

CHILDREN'S SERVICES SCRUTINY FORUM AGENDA



Monday, 8th September 2008

at 4.30 pm

in the Council Chamber

MEMBERS: CHILDREN'S SERVICES SCRUTINY FORUM:

Councillors Aiken, Fleet, Griffin, Kaiser, London, McKenna, Preece, Shaw and Simmons

Co-opted Member: David Relton.

Resident Representatives: Christopher Akers-Belcher, Joan Steel and Sally Vokes

Young Peoples Representatives.

- 1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE**
- 2. TO RECEIVE ANY DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST BY MEMBERS**
- 3. TO CONFIRM THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 26TH AUGUST 2008 (*to follow*)**
- 4. RESPONSES FROM THE COUNCIL, THE EXECUTIVE OR COMMITTEES OF THE COUNCIL TO FINAL REPORTS OF THIS FORUM**

None.
- 5. CONSIDERATION OF REQUEST FOR SCRUTINY REVIEWS REFERRED VIA SCRUTINY CO-ORDINATING COMMITTEE**

None.

CHILDREN'S SERVICES SCRUTINY FORUM

MINUTES

26 August 2008

The meeting commenced at 4.30 pm in the Civic Centre, Hartlepool

Present:

Councillor: Jane Shaw (In the Chair)

Councillors: Martyn Aiken, Mary Fleet, Frances London, Christopher McKenna, Arthur Preece and Chris Simmons.

Also in Attendance:

Councillor Cath Hill, Children's Services Portfolio Holder
Beth Hawkrige, Barnardos

Co-opted Members:

David Relton

Young Peoples Representatives:

Kelly Goulding, Hannah Shaw, Gillian Pounder and Leigh Bradley

Officers:

John Robinson, Children's Fund Manager
Jim Murdoch, Head of Business Unit (Young Persons)
James Walsh, Scrutiny Support Officer
Angela Hunter, Principal Democratic Services Officer

21. Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Kaiser and resident representative Christopher Akers-Belcher and Sally Vokes.

22. Declarations of interest by Members

None.

23. Minutes of the meeting held on 21 July 2008

Confirmed

24. Responses from the Council, the Executive or Committees of the Council to Final Reports of this Forum

None.

25. Consideration of request for scrutiny reviews referred via Scrutiny Co-ordinating Committee

None.

26. Consideration of progress reports/budget and policy framework documents

None.

27. Scrutiny Investigation into Hartlepool Borough Council's Foster Care Service – Setting the Scene Report *(Assistant Director of Children's Services (Safeguarding and Specialist Services))*

The Head of the Business Unit, Children's Services Department presented a report which provided the background to the investigation to review Hartlepool Borough Council's recruitment and retention activity in relation to Foster Carers, including the provision of guidance and support to foster, kinship and special guardianship carers. The national and legal context along with the regulatory framework of fostering regulations were outlined for Members' consideration. It was noted that the foster care service was inspected on an annual basis and the last inspection took place in August 2007 with an overall rating of good. The inspection had made only one statutory recommendation in relation to the need to develop and maintain a foster carer's register and this was due to the difficulties at that time with the appropriate software.

Members were reminded of the 'fostering fortnight' event held on an annual basis, which promoted the foster care service and raised awareness of the service within the community. Reference was made to the payment scheme for foster carers which was linked to their skills and expertise with a view to their retention as foster carers for the Council, whilst also attracting prospective foster carers to the Council. It was noted that the training programme and on-going support provided to foster carers were critical elements to the recruitment and retention of foster carers.

A discussion ensued which included the following issues:

- (i) Clarification was sought on the support provided by the Council to ensure the retention of foster carers. The Head of Business Unit

responded that historically a number of carers had transferred to the private sector due to the financial benefits. Across the private sector up to 80% of foster carers had never undertaken foster care services for the local authority as the local authorities were more often than not seen as the 'poor relation'. However, in recent years the Council had undertaken a lot of hard work to change this perception, although further promotion was always being considered for example, by inviting all independent agency foster carers to Council events such as the Annual Celebrating Success Awards.

- (ii) A Member was concerned that if a foster carer felt they were unable to cope with a child with particular difficulties, they may feel that they have failed, what additional support was given in this situation? It was recognised that the matching process was not infallible and that new dimensions to a child's needs and care could arise at any time. The Head of Business Unit indicated that each placement was reviewed statutorily with foster carers visited on a monthly basis by their dedicated social worker. One of the elements the social worker would examine would be how the carer was coping with the current children placed. Should it become necessary, a child could be moved to a more suitable placement, although this decision was not taken lightly.
- (iii) A resident representative sought clarification on the looked after children who were not placed in foster care. The Head of Business Unit indicated that the 18% of looked after children not placed in foster care were mostly in specialist residential care due to their diverse needs, although it was noted that none of the specialist residential care was provided within the town. It was hoped that the support provided in the specialist residential centres would enable the children to move to more local foster care or even back to the care of their parents eventually.
- (iv) A Member commented on the increase in the number of young people in care and the possible reason for this. The Head of Business Unit responded that one of the biggest single contributory factors to the number of young people in care was domestic violence within their home. There had recently been a drive and awareness raising within local police authorities of the impact on children of domestic violence and within Hartlepool this had resulted in 29 police protection orders with all but 1 resulting in care proceedings.
- (v) Was the training for foster carers provided on a group basis? The Head of Business Unit commented that getting foster carers together for training was an issue but there were plans in place to deal with this in line with national minimum standards for training provision. The Carers' Progression Scheme recognised the demonstration of training undertaken being put into practice. Members were asked to note that the Council did have the ultimate sanction of not progressing payments or in extreme cases reducing payments where foster carers were unwilling to attend training sessions.

- (vi) What strategies were in place to support the parents of children who were placed with fostering parents? The Head of Business Unit informed Members that there were a range of resources and strategies in place to support parents including family support workers on a multi agency basis including substance misuse support groups and MIND.
- (vii) A Member asked what percentage of children were in temporary foster care? The Head of Business Unit informed Members that short term care was relatively low as the current strategy provided support to parents to continue parenting whilst helping to restore family relationship breakdowns, mainly with adolescents.
- (viii) Clarification was sought on the banding of payments referred to in the report? The Head of Business Unit indicated that the banding depended on the level of expertise adjudged to be achieved by the foster carers. This would need to be demonstrated through application within a caring situation and was measured against set criteria. Members were asked to note that the highest band of payment required a high level of responsibility, with a 4 weeks paid 'leave' entitlement, although foster carers did plan any leave of this nature to coincide with a time when they were in between placements. However, the vast majority of children looked after by foster carers, attended holidays with their foster family.

The Head of Business Unit was thanked for his attendance and for answering Members' questions.

Decision

That the presentation and discussions that followed be used to inform the Forum during its investigation.

28. Scrutiny Investigation into Hartlepool Borough Council's Foster Care Service – Evidence from the Children's Services Portfolio Holder *(Scrutiny Support Officer/Children's Services Portfolio Holder)*

The Portfolio Holder for Children's Services was in attendance to provide evidence in relation to the ongoing investigation into Hartlepool Borough Council's Foster Care Provision. The Portfolio Holder emphasised the need for promotion of the Council's Foster Care Provision with a view to recruiting more foster carers through advertising, promotion of the benefits from current foster carers to friends and family. The Chair suggested that if any members of the Forum had any ideas for the promotion of the foster care service to let the Head of Business Unit know. It was noted that previously, Hartlepool United Football Club had taken part in a promotional event for Fostering Fortnight with the release of balloons on the cenotaph in Victoria Road. This kind of high profile event was a huge publicity drive and should be considered again. It was acknowledged that the recent vacancy for the Assistant Director

(Safeguarding and Specialist Services) had resulted in several difficulties across the Department but Members were aware that this vacancy had now been filled.

The Portfolio Holder acknowledged that social workers were in a difficult situation as generally the public's perception of them was negative. However, once prospective foster carers met with social workers and gained a wider understanding of the service provided their view tended to change and the changes implemented at the Star Centre had shown the commitment of the local authority. One of the disappointments faced by Members as a corporate parent was the education outcomes of the looked after children. The facility of local authority funded private tuition was available for looked after children for additional help or extra-curricular activities and it was emphasised that this should be promoted more to foster carers. The young people in attendance were asked for their views on the recruitment of new foster carers. One of the young people commented that the process to foster a child takes a long time, which can sometimes frustrate prospective carers. The Portfolio Holder felt this was a useful point to note but added that because of the nature of the foster carer's role there needed to be a strict selection process and training programme. The Chair requested an average breakdown of the timescales for the whole process of becoming a foster parent from a carer's original application to actually gaining their first foster placement.

A discussion ensued which included the following issues:

- (i) It was noted that some foster carers were keen to increase the number of children they looked after but were unable to because of the number of bedrooms within their houses.
- (ii) A Member suggested that the age profile of foster carers was increasing and that younger people should be encouraged to apply with the aim of balancing this age profile.
- (iii) In relation to looked after children requiring additional support with their education, it was questioned whether the Head Teachers in schools were aware of which children were looked after within their school? The Head of Business Unit responded that the use of Personal Education Plans for all looked after children had been pioneered by Hartlepool Council and were now in place with the relevant social workers working very closely with schools to monitor their progress. The Portfolio Holder added that more stringent procedures were currently being considered to facilitate social workers to regular report on the educational attainment/progress of looked after children to the Director of Children's Services and Portfolio Holder. It was suggested that other authorities should be approached with a view to obtaining examples of best practice with regard to this.
- (iv) The Forum emphasised that they felt that the staff within Children's Services Department had shown a lot of dedication through their hard work during a difficult time of staffing disruption within the Department.
- (v) The Portfolio Holder suggested that the term 'disruption' meeting, a

meeting which was held when a foster care placement breaks down, be changed to a more positive term, for example constructive meetings.

Members of the Forum were asked to note that the Celebrating Success Event was to be held on 14 October 2008 at 6.00pm in the Borough Hall on the Headland. Members were reminded of the success of the event last year which was organised by the looked after young people, and enabled Members to meet and chat to the carers and young people.

The Portfolio Holder for Children's Services was thanked for her attendance and for answering Members' questions.

Decision

That the presentation and discussions that followed be used to inform the Forum during its investigation.

29. Any Other Business – 11 Million Take-Over Day

The Children's Fund Manager informed the Forum that the above Government initiative was to be held on 7 November 2008 and was the chance for young people to take-over a role of someone in a decision making position. Last year, people were given the opportunity to have two young people shadow their work-related activities for the day. Members were asked to give consideration to participating in this initiative and to let the Children's Fund Manager know as soon as possible as the more people who were willing to participate, the more young people could become involved.

Decision

That any members of the Forum willing to participate contact the Children's Fund Manager as soon as possible.

The meeting concluded at 6.00 pm.

CHAIRMAN

6. **CONSIDERATION OF PROGRESS REPORTS / BUDGET AND POLICY
FRAMEWORK DOCUMENTS**

None.

7. **ITEMS FOR DISCUSSION**

Scrutiny Investigation into Hartlepool Borough Council's Foster Care Service

7.1 Evidence from an Independent Foster Care Agency

(a) Covering Report – *Scrutiny Support Officer*

(b) Verbal evidence from a representative from an Independent Foster Care Agency

7.2 Evidence from Foster Carers

(a) Covering Report – *Scrutiny Support Officer*

(b) Verbal evidence from Foster Carers from Hartlepool Borough Council's Foster Care Service

7.3 Evidence from Young People

(a) Covering Report – *Scrutiny Support Officer*

(b) Verbal evidence from young people from Hartlepool Borough Council's Foster Care Service

8. **ISSUES IDENTIFIED FROM FORWARD PLAN**

No items.

9. **ANY OTHER ITEMS WHICH THE CHAIRMAN CONSIDERS ARE URGENT**

ITEMS FOR INFORMATION

- i) **Date of Next Meeting 6 October 2008, commencing at 4.30 pm in Committee Room B**

CHILDREN'S SERVICES SCRUTINY FORUM

8 September 2008



Report of: Scrutiny Support Officer

Subject: SCRUTINY INVESTIGATION INTO HARTLEPOOL
BOROUGH COUNCIL'S FOSTER CARE SERVICE –
EVIDENCE FROM AN INDEPENDENT FOSTER
AGENCY – COVERING REPORT

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To inform Members of the Forum that representatives from an Independent Foster Agency have been invited to attend this meeting to provide evidence in relation to the ongoing inquiry into Hartlepool Borough Council's Foster Care Service.

2. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 2.1 Members will recall that at the meeting of this Forum on 21 July 2008, the Terms of Reference and Potential Areas of Inquiry / Sources of Evidence for this scrutiny investigation were approved by the Forum.
- 2.2 Consequently representatives from an Independent Foster Agency have been agreed to attend this meeting to submit evidence verbal evidence as to their role in relation to Foster Care provision within Hartlepool Borough Council.
- 2.3 During this evidence gathering session with the Independent Foster Agency it is suggested that responses should be sought to the following key questions:-
- a) What are your roles and responsibilities in relation to the provision of Hartlepool Borough Council's Foster Care Service?
 - b) The Forum recently heard that 75-80% of Foster Carers with an Independent Foster Agency are new to fostering, to what extent do you agree with this statement?

- c) What are the timescales for someone to express an interest in Foster Care and become trained, before they can have a Foster Child placed in their care?
- d) Do you have any other view / information which you feel may be useful to Members in forming their recommendations?

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 That Members of the Forum consider the views of those representatives from the Independent Foster Agency in attendance at this meeting in relation to the questions outlined in Section 2.3 of this report.

Contact Officer:- James Walsh – Scrutiny Support Officer
Chief Executive's Department - Corporate Strategy
Hartlepool Borough Council
Tel: 01429 523647
Email: james.walsh@hartlepool.gov.uk

BACKGROUND PAPERS

The following background papers were used in the preparation of this report:-

- (i) Report of the Scrutiny Support Officer titled 'Scrutiny Investigation into Hartlepool Borough Council's Foster Care Service – Scoping Report,' presented at the meeting of the Children's Services Scrutiny Forum of 21 July 2008.

CHILDREN'S SERVICES SCRUTINY FORUM

8 September 2008



Report of: Scrutiny Support Officer

Subject: SCRUTINY INVESTIGATION INTO HARTLEPOOL BOROUGH COUNCIL'S FOSTER CARE SERVICE – EVIDENCE FROM FOSTER CARERS – COVERING REPORT

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To inform Members of the Forum that Foster Carers from Hartlepool Borough Council's Foster Care Service have been invited to attend this meeting to provide evidence in relation to the ongoing inquiry into Hartlepool Borough Council's Foster Care Service.

2. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 2.1 Members will recall that at the meeting of this Forum on 21 July 2008, the Terms of Reference and Potential Areas of Inquiry / Sources of Evidence for this scrutiny investigation were approved by the Forum.
- 2.2 Consequently Foster Carers from Hartlepool Borough Council's Foster Care Service have agreed to attend this meeting to submit evidence verbal evidence as to their role in relation to Foster Care provision within Hartlepool Borough Council.
- 2.3 During this evidence gathering session with Foster Carers it is suggested that responses should be sought to the following key questions:-
- a) How did you first become aware of the Foster Care Service delivered by Hartlepool Borough Council?
 - b) What do you think Hartlepool Borough Council should do that it isn't currently doing to encourage more Foster Carers?

- c) What are your opinions on the application / training process that Hartlepool Borough Council goes through before you are in a position to receive a Foster Child?
- d) Members received evidence that attendance at some Foster Care training session is poor. Why do you think that is and what can the Authority do to improve attendance rates?
- e) Do you have any other view / information which you feel may be useful to Members in forming their recommendations?

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 That Members of the Forum consider the views of Foster Carers from Hartlepool Borough Council's Foster Care Service in attendance at this meeting in relation to the questions outlined in Section 2.3 of this report.

Contact Officer:- James Walsh – Scrutiny Support Officer
Chief Executive's Department - Corporate Strategy
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CHILDREN'S SERVICES SCRUTINY FORUM

8 September 2008



Report of: Scrutiny Support Officer

Subject: SCRUTINY INVESTIGATION INTO HARTLEPOOL
BOROUGH COUNCIL'S FOSTER CARE SERVICE –
EVIDENCE FROM YOUNG PEOPLE – COVERING
REPORT

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 To inform Members of the Forum that young people have been invited to attend this meeting to provide evidence in relation to the ongoing inquiry into Hartlepool Borough Council's Foster Care Service.

2. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 2.1 Members will recall that at the meeting of this Forum on 21 July 2008, the Terms of Reference and Potential Areas of Inquiry / Sources of Evidence for this scrutiny investigation were approved by the Forum.
- 2.2 Consequently young people from Hartlepool Borough Council's Foster Care Service have agreed to attend this meeting to submit evidence verbal evidence as to their role in relation to Foster Care provision within Hartlepool Borough Council.
- 2.3 During this evidence gathering session with Foster Carers it is suggested that responses should be sought to the following key questions:-
- a) What is your overall experience of the Foster Care Service delivered by Hartlepool Borough Council?
 - b) How much support did you receive outside of your Foster family during you time with Hartlepool Borough Council's Foster Care Service?

- c) Were there any opportunities that you would have liked to have explored, but were unable to during your time with Hartlepool Borough Council's Foster Care Service?
- d) What changes (if any) would you like to see to the Foster Care Service delivered by Hartlepool Borough Council?
- e) Do you have any other view / information which you feel may be useful to Members in forming their recommendations?

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 3.1 That Members of the Forum consider the views of young people from Hartlepool Borough Council's Foster Care Service in attendance at this meeting in relation to the questions outlined in Section 2.3 of this report.

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Chief Executive's Department - Corporate Strategy
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