



Our children first

Report of the Corporate Parenting
Commission in Salford

September 2005



Contents

Members of the Corporate Parenting Commission	3
Terms of reference for the Corporate Parenting Commission	3
Corporate Parenting: the national picture	6
Corporate Parenting: the local picture	7
The Scrutiny Commission process	13
Summary of evidence	19
Recommendations	27
Acknowledgements	30



To Salford City Council, Salford Primary Care Trust, Salford Community Leisure Ltd and the Local Strategic Partnership

Chair's foreword

This report brings together the conclusions and recommendations based on the evidence provided to this Scrutiny Commission.

I am delighted with the many and varied contributions that have been made by individuals and organisations in providing evidence to this scrutiny commission. I thank them all for their time and desire to help and feel confident that this report will be viewed as an independent source of information, which will ultimately benefit and help influence the future for our children and young people.

In conclusion I wish to thank the members of the Commission, who gave their time both freely and readily, in particular the advice and guidance offered by Dr Hugh McLaughlin from the University of Salford.

I commend this report to the City Council, Salford Primary Care Trust and the Local Strategic Partnership.

Councillor Bernard Pennington



Members of the Commission

Councillor B. Pennington (chair)

Councillor C. Gray

The late **Councillor D. Fernandez**

Mrs Dixon

Community representative on the Community, Health and Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Mrs Thompson

Foster Carer and co-opted member on the Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Mr J. Wheelton

Community representative on the Community, Health and Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Dr H. McLaughlin

University of Salford - Expert adviser to the Commission

Officers supporting the Commission:

Amanda Carbery

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Terms of reference

The terms of reference for the Commission were: -

To support the delivery of the 7 pledges in particular :
Investing in Young People in Salford by:-

- Investigating the contribution to Corporate Parenting from Lead Members and Directors from each Directorate within the Authority. What arrangements were in place and did they support the achievement of best practice.
- Identifying Best Practice within other local authorities.
- Consulting with the various stakeholders to determine whether the Council, as corporate parent, meets the needs and aspirations of the young people it is looking after.

The Commission considered a wide range of evidence from the following:-

- The Leader, Chief Executive, Council Lead Members, Strategic Directors and relevant members of staff from each Directorate as appropriate
- Stakeholder Groups, including looked after children, foster carers and staff groups
- Partners, such as voluntary agencies, health organisations - Salford Primary Care Trust, Spurgeons, Connexions Service and STARLAC
- Other local Authorities identified with excellent children's services namely Bolton MBC and Knowsley MBC

What is corporate parenting?

Corporate parenting is the term given to local authority duties and responsibilities towards children (0-18 years) who are looked after away from their homes. A child is 'looked after' by a local authority if they are the subject of either a Section 31 care order or accommodation is provided on a voluntary basis under Section 20

(The Children Act 1989).

Why corporate parenting?

On 1st September 2004, a successful event was held to launch a review of the Council's response to Corporate Parenting. During the event it was agreed that a Scrutiny Commission should be undertaken in order to investigate the current service provision within the City Council and how it compares with best practice elsewhere.

'Corporate Parenting' emphasises the collective responsibility of Local Authorities to achieve positive parenting for all children in their care - an essential part of which is to safeguard and promote education. For corporate parenting to be successful it requires ownership and leadership at a senior level, including elected members.

The Quality Protects initiative introduced by the Government in 1998 insists all Councillors must have knowledge of young people in the care system in their locality. This should include talking regularly to looked after children and finding out what their needs and the needs of their families are. In addition they should expect to receive regular reports on the young people's welfare, health and education.

All council employees have a responsibility towards looked after children and not just those that work directly with them on a day-by-day basis.

Decisions and actions taken by the various directorates can, and do, have a direct impact on the lives of children looked after. In order to drive this initiative forward councillors and council staff when providing services should ask themselves "is this good enough for my child?"

All of the children in the authority's care need to:-

- Have someone who sees them as special
- Have reasonable accommodation in which to live
- Have access to quality education
- Be safe and feel safe
- Have opportunities to enjoy sport, leisure and culture
- Have opportunities to gain worthwhile employment

The above have a direct link to the 5 key outcomes for children and young people as set out in the Children Act 2004 which are:-

- Being healthy
- Staying safe
- Enjoying and achieving
- Making a positive contribution
- Achieving economic well-being

(1) Preventing Social Exclusion, Social Exclusion Unit, 2001. The other statistics in this paragraph also come from the Social Exclusion Unit

(2) National Statistics first release (2004) Children Looked after in England (including adoption and care leavers) 2003-04 Department for Education and Skills

(3) Official Statistics and Surveys Department of Health

(4) Outcome Indicators for looked after children 12 months to 30 September 2002, England Department of Health 2003.

The national picture

National Statistics for Looked after Children and Young People reveal that they are:-

- 4 times more likely to suffer mental ill health
- 4 times more likely to be unemployed
- 10 times more likely to be permanently excluded from school
- 12 times more likely to leave school with no qualification
- 50 times more likely to be sent to prison
- 50 times more likely to have children who come into public care
- 50 times more likely to seek help from substance misuse agencies
- 60 times more likely to experience homelessness

*Social Exclusion Unit Figures 'Bridging the Gap 2000'

In 2003, 48% of children in care left school without any qualifications, compared to only 5 % of all other children. Only 9% of children in care left school with five or more GCSE's grade A-C, compared to 53% of all other children and just 1% of children looked after went on to university. For those children who do attend school they are also at greater risk of being bullied

There is a strong link between looked after children and social exclusion. Between a quarter and a third of rough sleepers have been looked after by local authorities as children. (1) Over a quarter of the prison population were in care as children. Children who have been in care are also disproportionately more likely to become unemployed and two and a half times more likely to become teenage parents; the children of women who have been

in care are themselves two and a half times more likely to go into care than their peers.

It is agreed that while children in public care are no more or less able than the general population, their educational success is lamentably low. Pupils in public care are 13 times more likely than other pupils to be excluded from school. Key stage tests show poor results for younger children in care, and government figures show that in 2003-04, only 43% of the 6,700 children leaving care in England aged 16 or over had at least one GCSE or GNVQ. Looked after children are also nine times more likely than their peers to have a statement of special educational needs. (4) However, a good education is vitally important to children in care, education has been shown to increase looked after children's resilience to other problems they faced; enabled young people to make the transition into adulthood; provided opportunities for better employment and reduced the likelihood of the 'cycle of disadvantage' being repeated.

In March 2004 there were 61,100 children and young people being looked after by English Councils and 4,516 in Wales - numbers have been on the increase in recent years. Approximately 11% of young people in England are looked after in children's homes, whose numbers and size are much lower than in the past. (3) However, the proportion of boys and younger children has been rising. Boys, children from certain ethnic minority groups (eg Afro-Caribbean or mixed heritage), disabled children and those from lower socio-economic groups are over represented in the care system.

The local picture

In an independent study conducted in 2000 on behalf of the authority it was identified that the major reason for being looked after in Salford was neglect. One of the major causes why parents neglect their children is parental drug and alcohol misuse. This has a profound impact on the ability of parents to care and on the care provided to their children. Neglect is also a much more difficult issue to address than say, physical abuse as it is not as easy to diagnose and impacts on all children in the family.

The number of children and young people looked after by Salford on 30 June 2005 was 566. A breakdown is given below in the tables adjacent.

Approximately 320 children are currently being fostered, 260 internally and 55 are with outside agencies. In addition to the 320 children in full time foster care there are a further 60 children taking short breaks. A short break is defined as any service of limited duration which benefits a person who has support needs and their carer. The authority has 206 foster families, some are couples and some are single parents but there is a total of 206 families registered as foster carers with the authority. A third of foster carers families are friends and family members. Salford has 57% of looked after children in foster care which is lower than the national average which is about 66% and whilst the authority is successful in placing children under the age of 10, there are particular problems with placing children older than 10.

Age range	Total	%
Under 1	21	3.7
1 to 4	83	14.7
5 to 9	117	20.6
10 to 15	258	44.6
16 to 17	87	15.4

Gender	Total	%
Female	260	46
Male	306	54

Total	566	
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Ethnicity	Total	%
Any other ethnic group - Asian/Asian British	2	0.35
Any Other Asian background	3	0.5
Asian/Asian Brit. - Bangladeshi	3	0.5
Asian/Asian Brit. - Pakistani	3	0.5
Black / Black Brit. - African	1	0.2
Jewish	2	0.35
Mixed - Other Mixed Background	8	1.4
Mixed - White & Asian 1	0	1.8
Mixed - White & Black African	5	0.89
Mixed - White & Black Caribbean	15	2.65
Other White Background	3	0.5
White British	506	89.4
White English	2	0.35
White Irish	2	0.35
White Welsh	1	0.2

Total	566	
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Placement	Total	%
Children's homes inside LA boundary	49	8.65
Children's homes outside LA boundary	40	7.1
Family Centre / Mother and Baby Unit	5	0.9
Foster placement with relative or friend in LA	59	10.4
Foster placement with relative or friend out of LA	31	5.5
Independent living	2	0.35
Other placement	7	1.2
Placed for adoption	30	5.3
Placed with foster carer provided by LA out of LA	47	8.3
Placed with own parents/person with parental responsibility	99	17.5
Placement with agency foster carer in LA	1	0.2
Placement with agency foster carer, outside LA	48	8.5
Placement with foster carer, provided by LA in LA	134	23.6
Residential accommodation not Regulated Children's Home	4	0.7
Residential Schools	7	1.2
Secure unit outside LA boundary	3	0.5
Total	566	

Need

Reasons for children being looked after	TOTAL	%
Absent Parenting	8	1.4
Abuse/Neglect	460	81
Disability	11	2
Family Dysfunction	42	0.5
Family in Acute Stress	23	4
Low Income	2	0.35
Other	4	0.7
Parental Illness/Disability	8	1.4
Socially unacceptable behaviour	8	1.4
Total	566	

Eighty-nine children are looked after in children's homes. Of these 49 children are in children's homes within Salford and 40 children are placed in Children's homes outside Salford.

On the 1st January 2005 there were 37 young people in outside placements, with a further 2 aged over 18 in a jointly funded residential placement. The Authority was using 31 separate homes through 25 providers.

Salford also has 99 looked after children (17%) placed with their own parents/person with parental responsibility.

Placement costs

The cheapest placement was £448 a week (residential school), the most expensive £5,500 a week (residential 2:1) with the average being £2,682.56

Distance from Salford

The majority of children (76%) were placed within 25 miles of Salford with less than 18% over 50 miles away. This compares favourably to Greater Manchester statistics of 49% within 25 miles and 29% over 50 miles.

Children and young people in residential provision

Of the 37 young people in outside placements, 24 were males and 13 were females. The 2 over 18's in residential school were female.

The youngest child in placement was 6 years old and oldest was 17. The average age was almost 13 years 1 month compared with 13 years 8 months for the whole AGMA group (Salford was the youngest overall).

All placements at the time were deemed as long term. In relation to stability of placement 49 (9%) children out of 566 have had 3 or more placements within the last

Cost In £	Number	% of young people
Under 2000	16	41
2001-3000	9	23
3001-4000	9	23
4001-5000	4	10
Over 5001	1	3

Miles from Salford	Number	% of children
10 & under	15	41%
11-25	13	35%
26-50	4	11%
51-75	2	5%
Over 75	3	8%
Total	37	

year. This is better than the government's target of 16% of all placements having less than three moves in one year and Salford's performance in relation to this target is excellent. Further investigation of the breakdown of where these placements are is being undertaken.

10

Independent fostering agencies

Agency	Regional accreditation agreement	No of children placed	Cost range per child £
Barnardos		1	683
Jigsaw	•	7 *	447-706
BGWS	•	10	879-988
Foster Care Associates	•	8	815-886
Fostering Solutions	•	2	701-702
Alpha Plus	•	7	303-747
Catholic Caring Services		4	404-478
CCRS		2 *	479-514
SWISS	•	2	869
Premier		4	896
Team Fostering		2	784
Local Authority			
Surrey S.S		3	No cost available
Bolton Family Placement		2	102
Solihull Met Council		2	470

* 1 Child living in Salford boundary

Fostering

Local Authority Service

On the 30th April 05 327 children were placed in foster care. 136 of these were with carers living in Salford, 66 with a relative or friend in Salford and 1 with an agency in Salford. This means 62% of fostered children were living in Salford.

Independent Fostering Agencies

On June 1st 2005 we had 56 children placed between 11 independent fostering agencies and 3 local authorities

A breakdown by wards of the location of foster carers in the City is shown opposite.

Children placed outside of Salford

On April 30th 2005 the number of children placed with agency foster carers outside the LA was reported to be 46. However there were a further 30 placed with a relative or friend outside the LA and a further 48 with our own foster carers living outside the LA. This makes a total of 124 foster children living outside of Salford, 38% of the population in foster care.

Currently there are between 30 and 35 children being adopted and this has been increasing year on year.

There are 10 residential homes in Salford provided in-house by Social Services and 4 partnership homes commissioned by voluntary or private sector organisations; Spurgeons, Boys and Girl Welfare Society and the Catholic Children's Rescue Society.

The recruitment and retention of Social Workers is a national problem that is also reflected in Salford. Private agencies are offering higher salaries and added incentives and it is difficult for local authorities to compete. The Green Paper, Every Child Matters, recognises the severe recruitment and retention problems in child and family social work services and seeks to improve the attractiveness, public image and status of the work. Some local authorities are now offering 'golden hellos' and 'golden handcuffs' as ways of trying to recruit and retain staff. Local authorities across the country are struggling to find additional ways of rewarding staff to encourage them to remain with their local authority whilst also looking at alternative skill mixes.

Recruitment of new foster carers improved considerably during the year 2004. Improvements in staffing allowed a proactive and targeted recruitment strategy to be put in place based on a clearer analysis of the factors influencing success. The target to approve 10 new general foster carers was exceeded and the increase in the number of enquires and initial visits was substantial. However, conversion rates continue to be low, although, they are in line with the experience of other local authorities. Very few foster carers are recruited specifically for long-term care but children placed on a short-term basis often become linked long term.

Retention rates for foster carers are excellent with 35% of carers having fostered for 10 years or more and 67% for over 5 years.

Foster carer registrations as at 22nd August 2005

Ward	By LA in LA	Friend/family in LA	Temp approval in LA	Total foster carer reg.
Barton	9	6		15
B'town & Ellenbrook	6		1	7
Broughton	4	2	1	7
Cadishead	10	1		11
Claremont	5	2		7
Eccles	3	3	1	7
Irlam	8	4	1	13
Irwell				
Riverside	1	3	1	5
Kersal	3	1		4
Langworthy	2	6		8
Little Hulton	18	2	1	21
Ordsall	2	2		4
Pendlebury	3			3
Swinton N	7			7
Swinton S	2	1	1	4
Walkden N	3	1		4
Walkden S	3			3
Weaste & Seedley	5	3		8
Winton	4	4		8
Worsley	1			1
Total	97	41	9	147
Out of area	45	17	3	65

The new payment for skills scheme alongside a range of support services has ensured that these rates are maintained.

One of the areas picked up by the Joint Review inspection in 2002 was the issue of preventative care and early intervention. The authority has since provided an extra £0.5million for preventative care. This has been invested in developing the formation of a preventative care team whose aim is to prevent the need for children to be looked after by meeting their needs in the local community. This team is in the early stages of being established.

In relation to general education the number of children looked after eligible to receive full-time schooling during the 2003/2004 school year was 377. Of these, 2 were permanently excluded from school and 88 missed at least 25 days of schooling.

In 2004, the number of children in year 11 who were eligible to take GCSE (or equivalent) examinations was 41. Of these the number who obtained at least 1 GCSE at grade A*-G was 28 (68%), the number who obtained at least 5 GCSE's (or equivalent) at grade A*-G was 18 (44%) and 1 (2%) young person obtained at least 5 GCSE's at Grade A*-C. Within the general population of young people in Salford taking GCSE's this compares as follows; 94.4% obtained at least 1 GCSE at grade A*-G, 85.3% gained 5 or more at Grade A*-G and 37% gained 5 or more at Grade A*-C. (Source Department for Education and Skills National statistics for 2003/04)

In relation to the position for young people at age 16 or over :-

41	The number in Year 11 at school who were eligible for GCSE (or equivalent) examinations
18	Of these: - the number who at 30 September 2004: - were in full -time education
3	- were in full -time training
5	- were in full-time employment, with planned training
2	- were in full-time employment with no planned training
3	- were in part-time employment, education, or training
0	- were unemployed as a result of ill-health or a disability
10	- were unemployed for any other reason

Potential impact and risks to the authority of not undertaking the corporate parenting role

Children in care are one of the most vulnerable groups in society. As we have already identified ex-looked after young people are more likely to be socially excluded. They are over-represented in the prison population, mental health service users, homeless people and teenage pregnancy statistics. The cost to the Salford Community will be much higher if these issues are not addressed now both in terms of financial and human cost.

The work of the Commission provides a real opportunity to break the current trend, and provide a much more positive and aspirational future for those children for whom councillors and council employees have corporate parenting responsibilities.

Scrutiny Commission process

The Scrutiny Commission's process can be summarised by the following six points:-

1. Scoping the review
2. Evidence gathering
3. Analysis and evaluation of data/ evidence obtained
4. Preparation of draft report and recommendations
5. Publicising the report
6. Monitoring implementation of the recommendations

The Commission heard evidence from a wide range of key people including: -

- Lead Members
- The Chief Executive and Directors from each directorate within the authority
- Key stakeholders including young people in care, foster carers, social workers, other relevant specialist officers from the local authority and Salford Primary Care Trust
- Officers and Members from Bolton MBC and Knowsley MBC

A comprehensive list of those interviewed as part of the Commission is provided under the acknowledgements section on page 30.

At the beginning of the process the Commission determined a questioning framework around the following 4 key areas: -

- Do you know how many looked after children you provide services for?
- Are you satisfied that the services you offer would be 'good enough' for your own child?
- How does the delivery of your services contribute to a holistic service for looked after children?
- If you had a magic wand what three things could you do to improve the life chances of looked after children?

Supplementary questions were asked at each interview where appropriate. The Commission also took into account relevant legislation and government initiatives when undertaking the review.

In addition to the above the Commission met with a small group of looked after children from Salford to gain their views on what its like being 'looked after' by the local authority. As part of this the young people were asked if they had 3 wishes what would they be. What the young people said is outlined below

Wishing well exercise ratings

Better support when you have problems or during a change

See my mum more

Be rich and I can share it

Have loads of things

Have more things

Not be bullied

More choices in moving schools or houses

I wish my family was how it was

To have a brilliant life and still be with my friends

To be a millionaire in a foster home

Have a computer, go on the Internet

More support for me, like support for moving on to my new home

Less moving - like to stay in one place

Regular contact with my social worker

More options in where I move to - like what area I wanted and what type of place I stayed

Better contact with social worker

Details of the magic wishes given by those officers and interested parties who were interviewed as part of the Commission are outlined below.

Summary of 3 magic wishes to improve life chances of looked after children - grouped under 6 key theme headings

Placement stability

- To provide a loving home life as a foundation for the future
- More fostering of looked after children
- In the absence of an increase in foster carers then more one to one's should take place with the individual young people
- An increase in the number of Social Workers to enable more meaningful contact with looked after children
- Consistency - reduce the number of different Social Workers and professionals that children have contact with. Too many children have too many social workers over a very short period of time
- Informing and preparing young people for events that will have an impact on them i.e. their social worker leaving, placement moves, changes in family contact and so on.
- Placement choice/quality - someone who REALLY cares and where children and young people are wanted
- Consistency of key professionals
- To have a greater choice of staff and easier recruitment
- To have more foster carers
- Fewer children in residential homes
- A greater choice of foster placements at the beginning of the process and more long

term placements

- More staff
- To have a greater choice of staff and easier recruitment
- To have more foster carers
- Stable placement for looked after children throughout their education
- Improved equipment and improved social worker support
- Improvements to foster care allowances in line with national level
- Stability for the children in care - consistent social workers and more foster carers
- Placement stability
- Nurturing and supportive foster placements
- More choice as to where children can go

Education and employment opportunities

- Ability of schools and educators to see the potential of young people and raise their aspirations
- Increased school support and support with homework
- True corporate parenting - particularly with education
- Education - to make improvements and encourage looked after children in education
- To raise educational attainment and ensure that all looked after children attend school
- Improvements in education
- To focus on looked after children that are struggling in education pre 16 and to ensure that they are provided with the necessary support and individually tailored curriculum to ensure better attainment at 16
- * More input into education. Whilst it is recognised that extra

provision is available for pupils taking GCSEs there is no provision to assist children taking SATs

- More diversity in education training and employment
- To provide suitable opportunities to enable them to succeed
- To raise the aspirations of looked after children and to let them know that support is available for them
- Educational support
- Fair access to education provision

Employment and training opportunities

- Quota of work placements
- Employment and the funding of posts to help young people
- To provide opportunities to develop both educationally and socially
- To offer decent and sustainable employment
- More diversity in education training and employment
- To provide suitable opportunities to enable them to succeed
- To raise the aspirations of looked after children and to let them know that support is available for them
- More employment opportunities within the Council
- More jobs in Private sector in Salford

Health and well-being

- Free Leisure passes for young people and their carers and carer's family to enable free access to all leisure and sporting facilities
- Additional psychiatry input for 16-18 year olds
- No baby or child to be placed in a placement with carers who smoke

- Sexual health awareness - for people to be unafraid of talking to young people
- * Introduction of family workers to focus on personal development issues and education

Structural issues

- A positive commitment to change things rather than just listening to the young people.
- Advocate and champion for young people and help other directorates to understand the needs of looked after children
- To have a greater capacity to engage in more direct work with the children and to support the placement
- Bring our children back home to Salford
- For foster carers to be treated as equal professionals and consulted about decisions made
- For fostering allowances to be increased to enable foster carers to provide a better quality of life for the children
- Fill vacant social worker posts
- More intensive resources for those children with complex needs
- To provide consistent empathetic parenting for all looked after children and to make them feel that they are no different to any other child
- To provide suitable opportunities to enable them to succeed
- To raise the aspirations of looked after children and to let them know that support is available for them
- Perception of looked after children needs to be changed
- Adequate funding for all services
- Increase in numbers of community workers in Salford

- Nobody without a professional qualification working with children
- * No custodial sentences for children looked after - if necessary therapeutic secure units in Salford not in outside placements and a positive approach to restorative offending

Pre and post care issues

- Increase support to parents to prevent children and young people coming into care
- More understanding of the reason why children come into care in the first place
- Resources allocated to preventative measures

Acknowledgement of the work already undertaken to improve things

A Scrutiny Commission, by definition, is looking for ways in which the current system can be improved. It should however be acknowledged that there are good examples throughout Salford of Corporate Parenting.

The Commission found that the Authority already does the following:-

- The Commission for Social Care Inspectorate gave positive feedback in relation to children's homes within the authority and commented on the fact that the authority provide a sound service and are good at keeping the fabric of homes nice
- Councillor visits to children's homes (rota visits)
- A panel of councillors reviews the reports of rota visits
- A panel of councillors considers reports by the independent reviewing officer
- Councillors undertake visits to advice and assessment teams
- A panel of councillors deals with all statutory social services functions
- Children's Services Scrutiny Committee receives a report on aspects of children looked after
- The introduction of a payment for skills scheme for foster carers was introduced in July 2003 which has been welcomed by foster carers although concerns remain as the payment is below the national average
- Salford has a very comprehensive training programme for foster carers
- Continual major recruitment campaigns for foster carers and a recruitment strategy
- Retention rates for foster carers are good - to date no approved foster carers have been lost to independent fostering agencies the main reasons for leaving have been due to personal circumstances
- A multi-agency health protocol is in place for looked after children
- Comprehensive training programme for approved foster carers
- Salford is a top performing authority for the stability of placements and for the number of children getting 1 GCSE at grade A-G
- The Authority has good performance for looked after young people in education, training or employment at 19.
- A significant number of Salford's looked after children are adopted

- Steps are being taken to try and alleviate the shortage of social workers
 - The Commission found evidence of a lot of good partnership working already in existence with the Primary Care Trust, the Greater Manchester Police and Voluntary Agencies and attention is now being given to improving the health, educational attainment and leisure opportunities for looked after children
 - The Primary Care Trust has employed a consultant paediatrician lead for looked after children and two specialist nurses to oversee, review and improve health services for looked after children and undertake health assessments for looked after children. The lead nurses provide specialist services for children who are hard to engage or reach particularly for the 16-18 age group and the consultant paediatrician provides a dedicated initial health assessment clinic
 - Introduction of designated teachers in schools for looked after children and introduction in the autumn 05 of designated governors on governing bodies to act as champions for looked after children
 - Used to be very low on the number of health assessments undertaken for looked after children but progress has been made and 86% of assessments are now being done. In addition the number of looked after children attending a dentist has increased from 48% to 80%.
 - The Best Value Review of Children's Residential Care set a target of reducing spot purchased placements by half to 20% of the total residential placements
- A new 8 bed unit for 16 plus age group is to be opened in 2006
 - The authority is currently awaiting the outcome of a bid for the Intensive Foster Care Programme and is working to develop an enhanced in-house fostering scheme to provide for younger children with challenging behaviour

Summary of evidence

A summary of the evidence heard by the Commission is outlined below and is separated under 6 key themes. These six key themes are also reflective of the magic wishes identified previously.

Placement stability

Recruitment and retention of foster carers

The recruitment and retention of foster carers are crucial issues in Salford. Children placed with foster carers experience a greater degree of stability and security, achieve better educationally and experience better health care generally, than children placed in residential care. In addition foster care is the placement of choice for the majority of young people.

The Commission felt that the authority has high expectations of foster carers as the children placed often have experienced very negative events, are often emotionally immature and require high levels of support not only from foster carers, but from the Council as well. In response to these circumstances the Commission believes there needs to be a more targeted approach. This could include a number of specialist foster carers specifically trained and rewarded to look after those children who are the most challenging. The Council should also consider providing a higher level of support to foster carers to cope with the increasingly challenging demands of some of the children in the authority's care.

The Commission were impressed with the extent of the package of benefits offered by Knowsley MBC to their foster carers such as advice and support, help with childcare, after school arrangements and holiday provision. Knowsley Council also purchased 2 caravans in North Wales for the sole use of foster carers and their families to use as a holiday retreat each year.

The number of foster carers in Salford is decreasing although the commission acknowledged that recruitment of new foster carers improved considerably in 2004. However, of concern is the fact that foster carer allowances remain below the national average and that proposed by the National Foster Care Association. The authority can no longer just rely on the goodwill of foster carers whilst fostering needs to be viewed as a career choice and professional activity and remunerated appropriately. This situation is exacerbated due to the increased competition from private agencies who are recruiting local authority trained foster carers and then selling these back to the local authority at an increased financial rate. The authority needs to seriously consider increasing payment in line with the national average. The Commission recognise that moving to the recommended rate would require considerable investment by the Council but feel that this should be a priority.

The Commission were also concerned about the age profile of existing foster carers in Salford and the potential problems for the future if the authority is unsuccessful in

recruiting younger foster carers to replace the existing workforce.

Inconsistencies in practice were highlighted as an issue, especially in relation to what can and cannot be claimed for. It was felt that there was a need for a regularly updated handbook for foster carers identifying what the local authority expected of them and what they could expect of the local authority. This would be explicit about what foster carers are allowed to do, what they are entitled to claim for, the services that exist to support them, how these can be accessed and who to speak to in different situations. The Commission found that support services were good but that there was a need for better communication and co-ordination between services

The issuing of equipment was also of concern in that choice was often very limited, goods could be often purchased independently for less money and faulty equipment had on occasion been provided to foster carers.

Carers felt that they were not equipped or supported to provide sufficient support and encouragement at home for learning and development. In addition some young people looked after in Salford do not have access to a computer for homework. There is provision for those taking GCSEs but not for any other age group which was an area that the Commission felt needed further examination.

Foster carers also wanted to participate more and be more involved in care planning.

Currently they are not involved in the “professionals meetings” and it was felt that they should have more involvement as decisions have a direct impact on their family life. The need to improve social worker support to foster carers was cited as a real issue for foster carers whilst acknowledging that there were at the time of the meeting, 20 vacancies out of a group of 60 staff.

Concerns were also raised regarding the dilemma faced by foster carers when a young person reaches 18 and payment by the local authority ceases. Foster carers would not expect their own children to leave home at 18 but it is very difficult for foster carers who have had their foster children for a long time to take a drop in income when a young person reaches 18. In addition the Commission believed the operating principle should be that young people only left care when they were ready, not when they reach a particular age, as many young people (not only those looked after) are not mature enough to leave home at 18. The commission acknowledge that a number of foster carers receive a continuing care allowance after a child is 18 if they are in continuing education but there was still an issue for those children not going on to further education.

Friends and family placements

The Commission heard that the role of support workers was valued and could be developed more in the future. Currently there were 4 posts and all new foster carers have a support worker. This system however, does not transfer to friends and family placements which raised concerns. The role of the support

worker was seen as very important especially due to limited contact children and foster carers have with their social worker.

Recruitment and retention of social workers

One of the main messages from young people is the contact or lack of it with their social workers. This is acknowledged as a problem in Salford and is connected with the recruitment and retention of social workers. The overall retention rate is 89% which is quite good compared to other local authorities but if the figures are separated between the different client groups then the Children and Families Social Workers experience the greatest difficulties. Enabling retention is not only down to money, often caseloads and stress are contributory factors to social workers leaving Salford and the profession in general. Frontline social workers have to deal with children who have been subject to sexual and emotional neglect and/or physical abuse and unfortunately this is a trend which is increasing. In addition a high percentage of the current workforce is aged 40+ and there is both, a local and a national, human resource issue as to how we secure a future workforce.

The Commission were impressed with practice in Knowsley whereby the council approach colleges and universities to lift the spirits of social work students and promote the benefits of working in Knowsley.

Residential homes

The Commission heard evidence that there were inconsistencies

between residential homes in Salford and homes run by outside agencies for such things as pocket money, rules, sanctions, treats etc

A key concern from heads of residential homes was the lack of a devolved budget for each individual home. The possibility of having a devolved budget would enable flexibility for decorating rooms or trips out, allow homes to obtain the most economical price and enable money to be spent in the best interests of the young people.

According to national performance targets Salford is rated as a top performing authority for the stability of placements but that the measurement for this target was 3 or less moves per year. This raised concerns as it was felt that having to make one move per year is distressing in itself let alone having to move 4 times and a more challenging target was needed. Members also raised the issue that a stable placement could be out of the Salford area but ideally children should be in stable placements in Salford. This suggests that where possible children currently placed outside Salford should be brought back "home".

The issues concerning social worker contact were similar for those in residential care as for those in foster care.

Education and employment opportunities

The role of education in preventing social exclusion is crucial and improvements are needed in the education provided to look after children in Salford. It is recognised that difficulties are encountered in supporting children into a culture of learning but there is also a concern as to how the curriculum is delivered within schools; how young people can be motivated and how to raise their aspirations and recognise their achievements.

The Government has identified the educational attainment of looked after children as a key issue and in July 2005 the Children's Charity NCH called for a government pledge to completely close the gap in achievement between children in care and other children by 2020 (Close the gap for children in care NCH (2005)). In Salford there is a Care and Education Support Team to promote the educational attainment of young people but the team only has the capacity to offer a service to secondary age pupils. Intensive support for primary aged pupils is not available. This is particularly worrying as research shows that the educational experience of children looked after prior to being looked after is usually characterised by problems in education and often non-school attendance. If this is to be addressed extra support needs to be extended to all looked after children, at the point of their reception into the system irrespective of their stage of education.

It is acknowledged, and welcomed, that the Care and Education Support team is to be extended with 2 new

posts being created to work with primary aged children to address early intervention but it was felt that more needs to be done in this area. Children seem to achieve well through key stage 1 and 2 but when they reach key stage 3 achievement takes a dip for looked after children. One of the main reasons for this appeared to be that at primary school children feel nurtured and have the stability of the same teacher and classroom but when they move to secondary this all changes.

The Performance Assessment Framework Indicator in relation to education for looked after children is to gain 1 A-G GCSE as opposed to 5 GCSE's at A-C level for other children. The Commission strongly felt that this sent out the wrong message as to the level of expectation and aspiration for looked after children. For the year 2003/04 only 1 child out of 41 gained 5 or more GCSE's at grade A-C and this was felt to be a major concern that requires addressing.

Employment and training opportunities

Currently the authority is able to ring fence a minimum of 5 apprenticeships for looked after children within such areas as Horticulture and Mason Paviors.

However, the possibility for the development of apprenticeships should be considered in all other areas of the Council's work. The Council as a corporate parent needs to ensure that when young people are due to leave care their skills and abilities are identified in order that appropriate work experience can

be provided. The Commission also felt that the Council would benefit from a corporate work placement scheme clearly structured to offer work placements in all directorates of the City Council and developing partnership arrangements with other public/private sector organisations within the City.

It was felt that mentoring should be offered to young people from the age of 14 following selection of their options at high school. Such a scheme would not only make young people aware of employment opportunities and choices available to them, but also seek to inspire them towards gaining qualifications or gaining employment. The Commission were impressed with the employment scheme operated by Bolton MBC known as LASE (Looked After Supported Employment Scheme). Every major department in Bolton Council has contributed placements for the scheme for young people in care. The scheme is providing the young people with a direct route to valuable experience, qualifications and jobs. So far 24 young people have been through the scheme which is a six month paid placement, a crucial element of which is that it is paid, up to £100 a week, through the Council's wages system which ensures that young participants are set up with a bank account and tax code, a further advantage on their path to independence.

The commission were equally impressed with Knowsley's approach whereby a DVD is used in schools to explain to teachers why children come into care.

Health and well-being

Looked after children tend to have more health care issues due to high levels of unmet health needs, for example, not being up to date with immunisations and that some illnesses that are presented are not followed up may result in a cough being 'misdiagnosed' when in fact the cough was due to asthma. The Commission were impressed with the number of annual health assessments undertaken in relation to children looked after and the level of immunisations. The Commission found that there doesn't appear to be any one area in Salford that presents high numbers of looked after children with high levels of health care needs

The commission found evidence that mental health issues for young people looked after tend to be significantly higher than in the general population and often create barriers to young people's learning, their ability to form stable relationships and be managed in foster homes or homes provided by the local authority.

Salford now has a full complement of educational psychologists and there are now increased resources available in terms of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). However, the system is not yet a local one but remains hospital based. There is a need to change practices and to design new models across Health, Education and Social Care focused on where young people live. In addition there is a problem with 16-18 year olds accessing these services, as they are not seen as either children or adults and are

in danger of falling through the gaps in services. The age at which people are being diagnosed as suffering with a psychotic illness is reducing from 20 to 15 years of age and less, with a requisite need to build early intervention into community services. Currently the only provision is on the Prestwich site in a secure and an open unit with very tight eligibility criteria. This is an issue that goes beyond Salford and requires tackling across Greater Manchester as a whole. There are several young people in Salford with severe psychotic illnesses who are currently in residential homes which are not geared towards meeting their needs.

The Commission welcomed the policy that a free leisure pass was given to each child looked after and their foster carers but felt that this could be extended to the foster carers' families as well. In addition it was felt that there should be a more targeted campaign to increase the uptake of Leisure passes amongst young people in the authority's care.

Structural issues

The Commission felt that there was a need to have a clear, aspirational corporate vision for children looked after by the City of Salford. This vision would seek the highest possible outcomes for young people looked after and be accompanied with clear implementation plans as to how this is to be championed, co-ordinated, implemented and evaluated across the different directorates within the Council and its stakeholder and partner agencies

There is a need to ensure children's issues remain at the forefront of all Council agendas. All directorates of the Council need to consider the implications of existing and new policies on looked after children. The Commission felt that the creation of the new Children's Services Directorate provides a golden opportunity to place children's issues to the forefront of the Council's agenda.

The Commission felt very strongly that it is important that children looked after are not made to feel different from other children by the words we use when we are referring to various aspects of their lives. The Commission felt that the children live in homes/houses and not units. Looked after children are children first and foremost and should be living in Salford where at all possible, it is this ethos that the Commission feel should be embedded into the approach here in Salford.

The Commission were very impressed with the Corporate Children's Officer role at Bolton MBC. The post enables a dedicated officer to take a strategic role on behalf of the authority, in relation to corporate parenting issues. They are thus committed to raise awareness of the corporate parenting issues and ensure all Directorates within the Authority give due attention to the issues. The role also develops practical initiatives across directorate boundaries which benefit looked after children and assist those services in promoting social inclusion.

The Commission felt that the recently established Children and Young People's Partnership Board could be key in taking the Commission's recommendations forward and to ensuring looked after children are at the forefront of the agenda within the new Children's Services Directorate. It was also felt that the work of the Commission should be taken into account when devising the Children and Young Peoples Plan (currently aiming to be produced for March 2006).

There was a general feeling amongst the family placement team that they currently have no links with other directorates within the authority. Often the children they are dealing with have complex needs and there appears to be a lack of joined up thinking, with difficulties in communication. There is a worry that the new Children's Services Directorate may not take on board the needs of the service. An instance was quoted whereby it had taken 17 months to get a child back into education. Cross boundary situations can raise difficulties and can cause major impact on the life of a child which can ultimately be the cause of a breakdown of the placement. The Commission sought re-assurance that this would be taken on board.

The Commission found that the number of visits undertaken by elected members to residential homes was very low and being undertaken by a small group of members. In 2003/04 only 52% of rota visits were completed by elected members and in 2004/05 only 64% were completed by members. The Commission felt that this was inadequate and needed addressing.

Pre and post care issues

The Commission found that accommodation and support to care leavers was inadequate and insufficient. In particular concerns were expressed about the services provided for young people that are 16+ and due to leave care. Evidence was given that the authority is potentially setting the young people up to fail as little help is provided to enable them to successfully complete the transition period. It was felt that there is a need for some form of half-way house provision to prepare young people for independence. One such example of this was offered in Knowlsey whereby there is a pre-independence unit for young people about to leave care which houses 3 young people and they each have separate living areas and kitchens and are expected to manage their own budget, cook their own meals and do their own washing etc with an officer who supervises from a distance and provides advice and support if required. Currently if accommodation is found for a young person through the Housing Directorate help is not provided with furnishing the accommodation and the leaving care grant of £700 is inadequate to cover all expenses.

Members acknowledged that the re-provisioning of the 16+ provision has been under discussion for many months and that work on a new building is about to begin and is due for completion in June 2006. This building would offer 8 young people supported accommodation but the Commission felt that this area of provision needs to be a priority.

In addition concerns were expressed regarding young people being placed in unsuitable temporary accommodation to which they cannot adjust. Once the placement breaks down the young person is asked to leave and due to the fact that the homeless team have provided accommodation once they are no longer obliged to find an alternative. Young people need the opportunity for intensive support from the outset and there is a need for increased support for financial and life skills training to equip young people for adult life. Members felt that the Next Steps project appeared to focus on education and training when more support was needed to help young people find suitable accommodation and maintain and develop their independence

The creation of the new Children's Services Directorate will see the introduction of local Children's Services Teams who will provide early intervention/ preventative care. These teams will have a crucial role as it was felt that more could be done to prevent children coming into care in the first place and to examine in greater detail why children are being admitted into care and what services could be developed to address these needs and avoid the need for admissions. Examples were given of parenting programmes in the City e.g. "Triple P" a parent support initiative offered through primary schools and managed by the Primary Care Trust and the parent survival course using the Webster Stratton Model which is available at Royal Manchester Children's Hospital and in the Community via area based initiatives such as Surestart where work is undertaken with parents

on more complex parenting and behaviour management issues. Such initiatives were highlighted as examples of good practice. For perfectly justifiable reasons some children will continue to need to be looked after by the City Council. It is though imperative that we ensure that those whose needs could best be met safely in the community are done so, otherwise we risk the situation whereby all resources become focused on those being looked after. In such a case insufficient attention is provided to addressing preventative measures resulting in even more children becoming looked after and less resources being available for prevention. This is potentially a very damaging personal and financial situation. This Commission has focused primarily upon the looked after children but it should not be forgotten that the preventative services available and the looked after services are integrally linked. Impact in one area can impact in the other.

Recommendations

Stability

The City Council and relevant partners where appropriate should

R1 Explore ways of sustaining, developing and increasing the number of foster carers, particularly in light of competition from the private sector by:-

(i) by examining the possibility of increasing the allowances paid to foster carers in line with the national average and looking at the overall package offered to foster carers in Salford exploring the use of incentives, benefits and other 'perks'.

(ii) addressing the issue of adequate family placement social worker support to foster carers and investigate the possibility of developing the role of support workers

(iii) producing a foster carers' handbook explicitly stating what they can expect from the local authority including:- what they can claim for, service contact details, fee payments and other issues of importance to foster carers. This handbook should be developed in partnership with foster carers.

(iv) exploring the possibility of increasing foster carers involvement with professionals meetings and opening up more lines of communication

(v) developing a team of specialist foster carers to foster challenging children who have specific developmental and/or emotional needs. This team should be offered extra payments, training and support

R2 Refer the problems in the recruitment and retention of social workers to the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities (AGMA) to examine the possibility of introducing standard pay, terms and conditions across Greater Manchester and devising a joint human resources strategy to address the issue.

R3 Investigate the potential of a consultant social worker model for a small group of experienced and post qualified staff working with children and families social workers to address the staff shortages in the children and families social work team.

R4 Identify a strategy to further reduce the number of moves that young people make during their care. This would help to improve the stability of care placements and to promote a more planned and child centred approach.

R5 Review the needs of children placed outside Salford with a view to identifying what resources would be required to provide their care in Salford with a view to developing suitable care provision.

R6 Consider extending the role of support workers to friends and family placements

Education

R7 Examine the possibility of extending educational support to all looked after children irrespective of their stage of education.

R8 Consider ways of providing extra support to looked after children when they are moving from primary school to secondary school

R9 Consider ways of increasing the motivation of young people looked after, raising their aspirations and recognising achievements - not just academic achievements

R10 Improving access to computers for all looked after children

R11 Ensure mentoring is offered to young people from the age of 14 when they are taking options at high school to ensure young people are aware of the educational, employment and training opportunities available to them

Employment

R12 Introduce a Work Placement scheme for looked after children with clear opportunities to be offered by all directorates tailored to meet the needs of the young people.

R13 Explore the possibility of approaching the Local Strategic Partnership to extend the work placement scheme to other public/private and voluntary organisations in Salford to open up more opportunities for young people in care

Structural issues

R14 Develop a corporate vision for the children looked after in Salford with clear implementation plans as to how this is to be developed, co-ordinated and implemented with a clear timetable including reporting mechanisms for members.

R15 Consider appointing a dedicated officer to take a strategic role in relation to corporate parenting issues and to raise awareness for corporate parenting issues throughout all the various Directorates within the Authority.

R16 Refer the Corporate Parenting Commission report to the Children and Young People Partnership Board to assess their role in taking forward the recommendations and to ensure that Looked after Children are kept at the forefront of the agenda within the new Children's Services Directorate

R17 Ensure that the findings of the Commission be taken into account when devising the Children and Young People Plan for Salford

R18 Establish a sub-group to undertake the monitoring of the recommendations of the Corporate Parenting Commission and to further investigate after care provision in Salford and the issue of outside placements. It is recommended that consideration should be given to having a young person on the sub-group and to approach Dr McLaughlin to continue to sit as expert adviser to the Sub-Group

R19 That Members' responsibilities of being a corporate parent be included in all new members induction and that an annual seminar be held for members to give feedback about how children looked after are doing and how well members have fulfilled their responsibilities.

Health issues

R20 Highlight the issue of young people aged 16-18 accessing mental health services as part of the formal consultation on the reconfiguration of Children's health Services for Greater Manchester

R21 Ask the Board of Salford Community Leisure to consider offering free leisure passes to foster carers' families

Pre and post care issues

R22 Investigate the possibility of developing halfway provision to prepare young people for independence

R23 Examine the support offered to young people leaving care with a view to ensuring that they are sufficiently prepared for adult life.

The Commission acknowledge that many of the above recommendations have cost implications and realise that there will always be competing demands on the authority's budget. However, it is felt that it is vital for the future of our looked after children that the above recommendations are addressed.

The Commission also acknowledge that since this piece of work started progress has been made in different areas due to the efforts of officers in ensuring services are continuously improved and this is to be welcomed.

The Commission acknowledge with thanks the contribution made to the Corporate Parenting Commission by the organisations and witnesses outlined here:-

Acknowledgements

Salford City Council

Councillor John Merry - Leader of the Council
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 Faith Mann - Assistant Director of Education
 Paul Woltman - Assistant Director of Children's Commissioning
 Lee McKay - Children's Services
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 Claire Paynter - Team Leader, Looked After Children, Child Protection and Reviewing Unit
 Liz Cameron - Principal Officer Listening to Children and Young People

Vicky Nutt - User Development Worker - Listening to children and young people

Heads of Residential Homes

Principal Manager Children's Resources
 Mike Kelly - Member of the Family Placement Team
 Tom Healy - Youth Offending Team Manager.
 Cath Connor - Social Worker, Youth offending Team
 Brenda Lee - Operational Manager Youth offending Team
 Carolyn Williams - Principal Manager, Family Placement Team.
 Michael Kemp - Principal Manager, Social Workers
 Janice Boulger - Family Placement Support Worker

Salford Primary Care Trust

Alison Dally - Salford Primary Care Trust
 Ann Drake - Health Needs Co-ordinator
 Assumpta O'Connell - Healthy Schools Initiative
 Alison Pike - Paediatric Consultant
 Susan Slater - Head of Operations, Children's Services Salford Primary Care Trust

Other Organisations

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 Steve Hassall - Chief Executive Salford Community Leisure Limited
 Sarah Randall - Project Manager Spurgeons
 Bob Horrocks - Corporate Children's Officer, Bolton MBC
 Councillor Ken Keith - Cabinet Member Health and Social Care, Knowsley MBC

Councillor Larry Nolan -
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Nigel Gilmore - Connexions
Gavin Armstrong - Connexions
Carmel Stott -
Chairperson of the Salford Foster
Care Association
Mike Kelly -
Principal Manager, Next Steps
Project/After Care Service
STARLAC Team - Amanda Mcleod
Irlam Foster Carers Group
Walkden Foster Carers Group



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