

**PERSONAL CARE SELECT COMMITTEE - DRAFT REPORT****THE CORPORATE PARENT ROLE OF THE COUNTY COUNCIL****1. CONTEXT**

- 1.1 The term 'corporate parenting' was first introduced as one part of the government's Quality Protects programme to transform children's services. Corporate parenting includes any person who has a responsibility for the care and protection of children looked after by local authorities and those leaving care. However, elected Members have a key role to play. This report examines how well Members in Buckinghamshire meet their responsibility as a Corporate Parent.
- 1.2 The Children Act 1989 and associated guidance sets out the County Council's legal responsibility for these children. These are summarised in 'The Government's Expectations of a Local Authority as a Corporate Parent' (Appendix 1).
- 1.3 However, put simply, when thinking of standards for the children in the authority's care, Members need to be asking: What if this was my child? Would it be good enough for them? Would it be good enough for me?
- 1.4 In order to be able to carry out their functions effectively Members need information about the children for whom they are responsible. The 1998 letter from the Minister for Health suggests a checklist of questions Members may need to ask. (Appendix 2).
- 1.5 Further advice about how Members can influence outcomes for children in their community including Looked After Children is given in "Think Child". This was distributed to all Members last year.
- 1.6 Regulation 22 of the Children's Act Guidance requires that directors or others responsible for the conduct of children's homes should visit the homes once a month. It has been Buckinghamshire policy, where possible, to include elected Members in the programme of visits.
- 1.7 The main officer arena for ensuring that the interests of Looked After Children are met is the Joint Agencies Committee for Looked After Children (JACLAC). Education, Social Services and Health are represented on this group. Until local government modernisation the Children and Young People's Board was the officer/member forum for discussing a wide range of children's issues but in particular those for Looked After Children.
- 1.8 To support the national and local objectives to improve the educational outcomes for Looked After Children, joint guidance has been produced by the Department for Education and Employment and the Department of Health. This also emphasises the corporate parenting role in ensuring that these children have access to all the educational opportunities available to enable them to participate fully in the community as adults. This includes prioritising education, changing attitudes about inclusion, achieving continuity and stability, having high expectations and raising standards, early intervention and listening to children.

## 2. THE INVESTIGATION

2.1 The committee's initial meeting produced a number of issues for investigation.

- councillors awareness of their responsibilities for Looked After Children and knowledge of services provided for them
- the level of Members visits to children's homes
- the recruitment and retention of staff
- methods of reporting information to and from Members
- the exclusion and educational placement of Looked After Children
- the performance of other local authorities

2.2 The Committee therefore researched a number of services provided by the County Council and examined in particular the issue of the exclusion of Looked After Children.

2.3 The Committee conducted it's inquiries through:

- individual interviews with personnel from within and outside the County Council
- visits to service bases and children's homes.
- comparisons with other local authorities.
- written responses to questions submitted to officers.
- discussions in Committees with the appropriate Cabinet Members, Policy Advisory Group Members and senior officers.

2.4 The outcome of the Committee's investigation and the emerging issues are summarised below, additional information is to be found in the relevant appendix.

### 2.5 **Education of Children in Public Care (ECPC).** (Appendix 3)

The aim of the service is to improve the educational experiences and achievements of children in public care. The service was established in Sept 2000, with staffing appointments being completed in Jan 2001.

The service has a strategic role in ensuring:

- All schools have a designated teacher for Looked After Children
- All Looked After Children have a Personal Education Plan
- The Plan is reviewed prior to the case review
- Appropriate data collection

Discussion highlighted the fact that the Connexions Service will be of great benefit to Looked After Children.

Issues concerned time limited grant funding for the service, reporting to councillors in the absence of the Children & Young People's Board and development of options of support for those out of school. It will also be important to look at the future development of Connexions.

## **2.6 Restorative Justice Service.** (Appendix 4)

This service attempts, through mediation between victims and offenders, to repair and restore the harm caused by crime. A restorative conference is a meeting whereby a victim meets the person who has offended against them. The meeting will explore the event and the feelings of those involved and try to reach an agreement about what can be done to put things right. It has been possible for a Member to sit in at one of the conferences and this invitation could be extended to others.

The service deals with youngsters aged 10-18 who are subject to a formal caution. Juveniles account for 60% of the work of the service. Latest figures indicate a 28% reduction in re-offending.

Issues concerned the lack of access to follow up work from a social worker for those receiving a reprimand caution for a first offence. The grant funded post has been relocated to the Youth Offending Team (YOT) Support and is now only available through the YOT for those receiving a final warning for a second offence.

## **2.7 Visits to Children's Homes.** (Appendix 5)

It has been the case in Buckinghamshire for many years that there is an expectation that a member will visit each Social Services establishment every quarter. Establishments have included residential units and day centres for all client groups. Quality Protects guidance strongly promotes the concept of Corporate Parenting and regular visits to children's homes is part of this role. A rota has been provided to ensure that visits take place. The purpose of the visit is to see the home in action and to hear the views of staff and residents directly.

Issues emerged relating to the poor compliance with the rotas by Members, the value of the visits for staff and the pressure of staff shortages exacerbated by higher rates of pay for agency staff. One Member visit revealed a situation where five children were reported as being out of school and not receiving educational input.

## **2.8 Comparison with Other Local Authorities.** (Appendix 6)

A comparison was made with Gloucestershire, a similar Shire County to Buckinghamshire. Gloucestershire has a 17% larger population than Buckinghamshire but with nearly double the numbers of Looked After Children. They have a greater percentage in Foster Care, 72% compared with 64% in Buckinghamshire. At present visits to homes are made by volunteers but, it has now been agreed that in the new Council all Members should take part in visits. Gloucestershire have a Corporate Parenting Working Group, who meet every two months and who have established a project to provide officer support for maintaining a network forum for Looked After Children across the county.

Issues concern the lack of opportunity in Buckinghamshire for channels of communication between Members and Looked After Children and amongst Looked After Children themselves, for starting and funding such endeavours and for seeking further comparisons with other authorities.

**2.9 Buckinghamshire Children's Rights and Advocacy Service (BCRAS).**  
(Appendix 7)

This service is provided by the NSPCC in partnership with Buckinghamshire County Council. It is a means of providing support to Looked After Children, children and young people receiving respite care and those young people entitled to a leaving care service. The service aims to provide advocacy for individual young people by attending meetings with them, assisting in writing letters, attending court, recruiting and training volunteer advocates.

An issue surrounds the lack of Member involvement on the steering group for the service.

**2.10 Multi Agency Rapid Response Service (MARRS).** (Appendix 8)

The project is funded through the Quality Protects programme and is based at Orchard House. The service is set up to provide support families with young people aged between 11-16 years and is involved at the point of crisis rather than offering long-term support. It aims to provide a speedy response (within 72 hours of referral), appropriate assessment and onward referral for support. Currently supporting 25 outreach cases and early indications demonstrate significant success.

Issues relate to the time limited grant funding supporting the service.

**2.11 Exclusions and Looked After Children.**

The Committee received written information on this topic in the form of copies of the report to the Children and Young People's Board in November 2000 and detailed responses to supplementary questions submitted to the General Manager for schools. The Committee also had the opportunity to discuss issues with the Assistant Chief Educational Psychologist and the Assistant Director of Children and Families.

Issues arose concerning the prolonged use of fixed term exclusions, the lack of communication amongst professionals and between professionals and carers and the lack of educational provision made for excluded pupils.

**2.12 Recruitment and Retention of Staff**

This was a recurring theme throughout the investigations of the Committee. Indications are that this is a long-standing problem that requires a long-term strategy as well as some immediate action. The quality of service provided is substantially impaired and the morale of staff severely affected by the current situation.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

#### 3.1 **The Committee concluded that all Members need to be fully aware of their responsibilities as Corporate Parents.**

Evidence to the Committee demonstrates:

- a) Members lack awareness of the requirements placed on them as Corporate Parents.
- b) Members lack of knowledge of the provision and impact of services for Looked After Children in Buckinghamshire.
- c) The inability to sustain a consistent programme of member visits to residential establishments. This has remained the task of a small number of Members with a particular interest in the field.
- (d) Members may underestimate the importance of these front line visits to staff and the positive impact this channel of communication may have on morale.

#### 3.2 **The Committee concluded that reporting channels to Members on their Corporate Parent role require definition and publicity.**

Evidence to the Committee indicates that:

- a) The Member/Officer forum of the Children and Young People's Board has not been replaced in the new modernised structure.
- b) Reporting on the checklist of information (App 2) is no longer reaching a wider Member audience.
- c) The Member representation on the Buckinghamshire Children's Right and Advocacy Service (BCRAS) is still awaited.
- d) The role of the Policy Advisory Group as a channel for communication about Corporate Parenting is unclear.
- e) The Joint Agencies Committees for Looked After Children (JACLAC) continues as an officer forum and could have scope for Member involvement.
- f) Corporate Parenting cuts across a number of portfolio areas and has the potential for wider member involvement.
- g) There is no forum for reporting back information gained from Member visits to the wider Member audience.
- h) Some Members are unaware that there is a requirement for them to receive information about youngsters in their 'Corporate Parent Care'.

**3.3 The Committee concluded that recruitment and retention of staff is having a significant and potentially dangerous impact on service delivery.**

Evidence to the Committee confirms that:

- a) Not every youngster has an allocated social worker.
- b) Vacancies across all Children's Social Care Services are running at over 18% (=57 posts).
- c) There are severe and prolonged vacancies of around 40% in front line child care teams.
- d) Staff feels there is an issue concerning the level of management support available for them.
- e) Higher agency rates exacerbate the situation and prevent permanent appointments.
- f) It is increasingly difficult to attract staff to this area of the Service.
- g) The budget for recruitment and retention of staff remains unconfirmed.
- h) Caseloads have to be frequently reviewed in order to maintain the safety between urgent or statutory cases, social workers caseloads and the unallocated cases.
- i) This is an inherently dangerous situation with the potential for tragedy for a youngster and culpability on the part of the County Council.

**3.4 The Committee concluded there is lack of communication between Children's Services in relation to the exclusion of Looked After Children.**

Evidence to the Committee signified that:

- a) Data information systems need improving.
- b) The establishment of the ECPC Team will ensure speedier and more appropriate educational outcomes for Looked After Children.
- c) The ECPC team is required to cover the whole County on a similar staffing establishment to that which serviced the Chesham Pilot Project.
- d) Those involved in direct care for Looked After children were often not included in information about exclusion.

- e) Some Looked After children receive a number of fixed term exclusions (44 fixed term exclusions for 20 children).
- f) If fixed term exclusions are repeatedly used this may then have the effect of a permanent exclusion without registering as such.
- g) There are clear incidents when Looked After Children are out of school for a substantial length of time without educational provision.
- h) From September 2002 full time curriculum will be required for those who are permanently excluded.
- i) Choice of alternative school placements can be further limited when there are a number of schools in the County in special measures or who are over subscribed.

**3.5 The Committee concluded that our performance compared with other Local Authorities requires further investigation.**

Evidence to the Committee established that:

- a) Other authorities have established mechanisms for Members to share a dialogue with the client group.
- b) Providing a network for Looked After Children to contact each other is a positive experience.
- c) Members require clear reporting lines and a forum in which to share information about youngsters in their care.
- d) Time had only allowed for in depth discussions with one other authority.

#### 4. RECOMMENDATIONS

##### The Committee recommends that:

##### 4.1 An explicit set of expectations as a Corporate Parent are set for all Members in the new County Council.

- The Corporate parent role is defined as a key task for all Members of the County Council as part of a job profile.
- A dedicated number of Members across political parties, are assigned to undertake a rota of visits, with visit targets being set, monitored and reported quarterly to Council.
- Briefings and a proforma are available for member visits.
- In their role as school governors, all Members will meet annually with the designated teacher to discuss issues relating to Looked After Children.
- Early in the life of the new Council all Members receive a 'Corporate Parent' Pack. This should include a laminated A4 statement about the requirement of the Corporate Parent. It should be clear that it is a statutory responsibility and not voluntary and that it is distinct from making visits to homes. This pack should also include Appendix 2.
- The pack could include a reminder designed by one of the youngsters e.g. badge/fridge magnet "I am a Corporate Parent", "Don't forget you are a Corporate Parent".

##### 4.2 Members have a forum for discussing issues and receiving information concerning Looked After Children.

- Members are represented on the Joint Agencies Committee for Looked After Children (JACLAC) and on the steering group for the Buckinghamshire Children's Rights and Advocacy Service (BCRAS).
- A quarterly digest is distributed to all Councillors.
- Develop a web site 'The Corporate Parent'.
- The relevant Cabinet Members Policy Advisory Groups (PAGs) have Corporate Parenting as a regular agenda item communicating information to and from Members and monitoring targets for visits.
- A contact network for Looked After Children is developed.
- A forum for member contact with those for whom they are Corporate Parents is established.



**4.3 A fully costed long-term strategy for recruitment and retention of staff is implemented.**

- Strategy to include ring fenced costings and an implementation plan specifying lead officer, timescale, outcome and costing for each required action in the strategy.

For e.g.

Action	Lead	Time Scale	Outcome
Sustained and persistent advertising campaign	Personnel	June 2001	Successful recruitment from every advert. Renew and revise placement of adverts
Recruitment and retention post to manage advertising		May 2001	100% recruitment 8% turnover
Links with colleges to recruit: de Montford, Brunel etc.		Series of (throughout the year) open days. Recruitment seminars offered to colleges	
Recruit degree graduates and second to Dip.SW			
Sponsorship to qualified SW's for 4 day week to undertake Masters Degree			
Ensure links to new housing initiatives			
Recruitment stand purchased for conferences			

- Establish outcomes of discussions with housing associations to provide opportunities for staff accommodation

**4.4 Services work together with carers to ensure that notifications of exclusion are made and alternative educational packages are implemented.**

- Carers as well as Social Workers and the ECPC team are immediately informed about any exclusion of children in public care.
- Increased advocacy for Looked After Children prior to the serious action of exclusion.
- Development of alternative packages of educational provision for those permanently excluded from school.

- Data systems are explicit concerning the total number of days any one Looked After Child is excluded. (10 days of fixed term exclusion would account for the loss of almost 5% of a school year.)
- Data systems are explicit in recording the number of days a Looked After Child is without any educational provision.
- Review impact of the ECPC Team in 6 months.

#### **4.5 Further work be undertaken in comparison with other authorities**

- Comparison is made with an authority of similar size with a similar number of Looked After Children.
- Comparison is made with an authority of similar size with a smaller number of Looked After Children.

### **5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE PROGRAMME OF WORK**

- Continued comparison of our Corporate Parent Role with other authorities.
- Follow up to the Learning Disabilities Review.
- Implications of the NHS Plan.
- The introduction of the new person-centred policies including funding issues.
- Recruitment and retention of staff, both adults and children and the implications of service delivery.
- The separation of Schools and SEN policy – review the implications and outcomes.
- Review the progress made on the integration of Children's Services.
- Review the performance of home care provision to benchmark standards.
- Review outcomes of the recommendations of this report in 6 months.

### **6. BACKGROUND PAPERS**

Guidance on the Education of Children in Public Care, DFEE 2000

Quality Protects transforming Children's Services, Department of Health September 1998.

Think Child: The Councillors Guide to Quality Protects, Department of Health/Local Government Association 1999

**7. APPENDICES**

1. The governments expectations of a Local Authority as a Corporate Parent.
2. Checklist of questions.
3. ECPC summary notes. (Publicity Leaflet also available in the Group Rooms).
4. Fundamental Concepts of Restorative Justice.
5. Request for Information from Members Visiting BCC Children's Homes.
6. LAC by Gloucestershire County Council.
7. Buckinghamshire Children's Rights and Advocacy Service.
8. MARRS Publicity Leaflet. (Also available in the Group Rooms.)