

Committee: **CHILDREN'S SERVICES
SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

Date: **5 JULY 2006**

Report of: **CORPORATE
PARENTING SCRUTINY
PANEL**

Bolton Council

Contact Officer: **John Addison**

TITLE OF THE REPORT

Corporate Parenting Scrutiny Panel Report

NON-CONFIDENTIAL

This report does not contain information which warrants its consideration in the absence of the Press or Members of the public.

PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

To advise and seek the approval of the members of the Scrutiny Committee for the investigation of, and recommendations made by, the Corporate Parenting Scrutiny Panel.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Members are asked to approve:

- (i) the recommendations made to the Executive Member for Children's Services as laid out in the report; and
- (ii) that the Executive Member for Children's Services be asked to prepare a report, setting out their response to the recommendations contained in this report. That these responses be presented back to the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee within six months.

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Background

At the Social Care and Housing Scrutiny Committee on 3 February 2004 it was decided to establish a Corporate Parenting Scrutiny Panel to investigate issues in relation to the council's Corporate Parenting responsibilities. Although the Panel was established originally in February 2004, its work did not really commence until November 2005.

The Panel was subsequently appointed, being politically balanced and comprised:

1. Councillor Allen
2. Councillor Hamilton
3. Councillor Mrs. Howarth
4. Councillor Mrs. Rothwell
5. Councillor Mrs. Thomas (Chair)
6. Councillor Mrs. Woodward

The Panel was supported throughout its investigations by the following officers:

John Addison – Members Services Manager (Legal and Democratic Services)
Margaret Blenkinsop – Director of Children's Services (Children's Services)
James Dearling – Senior Democratic Services Officer (Legal and Democratic Services)
Bob Horrocks – Corporate Children's Officer (Children's Services)
Lynne Jones – Assistant Director (Children's Services)
Tom O'Loughlin – Principal Officer, Advice and Assessment (Children's Services)
Mike Williamson – Democratic Services Officer (Legal and Democratic Services)

The Panel also invited Jane Trevett, Foster Carer, to attend its meetings.

1.2 Reasons for Review

There is a growing number of children and young people in the Looked After System within the borough. In addition, overall the council has not been able to make improvements in the educational achievements and employment, education and training opportunities to ensure that children looked after gain the maximum life chance benefits.

The Panel intended to assess current provision, project future need, and seek examples of good practice and creative ways of improving Corporate Parenting.

1.3 Process and Evidence

The Panel met on six occasions. During the course of its considerations the Panel, in addition to oral evidence from officers, also received reports and undertook research as follows:

Background presentation

The Panel received background information setting the council's Corporate Parenting responsibilities and obligations in the national context and identifying key issues.

Questionnaire to Elected Members

A questionnaire circulated to all 60 elected members, the responses to which were analysed and considered by the Panel.

Directors' Understanding

Information was sought from Directors concerning their Department's commitment to Corporate Parenting and their current and future actions in relation to Corporate Parenting.

2.0 The Current Situation

Bolton Metropolitan Borough Council has a statutory responsibility to look after children/children in need/children at risk of harm within the borough. In Bolton, there are currently around 380 children and young people looked after at any one time. Most live within a foster family, a small number live within residential care settings, and a further number live at home or with extended family members. Some looked after children may be placed in establishments outside of the borough boundaries.

The outcomes for the children and young people looked after by the authority are poor in many aspects (e.g., in line with national findings, local educational outcome figures for looked after children in Bolton confirm that many are denied the opportunities allowed to their non-looked after peers and fail within their school career).

National figures (Home Office Social Exclusion Unit, Bridging the Gap 2000) show that looked after children often remain disadvantaged into adulthood: they are twelve times more likely to leave school with no qualification, fifty times more likely to be sent to prison, and fifty times more likely to have children who experience public care.

2.1 Legislation and Guidance

There is a duty on the council to provide a borough-wide approach to the care, promotion, and protection of the children and young people looked after by the authority.

The duties and obligations of the council are laid out in the Children Act 1989, the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000, the Children Act 2004, and the Government's 'Quality Protects', 'Education Protects,' and 'Choice Protects' programmes.

The council's main obligations:

All elected members, council employees, service areas, departments and directorates are instructed to consider looked after children as if 'they were their own children' and seek to provide only the quality of care which would be good enough for their own children. This includes that they should be healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution to society, and achieve economic well-being.

Elected members are at the top of the Corporate Parenting structure: they have a 'special responsibility' to oversee the local authority's approach and commitment to improving the life chances of looked after children and for championing them in all council concerns. Department for Education and Skills guidance makes clear that councillors should make it their business to find out who and where the looked after children in their authority are and to make sure the council is doing its best to help them (If this were my child . . . : A Councillor's Guide to being a Good Corporate Parent, DfES 2003 (<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/educationprotects//upload/ACFC03E.pdf>) See also, Statutory Guidance on the roles and responsibilities of the Director of Children's Services and Lead Member for Children's Services, DfES 2005).

3.0 Investigations and Recommendations

The Panel began its investigation by focusing on the current understanding of the Corporate Parenting framework by departments and elected members.

3.1 Departments' Understanding

Each Director was requested to provide a written response in relation to what their department was doing about Corporate Parenting. From the extremely limited response the Panel was forced to conclude that the understanding of departments' responsibilities in the area of Corporate Parenting was weak.

With this in mind, the Panel makes the following recommendations:

- That a presentation on the role of the Council as a Corporate Parent be made to the next Chief Officers meeting; and
- That every department appoint a Corporate Parenting Champion at a suitable level (e.g., Assistant Director) to promote Corporate Parenting and act as a point of contact.

3.2 Members' Understanding

A questionnaire to find out about elected members' knowledge of the role of corporate parents was circulated to all 60 elected members. From both the low response rate and the low percentage of respondents who had a clear perception of their role as corporate parents, the Panel concluded that there was a need to provide

some developmental work for elected members in this area.

With this in mind, the Panel makes the following recommendations:

- That a Corporate Parenting workshop be arranged for all members and, contingent upon the approval of the three group leaders, a raising awareness presentation be staged at each group meeting; and
- That Corporate Parenting be a regular agenda item for all appropriate Policy Development Groups and for the Children's Services Scrutiny Committee, and be recommended as a regular item on school governors' reports.

4.0 Conclusion

The Panel are mindful that these recommendations fall short of the original scope of its review. However, the Panel feel that the apparent knowledge gap of officers' and members' concerning the role and functions of corporate parents necessitates measures to raise awareness.

Nevertheless, the Panel are aware that Bolton has, in comparison to neighbouring authorities, successfully promoted corporate opportunities for looked after children and young people. Indeed, in relation to the health and well being of looked after children the Panel notes the high level of service provided by the social care division of the council.

The Panel looks forward to the response of the Executive Member for Children's Services to their recommendations.