

Elected Members' visits to Wirral Children and Young People's Department Children's Homes

Executive Summary

Elected Members' visits to children's homes are carried out as part of their corporate parenting role under recommendation 61 of the 2000 Waterhouse Report (Lost in Care).

1. Background

- 1.1 Existing Elected Member visits to children's homes were born out of the Quality Protects government initiative from 1998 where the concept of corporate parenting was first developed. Subsequent legislation in the intervening years has reinforced the concept and in 2008 the DCSF published "Care Matters: Time to deliver for Children in Care" which is a detailed implementation plan for local authorities. The key role for Elected Members in the development of corporate parenting is embedded in this guidance.
- 1.2 Clearly Members' visits to our children's homes can be just one aspect of corporate parenting and has been interpreted and implemented in a variety of ways by different local authorities.
- 1.3 The legislative requirement for officer visits to children's homes is contained in Regulation 33 of the Children's Homes Regulations 2001. This statutory requirement is conducted in Wirral by our Independent Reviewing Officers based in the Quality Assurance/Safeguarding Unit. There is no statutory requirement for separate Members' visits; however, most local authorities, Wirral included, have accepted it is a key strand in corporate parenting and have accordingly established Member visits in a variety of ways.
- 1.4 Some local authorities, Cheshire East Council being our nearest, have combined the Regulation 33 requirements with their corporate parenting strategy and have Elected Members conducting their monthly Regulation 33 visits – the overwhelming majority, however, conduct the two requirements separately.

1.5 Current arrangements

- 1.6 The existing arrangements for Member visits to Wirral's children's homes (suspended since September 2008) were established in 2003. Each month two Members are accompanied by the Service Manager, Quality Assurance/Safeguarding, on an unannounced visit to one of our three children's homes. Staff and young people are usually spoken with and a general tour of the building conducted. Members then complete a proforma report on their observations and return this to the Service Manager.

- 1.7 The scrutiny and inspection requirements for children's homes are now covered across a number of interventions, from scheduled Ofsted inspections to our monthly unannounced Officer visits and independent advocacy services. Members' role therefore requires a re-definition within the corporate parenting role which will always include every member being subject to enhanced CRB checks to comply with the Barring and Vetting scheme being phased in throughout 2009/10.
- 1.8 "Care Matters: Time for Change" was published by DCSF in June 2007 and sets out the steps to be taken, with local delivery partners, to improve the outcomes for children and young people in care. At the beginning of 2008 the DCSF published "Care Matters: Time to Deliver for Children in Care" which is a detailed implementation plan for local authorities. The key role for Elected Members in developing corporate parenting is embedded in this guidance.
- 1.9 The section of the implementation guidance which emphasises the importance of corporate parenting can usefully be quoted here:

"Every child needs a good parent who looks out for them, speaks out on their behalf and responds to their needs. For children in care, this is a statutory role for local authorities – all local councillors and council officers share the corporate parenting responsibility. This responsibility is paramount and councillors and council officers should carry it with them as they go about their daily business. They should also be clear about how, as corporate parents, they work with and support the Lead Member and Director of Children's Services in their strategic roles."

1.10 Options

1.11 Option 1: Monthly unannounced visits

- 1.12 Members may wish to re-establish the existing arrangements for children's home visits with some improvements.
- 1.13 This would entail all members of this Scrutiny Committee agreeing to a monthly rota of unannounced visits. Two Members per month would be accompanied by the Service Manager, Quality Assurance/Safeguarding, with each Member completing a pro forma report on their findings. This report would be processed by the Quality Assurance/Safeguarding Service Manager via the appropriate operational manager, with any identified areas of concern actioned accordingly.
- 1.14 Progress on these action points would be reported into Scrutiny Committee as part of the cycle of reporting around Regulation 33 Officer visits to children's homes.
- 1.15 This option would be accompanied by some refresher training to Members on the corporate parenting role as it relates to our children in Wirral children's homes.
- 1.16 Children's homes managers and staff would also receive briefings on the corporate parenting role of Elected Members.

1.17 Pros and Cons of Option 1

- 1.18 Pros

- 1.19 Unannounced visits should allow Members to see our children's homes as they really are without the potential for staff to engage in preparation for the purposes of the visit.
- 1.20 Monthly visits allow Members to duplicate the visiting cycle of Regulation 33 Officer Visits, therefore enabling a twin-tracking of both statutory and corporate parenting issues arising from children's homes visits.
- 1.21 Cons
- 1.22 Unannounced visits often occur when either most or all the young people are out of the building at school or engaged in activities with staff. Also, if key management staff are not on duty, Members' questions to the available junior staff are often limited in scope.
- 1.23 Children's homes receive scheduled and unannounced visits from both Ofsted and Council Officers. They also receive visits from independent advocacy services. There is a danger, therefore, that our attempts to reinforce the concept of 'home' to looked after young people is undermined by the frequent arrival of visitors.

1.24 Option 2: Scheduled Meetings

- 1.25 The second option would entail two to three Elected Members meeting on a 3-monthly cycle within the Children's Homes; so one home would be visited per quarter. Attendees would be relevant managers and young people, Head of Branch Children's Social Care, two existing or former looked after young people, Children's Involvement Officer, Service Manager Quality Assurance/ Safeguarding and Service Manager Children with Disabilities Service.
- 1.26 The focus of the agenda for the meeting would cover most recent Ofsted reports and recommendations. In addition internal audit action plans, Regulation 33 Officer visit feedback, children and young people meetings feedback, recorded complaints and Elected Members' comments/concerns would also be covered.
- 1.27 Members would need to consider identifying a core group of three to six Members from Select Committee to conduct this corporate parenting role.

1.28 Pros and Cons of Option 2

- 1.29 Pros
- 1.30 Quarterly meetings with key relevant managers and young people will provide Members with opportunity to scrutinise current findings from internal and external formal inspections of our children's homes. In addition, there will be opportunity to hear from relevant staff and young people about their experience of living and working in their respective homes with opportunity for young people to prepare for this.
- 1.31 Cons

1.32 Although less frequent in occurrence than the previous monthly unannounced Members' visits there would be more preparation required for the quarterly meetings on key items such as findings from Ofsted inspection reports and this may pose more demands on Elected Members than the previous system.

1.33 Spreading the commitment to these corporate parenting tasks across all Scrutiny Committee Members, rather than a core group, may dilute the effectiveness of achieving a satisfactory outcome to particular themes or actions raised by individual members.

1.34 Proposal

1.35 The proposal is that Option 2 Scheduled Meetings would best meet the corporate parenting role requirement of Elected Members.

1.36 Training/briefings

1.37 All of the options for Elected Member visits to children's homes include a commitment to providing up to date training and briefings to both Members and relevant staff on their respective roles in this corporate parenting task.

2. Financial Implications

2.1 There are no immediate additional financial implications other than those mentioned within this report.

3. Staffing Implications

3.1 There are no immediate additional staffing implications other than those mentioned within this report.

4. Equal Opportunities Implications

4.1 All Children's Homes accommodate children assessed as in need and recognise the importance of meeting these individual needs, with awareness of race, culture and disability issues.

5. Community Safety Implications

5.1 Good quality childcare helps ensure the young people in our care are appropriately supervised. This reduces the potential opportunities for them to be involved in inappropriate behaviour in the community.

6. Local Agenda 21 Implications

6.1 All Children's Homes aim to promote an awareness of society and aim to equip young people to be able to take a positive part of society's future.

7. Planning Implications

7.1 There are no planning implications in this Report.

8. Anti-poverty implications

- 8.1 Children in care come from a range of backgrounds but many of our most vulnerable children and young people are over-represented from the poorest and most deprived families in Wirral.

9. Social inclusion implications

- 9.1 All children's residential homes actively seek to involve their children and young people in activities which provide links with their peers in the wider community.

10. Local Member Support Implications

- 10.1 There are no Local Member support implications in this report.

11. Background Papers

- 11.1 Relevant Children's Homes, Operational Managers and Children's Involvement Officer were consulted in the preparation of this report.

RECOMMENDATIONS

That:

- (1) The Committee Members note the report and consider a response to the proposed options for Elected Members' visits to Wirral Children & Young People's Department Children's Homes.
- (2) The Committee Members consider the proposal that Option 2 Scheduled Meetings is the preferred option.

Howard Cooper
Director of Childrens Services