

The Cabinet – 13 December 2006

Report of the Director of Children's Services

The Green Paper 'Care Matters'

Purpose of Report

1. The purpose of the report is to summarise the key elements of the Green Paper 'Care Matters' and to propose the basis of a response.

Background

2. The Green Paper 'Care Matters' was published in October 2006 with a response date of 15 January 2007. Following the consultation the DfES will publish a 'Next Steps' document which will set out the delivery plan and timetable for reform. Alongside the consultation the DfES has set upon four working groups to advise the Secretary of State on specific areas; the Director of Children's Services is a member of the working group on 'Best Practice in Schools'. A copy of the Green Paper is in the Members' Room; the Executive Summary has been sent to all Councillors.
3. 'Care Matters' sets out a radical package of proposals for change to improve outcomes for children in the care of Councils. The proposals will require commitment from central and local government and from professionals working on the front line.
4. The context is that about 60,000 children and young people are in care at any point in time – in Dudley 492 children were in the care of the Council on the date of drafting this report. Two thirds of these children and young people were in care due to abuse or neglect. The starting point for 'Care Matters' is that the outcomes for children in the care of Councils is poor:
 - Only one in ten attained 5 good GCSE's in 2005 compared with more than half of all children.

- Only 6% of 19 year-olds enter higher education compared with nearly a third of all young people.
- By the age of 19, more than 30 per cent are not in education, training or employment.
- 27% of adult prisoners have spent time in care.
- Young women between the ages of 15 and 17 are three times more likely to become teenage mothers than others of their age.

5. Current concerns are that:

- We don't intervene early enough with families of children 'at risk'.
- Children in care lack a consistent adult.
- Children move between placements too frequently, and placement quality is not high enough.
- Children in care attend the lowest performing schools and lack sufficient support in school.
- Key services do not do enough to help children in care get their lives back on track.
- Children leave care too young, often poorly equipped for adult life.
- Our response to service and system failure is weak.

6. The proposals are based around seven themes:

- intervening earlier and more effectively with children on the edge of care, and their families;
- strengthening the role of the corporate parent;
- improving the quality and stability of placements;

- ensuring a first-class education;
- improving life outside school;
- easing the transition to adult life; and
- making the system work through robust accountability.

7. For children on the edge of care, the proposals include:

- developing training resources for practitioners on identifying and responding to neglect;
- testing out a model of intensive whole-family therapy to keep families together; and
- developing ‘whole family approaches’ by improving links between adults’ and children’s services.

Dudley already has good practice in this area, for example: the Prevention and Intervention Service; Family Group Conferencing; partnership with Bristol University; support to parents with disabilities; and placements with family and friends.

8. The rôle of the corporate parent will be strengthened by:

- piloting independent ‘social care practices’;
- developing budget-holding for lead professionals and social workers;
- unifying and strengthening care plans;
- expanding the ‘independent visitor’ role into an Independent Advocate;
- develop a ‘Pledge for children in care’; and
- setting up in every area a Children In Care Council.

Dudley already has good practice in this area, for example: a Corporate Parenting Officer; a Corporate Parenting Committee; a Corporate Parenting Pledge; effective Independent Visitors; and an Independent Advocacy Scheme.

9. Better and more stable placements will be secured by developing:
- a tiered framework of foster and residential placements tailored to children's needs;
 - pilots for intensive foster care with multi-agency support for younger children;
 - specially tailored recruitment campaigns for foster carers; and
 - regional commissioning units to secure choice and better value.

Dudley already has good practice in this area, for example: regional partnership with the West Midlands Centre of Excellence; Multi-Dimensional Treatment Foster Care (Flipside), now extending for primary age children following a successful bid to the DfES; children's homes with very positive inspection outcomes; good performance on placement stability; committed resource for children with disabilities; and positive performance for recruitment and retention of foster carers.

10. A first-class education for every children and young person in care will be ensured by:
- a new requirement for all schools to admit children in care;
 - a 'virtual headteacher' in every local area to drive up standards for children in care;
 - a dedicated budget for each social worker to spend on improving the child's educational experience;
 - avoiding young people in care moving schools in years 10 and 11, unless it is clearly in their best interests;
 - strengthening the role of the 'designated teacher' for children in care; and

- considering a new power for local authorities to intervene in schools performing poorly in relation to children in care.

Dudley already has good practice in this area, for example: the LACES Team (the multi-professional Looked-After Children Education Service); reduction in absences from school; improved performance at Key Stages 2 and 4; the introduction of the 'Hard to Place Protocol'; Dudley is a DfES pilot site for the use of state boarding school provision for children in care; a dowry for children moving mid-term between schools; and designated teachers in place in all schools .

11. Life outside school for children and young people in care will be improved by:

- ensuring free access for children in care to local authority leisure facilities;
- developing a new model of comprehensive health provision;
- providing specialist training for health professionals in working with children in care;
- ensuring access for foster carers to children's centre provision; and
- better access to volunteering and other positive activities for children in care.

Dudley already has good practice in this area, for example: the 'Options to Leisure Card' is in place for children's homes and foster carers; the 'Health of Looked After Children Service' including dedicated service within CAMHS; the Sexual Health Policy for looked after children; the Substance Misuse Project sponsored by ADFAM; and a pilot project for restorative justice with the Youth Offending Service.

12. The transition to adult life will be eased by:

- changing the language to be more positive; no longer 'leaving care';

- giving young people a veto over whether to leave care before the age of 18;
- allowing young people to stay in foster care up to the age of 21;
- providing £100 top-up to the child's trust fund;
- providing a £2,000 university bursary; and
- developing supported accommodation for older young people in care.

Dudley already has good practice in this area, for example: a specialist 16+ Team, development of a bursary for further education; a positive relationship with adult services; and development of skills modules for care leavers.

13. Other system improvements will be:

- regular Ofsted inspection of education of children in care;
- an annual national stocktake by Ministers;
- introducing a 'Children in Care Council' in each local area;
- making Reviewing Officers more independent; and
- making standards of education of children in care a key DfES national target.

Dudley already has good practice in this area, for example: Corporate Parenting Policy with a contribution from each Directorate; a joint Policy Statement with Health; the Corporate Parenting Committee; the Children's Champion; and independent Reviewing Officers.

14. The conclusions to be drawn from this analysis are as follows:

- There is much to be welcomed in the Green Paper, particularly the aspirations to improve outcomes for young people.

- There is much good work already underway in Dudley, although there is still much to be done to meet the expectations of the Green Paper.
- While some of the proposals will be cost neutral, others will have significant implementation costs, and these will need to be met by central government.
- Some of the detailed proposals (such as 'independent social care practices' are unproven and some cases contentious.

Finance

15. There are no direct financial implications of the Green Paper at the present time. However, there would be significant costs to the Council if the Green Paper proposals were implemented in full; the response will highlight the specific areas which could not be implemented without incurring expenditure.

Law

16. Some of the proposals within the Green Paper could be implemented by the Council and by the DfES within existing education and other powers; others would require either new Regulations or primary legislation.

Equality Impact

17. Children and young people were consulted extensively during the preparation of the Green Paper and their views are quoted extensively at Annex A (attached).
18. Children and young people in Dudley have already been consulted in the context of the Children and Young People's Plan; views expressed have been generally in line with those expressed in the Green Paper.

Recommendation

19. It is recommended that the Director be authorised to prepare a formal response in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Children's Services, in line with the analysis above at paragraph 14, and that the

Director should arrange for the response to be published in a form suitable for children and young people.



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List of background papers

Green Paper 'Care Matters' (DfES, October 2006)