost placements are being scrutinised to make sure that they are still relevant and appropriate to the child
  - Effort is being made to monitor children without bringing them into care, and only taking this extreme measure if it is absolutely necessary.
  - Developments such as the Tri-Borough working has helped to cut costs at no expense to the level of care provided as there have been staff losses and other services have been consolidated.
  - Ideas are being taken from other boroughs, particularly those that have piloted a scheme to promote placements that extend beyond the age of 18, as this can be a particularly troubling time for children in care, and would better reflect the average age that children now leave home, which tends to be in their mid twenties. It also leaves more time for the child to prepare themselves for leaving care.
• Are different categories of needs being catered for in the care that these children receive? For example, a child whose parents are ill may have different needs to a child who has been abused, or an unaccompanied asylum seeker.
  - Although there are categories such as these, the needs of these children overlap so they may not have to be treated entirely differently in each case.
  - Long term placements and plans concerning children in care always take into account the background of the children.
  - Some looked after children can do better in good residential units rather than foster homes, particularly if their ties to their original families remain strong.

• What support is provided for looked after children when they are transferring from primary to secondary school? Are foster carers being encouraged to send their foster children to the best possible schools and not just those closest to them?
  - Legally, schools can be forced to admit looked after children, even if that school is full, which makes it easier to ensure that they are admitted into the best school for them.
  - Travel and the widely spread location of foster homes can mean that practical issues must be prioritised when considering which school a child should attend.
  - Only 27% of looked after children attend a school in Westminster, so it can be hard to keep track and assess all of these schools.
  - Ofsted ratings are considered before a child is placed in a school, but ultimately a school is decided on based on how it best meets the needs of the child rather than the general performance of the school.
  - Schools are often resistant to admitting children in care so it can be a lengthy process to enrol a child at a school.

• What measures are in place to look after carers and could improvement of these measures increase stability?
  - Relationships with social workers and independent reviewing officers are often long term and stable; agency social workers are not accepted and all staff must make a commitment to work two years.
  - Westminster do not tend to lose their foster carers to other agencies because they look after them well; they have their own visiting social workers and are invited to attend support groups and annual events.
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