

<b>NAME OF SCRUTINY COMMITTEE</b>	<b>SERVICES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE</b>
<b>DATE OF MEETING</b>	<b>28:11:2013</b>
<b>TITLE OF ITEM</b>	<b>COUNCIL'S CORPORATE PARENT PANEL</b>
<b>CABINET MEMBER</b>	<b>COUNCILLOR SIAN GWENLLIAN</b>

## **1. Introduction**

**1.1** It was decided at the Services Scrutiny Committee's preparation meeting on 21 October that there was a need to scrutinise the work of the "Council's Corporate Parenting" and a number of questions of interest to members were noted. Therefore, the intention of this report is to respond to each question in turn.

**1.2** On 8 October, the Annual Report of the Corporate Parent Panel was submitted to the Cabinet. It is noted in the introduction to the Report that the Council has a statutory responsibility as a "corporate parent" for looked after children and that there is an expectation on each Council to behave as if it is a parent to these children. Although there is parental responsibility on every elected member and Council staff member (these responsibilities are described in the document "If it were my child..."), the Corporate Parent Panel has a specific role in relation to ensuring an overview of the welfare and interests of looked after children.

## **2. Number of children for whom the Council acts as a corporate parent and the arrangements for taking on this responsibility.**

**2.1** In the latest report of the Service Manager (Resources) to the Corporate Parent Panel, it was noted that care can be provided to a child or young person in many types of placements. Changes in the nature of placements or placements themselves do not reduce the Council's responsibility as a corporate parent. Those placements may include:-

- Foster placements
- Placements with extended family or friends (under fostering regulations)
- Residential placements
- Placements with a parent or parents under a Care Order
- Independent accommodation in the community (for young people over 16 years of age)

**2.2** Every child or young person has a social worker who has a responsibility to keep in regular contact. It should be noted also that there is a responsibility towards young people who have left care and it is ensured that the Service makes every attempt to continue with the necessary support if the young person wishes for that to happen. In addition, looked after children cases were reviewed in accordance with a statute by Independent Review Officers. An initial review is undertaken within a month of the placement, a second review within three months and further reviews every six months throughout the care period. This has been a challenge for the service, but performance is now improving. Performance is reported upon regularly to the Corporate Parent Panel.

**2.3** At the end of September 2013, 191 children and young people were in the Council's care and the Council was their corporate parent. This was a reduction of 12 children compared to the total at the end of March 2013. From this total, 152 (79%) were in foster care, 17 (9%) were in a residential placement and 13 (7%) were placed with parents. Seven children were in adoptive placements and four young persons lived independently with support.

**2.4** During the period April – September 2013, 12 children came into care for the first time (which is substantially fewer than during the same period last year). The majority were young children, younger than one years of age. Over the same period, 25 children or young people left care – three were adopted, five returned to their parents, 10 young persons turned 18 and a Special Guardianship Order was made in four cases.

**2.5** In the report of the Service Manager to the Panel, the following is also noted:

*“...the children service has a placement strategy at work with the aim of increasing the choice of placements available for children. Responding to the welfare and safety needs of children means that it is not always possible to place a child in an internal Council provision. Where there are children with very severe needs, specialist placements would have to be commissioned. The type of needs which cause the biggest difficulties are -*

- *Placement for teenagers – behavioural / criminal problems*
- *Specific need placements – unsuitable sexual behaviour, mental health needs*
- *Placements for children with severe disabilities*
- *Placements for large sibling groups*
- *Parent and child placements”*

**2.6** An “End to End” review was undertaken in the Children and Families Service recently and it was noted that there was substantial expenditure on out-of-county residential placements. Having a strategy that will increase the choice of internal placements with workers and carers who have specialist skills will be essential if this expenditure is to be reduced.

### **3. How do the Council's arrangements tie-in with the Welsh Local Government Association's checklist for the role of a corporate parent?**

**3.1 Training and information for members** – Following establishing the latest Panel in July 2012, training was arranged for members in November of the same year. Each elected member was invited to the training. The training included information about the role and responsibilities of members and members were asked to consider and discuss various situations faced by looked after children in Gwynedd. 24 members attended. It is intended to hold further training during the coming year (8 January 2014 at 2:00pm in Porthmadog); however, work will need to be done beforehand to emphasise the importance of the role and encourage members to attend. It is certain that there will also be a need to consider various methods of raising awareness of the field.

**3.2 The Council's Statement on corporate parenting** – Members of the Corporate Parent Panel have decided that a Corporate Parenting Strategy, that will include a clear statement regarding the Council's vision, should be drawn up. The work has commenced and it is expected that engaging with children and young people who can contribute because of their experience in care will be a part of this process. Each Department will be expected to commit to the objectives included in the Strategy.

#### **3.3 Specialist training for members who could come into contact with looked after children**

Apart from the training arranged annually for members, no further training has been offered to members who could come into contact with looked after children. It could be argued that what is needed is communication skills with children and young people in general, along with an understanding of the situation of each individual, rather than any skills deriving from specialist training. Nevertheless, further training could be considered if that is the members' wish.

#### **3.4 Matters of concern to looked after children and young people**

Through discussions with looked after children and young people on many levels (from individual discussions with social workers, to discussions at review meetings, to gather views from the Customer Care Unit to conversations within special meetings for looked after children such as Have Your Say), it is believed that we can be comparatively confident that the Panel is aware of the main matters that cause concern to looked after children and young people. However, discussed below is the need to strengthen structures and engagement processes with children and young people by giving them confidence and empowering them to contribute in a proactive and firm way. This would need to be a central part of the Panel's work over the coming year.

Listed below are some of the matters that caused concern to the young people to whom panel members spoke:-

- There is a need for more information about the placement before commencing there.
- Challenge of changing schools (in particular if it happens more than once), and the effect on education.
- The need for support in schools for looked after children.
- The need for a social worker who listens, who can answer difficult questions and who makes things happen.
- The need for support from other Council departments, apart from Social Services.
- The need to acknowledge how critical and difficult the 14-16 year old period is.
- Difficulty to obtain assistance outside office hours at times.
- The need to collaborate more with post-16 education colleges to ensure that no discrimination occurs.
- The need to ensure that housing associations, when making decisions regarding housing allocations, consider the background and experiences of young people and avoid placing young people in accommodation that causes them any stress.
- The need to ensure fair employment opportunities.

These are the concerns that will drive the work programme of the Corporate Parent Panel.

**3.5 Arrangements to commence discussions with looked after children and responding to their viewpoints** – Each looked after child or young person has a social worker and his/her case will be reviewed regularly by an independent officer. It is required for these workers to see the child by him/herself and ensure that he/she has the opportunity to voice opinions and express views regarding his/her situation. This is the first step in terms of starting to engage with children and young people.

**3.5.1** In addition, the Senior Manager - Children and Families Service and elected members (Cabinet members), along with the Children Services customer care officer, meet regularly with a group of looked after children and children who have left care, in a group called “Speakout”. This group has existed for 10 years in Gwynedd and meets with a number of young people every quarter outside normal working hours. The meetings are ones that are led by the young people themselves – they set the agenda, they chair the meetings and they minute the meetings also. The officers and elected members are there by invitation and the main purpose is to give the young people for whom the Council has parental responsibility an opportunity to have direct access to officers and members who are able to influence practice and policy. It is an opportunity for them to share their experiences about being a young person who is looked after (or in aftercare), and gives an opportunity to provide their opinion on what they would wish to see change in the interests of other young people in the future. Some of the messages listed above in 3.4 are as a

result of some of the discussions held at this group. Feedback from these meetings is provided to the Corporate Parent Panel.

**3.5.2** In addition, an officer from the Customer Care Unit will gather the views of looked after children regularly (by means of questionnaires, group meetings and individual meetings, subject to the preference of the young person) and will report on her findings to the Panel.

**3.5.3** It is also ensured that looked after children and young people have access to advocates who are prepared to speak on their behalf or to assist them to express their views and ideas in various “formal” situations. Gwynedd Council has a joint service level agreement with Conwy and Anglesey with NYAS (National Youth Advocacy Service) to provide this statutory advocacy service.

**3.6 Mechanisms to ensure that the Council seeks the views of looked after children and young people and celebrates their achievements** – In addition to the above and as noted in the Panel’s Annual Report, the Panel requests, and receives, direct input from looked after young people on occasions. This has included “honest and challenging” input from services users, referring to their experience of being in care.

**3.6.1** A presentation from two young persons who had left care was also received.

**3.6.2** The Panel intended to continue with regular input of this type; however, there was also a need to develop the engagement process further and ensure that it contributed to the Panel and Council’s systems. In order to do so, there is a need to spend considerable time encouraging and giving children and young people confidence to participate. There is also a need to decide who would be best to lead on such work as there will be a need for an element of independence along with capacity to be able to work with the children over a period of time. Without doing so, there is a risk of the entire process becoming tokenistic.

**3.6.3** In terms of celebrating achievements, this is undertaken in a method is was suitable for the child or young person – it could be a card or letter of congratulations from the Chair of the Panel or the Chief Executive, Statutory Director or Senior Service Manager. This could be publicised further also; however this would be at the request / upon permission from the young person and his/her family (where appropriate). There certainly was a need to develop the “celebrating success” agenda further and consider...if it were my child, how would I celebrate? Currently, the young people are of the view that they do not wish to see an “event” to celebrate success just because they are looked after children as this would make them different to their peers.

**3.7 Occasions (at least once a year) for looked after children to contribute to Gwynedd Council meetings** – There are no specific occasions for looked after children to contribute towards the Council’s meetings (apart from their input to the

Corporate Parent Panel as seen above). It is difficult to consider how this could be implemented at present without the experience being a very threatening one for the child or young person. Possibly, the secret is to develop the engagement agenda as noted above and nurture the confidence of young people so that they can contribute to formal meetings in future. This is a matter to be discussed further in order to agree on the way forward.

**3.8 Opportunities to hear from foster carers and celebrate their work.** At the end of March 2013, 106 foster parents were registered with Gwynedd Council - the highest number to date and the service is consistent in reaching its assessment and registration target of 20 new fostering units within any year. A robust recruitment strategy has been in place for many years and recruitment events target special locations in the County, for example, a shop was hired in Pwllheli for a week last year, there is an advertisement on the back of an Arriva bus that travels throughout Gwynedd, there is an advertisement at the Bangor City Football Club and these bring positive results in terms of attracting and recruiting. By now, other Counties contact us asking for advice and guidance to develop recruitment skills as we have proven so successful.

**3.8.1** Structures are in place within the Children and Families Service (Fostering and Adoption Unit) to support foster carers in their day to day work. The standard of this work has been praised regularly by independent inspectors from the Care and Social Services Inspectorate for Wales.

**3.8.2** The Council acknowledges the work and takes an opportunity to thank the carers in general and celebrate the special successes at an annual dinner arranged by the Service. Usually, the Press Unit ensure that the event is publicised in local newspapers. This evening is an important one for foster parents and for the Council and awards are presented to specific foster parents who have reached significant milestones in their fostering careers.

#### **4. Arrangements to share practical responsibilities across members and Council officers**

**4.1** Although each elected member and staff member is a corporate parent, many have a key role in the process of ensuring that our vision is achieved in relation to looked after children and young people.

**4.2** In relation to Social Services, the Statutory Director has specific duties, and similarly the Senior Manager - Children and Families Service and the staff of that service. Also, the Care Portfolio Member and Children and Young People Portfolio Member hold the same responsibilities.

**4.3** In terms of the children of Gwynedd in a more general sense but with emphasis on the needs of the most vulnerable children, there is a responsibility of the Lead

Member for Children and Young People and the Children and Young People Portfolio Member. In addition, Gwynedd has a Children's Champion amongst its elected members.

**4.4** With the emphasis on children and young people, the Corporate Parent Panel includes elected members and cross-departmental officers collaborating on the same agenda to ensure that looked after children are safe and receive the best opportunities in life. This is the strategic body that sets the agenda for the Council as a whole.

However, the existence of the Panel cannot reduce the responsibility of each elected member and officer to be corporate parents to these children. Whilst we are clear regarding the structure and sharing of responsibility, there is further work to be done in relation to raising awareness of the field.

## **5. Membership, responsibilities and arrangements of the Corporate Parent Panel, giving attention to good practice.**

**5.1** The Corporate Parent Panel reports to the Council's Cabinet and it is chaired by the Lead Member for Children and Young People. The Panel has a standing membership, including the following Cabinet Members:-

- Gwynedd Council Leader
- Lead Member Children and Young People and Portfolio Leader - Education
- Cabinet Member – Deprivation
- Cabinet Member – Care.
- A member nominated by the Scrutiny Committee
- The Champion of the voice of Children and Young People

along with the following officers:-

- Chief Executive
- Corporate Director and Lead Director – Children and Young People
- Corporate Director and Statutory Director of Social Services
- Head of Education Department
- Senior Manager – Children and Families Services
- Service Manager (Care Resources), Children and Families Services

An invitation could be extended to a representative of Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board, a representative of the third sector or any other agency as required.

**5.2** The responsibilities of the Panel have been noted in the Terms of Reference adopted by the Panel recently. The document notes the Vision of the Panel, namely:

*"Ensure that children in public care have the same outcomes as every good parent would wish for their own children."*

**5.3** It also notes the Aim of the Panel, namely:-

*"Collaborate effectively to ensure that every looked after child and young person in Gwynedd has access to the best opportunities in life."*

**5.4** Along with the objectives (based on the 10 Basic Rights of the Child), namely:

*"Ensure that children and young people who are in Gwynedd's care:*

- *Have the best start in life.*
- *Have access to a comprehensive variety of educational and learning opportunities to enable them to achieve their potential.*
- *Are able to enjoy the best possible health and be free from persecution, abuse and exploitation.*
- *Have opportunities to participate in cultural, play, leisure and sport activities.*
- *Have someone who listens to them, be treated with respect and be able to profess their race, language and cultural identity.*
- *Have a safe home and community that supports their physical and emotional well-being so that they have a strong sense of belonging and being appreciated.*
- *Are free from disadvantages caused by financial poverty.*
- *Can develop skills and promote enterprise and make a positive economic contribution and a contribution as citizens of the future".*

**5.5** Amongst the panel's responsibilities are:-

- Promoting the welfare of looked after children and young people in Gwynedd.
- Ensuring and demanding collaboration between agencies and partnerships for the benefit of the children.
- Coordinating services for every looked after child and young person from the pre-natal period until their 21<sup>st</sup> birthday (or 25<sup>th</sup> birthday if they are in education or training).
- Promoting the rights of the children and young people.
- Providing a vision and setting strategic priorities for services for looked after children and young people.
- Receiving the views of children and young people about their care.
- Receiving information about the current condition of looked after children in Gwynedd and the provisions available for them.
- Promoting awareness of the duties of officers across the Council.
- Acknowledging and promoting the work of foster carers who provide services for looked after children in Gwynedd.

**5.6** The new-look Corporate Parent Panel was established in July 2012. Panel meetings are held every quarter; however, it reserves the right to call an urgent meeting should the need arise. The Panel reports to the Cabinet and to individual Cabinet members in relation to matters within their portfolios.



**5.7** The Panel receives direction and information about good practice and best practice from specialist officers who are members of the Panel. Attention is given to best practice on a national and international level and such examples are reported upon as relevant. An example of this is the current use made of research when commencing work on drawing up a Corporate Parent Strategy.

## **6 Measuring the Council's success as a corporate parent – the current assessment of the work**

**6.1** To date, the Panel has depended (possibly excessively), on information associated with a number of national and local performance indicators on a national and local level where the emphasis has been on quantitative information rather than on the standard of services and provisions. Annual reports are received from Independent Review Officers who summarise the performance of the Review and Quality Unit; from the Service Manager (Resources) within the Children and Families Service, which focuses on relevant statistics; and a report from the Head of Education Department noting the achievement of schools in relation to providing the Personal Education Plans of Looked After Children. Once again, it is seen that the emphasis is placed on the quantitative and despite the fact that the information is useful and important in terms of providing an overview of the field, the information regarding the standard and quality of the service and provision for children and young people is scarce. The information regarding the general impact of the Council, or the Corporate Parent Panel in particular, as a corporate parent on the lives of these children and young people is also scarce. The major challenge for the Panel in the coming weeks is to consider the objectives agreed upon in the Terms of Reference and ask “How will we know that we are succeeding?” and “How can we testify to that?” This will be a core part of the Work Programme. From examining best practice in other councils, it can be seen that the majority find it difficult to testify to the impact; however, certainly one of the most effective ways is to speak with the children and young people and foster carers regarding their experiences and ensure that they are included during the work of planning, developing and evaluating a strategy and work programme for the Panel.

**6.2** In relation to the Council itself as a corporate parent, work has taken place in relation to training members and 24 members attended training last year. The 2013-2014 work programme includes, amongst other things, addressing further training to members and staff, along with raising awareness of corporate parenting Policies and Guidelines. Every service will be expected to develop such policies and guidelines to be approved by the Panel and it is expected that the services will subsequently report on success against the intentions.

## **7. Closing Statement**

7.1 This report was prepared as a response to a number of questions raised by the Services Scrutiny Committee regarding the work of the Corporate Parent Panel. The answers given, along with the Panel's Annual Report that was presented to members recently, gives a taster of the Panel's work. A challenging agenda faces the Panel members, in particular in relation to ensuring corporate commitment and in relation to ensuring a real voice for each child who comes into care and who leaves our care as a Council. We are confident that the Council can rise to the challenge and act as one in the interests of the children and young people for whom we are responsible.